

## *Artistic Performance as Ministry*

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Participation in performance through the church includes artistic performance through the arts. Churches provide many opportunities for people to participate as performers, especially through music. Aesthetic performance includes those who are the “performers” and those of the audience or congregation who observe and enjoy the performance. Congregation and leaders perform, within the context of services of worship, by singing songs and reading responsive litanies, as members or leaders of choirs, and in all aspects of performing worship for God. Many churches provide opportunities for aesthetic performance in non-worship settings as well. These include presentations of musical theater and non-musical drama, talent and variety shows, sacred and non-sacred concerts, performances for senior adult groups and fellowship-promoting events within the congregation, and performances as part of outreach ministries at the church building and in conjunction with tours and mission trips.

Aesthetic performance is a process. Preparation or rehearsal or both, for a particular presentation, leads toward that presentation. The presentation itself is an ending and also a beginning. When completed, it provides an opportunity for reflection and learning for the preparatory process for the next presentation. Understood this way, the process of performance is present in church at many levels: through its music, arts, and drama ministries, through its worship, and through many other aspects of its communal life.

Performance theory provides a context for examining the function of performance in all of life, including the church. There has been significant development in this field over the last several years as the idea of performance has expanded to include much more than just theatrical or artistic performance. The work of New York University professor and theatrical director Richard Schechner, who has written extensively in this area, will serve as a primary guide to its introduction here. Schechner’s field is theatrical drama and he indicates that, in terms of performance theory, “dance and music can be considered varieties of theater.” The understanding of performance theory from theater, and its application in terms of theatre, also holds true for the other performing arts.

Aesthetic consciousness is a human trait. Art, especially the performing arts, blends aesthetic consciousness with a significant degree of ritual. Schechner identifies a primary goal of performance as the seeking of intimate community within an industrial society that tends toward the impersonal. The relationship between performer and audience is reciprocal and performance aims, not only to provide enjoyment and entertainment, but also “to create what the late anthropologist Victor Turner calls ‘spontaneous *communitas*,’ the dissolution of boundaries shutting people off from each other, ...a movement toward ritual.” He states the idea again in a more graphic way: “What starts in dancing ends in eating [and] what starts as theater ends as Communion.” This image certainly has application directly to the process of performance in the church.

Performance also deals with “real life” in a structured or ritualized way. This is a second primary goal. Schechner differs with Turner in terms of the essential matter of drama or art. Whereas Turner sees conflict and resolution as basic, Schechner prefers the concept of transformation. He sees this happening at three levels in aesthetic performance: in the performance itself, in the performers themselves, and in those who comprise the audience. This last quality of transformation occurs between performers and audience that are, by definition, separated. This marks a significant point of differentiation and convergence between aesthetic performance and social drama. The latter often takes place within the context of the former. Audience and performers alike are involved in an artistic performance while in the latter, “only those playing roles in the drama are participants in the drama nested within the performance.” Transition in performance is “the ability to ... transform the raw into the cooked.”

Aesthetic performance is a process and much of that process is rehearsal. All the works of theater and music “are produced by the rehearsal process.” This process refines the dimension of interpretation of the “script” or “score” and defines the part each player plays. Many forms of performance require preparation more than they require rehearsal. It is a similar process and Schechner finds both preparation and rehearsal to contain “the fundamental ritual of theater.” The same perspective is applicable to performance in the church.

The performing arts are “open, unfinished, de-centered, liminal; ...a paradigm of process.” The process of rehearsal and preparation in these arts is virtually as important as the actual presentation. In fact, it may be claimed that the rehearsal process is part of the performance and performance itself is process.

*Liminality* is a characteristic of social drama, as well as being a characteristic of performing art. *Liminal* means threshold. The term literally refers to the mid-point in a rite of passage. *Liminality* is characteristic of “every change of state or social position, or certain points in age.” The three phases of rites of passages are: a separation from the normative structures and relationships, a *liminal* or threshold, and a reaggregation. *Limens* are thresholds, like that of a door, between what was and what is. The person undergoing the rite is literally in the state of the threshold, “neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification” Performance as process in art can be characterized as liminal.

The concept of *communitas*, is existential. Normative *communitas* simply connotes a sense of group and is “typified by ‘we’ feelings, loyalty to the group, sacrifice for it, and comradeship among its members.” Behavioral *communitas* can be camaraderie such as “the kind of good fellowship one finds in many secular, marginal, and transitional social situations, such as an English pub... [or] at some religious meetings.” Existential *communitas* is a unique form of community that is “purely spontaneous and self-generating.” It exists outside the normal structures of culture, unlike camaraderie. It often results from the process of performance and is characterized by a “direct, unmediated, and total confrontation of human identities, often ephemeral in duration akin to Martin Buber’s *I-Thou* or ‘Essential We’ relation.” In the context of religious practice, existential *communitas* occurs in small groups or communities of people who

share common disciplines of faith, such as an ascetic lifestyle. Practitioners may be drawn by the group's *communitas* as much as by the group's principles or ideals.

The performing arts provide structure, within which existential *communitas* can develop, even though its existence is outside normative structures. Within the structures of aesthetic performance in the church, *communitas* resembles, at least metaphorically, the unique form of community Christians call *koinonia*. Opportunities are available for those possessing the attitude of pastoral ministry to interpret the *communitas* that emerges in aesthetic performance in terms of the *koinonia* of Christian faith. *Communitas* is a unique form of human community that develops through cultural, including aesthetic, performance. *Koinonia* is a unique form of human community that is divinely given and divinely indwelled.

The normative structures of society are those "distinctive arrangement of mutually dependent institutions and the institutional organization of social positions and/or actors they imply." Existential *communitas* exists outside these normative structures. *Communitas* does not exist as a structure, but as anti-structure; not as a negation of societal structure, but from its own positive "generative center." Anti-structure is defined by *liminality*.

Performance is an important perspective for understanding the linkage of the arts and ministry. Music ministry and worship provide opportunities for people to participate in performance. Theatrical drama and other forms of performance in the arts are both aesthetic performance and ritualized behavior in the form of artistic process. Those making music and those hearing it are all engaged in performance that is aesthetic. It is also cultural performance. Performance within the church can be, and needs to be, understood anthropologically as ritualized behavior. Other approaches to interpreting cultural performance are beyond the scope of this project to examine, yet it is clear that musical performance in the church can, and should, be interpreted by more than just aesthetic judgments.

### Key Resources for this article

Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996)

Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, rev. ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 1988)

Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988)