

Music and the Christian

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Jerry Solomon encourages Christians to begin to think about the place and influence of music in their lives.



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Music is a pervasive part of contemporary culture. We hear it on elevators, in restaurants, on telephones while we wait for our party to answer, in offices, in hotel lobbies, and in virtually every corner of contemporary life. In fact, it permeates the airwaves so thoroughly we often do not realize it is there. Television uses music not only in musical programs but also in commercials and program soundtracks. Movies also utilize music to enhance the events shown on the screen. Radio offers a wide variety of music around the clock. The availability of recordings allows us to program music to suit our own listening tastes, and we can hear them in virtually any location. Concerts, especially in large cities, offer a potpourri of music to choose from.

There is also a wide variety of musical genres. Rock (with its assortment of styles and labels), rap, country and western, jazz, Broadway, folk, classical, New Age, and gospel provide us with a dizzying assortment of listening and performing options. Such permeation and variety provide us with a unique opportunity to practice discernment. Some may think this is unnecessary because they claim to listen only to “Christian” music. Nevertheless, the broader population of the evangelical community spends innumerable hours absorbing music, whether “Christian” or “secular.”

Why should a Christian be interested and involved in the arts, music in particular? In his excellent work *Theology and Contemporary Art Forms*, John Newport lists several helpful points:

The first reason Christians should be interested in the arts is related to the biblical teaching that God reveals and carries on his redemptive purpose in time and history. The Christian community ...cannot cut itself off from the characteristic artistic vitalities of history—past and present. Second...the arts give a peculiarly direct access to the distinctive tone, concerns, and feelings of a culture.... The artists not only mirror their age in its subtlest nuances, but they generally do it a generation ahead of more abstract and theoretical thinkers. Third...the arts focus (in a remarkably vivid and startling way) on the vital issues and themes which are the central concern of theology. Fourth...the arts spell out dramatically the implications of various worldviews.(1)

The second, third, and fourth points are especially applicable to music. If music mirrors culture, if it tells us of important issues and themes; and if it shows the implications of various worldviews, it can tell us a great deal about our culture. Lyrically, music can be used as a medium for criticism, commendation, reflection, questioning, rebellion, and any number of other thoughts or emotions. When the musical language is employed to relay these thoughts or emotions the result can be significant.

History is replete with examples of the ways music has been vitally employed in various cultures. One of the more prominent examples of this can be found in the Psalms, where lyrics were merged with music to form a strategic voice for Israel's life. The same is true in contemporary life. The themes of rock, rap, and country music demonstrate how music can be a notable voice for the spirit of a culture, whether for good or evil.

In order to affect our culture we must listen to that voice. We must hear its questions and be sensitive to the needs that cry out for the answers God provides.

Can Music Be “Christian”?

One of the continuing debates among evangelicals centers on how music is to be

judged. Some say there is a particular musical style that is distinctly Christian. Others reject such a proposition. Some believe that certain musical styles are intrinsically evil. Others reject this. The examples of such conflict are numerous. It is important that we join the dialogue. In the process we will observe several ways we should respond to the music of our culture.

First, the term “Christian music” is a misnomer. Music cannot be declared Christian because of particular ingredients. There is no special Christian musical vocabulary. There is no distinctive sound that makes a piece of music Christian. The only part of a composition that can make it Christian is the lyrics. In view of the fact that such phrases as “contemporary Christian music” are in vogue, this is a meaningful observation. Perhaps the phrase “contemporary Christian lyrics” would be more appropriate. Of course, the lyrics may be suspect doctrinally and ethically, and they may be of poor quality, but my point is concentrated on the musical content.

It is possible that misunderstandings regarding “Christian music” are the product of cultural bias. Our “western ears” are accustomed to certain sounds. Particular modes, scales, and rhythms are part of a rich musical heritage. When we hear music that is not part of that heritage we are tempted to label it, inaccurately, as unfit for a Christian’s musical life.

We should realize that music is best understood within its culture. For example, the classical music of India includes quarter tones, which are foreign to our ears. They generally sound very strange to us, and they are often played on instruments that have a strange sound, such as the sitar. But we would be guilty of flagrant prejudice if we were to maintain that such music is un-Christian because it does not contain the tones we are used to hearing. Another example of the way evangelicals tend to misapply the term Christian to music can be understood by reflecting on how music may have sounded during biblical and church history. Scholars have begun to demonstrate that the music of biblical history may have been comprised of tonal and rhythmic qualities that were very different from what

we are accustomed to in western culture.

The attitudes of Luther and Calvin toward the use of music show a disagreement concerning the truth of a particular Christian style. Charles Garside provides intriguing insights:

Luther had openly proclaimed his desire to use all available music, including the most obviously secular, for the worship of the church. . . . Calvin, to the contrary, now absolutely rejects such a deployment of existing musical resources.(2)

It is obvious that these great men did not agree on the nature of music.

Our musical preconceptions do not die easily, and they seem to recur periodically in church history. Once a style becomes familiar enough, it is accepted. Until then, it is suspect. More recent examples can be found in the controversies surrounding the use of instruments such as drums and guitars during worship services. Evangelicals need to be alert to their biases and understand that “Christian music” is a misnomer.

The “Power” of Music

It is often claimed that music has “power” to manipulate and control us. If this were true, Skinnerian determinism would be correct in asserting that there is no such thing as personal choice or responsibility. Music, along with other “powers” found in our cultural settings, would be given credit that is not legitimate.

Best and Huttar address this by saying:

The fact that music, among other created and cultural things, is purported by primitives and sophisticates alike to have power is more a matter of the dislocation of priorities than anything else.(3)

Such beliefs not only stimulate a “dislocation of priorities,” they also stimulate poor theology.

The Bible tells us that early in their relationship David played music for King Saul. On one occasion what Saul heard soothed him, and on another occasion the same sounds infuriated him. In reality, though, the reactions were Saul's decisions. He was not passive; he was not being manipulated on either occasion by the "power" of the music.

Much contemporary thinking places the blame for aberrant behavior (sexual misconduct, rebellion, violence, etc.) on the supposed intrinsic potency of music to orchestrate our actions. Some extend this to the point of believing that music is the special tool of Satan, so when such behavior is exhibited he is the culprit. Again, Best and Huttar offer pertinent thoughts. They write:

Ultimately the Judeo-Christian perspective maintains that man is interiorly wrong and that until he is right he will place the blame for his condition outside himself.(4)

Admittedly, my point is a subtle one. We must be careful not to imply music cannot be used for evil purposes. But we must realize that the devil goads people who use music; he does not empower the music itself.

Current controversy among Christians concerning the rhythmic content of rock music is an example of the tendency to believe that some musical styles are intrinsically evil. For example, Steve Lawhead has demonstrated that the music of the early slaves probably did not include much rhythmic substance at all. The plantation owners would not have allowed drums because they could have been used to relay messages of revolt between the groups of slaves. This observation is central to the issue of rock music, because some assert that the syncopated rhythm of rock is the product of the pagan African backgrounds of the slaves. In reality, American slave music centered around the playing of a "banya," an instrument akin to the banjo, and not drums or other rhythmic instruments.(5)

Rock music is not intrinsically evil. It did not originate in a pagan past, and even if it did that would not mean that it is evil. Nevertheless, since it has been a

prominent and influential part of American culture for several decades, it demands the attention of evangelicals. The attention it is given should begin with the understanding that the problems that are a part of rock do not reside in the music itself; they reside in sinful people who can and often do abuse it. The same can be said about any musical style, or any other art form.

The Quality of Music

So far I have asserted two propositions concerning how Christians can respond to the music of their culture: the term Christian music is a misnomer, and no musical style is intrinsically evil. While both of these statements are true, they say nothing about the quality of music we choose to make a part of our lives. Thus my third proposition is that music should be evaluated based on quality. A proposal that includes judgments of quality is a challenging one. Evangelicals will find this especially difficult, because the subject of aesthetics is not a prevalent part of our heritage.

Evangelicals tend toward lazy thinking when it comes to analyzing the music of their culture. As Frank Gaebeline said, "It is more difficult to be thoughtfully discriminating than to fall back upon sweeping generalization."⁽⁶⁾ There are several factors to be weighed if discriminating thought is to occur.

We should focus attention on the music within Christian life. This applies not only to music used in worship, but also to music heard via radio, CDs, concerts, and other sources.

Lack of quality is one of the themes of those who write about contemporary church music. Harold Best states: "Contentment with mediocrity as a would-be carrier of truth looms as a major hindrance to true creative vision among evangelicals."⁽⁷⁾ Robert Elmore continues in a similar vein:

There are even ministers who feed their congregations with the strong meat of the Word and at the same time surround their preaching with only the skimmed

milk of music.(8)

If negative declarations such as these are the consensus of those who have devoted ardent attention to the subject, what are the contents of a positive model? The answers to this are numerous. I will only relate some of the insights of one thinker, Calvin Johansson.

The first insight refers to movement. Music must move:

The principle here is that music needs to exhibit a flow, an overall feel for continuity, that moves progressively and irresistibly from beginning to end. It is not intended to hammer and drive a musical pulse into the mind.

This principle can be applied to the incessant nature of the rock rhythm we have previously discussed. The second insight has to do with cohesion:

Unity is an organic pull, a felt quality that permeates a composition so thoroughly that every part, no matter how small, is related.

The third insight relates to “diversions at various levels.... Without diversity there would only be sameness, a quality that would be not only boring but also devastatingly static.”

The fourth insight focuses on “the principle of dominance.... A certain hierarchy of values is adopted by the composer in which more important features are set against the less important.” The fifth insight shows that “every component part of a composition needs to have intrinsic worth in and of itself.... The music demonstrates truth as each part of the composition has self-worth.”(9)

These principles contain ideas that the non-musician might find difficult to understand. Indeed, most of us are not accustomed to using language to discuss the quality of the music we hear other than to say we do or do not “like” it. But if we are going to assess the music of the broader culture accurately, we must be

able to use such language to assess music within our own subculture. We must seek quality there.

Pop Music

Another factor in musical discrimination applies to the way we approach music outside our subculture. The Christian is free to enter culture equipped with discernment, and this certainly applies to music. We need not fear the music of our culture, but we must exercise caution.

Assessments of quality also apply here. The Christian should use the principles we discussed above to evaluate the music of the broader culture.

We should also be aware of the blending of music and message, or lack of it. The ideal situation occurs when both the medium and the message agree.

Too often the music we hear conveys a message at the expense of musical quality. Best explains:

The kind of mass communication on which the media subsist depends on two things: a minimal creative element and a perspective that sees music only as conveying a message rather than being a message. Viewed as a carrier, music tends to be reduced to a format equated with entertainment. The greater the exposure desired, the lower the common denominator.(10)

The messages of our culture are perhaps voiced most strongly and clearly through music that is subordinated to those messages. The music is “canned.” It is the product of cliches and “hooks” designed to bring instant response from the listener. As Erik Routley stated, “All music which self-consciously adopts a style is like a person who puts on airs. It is affected and overbearing.”(11) This condition is so prevalent in contemporary music it cannot be overemphasized.

Another concern is found in certain features of what is usually called “popular

culture.” Music is a major part of pop culture. Kenneth Myers, among others, has identified certain culture types beginning with “high,” diminishing to “folk,” and plummeting to “popular.” Popular culture “has some serious liabilities that it has inherited from its origins in distinctively modern, secularized movements.” Generally, these liabilities include “the quest for novelty, and the desire for instant gratification.”(12) In turn, these same qualities are found in “pop” music.

The quest for novelty is apparent when we understand, as Steve Lawhead states, that the whole system feeds on the “new”—new faces, new gimmicks, new sounds. Yesterday in pop music is not only dead; it is ancient history.(13)

The desire for instant gratification is the result of the fact that this type of music is normally produced for commercial reasons. Continuing, Lawhead writes that

...commercialism, the effective selling of products, governs every aspect of the popular music industry. From a purely business point of view, it makes perfect sense to shift the focus from artistic integrity to some other less rigorous and more easily managed, non artistic component, such as newness or novelty. Talent and technical virtuosity take time to develop, and any industry dependent upon a never-ending stream of fresh faces cannot wait for talent to emerge.(14)

We do not offer God our best when we employ this approach. Additionally, we do not honor God when we make the products of such thinking a consistent part of our lives.

Notes

1. John P. Newport, *Theology and Contemporary Art Forms* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1971), 17-24.
2. Charles Garside, Jr., *The Origins of Calvin’s Theology of Music: 1536-1543* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1979), 19.
3. Zondervan Pictorial Dictionary, s.v. “Music,” by Harold M. Best and David

Huttar.

4. Ibid.

5. Steve Lawhead, *Rock of This Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1987), 51-52.

6. Frank E. Gaebelin, "The Christian and Music," in *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 446.

7. Harold M. Best, "Christian Responsibility in Music," in *The Christian Imagination*, 402.

8. Robert Elmore, "The Place of Music in Christian Life," in *The Christian Imagination*, 430.

9. Calvin M. Johansson, *Music and Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1984), 93-95.

10. Ibid., 412-13.

11. Erik Routley, *Church Music and the Christian Faith*, (Carol Stream, Ill.: Agape, 1978), 89.

12. Kenneth Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989), 59-64.

13. Steve Lawhead, *Turn Back the Night: A Christian Response to Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1978), 97.

14. Ibid., 98.

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