Article

Worshipping Musically Online During Covid-19

Irene Trønnes Strøm
University of South-Eastern Norway

Abstract

The Covid-19-pandemic and resulting infection control measures drastically impacted the ability of Christian worshippers to gather and practice their faith. As a result, online solutions emerged as the primary option for maintaining religious practice. In this article, I conduct an autoethnographic study of my own experiences as a member of a Lutheran congregation to explore the impact of online worship practices during the pandemic. Specifically, I examine how music and sounds in worship online shaped worshippers like me through affective means, and what social and political effects these sonic engagements had. To guide my analysis, I draw on Gibson's concept of affordance and affect theory as theoretical frameworks. It is important to acknowledge that online worship during the pandemic was experienced in different ways. Some individuals may have experienced a sense of flourishing and connection through online worship, while others may have felt isolated and disconnected. Although online worship may lack the physical presence of traditional religious gatherings, it can still serve as a means of facilitating a sense of an 'absent presence' for individual worshippers. Overall, understanding the impact of online worship practices during the pandemic is an important area of study with significant implications for the future of religious practice.

Keywords

Online worship events

The Covid-19-pandemic forced many congregants to attend Christian worship events online, as social distancing measures prevented physical gatherings. Although worship online offered a means of maintaining a sense of belonging and continuity, it also brought feelings of loss to practitioners that were used to singing together. In this article, I study how social distance and increased use of digital technologies (e.g., Zoom and Facebook) shaped practices of Christian worship, and musical ways of being together, by drawing on my own experience as a member of a Lutheran church community. Informed by recent work on affective politics and affordance within music studies I explore how the pandemic both challenged, and gave new life, to the church community as we had to develop new ways of singing together online. Methodologically, I draw on autoethnography, as

it allowed me to utilize my personal experience and participation in the community as data together with reflexive writing (Karlsson et al. 2021). This method afforded a deeper understanding of how the pandemic transformed religious communities, as established forms of 'musicking' (Elliott 1995, Small 1998), like congregational singing, became impossible due to contamination measures. Autoethnography enabled me to use my lived experience as a musician, music scholar and member of a Lutheran congregation for the last 17 years as a method to explore how the pandemic shaped participation in the worship community. By focusing specifically on music and affective engagements from this autoethnographic perspective, I aim to shed light on the broader implications of the pandemic for religious communities and highlight the significant role that music and sound play in shaping experiences of Christian worship. More importantly, since there has been no autoethnographic research on how the pandemic shaped musical practices of worship, this study aims to fill this gap.

The pandemic, worship online and blurred distinctions between offline and online

During the pandemic, most worship events were facilitated through real-time interactive platforms like Zoom or recorded and shared on social media platforms such as Facebook or on video platforms like Vimeo. Even those who had never attended an online service before were suddenly confined to the digital realm. This was part of a broader national policy implemented by the Norwegian government, which involved the most invasive measures in Norway during peacetime, leading to the lockdown of all social activities, including religious gatherings (Røed-Johansen and Torgersen 2020). Waves of mutated virus variants led to the maintenance of strict restrictions on social interaction (Bøhler 2023, 314; McClellan et al. 2023, 1–2), resulting in limited opportunities to gather and worship. Consequently, many worshippers experienced a sense of loss, including physical space, physical presence, physical people, and physical sound.

There is an increasing body of academic literature on the intersection of religion and digital media (Campbell and Connelly 2020; Dawson and Cowan 2004; Hackett 2006), offering insight into topics like the distinction between online and offline religious activities. However, any attempt to separate these two modalities have become increasingly difficult, as people often mix their online and offline interactions in ways that blur the distinction between them (Campbell and Tsuria 2022, 4). This can be seen in light of the more general mixing between online and offline activities and the increased use of the internet and smartphones in many peoples' daily lives over the past decades (McEwan and Zanolla 2013). The shift to online religious practice during the pandemic posed substantial challenges for worshippers and religious communities worldwide, and several studies have explored its impact (Birkedal 2022; Danbolt, Isene, and Stålsett 2021; Lorea et al. 2022; Hendricksen 2021; Giles, Dee, and Payne 2021; Salater-Daljord 2022; Vikre 2020).

Heidi Campbell's books written during the pandemic (Campbell 2020b, 2020a) bring together religious leaders and scholars and present insights gleaned from researching religion online. Adam Bajan emphasizes the limitations of online worship experiences, arguing that the absence of physical presence and the communal experience of worship cannot be adequately replaced by digital platforms such as podcasts or virtual services (Bajan 2020). Bajan notes that individuals who encounter religious podcasts for the first time may miss out on the visual and sensory elements of religious practices, such as 'the effervescence of collective worship' (Bajan 2020, 34). Considering these limitations, Bajan concludes that offline worship cannot simply be translated into an online format and that the lack of physical presence in podcasts and online services is at best a rudimentary substitute for the 'real' product (Bajan 2020, 35).

According to Edward Phillips, the pandemic forced most Christian congregations in the U.S. to transition to online worship services, creating a massive social experiment (Phillips 2021). As in the rest of the world, this shift was primarily driven by necessity, as in-person gatherings had become unsafe due to the pandemic. While platforms such as Zoom have proven effective for facilitating small group worship meetings and maintaining emotional intimacy, they cannot fully capture the visceral experience of attending a worship event in person (Phillips 2021, 52). As Phillips notes, participants may share some acts of worship, but there is still a sense that something is missing. To illustrate this point, he quotes a friend who likened worship online to 'watching a video of a fireplace' (Phillips 2021, 53) – providing a view, but not the heat. Ultimately, Phillips concludes that our experiences during the pandemic will likely have lasting effects on our expectations of worship and the concrete practices we engage in.

Hans Olav Hodøl and Egil Sæbø's study investigates the extent to which online worship services were deemed a viable substitute for physical services during the spring of 2020, as perceived by the users (Hodøl and Sæbø, 2021). The findings revealed that media users accessed broadcasts from multiple churches, not solely their own, and that young respondents were more receptive to the idea of online services as an alternative to physical church attendance than older respondents. The study identified three key factors that contributed to users' perception of their participation in the service: recognizability, authenticity, and simultaneity. This result underscores the significance for practitioners that the online worship service closely resembles conventional ones and take place at the accustomed time. The study also revealed that online services reached a wider audience than their offline counterparts.

The study by Hans Olav Hodøl, Roy Emanuelsen, and Geir Christian Johannessen presents quantitative data indicating that numerous congregations have had positive experiences with online services (Hodøl, Emanuelsen and Johannessen, 2021). However, despite the benefits, church leaders who participated in the study expressed concern that online church services do not provide the same level of human interaction as in-person church services. This

lack of personal contact may ultimately result in a diminished sense of community and belonging, lessened sense of responsibility towards the congregation as a social entity, and a movement towards more individualized religious practices (Hodøl, Emanuelsen, and Johannessen 2021, 18).

In her study, Laura Benjamins examines the role of worship leaders in recorded and online services during the pandemic in three evangelical churches located in Ontario, Canada (Benjamins 2021). By emphasizing the importance of creating 'a sense of space … rather than place' (Benjamins 2021, 14), Benjamins's study sheds light on the crucial role worship leaders play in facilitating meaningful online worship experiences during the pandemic. Through their ability to create a sense of space, worship leaders can help individuals maintain a sense of spiritual community and connection, even in the absence of physical proximity. Benjamins's findings present a more optimistic view of the importance of online services than, for example, the aforementioned study by Bajan (Bajan 2020).

Lastly, Allie Utley's dissertation examines how affects shape the liturgy of a white, mainline Protestant church in the United States (Utley 2021). According to Utley, the nonverbal and affective elements of worship are a 'product of the gathered community' (Utley 2021, 3). Utley suggests that worship is characterized by playfulness and a willingness to experiment with new combinations 'seeking to provoke a bodily response from participants' (Utley 2021, 148). The study was completed during the initial phase of the pandemic. Utley's research findings reinforced her notion that affect is generated through bodily presence and interpersonal relationships, which can be challenging to replicate in a virtual environment. Despite this, Utley argues that worship online can still be a meaningful and fulfilling experience (Utley 2021, 28), albeit with its own unique set of challenges and opportunities, such as the lack of singing together in church. Utley anticipates that future scholars will be studying pandemic worship online for a long time, and that the study of affect will be an important aspect of that endeavor.
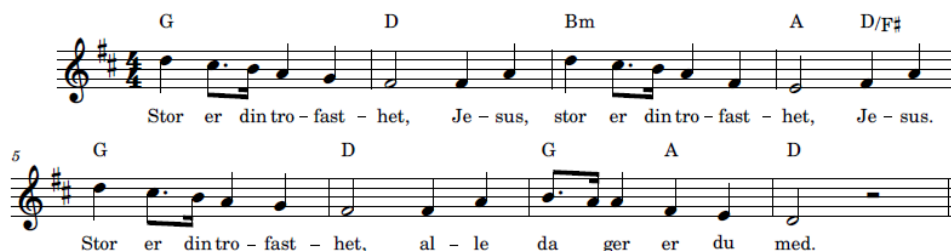
Taken together this overview of recent research illuminates the diverse experiences and interpretations of worship events online during the pandemic among practitioners, worship leaders and church leaders. The blurred distinctions between offline and online religious interactions, which might have been a pertinent situation for younger generations before the pandemic, presented an entirely novel mode of religious practice for older generations, like me. The abrupt transition to an online format not only introduced a fresh approach to religious engagement but also posed challenges to established notions of meaningful worship, which I will explore. In the subsequent section, I will elaborate on the concept of worship.

Understanding worship through songs

In the context of Lutheran church communities, worship is deeply musical and often understood as all types of music performed during services. Worship leaders

in our own church community, for example, can initiate a worship session with 'let us now worship,' regardless of whether hymns, psalms, or modern worship songs are on the schedule. In his article 'Why do Lutherans sing,' Andreas Loewe highlights how Martin Luther 'particularly valued the combination of music and message, the "singing preaching and praising of God's grace and mercy" afforded by spiritual songs' (Loewe 2013, 70). Furthermore, he reflects on Luther's belief that communal singing could profoundly affect hearts and minds. While hymns often have a teaching purpose and help unify different parts of the service (Kaufman 2008, 18), there exists an understanding that through worship, believers can encounter God and participate in a communal experience. Thus, singing songs of worship is an integral part of Lutheran worship gatherings.

Worship in Christian contexts is often associated with music performed during church services. However, the term 'worship' itself is most commonly linked to contemporary worship music, a genre characterized by simple lyrics and a popular musical expression that is often repeated multiple times (Porter 2016; Ingalls 2018). These songs, also referred to as praise or worship songs, are typically led by a worship band, ranging from a full ensemble with several worship leaders to a solo guitarist or pianist (Kaufman 2008). Most songs that are performed in Christian contexts have a clear tonality, mainly basic functional harmonic progressions, a singable melody, and catchy rhythms. These attributes enhance the impact of these songs, making worship both affective and joyful. The following example, written by David André Østby, Vetle Jarandsen and Josefina Gniste, may illustrate features of modern worship songs (translation: 'Great is your faithfulness, Jesus, every day you are with me'):

Example 1: Transcription of 'Stor er din trofasthet', main refrain.

As illustrated in the music example, the melody is firmly situated within D major. It is affective and easy to sing along thanks to its use of diatonic movements (*see* bar 1, 3 and 5) and arpeggiated triads (*see* bar 2), and its rather broad tone range (one octave) further adds emotional engagement and joy to the music. Similar melodies, that are easy to sing and follow, are common in the Church of Norway, missionary organizations, youth gatherings, and within many non-denominational churches. Some Roman Catholic congregations have even begun incorporating it into mass. Kaufman emphasizes the idea of 'entering into worship' (Kaufman 2008, 18, my translation), which may involve a section with many worship songs in certain contexts, while others include two or three songs. In this article, I consider

the concept of worship to encompass both new and traditional songs from various songbooks used by churches and congregations. My focus is primarily on worship events during online services, with less emphasis on specific textual content or musical genres. In the following two sections, I will outline the theoretical basis of my study, with a specific focus on the links between affect, politics, music, and religion.

Conceptualizing music, religion, and affective politics

Inspired by Martha Nussbaum's work *Political Emotions* (2013) and recent scholarship on affective politics (Desai-Stephens and Reisnour 2020; Seigworth and Gregg 2010; Bøhler 2017, 2021), I propose that our local worship community functions as a distinct political entity. I argue that singing together, including in online worship, shapes a 'person's own viewpoint [and] conception of a worthwhile life' (Nussbaum 2013, 11). Anaar Desai-Stephens and Nicole Reisnour suggest that people are drawn to music because of how it makes them feel, and that these feelings have exceptional potency (Desai-Stephens and Reisnour 2020, 99). Nussbaum argues that emotions are most powerfully stirred by those to whom we are connected in some way. These emotions position people within our circle of concern, creating a sense of 'our' life in which these people and events matter as part of 'our own flourishing' (Nussbaum 2013, 11). Donovan Schaefer (2016) proposes affect theory as an approach to culture, history, and politics that highlights the role of prelinguistic or nonlinguistic forces or affects. He highlights that the way affects pulsate through bodies can have significant political implications, such as promoting health, flourishing, and happiness (Schaefer 2015, 119). Kathleen Stewart argues that the body learns to play itself 'like a musical instrument in this world's compositions' (Stewart 2010, 341). Stewart also reminds us that affect is a labor-intensive process of sensing modes of living as they emerge (Stewart 2010, 340). Her concept of 'bloom spaces' is useful for understanding affect in worship settings online. A bloom space can be a transformative experience that can both uplift and challenge individuals. Determining whether online worship practices during the pandemic were experienced as flourishing bloom spaces or as drylands is a complex issue without a clear-cut answer. However, worship online did provide potential spaces for spiritual and physical well-being (Benjamins 2021) during the pandemic, such as increased life satisfaction and happiness, according to Shiba and colleagues (Shiba et al. 2023, 3893).

A helpful definition of affect in the context of worship online is proposed by Jenna Supp-Montgomerie who sees affect as 'the constant movement between coming together and falling apart that constitutes any mode of being' (Supp-Montgomerie 2015, 336). Participation in worship online involves connections and disconnections, both in terms of actual logins to digital spaces and alternating feelings of well-being and discomfort during the worship practices in question.

Even though the terms space and place are closely related, they have distinct characteristics that are worth exploring. 'Place,' in the sense of location, may in this context be interpreted as a room that holds a specific meaning, while 'space' is a more abstract concept. Whereas space can be seen as the background where all things happen, place has a more subjective and qualitative nature. Place is not just a physical location, but rather a room with personal or cultural significance. According to Krims, it often carries a sense of identity (Krims 2012, 141). However, space and place cannot be strictly separated; they are rather interconnected and influence each other. Digital spaces can become places through human interaction and experiences, and perceptions of different spaces can also be altered through use (Wong 2022, 7). Places, such as a church or a chapel, are shaped by human activity, memories, emotions, and stories. While space is more about objective relationships, place considers subjective meanings attributed to the space. According to Utley people reported being immersed in and moved by worship online: 'We show up to worship. We come to worship because it makes us feel something – for better [or] for worse' (Utley 2021, 148). Even though Shiba and colleagues conclude 'that there was only limited evidence that online religious participation during the lockdown promoted health and well-being among adults in the UK' (Shiba et al. 2023, 3895), Utley's sentiment resonates with my experience, as worship online provided a certain sense of being cared for in a spiritual matter, despite its shortcomings.

Allie Utley's investigation of a white Protestant church reveals that while language and cognition are often privileged in worship, the affective dimensions of musical experience should not be ignored (Utley 2021). She claims that 'the intention of composer and performer, spaces between notes, the intensities of the sounds, the quality of tone, the movement of sound waves between bodies – these elements of music affect us' (Utley 2021, 29). Music thus affects us in ways that go beyond its literal meaning. Music has a profound impact on our emotions, thoughts, and overall well-being that goes beyond the explicit words or message conveyed by the lyrics. In other words, music has the power to evoke feelings, memories, and sensations in listeners that may not be directly related to the specific content or message of the song.

Furthermore, Utley emphasizes that each person's presence in worship affects the feeling of the room for all participants (Utley 2021, 69). During the pandemic, the absence of such experiences of tangible presence in online worship practices was palpable. Drawing upon Sara Ahmed's analysis of emotions as political, Utley argues that emotions are 'an affective force that circulates in the worship assemblage' (Utley 2021, 78). Ahmed understands 'emotions to be "political" in two ways which are important for how they shape communities: 1) they lead to the formation or understanding of boundaries, and 2) they begin to govern behavior' (Utley 2021, 74–75). Utley asserts that worship is a social practice that involves emotional encounters with God and with one another (Kaufman 2008, 18), and that silence in worship is an example of the social and affective dimensions of worship. Utley suggests that being silent together feels different

from being silent alone because worship is inherently social and the social is affective. Nussbaum's concept of 'flourishing' (Nussbaum 2013) and Stewart's 'bloom space' (Stewart 2010) can be seen as analogous concepts to Utley's analysis of worship as a social and affective practice (Utley 2021). Moreover, Utley argues that if 'the Kingdom of God is social' (Utley 2021, 116), then it must also have an affective dimension. While worship online poses significant challenges to creating an immersive and participatory experience, according to Utley, worship online can still create affective experiences. Utley's analysis sheds light on the social and affective dimensions of worship and emphasizes the importance of attending and participating in worship for creating affective experiences. During the pandemic, I personally experienced the value of participating in online worship gatherings, which allowed me to connect with others and engage in meaningful ways despite physical distancing. The presence associated with physical gatherings is often linked to an experience of something genuine or true. The 'original' (in-person services) typically refers to a form of presence or truth, while the 'copy' (worship services online) does not. However, according to Amanda Bell, the copy should be interpreted as 'an image [phenomenon] endowed with resemblance' (with reference to Deleuze) (Bell 2021). She concludes that the copy exhibits a kind of absent presence. Worship in digital spaces can thus be understood as providers of an absent presence.

Taken together the present arguments allow me to investigate how worship online shaped worshippers like me through affective means, and what social and political effects these sonic engagements had. In my analysis I draw specific attention to 'space' versus 'place' and the concept of absent presence as prisms of analysis as they enable me to study how worship online afforded musical and affective experiences. While worship online presents challenges, it also offers unique affordances that can be utilized to create meaningful worship experiences online. In the subsequent section I will elaborate on the concept of affordance as theorized by James Gibson (Gibson 2015).

Affordance theory and worship online

According to Gibson, the concept of 'affordance' describes the potentialities that environments offer individuals, both positive and negative. This term is based on the verb 'to afford' and refers to how the environment and its actors complement or presuppose each other (Gibson 2015, 119). Affordances are the potential uses, meanings, and values that a phenomenon can have in different contexts for different people. Gibson emphasizes that the richest affordances are those offered to us by other people: 'When touched they touch back, when struck they strike back; in short, they interact with the observer and with one another' (Gibson 2015, 127). We perceive these affordances through various sensory modalities such as touch, sound, smell, taste, and ambient light. However, when transitioning to an online worship format, many of these affordances are lost, leaving mainly sound and light. The concept of affordance, when used in tandem with affect theory, serves as a valuable starting point for analyzing how and to what degree online

worship events were able to provide a sense of community for worshippers during the pandemic. By analyzing the affordances of digital platforms and the affective experiences of participants, we can better understand how online events can facilitate meaningful connections and a sense of belonging among members of a worship community, even given their shortcomings.

Gibson highlights the importance of the physical environment in shaping our experiences, with different kinds of places offering different affordances. One such place is the hiding place, which allows observers to perceive not only others who may be hidden or visible to them, but also their own visibility to others (Gibson 2015, 128). In the context of online worship, the digital screen serves as a key affordance, enabling users to create existential bubbles where they can find intimacy and refuge, even in public (Buckley, Campe, and Casetti 2019). Digital screens have a similar environmental nature to analogue screens, providing a filter, separation, shelter, or camouflage. This highlights the importance of screens as affordances for both contact and interaction, as well as for protection and filtering. For example, in a Zoom service, the number of participants can be seen, but not necessarily their identities. Therefore, screens play a significant role in shaping our experiences of worship online, functioning as both affordances and limitations. The screen provided a means to listen to and sing along with fellow worshippers, yet I could not quite sense their presence as I would in a church. Consequently, my musical experience fell short of true fulfillment.

Musical sound can be understood as an affordance in that it offers opportunities for action and engagement; for example, musical sound can provide movement and dance (Windsor and de Bézenac 2012, 112). Musical sound can also offer emotional reactions. Different musical elements, such as melody, harmony, and timbre, can evoke various emotions in the listener (Windsor and de Bézenac 2012, 111). Furthermore, musical sound can provide social interaction and communication. Music often serves as a means of expression and a connection between individuals. It can facilitate shared experiences, cultural identity, and a sense of belonging. The concept of affordance also suggests that musical sound has meaning, while also being transient and changing in different contexts, depending on the individual listener.

In developing affordance research in the field of music studies, Even Ruud shows how different layers in music offer unique experiences to us (Ruud 2020). He suggests that we must appropriate the meaning that is offered by a musical experience, and that it is the sum of musical affordances that gives music its specific value for us (Ruud 2020, 20). Ruud also notes that important interactions influence the formation of meaning in musical communication. In online worship events, this concerns the musical interaction between the worship band and the worshippers, and between worshippers if there are several present in front of the screen. Although individual participation may vary, listening should also be considered full participation (Skaadel 2013, 284; Salisbury 2021): 'We participate through our presence and our listening, that the words and the music might

become a prayer within us and lift us' (Salisbury 2021, 416). In this way, Salisbury argues that listening to music in online services can afford spiritual significance. Overall, the concept of affordance is a useful framework for understanding the potentialities that different environments offer individuals. While online worship formats offer certain affordances, such as digital screens that can function as hiding places, they also lack some of the richness and complexity of physical environments. To provide context for my application of theory, I will begin by briefly outlining the method of autoethnography.

Autoethnography as a method

Autoethnography is a valuable research method that offers an insider's perspective on cultural phenomena and experiences (Karlsson et al. 2021). By incorporating personal experiences, autoethnography enables researchers to describe, understand and challenge cultural practices and perceptions. According to Ellis, Adams, and Bochner,

> [scholars] must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders. To accomplish this might require comparing and contrasting personal experience against existing research […] and/or examining relevant cultural artifacts (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, 4).

Unlike traditional ethnography, autoethnography allows researchers to embrace their own subjectivity rather than limit it, as Karlsson and colleagues highlight (Karlsson et al. 2021). Waterston emphasizes the importance of acknowledging subjective and emotional aspects of autoethnographic research, referring to her approach as 'intimate ethnography' (Waterston 2019, 12). Ellis, Adams, and Bochner describe autoethnography as an approach to research and writing that analyzes personal experience to understand cultural experience, combining autobiography and ethnography (Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011). Thus, autoethnography can be both a process and a product. Karlsson and colleagues divide the term 'autoethnography' into three distinct parts: auto–ethno–graphy, emphasizing that experience-based knowledge (auto) must be situated in cultural, social, and political contexts (ethno) (Karlsson et al. 2021). This contextualization is evident in the two following sections, where I will share my experiences of participating in online worship events. Autoethnographic writing (graphy), then, often deals with experiences that individuals usually keep to themselves or only share with those closest to them, as it offers a tool for sharing thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Karlsson et al. 2021, 16). Karlsson and colleagues suggest that autoethnography can serve as a testimony of the researcher's lived experiences, providing opportunities to explore how they are affected by different contexts and encounters with others (Karlsson et al. 2021, 16). Despite the benefits these authors suggest, some critics (Madison 2006, 321) argue that autoethnography lacks a strong theoretical basis and clear focus. To address these concerns, I have

introduced the aforementioned theoretical arguments and research questions before sharing my own experiences. Below I apply the presented arguments to an analysis.

From Vimeo productions to Zoom links

Our congregation is part of one of the many free, independent mission organizations in Norway. The organization is based in the Lutheran theological tradition and has historically had close contact with, and in practice been a part of, the Norwegian Church. However, the organization has pursued an increasingly independent course the last two decades and is now an independent religious community. In March 2020, when the country went into lockdown, numerous churches and organizations in Norway swiftly responded by offering a range of digital solutions to replace in-person meetings (Hodøl, Emanuelsen, and Johannessen 2021; Hodøl and Sæbø 2021; Den norske kirke 2022). This allowed me to attend recorded church services every Sunday morning from our organization's head office in Oslo. From March 22 to June 14, a total of fifteen services were broadcast on Vimeo, featuring skilled young musicians and worship leaders accompanied by texts on screen, creating an engaging experience for viewers at home. The services bore numerous resemblances to their physical counterparts in terms of content and structure. However, they diverged in that they did not take place within a traditional church setting; instead, they were recorded within a room in the head office designated for the purpose. The production quality of the broadcasts was excellent, with professional leadership and high-quality sound and image. Singing along with one or two other family members at home while knowing that many others were watching the same services all over the country created a sense of being part of something greater, and more importantly, of participating in a church community that was challenged by the virus.

When the country underwent its second lockdown in November 2020, the head office had stopped broadcasting these video services. Consequently, our congregation gradually began experimenting with the possibility of gathering via Zoom. The following vignette, which I wrote down as a field note, may illustrate:

> Vignette 1
>
> It's early Sunday afternoon and we're lounging on the sofa, clicking on the Zoom link to attend another online Sunday service. The service is announced as a 'Song-and-Music Meeting,' and the leader promises that there will be plenty of singing today. The leader, who is also today's pianist, leaves the pulpit and is captured by a new camera as he takes his seat at the grand piano. In the background, the sound of a drum set is heard. I'm confused – there are apparently no worship leaders today. The texts appear on the screen, and some of

the participants have their video cameras on while others have black screens. Everyone is muted. I notice some participants moving their mouths and recognize the text on the screen. My husband sings more somberly than usual, and I hesitantly join in. We are usually enthusiastic worshippers, but today feels a bit strange. As the online service ends, we feel far from uplifted. (17.1.2021)

As a participant, I was able to engage in various activities such as listening to sermons, listening to music, or singing along. However, I missed the physical presence of people and the tangible aspects of our church building, such as the altarpiece, flower arrangements, and the pot for secret prayer requests. Initially, only one mobile phone was used to mediate Zoom services, resulting in poor sound and image quality. To address this issue, the congregation purchased cameras and technical equipment, which improved the overall experience slightly. Despite enhancements to the quality of Zoom broadcasts, fewer participants were singing along, and several were turning off their cameras, including ourselves. In comparison, Vimeo productions from the head office with band, worship leaders, and high-quality sound were much more fulfilling musically. The lack of joy experienced while worshipping in front of a screen with a single piano, a drum set, and no worship leaders can be attributed to this difference. I also watched short music devotionals on Facebook from a nearby Church of Norway, which did not prompt me to sing along. Although I find it difficult to put into words, the spiritual impact of the worship songs performed during these music devotionals and other worship services online was profound.

From worship online to early phases of post-pandemic worship offline

Vignette 2

As the clock approaches 11:00 on Sunday morning, we gather on Zoom for our weekly service. Due to a mutated variant of the virus, all religious gatherings have been put on hold temporarily, and so the service has been moved from the church to the pastor's home. The pastor begins with a short prayer and a reading of a worship song. However, there are no texts on the screen, and I find that my concentration slips during the reading. As the pastor concludes his sermon and says his goodbyes to the congregation, I quickly unmute my microphone and speak up: 'We have a piano in our living room – would you like to sing "Navnet Jesus blekner aldri" (The

name Jesus never fades)?' I play and sing the hymn knowing
that some of the Zoom participants are singing along, despite
their muted devices and whether they have their cameras on
or off. It is a beautiful moment, and it reminds me that even
though we are physically apart, we are still connected through
our faith and love for Jesus. (31.1.2021)

A few days after attending this online service, I went skiing on a bright, sunny day.
While in the middle of the slope, a song suddenly echoed through me: 'Thanks
and praise, Jesus' friends always say thanks and praise.' This refrain, which I
learned at Bible camps for children, is part of a short verse sung before meals:
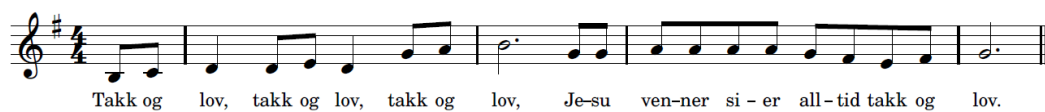
Example 2: Transcription of 'Takk og lov', main refrain.

During the song, which I interpreted as a spontaneous worship event, I felt
overwhelming joy, gratitude, and a deep sense of well-being. As I sang the refrain,
I noticed a tension-relaxation structure that emerged between the first two bars
and the last two. The release of the dotted half note in the second measure and
the implied dominant chord in the third measure created a sense of musical
resolution that echoed my emotional state. The ascending melody in the first bars
culminated in a sustained note (B4) that affirmed and strengthened my elation.
These musical affordances played an important role enhancing my worship
experience. What struck me the most about this experience was that it took place
in nature, outside the confines of the church room and the online service. This
made the experience feel more genuine and tangible compared to participating in
religious activities virtually via a screen. Even being alone seemed more rewarding
than being with others virtually.

The vignette above highlights the challenge of not being able to worship, which
inspired me to engage in a spontaneous act of worship towards the end of the
service. In 1995, the hymn 'Navnet Jesus' was voted as the 'hymn of all time' on
TV2, and in 2005, the state channel NRK's radio listeners voted it as the 'hymn
of the century' (Wikipedia 2022, 29.12). Knowing that this hymn was cherished by
the congregation, I chose it as the focal point of my worship. As the physical
absence persisted, my husband and I were asked to record ten worship songs. We
made these recordings on my mobile phone, and they were shown at online
church services from March to May 2021. Despite the simplicity of the recordings,
our presence on screen evoked a sense of familiarity and connection among the
congregation, which may have been due to our active participation in worship
services before the pandemic.

In May 2021, as physical gatherings became permissible again, the risk of infection posed a challenge for congregations seeking to worship in church rooms. Despite the inadvisability of congregating indoors, our congregation found a way to worship by positioning a few worship leaders up front, while the rest of the congregation sat silently wearing masks. This 'masked' silence was different from the muted silence experienced during online services. The affective sociality of being physically present in the church room, with masks on, listening to the soundwaves of worship from the stage, was akin to sitting in a waiting room, eagerly waiting for a ticket to board the 'Gospel train.' On the other hand, during online services, the muted silence felt quite distinct. It was impossible to hear or sense the presence of other worshippers in the Zoom room, and I could not even be certain if they were worshipping at all. Consequently, the responsibility of getting in the mood for worshipping lay solely with the individual.

Understanding worship online through affective affordances

Worship online, whether recorded or live, offers several affordances. People can listen, sing, and pray through digital devices, such as mobile phones, tablets, and computers, connected via the internet, cables, and routers. On the other end, people produce, conduct, speak, and sing. Thus, worship online involve a variety of affordances, including visible and invisible, human, and non-human affordances. Rather than static constellations, online interactions can be understood as the 'constant movement between coming together and falling apart' (Supp-Montgomerie 2015, 336), shaped by participants' choices to activate or deactivate their microphones and/or cameras during the services, as depicted in the vignettes. This perspective emphasizes the fluidity and contingency of worship online, as well as the agency of the participants in shaping the nature and intensity of their involvement.

Utley poses an interesting question, asking how the emotional attachment to sacred objects might continue to influence people's lives when they are no longer present together in the physical space (Utley 2021, 85). As described above, I missed the physical presence of people and the tangible aspects of our church building. Additionally, the change of setting to the pastor's home also affected the whole, as I was unable to observe the familiar surroundings of the church on the screen (Hodøl and Sæbø 2021). Utley emphasizes that the worship 'assemblage' of sacred objects and the worship community is always in flux (Utley 2021, 62) and that the assemblage only exists when affect binds it together: 'the melding of bodies through affect, is a force of its own and possesses its own energy. The energy changes as the assemblage changes' (Utley 2021, 104). By emphasizing the role of affect and energy in shaping assemblages, Utley's analysis sheds light on the complex interplay between visibility and invisibility, human and non-human elements, and individual and collective actions. This understanding resonates with my personal experiences attending Zoom services, whereas the dynamic of the

group shifted depending on where the zoom gathering was recorded, who was present and how those present interacted with each other.

Nussbaum argues that people who are emotionally connected to us are the ones who can stir deep emotions within us (Nussbaum 2013). Participants in Vimeo productions and other remote worshippers may be considered 'distant people,' (Nussbaum 2013, 11) while those gathered in Zoom services may be labeled 'close people.' To elicit emotions, according to Nussbaum, distant people must be positioned within our circle of concern. During the early phases of the pandemic, Vimeo videos became part of our religious life, and the people and events depicted in the videos mattered as part of our own flourishing (Nussbaum 2013, 11). Although we did not have a close relationship with any of the participants in the Vimeo videos, they formed the only available worship community at the time, and we were affected by our shared urge to worship in times of isolation. Utley expresses concern, though, that watching worship online would be like watching a music video, lacking the sense of space and place that is crucial to creating a meaningful worship experience (Utley 2021). However, as Benjamins proposes, the worship leaders in the Vimeo productions were able to cultivate a sense of space in which we were immersed and affected by the shared worship events, even though we were not physically present (Benjamins 2021). Despite our own congregation being considered 'close people,' the lack of affective fellowship in singing together in time and place during live Zoom services led to worship encounters lacking the essential musical, social, and material affordances for genuine heartfelt worship. These affordances pair well with emotional and spiritual arousal and are essential for creating a meaningful worship experience. Although our local online worship leaders did their best to create a sense of 'space' through encouraging words and playing instruments, this was not sufficient to replace the embodied and communal nature of in-person worship.

The two vignettes above illustrate how online worship services on Zoom failed to replicate the experience of physical Christian worship due to the absence of certain critical affordances. Despite sincere attempts to enliven the online services, my own and other participants' worship almost fell silent. One significant affordance that was missing in the Zoom services was the sound of an effervescent (cheerful, energetic, and full of life) worship community (Bajan 2020) in a sacred space, which may uplift and inspire worshippers. As Phillips points out, listening to a congregation sing a traditional hymn or recite a responsive reading in a video production is not very engaging (Phillips 2021, 52). This is because online streaming lacks the unique physical sensations that are generated by sound waves, which reverberate through our bodies in a particular way. Additionally, the experience of sound through various affordances, such as a PC or portable speakers, could not replace the presence of physical singing voices and musical instruments.

Furthermore, the social community that is created in a physical space through glances and gestures is also lost in online worship services. The transformation

from a three-dimensional (3D) to a two-dimensional (2D) format, resulted in the removal of crucial affective affordances like sensory perception. As Utley observes, the sense of seeing, hearing, and smelling other worshippers is an important aspect of the physical presence that defines worship (Utley 2021, 90). Consequently, I find that online services could not completely replicate the experience of being physically present in a room with other worshippers. This is because they lacked the essential human interactions and sensory experiences that are integral to the worship experience.

According to Utley, silence is not just the absence of sound but a neutral foundation upon which sound and noise are layered (Utley 2021). Utley also discusses presence and absence in worship, noting that in communal settings, individuals can feed off the energy of others, whereas in solitude, emotions and presence are not shared (Utley 2021, 90). The voluntary muted silence observed during Zoom services, and the mandatory masked silence enforced during early post-pandemic physical church gatherings, can be seen as two distinct forms of sonic policing. Singing 'in spirit' with masks on or singing in front of muted screens can be seen as sonic acts (Saher and Cetin 2016, 378) with spiritual significance, although no sound was heard by fellow worshippers. As both Utley and Benjamins suggest, worship takes place in specific contexts that shape the way it is organized (Utley and Benjamins 2021). The diverse contexts on digital platforms such as Zoom, Vimeo, and Facebook provided me with meaningful spaces (Ruud 2020) to return to repeatedly. In these digital bloom spaces (Stewart 2010), my personal growth and development (Nussbaum 2013) occurred. However, the quality of production and the lack of social affordances associated with physical gatherings affected the online worship experience. For example, high-quality Vimeo videos with professional musicians and singers ignited a desire to sing along, whereas Zoom gatherings lacked this level of musicality.

As mentioned above, worship is experiential on a bodily, spiritual, and social level, with layers of senses that take advantage of sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste (Utley 2021). The lack of these affordances in online formats may affect perceptions of the worship session's authenticity. Although physical presence is often associated with the flourishing of worship, my spontaneous worship event on a ski trip challenged this notion, suggesting that worship can arise under various conditions beyond social and musical affordances. Thus, online worship events can be seen as providers of an absent presence for individual worshippers. As a result, worship online can provide a valuable alternative to traditional sacred spaces and enable people to connect with distant communities and individuals. However, it cannot fully replace the material, social, and spiritual affordances of physical spaces and may require new approaches to cultivating emotional connection and communal experiences by affective means.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to explore how musical sounds and practices in online worship during the pandemic shaped worshippers through affective means,

and what social and political effects these sonic engagements had, even if imperfectly. Although online worship may have lacked the physical presence of traditional religious gatherings, it could still serve as a means of facilitating a sense of an absent presence for individual worshippers. The concept of the absent presence may function as a powerful validation of online worship practices during the pandemic. It is important to acknowledge, though, that online worship during the pandemic was experienced in different ways. As mentioned earlier, whether worship practices were experienced as flourishing bloom spaces for spiritual growth or as uninspiring drylands, is a complex question that defies easy answers. As Utley suggests, worship is distinguished by a playful spirit and a willingness to explore novel forms and expressions of devotion (Utley 2021). This sense of playfulness is a shared responsibility between individual worshippers and the wider worship community, whether participating online or offline, as it only arises when affect unites them.

Despite the challenges of worship online, the collective sum of audible and silent worshipping during periods of isolation proved to be an essential source of support and connection for myself and countless other individual worshippers, as it offered a means of sustaining spiritual and physical well-being (Benjamins 2021). While not every online worship experience may have resulted in heartfelt singing or confident participation, the opportunity to connect with others and express one's devotion during a challenging time has been invaluable. As we look to the future and contemplate the potential for hybrid forms of worship that combine online and offline elements, we must remain open to new possibilities and embrace the playful spirit that is at the heart of all authentic worship experiences.

Author bio

Irene Trønnes Strøm is an Associate Professor in music at the University of South-Eastern Norway, where she teaches music at the kindergarten teacher training course and in the program of music studies. She has a PhD in Music Education from Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences (2016). Her particular focus lies in exploring how individuals exercise musical agency in cross-cultural contexts. She has a background in music pedagogy and teaching, and conducts research in various areas, including music and religious belief, as well as music in children and youth culture.

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