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Musicology through Biblical lenses: As many perspectives as there are Christianity(s)

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ABSTRACT: The Bible is a seminal canon on which entire cultures, institutions, systems of thought and disciplines are based upon. Since musicology entails a study of why and how human beings are musical, this discipline (musicology) is inclined to look into biblical interpretations and perspectives that guide human musicking. This study seeks to highlight the confluence of the Bible and Musicology and discuss ways in which different perspectives of the Bible have guided human musicking in specified contexts. This study was guided by the following general question: How have the multiple biblical perspectives interacted with the discipline of musicology? The study sought to answer the following questions: What factors that led to the many Biblical interpretations? How has the Bible been used as a source of data for empirical studies linked to musicology? How has the Bible impacted the way people think, theorize and therefore perform music? How is the bible applied in the study of new and emerging issues in musicology that pertain gender, environment, crisis and justice? Information from this study is going to inspire a dialectical approach to musicology related studies that are linked to theology and Biblical studies. The study will highlight how musicological information can be applied positively to societies and more specifically in congregational contexts to enrich the music related aspects of the liturgy. In addition to this, the study is going to provide information on ways in which musicology and biblical perspectives interact to provide solutions to current and emerging issues. Data from this study was sourced from existing academic journals, varied liturgical guidelines, and musicological reports. The Bible was used as a key reference in this study to as it provided contexts for the many perspectives.

Keywords: World Christianity (s), Musicology, Worship, History, Theology

Introduction

The term biblical perspective implies a paradigm, a way of thinking about a topic that is guided by biblical truths and knowledge. A contemporary use of the word bible describes it as an authoritative body of literature consisting of a collection of books used by Christians (Finstelbusch & Lange, 2012; Merriam Webster, 2021). Interpretation of the bible has evolved in the course of history. The biblical interpretations have not only been limited to religious studies but have been applied to other studies in the humanities and social sciences such as anthropology, history, philosophy, economics and sociology. This particular study focuses on biblical perspectives to musicology.



World Christianity(s) and Musicology

This study recognizes that biblical perspectives have been fluid and period specific. Developments in thoughts and ideologies around the globe have had a significant effect in the way the biblical content is interpreted and applied in different areas of human life. McGrath (2012) observes that the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine was a significant point in Christian history. Significant changes were made by Constantine in 321 when he established Christianity as the religion of the empire. Though there were divisions onwards, a major rift occurred with the protestant and catholic reformations in the 1500s. Key figures in the reformations include Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin. Groups such as Lutherans (From Martin Luther's German reformation), Calvinist (from John Calvin), Anglicans (English reformation) and Anabaptists (centred in Zurich) are examples of different Christian formations with varying biblical perspectives in history. In contemporary theology, movements now range from liberal Protestantism, modernism, neo-orthodoxy, ressourcement/la nouvelle theologie (the new theology), liberation theology, black theology, post liberalism, African theology, and radical orthodoxy (McGrath, 2012). This observation of plurality in biblical perspectives manifests as different denominations and Christian communities with a culture that communicates its own music systems as well as other aspects of liturgy. In Kenya examples of denominations and different Christianity(s)¹ include: Evangelical churches, Seventh Day Adventist churches, Roman and Charismatic Catholic churches, Anglican churches, Lutheran churches, and Assemblies of God churches, among others. Reily & Dueck (2016) note that though the different Christian groups may have a lot of beliefs and practices in common as a result of their overlapping histories, the processes of music making and the product of their music is directly linked to their doctrinal orientations and religious identities.

A biblical perspective towards musicology therefore has to be contextualized to the Christian's group history, process of music making and musical product. From the latter submission, this study observes that though there is a common seminal canon which all these religious entries read, a guideline can only be distilled from the biblical interpretations of a particular (specific) Christian group.

The field of musicology as observed by DeMol (2009) became an independent academic discipline in the 19th Century. DeMol (2009) maintains that this discipline was a response for the period's "hero worship" of composers and was aimed at shifting the spotlight from the composer to focus on the music. Yang (2020) notes that the nationalism movement in the 19th Century situated music as an important signifier of race. Classical composers who identified with a specific nationality attained a hero status. Yang (2020) gives an example of the German ideas of nationalism that "emphasized a common blood (Blut), soil (Boden), cultural past, and language and provides example of Bach and Beethoven who had been accorded the title of "supreme masters of German music". They were at times praised as embodiment of Nietzsche's *Urbemensch*² (p. 12). This period is also characterized by musicians' and scholars' regard of music scores and musician's works as 'holy'. Yang notes "*Performers of these 'great' works became the priests who communicated messages from gods; the intermediary between*



composer and listener. -The concert hall became the church, and eventually the reverent silence of the church's congregation became an expected practice in the concert hall" (Young 2020, p.11). This phenomenon is referred to as the sacralization of music. DeMol (2009) notes that traditional musicology was focused on the music and not on the study of music's social and cultural contexts. The main for ethnomusicology was focused on analysing music pieces, studying past performance practice, and compared the music compositions to the capacity of the musical instruments of the time. Music was the main focus of such musicology. However, a new focus of studying music as situated in culture was acquired and developed for over a thirty-year period. DeMol (2009) observes that this expanded musicological issues to include sociological, cultural and historical issues. It is at this juncture that musicology, ethnomusicology and biblical perspectives intersect. Missionary bodies such as the Wycliffe Bible Translators incorporate ethnomusicologists to help shape the music accompanying the Gospel into appropriate and relevant styles for the cultures.

This is a distinct approach as compared to previous modes of spreading the gospel through missionary work that as Shrag (2007) notes that missionaries discouraged the use of local art forms especially in the beginning of the 1700s. The same trend is evident in the mid-1900s, where Shrag (2007) notes that many protestant missions ignored local art forms and even demonized them. Agawu (2016) observes that these trends were used as a colonizing force to people Non-European and Non-American origins. Shrag (2007) expands this cause to include: to eliminate competing indigenous beliefs and traditions, and to encourage the thought of a superior European culture.

A missionary perspective that is sensitive to both traditional practices as well as Christian ethos is emerging guided by ethnomusicological studies. Shrag quotes a sociologist Paul Lewis (2007) who observes that the arts (which include music) provide a platform for us to celebrate the multitude of culture that God has created within the globe. He states that "*the picture of every tribe and tongue and nation*" *worshiping around the throne is not just a celebration of linguistic diversity ... but also a celebration of the wonder and wildness of God's greatest creation through their art*" (Shrag 2007, p.200). The concept of global diversity is emphasized in both the Old and the New Testament. Psalm 64:4 states that all nations should be glad and sing for joy. This verse suggests a multinational and multicultural approach to music and music performance. More biblical texts that address this include: Isaiah 52:10, Psalms 67:2, Psalms 22:27, Amos 9:12, Micah 4:2, Revelation 5:9, Revelation 7:9, Galatians 3:8, Revelation 14: 6, Revelation 15:4, Romans 16:26, John 4:42, Matthew 28:19, Mark 13:10, Matthew 24: 14, Luke 24: 47, Mark 16: 15, Mark 11:17 and Luke 2:31. These verses from both the Old and the New Testament recognize the global nature of Christianity and application of the Bible across the world. The verses emphasize an egalitarian perspective to cultures that respects and encourages diversity and difference of the world's cultures and Christianity.



An Archive and Repository of history

Musicology in a biblical context is dialectical in nature. Both musicology and the bible are not only disciplines, concepts and studies but also a human way of understanding life, creating new culture and sustaining particular elements of culture. The bible canon contains books that serve a variety of purposes that for musicological study. Biblical texts contain historical information of different cultures. The historical accounts are used in historical musicology in the study of the different cultures mentioned in the Bible.

The Bible is an archive and a repository of memory where a history of people's migrations, economy, political and social organization, myths, legends, architecture, science, and other forms of information about past lives of people have been archived. Shiloah & Gerson-Kiwi (1981) in their works titled 'Musicology in Israel 1960 – 1980' provide an account on works focusing musicology in Israel using biblical texts as historical data. Among works mentioned here include Robert Lachmann's essay titled '*Jewish Cantillation and Song of the Isle of Djerba*' which Shiloah & Gerson-Kiwi (1981) explain that they show a new way of analyzing and interpreting the Biblical chants. The *Haifa Music Museum* and *AMLI Library* founded in 1959 is mentioned to have significant projects that pertain Biblical historical information. Some highlighted aspects in relation to musicology and the bible entail: "Music in Ancient Israel", "Music in the Bible- the Bible in Music", "The Old Testament in World music". Some publications of exhibition catalogues mentioned include: "*Music in Ancient Israel* (Haifa 1974) and *The Old Testament in World Music* (Haifa 1976)" (Shiloah & Gerson-Kiwi 1981, p. 207). This perspective speaks to the historical contents and wealth contained in the Bible.

'Thoroughly equipping for every good work' I: Contextualized Approaches

The biblical text 2 Timothy 3:16 - 17 "*All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness ¹⁷so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*" confirms the bible's role in guiding the musicking³ process within the various contexts of Christianity that exist in the contemporary world. Work written on this theme has been context specific, that is, guided by the denomination or faith's interpretations of the bible. Spiritual leaders, musicologists and ethnomusicologists in these contexts refer to the Bible for an interpretation that guides the Christian communities' liturgical process and musicking.

Ebens (2001) book titled "Music in Worship" is an example of such work. Ebens (2001) observes that the issue of music and worship has been a point of contention and even split in church at the time of his publication. There was an increase lobbying in the church for change and relevance in terms of music. His work sought to answer two fundamental questions. First, he sought to find if there are moral implications associated with music. Secondly, he sought to establish guidelines to inform the church on music in relation to worship. From a study sample of 68 people (30 females and 8 men) and another of 350 students conducted in 1987 (an earlier survey), he observed that the preference of style varied according to age groups. The 16 – 25 age group revealed to have a broad range of appreciation of music styles. The age group under



16 years showcased a preference to rock, rap and jazz and a dislike to sacred and classical music. The age groups above the age of 25 according to his study shared largely similar preferences. From this survey he confirmed that the conflict in music preference was mainly between the ages individuals under the age of 16 years against the individuals over the age of 25. Eben (2001) offers guidelines that are specific to his congregation and recommends a similar study but with a contextualized approach for congregations facing the same issues. Among his recommendations include: a careful planning and structure for music activities with an appointment of a music director; education programs to nurture the musical talents of the young congregation, activities such a choir system, introduction of new songs and hymns, creativity concerts, inclusion of variety of instruments and evangelism through music activities. Ebens (2001) observes that the bible does not offer direct prescriptions of how music should be applied in worship. He notes that his guidelines stem from a summary of theological principles such as the doctrine of creation, the principle of incarnation, the concept of embodying the gospel content, and the doctrine that states that faith embraces every Christian life.

A similar work was done by Mwesa (1998). His essay titled '*The Choice of African Music in Adventist Education Institutions*' provides a criterion for choosing repertoire from African music for teaching both music and issues of faith in an African Adventist context. Mwesa's essay draws significantly from an ethnomusicological discipline, a distinct approach from Ebens (2001) whose work drew predominantly from a theological perspective. In his essay, Mwesa (1998) attempts to draw similarities and congruities in African perspectives of God, natures and functions of African music, as well as the significance of artistic import in music. This work is a response to the missionary endeavors that sought to erase and to some extent demonize African music. Though particular submissions may be unpopular in the contemporary musicological and even most Christian world views such as his views of rock music⁴, such works advocated for African music in education and in the church where there was none. Mwesa (1998) include an 'African' aesthetic experience and expression in music education in an Adventist context drawing from both the biblical perspectives and musicological perspectives in teaching and guiding according to 2 Tim 3:16. Both Eben's (2001) and Mwesa's (1998) work are prescriptive and offer directions and guidance to musicking in a specific Christian context.

'Thoroughly equipping for every good work' II: Broad Approaches

Biblical perspectives are also used to provide critical musicological insights to overarching themes that pertains to Christians in a general context. Such a work entails Femi Adedeji's, (a Professor of Music, musician and religious leader in Nigeria) article titled "*Christian music in contemporary Africa: a re-examination of its essentials*" published in 2015. In this article, Adedeji (2015) provides a definition of Christian music and provides prescribes parameters for its use and attribution. He (Adedeji) draws significantly from biblical texts. From this work, Christian music is described as a combination of all music used by Christians in whatsoever setting. He limits the agency of Christian music to only Christian musicians and advocates for



the musician to be versed in theology, and musical skills. In a dialectical thesis on forms and styles, Adedeji notes “*since we have not heard of a heavenly beat-style, we have no alternative than to use them* (the musical styles and sounds from assorted sources; pop, traditional, and classical) *in so far as they enhance the purpose*” (Adedeji 2015, p.93). Though this submission provides a critical perspective, it evokes further thought into a description of music that is used by Christians who use biblical texts as lyrical content of their music but consider their music secular. Ntagarawi (2016) presents Juliani’s⁴ definition of music in which he describes as “*hip hop with a taste of gospel*” (Ntagarawi 2016, p.45). Ntagarawi (2016) suggests a contextualization of the gospel music to youth culture for relevancy and effectiveness in passing the Christian message.

So far, this study has dealt with biblical perspectives to musicology. Musicological perspectives and approaches have been applied to biblically based music especially popular Christian music in various contexts. Examples of such work include Imani Sanga’s article “*The Practice and politics of hybrid soundscapes in Muziki wa Injili in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania*” published in 2010; and Jean Kidula’s article “*Simba Nguruma: The Labor of Christian Song in Polycultural, Multifaith Kenya*” published in 2019 as well as “*Music in Kenyan Chritianity: Logooli Religious Song*” published in 2013, and Roberta King’s book (chapter collection) titles “*Music in the Life of the African Church*” published in 2008. An critical look into such works is however beyond the scope of this study.

Emerging issues and directions

With the turn of the 21st Century, the global village is consistently shrinking and the issues of the world that now faced in one dimension of the world are felt in another dimension due to the interconnected nature of humanity at the time of writing of this paper. DeMol (2009) study focuses on crisis, justice and music from biblical perspective. She links her works and similar works of other scholars to the Biblical accounts such as the history of the Israelites who were held in captivity in Babylon and were unable to sing songs of their homeland despite their captors coercion highlighted in Psalms 137:4. Horst (2018) article titled “*From Queer Musicology to Indecent Theology: Liberal and Liberationist Protestant Theology and Musical Queerings of the Bible*” provides a biblical perspectives to queer voices in a musicological context. Such issues concerning gender combined with feminist studies, studies on race, decolonization, and the environment are topics that both musicologists and theologians are points of concern to scholarship.

Conclusion

This work sought to underscore biblical perspectives as applied in the field of musicology. The beginning of the study provides threads of definitions that connect biblical perspectives to musicology. The use of the plural form ‘perspectives’ recognize the many interpretations of the bible resulting to multiple theologies, Christianity(s) and hence many perspectives. The study differentiates the different purposes of the bible from which these perspectives emanate. The very nature of the Bible presents a multitude of functions for this Christian canon. This study picks on two main functions of Biblical texts and uses them as foundation for the discussions



that follow. First, is the nature of the Bible as a repository of historical knowledge which has facilitated its use in the musicology of music of Israel and communities mentioned in the canon. Secondly, the use of the term Biblical as pertaining the use of the Bible as an ideological source which the study explores as into main sections.

Though the study observes that an application of Biblical perspectives to ‘all Christianity(s)’ would be an ambitious fete, one that would consequently raise one ideology above the other, two main themes can be traced across most interpretations of the bible and across the various cultural contexts. First is the use of music in for worship, this has been underscored as imperative across all Biblical perspectives. The mention of music as a medium of man to connect with God was an overarching theme across the Biblical perspectives. However, the Bible does not explicitly dictate the type of music. This is area is subject to interpretation based on the varying theologies and cultures. The second is the need for a link between a people’s culture, aesthetic experience and musical practice.

Notes

- ¹. The term Christianity(s) is an adapted form of Christianities by Reily & Dueck (2016). It is used to in this paper to mean many forms of Christianity.
- ². Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*² – The term *Übermensch* can be translated directly as overman or superman and appears first in Nietzsche’s book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* written in 1883 – 1885.
- ³. The word *musicking* as applied in this paper is adopted from the coinage by Christopher small that coverts music from a noun to a verb form. This word entails all aspects that encompass music, from listening to playing music.
- ⁴. John Mwesa’s ideas on rock music identifies the genre as intrinsically evil, with sexually motivated songs and dances.

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