

Corporate Worship - Music – The Tune

We come to the topic everyone wants – or perhaps doesn't want – to hear about: the music itself. When we worship God – what kind of music is appropriate? For that matter, since life is worship – what kind of music is appropriate for a Christian to willingly listen to?

To answer that you must agree with what we have already seen. We have seen that music is like a language – it teaches, it speaks to us of God, the world and ourselves. It not only communicates ideas, but it communicates emotions. And we reasoned from the Scriptures that since verbal communication can be corrupted, musical communication can be as well. The ideas and emotions that the music communicates must be truthful. If you believe that music does not communicate in this way – then you will not see the need to evaluate what music goes in your ears. But if you believe music has meaning, then you must evaluate that meaning.

The fact of the matter is this – what the lyrics say on paper is not as important as how they are said – i.e. the music they are sung to. The words “My wife is here” communicate a fact – the lady I am married to is in this place. However, the tone of my voice, my pitch, my speed, what words I emphasise will explain how I feel about that fact, and so shape the meaning of it. I can alter the tone to express excitement, contentment, boredom, frustration, irritation, exasperation, surprise or joy. And that emotion in turn will tell you much about how I view my wife, my love for her, and the nature of our relationship. The words, “My wife is here”, only take on meaning in a context – who says it, to whom, and how.

On paper, many lyrics seem theologically sound, essentially right statements about God, the world and Christian experience. But their meaning is shaped very much by the music they are set to. The simple words – ‘Lord, we praise your name’. If that is set to sad music, the message of those words becomes praising God is a sad affair. Set to romantic music, it means – praising God is a starry-eyed, dreamy thing. Set to party music –praising God is a raucous, revelling, even sensual experience. Set to majestic music – praising God is a reverent, joyful, glorious affair. You see, it is not enough to say the words do all the work, and the music is whatever you want it to be. Music communicates a message of its own. The fact is, the message of the music dominates the message of the lyrics, not the other way around. The tone of my voice shapes the meaning of my words, not the other way around.

So today we wish to answer the question – how do we determine the message of the music? If we understand to some degree, what the music means, what it communicates – we can reason that it either communicates ideas and emotions pleasing to God or displeasing to Him.

We have learned that we sometimes have to go outside the Scriptures to get information so as to apply the Scripture correctly. We saw for example, that Scripture does not explicitly address the use of a drug like cocaine. Scripture directly addresses matters such as obeying the laws of one's country, not being enslaved to anything, not harming one's body, and being a good steward of one's finances. But it is outside the pages of Scripture, in contemporary culture, that we will get information on cocaine's legality, cocaine's effects on the body and its addictive properties, cocaine's cost, and

so forth. Bringing together information from our world, and the principles from the Word, enable us to make a sound moral judgement about cocaine.

We will have to do this with music, because it is obvious the Bible has not told us how to compose music. There are two ways we can consider the meaning of music and therefore its appropriateness for worship. The first way is the meaning the music has directly – the meaning in itself and the second is evaluating the meaning it has indirectly – the meanings attached to it.

1) Evaluate the Meaning Music Has In Itself

A simple way of thinking about music is this: music uses audible symbols that stand for something else in the real world. We, as listeners, connect the sounds with thoughts - thoughts such as feelings, moods, ideas, and emotions, as well as the simplicity or complexity of the tune. There are numerous ways music can do this – far more than we could talk about. But to list some examples which you are already familiar with:

Music can vary its tempo from very slow to very fast. It can accelerate the tempo or do the opposite. Very slow can be sad music, very fast can be patriotic – a march.

Music can be sudden and abrupt – present an angry, clamorous sound.

Music can be gentle and gradual – presenting a calm, ordered idea.

The melody can slowly build developing a theme into a climax which is then worked out – which suggests the idea of truth. Or it can aimlessly repeat a few melodies – which suggests a cyclical, no beginning, no end, and no point – relativism.

A tune can be intricate and suggest the meaning is serious, or it can be very simple and suggest the meaning is basic.

It can increase the prominence of the rhythm so that its pulsing sound becomes very physical, very bodily, and even sensual.

How you accent or emphasise the notes, can produce a bright sound, a marching sound, a waltzing sound, a silly merry-go-round at the fun-fair sound

What instruments are used, how many and how often affects the sound. The sound of a lone flute can sound lonely and wistful, the sound of a whole brass section can sound commanding and even aggressive.

It can vary the volume – be loud and angry, or quiet and contemplative.

It can repeat a line for emphasis; it can introduce all kinds of variations.

Music can be written in sadder, minor keys, or bright, major ones.

That is just a smattering of examples. There is an infinite amount of variations one can make to produce thoughts. Some of those thoughts are almost instinctive – like slower sounds remind us of how sluggish we are when we are sad. Some of them are taught to us by our culture. But either way the meaning is direct – it is there in the music.

Now one way to see this in action is to look back a few centuries.

The music of an age is like a metaphor for its ideas – what it believes about God, the world. Listen to the music of the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th century and the differing ideas about reality are heard in the changing music.

Now come into our era and ask: What are the main ideas of 21st century society? *Relativism* – no absolute truths; *selfism* – it's all about me; *hedonism* – the most important thing is pleasure; *commercialism* – the best thing to have is money; *individualism* – I'll do it my way; *trivialization* – nothing should be taken too seriously; *amoralism* – there is no right and wrong, *nihilism* – life is without meaning, and many other *isms*.

What sounds have come with these views? The sentimental, self-centred, shallow, sensual sounds of rock, pop and its hundreds of derivatives. Why? Because the sounds fit the ideas.

Can the music, crafted to suit these ideas and to spread its message, be an adequate vehicle for the worship of God? The ideas we must deal as Christians are notions of glory, eternity, non-materialism, sacrifice, discipleship, holiness, reality, meekness, permanence. And if I use modern pop music to carry these ideas, I am taking music that will be one of the following: sensual, shallow or trivial, self-centred, sentimental or stereotyped, to sing about things that are spiritual, profound, God-centred, sensible and things which teach us and stretch us. It is a contradiction in goals.

To see the contradiction, imagine someone producing a pop sermon – a sermon crafted the way music is in our commercial pop culture, to get the widest possible audience so that it can sell and make money. It will need to provide immediate gratification, so I must say things which amuse, titillate, excite immediately and constantly. My goal throughout will be to amuse and entertain. To do this, I will repeat things you know, keep everything very familiar. If I introduce something you do not know, or struggle to understand, it will not be easy to consume, so I keep it recognisable. I'll use the same patterns, same words. I'll stick to some stock cliché phrases, some stereotype religious lines. And I'll be sure to make sure I take your emotions on a ride – I'll make you weep, but not over yourself, over stories about heroic dogs and brave orphans. I'll make you laugh, and smile and giggle. I'll throw in some romantic twists and turns, maybe even something suggestive and sensual. I'll keep it very, very accessible, very, very familiar. In fact, you could walk in halfway and know what I am saying, more or less what I have said, and pretty much predict what I am going to say. I will make sure it goes no longer than I can hold your attention for.

Question – can I communicate truth to you in this format? No, because this approach is not concerned with truth, it is concerned with popularity. It appeals to the lowest common denominator. You know that true preaching breaks every one of these rules.

Now, can music composed in the same way as a pop sermon work in terms of teaching us truth, transforming us, growing us? No – because all it can do is repeat the familiar, titillate us momentarily, thrill us with substitute emotions.

If you are seeking music which carries the idea of a transcendent God and the appropriate affections, do not look to modern popular music. Don't be tripped up by the 'style' argument. The word 'style' makes all kinds of music equal which is not true. Serious music is not just a 'style'; it is true. Pop music is not just a "style"; it is false to everything the Bible says is important. We don't say that a sermon which

preached the truth and a sermon which preached false doctrine were two different styles of preaching.

Does God ever tell us what kind of music He likes? Of course – Philippians 4:8 kind of music. God loves music that is true, honourable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy. (Phi 4:8)

Music is **true** when it reflects God and what he says about Himself and creation. Music must not glorify false ideas – sensuality, self-centredness, triviality, relativism, despair. Music must not raise up inordinate affections. It should raise up the emotions of dignity, reverence, awe, majesty, hope, joy, love, glory etc.

Music is **honourable** when it honours God and His will. When it encourages being respectable, upright, principled and noble, not the opposite.

Music is **just** when it deals with life, ideas and emotions fairly. It does not love anything more than God does. It does not prejudice our hearts against what is right.

Music is **pure** when it upholds God's moral Law. It does not tempt us to sin, or fill our minds with images that are defiling.

Music is **lovely** when it expresses the beauty of God and His world.

Music is commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy when its composition is creative, precise, and beautiful.

Meaning in music is not meant to be as precise as literary meaning. Its symbolic nature is part of its beauty and mystery. But because its meaning is symbolic and sometimes abstract does not mean it is non-existent, unimportant or completely subjective.

The wrong way of evaluating music is to always go with what you like and are immediately attracted to, what you can immediately grasp or understand. This is the old error of romanticism: that what I feel intuitively is the 'truest truth'. Arguments about beauty and form are useless against someone who believes that his or her feelings are the most reliable judge of beauty.

If you did that with the Bible you would get nowhere fast. Our tastes can be warped – what we like isn't the best judge. Also there is the danger of desensitisation. We get used to a sound, and do not think carefully about its meaning. We are surrounded by these sounds, and it causes us to feel there is nothing wrong with a trivial, superficial, sensual sound. Instead, God tells us to grow in our understanding of what is excellent – Phil 1:9-10.

As you can tell, this is something that requires some patience to learn. In our era where no one wants to think too hard or learn, the music must be easy to assimilate, no learning required, no training, no education – just simple, candy-floss entertainment. It can be mediocre, and even expendable, but as long as it is instant gratification – it will be popular. But it cannot stretch us, grow us, transform us because it is designed to be easy come, easy go.

But you and I have a command in Scripture – to approve what is excellent, even if that takes time. Just as a grammarian will be able to tell you why a paragraph of written language is good or bad, or better or worse, so musicians can tell you if music

is better or worse, superior or inferior. Get Aaron Copland's little book *What to Listen For In Music*. Learn, listen and grow. Your love of God depends on it.

It is one thing to be musically immature, uninformed, uneducated. It is another to insist on remaining so. So the primary way we evaluate what music we should listen to and what music should be used to communicate who God is - learn what the music itself is saying.

2) Evaluate the Meaning Often Attached to the Music

But there is a second way that music communicates meaning. This secondary way is indirectly. Music receives a meaning from the culture in which it is heard.

In a way, this is like saying – how is this music usually understood in our culture? What is the music usually used for? Who produces this music, and usually for what purpose? What sort of lyrics and themes and ideas and emotions are usually attached to this music? What kinds of people sing this, and what kinds of people listen to it? Where is it usually played? On what occasions is it usually played?

These are its *associations* – the baggage that comes with it. It is what our culture attaches to the music, what that music is recognised for. It is the ideas, beliefs and emotions associated with that music. We can argue forever about why these associations are made, the fact is – they are there. Once they are there, they bring meaning to that sound to whoever hears and recognises the sound.

The next question is this – can some music have meaning attached to it which makes it unwise or impossible to use for worship?

A CCM advocate had this on his website:

“The word contemporary has proven to be an appropriate description of this music over the last twenty years because its styles have kept up with its *secular* counterpart” He goes on to say “the ever-evolving state of CCM includes such diverse and contemporary styles such as rock, jazz, blues, dance, metal, rap, alternative, new age, grunge, punk, thrash, death, gothic and industrial”.

Does the Scripture give us any direction towards things secular?

Romans 12:1-2 does. This is a worship text ‘this is your spiritual worship service’. And the negative command here, the prohibitive, is do not be conformed to your age. I would say, in simple terms – we have an absolute command here that tells us to not keep pace or be conformed to the age, that is, the very thinking and mindset and attitudes of our age. And since its music represents its ideas, at least by association, the command is – don’t copy that.

In contrast to being copycats of the world, we are instructed to be different – a transcendent alternative to the world. Our music ought to be entirely composed and set aside for the use of God – that is the definition of sacred.

I am not saying we cannot use music because unsaved people play it. I am not saying we cannot use music because unsaved people like it. Many unsaved people play God-

pleasing music. Many unsaved people enjoy music which is true, honourable, just, pure, lovely and excellent. I am saying when music is used to promote *worldliness successfully* its associations are wrong to bring into the Gospel.

Usually those associations are there, because the shoe fits, so to speak.

You will find that when singers want to sing about free sex, immorality, sensuality, revelling and unrestrained indulgence – they use certain formulas. The music is like what they were singing about, the sound symbols represented their message – very physical, instant gratification, sensationalism, tantalising, superficial fun – a pounding rhythm, a repetitive or simplistic melody, breathy vocals. In other words, when singers want to sing about immorality, they seek a sound that carries it. They do not look to J.S. Bach or Handel for music, because their music doesn't carry those emotions.

So when we see music which carries the messages of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – we know its associations are pleasing to the world and displeasing to God. Now to take that type of medium, and place the truth of God on it, will not pull up the music, it will drag down the truth.

Would it be possible for a Christian publishing house to buy the rights to a porn magazine, retain the name, and turn it into a Christian magazine? The taint of the magazine's associations will destroy your attempt to preach the Gospel.

You will not be able to re-associate music with Christ, so long as that music itself carries worldly ideas, and so long as that music is universally used for wicked purposes in our culture.

God says: "Abstain from all appearance of evil." (1Th 5:22)

Here is a simple test for if the associations of the music we are using are OK to use for worship:

They are of the world. Therefore they speak as of the world, and the world hears them. We are of God. He who knows God hears us; he who is not of God does not hear us. (1Jo 4:5-6)

On the other hand – when you speak for God in a godly way – the world does not hear you.

"If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. (Joh 15:19)

Today the church is largely governed, not by the thought of using music which shapes our affections to love a transcendent God, but instead by pragmatism. Very little time is taken to evaluate the meaning of music directly, or indirectly. Very few ask – what is this music saying, very few ask – what does this music usually say to our culture?

"Test all things; hold fast what is good. (1Th 5:21)

Instead we have all kinds of pragmatic answers as to why we should use popular, trivial styles of music.

Someone says, "You have to take the Gospel to the people. People aren't going to come to church. You've got to meet them where they are. Secular music is what they know. Using contemporary music is simply giving them the Gospel in a form they recognize."

Or: “You’ve got to be like them to win them to Christ. You need to sing and sound like they do to win their respect and friendship and so win their attention for a Gospel presentation.”

Or: “This is what the youth are listening to. They aren’t even interested in going to church. This is how we will reach them.”

Or: “What about good results? What about those who have been won over to God through contemporary Christian music?”

What all of this says is – the ends justify the means. We do not care about the form, only the result. We do not care about meaning, only the results. The result we care about is not true worship, but numbers – more people coming to church, professing Christ, claiming to be saved.

But in so doing you confuse the message of repentance with lyrics calling for repentance with music calling for continuance; you seek to make a difference by being no different; you condone that form of music and open the door to further experimentation and listening to the world’s filth, you indirectly condone the lifestyles of secular artists, you compromise God’s standards in a concession to youthful lusts, you dumb God down into a pop god, a sentimental god or even a sensual god; you teach inappropriate affections toward God – and a host of other problems too.

As to the results – God can use anything, including disobedience. That doesn’t make it anything less than disobedience. God may use disobedience, but He won’t reward it – on the contrary, He will discipline it. As vessels of honour or dishonour, God will get the glory.

If you are a Christian – then you care about truth. If you care about truth, then you care about meaning. You care about what is communicated, and what it means – be it in sermons, books, movies, documentaries, discussions, and websites. You care about ideas. If so, then you must care about what kind of music is used to speak about God and creation because music has meaning. And its meaning is either closer to God’s truth, or further away from it. So evaluate the meaning of music – directly, by listening carefully, and learning more about what it means. Evaluate the meaning of music indirectly – what comes with this music, what is associated with it. It may make it impossible to use for the Gospel.