

Composition in Context: Musical Creation and Liturgical-Congregational Expectations

Marcell Silva Steuernagel

Translator's Note of Introduction

Fernando Berwig Silva

This text was first published as a chapter in *O Ofício da Música na Igreja*, organized by Werner Ewald in 2020.¹ Aiming at a broad audience of church musicians and leaders, the volume builds on the experiences of Brazilian musicians, scholars, and clergy working within the local context of Brazilian Lutheranism. Marcell Silva Steuernagel contributes to the collection with two pieces: the present translation and another chapter, “Resgatando o Passado no Presente: Tradição e Renovação na Dieta Hinológica do Protestantismo” (Rescuing the Past into The Present: Tradition and Renovation in the Protestant Hymnological Diet). This article hovers between a translation and an English-language version. I have included contextual information for readers unfamiliar with the realities of Brazilian Lutheranism, and edited the piece for brevity.

In my own academic work—engaging decolonial thought, contemporary praise and worship music, and Latin American liberation theology—I have often felt the need for perspectives such as the one Silva Steuernagel offers here: a normative theoretical framework grounded in lived experiences and localized contexts. Such a framework helps initiate conversations around creativity, reproductivity, and land-conscious relationships for local musicians and church leaders. Silva Steuernagel’s work also presents an important case of musical epistemological hybridization. The author successfully adapts—or “digests,” to invoke the anthropophagic framework adopted by Brazilian authors following the modernist movement of the 1920s—North Atlantic theological and musical paradigms into a localized, contextually attentive mode of reflection. My hope is that this translation provides a platform for the exchange of knowledge between Global South and North contexts—particularly by recognizing that epistemologies of the South contribute not only to the numerical growth of Christianity but also to its theological development. More importantly, beyond the specificity of local sounds, I hope that my translation of Silva Steuernagel’s text enables readers to reposition land, context, and agency at the center of worship practice—away from commodification, the reproduction of models, and the logics of a global hymnological market.

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For almost a decade, I taught musical composition workshops at the *Seminário de Música de Rodeio 12*, a summer music seminary which takes place yearly in Rodeio, Santa Catarina, South Brazil. In the context of the *Igreja Evangélica de Confissão Luterana no Brasil* (IECLB), [the largest Lutheran denomination in Brazil], “Rodeio 12,” as it is usually referred to by participants, represents a long-running and significant opportunity to train musicians that serve local Lutheran parishes throughout the country.

Over the years, I taught a mix of returning and new students, many of whom attended multiple summers. This mixture of continuity and diversity helped me understand how congregations—at least within the context of IECLB—confronted the challenge of musical composition within their communities’ musical lives. I also came to realize that many students shared a sense that their compositional contributions were undervalued. A few came to Rodeio 12 energized by local churches that valued musical creation and sought to empower these young composers, but most demonstrated a defensive posture toward their craft. My role was to encourage composition [as a vocation] and try to create in students a “compositional self-esteem” that could free them to create without feeling that they might be wasting time and energy, or transgressing non-verbal cultural and/or “theological” rules around music creation, particularly the notion that music creation is “something for those who have nothing to do.”

Our conversations about the office of the music composer would often veer into the path of the good [*“do bom”*]; in other words, what was, or was not, adequate for congregational musicking. “How can I learn how to write music that my church people



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actually want to sing?” was a common question that revealed an expectation: young composers wanted to write music that fit their context and wished to see their creative efforts validated precisely through congregational participation in musicking.

My goal here is not to essentialize local Brazilian congregations, Lutheran or not, as hostile environments for musical creativity. The polarization between a composer and the context in which they work (in this case, the congregation) is pervasive and unhelpful and rarely leads to productive dialogue about music creation. Conversely, the Romantic figure—defined in its Western, nineteenth-century sense—of the composer as a blessed (or cursed) vessel of muses that inspire composition in an almost mediumistic process similarly does not aid in musical formation, as it tends to focus on subjectivity rather than offering concrete pathways for musical growth. As Villa-Lobos famously said, “this thing of looking for inspiration, of letting the hair grow so inspiration comes, drinking, that doesn’t exist in me. I write when I need to.”²

Nevertheless, the composition of liturgical music happens precisely at this intersection between necessity and inspiration and begs the question: how to write music that suits one’s congregational context. The focus of this article is, therefore, the appropriateness of a composition to one’s congregational context.³ I want to address this problem by examining three perspectives on music and the context in which it is composed.

First, I investigate the necessity—or not—of continued efforts to write new music for Christian worship. Is it truly necessary to produce new liturgical music connected to the practice of the Christian faith?⁴ Is it not the case that there is a rich, varied, and sufficient repertoire that can meet the liturgical demands of the church?

Second, I analyze two distinct perspectives on music, context, and function. The first is historical, and emerges from the concept of *Gebrauchsmusik*, proposed by Paul Hindemith and his contemporaries as a reaction to the Romanticism of the nineteenth century, and which deals, specifically, with issues around the social function of music creation.⁵ A second, theological perspective focuses on the essential characteristics of congregational singing as proposed by Brian Wren in *Praying Twice*.⁶

Finally, I propose a “third way” regarding composition in context, in an attempt to navigate the tensions between an ideological conception of music creation, such as Hindemith’s; and Wren’s perspective, which is essentially theological. Although this alternate path recognizes and incorporates elements of the other two, it offers a hybrid conception that allows application in different contexts: the idea of environment and its resistances as a holistic approach to guide the work of musical composition in a congregational context.

“Sing a New Song”

Our first task is to justify the need and relevance of writing music for congregational use. One might argue that the church possesses an extensive, rich, and duly approved (theologically and ideologically) repertoire for use in worship. Why, then, write more music? Furthermore, one might argue that the church’s established hymnody has withstood the test of time and, therefore, has already assured its place in the canon. However, neither argument addresses composition as a theological mandate.

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Theologically, the story of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis is, first and foremost, a testimony to God’s own creative impulse.⁷ There is no force greater than God that demands the creation of the world from him; there is no external urgency that precipitates His decision to create. Creation is an expression of God himself and occurs in a completely free manner: the Creator engages in the process through word and action, putting His hands in the clay, walking in the garden. This creative impulse is inherent in created nature. If God creates humankind “in image and likeness” (Gn 1:27) and entrusts them with the responsibility of stewarding created nature—in other words, from God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gn 1:29–30) it is clear that this creative impulse is preserved in created beings. The creative impulse is part of us. And if creativity is part of what it means to be human and if it comes from God, why does it not warrant a place in the worship of God? If, as Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, God seeks worshipers “in spirit and in truth” (Jn 4:23)—who worship in a holistic way—why would the continuous use of creativity be excluded from this configuration? This concept of our image and likeness of God has a name: *imago Dei* (image of God). In the classroom at Rodeio 12, I remind students that composing is creating, and creating is part of how we were created. There is no need to apologize for creating or writing music.

The impulse to create can be expressed in various ways and in various forums. How does this impulse take shape in music-making? The Psalms are not the first hymns of the people of Israel; their compilation took place over a longer period, likely during and shortly after the Babylonian exile.⁸ Psalm 33 is just one of the passages in which the psalmist encourages God’s people to sing a new song and, in the same verse, “play skillfully.”⁹ There were songs of praise long before this in the history of Israel; yet, even after generations, the exhortation to sing a new song is still heard.

Why, then, does it seem so important to sing something new if there is previous repertoire that can be used? First, a new song denotes originality and, consequently, spontaneity. It is not repeating something already done, something memorized beforehand, or appropriated from another. Not that spontaneity is more important, or more essential, than other aspects of making music in the church. I simply argue that the new song represents an effort that, even if composed in advance, expresses something fresh and new, which is offered for use in worship. In this sense, a new hymn is contemporary: it expresses and reflects its time and context, for it is created within that context. Music composed today is born today and not yesterday or tomorrow. It is linked to its own today; it is linked to its time.¹⁰ And, based on this connection, the musical artifact has the potential to establish new relationships in time. If music is connected to its time, it is also connected to the crises and challenges, as well as the possibilities and opportunities of that time. I recognize that music from the past has something to say to us today; nevertheless, I propose that in this relationship between music and its own time, the dilemmas of a given context appear, in one way or another, in its music.

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History exemplifies this connection time and time again. In the liturgical-musical transformations arising from the Protestant Reformation, this relationship between worldview and musical practice is described by Blume in the opening of his classic *Protestant Church Music*: “Just as the Reformation, in its protest, reflected in various ways the intellectual currents of its time, so too did its music emerge from the stylistic environment of the era.”¹¹ Music speaks the language of its time. Even if other music, from other cultures and eras, has the potential to be relevant outside this original context, it is precisely in its own moment in history that a musical piece finds its cradle, for it is born in context.¹² I draw here on the words with which Paul concludes his description of David’s life: a man who knew how to “serve God in his generation” (Acts 13:36). I point to the relationship between the psalmist’s voice, which encourages the contemporary expression of praise to God in Psalm 33, and Paul’s recognition that, in serving the Lord, we do so in our own time and place. In this sense,

putting the creative impulse to write music at the service of the Kingdom means speaking the truth of the Gospel in context, always anew. Therefore, as in other aspects of the creative expression of the *imago Dei*, the role of the composer is essential for the church today to have a voice in its own time and place.

Hindemith and Wren: Function and Context

Now that we have answered the question about *whether* churches should keep creating liturgical, congregational music, we need to ask *how* they should proceed. The goal is to use these approaches as scaffolding to construct a new framework—a third way—for composition.

In the search for music suited to particular congregational contexts, questions often arise regarding the *functionality* of a musical work. The question “Does this music work for the community?” points precisely to the importance of this quality. What do I mean by functionality? Simply that, since it is written for a specific purpose in community life, that purpose is germane to its existence and influences compositional process and outcome. The idea here is not that this or that piece “produces,” on its own, a specific spiritual or emotional effect—such as contrition and repentance at confession—but rather that a musical piece fits appropriately within a context, meeting, in one way or another, the expectations that the context generates regarding its functionality. That functionality, I want to emphasize, is not related to musical style or genre. Rather, it is that specific interrelation of liturgical history, cultural context, and functional guidelines that is appropriate. It is also important to emphasize that this function can vary and need not be communal singing. Christian liturgy readily accommodates, for example, processional music or musical accompaniments linked to specific liturgical actions, such as confession. Just as there is liturgical variety among traditions and denominations, there are also multiple functional opportunities for music in this context.

Questions of functionality invite us to consider the concept of *Gebrauchsmusik* or “music for use.” This concept of musical composition was developed by a group of artists active in the political and ideological milieu of the Weimar Republic that, in the early decades of the twentieth century, sought to move away from the Romantic ideal of art for art’s sake in the pursuit of music that was connected to—and useful for—its context.¹³ The term came to be associated primarily with Paul Hindemith, who believed in music as something to be played rather than merely listened to—in other words, music that was not written to be performed exclusively by professionals. Hindemith himself preferred the term *Sing-und-Spielmusik* (or “music to sing and play”), but the term *Gebrauchsmusik* gained popularity and remains commonly associated with the idea of “functional music.”¹⁴ Auner describes this period in which many composers, instead of writing for the concert hall, became involved in composing music for children, young people, the working class, and projects linked to specific educational functions.¹⁵ Composing for these forums and audiences meant, in

many cases, modifying the technical parameters achievable in the composition. An amateur group, for example, does not possess the level of technical proficiency required to perform music written for professional performers (if it wishes to undertake this process, the group will likely invest a significant amount of time and effort in the project). Thus, Hindemith and his colleagues wrote to meet the demands of the moment: if there was a need for a duet for violin and bassoon, it was for this formation that they wrote. If the music was to be sung by children, it was written with the children's vocal range and lung capacity in mind.

Behind the concept of *Gebrauchsmusik* lie several political and social agendas. This is evident in Hindemith's own work. In *A Composer's World*, he states that

The composer, in addition to the mere technical practice of his craft, could be the helper and even the spiritual leader in a search for a more salubrious musical world: it should be his main objective to lift the consumer to a higher level by convincing him of the harm a constant yearning for entertainment produces; and as a means to this end the writing of suitable music for amateurs was recommended.¹⁶

The ideological aspect of how Hindemith viewed the composer's place and his music in society is evident in this quotation. Composers from the same circle worked under similar constraints, recognizing how they altered their compositional processes and languages. In a project originally shared by Hindemith and Kurt Weill, for example, titled *Der Ozeanflug* (1929), the composers explored radio as a substitute for the concert hall.¹⁷ Thus, when composing the music, the limitations of this mode of dissemination were taken into account so that the music would *function* when broadcast on the radio. Since radio frequency was limited, bass quality was poor, and the transmission itself was often unclear, composers strove to keep most of the music in the central range of the register and clearly outline rhythmic and melodic elements so that these would translate well on the listeners' receivers.

At least in part, the concept of *Gebrauchsmusik* is based on the relationship between compositional practice and functional *limitations* of some kind. A singing congregation church and a radio certainly offer different functional constraints. Nevertheless, in both cases, to acknowledge such limitations is to resist the deeply ingrained caricature of the Romantic composer who, accountable only to his muses, seeks to write the music he hears within himself without recognizing interpretive limitations. In that nineteenth-century caricature, concerns regarding the size of the ensemble, the acoustic environment, and the intelligibility of the material are secondary, as the composer's primary commitment is to his own work. Here, in the work of Hindemith, Weill, and other artists from the same circle, the composer recognizes potential interpretive limitations in advance, taking into account expectations and functional constraints, and integrating them into the creative process.

Would this model of functional music be suitable for the composer seeking to write for a church community? After all, the term “music for use” is still employed today, even to describe composers who write music for religious purposes.¹⁸ I fear that, especially if taken to the extreme, the *Gebrauchsmusik* proposal runs the risk of significantly limiting the composer’s creative potential. Others have already argued that this proposal would simply reduce the composer to a sort of *fast-food* cook who prepares what his audience [merely] wants to consume.¹⁹ It is not difficult to see how this reduction might occur within the context of the community, where a set of congregational expectations could significantly limit music composition. Hindemith himself sought to distance himself from the concept in later years, coming to redefine his position regarding music that is primarily functional.

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Although *Gebrauchsmusik* was important for creating distance between a Romantic conception of the composer and his creative process and a world recovering from the traumas of World War I in which Hindemith and his colleagues were living: a Europe grappling with ideas of a new morality and a new quest for objectivity, the proposal itself has limitations regarding music for communal use due to its potential to reduce the composer (in a caricatured way) to a musical demagogue who seeks, above all, to meet the demands of his consumers.²⁰ If this is the danger of an ideological-functional approach to musical composition, other theological approaches to music for use in worship suffer precisely because they emphasize, above all, the supremacy of the lyrics over the musical elements when assessing suitability for use in worship.²¹ What is needed is an approach that keeps both in appropriate relationship.

Toward this goal, let us now analyze a theological approach to music and its liturgical function. In *Praying Twice*, Brian Wren, a theologian and pastor, develops a theology of congregational singing. Our point of contact between Wren’s work, Hindemith’s concepts, and the subject of this text is specifically addressed in the second chapter of the book, in which Wren discusses “functional art” and lists a series of characteristics considered essential for congregational singing. Before proceeding, I must acknowledge that Wren’s object of study may differ from the type of work composed by the proponents of *Gebrauchsmusik*. Hindemith and his circle were hardly thinking of music for use in Christian worship, although this is one of the categories to which the concept of music for use readily applies.

Wren embraces the functional nature of community musicking and extends this understanding to church music in a comprehensive way.²² He states that “the autonomous power of song tunes reminds us that congregational song, like church music in general, is a functional art, meaning that congregational songs are sung during the church’s ordinary and festive activities, to add intensity to them and express their significance”—a definition that he draws from Don Hustad’s work in *Jubilate II*.²³ Wren also makes a few fundamental observations that would qualify music to function in this liturgical context. The first is that “functional” does not mean better or worse; rather, it is tied to a role. Furthermore, for him, not all music must be functional, but if it is functional, the music must be judged based on the fulfillment of its function. Finally, Wren observes that the concept of “functional” cannot be reduced merely to “functioning” like a cog in a machine and the fulfillment of that function; nor can it be based on the volume of applause, the frequency of participation in worship, or an increase in tithing.

We can see this axiom in the way Wren describes congregational singing: “Congregational song is by nature corporate, corporeal, and inclusive; at its best, it is creedal, ecclesial, inspirational, and evangelical. Each characteristic is theologically important.”²⁴ We can also see it in the way Wren elaborates on the concept of functional art and lists a series of “functional genres” distinguished by musical language and literary content in the following chapter. He lists hymns, choruses, canons, refrains, chanting, ritual singing, and spirituals (which he defines as improvised congregational singing) as functional genres employed in church singing.²⁵ Nevertheless, the connection between the conceptualization of functional art and the essential characteristics he attributes to this art in worship, as well as its categorization by genre, is clear in the chapter addressing the practice of congregational singing. In other words, there is a *practical* impact that arises from a *theoretical/theological* development of the function of music in the church.

This connection between theology (in Wren’s case), ideology (in the case of *Gebrauchsmusik*), and any other conception of the “ideal” role or function of music and its concrete manifestation in context illustrates the impact of the way we think about composition within a determined context.²⁶ Nevertheless, the models presented here have specific limitations, and none of them fully encompasses the range of musical possibilities in a congregational context. In Wren’s case, his suggested list of functional genres for congregational singing omits, for example, a significant portion of the formal and technical possibilities of music from the 20th century onward—possibilities that can be applied to congregational singing, even though this seems not to be common practice in most contexts.

There remains, therefore, the need for an approach to musical composition in a congregational context that, on the one hand, embraces experimentation and the exercise of creativity and, on the other, respects the expectations, limitations, and resistances inherent in and to each context. To this end, I offer here a third way: the idea of the congregation as a medium. My previous research, grounded in Mark

Sullivan's work on gesture and music, addresses the question of the medium and its resistances in relation to the practice of composition.²⁷ Here, I propose applying this elaboration to the problem of composition in a community context.

The Community/Congregation as a Medium

In his discussion of musical gesture, Sullivan examines the resistance that a specific medium offers to the characteristic features of a musical gesture (1984). The medium is the 'channel' through which a creative intention acquires concreteness, that is, takes shape in phenomenological terms. This is what I call elsewhere "the concretization of an aesthetic intention"²⁸: the composer, starting from a creative impulse, channels this aesthetic intention through a medium so that it becomes, in effect, music—sound in time. In the first instance, the medium of music is sound itself. Secondly, this sound does not exist in isolation from an actual means of generation and propagation, be it the human voice, an instrument, or any sound-producing mechanism—acoustic, organic, or electric—that transforms this intention into sound through a compositional act. Instead of emphasizing the musical "object" (or what is commonly called "music and lyrics") as the medium, I am pointing to the *mechanism* through which this musical object acquires phenomenological concreteness or is, in other words, actualized into concreteness. This perspective reminds us that all music is only heard if and when it is produced (or reproduced), no matter how much the 'recipe' for music may exist independently of this instance of music making (such as in the case of a musical score).²⁹ From this perspective, I propose a view that treats the community that sings and listens as a medium, just as I treat any combination of instruments, voices, or amplifiers as a medium.

Most seasoned composers will recognize in this claim a common aspect of the creative process. Composers always take into account media and their limitations, and such considerations alter the way the music is written, since each medium has specific characteristics. A flute and a tambourine, for example, have distinct mechanisms for sound production. In the case of the tambourine, sound is generated by striking the drumhead of the instrument. This sound has percussive characteristics: a rapid attack, followed by a rapid decay. The sound emerges immediately and disappears just as quickly. In the case of the flute, however, the generating mechanism is different: the breath. The player creates a column of air inside the flute's tube, the length of which is controlled by the keys. The characteristics of the sound reflect this mechanism, and the sound envelope can be manipulated by controlling the breath, and consequently the air inside the tube. The attack may be percussive, but it will not be the same as the tambourine's. The decay of the sound can be controlled, and the sound can be colored in different ways by manipulating the quality of the air that generates it.

These two examples illustrate the concept of a medium and its resistances in a simplified way and demonstrate the inherent limitations of each medium. What I referred to as "characteristics" in the previous paragraph can be considered precisely these limitations; other possible terms would be "restrictions," "constraints," or

“resistances” (this last being the term Sullivan uses in his work). This is because, unless there is some additional and auxiliary mechanism for sound production (such as the methods employed in electroacoustic composition, for instance), the flute will not produce a sound like that of the tambourine, and vice versa. In other words, each instrument possesses specific resistances. Sullivan describes such resistances apophatically:

There are traces that a medium cannot preserve. There are traces that a medium can preserve but, under certain conditions, won't. A medium is distinguished by the kind of phenomena it offers to the composer who wants to create an order in it and by the way it prevents the composer from creating some orders.³⁰

Such resistances, then, “shape” the aesthetic intention realized through this medium. A good composer recognizes this idiomatic relationship between the sound in their mind and the medium chosen to actualize this intention into sound. Conversely, the composer who is frustrated by the fact that the piano does not produce the sound of the violin is wasting their time. If what one seeks is the configuration of the violin's specific resistances, then it is better to write for the violin (unless, of course, that idiomatic misalignment is intentional). Learning to recognize these resistances and use them to enhance expression is one of the skills inherent to the craft of musical composition.

Resistances Inherent to the Community/Congregation as a Medium

Having defined the concepts of *medium* and *resistance*, we must apply them to a discussion of composition in a community context. What I suggest here is to view the community precisely as a *medium*. By viewing the community through this lens and applying some additional considerations we will discuss here, it is possible to identify certain significant *resistances* that compel the composer to “listen” to the community when writing music, taking into account its inherent resistances.

When the church sings, some of these inherent resistances come to light.³¹ The very term “congregation”—from the Latin *congregatio* or *congregare*, meaning a group that gathers or exists in assembly—indicates this nature; Christian worship is for the Christian community, for the gathering of the faithful. Although music intended for worship, or religious music writ large, can certainly exist independently of this context and, in fact, can be created or enjoyed in solitude or in a concert setting, church music is essentially communal, gregarious, and congregational. This characteristic runs through Christian theology, from “It is not good for man to be alone” in Genesis 2:18 to collective worship in Revelation 7:9. The Trinity is communion, and this essence is mirrored and shared by the church of Christ, reflected, too, in musical expression. Christian worship is the gathering of this church. There, this diversity and collectivity are experienced, among other ways, through music.

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Nevertheless, this group faces specific challenges related to its musical ability, music education and training, and vocal range (to name a few factors). A fundamental rule of orchestration holds, for instance, that the larger the forces involved in music-making, the more difficult it is to achieve light, airy sounds in performance. Fast passages, interval leaps, and rhythmic precision become more difficult with a large ensemble. A full orchestra that plays or sings with the agility and lightness of a chamber group is a rarity; on the other hand, this large orchestra can produce more volume and denser textures than a chamber ensemble. In other words, the more people singing/playing, the less agility. This is a challenge that composers who wish to write for the congregation must consider. It is not surprising that church hymns are, for the most part, composed of music with simple and regular rhythmic development that favors melodic movement in conjunct intervals, and presents functional harmonic characteristics aligned with the principles of Western music theory.³²

Another challenge that stems from this collective nature concerns vocal range. The composer who wishes to write for congregational singing faces limitations related to the variety of voices in the congregation, which present various registers. When writing for the congregation, one is conscious of extremes and seeks a comfortable range, which is an intersection of such variance (thus avoiding the lowest notes of the basses and altos and the highest notes of the tenors and sopranos). The range narrows, and there lies the resistance. Although I support challenging the community vocally by exploring the extremes of the vocal range, the composer must be mindful of this

resistance. At times, perhaps, it is advisable to push the community to the limits of the collective range, but it is important to bring it back to the “comfort zone.” If there is no return, vocal fatigue—which results from singing only in the extreme low and high registers—will result in a community that stops singing.

The third form of resistance mentioned here also concerns collective vocal expression. When writing for the community's voice, one must account for the vagueness of that voice. Those who are not accustomed to singing or have not been trained to do so often do not know whether they should “join in” the melody in unison, or in the octave immediately above or below that used by the musical leader. Not everyone knows whether they are a soprano, alto, tenor, bass, or baritone. One cannot assume the same level of musical literacy among worship participants. Thus, either time must be set aside to teach, repeat, and educate, or the material must be simplified so that it can be easily grasped by the congregation. Once again, I am not advocating a “pedagogy of simplicity” in congregational music-making. Communities should indeed be challenged to expand their musical horizons. But this is a process that requires time and planning. Surprising the community with music that ignores these challenges is unlikely to have an immediate positive effect.

It is important to understand how these resistances are reconfigured in cases of silent community participation: situations where there is music, but no expectation that the community will sing.³³ Take as an example processional music for the Eucharist or a musical offertory in which the community participates by listening; the resistances change. They are linked to the means chosen for playing and/or singing; that is, the particular mix of voices and/or instruments that will be used to make music. But some of the resistances, if not all, still apply in varying degrees. One example would be the issue of musical literacy. If the chosen musical language is, for example, twelve-tone atonality, care must be taken not to alienate the congregation, which will likely struggle to follow the music prepared for it. While participants familiar with these musical languages may indeed be primed for this type of listening, congregants unaccustomed to these languages may have difficulty actively listening. In any case, the congregation's musical profile must be considered when choosing the repertoire.

Moreover, seeking this connection between music and function, I would like to address the issue of resistance from a liturgical perspective. Communal music is functional in that it serves a purpose. This statement can be interpreted in various ways, and the hierarchy of this relationship can vary greatly. Saying that two things are linked, as in a pair, does not automatically describe how this relationship plays out, nor which of the elements carries more weight in the equation than the other. In practical terms, in some contexts, the music itself may carry more weight than the liturgical narrative in shaping musical decisions for the community. In other situations, it is precisely this liturgical function that will determine the repertoire. An example would be the choice of repertoire for an important date on the liturgical calendar, such as Reformation Day or Christmas, and the selection of music for a service that takes place during the ordinary period of the calendar between Epiphany and Lent. Each of

these situations imposes specific liturgical constraints that alter how the repertoire is conceived. We sing “Silent Night” at Christmas, for instance, and not at Easter. This approach recognizes the relationship between piece and context, between music and function. It does not, in this sense, exist for its own sake, but rather for a liturgical configuration. These resistances are created and configured precisely within this relationship and vary according to changes in the community’s “musical equation.”

Such “liturgical resistances” exist both in the macrocosm of the church’s musical practice and within the microcosm of the weekly service. To illustrate how these resistances take shape in practice, I offer a few examples. Let us imagine that one is composing for confession. Notwithstanding the extensive semiotic discussion regarding music as language and its signifying and indexical functions within a cultural construct, I would like to employ the terminology of “musical discourse” as a sonic configuration, the result of musical choices made by the composer and performers, to refer to a composition and its liturgical context. That is, “musical discourse” as a form of rhetoric and not as a form of language.³⁴

In narrative terms, the liturgy of the church emphasizes different aspects of the Christian life: confession, the proclamation of grace, the reading of the Gospel, the Eucharist, a benediction. Each aspect emphasizes a different aspect of experience. Add to this the homily, or sermon, and we have a rich and diverse repertoire of narratives.³⁵ We can use this “moment of preaching” to illustrate the use of theological content in music, especially in compositions with lyrics, which add a new layer to the musical discourse. If the preacher emphasizes the sovereignty of Jesus, for example, this emphasis creates a resistance that arises precisely through exclusion: in the search for alignment or liturgical dialogue, the composer writing music to engage with the preached theme must take a stance toward it.³⁶ If we introduce, for example, a piece that emphasizes the fragility of the crucified Christ as the Lamb of God, as in the traditional “*Agnus Dei*” of the ordinary of the Mass, this decision alters the portrait painted by the preacher regarding a sovereign Jesus. Alternatively, it complements this portrait by adding a new aspect to the community’s Christology or dilutes the impact of the sermon by introducing a new focal point into the narrative. In each case, participants in the service must negotiate these elements as part of constructing the service’s meaning. The composer must therefore recognize the liturgical context in which their music will be used and the resistances that arise from this context.

Let us imagine, then, a second example: the practice of confession of sins and its place in Christian liturgy. What is sought in this case is [usually] introspection, an inward gaze, a surrender of the heart.³⁷ In this case, an extremely active, high-intensity musical discourse, with a dense texture and/or prominent rhythmic characteristics, competes with the liturgical function (exceptionally, this may not be the case. I am, of course, generalizing), as the participant’s attention is constantly diverted by the intensity and activity of this discourse. The attentive composer recognizes the liturgical function and the challenges it presents and proposes appropriate material. Note that there is no bias here toward one discourse or another, nor toward a specific

technique or timbre that “facilitates” or “is appropriate” for the confession—this decision must be made within a context, not apart from it. There would be nothing wrong, for example, with using spectral music or modal pointillism in this context. A bombastic guitar solo, on the other hand, would hardly facilitate the act of confession, because of its potential to call attention to itself, pulling participants away from the liturgical context to the musical event. Other resistances could be mentioned here. The higher the quality of the interaction between composer and context, the greater their ability to discern the resistances inherent to a medium, such as the collectivity of community musical engagement, and other contextual factors, whether liturgical or extra-liturgical.³⁸

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by considering the configuration I propose as a system as a whole, to then relate the applications of this model to musical composition in a community context. I return here to a previous illustration of an instrument as a medium with specific resistances: the flute. A piece written for this instrument is more than a thoughtless reaction to any of these resistances in isolation. It is more like a dialogue between the composer’s aesthetic intentions and the *set of resistances* configured by the medium. Each resistance either facilitates or hinders a specific aspect of the musical gesture intended by the composer while also helping shape the music realized through this medium. The same notes written on a page, for example, will sound completely different when played on a djembe, a piano, or an organ. If the composer’s intention is performance through a specific medium, they must take this set of resistances into account in the search for a configuration that is formally coherent, musically valid, and functionally relevant.

One also needs to remember that, unlike an instrument, the community is not an inanimate mechanical device.³⁹ It is a living organism that responds in real time and is in constant dialogue with the music during its worship experience. There are variables that the composer cannot control in advance and that lie beyond the composition’s specific time. Such elements belong to the moment of musical creation, which can, as in the case of improvisation, exist simultaneously with the composition or at the moment of performance, well beyond the composer’s sphere of influence. As I mentioned earlier, a composition can be transferred from one context to another, both temporally and spatially, and each such transfer creates and modifies the configuration of resistances associated with the musical object.

My goal in this text was to present a holistic alternative that meets the diverse requirements of diverse media, with regard to musical composition in the context of communal worship. In justifying the nature of composition in the life of the church, I want to make it clear that I consider the composer’s task in this context to be essential and, furthermore, that I consider it an ethical and theological responsibility—especially if the composer considers themselves a member of the family of faith—to

discern this configuration of resistances in order to write music in a way that is relevant to the community (whether local or broader) and thus serve God in their generation.

The models I have examined here contribute to this dialogue regarding composition, especially in the way they negotiate the ideological or theological demands that govern—even if hidden—the way musical creation and practice are conceived within the sociopolitical context. My intention is not to disqualify any of the models presented, but to demonstrate the limitations of their applicability as a more flexible framework for addressing a composer's specific questions within a given context. Thus, the third way is an attempt to establish a path that acknowledges these resistances and, based on this acknowledgment, construct a kind of pre-compositional “scaffolding” that can guide the efforts of the composer seeking to fulfill this calling to write for the voice of the church.

Endnotes

¹ Werner Ewald, ed., *O Ofício Da Música Na Igreja* (Otto Kuhr, 2020). “The Office of Music in the Church.” In this context “ofício” could be translated as “office” or “occupation,” referring to all aspects of church music work, including curating, composing, leading, and designing liturgy and worship.

² This famous Villa-Lobos quote is part of an interview recorded in the United States in 1957. The composer conceded this interview, a little before his death, to the reporter José Roberto Dias Leme, one of the founders of “Voz da América.” The full interview is available at <https://conteudo.ebc.com.br/portal/projetos/2014/villalobos/>.

³ Original: “adequação,” or “adequateness.”

⁴ I make a difference between congregational music, and liturgical music. Congregational music is music composed for a community to sing. It requires the vocal participation of the church. Liturgical music is written to be used in liturgy, and it can be both vocal and instrumental, but requires from the congregation active listening.

⁵ In English, *Gebruchsmusik* could be translated as “music intended, by virtue of its simplicity of technique and style, primarily for performance by the talented amateur rather than the virtuoso.” See more in “*Gebruchsmusik*,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed April 1, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Gebruchsmusik>. Paul Hindemith (1896-1963), German, was a considered by many a radical avant-garde composer: Harold C. Schonberg, *The Lives of the Great Composers*, 3rd ed. (W.W. Norton, 1997), 544. Through his publications and music, Hindemith had great pedagogical influence on the Western music compositional tradition.

⁶ Brian A. Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

⁷ There are different theological interpretations of the creation account in Genesis. Nevertheless, I draw the reader’s attention to the fact that, while theological positions regarding the reading and interpretation of the creation account may vary, God’s creative impulse survives these different interpretations with considerable certainty.

⁸ William Jensen Reynolds et al., *A Survey of Christian Hymnody*, 5th ed., (Hope Pub. Co, 2010), 1.

⁹ Psalm 33:3. This is not the only place in the Bible where there is an exhortation to sing a “new song” (see, for example, Psalms 96, 98, and 149); even more common are the exhortations to sing praises to God (see Exodus 15:21 and 1 Chronicles 16:23). I chose Psalm

33 because of its combination, in the first three verses of a “new song” and the emphasis on art, or skill, in verse 3.

¹⁰ It is also true that the music of the past flourishes through new connections with the present; consider Mendelssohn’s vigorous promotion of Bach’s work in the early decades of the nineteenth century. For a comprehensive examination of that case, see: *Mendelssohn, the Organ, and the Music of the Past: Constructing Historical Legacies*, Eastman Studies in Music (Boydell & Brewer, 2014).

¹¹ Friedrich Blume, *Protestant Church Music: A History* (W.W. Norton, 1975), 3.

¹² I am not taking into account considerations regarding quality, market dynamics, or any other complicating factor that might influence the acceptance of a piece of music. None of these factors alter the logic of my argument, although they may affect its characterization.

¹³ From an ideological standpoint, Hindemith and his contemporaries were positioning themselves in opposition to the extreme complexity and the Romantic ideals embodied in the music of Wagner, Mahler, and Strauss, for example. I must acknowledge that this position was indeed aligned with (and influenced by) the Russian socialist ideologies of composers such as Prokofiev, who were also working under the banner of music “of the people and for the people.” Due to the trauma of World War I, many artistic movements of this interwar period were characterized by “a rejection of the intense emotions and subjectivity that characterized both Romanticism and Expressionism.” Joseph Henry Auner, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 87-88. Austin describes Hindemith, especially in his youth—precisely the moment when the composer developed the idea of music for a specific purpose—as one of the most courageous radicals in the music of his generation in Germany: William W. Austin, *Music in the 20th Century: From Debussy through Stravinsky* (W.W. Norton, 1966), 397.

¹⁴ Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth Century Music: A History of Musical Style in Modern Europe and America* (Norton, 1991), 225.

¹⁵ Joseph Henry Auner, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, Western Music in Context: A Norton History (W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 92.

¹⁶ Paul Hindemith, *A Composer’s World, Horizons and Limitations*, The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1949-1950 (Harvard University Press, 1952), 219.

¹⁷ Auner, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, 92.

¹⁸ Alex Ross, for instance, makes a similar statement in *The Rest is Noise* (Ross 2007, 515).

¹⁹ Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 186. Schonberg also dismissed the initiative of Hindemith and his colleagues as an exercise doomed to failure, due to its deliberate elimination of the expressive character of composing: Harold C. Schonberg, *The Lives of the Great Composers*, 3rd ed. (W.W. Norton, 1997), 546.

²⁰ Auner, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, 85-89.

²¹ This logocentric characteristic of theology is not unique to Wren’s work, which will be analyzed here. A more comprehensive critique of this issue can be found in my book: Marcell Silva Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, Congregational Music Studies Series (Routledge, 2021), 22-23.

²² Wren, *Praying Twice*, 76.

²³ Wren, *Praying Twice*, 84. His source is: Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate II: Church Music in Worship and Renewal* (Hope Publishing Company, 1993).

²⁴ Wren, *Praying Twice*, 84.

²⁵ Wren, *Praying Twice*, 123. The third chapter of Wren’s book is quite practice-oriented and addresses various issues, such as church architecture and sound systems. The author’s concern is to answer practical questions regarding the development of the church’s music ministry.

²⁶ I do not wish, here, to be accused of a kind of veiled Platonism. Simply establishing the connection between the idealized and the realized does not mean embracing a Platonic position regarding the nature and practice of music.

²⁷ For a more in-depth discussion of the question of the medium and its resistances in relation to the musical gesture, see: Marcell Silva Steuernagel, “O GESTO MUSICAL ATRAVÉS DO MA: UMA ABORDAGEM ALTERNATIVA DA FORMA NA COMPOSIÇÃO MUSICAL” (Universidade Federal do Paraná - UFPR, 2008). A more abbreviated version of the same argument can be found here: Marcell Silva Steuernagel, “O Gesto na composição musical,” *Revista Vórtex* 3, no. 1 (2015), <http://periodicos.unespar.edu.br/index.php/vortex/article/view/758>.

²⁸ Silva Steuernagel 2008, 23.

²⁹ I use “played” here both in the sense of “live” music, which is performed during worship, and in the phonographic sense, recognizing that the mechanical reproduction of music is part of musical practice in different community contexts.

To continue this discussion, let us think about a musical score. For a more comprehensive discussion of issues related to Western musical notation, see: Trevor Wishart and Simon Emmerson, *On Sonic Art* (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996).

³⁰ Mark Valentine Sullivan, “The Performance of Gesture: Musical Gesture, Then and Now” (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1984), 13.

³¹ In this section, I am oscillating between the idea of the community, as a group that gathers, and the idea of the congregation which participates in the music by playing or singing.

³² There are also non-musical reasons for this preference for consonant intervals and regular metrical movement. One example would be Calvin’s vision of reverent and majestic music for worship and the way this vision took shape in the 1562 Geneva Psalter.

³³ For a summary of silent participation in congregational musicking, see chapter 3 of my book: Marcell Silva Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, 65-98.

³⁴ I avoid here the word ‘text’ in relation to the narrative/theological content of worship, as this is a term that can be interpreted in various ways, especially in the context of a discussion regarding the construction of meanings and contents.

³⁵ For the question of “diet,” as a useful analogy in the context of worship, see my other article originally published in the original Portuguese edition of the journal in which this article was published: Marcell Silva Steuernagel, “Resgatando o Passado No Presente: Tradição e Renovação Na Dieta Hinológica Do Protestantismo,” in *O Ofício Da Música Na Igreja*, ed. Werner Ewald (Otto Kuhr, 2020).

³⁶ Not necessarily through alignment, as it may do so through complementarity or contrast, or even by emphasizing a specific aspect of a theme.

³⁷ The formal triptych of *the Kyrie* demonstrates this liturgical approach through the repetition of each section (*Kyrie, Christe, Kyrie*), which emphasizes the meditative nature of this section of the Ordinary.

³⁸ It is obvious that, once the composer finishes the piece, they lose their connection to the context, insofar as their music can be transported to other contexts and incorporated into other narratives. In such cases, the curation of these functional resistances and expectations falls to the person responsible for planning the liturgy and making musical choices within that context.

³⁹ It is not that the instrument is not interactive, but that this interaction depends primarily on the performer’s manipulation of the medium and not on the medium itself, in the case of a mechanical instrument. The medium may be intertwined with the performer, as in the case of the human voice. In this sense, the level of intermediate mechanical (or electronic) layers is also an important resistance factor for the composer to consider.