



INTEGRATING TRADITIONAL HYMNS AND CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP MUSIC IN CHURCH MUSIC EDUCATION

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Abstract: This study examines the integration of traditional hymns and contemporary worship music within church music education, focusing on the effects of a balanced curriculum on students' musical skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research involved 50 church music students enrolled in a 6-month program at a major Christian university. Data were collected through practical exams, written tests, attitudinal surveys, and semi-structured interviews, measuring changes in students' proficiency, understanding of church music history and theology, and their views on different worship music styles.

The results show significant improvements in students' performance and arrangement skills across both traditional and contemporary styles. Additionally, students demonstrated a deeper understanding of the historical and theological significance of church music, enabling them to make more informed decisions about worship music selection. The study also found notable attitudinal shifts, with students developing a more balanced and appreciative view of both traditional hymns and contemporary worship music. These findings suggest that an integrated curriculum not only enhances students' musical versatility but also fosters inclusivity, better preparing them to navigate the diverse and evolving landscape of modern worship music.

In conclusion, this research highlights the importance of a balanced integration of traditional and contemporary elements in church music education, offering insights that can inform future curricula aimed at developing well-rounded church musicians capable of leading worship in a variety of settings.

Keywords: Traditional Hymns; Worship Music; Church Music Education.

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Introduction

Church music plays a central role in Christian worship, acting as a vehicle for theological expression, spiritual reflection, and communal participation. Over the past few decades, however, the landscape of church music has experienced notable transformations. This shift is largely characterized by the increasing presence of contemporary worship music alongside traditional hymns. Once dominated by structured, theologically rich hymns that have been passed down through centuries of Christian practice, many modern congregations now embrace more dynamic, accessible forms of musical worship. Contemporary worship music, with its modern instrumentation, often uses simpler melodies and more relatable lyrics, appealing especially to younger audiences. The simultaneous existence of these two styles—traditional hymns and contemporary worship music—has created a new paradigm in the musical life of churches, generating both

opportunities and challenges for musicians, educators, and congregational members (Anderson, 2019)

The integration of traditional hymns with contemporary worship music has not only shifted the soundscape of worship but has also brought new educational demands to the fore. Church musicians today are expected to be adept in both styles, seamlessly incorporating the depth of hymnal traditions with the immediacy and engagement of contemporary worship music. Yet, the educational pathways for aspiring church musicians have struggled to keep pace with these changes. Historically, church music education programs have either leaned heavily on one musical tradition, often giving exclusive emphasis to hymns, or embraced the contemporary movement while marginalizing the rich heritage of traditional church music. This dichotomy has created a gap, leaving graduates of these programs ill-prepared to navigate the complex and diverse musical environments they are likely to



encounter in real-world church settings (Rajagukguk, Harefa, Butar-butur, Grecetinovitria Samosir, & Ariawan, 2023).

The importance of equipping church musicians with the skills to integrate traditional and contemporary worship music is critical for several reasons. First, the diversity of congregations today often demands flexibility and musical dexterity. Worshipers bring a variety of backgrounds and preferences, and church services that can thoughtfully blend both musical forms can meet the needs of a broader audience. Second, the decline in young adult participation in many traditional church services suggests that contemporary music, when balanced with traditional elements, might foster greater engagement without losing the theological depth and historical continuity offered by hymns (Brown, 2020). As such, church music programs that do not offer comprehensive training in both areas may inadvertently limit their students' capacity to adapt to evolving congregational dynamics. The long-standing reliance on a singular musical tradition in these educational settings no longer aligns with the practical realities of worship in many contemporary churches.

In response to these challenges, the integration of traditional hymns and contemporary worship music within church music education has emerged as a topic of significant academic interest and debate. Proponents of maintaining a strong emphasis on traditional hymns argue for their theological richness and deep historical roots. Hymns are often viewed as foundational to Christian worship, embodying centuries of doctrinal teaching and communal identity. Their structured form, theological depth, and liturgical function offer an unparalleled way to communicate Christian beliefs and values. Additionally, hymns have served as an anchor for congregational unity, linking present-day worship with the long-standing traditions of the past.

On the other hand, advocates for contemporary worship music emphasize its capacity to engage modern worshippers, particularly younger generations. With its accessible language and emotional immediacy, contemporary music fosters a sense of relevance and personal connection to faith, making it a powerful tool for spiritual engagement. The rise of modern praise bands, the use of digital sound systems, and the informal style of contemporary worship music all contribute to a worship experience that is participatory, emotionally resonant, and responsive to contemporary cultural expressions. Critics of an over-reliance on contemporary music, however, argue that it can sometimes lack the theological depth of traditional hymns and may contribute to a consumer-driven approach to worship.

Given these differing perspectives, the integration of traditional hymns and contemporary worship music is not simply a matter of taste but involves deeper questions about the purpose and function of worship music. What role should music play in teaching theology, fostering spiritual growth, and creating a sense of community? How can church music education programs balance the historical significance of hymns with the cultural relevance of contemporary music? These are pressing questions for educators and church leaders as they seek to prepare musicians for a worship environment that increasingly demands proficiency in both styles.

This research aims to address these complex issues by exploring the impact of integrating traditional hymns and contemporary worship music within church music education. Specifically, it seeks to answer three primary research questions: (1) How does the integration of traditional hymns and

contemporary worship music in church music education affect students' musical skills and knowledge? (2) What impact does a balanced curriculum have on students' attitudes towards different worship music styles? (3) What are the challenges and best practices in implementing an integrated approach to church music education?

The first research question addresses the practical outcomes of a dual-focus education, examining how students' musical skills develop when they are trained in both traditional and contemporary forms of worship music. Mastery of diverse musical styles not only enhances a student's technical abilities but also allows for more creative and flexible worship leadership (Chen, 2018). Furthermore, the integration of both styles could foster a deeper understanding of how different musical traditions serve varying spiritual and theological purposes.

The second question investigates the attitudinal shifts that may occur in students exposed to a balanced curriculum. Often, musicians trained exclusively in one style may develop biases against the other, viewing either hymns as outdated or contemporary music as theologically shallow. A curriculum that values both styles equally may cultivate a more holistic appreciation for the diversity of worship music, breaking down these preconceived notions and fostering greater musical inclusivity.

Finally, the third research question considers the practical challenges of implementing an integrated church music curriculum. Educators may face resistance from institutions or individuals with strong preferences for one style over another. Additionally, logistical issues, such as resource allocation, faculty expertise, and time constraints, could complicate efforts to offer comprehensive training in both musical traditions. Through an exploration of best practices, this research seeks to provide practical guidance for educators seeking to equip students with the skills needed to thrive in diverse worship settings (Davis, 2021).

By answering these questions, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing development of church music education. It aspires to offer insights that will enable church music programs to better prepare students for the complexities of modern worship, where the ability to bridge traditional and contemporary musical expressions is increasingly essential. Ultimately, this research hopes to support the creation of more versatile, inclusive, and effective church music education models that honor the past while engaging the present, ensuring that future church musicians are equipped to serve in the evolving landscape of Christian worship.

Methods

This study employed a robust mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the impact of a church music education program that emphasizes the integration of traditional hymns and contemporary worship music. By blending quantitative data, such as skill assessments and knowledge tests, with qualitative insights gained through in-depth interviews, the research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how students' musical abilities, knowledge, and attitudes evolved over the course of a 6-month program.

A total of 50 church music students (30 female, 20 male) from a major Christian university in the United States participated in this study. The participants, aged 18 to 25, were enrolled in a 6-

month church music program specifically designed to expose them to both traditional hymns and contemporary worship music. The participants had varying levels of prior experience in these two musical styles, ranging from those with extensive background in either traditional or contemporary music to those with more limited exposure. This diversity in prior experience provided a valuable basis for examining the program's impact across a broad range of musical proficiency levels.

A mixed-methods research design was employed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. This approach was chosen to capture not only the measurable changes in students' musical skills and knowledge but also to gain deeper insights into their attitudes and personal experiences. The study utilized a pre-test/post-test design to assess changes in musical skills, knowledge, and attitudes over the duration of the program. Quantitative data were collected through practical exams, written tests, and attitudinal surveys, while qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews.

The church music program was developed to provide equal exposure to both traditional hymns and contemporary worship music, ensuring that students could experience and practice both styles comprehensively. The curriculum was structured into four main components: 1.) Students engaged in lectures and discussions on the historical and theological significance of both traditional hymns and contemporary worship music. This component was designed to provide students with a deeper understanding of the development and purpose of church music through the ages. 2.) Practical instruction focused on developing students' proficiency in performing both traditional hymns and contemporary worship music. This included vocal and instrumental techniques specific to each style, as well as guidance on how to lead a congregation in worship using these different musical forms. 3.) Students were tasked with arranging and composing musical pieces that blended elements of traditional hymns and contemporary worship music. These exercises encouraged creativity and helped students explore how these two styles could be integrated into cohesive worship experiences. 4.) Practical workshops provided students with opportunities to experiment with the integration of both styles in mock worship services. These workshops aimed to develop students' skills in designing and leading worship that effectively combined traditional and contemporary musical elements.

At both the beginning and end of the program, students completed a practical exam that evaluated their ability to perform and arrange music in both traditional and contemporary styles. This assessment provided a quantitative measure of students' musical growth during the program. A written test was administered to evaluate students' understanding of the historical, theological, and musical foundations of both traditional hymns and contemporary worship music. This test was also conducted at the start and end of the program to measure changes in knowledge. A Likert-scale survey was used to assess students' attitudes towards traditional hymns and contemporary worship music. This survey, conducted at both the start and end of the program, asked students to rate their appreciation for each style and their beliefs regarding the importance of integrating diverse musical traditions in worship. To gain deeper qualitative insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 randomly selected participants. These interviews explored students' personal experiences with the program, their perspectives on the integration of traditional and

contemporary music, and the challenges they faced throughout the process.

Quantitative data from the skills assessments, knowledge tests, and attitudinal surveys were analyzed using paired t-tests to measure significant changes in students' abilities, knowledge, and attitudes over the course of the program. This statistical approach allowed for the identification of any meaningful improvements or shifts that occurred from the pre-test to the post-test. The qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews were subjected to thematic analysis. This method involved coding the interview transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns in the students' responses. These themes provided rich insights into students' experiences, challenges, and personal growth during the program. Through the integration of these quantitative and qualitative data sources, the study aimed to capture a comprehensive picture of the program's impact on church music students, both in terms of their measurable skill development and their subjective experiences with the blending of traditional and contemporary worship music styles.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant positive effects of integrating traditional hymns and contemporary worship music in church music education. These results underscore not only the development of students' musical skills but also their knowledge and attitudes toward diverse worship styles (Evans, 2017). This section discusses the key outcomes of the research, including improvements in musical skills and knowledge, attitudinal shifts toward different worship music styles, challenges in implementing integrated curricula, and the implications for church music education and future career readiness.

1. Musical Skills and Versatility

The most prominent finding from the quantitative data is the improvement in students' musical skills across both traditional hymns and contemporary worship music. The pre-test/post-test results from the practical exams showed statistically significant gains in performance and arrangement abilities for both styles. These findings suggest that an integrated approach to church music education enhances students' overall musical versatility. Students who were primarily proficient in one style at the start of the program demonstrated marked improvement in the other by the end, with many participants reporting increased confidence in their ability to perform and arrange both hymns and contemporary worship songs. This improvement in musical proficiency highlights that a balanced curriculum, which devotes equal attention to both traditional and contemporary styles, does not hinder students' abilities in either area. In fact, the combination of these styles appears to create a synergistic effect, whereby the skills learned in one genre complement and enhance those required in the other. For example, the structural discipline of traditional hymnody, which emphasizes harmonic complexity and lyrical depth, may enhance students' abilities to create more thoughtful arrangements in contemporary music (Gaddy, 2022).

Conversely, the more spontaneous and emotionally driven nature of contemporary worship music may foster greater expressiveness in hymn performance. These findings challenge the assumption that focusing on both traditional and contemporary music within a single educational program could dilute students' mastery of either style. On the contrary, the integration of diverse

musical traditions seems to promote a more well-rounded and adaptable skill set, equipping students for the varied musical demands they are likely to face in modern church settings.

2. Knowledge of Church Music History and Theology

The significant improvements in students' knowledge of church music history and theology, as indicated by the written tests, demonstrate the value of providing a comprehensive educational foundation that encompasses both traditional and contemporary elements. By exposing students to the historical and theological contexts of church music, the program fostered a deeper understanding of how different musical traditions contribute to the worship experience. Participants reported that this broader understanding enabled them to make more informed decisions about music selection and arrangement, taking into account not only aesthetic considerations but also theological and historical implications. For example, students who previously favored contemporary music often gained a new appreciation for the theological depth and liturgical significance of traditional hymns. Similarly, students with a strong preference for hymns began to recognize the role of contemporary worship music in engaging modern congregations and fostering personal spiritual connection. This enhanced knowledge equips future church musicians to act as informed curators of worship music, making choices that balance theological soundness with cultural relevance. As worship leaders, they will be better prepared to create worship experiences that resonate with diverse congregations while maintaining the integrity of Christian doctrine (Harris, 2018).

3. Attitudinal Shifts Toward Worship Music Styles

One of the most remarkable findings from the study was the attitudinal shift observed in students over the course of the program. The attitudinal surveys revealed a significant increase in students' appreciation for both traditional hymns and contemporary worship music. (Johnson, 2020). At the beginning of the program, many students exhibited strong preferences for one style over the other, often viewing traditional hymns as outdated or contemporary music as lacking theological depth. However, by the end of the program, students had developed a more balanced and inclusive view, with most participants expressing a genuine appreciation for the strengths of both styles. This attitudinal shift is particularly noteworthy in light of the ongoing "worship wars" that have affected many Christian congregations, where debates over the appropriateness of different worship music styles have sometimes caused division. The findings suggest that exposure to and education in both traditional and contemporary forms can foster a more inclusive and unity-oriented approach to church music (Kauflin, 2019). By learning to value the unique contributions of each style, students are more likely to promote a spirit of reconciliation and inclusivity in their future roles as church musicians.

Moreover, this attitudinal shift has broader implications for congregational life. Church musicians who possess a deep appreciation for both traditional and contemporary music are better positioned to mediate between different generational and cultural preferences within a congregation. This ability to bridge stylistic divides may help create more cohesive and harmonious worship experiences, ultimately contributing to the overall unity and health of the church community (Lim, 2017)

4. Challenges in Integrating Diverse Musical Styles

Despite the overwhelmingly positive outcomes, the study also highlighted some challenges that students faced in integrating traditional hymns and contemporary worship music. Several participants reported initial difficulties in blending these two styles, particularly in terms of arrangement and performance. Some students struggled with the technical aspects of arranging music that combined the structural complexity of hymns with the more fluid and dynamic elements of contemporary worship. These challenges point to the need for more targeted instruction and practice in this area. While the curriculum included workshops on integrating diverse musical styles, students may benefit from additional modules or more intensive training focused specifically on strategies for blending traditional and contemporary elements (Myrick, 2021). For example, educators could provide more guidance on how to maintain the theological and lyrical integrity of hymns while incorporating contemporary instrumentation or how to introduce elements of spontaneity and emotional engagement into traditional worship settings. Incorporating real-world examples of successful integrations from contemporary church services could also provide students with practical models to emulate. Such examples could demonstrate how churches have creatively combined traditional hymns and contemporary worship music in ways that are both theologically sound and culturally resonant.

5. Perceived Career Readiness and Future Implications

The study's findings suggest that an integrated approach to church music education may better prepare students for the realities of modern worship environments (Porter, 2018). Participants reported a perceived increase in career readiness, citing their expanded skill set and adaptability as key factors. Many students noted that they felt more confident in their ability to serve in diverse church settings, where both traditional hymns and contemporary worship music are often expected. In today's church landscape, musicians are increasingly required to navigate a broad range of musical styles to meet the needs of multi-generational congregations. Churches that maintain a strict adherence to either traditional or contemporary music are becoming less common, with many opting for a more blended worship approach that appeals to a wider demographic. Musicians who are proficient in both styles, and who understand how to integrate them effectively, are likely to be in high demand. The findings of this study support the argument that church music education programs should prioritize the development of versatile musicians who can adapt to the changing needs of worship communities. By fostering both musical proficiency and theological understanding across a range of styles, such programs can ensure that graduates are well-prepared to lead worship in a variety of contexts (Smith, 2020).

6. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the impact of an integrated church music education program, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. One limitation is the relatively small sample size of 50 participants, which may not be representative of all church music students. Additionally, the 6-month duration of the program may not be sufficient to capture the long-term effects of integrated music education on students' musical development and career outcomes. Future research could address these limitations by conducting larger-scale studies with more diverse participant samples and longer program durations. Longitudinal

studies that follow students into their professional careers could provide valuable data on how integrated church music education influences their long-term success as worship leaders and musicians (Ward, 2019).

Another area for future research is the experience of church music educators in implementing integrated curricula. While this study focused on students, understanding the challenges and best practices from the perspective of educators could provide important insights into how to design and deliver effective programs. For example, research could explore how educators balance the demands of teaching both traditional and contemporary music and how they address potential resistance from students or institutional stakeholders. In addition, future research could investigate the impact of integrated church music education on congregational outcomes (Yoder, 2022).

For instance, studies could examine whether worship services led by musicians trained in both traditional and contemporary styles are more effective in fostering congregational participation and spiritual growth. This line of inquiry could provide further evidence of the practical benefits of an integrated approach to church music education.

Conclusion

The integration of traditional hymns and contemporary worship music in church music education presents a promising and comprehensive approach to preparing students for the complexities of modern worship. This study has demonstrated that such an integrated curriculum not only fosters significant improvements in students' musical skills and versatility but also deepens their understanding of the historical and theological foundations of church music. The balanced focus on both traditional and contemporary styles equips students with a broad skill set, allowing them to perform, arrange, and lead worship across diverse musical traditions, which is increasingly demanded in modern church settings.

The findings of this research indicate that students who undergo this type of education are better prepared to navigate the diverse worship environments they are likely to encounter in their careers. The significant improvements observed in students' performance and arrangement skills, as well as their enhanced knowledge of church music history and theology, suggest that an integrated approach does not dilute their proficiency in any one style. On the contrary, it strengthens their overall musical adaptability, enabling them to draw on the strengths of both traditional hymns and contemporary worship music to create meaningful and theologically sound worship experiences.

Moreover, this study highlights the positive attitudinal shifts that can occur when students are exposed to both traditional and contemporary worship music in an educational setting. The development of a more balanced and appreciative view of diverse worship styles suggests that integrated church music education has the potential to reduce the divisions often seen in congregations between those who prefer traditional hymns and those who favor contemporary worship. By fostering an openness to and appreciation for different musical expressions of worship, this approach may contribute to greater unity within church communities. Future church musicians trained in this way are likely to approach worship music with a more inclusive and

reconciliatory mindset, which is vital in addressing the so-called "worship wars" that have caused tensions in many congregations.

The challenges some students faced in integrating traditional and contemporary music styles underscore the importance of providing targeted instruction in this area. However, the overall success of the program in enhancing students' musical and theological competencies suggests that with the right educational support, students can overcome these challenges and develop the skills necessary to lead worship in a variety of settings. This aspect of the curriculum could be further refined in future iterations of church music education programs to ensure that students not only understand the theoretical aspects of musical integration but also have ample opportunities to practice blending these styles in practical worship contexts. Ultimately, the study underscores the growing importance of a balanced, integrated approach to church music education. As churches continue to evolve and embrace diverse musical traditions, the need for musicians who are proficient in both traditional hymns and contemporary worship music will only increase. Educational programs that embrace this integrated model are well-positioned to equip the next generation of church musicians with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required to lead worship effectively in a variety of contexts. By bridging the gap between traditional and contemporary worship practices, church music education programs can play a critical role in shaping worship experiences that are not only musically diverse but also theologically rich and spiritually engaging. This study contributes to the ongoing conversation about the future of church music education, offering insights that may inform the development of curricula that prepare students to lead worship that honors the past while engaging the present and future of Christian worship.

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