

Call an airlines office. Enter a supermarket. Stop at a bank. Walk by a teenager's room. You can't escape it. From the soothing to the shattering, from the rock to the rap, from the classical to the popular, music is everywhere. It's almost omnipresent.

But do we have a choice? In this age of explosion in audio/visual technology, can we really choose the music to which we listen? Are there standards that we can apply to our appreciation of music? To our teaching of music? To our practice?

For centuries the debate about music has been on center stage. Musicians, philosophers, and theologians have grappled with questions regarding the effects of different musical styles on human emotions and behavior patterns. Religion has tried to carve a role for music in praise and worship. Educators have not been far behind in the debate.

The Bible traces music's vital role in the Jewish religion and culture as well as in the early Christian church. Observe the variety of music styles and usage found within the biblical tradition: The song of Moses affirms God's triumphal liberating act (Exodus 15). David used music as a therapy for Saul (1 Samuel 16:14-23). Ezra records the bringing of 200 men and women singers from Babylon to help reestablish worship at the new temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 2:65). The Psalms and the Song of Solomon in the sacred canon attest to the value of music in Old Testament times. The apostle Paul's instruction regarding singing shows the value the early church placed on music (1 Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

Church history continues to record this tradition. Luther and Calvin had strong convictions on the role of music in congregational worship and in the lives of individual believers.¹ From Luther we have received a rich heritage of church music, including the famous Reformation hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

Music is not a concern of church alone. It is also the concern of educators. Allan Bloom states,

Though students do not have books, they most emphatically do have music. Nothing is more singular about this generation than its addiction to music. This is the age of music and the states of soul that

accompany it.... Today, a very large proportion of young people between the ages of ten and twenty live for music. It is their passion; nothing else excites them as it does; they cannot take seriously anything alien to music.... Nothing surrounding them—school, family, church—has anything to do with their musical world.²

Are Music Choices Really Important?

by
Marvin L.
Robertson

Further, English psychiatrist Anthony Storr adds, "Music is so freely available today that we take it for granted and underestimate its power for good or ill."³

It is within this milieu that Seventh-day Adventists seek to establish a philosophy of music that strengthens the

individual's relationship to Christ and the principles of His kingdom.

Music in the Adventist Church

Ellen White wrote extensively about the power of song and music.⁴ Biblical principles together with her published views have provided a core in the development of an Adventist philosophy of music. Her statements on the subject may be summarized as follows:

- Music is a gift of God, designed to inspire and elevate the individual. This gift may be perverted to serve purposes of evil, and as such is a most alluring agency of temptation.
- Music helps in the memorization of God's Word. "There are few means more effective for fixing His words in the memory than repeating them in song."
- Music is "one of the most effective means of impressing the heart with spiritual truth."
- Music is a valuable educational tool in both home and school. Singing draws parents, teachers, and students closer to God and to one another.
- "As a part of religious service, singing is as much an act of worship as is prayer."

Making Choices

As Christians, we are continually confronted with value judgments regarding each musical composition we listen to or perform. The following questions can help us in making these decisions:

1. What is the message of this piece of music?
2. What is its emotional and behavioral impact?
3. What is its cultural context?
4. What is its aesthetic value?
5. What is its appropriateness for worship?
6. What is its worship value?
7. What is its entertainment value?
8. What is its educational value?

- Through music "Heaven's communion begins on earth. We learn here the keynote of its praise."

In 1981 the General Conference published "Guidelines Toward a Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Music."⁵ The pamphlet, based on biblical teachings and statements from Ellen White, provides helpful suggestions on facing issues related to music that arise from time to time. Adventist periodicals continue to address these questions as well.

Dealing with change in music

With those concepts as background, can we find concepts and ideas to help us deal with the ever-changing, challenging, and sometimes chaotic world of music? I think we can. My experience as a musician, educator, and minister of music has led me to develop the following framework of principles from which each individual may make intelligent choices.

1. **Music must glorify God.** Whatever music I choose to listen to or to perform, be it sacred or secular, must be to the glory of God. As a performer I must always strive to give my best. Inaccurate, unprepared performance does not honor God. "Christians who excuse their own mediocrity with pious rationalizations seem guilty of not understanding the extent of God's call on their lives."⁶
2. **Music, per se, does not make one moral or immoral.** That is not to say music does not affect morality! It simply means that musical style preference (classical, folk, gospel, pop, etc.) is not to be equated with one's relationship to God. Just because I prefer Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms does not make me a more moral person than my friend who prefers Steve Green or Sandi Patti. When dealing with aesthetics it might be well to reflect on what Harold Best has said: "The beauty of God is not aesthetic beauty but moral and ethical beauty. The beauty of the

creation is not moral beauty; it is aesthetic beauty, artificial beauty. Aesthetic beauty lies in the way and the quality with which something is made or said. Truth lies in *what* is said."⁷

3. **Music must yield to the test of appropriateness.** While a bathing suit is appropriate at the beach, it would not be so in the church. The same principle can be applied to music. Not all styles of music are appropriate for all occasions, and some styles may never be appropriate for the Christian. What may be a perfectly legitimate, emotional love-song melody may not be suitable for a worship service. The context is different. Should music in worship focus one's attention to emotional pleasure rather than the praise of God? In our entertainment-driven world, we must be careful to distinguish between entertainment and worship. Worship is what we present to God; entertainment is "a performance or show designed to amuse or divert."⁸
4. **Culture conditions appreciation of music.** The norm for acceptable music varies from country to country and culture to culture. Adventists in each culture must study their own music and decide what does and does not express a positive Christian outlook.
5. **The world of popular music is not all conducive to Christian values.** Today's musical taste-maker worldwide is not the home, church, or school but the commercial interests of radio, television, and film. "Rock music is as unquestioned and unproblematic as the air the students breathe, and very few have any acquaintance at all with classical music."⁹ The global rock-'n'-roll utopia *Music TV* tries to create is an apt illustration of the worldwide nature of the problem we face in confronting new trends in music. James St. Lawrence and Doris Joyner recently reported on their research on "The Effects of Sexually Violent Rock Music on

Males' Acceptance of Violence Against Women." Describing the results of their study, they wrote:

"The experimental manipulation involved exposure to sexually violent heavy-metal rock music, Christian heavy-metal rock music, or easy-listening classical music.... The results indicated that males with an extrinsic religious orientation [i.e. not motivated by inner conviction] were more accepting of sexist and rape-supportive beliefs. Exposure to heavy-metal rock music, irrespective of lyrical content, increased males' sex-role stereotyping and negative attitudes toward women."¹⁰

Jeffrey Arnett has found that, when compared with boys who do not like heavy metal music, boys who liked heavy metal demonstrated more "reckless behavior" relative to driving, sex, and drug use. They were also less satisfied with their family relationships. Girls who liked heavy metal music were more prone to shoplifting, vandalism, promiscuous sexual behavior, drug use, and lower self esteem than their counterparts who did not like heavy metal music.¹¹

What do these findings mean? For one thing, churches and schools are dreadfully handicapped when trying to reach youth through music. Much of the music teenagers are exposed to is inherently anti-Christian. Even when the words may be appropriate, music cancels them out.

6. Music may be used to control a person's emotions and actions without going through rational thought processes. As Storr points out: "The power of music, especially when combined with other emotive events, can be terrifyingly impressive. At the Nuremberg rally of 1936, the thunderous cheers [sic] of the vast crowd eventually drowned the music of the massed bands which played Hitler in. But the bands were there long before Hitler appeared, preceding his rhetoric with their rhetoric,

preparing the huge gathering for expectations, aiding and abetting Hitler's self-dramatization, making it credible that a *petit bourgeois* failure had turned himself into a Messiah.... There can be no doubt that, by heightening crowd emotions and by ensuring that those emotions peak together rather than separately, music can powerfully contribute to the loss of critical judgement, the blind surrender to the feelings of the moment, which is so dangerously characteristic of crowd behaviour."¹²

7. It is legitimate for a Christian to perform and enjoy both sacred and secular music. As Christians we must take care that the words and the music lift our spirits above the mundane cares of this life.¹³
8. Music is not a static art. The repertoire constantly expands and changes. Harold Best observes:

"The church has for centuries waged one brush war after another over the question of whether or how art and music 'mean'—what it means to borrow styles, forms, process, tunes, techniques, textures, shapes, gestures, and instruments from secular sources.... At the time of the borrowing, the war rages quite bitterly and divisively. Then as time passes, the war dies down. The previously condemned becomes merely questionable, if not outrightly sacred."¹⁴

Reflection

Are our value judgments really important in this area? Do our listening habits affect our lives? I believe the answer is a resounding "Yes!" Our choices have eternal consequences. They either lead us toward or away from a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. □

Marvin Robertson (Ph.D., Florida State University) is the chairperson of the Music Department at Southern College of Seventh-day Adventists, in Collegedale, Tennessee.

Notes and References

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4. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., [1903] 1952), pp. 167 ff.
5. Readers interested in obtaining a copy of this document may request one by writing to the editor of *Dialogue* at the address listed on page 2 of this issue.
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7. Harold M. Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), pp. 43, 44.
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10. Janet S. St. Lawrence and Doris J. Joyner, "The Effects of Sexually Violent Rock Music on Males' Acceptance of Violence Against Women," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 15:1 (March 1991), p. 49.
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12. Storr, p. 46.
13. For Ellen White's views on secular music, see *Music—Its Role, Qualities, and Influence as Set Forth in the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1972).
14. Best, p. 41.



"To deal with the accusation that we at Cherry Hill Cathedral are culture bound, today's offertory hymn will be performed by the Duke Brothers."

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