

MUSIC IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

An Approach to Understanding

By

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One's understanding of what music is and how it may function in Christian worship is obviously colored by one's musical background and one's experience as a Christian. My perspective is that of a working professional musician who has been a Christian most of his life, one who has served a variety of churches as staff musician, as well as being an active performer and teacher outside church contexts.

I

Music-making can range in significance from being a mere time-waster to being a distillation of what and who we are. Indeed, the same music may function one way or another, depending upon our ability and willingness to interact with it. One writer, obviously not a music-lover, wrote that, "for sheer calculated malice, nothing beats music." There is no idea more false about music than the statement that music is a universal language. It is not. Music-making is a universal human activity. The various dialects and languages of music may have as little in common as do Russian and Swahili.

Music is sound ordered in time for the purpose of communicating meaning. It does this primarily, at least in much music, through the creation and release of tension. How it does this depends on how the various elements of music --- rhythm, melody, texture, timbre, intensity, and form --- are ordered by the senders [composer and performers] and how this ordering is perceived by the receptors [audience or congregation]. As there can be no communication without senders, so there must be receptors to react to what is sent.

For me, music is one of the great gifts of God. Whether in my home, in the concert hall, or at church, I, with many others, evaluate music by the criterion of the interaction of unity and variety. Is there enough unity for the sounds thus ordered to create the impression of one event? Do the aural phenomena have enough variety to keep my attention? In other words, if there is only variety, no communication takes place: there is only disparate sound. If there is only unity, no communication takes place: there is only cliché or mere background noise. It should be apparent that people with similar musical expectations have a ready-made way to find a common bond in shared musical experiences. This is not bad. It is a simple fact of life. The questions in community always become, "Unity enough for whom? Variety enough for whom?"

When the discussion of what music is and how it functions in psycho-social contexts is moved into the Church, the stakes become far more serious than mere aesthetics. Churches explicitly answer the unity-variety question every week through the music chosen, confirming and continually reshaping their identity as a community. A Christian serving a church through music must face the fact that the matrix in which

music ministry happens is this continual reformation of cultural identity. It is **NOT** the ministry itself. Musical taste, as a part of our cultural identity, is part of our equipment for responding to God, to each other, and to the world. It is not necessarily the same as the actual response. In fact, it may actively hinder this response, for a variety of reasons.

A musician serving a church must become something of both a musical polyglot and a cultural anthropologist, able to stand outside his or her own musical tastes and see those in the largest perspective possible. For such a musician to be able to minister effectively for any length of time to a community which is embedded in a narrower range of musical expression, that range must be close to the center of the musician's own musical identity. A musician serving a congregation where musical tastes touch only at the fringes is in for trouble. Conversely, a musician comfortable with never testing the limits is setting up those thus served for idolatrous self-centeredness. Both the "sharp-change-of-course" and the "go-with-the-flow" approaches are recipes for disaster, I believe.

II

Music is simply music. It is not preaching, evangelism, catechesis, nor social action. While there may be elements in music ministry which are kerygmatic, hortatory, didactic, or diaconal, music does not primarily function in these ways, nor should it be constrained to do so. At its best, I believe music-making in the Church to be a making explicit of the substance of who we are as a community of faith at the intersection where emotion, intellect, spirit, and body meet, offering ourselves to God. The musician called to serve a church has the task of enabling that moment of distillation to happen.

This distillation is always performance. As such, it should involve the highest standards possible. Performance brings together *these* particular musical ideas with *these* particular musical resources in *these* particular contexts of time and space, with and for *these* particular people. However, performance is not an end in itself. Pride in the performance has no more place in the choir loft than it has in the pulpit, than it has in the congregants' pride in "their" church. The performances and our ability to muster them are means to an end: that *these* people in *this* time and place know and are known of God and each other *as* they offer their "first fruits," their best, to God in praise. Those listening, the receptors, are in no sense an audience. All participate in this offering whether as performers or listeners, offering their actions and responses to God as their living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, their reasonable service to God [Romans 12:2].

There is no "mere" listening, no "ordinary" singing in church. There is either faithful service to God, or there is idolatry, either of the performances or, more insidiously, of our reactions to those. Awakening from such idolatries is the life-long vocation of the Christian. Sanctification, in a word. This process is made necessary by the fact of living in a fallen world which is, however, under the forming and transforming action of the Holy Spirit. That music could play a role, ordained of God, in this forming and transforming, is a grace beyond our comprehension, though not beyond our obedience. As someone has said, "After silence, that which comes closest to expressing the inexpressible is music."

I would never want music to get in the way of the explicit proclamation of the Good News. The praise of God is not, however, secondary to anything else which the individual Christian, the gathered local church, or the Church Universal does. It is and will remain our primary work, both now and in eternity. Of this ultimate function our weekly musical choices must partake. The musical and cultural identities, and the spiritual development of those gathered must always be factored into any decision regarding what materials, resources, personnel, and manner of presentation will be used. Our quotidian task concerns us with eternal things.

It is the calling of the minister through music to help a local church make the choices which will assist it in keeping that ultimate function as the goal. While a wide range of music may be done in worship, each piece chosen must contribute to the church's proclamation of God's saving work in Jesus Christ, to our faithful following of this Crucified One, and to the expression of our hope in God's final reconciliation of all things in Him. This does not mean that every piece of instrumental music must have an explicitly Christian text attached. It does mean that everything done must contribute to that opening of heart, mind, and soul in which kerygma, exhortation, teaching, and service may meet and be lived out through God's grace.

Music ministries, like all other actions of the Church, fall under the general rubric of the Great Commission, the Church's job description: "Go, therefore, and make disciples [not clients or customers] of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" [Matthew 28: 19-20]. Music ministries must be as faithful to this command as must any other aspect of the Church's life.

One of the most effective means of governing the church's music ministries is by placing them in the context of the liturgical year. Ideally, the use of the liturgical year is part of a church's attempt to proclaim "the whole counsel of God" [Acts 20: 27]. Admittedly this attempt will always be only partially successful. As with other strategies which churches use, the liturgical year cannot be an end in itself. For one thing, many Biblical texts which are crucial to our faith and understanding are not included in the three year lectionary cycle, revealing the biases of those who devise lections. For another thing, no one hymn, no one anthem, no one sermon, no one church can declare "the whole counsel of God." Only by life faithfully lived can the Christian, the local congregation, the Church be and continue to become what God would have us to be and become. That the use of the liturgical year can contribute to this should be obvious.

III

Unlike Islam, Christian faith must always be encoded in our own culture, in our own language, in order to be faithful. That some churches live on the edge of popular culture, some within a clear ethnic culture, and some within the slowly moving currents of the profoundest depths of our cultural legacy is neither here nor there. Each local church has a continuously evolving identity as an instance of the Body of Christ in its

particular context. Each church has a responsibility to equip its people to be light and salt in their own contexts. There is more than enough work for all sorts of faithful following of Christ. No Christian, no church, can be "all things to all people," [*pace*, Paul], nor should it try. It will defeat the efforts of the entire Church throughout time and eternity to proclaim the goodness of God. We do what we can. We rejoice with other Christians who have ministries different from our own, recognizing that all of us "have this treasure in earthen vessels" [II Corinthians 4:7].

While the possibilities of syncretism, the Church's besetting sin, are always there, Christ not only came, He came in a way we can understand, in a way which we can imitate in the warp and woof of our own lives. After all, the oldest name for Christianity is, apparently, "The Way" [Acts 9: 2]. Salvation history, culminating in the final revelation of Jesus as the Christ, must always be translated into the idiom of who and what we are here and now. Truly enough, it will always transcend that translation, always be beyond that which we can express or understand. However, that which we can know and express can be, by the grace of God, a true foretaste of that which we shall drink without measure when we finally "know as we are known" [I Corinthians 13:12].

While in one sense music ministries are among the most flamboyantly public of the things which a church does, in another sense music ministries need to be like ballast in the bottom of a great ship. The ballast does not decide the direction of the ship, nor its cargo, nor its crew. It does help maintain its identity, however, as a ship, not a shipwreck, in the midst of the voyage. When music, be it simple or complex, chastely demure or theatrically spectacular, is used by God to make an opening in our lives for an awareness of the transforming presence of God, then music has done its divinely appointed task. When Isaiah saw the vision of God, he said that the hem of God's robe filled the temple. However, his attention was focused on and transformed by God's own presence and action, not by the spectacular hem [Isaiah 6: 1-13]. May all of our music, all of our ministries, be cleansed and embroidered, by the grace and power of God, into that hem.

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