

# *Organic Zombie & Synthetic Soul; The Unity Between Preservation & Progress in Contemporary Church Music*

Nishan Varatharajan

*Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney*

The article explores the relationship between modernism and traditionalism in contemporary church music. Beginning with a once-revolutionary organ at St Anne's Anglican Church in Sydney's west, the essay examines how the church has adjusted to rapidly changing social conditions over the course of the 20th Century. I utilise the concepts of 'zombie categories', 'liquid modernity' and authorised idealism to address common misconceptions that progress and conservation are diametrically opposed ideologies. In addition, I attend to the challenges presented by hybridity in an attempt to produce a delicately balanced report. The key discussion of the paper lies within the examination of tension. I examine the church's staggered system of acceptance regarding progressive music, and how the gap between spiritual and secular music continues to lessen with contributions from both sides. I wrestle with the movement of the church from musical trailblazer to conservative; in stark contrast to the evolution of jazz, rock, blues, funk and hip-hop outside of the church. This is especially pertinent due to these genres roots in gospel music. More importantly, I delve into the underlying convictions that drive both liturgical modernists and traditionalists. This was when the research proved most surprising. Indeed, as I contrasted the two school of thought, I found that their shared desire for an ideal and the lack of authority to ratify that ideal, in particular, were of prodigious noteworthiness. It is here that the discussion of hybridity, and the logic of its inherent paradox, diverts the essay's focus from tension to resolve.

It was the evening of December 4th, 1895, and an organ craftsman by the name of Charles Richardson was unveiling his latest creation at St Anne's Anglican Church, Strathfield. Standing two storeys high, the immense instrument boasted revolutionary tubular-pneumatic design and was hailed as "a triumph of mechanical skill" (Barnes 1930, p.228). Its first notes were met with wonder, joy and applause. Shift to the present, however, and the once-cutting-edge organ lies largely dormant. It has been superseded by synthesisers and surround-sound speakers, which blare hymns out each Sunday as the elderly parishioners frown. This musical tension seems to represent a polarised interaction between the ideas of tradition and modernity; between the preservation of the 'organic' way of life (with the ideas/beliefs that sustain it), and it's 'synthetic' transformation; between the value bestowed upon culture, and this idea we call progress. However I wish to propose that, rather than working in opposition, these two ideologies are "mutually reinforcing" (Gusfield 1967, p. 356) and can operate simultaneously. Perhaps the church's own website encapsulates this abstract relationship most effectively...

"As is true of every church, St Anne's has had its share of both prosperous and lean times over the past 125 years... The changing nature of Sydney's inner west has brought new challenges... But the essential task of proclaiming Christ is unchanged and remains our priority."

Here we see the central theme of Reinhard Bendix's 'Tradition and Modernity Reconsidered' (1967) come to life - that the underlying notions of tradition and modernity are inextricably interlinked. I would add, in the words of Suzanne and Lloyd Rudolph, that "the assumption that modernity and tradition are radically contradictory rests on a **mis**diagnosis of tradition as it is found in traditional societies, a **mis**understanding of modernity as it is found in modern societies, and a misapprehension of the relationship between them" (1967, p.1, emphasis

added). I seek to address these 'misses' by exploring the concepts of 'zombie categories', 'liquid modernity' and authorised idealism. I also wish to attend to the possible challenges posed by hybridity in such a study. By shedding light on how the ideas of tradition and modernity allow us to understand the role of music within St Anne's, I aim to illuminate our understanding of the global church in this present moment.

The term 'zombie categories' may provoke images of trudging husks of rotting flesh, but it was originally used by sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992, 1994, 2000, 2002) to describe active social structures that have lost their connection with reality. Building on this, I identify 'zombie categories' as institutions which are dead in the sense of being irrelevant (or perceived as irrelevant) to the contemporary period yet continue to be animated by social forces. For example, at St Anne's, the reverence and solemnity often associated with the pipe organ maintains its sporadic use during weddings, funerals and memorial services. Furthermore, the popular Christmas carol, in some cases just as old as its hymn counterpart, is revived annually by the non-religious. In fact, whether the artist be Mariah Carey or Robbie Williams, major record labels will often produce entire Christmas albums where traditional songs are presented in contemporary genres. In this case, we must acknowledge the manner in which modernist societies can accommodate social structures and cultural values which with they share only a traditional relationship (Gould 1970, p.1171). Thus, the idea of 'the living dead' reveals that church music can not only survive when deemed as irrelevant by the mainstream, but even thrive under certain conditions. Another strong example is the hymn 'Amazing Grace', which may be considered by liturgical modernists as "clinically dead for a long time, but... unable to die" (Beck, 1994, p. 40). Despite being first published in 1779, the hymn has spent hundreds of weeks on the top of popular music charts in the last century, performed by everyone from Elvis to Aretha Franklin (Turner, 2002). It has even been featured in 'The Simpsons' and 'Star Trek' (Porter, McLaren, 1999). However, these various incarnations bear only a lyrical connection with the traditional model, as each interpretation reflects the progressive musical context of its individual creator. A case study into this continuous animation of John Newton's work reveals a key element in the relationship between tradition and modernity, particularly in church music - that of 'nostalgia'. In 'Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia', sociologist Fred Davis presents nostalgia as a hallmark of transition, indeed only made possible in the face of or after a period of progress. In fact the collective nostalgia aroused by hymns and Christmas carols, while drawn from the traditional past, can only be a product of the present (Havlena & Holack, 1992). The very sound of the organ at St Anne's, whether it plays 'Here Comes The Bride', 'Amazing Grace' or 'Silent Night', instantly attaches itself to notions of tradition. However, the external process of re-invention marks these traditional pieces as the 'unread' of church music. The re-animation of 'zombie categories', neither wholly traditional nor completely progressive in any sense, thus entails that modernists do not have to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater when distinguishing innovation from conservatism. For traditionalists, the very composition of bathwater may serve as a guide for navigating and incorporating the Enlightenment philosophies of progress - 'liquid modernity'.

Coined by Zygmunt Bauman in his book of the same name, 'liquid modernity' (or late modernity) is an idea that provides great insight into the mutual reinforcement of progress and preservation in church music (2000). The transformative and flexible qualities of liquid are Bauman's focus – with the key idea being that the core substance of a liquid is the same as it's solid (traditional) format. In his analytical offering, 'Liquid Church', Pete Ward postulates that the only way for the 'western' church to succeed is if it clings equally to tradition and innovation (2002, p.1); with the refrain “change the method but not the message” central to his thesis. This vein of thinking is the foundation upon which drum kits, electric guitars, synthesisers and surround-sound speakers now invade the church space and infiltrate the

soundscape. There are opponents to the changes in style, some claiming that rock's syncopation is Satanic while others claim that the amplification is simply too loud (Garlock, F, 1971). However, liturgical analyst Richard Hillert argues that "the very presence of a revival of popular music in the church is a price the church is paying for having inflicted musical boredom and for perpetuating its habits of musical parochialism instead of wholeheartedly participating in the adventures of renewal" (Hillert, 1969). Furthermore, the relatively recent arrival of the 'popular music revival' at St Anne's reflects the slow speed of artistic progress within the church as a global body. In fact, since the building of the revolutionary pipe organ in 1895, the walls outside the church have become the breeding ground for innovative leaps in creativity -moving from gospel music into rhythm and blues, rock, jazz, funk, hip-hop and electronica. In 'Christian Contemporary Music: Its Role in the Lives of Young Christians and Its Use in the Ministry of Their Church', James Tiefel asserts that "the church has always preferred to allow a style to develop before it was assimilated into corporate worship" (Tiefel, J, 1987). He gives the example of Geoffrey Beaumont and his failed attempt to integrate jazz into the American church, only fifty years after the genre's inception. Tiefel's argument is reinforced by an essay appearing in the 1969 editorial 'Church Music', which states that "Christian rock is by no means a common language of the people, and still less of the people of the church" and therefore needed to be kept out of the church (p.31). However, these conclusions of 'church as follower' do not reflect the St Anne's of 1895, whose equipment was years ahead of most Sydney music venues, surpassed only by Town Hall's Grand Organ. Indeed, in the nineteenth century you were more likely to first encounter music, regularly listen to music and learn how to play music at church than in any other social space (Davies, H, 2007). This musical shift from progressive leader to conservative follower reflects a parallel global shift in the church's socio-cultural role over the last century. Thus, it can be argued that the church's musical traditionalism may stem from an association between the music of the past and the society of the past; a society in which the church was an authoritative pillar (Thibodeau, R 1969, p.15). With the transition into the 'Liquid Church', however, this model has been long abandoned by the current generation of church musicians (Davies, H, 2007). Returning to the observations of Tiefel, it is interesting to note the 'liquidification' of the pattern he identifies. That is, as the modern church embraces liquid modernity in place of hardline traditionalism, the length of time between mainstream musical innovation and the church's adoption of that musical style is quickly lessening. In simpler terms, it appears as if the transformation of progress into tradition is becoming a swifter shift. As Schalk writes, "For some, tradition means 'how we did it last year', a tradition based... on the personal and idiosyncratic projections of worship leaders." (Schalk, 1990, p.307). Again, this consistent and personal transformation reflects upon the wider context of a society in which progress is closer to tradition than ever before. One's computer, mobile phone or television is practically obsolete upon acquirement. Indeed, innovation and out datedness have never been more intimate, and it appears as if liquid modernity is the only manner in which the traditions of St Anne's can survive. As this ideological gap closes in over time, it is important to note a key issue in which progressive aims and conservative goals already share parity.

The fundamental common ground of both tradition and modernity is that they possess an 'ideal'. Both schools of thought have something they are maintaining and protecting or uncovering and improving toward, respectively. In this particular case, it is seen as the best approach or style through which to 'worship' God -in no way a novel struggle for the fissiparous church. The theologian Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation, concluded in 1526 that the 'ideal' may not be any particular form of worship, but rather to get rid of form entirely (Luther, M., 1965). Searching for parishioners willing to rethink corporate worship, he discovered "I have not yet the people or persons for it, nor do I see many who want it." The reformer was left with one conclusion regarding different worship formats -

“We cannot live without them”. When these prevailing attitudes toward church music are viewed as a microcosm of attitudes amongst the greater church body, it is evident that the cause for much of the conflict and separation within the church comes from a belief in a superior format (Sampson et al. 1993). It is here that the question of authority in both modernism and traditionalism rears its unassailable head. For while one may observe and identify the values being protected by traditionalism or pursued by modernism, there is no objective authority on which to measure the value of such values. Indeed, the abstract nature of the metaphysical sets up the foundational epistemological dilemma facing any idea in history. 'On what authority do you base your claim?' While both ideologies would identify the Bible as their penultimate source, a plethora of issues immediately arise. While I won't go into the details here, two relevant issues would be the self-authorisation of the Bible and the modernist's Enlightenment legacy to emerge from "self-imposed maturity" (Kant, I., 1784, p.1). There is also the glaringly obvious difficulty that both sides read the same text yet arrive at polarised ideological conclusions. This could be as a result of the idea that "we don't find meaning, we make it" (Hansford, 2010). The self-authorisation of the Bible appears to be more of an issue for modernists than conservatives. As Hopgood writes in 'Moral Authority, Modernity and the Politics of the Sacred', "[r]eligion adapted — most notably by fragmenting — and, I shall suggest, now finds itself in receipt of an unexpected dividend; modernity's inability to generate self-authorizing authority to replace the authority of church and state" (Hopgood, S., 2009). Another reason the problem of authority poses a lesser challenge to the traditionalist is that he need only maintain -not create, as the modernist does. For example, Reformist Martin Luther had to re-evaluate the traditional values with which he was raised in order to create his famous 'Ninety-Five Theses' and instigate change. On the other hand, it is fairly straightforward for the traditionalist to warn about fire and brimstone (quite literally, in this case) and marginalise the claims of modernists with arguments such as this;

"These two viewpoints are, therefore, absolutely opposed to one another and no genuine synthesis or reconciliation can ever be logically or rationally possible; each, for instance, totally denies the final validity and cognitive rationality of the other system of thought, of basic ratiocination; and, there are, of course, quite necessary consequences that do intellectually, morally, and, most significantly, spiritually follow from these revealed truths and facts" (Writer, J., 2009).

The irony of such traditional thinking, which of course does not reflect the entire traditionalist school, is that it simultaneously proclaims the complete divinity and utter humanity of Christ as its foundational creed. Regardless, any case study of authority in church worship brings to light certain shortcomings of both traditionalism and modernism; that is, neither school of thought can authorise its own judgement of values. In turn, this reflects upon the epistemological dilemma facing every idea in the present moment - the problem of authority.

Another challenge posed by the mutual reinforcement of progress and preservation in church music is that of contradictory 'hybridity'. The term 'hybridity' possesses as many definitions as there are scholars employing it; from 'dual' to 'mixture' to 'synthesis'. Yet is the paradoxical denotation of hybridity which I wish to focus on in this article. The mutually and internally contradictory nature of the modern-traditional model, simultaneously playing on transcendence and imminence, is the premise upon which Bruno Latour's 'We Have Never Been Modern' is constructed (1993). The thesis criticises the invincibility of the modernists, claiming that "[t]hey hold all the sources of power, all the critical possibilities, but they displace them from case to case with such rapidity that they can never be caught red-handed." His conclusion? The elusive nature of modernity is such that it even eludes the moderns themselves; thus, we have never been modern. Of course many of the arguments contained in

this journal article could be seen as fruits of modernist hybridity, particularly those surrounding 'zombie categories' and 'liquid modernity'. I would agree with many of the claims made in Latour's opus, particularly concerning the paradoxical nature of many hybrid truth claims. However I would challenge his fundamental cry that such hybridity makes modernity elusive. Indeed, to reiterate the words of Suzanne and Lloyd Rudolph, I believe this conclusion "rests on a **misdiagnosis** of tradition as it is found in traditional societies, a misunderstanding of modernity as it is found in modern societies, and a misapprehension of the relationship between them" (1967, p.1, emphasis added). In the case of church music, for example, the interaction may not be purely progressive nor purely conservative. It could be argued that while modernism is unattainable because progress is immediately relegated to the past, for the same reason, we are always progressing. For tradition is constantly evolving also; leaving the two ideologies co-dependant. It is the same logic that see the Christ as absolutely human and fully divine. For a more empirical example, it is the same logic from which quantum physics concludes that light is unconditionally a wave and in all respects a particle. As Latour himself writes, "... here the beauty of the mechanism comes to light) the modern Constitution allows the expanded proliferation of the hybrids whose existence, whose very possibility, it denies" (Latour, B., 1993). The problem, or 'beauty', is the ambiguity of authority rearing its unassailable head once more. Yet the relativism which Latour criticises is not just flexibility, it is power. As he argues, the hybrid holds all the critical possibilities, and can never be caught red-handed. Though we agree on all these points, my final conclusion would surely irk Bruno Latour; I believe that we have never been, and always been, both modern and traditional.

One hundred and fifteen years on, and the social landscape has radically changed. Church attendance levels are lower and church volume levels are higher. From a musical perspective, St Anne's has shifted firmly into the backseat of Sydney culture. Yet the analysis of progressive and conservative values is not as simple as it first appears. Indeed, as we identify 'zombie categories' and highlight the need for a 'liquid church', it becomes evident that modernity and tradition are so entangled with one another that they cannot be separated. Aspects of the past are clung to with one hand just as opportunities are lunged at with the other. And while we attempt to evaluate the consequences of this co-existence, we cannot escape the issue of authority; which at once renders us powerless and all-powerful. Here lies the fundamental cause of our predicament - if an infallible authority presented itself, we would not be able to identify it. Thus, there is tension between the advocates of the dusty old organ, and those that desire surround-sound. Thus, there is denominational crisis in the church, and, dramatically enough, civil war. A government desires maintenance, the people desire change. In this tension lies modernity and tradition, yet they would be unnecessary if we only knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, what was best for us. However, we cannot. Furthermore, the inevitability of change renders an unwavering commitment to tradition as foolhardy. Equally as foolish is a steadfast pledge to progress, for none can know the full ramifications of the present on the future. They are essentially two sides of the same coin, and an allegiance to both is the only way to resolve the tension.

### **Notes on Contributor**

Nisham Varatharajan studies journalism and international studies at the University of Technology Sydney.

### **References**

Apel, W. 1948, *'Early History of the Organ'*, *Speculum*, Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 191-216, Medieval Academy of America

- Barnes, W. 2007, *The Contemporary American Organ - Its Evolution, Design and Construction*, Read Books
- Bauman, Z. 2000, *Liquid Modernity*, Wiley Blackwell Publishing, Malden.
- Baxendale, J. 1995, 'Popular music and late modernity', *Popular Music*, Vol. 14, Issue 02, pp. 137-154
- Beck, U. 1992, *Risk Society Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter, Sage Publications, London.
- Beck, U., Giddens, A. & Scott L. 1994, *Reflexive Modernization. Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Polity Press, Cambridge
- Beck, U & Beck-Gernsheim, E. 2002, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*, Sage, London
- Beck, U & Willms, J 2003, *Conversations with Ulrich Beck*, Polity Press, Cambridge
- Bendix, R. 1967, 'Tradition and Modernity Rediscovered', *Comparative Studies in Society & History*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 292-346
- Bowie, A. 2007, *Music, Philosophy, and Modernity*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 428
- Casanova, J. 1994, *Public Religions in the modern world*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Collins, J. 1998, *Singing Lessons: A Memoir of Love, Loss, Hope, and Healing*, Pocket Books
- Davies, H. 2007, *Christian Worship - Its History & Meaning*, Davies Press
- Davis, F. 1979, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, The Free Press, New York
- Davis T., Yip J. 2004, 'Reconciling Christianity and Modernity: Australian Youth and Religion', *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol 31. pp. 113-116
- Erlmann, V. 1999, *Music, Modernity, and the Global Imagination*, Oxford University Press, New York
- Frame, J. 2004, *Contemporary Worship Music*, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Institute for Christian Worship
- Gould, A. 1970, 'Is the Modernity-Tradition Model All Bad?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 5, No. 29/31, pp. 1171-1176
- Havlena, W., Holack, S. 1992, 'NOSTALGIA: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THEMES AND EMOTIONS IN THE NOSTALGIC EXPERIENCE', *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 19, pp. 380-387
- Hillert, R., 1969, 'Popular Church Music—20th Century Style', *Church Music*, Vol. 2, p. 3
- Hopgood, S. 2003, 'Moral Authority, Modernity & the Politics of the Sacred', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 229-225, School of Oriental and African Studies
- Krier, L. 1987, 'TRADITION -- MODERNITY -- MODERNISM: some necessary explanations', *Architectural Design*, volume 57, pp. 38-43
- Latour, B. 1993, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press
- Luther, M. 1965, 'The German Mass and Order of Service,' *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, p. 64., Hymns and Liturgy, Concordia, St Louis
- Organ Music Society of Sydney, 2007, *St Anne's Anglican Church*, viewed 30th August 2010 <<http://www.sydneyorgan.com/StAnnesStrathfield.html>>
- Porter, J., McLaren, D, 1999, *Star Trek and Sacred Ground: Explorations of Star Trek, Religion, and American Culture*, State University of New York Press
- Rudolph, L. & Rudolph S. 1984, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Sampson, P., Samuel, V. & Sugden C. 1994, *Faith and Modernity*, OCMS
- Schalk, C. 1990, 'Church Music in the '90s: Problems and Prognoses', *Christian Century*, March 21-28, pp.306-308
- St Anne's Anglican Church Strathfield, 2010, *Our History*, viewed 30th August 2010, <<http://www.annes.org.au/index.php/about-us/history>>

- Thibodeau, R. 1969 *'Threnody for Sacred Music or The People of God Have Been Had'*,  
Commonweal in Church Music, Vol. 2, p. 15
- Tiefel, J. 1987, *Christian Contemporary Music: Its Role in the Lives of Young Christians and  
Its Use in the Ministry of Their Church*
- Turner, S. 2002, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song*, HarperCollins
- Ward, P. 2002, *Liquid Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, 2002
- Wilson, A. 2003, *'The Music of God, Man, and Beast: Spirituality and Modernity in Jonah's  
Gourd Vine'*, The Southern Literary Journal, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 64-78, University  
of North Carolina Press
- Writer, J. 2009, Relijournal, *Traditionalist Vs. Modern Catholicism*, viewed 18th October  
2010, <<http://relijournal.com/christianity/traditionalist-vs-modernist-catholicism/>>