

Tips for Selecting & Planning Worship Music

Synkatabasis & Church Music: A Theological Framework for Worship Leaders

When selecting music for worship, context matters deeply—our congregations carry strong sensibilities, traditions, and emotional associations with different genres, styles, instruments, and poetic forms. As leaders, we’re called to care first for who we have, not just who we’d like to have. In this, we reflect how God meets us where we are.

John Chrysostom’s concept of *synkatabasis* (“stooping down,” God’s accommodation) offers a powerful theological lens: God adapts to our limitations so that relationship, understanding, and worship can flourish. Applying that to worship music means choosing songs that resonate with the cultural, emotional, and spiritual experiences of our people—and doing so *gradually, gently, and patiently* so that people are not overwhelmed or alienated.

The “Three C’s” for Song Selection

Type	What It Is	How It Reflects <i>Synkatabasis</i>
Canonical Music	Traditional hymns that have been part of Christian worship over centuries	These root us in history and theology; their endurance shows how the Church has repeatedly “stooped down” across generations. Introducing or maintaining these works gradually helps people gain appreciation without feeling forced.
Current Music	Songs composed in recent (e.g., past 10) years, using contemporary language, styles, and themes	They meet people where they are now—especially younger worshipers or newer Christians. But change here is best implemented slowly: introducing one or two new songs at a time, allowing people to become familiar and comfortable.
Compelling Music	Songs (old or new) with lyric depth or musical richness that engage deeply	These draw the heart into worship; when introduced gently, they help bridge the gap between emotion and doctrine, allowing individuals to connect more deeply without feeling rushed.

Balancing & Applying the Three C’s

- A healthy worship service blends all three: tradition (canonical), relevance (current), and emotional power (compelling).
- This reflects God’s model of *synkatabasis*: reaching out, adapting, engaging.
- Thoughtful song planning considers not only “what we love to sing” but “who we are singing with”—our people’s backgrounds, spiritual journeys, preferences.

Conclusion

Embracing John Chrysostom’s hermeneutic of *synkatabasis* in church music means ~~more than selecting~~ songs that are theologically sound or musically excellent—it means *meeting people where they are and walking with them into new expressions of worship* with grace. Change done *slowly, gently, and patiently* reflects God’s own way with us. As leaders, our aim is to nurture worship environments where every person—old, young, familiar, new—can encounter God genuinely, steadily, and without fear of being left behind.



Submitted by Ian Koiter