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I am always looking for great songs.

Oftentimes when I am invited to play for an event, I try to find appropriate songs that speak to the theme of that event. When I play for liturgies, I try to find exceptional, congregational-friendly songs that coincide with the readings, the seasons, and the antiphon texts. When I play for adoration, I try to find recent songs that are fitting for those in attendance. Even when I look for songs to adorn my own MP3 player, I now search for songs based on specific themes that compliment those characteristics that I wish to embody: growing in courage, in patience, in familial love.

The best research utility on the Internet for these types of songs, hands down, is Christian Copyright Licensing, Inc., (ccli.com). CCLI is a company that specializes in granting copyright reprint permissions for churches and ministries. But it has emerged as the most important resource for finding these sorts of songs. They have a powerful search engine that finds songs based on lyrics, themes and/or scripture passages, and they periodically tally up the most requested songs. They currently employ a listing of over five million songs, from every style of music and from every denomination.

Think about that for a minute.

Great Lyrics

All of the complaints about the current roster of contemporary

How to Discover Great Songs

Christian songs fall woefully apart at that last staggering statistic. You are now free to find those very songs that befit the most stringent of lyrical requirements. Want to find vertical songs (directed solely to God)? Check. Songs that the community can sing (“We, and not I-centric”)? Check. Songs that employ the specifics of a particular Biblical passage, that do not use archaic English (“Thee/Thou”), and that refer to God as “Bread of Life”?

Check, check, and check.

Whether an undiscovered public domain hymn, or a contemporary repetitious, one-word praise-chorus, or an entertainment-oriented song that addresses a contemporary issue (such as pro-life concerns), CCLI carries them all.

Incidentally, this is one of the reasons why I believe it is imperative that all independent Catholic artists have their songs registered under CCLI. Contact CCLI’s customer service desk to sign up. If your song’s copyright is already held by a publisher, check with them first.

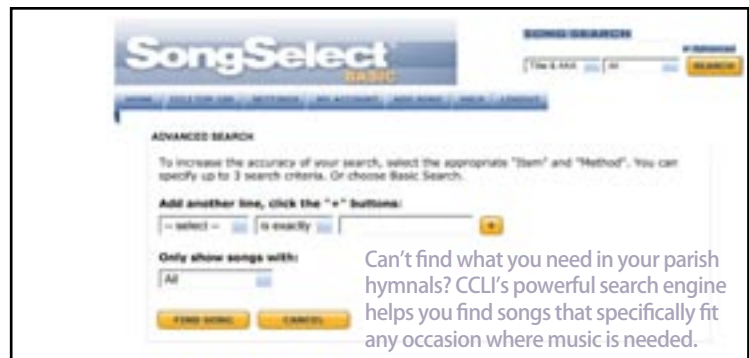
After running a stringent set of requirements on their search utility, I come up with a list. Sometimes it’s a long list of hundreds or thousands of possible entries; sometimes it’s a short list of a mere dozen.

I eyeball the authors. Do I recognize any names? Any Catholic artists that I want to support? Any CCM artists

whose work I admire? Any public domain songs that are worth revisiting? It’s a quick cursory glance, but I take note of such songs, and I revisit my personal music collection before I continue forward.

Greatly Embraced

A great way to whittle down a long list to a workable one is to focus on “Greatly Embraced” songs—only those songs that a lot of churches use.



If many churches use a particular song, it is highly likely that this song will work for your congregation. It is also likely that a number of your own congregants are already familiar with the song, whether through the many venues that a particular song is made available today—Christian radio, CD compilations, conferences, rallies, etc.

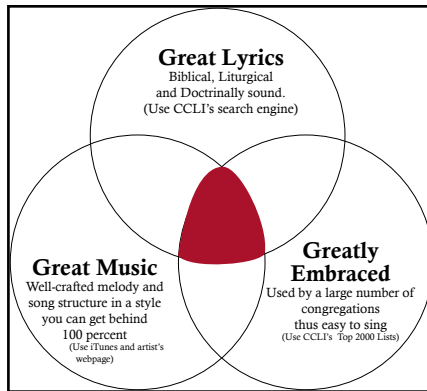
CCLI makes this easy by making the very top songs available. The Top 25 song lists are available at no charge, but it’s the lists that contain as many as one-hundred, five-hundred, or even two-thousand songs that are most worthwhile to me. They even make a list that compares the songs’ placements over a period of years.

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These lists cost money, but they are worth every penny. I upload these songlists into a homemade database (like Microsoft Access), and tally all the songs that made a Top 2000 List over the last seven years, even if it made the list only once. A song in the top 2000 stands within the top .04 percent of all songs used in a nationwide tally of all churches and ministries. (One way to cut down costs is to purchase the list as part of an established group, and divvy up the expenses).

Oftentimes I see people take a woeful shortcut, and focus entirely on the songs off the Top 25 list, assuming that such songs that grace the very top of these lists are worthwhile additions to any song repertoire. This is a mistake. Some songs rise to the top on the basis of their simplicity, or their popularity in specific youth movements—but popularity is never a good



The three essential factors of a great congregational-friendly song: Great Lyrics, Great Music, and Being Greatly Embraced.

critterion for orthodoxy. Many songs were written outside of a Catholic perspective—and I don't fault the songwriters for not catering to particular doctrines in a denomination they do not share—but that doesn't mean we need to employ such songs in our repertoires. Lyrical integrity must always precede popularity.

That said, after I upload the popular

lists into my database, I immediately use customized database queries to find only those songs that had made both lists. Most of the time the list whittles down to around thirty songs to choose from, fitting both my stringent criteria for lyrical integrity, and that are also used a lot.

Great Music

Once this list is whittled into a manageable size, it is then that I finally listen to the songs themselves.

Thankfully, the Internet has made this so very easy. I go to iTunes to see if the song is available there. It is there that I can listen to a thirty-second snippet; if I like it, I purchase it for a buck.

If iTunes doesn't carry it, I run Google searches on the artist's name, the song title, or the publishing house. Oftentimes I would find a MySpace

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“There’s a little black spot on your head todaaay....”
-This Time of Forty Days



I Wanna Be Debated available on iTunes, and www.nickalexander.com.

Nick's Notes

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page or a personal website that offers a free listen to such songs. I read about the author, what his/her background is, and where they are coming from. Sometimes I contact the songwriter directly, to strike up a relationship with them, and ask where I could hear the song.

It is only after then, that I can hear the song for myself, that I judge whether I like the song or not. Is the melody beautiful? Do I think that my congregation can pick it up easily? Does it fit within my range, using the instruments I have at my disposal? Is the music easily available? Can I get behind this song one-hundred percent, as if it were my own?

I cannot tell you how many times I have found the absolute "perfect" song for an event through this type of legwork. Many times I have been introduced to a spectacular artist through this, one whom I will return to, time and again.

Is CCLI perfect? Not quite. A lot of the songs in OCP, GIA and World Library repertoires are not available in these lists. Very few of the songwriters from North

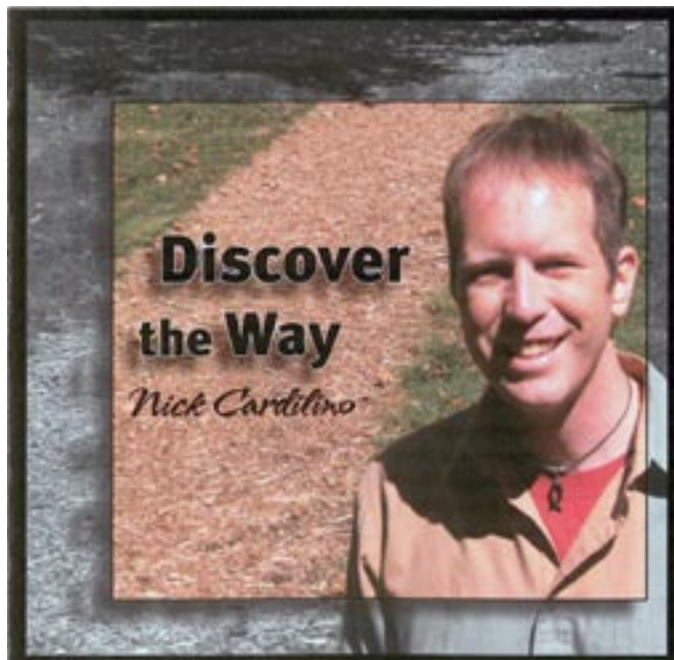
American Liturgical Resources (NALR) are represented. Only recently has OCP contributed to the CCLI pool, by including those artists from their spiritandsong.com roster.

Further, these lists are only as good as the entries of the songs themselves. Not all of these songs have lyrics attached. And to search for specific scripture passages, I would either search for the scripture reference in the "Title or AKA" section, or type in specific phrases (from multiple translations) in the lyrics section.

That said, the thrill in discovering, and introducing a great song makes the search incredibly worthwhile. The power of great songs is the power to inspire you and your audiences to greatness, to holiness, and to a deeper conversion. Such songs become the soundtrack to your life.

One of my favorite newly-discovered Eucharistic adoration songs was discovered through this process: Ross King's "You Alone Can Satisfy," in which the chorus is:

*My Bread of Life, You're my provider
You fill me up, with Living Water
Beneath Your wing, there is a shelter
Where I hide
You alone can satisfy*
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Contains both versions
of the 2007 National Catholic Youth Conference
theme song "Discover the Way"
"Discover the Way" was named the #4 Catholic
song of 2007 at TopCatholicSongs.com!
Hear samples at nickCardilino.com



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