

Reevaluating Church Music in the Context of Contemporary Life and Modern Musical Culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper reevaluated the repertoire of church music with reference to contemporary life and recent musical culture with a special focus on the Methodist youth community in Sarawak, Malaysia. Following the considerations of Zoltán Kodály's pedagogical philosophy as well as Charles Wesley's contextual hymnody, the research clarified the ways in which faith and culture may meet in music that connects to the present believers. Through historical and theoretical investigation, musical analysis and quantitative research of 55 participants from 14 churches, the study has found a gap between the traditional hymnals and the contemporary youth expression. Results indicated that a new contextual repertoire that is based on cultural familiarity, pedagogical reach and theological depth can renew congregational participation and spiritual development.

Keywords: Kodály method; Charles Wesley; Wesleyan hymnody; church music; Malaysia; Methodist youth; cultural contextualization

INTRODUCTION

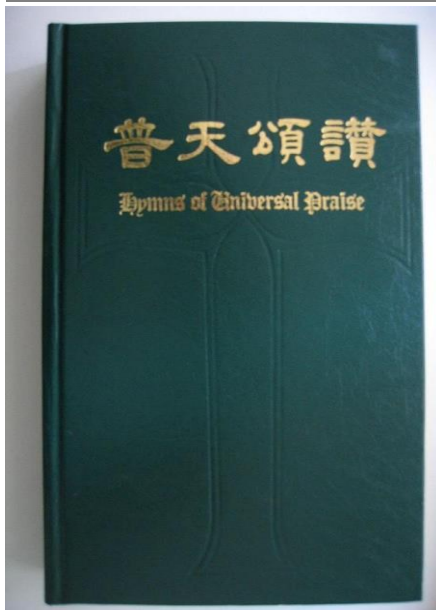
The church music has served not only as an liturgy in the history of Christianity, but also as a theological speech and a cultural identity. Since the song of the early church up to the vernacular hymns of the Protestant Reformation, innumerable forms of sacred music have been developed, according to the spiritual and social life of the faithful. ¹ In the twenty-first century, this dynamic tension between tradition and change is observable in the Methodist churches of Malaysia, where the youth in the church is growing less connected with conventional hymnals from their lived reality.

This research is inspired by the pedagogical philosophy of Zoltán Kodály and musical theology of Charles Wesley. Kodály thought that people needed to learn the music of their own culture and language, to cultivate literacy and appreciation through familiarity. On the other hand, hundreds of years ago, Wesley composed the hymns that embodied the daily struggles and joys of believers and made the doctrine a matter of personal devotion. ² They both saw music as a democratic art and as a means of connection between art and life, faith and culture.

In the Methodist Church Sarawak Chinese Annual Conference (SCAC), the youth members form a significant part of congregational life and they are inquisitive and willing to be creative. However, a lot of people feel out of place with the old Hymns of Universal Praise (1936), which outdated language and alien harmonic idioms no longer appeal to their generation.

¹ Piero, W., & Richard, T.(2008), P.21

² Andrew,T., Ronald, Y., Hui Ming,L., & Philip, S. (2020). P.55



Picture 1

“Hymns of Universal Praise”, 1936 published in Shanghai

Song collections from Martin Luther, Isaac Watts to Fanny Crosby, John Newton

On the contrary, imported modern worship songs, which are often modelled on Western pop idioms, appeal to the heart, but may not fit to the theology concept or culture. That gap raises a desperate missional question: how can church music reflect modern life without losing sacred identity? The paper will address this question by discussing the reconstruction of church repertoire that is musically accessible, culturally contextualised and spiritually formative to the Malaysian Methodist youth community.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach that integrates historical–literature analysis, quantitative survey research, and musical analysis to examine the applicability and relevance of church music among Methodist youth in Sarawak. The methodological design is informed by Zoltán Kodály’s pedagogical philosophy, particularly his emphasis on cultural familiarity, linguistic accessibility, and progressive musical literacy, and is further situated within the theological and historical framework of Wesleyan hymnody.

The quantitative component consisted of a questionnaire distributed through the youth networks of 14 Methodist churches within the Sarawak Chinese Annual Conference. A total of 55 respondents aged between 10 and 30 years participated in the survey. While the sample size is limited, it is appropriate for the exploratory and contextual nature of the study, which seeks to identify patterns, tendencies, and perceptions within a specific ecclesial and cultural setting rather than to achieve broad statistical generalization. The inclusion of participants from multiple congregations enhances the internal diversity of the sample and provides a representative cross-section of active Methodist youth involved in congregational life, including choir members, worship band participants, and youth fellowship members.

The questionnaire comprised demographic items and structured questions designed to elicit information on musical preferences, frequently discussed topics in daily life, perceived stressors, and desired themes for church songs. These questions focused on concrete experiences, such as commonly listened-to music, everyday conversations, and sources of stress; in order to capture the lived realities of respondents and their expectations of church music. This design supports the study’s aim of understanding how worship music may resonate with contemporary youth experience.

Data were collected using Google Forms and analysed through descriptive statistical methods, including frequency counts and percentage distributions. While self-reported data may be subject to limitations such as social desirability bias or recall bias, several measures were taken to mitigate these effects. Participation was anonymous, reducing pressure to provide socially acceptable responses, and questions were framed in a neutral, non-evaluative manner to encourage honest reporting. Furthermore, survey findings were interpreted in conjunction with musical analysis and historical-theological inquiry, allowing for methodological triangulation and reducing reliance on any single data source.

Musical analysis constituted a further methodological layer of the study. Selected traditional hymns, contemporary worship songs, and frequently cited popular songs were examined comparatively to identify stylistic patterns, including melodic range, rhythmic structure, harmonic language, and functional purpose (congregational singing versus individual listening). Rather than treating musical examples impressionistically, the analysis followed consistent criteria across repertoires, enabling systematic comparison. This comparative approach supports the articulation of a proposed contextual model of church music that balances congregational accessibility, cultural familiarity, and theological depth.

The integration of quantitative data, musical analysis, and historical-theological reflection provides a multidimensional perspective on church music as a dynamic expression of faith shaped by culture, pedagogy, and lived experience. In a conclusion, these methods inform the study's proposal for the development of a culturally competent and educationally effective church music repertoire for the Malaysian Methodist youth context.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The combination of music pedagogy, theology, and cultural adaptation contribute to the theoretical background of the current study. The philosophies of Zoltán Kodály and Charles Wesley serve as its central pillars.

Zoltán Kodály's Musical Philosophy

During the educational reforms of the early twentieth century Hungary Zoltán Kodály stressed that music education should start at an early age, and it should teach with one's own cultural materials. The essence of his learning using the Hungarian folk songs as pedagogical musical literacy material was based on the belief that familiarity leads to accessibility and national pride.³ Kodály was of the opinion that music literacy should not be restricted to the professionals and all people ought to be able to understand, perform, and appreciate music.⁴ His pedagogical ideal of music education and his democratic vision of people learning best when music mirrors their linguistic and cultural patterns form the basis of the approach of the current study to the church music. This makes it culturally relevant yet enriching to the music experience of the Malaysian Methodist youth.

Charles Wesley and the Methodist Hymn Tradition

The founder of Methodism, Charles Wesley had a great influence on the hymnody of the church as he combined the spirit of sacred and secular emotions in his songs to show the theological and emotional possibilities of the contextual music. "His Family Hymns" (1767-1776) dealt with a variety of situations in day-to-day life such as childbirth ("Thanksgiving to Her Safe Delivery"), education ("At Sending a Child to Boarding School"), illness and labour, giving faith a strongly anthropological human touch.⁵ The power of his poetic and lyrical depiction enabled him to sing theological truths using familiar stories.⁷ The cooperation between Wesley and John Frederick Lampe who was a composer depicts the union of theology and modern music trends. Wesley made faith available to the people by modifying the tonal idioms of popular music and preserving the poetic rhythm. His hymns were aimed at singing in unison and effortlessly, which corresponds to the principle of participation

³ Halford, E. L., Paul, H., & Robert, W. G. (1926), P.162

⁴ Board of Archives & History. (n.d).

⁵ Halford, E. L., Paul, H., & Robert, W. G. (1926), P.107-110

⁶ W.H.O., 2010, para.1 & The first vaccine section, para 1.

⁷ Halford, E. L., Paul, H., & Robert, W. G. (1926), P.106

by the congregations.⁸ This emphasis on the voice of the people as opposed to elite musicianship is similar to populist educational principles of Kodaly. His method shows that theology can make the mundane experience holy.

Reformation Legacy: Luther and Calvin

Both Martin Luther and John Calvin developed congregational singing as a faith expression. Luther has written hymns in the folk theology and based on basic folk melodies, whereas the Genevan Psalter of Calvin democratized worship with metrical psalmody that could be easily sung by people. As these historical precedents show, the renewal of church music is based on its cultural and linguistic appeal and the possibility to speak to the voice of the people. Their heritage is shown in the philosophies of Wesley and Kodály, both of which advocated the availability of sacred art.

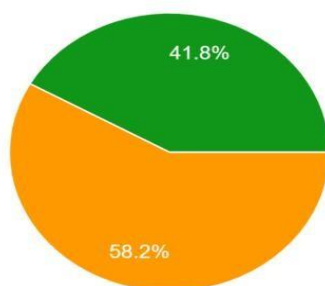
Methodism in Malaysia: A History and Culture.

The Methodist Church came to Sarawak in the early part of the 20th century with missionary James Hoover whose education and social activities had a great influence on the society. The church has since expanded throughout the decades to be one of the most influential Christian organizations in East Malaysia. Nonetheless, its hymnody also has a considerable number of linguistic and stylistic remnants of the Western sources. Classical Chinese written hymnals are becoming less readable by the young Malaysian generation and the melodic nature of much of the traditional hymns is a challenge to the skills of local musicians.⁹ One of the pillars of Chinese Methodism, the “Hymns of Universal Praise” (Shanghai, 1936) is still used, but its vocabulary and difficult harmonies are incomprehensible to many younger members of the congregation. Therefore, most churches have embraced the imported modern songs which are usually Western or Chinese pop-style worship songs. Newer styles, though emotionally coloured, often lack local linguistic delicacy and theological underpinning which reflect entertainment and not formation.

FINDINGS

Demographics and Listening Trends

Gender
55 responses



Age Group

The total number of respondents involved in the study was 55 people from 14 Methodist churches in Sarawak, Malaysia. The distribution of male and female participants was 58.2% and 41.8% respectively. Most of the participants were aged between 20-30 years. The participants were all active church members and had been involved in one way or another in the musical life of the church choir, worship band, or youth fellowship. The information served as a description of a modern digitalized, culturally diverse, and musically diverse Methodist youth. Out of the 305 song titles given, there were 66% (203) and 34% (102) church and pop songs respectively.

⁸ Halford, E. L., Paul, H., & Robert, W. G. (1926), P.115-116

⁹ Halford, E. L., Paul, H., & Robert, W. G. (1926), P.164-172

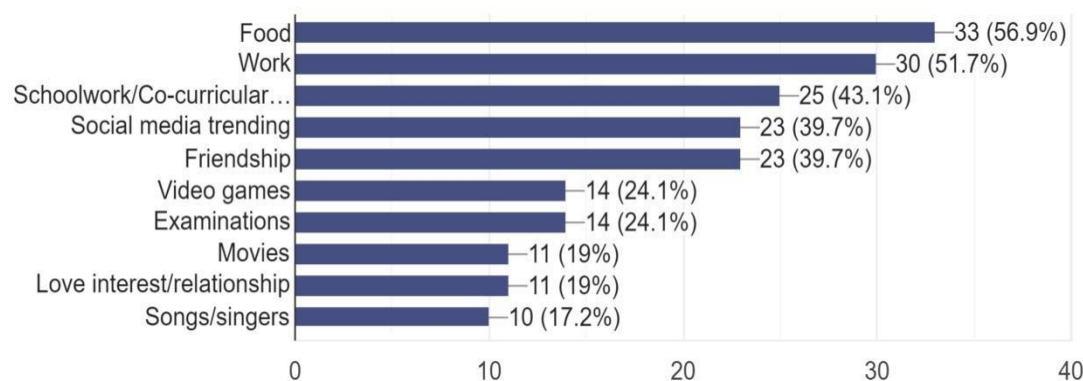
This balance signifies that faith-based music is still the centre of everyday life while being accompanied by secular listening patterns.

The musical examination of the most-cited examples indicated that there is a strong similarity on the stylistic level in the categories. The examination of the mentioned repertoire has shown that the repertoire exhibited three interesting tendencies: harmonizing harmonic means of sacred and secular genres, the use of moderate rhythmic energy characteristic of global pop and the emotional instead of dogmatic focus in the subjects of the songs.

- The most popular church song, “Won’t give up”, had melodic features of repetition, narrow vocal ranges, and fixed rhythms which were suitable for congregational singing.
- The pop song “You Are Everywhere” had complicated rhythms, broad vocal ranges and improvisatory phrasing features of the music intended for listening but not for singing in groups.

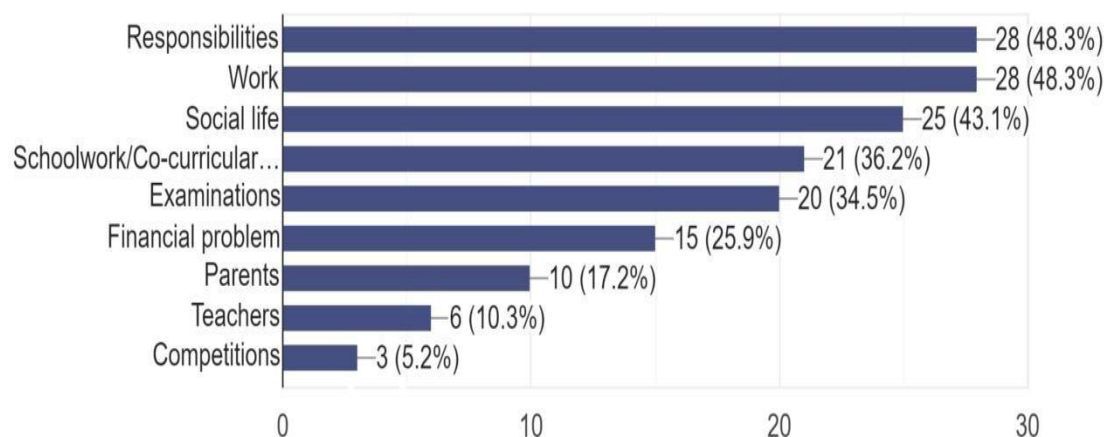
Although the two styles were different in terms of functionality, they had harmonic similarities that included diatonic progression, stepping bass movement and repeated chord progression. The results in this context point to the intersection of sacred and popular idioms, which allows it to be believed that the stylistic convergence might be used as a means of renewing worship.

Cultural Preferences, Daily Conversations and Stress Factors



Topics in the conversations of daily life

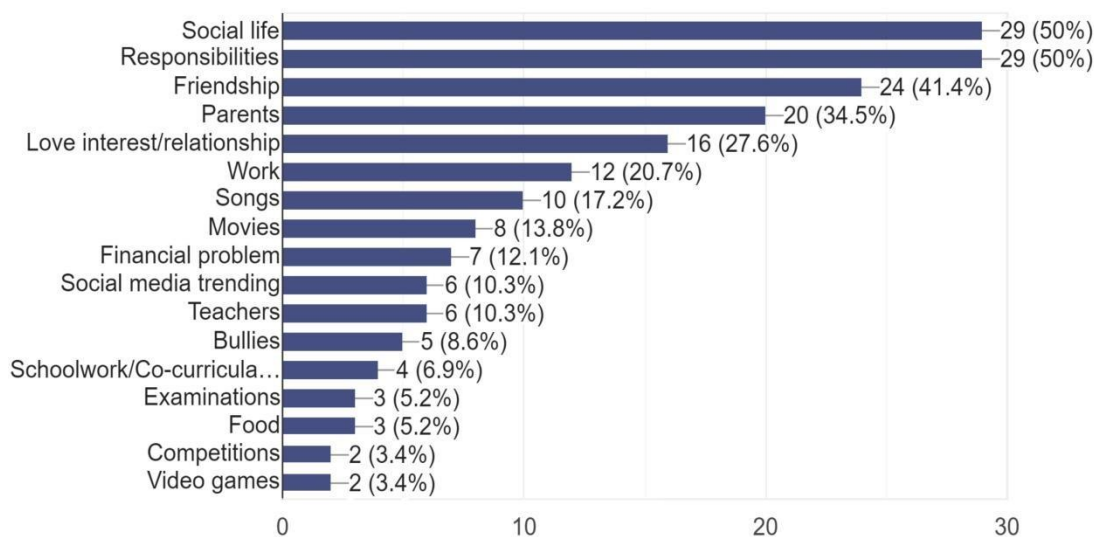
In regards to the frequent topic of the conversation, food, work, and school life were found to be discussed the most, followed by social media, friendship, video games, examinations and movies. These themes are a reflection of the realities of Malaysian youth in their daily lives which shows a lived culture more focused on social and pragmatic themes than doctrinal aspects. In a follow-up query that identified the recent conversation issues, recreation, work, and study were described as the leading categories. In the meantime, the “relationship” and “future” concerned mentioned both emotional and existential aspects of youth discourse.



Stressors

Moreover, the usual stressors were responsibility, work, social life, schoolwork, exams, financial matter, parental expectations and so on. These aspects are very congruent with regional sociological information of the Malaysian youth anxiety. The findings indicate that the faith communities might offer emotional and spiritual help in the form of music that deals with these struggles in the companionship of God in the present-day anxieties.

Desired Church Song Themes



Themes that should be included in church songs

In response to the question about the theme to be considered for church music, the answer was more about social life, responsibilities, friendship, parents, love/relationship, work life and so on. Although faith or church issues seem to be less prominently discussed in casual conversation, when asked to mention desired themes of future worship songs, respondents ranked them higher. The inclusion of 'love', 'work' and 'comfort' are indicative of a need to have the songs that get in touch with the human soul and heart, and merge theology with reality in the world similar to the hymns of Wesley. This convergence highlights an opportunity to reconnect theology with lived reality.

DISCUSSION

Musical Characteristics

There is a musical parallel between the traditional hymnody and the contemporary worship repertoire that leads to a recurrence trend in the history of church that effective worship music is both available and relevant. In Sarawak, however, language and emotion are estranged because the favoured source of hymns remains Classical Chinese. Younger pianists who may lack experience in playing find it difficult to be complex in the harmonic content of the old hymns. This disconnects and undermines communalism of worship. In comparison, pop-infused church songs are immediate and emotional but may not be theologically deep and educative. The issue thus, is how to combine musical accessibility, familiarity with the culture and spiritual integrity.

Bridging the Gap: Toward a Contextual Repertory

The paper proposes the establishment of a new Malaysian church music based on the current language and culture. It needs to rely on well-known, pedagogically useful melodies in the tradition of the Kodaly model, but like Wesley, it must write about real life. One possible approach will be to attract lyrics by the testimonies of communities as the most ordinary stories which are the reflection of the true emotion and theological fact. They are able to involve church musicians, educators and youth leaders in the creative process in order to make sure

that there is diversity of expression. The church must make songs such that the introduction of the harmonic and melodic aspects is slow, and therefore, musical learning occurs in steps. The combination of Western harmonic traditions with the Asian musical sensitivities and the native languages can help.

Theological/Philosophical Implications

The main theological issue, which arose during this study, is how it is possible to contextualize without theological dilution. Past experience supports the tracing of sacred music renewal as having always involved cultural translation. While the chorales of Luther were based on folk melodies, the hymns of Wesley took their pattern of the contemporary lyric and the pedagogy of Kodaly was based upon folk song. Similarly, the Malaysian churches have a right to rely on their linguistic and musical background to present the same truth about the gospel. The statistics indicate that young people do not experience authentic worship by focusing on its stylistic faithfulness to tradition, but in its relational relevance, music that addresses them in their own language and their own language. Renewal therefore entails inculturation (gospel in regional expression) and transculturation (global/local dialogue).

Relevance to Contemporary Church Practice

The contemporary churches are confronted with the problem of reverence and relevance. In this study, the authors have indicated that the relevance does not necessarily have to destroy the sacred. The church can keep up with its historical mission of renewal through the grounding of musical creation on theological reflection and cultural sensitivity. The Malaysian Methodist community, in a manner akin to the early reformers, can therefore re-discover a sound repertoire doctrinally and musically vibrant and emotionally alive which is a very real manifestation of faith in culture. Therefore, the research is not only culturally relevant but can also help in establishing youth empowerment and have a positive educational impact. Music can function as an educational tool as well as an avenue to address emotional and social realities such as love, stress and work through theological reflection.

Limitations and Future Recommendations for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size and regional focus restrict the generalizability of the findings beyond the Sarawak Methodist Church youth context. Moreover, the cross-sectional design captures preferences and perceptions at a single point in time and cannot account for changes in musical taste or spiritual development over longer periods. The study also relies primarily on survey data, which is effective for identifying trends, but does not fully capture the depth of individual musical or theological experiences.

Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to examine how musical preferences and theological engagement evolve over time. In-depth qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, or participant observation during worship services would further enrich understanding of how music functions affectively, pedagogically, and spiritually within congregational life. In depth comparative studies could also illuminate how contextual factors shape church music practices, and would provide a more valuable and empirical evidence in this study.

CONCLUSION

This paper indicates the necessity to revise the church music in such a way that it can be a genuine reflection of the current culture of believers. The results reveal that the richness of the spiritual content combined with the influence of modern musical idioms makes Malaysian Methodist youth prefer more relatable and emotional songs that have a spiritual context. Relationship, responsibility, and comfort are major themes in their concerns, which indicates that they are shifting towards individual and contextual worship. Based on the educational philosophy of Kodály and the theological ingenuity of Wesley, there can be a renewed church music repertoire, a pedagogic and devotional repertoire. With such a repertoire, the church will not only enhance congregational involvement but also develop a musical and spiritual literacy among future generations. Ultimately, it is not an

aesthetic movement, but a necessitated theological reconsideration of the repertory of church music. It is yet another affirmation that faith, to stay alive, must incessantly seek its expression in the music of the people.

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Statement and Declarations

Ethical Considerations: The Internal Review Committee of the Zoltán Kodály Pedagogical Institute of Music, Ferenc Liszt Academy of Music, Hungary has approved it (Approval No. MA2-DTHH-2022).

Consent to Participate: All the participants provided informed consent in written form.

Consent for Publication: Not applicable.

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Data Availability Statement: The data created and evaluated in the context of the present study can be shared by the respective author in case of a reasonable request.

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