



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What music is appropriate for Lutheran weddings?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

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When a couple chooses to celebrate their marriage in a church, questions about music will certainly arise. Sometimes choice of music is framed according to its appropriateness. What do we mean by this?

What is meant by “appropriate?”

There is no one definitive list of music appropriate for Lutheran weddings in every place or situation. Before we consider possible dimensions of “appropriateness,” let us consider briefly why such questions come to the forefront and why they can be a source of tension during the planning process.

Much of the tension that arises around music in weddings stems from the “collision of faith and culture.” Consider these words from a partner volume to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, The Christian Life*:

Though adding the proclamation of God’s word and God’s blessing to the culture’s marriage rites theoretically balances the Christian and societal aspects of marriage, many weddings are characterized by the collision of faith and culture...Some of our most cherished wedding practices, including the bride wearing white and processing down the aisle as the center of attention, the father giving the bride away, **choices of music** and ceremonial inventions like the unity candle reflect the values of the culture rather than the church. (p. 188, emphasis added).

This “collision” can be felt when couples and the church (musician, pastor) come together to plan music for a wedding. A couple may have one set of ideas, choosing music that reflects their love for each other, songs they enjoy, music they’ve heard at other weddings. Out of care for the couple, the church may honor these wishes, but they may also invited the couple to understand the music of their wedding in the same way music is considered for a worship service. This will mean selecting music that reflects praise of God and encourages the assembly’s participation.

Churches negotiate these faith/culture tensions in different ways. Some choose to create a written wedding policy, carefully worded guidelines that address all matters of the wedding in the church, including a list of appropriate music. Other churches may decide that specific musical choices are not a major issue for them; they'll simply address each context and situation as it comes. Most will seek a middle ground. With any approach, a church will need to be clear and up front about how they regard music for weddings so as to avoid pitfalls in the planning process and in the wedding itself.

Does the original setting of the music matter?

One reason a church may give for considering certain pieces "inappropriate" is the music's original setting. For example, a bride would like to process down the aisle to the traditional "Wedding March." The church points out that this piece comes from the opera *Lohengrin*, a very tragic tale. Since it's original intention was not a Christian or religious one, it is deemed inappropriate.

While this may be a fair assessment of a piece of music, it leads to less clear-cut questions. Many pieces of classical music such as Jeremiah Clarke's "Trumpet Voluntary" or Pachelbel's "Canon in D" did not originate in a Christian worship context. Does this make them inappropriate? What about any "classical" music? Determining criteria for accepting or rejecting music for a marriage liturgy is not an easy, clear-cut task.

The original setting for the performance of a composition may not always be the best criterion for determining appropriateness, because many standards in the church have less than sacred beginnings. More important is the effect, sometimes subconscious, a piece has on the gathered assembly. Certainly individuals may carry personal "baggage," for better or worse, about specific musical selections. However, public (mis)use of a particular piece may ruin its use in worship forever. Who has not heard, "Here comes the bride: big, fat, and wide?" These words subconsciously meander through the minds of many guests at a wedding when the so-called traditional wedding march accompanies the procession of the bride and her attendants. Even the more polite, "Here comes the bride all dressed in white" is an inappropriate image for use in a service of worship, where God is rightly the center of attention. Pachelbel's "Canon" and Mouret's "Rondeau," although beautiful pieces of music, have been so overused in the commercial world that they may no longer be adequate choices for creating a worshipful environment.

One also must consider the musical instruments that will be used and how they will render the musical choices. When played on the organ, Pachelbel's "Canon," originally composed for string quartet, is rarely a satisfying experience. Neither is playing a pop rock piece on the organ or as a piano solo. A band at the reception may be in a better position to do justice to that music.

A matter of fit and function

A more helpful set of questions when determining music for a wedding is considering if or how the music "fits." What is its function in the marriage service?

When choosing songs with texts, what are the words communicating? How are they functioning in the wedding? Strictly secular texts simply do not fit when marriage is regarded as gift of God and the wedding is a service of worship. Granted, this is often a matter of tension. While the culture tends to view a marriage only in terms of a couple's love for each other, the church calls the couple to envision a marriage as a vocation in the Christian community. How can texts affirm romantic love but also call us to broader dimensions of love?

Secular texts, even those not offensive or profane but having no specific religious reference are, however, rarely the strongest choice for a marriage service. "Jingle Bells" is a perfectly delightful Christmas carol for use at home and elsewhere. It is not, however, usually sung during the Christmas Eve liturgy. A couple's favorite song may be more appropriately performed at the reception, just as the hymn "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," on the other hand, allows the congregation to participate and, therefore, is more appropriate in the liturgy. One song is not better than the other; they simply function in different ways and for different occasions.

Many couples regard music in the wedding as something to be performed while the "audience" listens; the church regards those gathered as participants in a worship service. If these two values are in tension, is it possible to encourage the "audience" to become "assembly," a community that prays and even sings together? Yes, with careful preparation. If other musicians such as vocal soloists will sing at the wedding, perhaps they may also lead the first stanza or two of a hymn with the assembly joining on the remaining stanzas. See *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* for a suggestion of hymns for a wedding (p. 1185). Hymns of praise, thanksgiving, joy and celebration can be very fitting; so, too, can hymns appropriate to the liturgical season, such as singing a Christmas hymn during the Christmas season.

Questions of fit and function are helpful because they move the conversation beyond what people like or don't like. Yet pastors and musicians must realize that these are not often the questions couples or their families are asking when they are looking for wedding music.

Being on the "same page"

Due to the prevalence of wedding suggestions on-line and elsewhere, couples rarely come to the pastor and musician with no opinion. Likewise, church leaders have perhaps developed a greater understanding of marriage as a baptismal vocation (see *Christian Assembly* in Resources). A "collision" of values often occurs. Both a gift and a challenge of planning a wedding is discovering how the church and culture intersect regarding Christian marriage.

To help negotiate potential conflicts, it is very important that relationships among the staff, especially the pastor/musician (s) relationship is on solid footing. It would not be helpful to have a musician say that certain music is "appropriate" only to have the pastor disagree, thus creating unhealthy triangulation.

In every congregation, a small committee, including the pastor and musician, may develop simple principles that guide the selection of music for all liturgies, and share them with the entire congregation. Once clear principles are agreed upon, transferring

those criteria to a wedding should not be difficult. This assumes that weddings are understood as events within the whole liturgical life of a congregation, a fact that may not be understood by those wishing to be married in the church. In a wise and pastoral manner, church leaders are called to prepare and lead so that those desiring a wedding in a church, and the church itself can be enriched and blessed by the celebration.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ☞ The role of music in worship?

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Leaders Desk Edition*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.
- 📖 Bushkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Christian Life, Baptism and Life Passages*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008. (List of hymn suggestions for weddings p. 238)

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