


# 'That song moves me to tears' – Emotion, memory and identity in encountering Christian songs

**Author:**J. Gertrud Tönsing<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Gertrud Tönsing,  
gertrud.tonsing@googlemail.com

**Dates:**

Received: 12 June 2019  
Accepted: 19 Mar. 2020  
Published: 08 Sept. 2020

**How to cite this article:**

Tönsing, J.G., 2020, "That song moves me to tears" – Emotion, memory and identity in encountering Christian songs', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(3), a5618. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i3.5618>

**Copyright:**

© 2020. The Authors.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

This article aims to explore the complex issue of the emotive effect of Christian songs. It is based mainly on a literature survey, using sources both from Christian hymnology and musicology. It also uses illustrative examples from three informal surveys in congregations on the reasons particular songs are favourites. The point is made that exploring this issue scientifically is very complex as there are so many variables in people's appreciation of songs. Some of these elements are discussed, such as the effect of the external setting in which people experience a song, factors important in the appreciation of a text, such as poetic quality and knowledge of the author's background. Other factors are the emotive quality and level of difficulty of a tune and in what time this style was popular. Then there are the internal factors, such as the link of a song with group identity and special memories. Some of the survey results corroborate the pointers in the literature for what makes certain songs particularly emotionally appealing. Some of these were a preference for musical styles popular in one's youth, the importance of relationships with significant others for forming favourites and the important element of memory in the emotional impact of songs. Concluding pointers for worship include motivating for different styles of music in worship and carefully finding those songs in each new musical genre, which have the potential for sustaining today's youth into the future.

**Contribution:** This article makes a contribution in what is a complex and often emotionally charged issue in congregations: Worship styles and musical preferences. It argues for the importance of using different musical styles and bringing the generations together.

**Keywords:** songs; worship; musical styles; emotion; identity; memory.

## Introduction

For many Christians, songs and music are a central part of their faith and experience of worship. But the experience of music varies widely between groups, sometimes also within groups. For some people, it is important to be touched emotionally by the songs they sing, and this is sometimes equated with the presence of God. Others react negatively to what they feel is emotional manipulation.

This article explores some of the complex dynamics around the emotional response to Christian songs and the different elements that come into play in songs which touch the emotions. Why do some songs 'move people to tears' and others leave them unaffected? What are the reasons people react to songs in certain ways? In history, particularly in the German Lutheran tradition, there have been swings from more emotive to more cerebral worship styles, sometimes leading to conflicts between congregants and liturgists (Nüchtern 2008: 16–22). These have left their mark on worship and the level of people's engagement and participation.

## Methodology

Studying human responses to music is a very complex field as there are so many variables. Musicologists have found that scientific studies that isolate variables are so contrived and unnatural that they cannot say much about people's real reactions and engagement with music (Levitin 2006:140). Especially the link of music and emotion is difficult to research as 'emotions are not easy to arouse in artificial laboratory environments' (Joslin, Barradas & Eerola 2015:282). Nevertheless, there is a wealth of research about different single aspects of music appreciation and emotional response, for example, on the correlation of empathy and enjoyment of sad music (Vuoskoski et al. 2012), or the correlation of experience of 'chills' and general reward sensitivity (Mori & Iwanaga 2015). There are numerous studies on what musical structures produce what emotional effect (see overview in Eerola and Vuoskoski 2013), noting the fact that

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

there is a difference in the emotion perceived as expressed in the music or the emotion actually felt by the listener:

Listeners might experience pleasure regardless of whether a piece of music expresses sadness or happiness. This notion is related to the nature of music: people listening to music are safe from any threat or danger represented by the music. (Kawakami et al. 2013:411)

Many studies have been conducted on the complex relationship of music and memory (e.g. Ferreri & Verga 2016). So, in the appreciation of music, there is a vast complex of factors. In the case of Christian songs even more variables are added, as the text also comes into play and the experiences of people singing together, or hearing the song at important, emotional occasions. This article will not attempt to isolate any variables to make objective findings, but begin to explore people's holistic and subjective enjoyment of songs, through what they themselves say about it. As this is a subjective and exploratory study, it can only illustrate various aspects of emotion in Christian songs and not draw any definite conclusions.

The study draws on three informal surveys that were conducted in German Lutheran congregations. As the study is subjective and illustrative, volunteers were used from groups which the researcher had access to, and no attempt was made to ensure that the groups consisted of comparable or representative samples.

The first group was a seniors' group in Pretoria (P), where the researcher was invited to speak on the topic, 'Songs which touch the emotions', an outflow of the researcher's PhD thesis. This group consisted of about 30 German congregants, mainly women but also some men. The second group was a women's group in Kroondal (K) near Rustenburg, where the same talk was repeated. This was a group of about 15 women, mostly elderly but some middle aged, the youngest in their 40s. The last group was a congregation in Randburg (R), after a service the researcher held there. There were about 50 people in the service, but only seven responded to the survey. This was a group of women and men of all ages from youth to elderly people.

In each group, the researcher requested them to write down the names of some songs which touched them emotionally and to try to find reasons why these songs are special to them. In the first two groups, the researcher did not limit the number of songs, and there were some very long lists. In the last group, the researcher asked for a maximum of five, and several people expressed difficulty with making a choice.

However, generally people found the first task much easier than the second, and many left out the reasons completely. There was a large overlap between the choices of favourites in the first two groups. Most of these came from what is at present the official German Lutheran hymnal, the *Evangelisches Gesangbuch* (EG).<sup>1</sup>

There was a much higher percentage of non-hymnal songs in the last group with the larger age spread. This indicates the

1. This article follows hymnological convention in referencing hymnals by abbreviation rather than publishing agency.

**TABLE 1:** Table of five most popular songs.

Name of song	Votes P/K (R)	Alliteration or assonance	Range	Intervals 4-5/6,7,8	Slurs	Date of tune origin
1. <i>Geh aus mein Herz</i> [Go out, my heart]	3//5 (1)	strong	11	4//3	16	1813
2. <i>Stern auf den ich schaue</i> [Star that gives direction]	4//4	weak	11	3//2	5	1897
3. <i>Großer Gott wir loben dich</i> [Mighty God we praise your name]	5//1 (1)	moderate	6	2//0	10	1668/1776/1819
4a. <i>Mein Schöpfer steh mir bei</i> [My maker be now nigh]	3//2	moderate	8	10//0	0	1741
4b. <i>Jesu geh voran</i> [Jesus still lead on]	2//3	weak	6	0//0	0	1698

result one would expect, that one's age plays an important role in one's music preferences. The choices of the third group will only be commented on where they overlap with the first two.

The number of times a particular song was mentioned was totalled, and the top five songs are listed in the results table (See addendum). Mainly these five will be discussed, but sometimes other songs will be commented on.

Four of these are from the common section of the EG, but one from the regional addendum.

There were some clear 'winners' among the songs, but a wide variety of reasons for choosing these.

Four factors that influence the emotional impact of a song will be discussed below: the external situation in which a song is sung, the internal make-up of the one singing it (memories, identity and values), the text and the tune itself. The discussion will begin with the simpler factors and move to the more complex ones.

The results from the surveys will be used as illustrations, but cannot furnish proof of any factor's importance.

## The external situation

It is immediately obvious to most people that the external situation influences how people experience songs. Singing the national anthem at a school assembly or at a Rugby World Cup Final will have a different emotional impact, similarly singing a well-loved hymn in a huge hall with an excellent band will have a deeper emotional effect than singing it unaccompanied on a Sunday morning with 20 people in church. Songs sung during emotive events like funerals, weddings or festivals or around a campfire are more likely to move people. The quality of the accompaniment (Sloboda 2005:225-226) and the acoustics affect our experience, as well as who one shares the experience with and what our relationship is with these people. But even then, not all songs will be experienced the same at a particular emotive event, and not everyone in the group will have a similar experience. This depends on internal factors (see later section), cultural exposure and group identity.

Several of the responses mentioned the situation at which a song was sung – often funerals, also confirmation. This

reinforces the emotive effect a song already has, seeing as only certain songs are chosen for funerals and celebrations. It can also be that a song gains a significance it did not have before when it is used at an emotive occasion.

Music is a universal phenomenon, found in every human society on earth, suggesting that music has very deep, fundamental evolutionary importance. One of these is probably the effect of group bonding. Music helps to promote group cohesion, and it strengthens ties between people (Robinson 2005:390). This effect is highest, when not only listening together but actually singing together. Singing together triggers the communal release of serotonin and oxytocin, the bonding hormone, and can even synchronise our heart beats (Sheppard 2016). But this effect is not always equal. At concerts or events and even at worship services, usually, people gather who value the same type of music, heightening the emotional effect. Under certain conditions, listening to, and even more participating in music-making triggers the release of endorphins, which leads to emotive experiences, even ecstasy (Freedman 2012:22). This can be described as a sense of 'timelessness', 'connection', even 'transcendence' (Freedman 2012:23). Sheppard (2016:online) states:

Singing helps people with depression and reduces feelings of loneliness, leaving people feeling relaxed, happy and connected. What's more, the benefits of singing regularly are cumulative. People who sing have reduced levels of cortisol, indicating lower stress.

This has the potential to create powerful memories that are drawn on in later experiences of hearing or singing this music (see internal factors). However, these experiences are not always equally strong, even under similar conditions. In general, the external situation may make one more attentive to a song initially, but other factors mostly determine which songs become favourites.

## Text

For many people, the text of a song has much lower value than the music in determining its emotive appeal.

However, text is still important, particularly in Christian music. When people say a song 'comforts them' or 'expresses joy', this comes from both the words and the music, but it is most easily demonstrated when looking at the words. In the survey, there were several comments which related to the text. For the second song in the results table, *Stern auf den ich schaue* [Star that gives direction] (EG 407), among the reasons given were 'comforting words'. In many cases, in the reasons given for choosing particular songs, it was the words that were commented on: 'valuable text' or 'wonderful praise of God'.

Texts which are in themselves emotionally touching are often poetically strong texts with vivid imagery. This is true particularly for the first two songs which create strong images. All the top five songs had smooth rhymes with no wrongly stressed syllables. Many had some assonance or alliteration. The top song listed first in the results table *Geh*

*aus mein Herz* [Go out my heart] (EG 503) is one which has very strong alliteration and assonance in its verses.<sup>2</sup>

Another reason linked to the text's appeal was knowledge of the biography of the author. This was noted for *Geh aus mein Herz*, a joyful song written by Paul Gerhardt in a very difficult time. It was also noted about several other songs that did not make the top five, such as the song *So nimm denn mein Hände* [Lord, take my hands and lead me] (1/ /2 votes) (EG 376), where the reason given by one respondent was 'background, life situation of author'. This is likely to refer to a story, possibly legendary, which is passed on word of mouth by people who love the hymn. It tells of Julie Hausmann travelling to Africa to marry her missionary fiancé, but finding on her arrival that he had passed away.<sup>3</sup> It is said that this is when she wrote the hymn. It is unlikely that the story will cease to make the rounds.

Two of the 'top five' songs listed were not included in the previous German Lutheran hymnal of 1974, the *Evangelisches Kirchengesangbuch (EKG)*, as they were judged not theologically and musically adequate for use in the divine service (Albrecht 1995:84). Such songs were then called 'religious folk songs'.<sup>4</sup> One of these was *Großer Gott wir loben dich* [Mighty God, we praise your name] (EG 331) which was written by a Catholic priest. It is difficult to know how far the 'non-Lutheran' origin was a factor. In the responses, the 'ecumenical' nature of the hymn was listed as an attractive fact.

The second song, *Stern auf den ich schaue* [Star that gives direction] (EG 407), strings together many metaphors for Christ, and is a song of trust, a faith response, but not of proclamation. The Lutheran orthodox position was that songs should teach people faith truths. Such songs which simply articulated a faith response of the believer were not judged to have adequate theological depth.<sup>5</sup> Luther himself was more flexible. He knew that songs have the capacity to influence faith deeply. In contrast to Calvin, who was wary of this power of music and argued that only biblical words should be set to music (Leith 1981:211), Luther embraced the power of music and maintained that music and the arts were in essence good and should be used (Luther 1965:316). He encouraged people to write songs, and this resulted in many hymns, some better some worse, but many that have nourished Christians for generations. His own songs had an even a wider audience than his theological writings, leading his opponents to remark that Luther's songs 'destroyed more souls than his speeches and writings' (Blume 1965:27). He said that singing is a response of Christian joy to what Christ has done for us (LW 53:333).

2.The song *Geh aus mein Herz* has strong alliteration and assonance in almost every verse: four keywords beginning with 'G' in verse 1, 13 's' sounds in verse 2 (including sch and z) and 11 'l' sounds in verse 3 (EG 503).

3.I myself heard the story orally, from someone who loves the hymn. This story is recounted by D Gerber (2015). Wikipedia (n.d.) denotes the story as 'probably legendary'.

4.One of the most successful Christian song books in Germany was the *Missionsharfe*, published initially in the middle of the 19th century and reprinted every 2 years (Gruber 2005:192). The edition for the congregation was called *Kleine Missionsharfe im Kirchen- und Volkston* (Small Mission Harp in church and folk tone. KMH 1919).

5.See the discussion in Tönsing (2013:90–93).

While his songs focus on teaching the faith, some of them are also joyous expressions of emotion. However, Luther's balance was not always maintained, and the EKG was on the 'cognitive' end of the pendulum, applying fairly strict theological criteria to songs, and excluding many songs which had deep emotive value for people. This was rectified to a certain extent by the next edition of the hymnal, the EG of 1990.

As the text in songs is so closely linked with the tune, it is difficult to measure objectively people's response to song texts, as it is different from people's response to tuneless poetry.

## Tune

As indicated in the introduction, different communities and generations have different conceptions of how emotive music in worship may be. Konrad Klek comments on the fact that particular harmonies were considered unacceptable in serious church music when he trained, for example, the *Quartsextakkord* [the 'six-four' chord], which is indispensable to many songs which are popular and deeply touching for many people (Klek 2008:40). Generally, this was a reaction by church musicians against particular emotive sequences, completely overused in the romantic era, which are now again more acceptable. Many of the exclusions of popular songs from the EKG were as a result of emotive tunes. The 'No. 1' song listed in the table, *Geh aus mein Herz*, was given an upbeat, popular tune in 1813. However, it was printed in the EKG with its old tune from 1555 (EKG 371). The 1813 tune stayed popular though, and was made the official tune in the EG, where emotive tunes were no longer sidelined.

Emotional effects in music come largely from setting up expectations, violating them and then fulfilling them. 'Music is organized sound, but the organization has to involve some element of the unexpected or it is emotionally flat and robotic' as, for example, in the case of scales or studies (Levitin 2006:169). Sloboda quotes examples of studies on the emotional effect of music, where certain musical sequences provoke tears, 'shivers' or a racing heartbeat. This was a study on music listening:

Tears were associated with melodic or harmonic sequences, appoggiaturas and suspensions, and downward harmonic movement through the circle of fifths. Shivers were associated with enharmonic changes and other harmonic, textual or dynamic discontinuities. Racing heart was associated with syncopation and other forms of accentual anticipation. These effects were insensitive to style, and examples of all these effective structures were found in both classical and pop music. This is another indication that these responses are 'pre-aesthetic'. (Sloboda 2005:169–170)

Such 'thrills and chills' and other intense musical experiences are associated with the brain regions involved in reward, motivation and arousal, and may result in the release of the neurotransmitter dopamine (Levitin 2006:185), which is a way of improving people's mood. Music can thus become a 'form of self-administered therapy' (Sloboda 2005:216). But it is clear that not all music has the same effect on all people. How frequently people feel 'chills' has to do with personality, with a study showing that 'individuals with high general

reward sensitivity easily experience intense music-evoked chills' (Mori & Iwanaga 2015:491). How a particular generation or culture expresses its emotions in music is not only culturally conditioned (Robinson 2005:405), but can also substantially shift and change over time.

In the experience of music, there are many more elements at play than just the tune, especially if there is harmony involved. However, it is often the tune, (or melody) that decides the appeal of music. Manoff (1982) writes:

Melody essentially exists as a natural expression of human musicality. This observation is supported by the fact that no one has ever found a way to teach a young composer to write a good melody: it seems to be a gift. (p. 49)

Jourdain (1997) writes:

A great melody is magic – magic for its sheer power, and magic because somehow a brain has unearthed it from amidst zillions of possible bad melodies. Thousands of new melodies are offered to the listening public every year, yet only a few strike our fancy. When a really good melody emerges, one that digs deep and just won't let go, we celebrate the event by listening to it over and over. (p. 60)

It is easy to recognise effective tunes, but no laws can be made to produce them. Often tunes work even against our expectations. For example, tunes should be singable by unmusical people also, at least in the case of Christian songs used in public worship. However, often it is elements that make a tune more difficult, which also make it more emotive and appealing. Jourdain (1997:86) writes: 'Rules can point out bad melody, but not predict good ones. Many rules have been broken by successful tunes'. He gives a list of rules of his own, some of which are broken by the songs in the list in this article (Jourdain 1997:85–86).

For example, 'Jumps should be few, large jumps rare' (see section on intervals, on the number of large jumps in the listed songs). Another rule of Jourdain: 'Melody should only have one instance of the highest tone, that is, climax. This should never be the seventh'. The latter part of the rule is followed, but not the first. The most popular song *Geh aus mein Herz* has two high Ds. *Mein Schöpfer steh mir bei* [My maker be now nigh] (EG addendum 565) has two high Cs. A third rule: 'Individual notes should not be repeated too much'. This is broken by *Jesu geh voran* [Jesus lead each day] which has five Fs in the first two phrases. This shows the impossibility of clearly delineating what makes a good tune.

As indicated above, often what makes a song emotive often makes it more difficult. Some of these elements will be discussed below.

## Range

Most untrained singers prefer to stay within an octave, and not sing above top D, or below lower A. However, greater ranges are also associated with more emotive tunes. It is interesting to see that of the top five songs, two have a range

of 11 notes, which is near the maximum for a congregational song. One other song on the list which got two votes in Kroondal even has a range of 12. This is of all the tunes the most successful and widely translated, *Wir pflügen und wir streuen* (EG 508) [We plough the fields and scatter] (MP 732).

However, on the other side, having a small range can also be attractive. One of the comments on the song *Jesu geh voran* was that it was 'easy to sing'.

## Intervals: Steps and leaps

Tunes move through time in musical steps and leaps. Generally, untrained singers prefer tunes that do not have too many leaps. Such tunes that travel in small steps are called 'conjunct' tunes. However, often emotive tunes use 'disjunct' melodies, which move in greater leaps. These are more demanding to sing (Politoske 1992:29). The size of the interval is important (it is counted by naming the first note of the interval as 1), but also the effect. 'Some intervals give the impression of firmness and stability, others of unsteadiness or instability' (Ratner 1962:17). The major sixth has been described as the most emotive, or even 'sentimental' interval (Albrecht 1995:82). This is the first leap in the hymn *The Lord's my shepherd* (Tune Crimond LH 387). However, it is interesting to note that this interval has no prominence in the 'top 5'. Most of the intervals are fourths and fifths. *Stern auf den ich schaue* has two leaps of a seventh, *Geh aus mein Herz* has two sevenths and an octave leap. There is no leap of a sixth in this list. This unexpected result probably has to do with the Lutheran socialisation, with most of the elderly having grown up with the EKG which had only three hymns with leaps of a major sixth.<sup>6</sup> Some of the other tunes on the list have major sixth leaps, among them again *We plough the fields and scatter*, which was not included in the EKG but part of some regional addenda (EKG 551). There are more of these leaps in the songs popular with the youth, particularly in the currently popular 'worship' style.

In the list of the top five, fourths and fifths are fairly prominent. There is only one tune in the top five which has no leaps at all. Most of the tunes are fairly disjunct.

## Stylistic elements

Musical styles, fashions and tastes shift and change, and every generation brings a new shift. Some elements go into and out of fashion. Usually, those songs that overuse particular elements will not outlast their generation (Tönsing 2013:89–90). However, there are always some that do. For example, the songs of the missionary revival of the 19th Century, collected in the various editions of *Missionsharfe* [Mission harp], had many large intervals, sometimes a militant overuse of fourths, and many slurs. The songs of the 1960s and 1970s had many jazz rhythms with dotted and syncopated rhythms. The slow worship style of the late 20th

6. Only three tunes in the EKG have a straight Major sixth leap (238, 129, 197). Another three only have arpeggios leading up to the major sixth (86, 226, 383). Albrecht (1995:84) comments on the purging of 'sentimental' tunes and calls them 'not suitable' for the divine service.

and early 21st century has many long notes, or repeated notes, and often also large intervals (Tönsing 2013:86–88). As people's musical tastes are often acquired in their youth (Levithin 2006:226), these styles will probably remain favoured for that generation until they are old, while the musical styles of the youth have shifted again, perhaps several times.

It was very noticeable that in the first two groups of survey respondents, contemporary styles were largely absent. There were a few songs from the second half of the last century, including chants of Taizé, but only one of these gained more than one vote. This means that musical styles from the 19th and the first half of the 20th century predominate, as well as the older traditional Lutheran chorales. In the 19th century, large intervals were common and also songs with slurs (two or more notes for one syllable). The well-known English tunes for *The Lord's my shepherd*, *The day thou gavest* and *Amazing grace*<sup>7</sup> are fairly typical representatives of this style.

Looking at the Table of Results (see Addendum), it is clear that the top three are all representative of this style, with some larger leaps and some (or even many) slurs. The tune for *Großer Gott wir loben dich* (EG 331) has seen some modification over the years, but can generally be taken as from the late 18th century, when a more emotive style was starting to develop. The fourth on the list *Mein Schöpfer steh mir bei* (EG 565) has no slurs but many leaps, so can still be taken as a representative of that style, even though it is a lot older. The last song on the table, *Jesu geh voran* (EG 391), is clearly of a different musical style. It is a classic Lutheran chorale written in 1698. The musical styles have shifted several times in the last decades. However in the list of popular songs the musical styles predominate which were popular when the respondents were young. The elements that became popular later – syncopated rhythms or slow rhythms – are largely absent in the lists from Pretoria and Kroondal, except for three newer songs that are listed. They make their appearance more prominently in the list from Randburg. This fits in with research which has found that adolescence and young adulthood are formative phases for the development of musical preferences (Ter Bogt et al. 2011:299).

## Harmony

While the melody itself would be of overriding importance in the reception of songs, harmony can reinforce the impact of a tune. One comment specified the harmonic setting of J.S. Bach of *Wachet auf ruft uns die Stimme* [Sleepers wake] (EG 147) as 'mighty and sublime' which shows the importance of harmony in the emotional effect of songs. Jourdain discusses the complex interplay of harmony and dissonance which creates emotional effect in music and which can add to the emotional appeal of a simple tune. Jourdain (1997:105) writes: 'Harmony needs dissonance, just like a good story needs suspense ... The trick is to find just the right balance between

7. These three have generally known popular main tunes, but are also sung to other tunes. The most popular are: *The Lord's my shepherd*, CRIMOND LH 387, *The day thou gavest*, ST CLEMENT, LH 549, *Amazing Grace*, NEW BRITAIN, ELW 779.

reinforcing tonal centers and violating them.' While there is much less dissonance in Bach harmonies than is usual for more contemporary music, all harmonic progressions live by the interplay between the more stable and less stable chords, until one comes to the final satisfying cadence. Emotion in music is expressed by alternately 'creating and releasing tension' (Weiss 1991:109). This is true even of simple melodies.

Interestingly, this effect is not lessened by familiarity, when one should no longer be surprised by tension and release. This Robinson (2005:365) argues shows that music works on the subconscious level, unaffected by rational analysis.

## Internal factors: Identity and belonging

In order to develop real emotive and comforting power, a song should be well known and sung many times in order to become a 'friend'. Such a song becomes part of a person's identity and is bound up with many personal memories. The comparison of a song to a friend was made by the German poet and hymn writer Matthias Claudius, who wrote *Wir pflügen und wir streuen* [We plough the fields and scatter] (EG 508). A song is like a 'good friend in your house' (quoted in Lieberknecht 1994:60), whose qualities and function are difficult to exactly define and describe, but whose strengths and weaknesses one knows and with whom one has a shared history. When a song becomes a 'friend', the singer enters in some way into the faith experience of the writer and uses the writer's words to express his or her personal faith experience. This is a powerful emotive process. While the words comfort, it is above all the tune, which determines which songs can become friends.

Clear from musicological research is the finding that although music is universal, the specific reactions are not. Researchers have as yet not found any piece of music that gets the same emotional reaction from people from all different cultures (Drösser 2010).<sup>8</sup>

A 'goosebump effect' will be more pronounced when the piece of music touches the core of a person's identity. A well-known example is, of course, the reaction to national anthems. Each nation has its own. Depending on one's level of patriotism, one will have stronger or weaker reactions to it (or even negative reactions). There are many examples of the power of music stirring patriotic loyalties and motivating defence efforts. It has proved its worth in supporting group morale (Weiss 1991:162).

Some scholars argue that music is a very early biological adaptation for, among other things, defining group identity. It strongly strengthens mother-child bonding from the beginning of life (Byrn & Hourigan 2010:75). It strengthens community bonds and helps resolve conflicts (Jourdain 1997:308). However, it also helps to mark the boundaries of the 'in-group' and defines it against the 'outgroup'. As much

<sup>8</sup>Drösser (2010) argues that the only effect of music that is completely independent of culture and upbringing is that it has an immediate effect on the brain stem.

as one would want music to unite people, one of the biological functions of music is not only to unite but also to set apart from the 'other'.

It hurts to say for a music lover, but emotional music can divide as much as it can unite. No one loves all music. The youth often quite deliberately sets itself apart from the older generation by the music they hear (Levitin 2006:226). Ter Bogt argues that 'cultural distinctions solidify group boundaries and legitimize social inequality; therefore studying taste [including taste in music] is essential to understanding social differentiation' (Ter Bogt et al. 2011:297).

People of all cultures react to music, but they react in very different ways, depending on whether it is music from one's 'in group' or one which may be friendly to it, or from a threatening or hostile culture. What can one permit and not permit in one's space, in one's worship services? This becomes a complex matter of cultural give and take. This will probably remain a never-ending debate, because as a group integrates something new, out on the fringes something newer is developing that defines itself precisely in opposition to that which is integrated and accommodated. Music plays a role in the complex interplay of in-groups and out-groups. There have always been people who have been attracted precisely by those unknown styles that were labelled 'hostile' by others.

Research indicates that two of the strongest influences on your musical preferences are (1) repetition and (2) perception of approval by someone who is significant to you. Familiarity enhances liking and also makes emotional experiences more intense. A study by Ali and Peynircio lu (2010:181) demonstrated that 'with more exposure and a greater focus on emotion ratings, familiarity enhances emotional intensity ratings, independent of the valence of the emotion'. This means that your musical choices are frequently determined simply by your repeated exposure to certain pieces (hence the importance of airtime for a song trying to climb the 'Top 40'), which is most likely to happen within your social group. Also, the opinions of friends and authority figures about unfamiliar music are important. This could be anyone from disc jockeys to respected musicians or teachers (Weiss 1991:18). These two factors have an influence in forming your identity. People growing up in a certain group will repeatedly hear certain styles of music, which will predispose them to like them more than others, and the significant figures in this group will shape music choices. This means that parents have a large influence over the musical exposure and development of their children. The study of Ter Bogt et al. (2011:300) indicated that 'preferences for seemingly highly changeable cultural artefacts, such as popular music, can be transferred from generation to generation'. But at the point when young people want to break out and find a new and separate identity, this will again come into play: music is then sometimes chosen in opposition to the parents and the significant people from a chosen peer group will shape choices in music. However, in general, there is still some

continuity between the tastes of the parents and that of the youth (Ter Bogt et al. 2011:301).

The songs chosen by the respondents as favourites reflected this in several ways. Several of the responses listed significant others as reasons for the choice of song: 'Favourite song of my father' or 'sung frequently by my mother, especially on birthdays' or 'favourite song of my husband'. The one song chosen twice in Kroondal *Wir plügen und wir streuen* [We plough the fields and scatter] was identified as a song that fitted their social and economic group: 'For the farmer', or 'in praise of God's blessings for people of the land'.

In terms of musical style, the chosen songs were almost all part of the genre of songs that define mission-descendent German Lutheran identity – an identity slightly different from the more cerebral identity of the EKG hymnological commission. The song which received the most votes, *Geh aus mein Herz*, is a song from the heart of Lutheran identity. Although it uses the upbeat 19th century tune, its text is from the high period of Lutheran orthodoxy. It was written in 1653 by one of its greatest poets, Paul Gerhardt.<sup>9</sup> The one song that came from another background *Großer Gott, wir loben dich* [Mighty God we praise your name] (EG 331) was recognised as an ecumenical hymn, but has been part of Lutheran culture for a long time so would not have been seen as an alien to the culture. Only two English songs were listed. One received two votes, once listed in German and the other time in English: *Du großer Gott, wenn ich die Welt betrachte* [O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder] (LH 881). *Onward Christian soldiers* (LH 208) was listed once, only in English. There is no German translation.

## Memory storage

Music has a strong link with memory; it is a 'powerful cue in bringing emotional experiences from memory back into awareness' (Robinson 2005:383). Music evokes associations in a powerful, unconscious way and part of our emotional response to music is based on emotional memories that are the 'more insistent for being only vaguely understood' (Robinson 2005:384). Drössler speaks about the 'stored memories' effect of music and calls it the 'Darling, they are playing our song', effect (Drössler 2010). Many couples have special memories of songs played at their first dance together, at a special event or at the wedding. The effect of musical memory is probably considerably heightened if one either sings along or even dances to it, rather than just listening. The effect wears down, of course, with repeated hearing (Levitin 2006:162), and can also turn into its opposite – for example, if they had broken up acrimoniously some time, this song would have strong negative or bittersweet associations (Drössler 2010). Fortunately, strongly negative associations can also be broken down when a song is placed into a more positive setting. Songs are also a favoured way to evoke memories and preserve traditions in sung lyrics (Thym 2012:263).

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion of Paul Gerhardt's response to his social situation (Tönsing 2019:2).

Music's ability to store emotional memories is incredibly powerful, and probably needs to be researched much more. In general, music seems to enhance the ability to remember, especially more long-term recall (Rainey & Larsen 2002:184). Some research has been performed about the secretion of endorphins when hearing expressive music, which strengthens the memory of that event and furthers group or individual bonding. Hearing a special piece of music conjures up memories, feelings, sometimes even tastes and smells (Drössler 2010). This power of music is both an asset and a liability in a congregational setting, as people have strongly positive or strongly negative associations, often with the same song.

In the survey, several responses had to do with memories (quoted here directly translated or summarised): 'sung at funerals/confirmation', 'Memories of Christmas, particularly as a child', 'sung very often at our school', 'reminds me of my mother, always sung at birthdays when we were children', 'have sung this song for 80 years', 'sung during difficult times'.

## General comments

In many of the comments listed, it was clear that the appeal of a song lies in the interplay of all the above factors, and that generally one cannot isolate any one of them. The melody is probably of overriding importance, but there are many other factors.

Many general comments were made such as 'it comforts', 'expresses thanks', 'it lifts the soul', 'wonderful tune, moving words' without being able to define why this particular song is able to move the singer or lift the soul. Some focused on the ability of the song to deepen faith and move the singer closer to God/Jesus: 'it shows how faith grows', 'the pain of Jesus becomes my pain', 'gives security in Christ'. This was experienced without being able to explain why this particular song has the ability to deepen faith experience.

There were also some comments about the power of singing in general: 'Singing has a positive effect on my mood and lets me forget my everyday life'. This is a function probably mainly of the tune, but also of the accompaniment, the experience of singing together and the text. Experiences in the past where songs have uplifted and comforted will be recalled and reinforced. Another general comment was, 'I cannot imagine a divine service without singing'. This would probably be echoed by most Christians today. Again, this is a reflection on the total experience of singing.

What became very clear is the importance of songs for all the congregants involved. Christian songs probably have a higher importance for people than music appreciation generally. But even for general musical engagement, Sloboda (2005:216) emphasises the importance and seriousness of the endeavour: '[c]onceptions of music as "entertainment" or "diversion" grossly underestimate the seriousness of many people's engagement with music'.

All of this shows the very complex nature of people's experience and appreciation of songs, and the difficulty of drawing out general principles or even directions for worship. Any conclusions will necessarily be very tentative.

## Conclusion

It is difficult to draw conclusions from this very simple subjective study. But some pointers can be drawn out. Firstly, the clearest outcome was that, in general, the respondents liked music of the style that was popular in their youth, or that was sung regularly when they were children. This is fairly easy to understand and shows the importance of still regularly singing older songs, even if, in general, the styles have shifted. If one wants to keep all generations together, one should try to cater for different tastes in music. Similarly, for the younger generation, it is important to find songs that can become their 'friends'. This means finding those songs in each musical style which have a chance of lasting longer and which could still provide comfort and inspiration for this generation when they become old. Such songs should be sung more often, so that memories can be made with these songs. Congregations that concentrate on only traditional songs, or only songs from the last 10 years will both leave a generation impoverished and will not manage to bring the generations together.<sup>10</sup> Many congregations have split the music styles and create different types of services. This is a possible solution, which may make some people happier, but it does end up dividing the body of Christ. There is no ideal solution in what is an emotive issue in churches.

Undoubtedly, music plays a large part in people's spirituality and in how they connect with the divine. What Jourdain (1997) says about 'great music' can also be said about the experience of music in worship for many people:

[In great music we can perceive] all-encompassing relations that go much deeper than those we find in ordinary experience. Thus, however briefly, we attain a greater grasp of the world (or at least a small part of it), as if rising from the ground to look down upon the confining maze of ordinary existence. It is for this reason that music can be transcendent. For a few moments it makes us larger than we really are, and the world more orderly than it really is ... As our brains are thrown into overdrive, we feel our very existence expand and realize that we can be more than we normally are, and that the world is more than it seems. That is cause enough for ecstasy. (p. 331)

Christians would generally say that music makes people see the world 'more orderly' than it normally seems because it helps them to reach into the realm of transcendence and a God who is the ordering power and makes people more than they normally are when they praise and thank him in song. Really 'good' Christian songs do not only allow people to forget the messiness of their daily existence for a time, but give them coping mechanisms to survive in the midst of it. This is what songs that are 'friends' can do.

<sup>10</sup>Guy Jansen (2005:17) discusses criteria for choosing songs and calls an excessive focus on either the past or the present 'chronological snobbery'.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank groups that were part of the informal survey about favourite songs. No single names are given but groups are described in the article.

## Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exist.

## Author's contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical consideration

This was a research project using human subjects in a low-risk informal survey. The participants were informed of the purpose of the research and participated voluntarily and anonymously.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as survey results were illustrative only.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

## References

- EG Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Niedersachsen und Bremische Evangelische Kirche, 1994, *Evangelisches Gesangbuch*, Lutherisches Verlagshaus, Hannover.
- EKG Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche Niedersachsens, 1974, *Evangelisches Kirchengesangbuch*, Schlütersche Verlagsanstalt, Hannover.
- LH Lutheran Church of Australia, 1995, *Lutheran Hymnal with supplement*, Openbook Publishers, Aidelaid.
- MP Horrobin, P. & Leavers, G., 1990, *Mission Praise – Combined Music Edition*, London, Marshall Pickering.
- Albrecht, C., 1995, *Einführung in die Hymnologie*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- Ali, O. & Peynircioğlu, Z.F., 2010, 'Intensity of emotions conveyed and elicited by familiar and unfamiliar music', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 27(3), 177–182, viewed 28 January 2020, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/mp.2010.27.3.177>.
- Blume F., 1965, *Geschichte der Evangelischen Kirchenmusik*, Bärenreiter-Verlag, Kassel.
- Byrn, M.D. & Hourigan R., 2010, 'A comparative case study of music interactions between mothers and infants', *Contributions to Music Education* 37(1), 65–79, viewed 28 January 2020, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24127269>.
- Drösser, C., 2010, *Musik und Wissenschaft – Der Gänsehaut-Effekt* viewed 15 February 2017, from <https://www.zeit.de/2010/35/Musik-Wissenschaft>.
- Eerola, T. & Vuoskoski, J.K., 2013, 'A review of music and emotion studies: Approaches, emotion models, and stimuli', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 30(3), 307–340, viewed 02 February, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/mp.2012.30.3.307>.
- Ferreri, L. & Verga, L., 2016, 'Benefits of music on verbal learning and memory', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 34(2), 167–182 viewed 03 February 2020, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26417442>.
- Freedman, D., 2012, 'In search of ecstasy: The musician's dream', *Music Educators Journal* 99(2), 22–24, viewed 31 January 2020, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23364281>.



- Gerber, D., 2015, 'So entstand, "So nimm denn meine Hände"', *Livenet*, viewed 03 May 2019, from [https://www.livenet.ch/themen/wissen/281116-so-entstand\\_so\\_nimm\\_denn\\_meine\\_haende.html](https://www.livenet.ch/themen/wissen/281116-so-entstand_so_nimm_denn_meine_haende.html).
- Gruber, S., 2005, 'Ein schönes Beispiel von Gebetserhörung der neuen Zeit', *Jahrbuch für Liturgik und Hymnologie* 44, 184–198.
- Jansen, G., 2005, 'Discernment and discrimination: Four categories of psalms, hymns and worship songs', *RSCM Church Music Quarterly*, Dec, 16–17.
- Joslin, P.N., Barradas, G. & Eerola, T., 2015, 'From sound to significance: Exploring the mechanisms underlying emotional reactions to music', *The American Journal of Psychology* 128(3), 281–304, viewed 28 January 2020, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/amerjpsyc.128.3.0281>.
- Jourdain, R., 1997, *Music, the brain and ecstasy: How music captures our imagination*, William Morrow and Company, New York, NY.
- Kawakami, A., Furukawa, K., Katahira, K., Kamiyama, K. & Okanoya, K., 2013, 'Relations between musical structures and perceived and felt emotions', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 30(4), 407–417, viewed 30 January 2020, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/mp.2013.30.4.407>.
- Klek, K., 2008, "'So nimm denn meine Hände...'" Rehabilitation des Gefühls im Evangelischen Gesangbuch mit Liedern aus dem 19. Jahrhundert?', *Arbeitsstelle Gottesdienst, Zeitschrift der GAGF* 22(3), 39–43.
- Leith, J.H., 1981, *An introduction to the reformed tradition*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, GA.
- Levitin, D.J., 2006, *This is your brain on music: The science of a human obsession*, Dutton, New York, NY.
- Lieberknecht, U., 1994, *Gemeindelieder: Probleme und Chancen einer kirchlichen Lebensäußerung*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- Luther, M., [1528]1965, 'Preface to the Weiss 1528', in U.S. Leupold (ed.), *Luther's works (LW)*, vol. 53, pp. 317–318, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA.
- Manoff, T., 1982, *Music: A living language*, WW Norton & Company, New York, NY/London.
- Mori, K. & Iwanaga, M., 2015, 'General reward sensitivity predicts intensity of music-evoked chills', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 32(5), 484–492, viewed 05 February 2020, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/mp.2015.32.5.484>.
- Nüchtern, M., 2008, "'Holder Knabe im lockigen Haar"- oder: Ein bisschen Kitsch darf sein', *Arbeitsstelle Gottesdienst, Zeitschrift der GAGF* 22(3), 16–22.
- Politoske, D.T., 1992, *Music*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Rainey, D.W. & Larsen, J.D., 2002, 'Effect of familiar melodies on initial learning and long-term memory for unconnected text', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 20(2), 173–186, viewed 08 February 2020, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/mp.2002.20.2.173>.
- Ratner, L.G., 1962, *Harmony: Structure and style*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, NY.
- Robinson, J., 2005, *Deeper than reason: Emotion and its role in literature, music, and art*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Sheppard, C., 2016, *The neuroscience of singing*, viewed 21 February 2017, from <https://uflightconnect.com/neuroscience-of-singing>.
- Sloboda, J., 2005, *Exploring the musical mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Ter Bogt, T.F.M., Delsing, M.J.M.H., Van Zalk, M., Christenson, P.G. & Meeus, W.H.J., 2011, 'Intergenerational continuity of taste: Parental and adolescent music preferences', *Social Forces* 90(1), 297–319, viewed 29 January 2020, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41682642>.
- Thym, J., 2012, 'Song as memory, memory as song', *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 69(3), 263–273, viewed 30 January 2020, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23375389>.
- Tönsing, J.G., 2013, 'Searching for the "good song": Determining the quality of Christian songs within the polarities of worship', Doctoral thesis, University of Pretoria.
- Tönsing, J.G., 2019, 'Responses to violence and human suffering in Christian hymnody: A study of responses to situations of violence in the work of four hymn writers', *HTS Theological Studies/Theological Studies* 75(1), a5197. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5197>
- Vuoskoski, J.K., Thompson, W.F., McIlwain, D. & Eerola, T., 2012, 'Who enjoys listening to sad music and why?', *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 29(3), 311–317, viewed 10 February 2020, from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/mp.2012.29.3.311>.
- Weiss, R., 1991, *Music and expression*, Wim C. Brown Publishers, Dubuque, IA.
- Wikipedia, n.d., *So nimm denn meine Hände*, viewed 03 May 2019, from [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/So\\_nimm\\_denn\\_meine\\_Haende](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/So_nimm_denn_meine_Haende).