

The Studio

EPISODE // ASSEMBLING A SONG SET

A song set is a series of two or three songs combined and sung back to back. I've grown up in an Evangelical tradition, and my tradition often relies on song sets in worship. Singing two or three songs back to back may seem boring to worshipers. And, to worship leaders, it may seem as if little preparation is required. But, I believe that the better the set is assembled, the more meaningful it will be meaningful for worshipers who are there to worship.

In the end, a well-constructed set gives the congregation a broad musical and textual vocabulary for our faith, and I believe this vocabulary enriches the church and our worship in so many ways. I've heard many ideas on how to put song sets together, but over the years, I've developed some opinions of my own. So, here are my thoughts on assembling a song set well.

- ✿ **Think about the context.** In other words, where will the song be sung in worship? Our music needs to match the ethos of worship. For instance, songs at the beginning might be more upbeat and praise oriented, and songs before or after the sermon might be more meditative, depending on the scripture preached.
- ✿ **Focus on the flow, both musical and textual.** *Musical flow* involves choosing of keys and tempos. For your band, orchestra, or even choir, you want the progression of musical ideas to make sense. You don't want the music to start fast and loud and abruptly go soft and slow. Find logical progressions, repetitions, and other ways to tie songs together. If I'm moving from a fast and loud song to a slow and soft song, I'll find a bridge or chorus to repeat that gradually changes the musical dynamics of the song to bridge into the next song. *Textual flow* is even more important, in my opinion. So often sets are focused only one topic - like praise, surrender, or commitment, but the congregation needs a full picture of who God is, who the Church at large is, and who each individual is. A broad range of textual ideas is just as important as musical ideas. If you have multiple songs sung back to back, don't choose songs that say the same thing. Instead, move your congregation from one thought to the next so there is cohesion and the progression of ideas makes sense.
- ✿ **Think through all of your transitions.** When preparing transitions, think about these relationships: How are the lyrics of the songs connected theologically? What is the instrumentation and key relationship between each song? What just happened in worship, and what is about to happen? What is the moment towards which all elements are moving and returning? What is the pace and feel of each liturgical element? When preparing transitions, think about these relationships: How are the lyrics of the songs connected theologically? What is the instrumentation and key relationship between each song? What just happened in worship, and what is about to happen? What is the moment towards which all elements are moving and returning? What is the pace and feel of each liturgical element? Transitions may occur verbally, musically, or visually. Although spontaneity is important in worship, it is more powerful within a planned and structured framework where elements fit together and make sense.
- ✿ **If you need help, look to a biblical model.** When it comes down to it for me, scripture is where I run for the ultimate guide to my worship leadership. For example in Isaiah 6, there's this great picture of Isaiah's encounter with God. He goes through a process of praising God, confessing and

repenting of sin, accepting God's unending forgiveness, and responding to this encounter with the words "Here am I, Lord – send me!" This model is a great progression of thoughts for assembling a song set, or any worship service in general. The Psalms are other rich components, too.

One of my frustrations as a worship leader is seeing too many leaders just copy the sets and music that mainstream artists do at worship conferences or in their own congregations. My other frustration is when worship leaders spontaneously throw a few songs together, then get up and lead without any real thought to what they're doing. Face it, you are better than either of these two options. God has called us all to a greater task and responsibility as worship leaders, and we need to take this seriously. So, grab your Bible, some music, a paper and pen, and get going. Create a song set that will make a difference in worship.