

Sacred Music as a Form of Resistance: Women's Sacred Music from the Protestant Reformation to Contemporary Global Contexts

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ABSTRACT This contribution examines women's sacred musical composition from the Protestant Reformation to the present as a form of performative resistance that challenges theological, artistic, and social hierarchies¹. Through analysis of key figures, from Elisabeth Cruciger to contemporary artists such as Lauren Daigle, we explore how women's sacred performance creates transformative ritual languages that mediate between individual and collective divine experience. The study reveals how women in different global contexts, from the *Corn Ditties* of enslaved American communities to contemporary gospel, use sacred performance to build cultural counter-narratives that resist marginalisation and create new spiritual epistemologies. Drawing on performance studies, ritual theory, and feminist musicology, this research demonstrates that women's sacred music functions both as devotional practice and as sociopolitical intervention, transforming traditional liturgical spaces into places of empowerment and theological re-imagination.

KEYWORDS sacred performance; women composers; ritual transformation; religious resistance; global Christianity; feminist spirituality

Introduction

The emergence of the term “sacred music” in the writings of the Protestant reformer Michael Praetorius in 1614 marked not only a taxonomic development but also the beginning of a contested performative space in which women would increasingly claim authority over sacred expression. This article argues that the composition of sacred music by women constitutes a form of performative resistance that operates across theological, artistic, and social hierarchies, creating transformative ritual languages that challenge traditional mediations of the divine experience.

In this context, performance transcends mere musical execution to embrace what Diana Taylor defines as “embodied knowledge”: the ways in which sacred music becomes a vehicle for transmitting alternative spiritual epistemologies that resist dominant patriarchal interpretations of Christian doctrine. From the Reformation to contemporary global Christianity, women composers have used sacred performance to construct what James C. Scott defines as “hidden transcripts”: cultural counter-narratives that operate both within and against hegemonic religious structures.

Theoretical Framework: Performance, Ritual, and Resistance

This analysis is based on three interconnected theoretical frameworks. First, performance studies, particularly the work of Judith Butler (1990, 1993) on performativityⁱⁱ, highlight how women's sacred music functions as iterative acts that both reinforce and subvert traditional gender roles within religious contexts. Second, ritual theory, especially Catherine Bell's (1992, 1997) conception of ritualisation as a strategic practice of differentiationⁱⁱⁱ, reveals how women's sacred compositions create new liturgical languages that mediate between individual mystical experience and collective worship. Third, postcolonial and feminist musicology, particularly the work of scholars such as Suzanne Cusick (1994, 2009) and Ellen Koskoff (1997, 2014)^{iv}, provides frameworks for understanding how women's sacred music operates both as devotional practice and as sociopolitical intervention in different global contexts.

The Reformation as Performative Rupture^v

The Protestant Reformation created unprecedented opportunities for women's sacred musical expression, radically altering the performative landscape of Christian worship. Martin Luther's emphasis on congregational singing and the translation of the liturgy into vernacular languages opened spaces for women's participation that had previously been limited to convent settings. As the first hymn of the Lutheran tradition written by a woman, Cruciger's work accomplished multiple acts of transgression: it challenged the Catholic prohibition of women's theological expression, affirmed Protestant doctrinal positions, and established female authorship within sacred musical discourse. The continued presence of the hymn in contemporary Lutheran hymnals demonstrates what Joseph Roach calls “surrogation,” the way in which performance enables the transmission of cultural memory across temporal boundaries.

The curation of Hussite hymns by Katharina von Zell in 1534 further illustrates the intersection of performance and resistance. Her editorial work transformed the canon into what anthropologist Victor Turner would recognise as a “liminal space,”^{vi} a threshold where traditional social hierarchies are suspended and new forms of community emerge. Von Zell's description of these hymns as suitable “for the craftsman bent over his workbench, for the mother cradling her child, for the servant washing the dishes” reveals a conscious democratisation of sacred performance that challenges both clerical authority and social stratification.

Pietism and the Individualisation of Sacred Representation

The Pietist movement of the seventeenth century radically transformed the relationship between performer and congregation in sacred music. The compositions of Henriette Catharina Freifrau von Gersdorff (1648–1726/1729) exemplify this shift from communal to individual expression, creating what we might define as an “intimate performance”: sacred music that mediates between private mystical experience and public worship^{vii}.

Gersdorff’s multilingual competence and her correspondence with intellectual figures such as Leibniz place her work within a broader Enlightenment discourse while maintaining specific Christian devotional aims. Her support for the translation of the Bible into Sorbian demonstrates how women’s sacred performance operated beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries, in a space where power hierarchies were questioned and dominant narratives could be subverted. The Pietist emphasis on individual conversion and sanctification, as noted by theologian Eberhard Busch^{viii}, created new performative possibilities for women’s sacred expression. This individualisation of spiritual experience provided a theoretical justification for women’s authorship of sacred texts, since personal spiritual authority could be claimed independently of institutional ecclesiastical recognition.

Pedagogical Performance: Women as Musical Educators

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the emergence of women as educators, a role that allowed both preservation and innovation within Christian musical traditions. The development of the Tonic Sol-Fa system by Sarah Anna Glover (1785–1867) democratised musical learning, moving beyond the restricted circle of specialists and reaching schools, churches, and amateur choirs. Glover’s publication of her Scheme to Render Psalmody Congregational under a pseudonym reflects the double bind faced by women in sacred musical contexts: the necessity of claiming authority while avoiding the social sanctions associated with public female authorship.

This strategy of what we might call “performative anonymity” allowed women to influence sacred musical practice while maintaining social acceptability. The strategy of anonymous publication reveals how women’s performance operated through subtle forms of resistance that act within dominant systems while gradually transforming them. The Tonic Sol-Fa method, devised by Sarah Anna Glover, revolutionised music learning because it enabled anyone to sing and play without necessarily having to learn traditional musical notation.

Revival Movements and Transnational Networks of Performance

The revival movements of the nineteenth century created unprecedented opportunities for women’s sacred musical expression beyond national and denominational boundaries. The tradition of the “gospel song,” with contributions from English composers such as Charlotte Elliott, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frances Havergal, together with American figures such as Fanny Crosby, illustrates how women’s sacred performances operated within transnational networks of religious renewal.

Phoebe P. Knapp

The composition of more than 8,000 hymns by Fanny Crosby (1820–1915) perhaps represents the most prolific example of women’s sacred performance in the nineteenth century. Her collaboration with Phoebe P. Knapp in *Blessed Assurance* demonstrates how women’s sacred performance created new forms of collaborative authorship that challenged traditional models of the

individual creative genius^{ix}. The importance of Charlotte Elliott's *Just as I Am* for Billy Graham's evangelistic campaigns reveals how women's sacred performances operated beyond temporal boundaries, with nineteenth-century compositions providing the soundtrack for the religious revival of the twentieth century. This temporal fluidity demonstrates what performance scholar Rebecca Schneider calls "temporal drag," namely the way in which performance allows the past to remain present through embodied repetition^x.

Performance and Racial Resistance: From Corn Ditties to Gospel^{xi}

The development of African American sacred music provides perhaps the most compelling example of how women's sacred performances function as resistance in contexts of extreme oppression. The "Corn Ditties" of the late eighteenth century, secretly performed by enslaved communities, represent what James C. Scott defines as "hidden transcripts"^{xii}: cultural practices that enable resistance while avoiding direct confrontation with structures of power. The transition from *Corn Ditties* to *Spirituals and Gospel music* illustrates how women's sacred performances adapted to changing social and political circumstances while maintaining their essential character as both devotional practice and a strategy of resistance.

Bessie Smith's promotion of gospel music, despite criticism from conservative Protestant churches, demonstrates how women's sacred performances challenged not only racial hierarchies but also religious orthodoxies. The fusion of blues and spiritual traditions by Sister Rosetta Tharpe exemplifies what ethnomusicologist Portia Maultsby defines as "musical code-switching," the ability to navigate between sacred and secular musical languages within a single performance. Tharpe's call-and-response interactions with the audience created what ritual theorist Catherine Bell recognises as "ritualised resistance," formal practices that enable the formation of community while simultaneously challenging dominant cultural norms^{xiii}.

Contemporary Global Contexts: Sacred Performance in the Digital Age

The emergence of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) at the end of the twentieth century created new possibilities and challenges for women's sacred performance^{xiv}. The crossing of Christian and secular musical boundaries by Lauren Daigle (born 1991) illustrates how contemporary women's sacred performance operates within globalised media contexts while maintaining devotional authenticity. Melody Green's rejection of the commercialisation of Christian music demonstrates how women's sacred performances continue to negotiate between spiritual authenticity and market pressures. Her establishment of the "Good Neighbor Mercy Fund" shows how women's sacred performances extend beyond musical creation to embrace the advocacy of social justice.

The creation of *Cecilia's List* by Kathryn Rose in 2017 represents a digital-age intervention in the canonisation of sacred music, using technology to make women's sacred compositions more accessible to contemporary liturgical contexts. Rose's observation that "one can go to church every week and not hear a single work written by women for months" highlights the ongoing marginalisation of women's sacred performances despite centuries of significant contributions.

Ritualisation and Transformation: Sacred Music as Liturgical Innovation

Women's sacred performances consistently demonstrate what ritual theorist Catherine Bell calls "ritualization," the strategic differentiation of certain activities from ordinary social action.

The compositions of Patricia Van Ness (born 1951)^{xv}, described as “ecstatic and ethereal,” “ancient and new at the same time,” exemplify how women’s sacred performances create new liturgical languages that mediate between historical tradition and contemporary spiritual needs.

The comparison of Van Ness with Hildegard von Bingen reveals how women’s sacred performance operates through what performance studies call “genealogical connection,” the way in which contemporary artists invoke historical precedents to legitimise innovative practices. Her current project of setting all 150 psalms to music in English, Hebrew, and Latin demonstrates how women’s sacred performance creates multilingual and multicultural liturgical resources. Patricia Van Ness is considered today the new Hildegard.

The last composition of Ursula Caporali (1971–2022), *Emunah*, provides a particularly moving example of sacred performance as spiritual testament. Her description of the piece as representing the “thread of hope that transcends reason” shows how women’s sacred performance mediates between rational theological discourse and mystical spiritual experience.

Global Implications: Sacred Performance and Cultural Counter-Narratives

The global scope of women’s sacred performance demonstrates what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls “cultural flows,” the way in which cultural practices cross national and linguistic boundaries while adapting to local contexts^{xvi}. From Margaret Dryburgh’s (1890–1945) composition of *The Captive’s Hymn* during Japanese internment^{xvii} to the influence of contemporary gospel on artists such as Carrie Underwood and Mary J. Blige^{xviii}, women’s sacred performance creates cultural counter-narratives that resist marginalisation while affirming spiritual agency.

The pedagogical dimension of women’s sacred performances, from the founding of the Cincinnati Conservatory by Clara Baur (1835–1912) to contemporary worship leaders such as Lauren Daigle, demonstrates how sacred performances function as cultural transmission, ensuring the continuity of alternative spiritual epistemologies across generations.

Conclusion: Sacred Resistance Continues

The composition of women’s sacred music from the Reformation to the present constitutes a sustained form of performative resistance that operates simultaneously across theological, artistic, and social hierarchies. Through the creation of new ritual languages that mediate between individual and collective divine experience, women composers have consistently used sacred performance to construct cultural counter-narratives that challenge marginalisation while creating new spiritual epistemologies. The persistence of this tradition in diverse global contexts—from Protestant Europe to enslaved African American communities to contemporary digital networks—demonstrates the fundamental human need for sacred expression that transcends institutional boundaries. As Randall Goodgame observes^{xix},

Music has something mysterious. It helps us to remember the Scriptures in a way that stays with us for life. Singing the Word allows the Holy Spirit to work through those verses, rooting them deep in our hearts.

This analysis shows that women’s sacred performances function not only as devotional practice but also as a form of theological and social intervention that continues to transform both liturgical spaces and the broader cultural understanding of sacred authority. In an era of increasing religious pluralism

and digital connectivity, women's sacred performances offer models for creating inclusive spiritual communities that honour both tradition and innovation.

The ongoing work of organisations such as *Cecilia's List* and the continuing popularity of contemporary women's sacred music suggest that this tradition of performative resistance will continue to evolve, creating new possibilities for sacred expression that challenge hierarchies and affirm the fundamental human capacity to connect with the divine through embodied performance.

Notes.

ⁱ The idea of “embodied knowledge” by Diana Taylor is a guiding thread that runs through her entire work *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (published in Italian as *L'archivio e il repertorio. La memoria culturale e la performance nelle Americhe*). “Embodied knowledge” is the repertoire. It includes practices such as dance, gestures, spoken languages, rituals, political demonstrations, and any form of performance. This knowledge cannot be fixed or permanently preserved like archival documents, but it renews and transforms itself in its very execution.

ⁱⁱ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990)

ⁱⁱⁱ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

^{iv} Suzanne G. Cusick, “Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem,” *Perspectives of New Music* 32, no. 1 (1994): 8–27.

Suzanne G. Cusick, *Francesca Caccini at the Medici Court: Music and the Circulation of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Ellen Koskoff, ed., *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987).

Ellen Koskoff, “An Introduction to Women, Music, and Culture,” in *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. Ellen Koskoff (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 1–23

^v Maria Teresa Pizzulli, *Compositrici tra vita, arte e spiritualità: Musica sacra ritrovata* (Matera: Edizioni Magister, 2022), 48–49.

^{vi} The “liminal space” is a central and recurring theme in chapter 3, *Liminality and Communitas*, of the book *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, published in 1969 by Victor Turner. The concept of *limen* (which in Latin means “threshold” or “margin”) was taken up and developed by Victor Turner starting from the work of ethnologist Arnold Van Gennep. The latter, in his book *Les rites de passage* (1909), identified liminality as the central and intermediate phase of these rites, characterized by a state of suspension and ambiguity.

^{vii} Alberto Annarilli, “Amore ed emozioni nell'innografia pietista, dal passato a noi: Esempi musicali,” *Religions* 15, no. 8 (2024): 954, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15080954>

^{viii} Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth e i pietisti: La critica del giovane Karl Barth al pietismo e la sua risposta* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004)

^{ix} see also Maria Teresa Pizzulli, *Compositrici tra vita, arte e spiritualità*, 61–65.

^x The concept of “temporal drag” by Rebecca Schneider refers to a performative phenomenon in which the past is not seen as something concluded, but as an active and present part of current temporality. In other words, it is a kind of “temporal resistance” in which the past manifests itself in the present, influencing it and intertwining with it.

^{xi} see also Maria Teresa Pizzulli, *Compositrici tra vita, arte e spiritualità*, 55-56.

^{xii} James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). Anthropologist James C. Scott questions the idea that power is always visible and direct, instead proposing that there exist more subtle and diffuse forms of power. He introduces the distinction between “public transcripts” and “hidden transcripts,” highlighting how the true opinions and resistances of subordinate groups are often concealed behind a façade of conformity.

^{xiii} The theory of “musical code-switching” by Portia Maultsby is widely discussed in her writings on jazz, R&B, and the history of African American music. A key reference text is her contribution in the book *The History of African-American Music*. Catherine Bell’s major work, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992), is the fundamental text in which she introduces the concept of “ritualized resistance” and explores its implications. In the book, Bell analyzes how rituals are not simply a passive reproduction of social norms, but can also be spaces of negotiation and challenge.

^{xiv} see also Maria Teresa Pizzulli, *Compositrici tra vita, arte e spiritualità*, 118-126.

^{xv} see also Maria Teresa Pizzulli, *Compositrici tra vita, arte e spiritualità*, 39.

^{xvi} Arjun Appadurai, Indian anthropologist, in his work *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996), argues about imagination and the media, which play a central role in the way people experience globalization, transforming the world into a system of dynamic flows rather than static entities.

^{xvii} see also Maria Teresa Pizzulli, *Compositrici tra vita, arte e spiritualità*, 62, 71.

^{xviii} see also Maria Teresa Pizzulli, *Compositrici tra vita, arte e spiritualità*, 39.

^{xix} <https://lc.cx/0PT7XM>

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Maria Teresa Pizzulli is a distinguished pianist, composer, and teacher at the "G. Verdi" Conservatory in Turin. Her career is defined by a unique intersection of musical mastery and theological research, holding a degree from the Waldensian Faculty in Biblical and Theological Studies. A dedicated researcher of female musical heritage, she published the acclaimed book and CD project *Compositrici Tra Vita, Arte e Spiritualità—Musica Sacra Ritrovata*. Her scholarly excellence was recognized at the 2025 Farnese National Literary Award 'La Farnia d'Oro', where she won the Romolo Lucarelli Special Audience Award and 3rd Prize (Essay Section) for her work on female composers of sacred music. Her discography includes *Women Composers from 700 to the Present Day* and *Brahms' Circle*. Beyond performing, she is a pioneer of Pedagogical Activism, authoring the innovative method *Il Solfeggio... Un gioco da Ragazze!*. As the founder of Officine d'Arte APS and a member of the CeSAP Board, Pizzulli continues to perform as a prize-winning soloist and ensemble musician to widespread public acclaim.