

**CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE EVALUATION OF CHURCH MUSIC: A BIBLICAL APPROACH**

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### INTRODUCTION

The growth of knowledge has been nurtured by a natural human instinct of curiosity. This curiosity invariably starts with a question which may involve a why, how, when, where, or even, why not?

In this continuum of knowledge expansion and exploration, the focus will naturally fall at some point on the arts, one area of which is music. Questions which have been asked touch on the vital and foundational aspects of the subject. Some of these include: What is music--a definition? What is the purpose of music? What are the evaluative criteria? The Christian further asks: Is there something called Christian music, and if so, how is it to be determined? An elaboration of the issue provides additional questions: Is there acceptable and unacceptable music for the Christian? What part does culture play in the entire exercise? Of what "pitfalls" must one be aware when addressing these matters? What impact and influence does music make on the human organism? Most, if not all, of these questions fall into the "grey" area of disagreement between people. The reason for this situation lies in the fact that we are all at liberty to arrive at our opinions individually.

When one considers the complexity of the issues involved, one can be inclined to adopt a defeatist and fatalistic attitude and approach. This, however, does not coincide with a posture of intellectual honesty or academic growth. Further, any position should be based on careful study, reflection, and contemplation. This

paper seeks, therefore, to address the subject of evaluative considerations for church music with its primary source originating from a Biblical perspective. It seeks, also, to develop an awareness of the various factors which impinge on our musical opinions and positions. It probably would be comforting to say that all the issues could be resolved by providing very definitive answers, this, however, would be antithesis of creativity, growth, and intellectual and spiritual development.

In an exposition such as this, it is essential that certain basic positions be established. When the Christian begins to look at the world, he must invariably go back to the beginning--a beginning--which starts with the Genesis account. Within the first three chapters can be found the three fundamental positions upon which any examination or evaluation of life or any of its constituent parts, hinges--the arts and music notwithstanding. These three positions are: creation, the fall, and redemption. Many authors who treat the subject of the Christian and music make reference to these three positions which must provide a basis for evaluation. Further, and more fundamentally, these are pivotal in the shaping of the Christian's world view.

This approach to the subject automatically combines the two facets: faith and learning. Any appeal to the Biblical source is predicated on the control belief of a faith which accepts the Bible as God's revealed will and, also, the trustworthy record of His acts in history (Fundamental SDA Belief No. 1). The acquisition and application of knowledge is informed by the directives and principles emanating from the source of truth--the Bible.

### Creation

The Bible opens with a definitive statement of origin which says, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void;..." (Gen. 1:1,2). The creation of the earth by God "ex nihilo" into an ordered pattern is evidence of both creative and imaginative qualities. "God. . . when He created there was nothing to replicate or represent. Instead, He imagined the most fascinating and bewildering assortment of creatures, and He made them." (BEST, p. 403)

A little further in the Genesis account, we find repetitions of three phrases which are pertinent, "and God said," "... and it was so," and "God saw that it was good." At the culmination of His creative acts the record says, "and God saw everything that He had made, and, behold it was very good." (Gen. 1:36). The first phrase refers to the utterance of God which by extension is His word. Elsewhere in Scripture, reference is made to the "Word" in creation. "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth...for He spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast." (Ps. 33:6,9).

God's authority, power, and sovereignty are seen in action and in response nature renders implicit obedience evidenced by, "And it was so," and also the word not returning void. This joint action of command and response elicits the refrain, "God saw that it was good." As God approaches the culminating and crowning act of creation, He says, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...so God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him..." (Gen. 1:26,27).

The conclusion which is to be drawn from the creation account as it relates to man in the context of the subject is this: God created man in His own image, that is with power to be imaginative and creative, utilizing the power to "think and to do." Best expresses it this way:

Humans are made after God's image. What God is infinitely, humans are finitely. God is the uncreated Creator, a human the created creator. Humanity was thought up and made, God was not...Humanity is both entirely dependent and contingent but created to reflect in this state all that God is and does. (p. 52)

#### The Fall

The "goodness" and "perfection" of creation did not continue uninterrupted. God had permitted Adam and Eve to eat of every tree of the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, "for in the day that thou eatest thereof," God said, "thou shalt surely die." (Gen. 2:16,17). But they yielded, "she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat." (Gen. 3:5). This marked the entrance of sin into the world and ultimately death.

The fall of man affected all aspects of his life and being, decay and degeneration were the natural result. Of the antediluvians it was said, "and God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (Gen. 6:5). It becomes obvious that human creativity, which, in the area of the arts particularly, is the flipside of imagination did not escape the effects of the fall. It is important also to note the methodology employed in the temptation. The devil used the tool of deception with the express purpose of discrediting the Creator. In the ensuing conflict

between good and evil which was now firmly established and continued in time, note the evolution of his basic deception. For every good thing which God provided Satan provided a counterfeit: Sabbath to Sunday, or other days; marriage--from monogamy to bigamy, polygamy, serial marriage; worship of one Deity, the true God to idolatry.

It is of utmost importance to know and remember this method of operation since it is crucial to the understanding of many aspects of the subject under discussion, which is the evaluation of church music.

### Redemption

The image of God in man, though marred as a result of the fall, was not completely obliterated as was Satan's design. E. G. White says, "In the beginning, God created man in his own likeness. He endowed him with noble qualities...but the fall and its effects have perverted these gifts. Sin has marred and well-nigh obliterated the image of God in man." PP. p. 595. However, together with the statement of consequence there was the promise of restoration and redemption. "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." (Gen. 3:15).

These words incapsulate the plan of redemption, the ultimate purpose of which is the complete restoration of the image of God in man. This restoration takes place at the consumation of all things when, "this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality." (1 Cor. 15:53). However, the process is not left entirely to the future.

. . . this restoration of the image is not only intended for the future. It is also the present reality of our

sanctification, our growth to maturity in Christ. Because Christ, the head of the church, is our standard and measure (Eph. 4:13), our imaging task of reflecting God's rule in our lives is equivalent to our growing in likeness to Christ. (Walsh & Middleton, p. 84)

Man, therefore, as he submits and yields himself to the molding influence of Christ through the agency of his Spirit is enabled to reflect, even though imperfectly, the image of the Creator. The Spirit of God is also still abroad in the earth working to counteract the advance of the forces of evil.

### Other Considerations

#### Good-Evil Conflict

A very important consideration is the fact that the exercise is undertaken against the backdrop of the good and evil conflict. The Bible records a number of experiences and statements from which pertinent observations can be made.

Two New Testament references are cited, (Heb. 11:25; Matt. 7:13, 14) which say something about the course of wrong doing. In Hebrews mention is made of, "the pleasures of sin," and Matthew says that the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction. In the concourse which leads to life the dimensions are reversed. Many find the path to destruction and few the path to life. The implications to be drawn here are these: The senses cannot be the only basis of judgment since sin at times is pleasurable (the converse is not necessarily true--that right doing is unpleasant), and, the determination of right and wrong are not based on a majority vote.

The experiences of Aaron and the children of Israel over the golden calf and Caleb and Joshua standing up to their fellow spies supports the position of the course of right doing being neither

always easy nor popular. It comes down in many an instance to a position on or reaction to the acclamation: "Choose you this day whom ye will serve."

When the serpent advanced his persuasive argument to Eve in the garden, he subtly veiled and masqued the real truth. "Here was falsehood, so concealed under a covering of apparent truth that Eve, infatuated, flattered, beguiled, did not discern the deception." E. G. White, Ed. p. 24. One may say that there was a partial rationalisation on Eve's part. Centuries later Saul was given specific instructions regarding the destruction of the Amalekites--wipe out everyone and everything. Saul disobeyed and provided a rationalisation for his actions. The lesson here is that wrong doing rarely appears for what it is, there is always the presentation of specious arguments and the insidious mixture of truth with error.

An implicit control belief which underlies this study is that we are dealing with a matter which calls for spiritual insight and spiritual things must be spiritually discerned. "Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Cor. 2:13,14). Paul, in the epistle to the Romans (chapter 7), elaborates on the tension between the carnal and the spiritual which is evident in the problem of knowing and doing. (v. 14 - 20). The problem of sin is not so much in recognizing it as it is in breaking away from it.



Culture

It is virtually impossible to undertake an exercise such as this without reference to culture and its impact on musical practice. Harold Hannum states that, "the selection of music for religious services is not a matter of right or wrong. It is a matter of culture and taste. Tastes change and cultures differ. The goal is to use, as far as possible, the songs considered best in the culture in which one lives." (p. 91). While this statement provides a very useful basis for the determination of criteria, one must not lose sight of the fact that the good and evil conflict also makes its impact here. Meddleton adapted the ideas of Richard Niebuhr in his book "Christ and Culture" and presented it in table form.

CHRIST OF CULTURE	CHRIST ABOVE CULTURE	CHRIST AND CULTURE	CHRIST AGAINST CULTURE	CHRIST REDIRECTS CULTURE
--Christianity <u>identified</u> with the best of human culture --No tension between Christianity and culture --Capitulates to the world	--Christianity <u>supplements</u> culture --Both/and approach, but Christianity is higher --Compromise with the world	--Christianity and culture in <u>paradox</u> --The Christian lives in the kingdom of God and the fallen world as best he/she can --No resolution of conflict	-- <u>Rejection</u> of or <u>separation</u> from human culture --Tension heightened --Gospel limited to the personal life and God's world left to the Devil	--Christianity <u>transforms</u> and <u>redirects</u> culture according to God's standards --Evil is opposed yet culture is affirmed
Culture uncritically viewed as good	Culture viewed as basically good (or neutral, yet deficient)	Culture viewed relatively evil yet necessary	Culture viewed as evil, the domain of Satan	Culture viewed as the fallen, yet redeemable Creation of God

A generalized conclusion with regard to the impact of culture may be attempted. By creation the world was in the full control of the Creator. As a result of the fall, Satan asserted himself as the prince of this world. The intervention at Calvary assured the restoration which will be consummated at the destruction of sin and sinners. Culture, "which comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values," reflects all the images of the good and evil conflict.

The approach which seems safest is that which espouses Christ redirecting culture.

In close relation to culture as it touches the topic of music is the matter of taste, already referred to earlier, and association. One's personal taste which may be arrived at as a result of training, environment, early impressions, just to name a few, definitely colours and affects one's perceptions. Within the cultural context people establish associative relationships of many sorts. By this token, we think of music for church, recreation, dance and other types of activities. As a rule, therefore, if there were to be a "wrong cross" of types the inappropriateness would be apparent.

Let me venture outside of the realm of music just briefly to illustrate the aspect of personal taste. A person from the tropics quite naturally develops a taste for tropical fruits and similarly, his counterpart from more temperate regions does the same. This does not classify the fruits as either good or bad, "right" or "wrong" simply on the basis of origin. One may transfer the argument in broad terms to patterns of sound, melody and har-

monic structures in oriental and occidental music; music from different historical eras or national styles. These are all contributors to one's musical taste. A high degree of understanding and tolerance is, therefore, expected as we relate to others whose tastes may differ from ours.

On the matter of association I can think of the use of the steelband (oil drums converted into musical instruments) as a classic case in point. This musical instrument was developed in the Caribbean, Trinidad in particular, in the mid 1940's. Let me build up to the point by drawing on the past. Historical evidence can support the claim that church society has been influenced by association and environmental factors in determining suitability or unsuitability of musical instruments. In support of the former, I quote from Clement of Alexandria (c. 170 - c. 215 A.D.), one of the early church fathers.

We no longer employ the ancient psaltery, and trumpet, and timbrel, and flute, which those expert in war and contemners of the fear of God wre wont to make use of also in the choruses at their festive assemblies; that by such strains they might raise their dejected minds.

Russel N. Squire in his book 'Church Music' sums up the matter this way:

There is reasonableness in the speculation that instrumental music was avoided because of (1) the adverse associative circumstance in paganism; (2) the tradition in the synagogue; (3) the early Christians' lack of proficiency upon instruments; (4) their feeling that instrumental performance on any elaborate scale would be impossible, unnecessary anyhow, and likely for social reasons to be out of Christian character; and (5) the very nature of the musical idiom of the day which made instruments for sacred usage practicable only for striking an occasional pitch and setting a rhythm.

Despite the remarkable progress which has been made over the last few years with the steelband, there is still a strong association with the carnival festivity, the calypso, and the fete. These associations, quite naturally, still exist in our society and, therefore, cannot be ignored. I am afraid that in some instances the employment of the steelband in the church would heighten some associations which we as Seventh-day Adventist Christians should seek to discourage. Further, if the use of the steelband in our churches will in any way affect the functioning of the body of Christ in preparation for His second coming, then I am afraid that the price is too high. If I may, without disservice, paraphrase the Apostle Paul in Romans 14:19,20, "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things where with one may edify another. For 'steelband' destroy not the work of God."

#### Worship--Music--Christianity

These three areas are not treated as separate entities but in joint relationship to each other. Music and worship are inextricably entwined.

Worship, the soul's unutterable desire, must ever be accompanied by music. From the time when "the morning stars sang together" until the day dawns when men shall stand before God "and sing the song of Moses and the Lamb," worship and music are united. (Douglas C. Percy, p. 5.)

Winfred Douglas gives a simple and comprehensive statement on worship, "Worship is the primary and eternal activity of redeemed mankind." He elaborates further, "all worship must spring from such a sense of God's presence, and of the paradoxical mysteries wherein alone we can apprehend him:...in my heart, or where two

or where two or three are gathered together in His name, and His simultaneous presence in the utmost bounds of remotest nebulae." p. 4.

Ellen White puts it simply but dynamically, "The melody of praise is the atmosphere of heaven; and when heaven comes in touch with the earth, there is music and song--'thanksgiving, and the voice of melody.' (Isa. 51:3)" Ed. p. 161. In another reference she states, "music was made to serve a holy purpose, to lift the thoughts to that which is pure, noble, and elevating, and to awaken in the soul devotion and gratitude to God." PP. p. 594.

It is to be noted that up to this point no definition of music or, more particularly, church music has been stated. A definition of the former is rather straight forward and there is little difference of opinion among scholars, the same cannot be said for the latter, however. "What is church music? Although many attempts have been made to answer it, the question remains as pertinent today as it was to our forefathers half a millennium ago; for a satisfactory, unqualified definition of the term has never been agreed upon." (Etherington, p. 1). Harold Hannum, though not making the point as definitely, speaks in a somewhat similar vein. "The church has not used only one kind of music, but has made use of many styles in its services...no one kind of music meets the needs of all kinds of people. According to his background, culture, and training, and individual comes to associate particular religious feelings with particular kinds of music." (pp. 10,11)

Whatever the differences of opinion, I think that Oliver Beltz's terse definition catches the kernel of truth about church music.

"Essentially, church music is more than a fine art. It is the very Gospel of Jesus Christ in appropriate sound."

In a sentence one can deduce that church music is a handmaiden of worship which in turn is an offering to God in response to a revelation of Himself. Music becomes such an important vehicle because of its potential for influencing the listener. "The power of music has more dynamics than is usually understood. It can amuse, control moods, arouse tears, and incite action...The experience of Saul and David points up the power of music." (Wohlgemuth, p. 16) The reference here essentially is to music without words. When there is the combination of lyrics and music the impact can be even more telling. E. G. White makes the comment, "It is one of the most effective means of impressing the heart with spiritual truth." Ed., p. 168.

Music is received through the receptors of both the intellect and the emotions, the mind and the body. Music is then a thinking and also a feeling experience. We must be appreciative of both dimensions here in that they contribute to our well being and development. The listener who cannot be moved to ecstasy by a scintillating rendition of "Every Time I feel the Spirit" or mellowed by a Bach chorale is being short changed in his musical experience.

The question may be asked, "What causes the difference in response to music, since all music utilizes a common medium-sound?" In a nutshell the answer is this: Even though the medium is the same, the mix of the ingredients is different and this is crucial. The main ingredients of musical composition are: rhythm and time, melody, harmony, tempo, timbre, and dynamics. In the same way

in which varying proportions and or the absence or presence of the different ingredients of a cake affect the end product, the case is similar with a musical composition. The composer or arranger prepares the mix according to his taste or intention. Our responses are also moderated by factors referred to earlier such as experience, musical or otherwise, training, background, mood, personal taste, associations.

One of the most damaging practices today in the area of church music relates to the "marriage" of text and tune. There seems to be a common feeling that if the words are sacred or make an allusion to something sacred, the tune, of whatever sort, becomes acceptable or kosher. What is happening as a result is that the most unholy alliances are being consummated musically on this premise.

Reference is sometimes made to the practice of Luther, Wesley, and Sankey "who went and grabbed their music and words from the devil." At the risk of making too broad a generalization, I think it safe to say that although there may be some similarities in the practice then and now, a more detailed study would reveal a number of important differences.

The exercise, in seeking to determine appropriate considerations for church music, is predicated on an assumption that there is an abiding desire to know and a willingness to accept and implement change when change is necessary. This is a fundamental tenet of growth and development in life and also the Christian life. It is this growth which enables us at one point to appreciate the simple appeal textually and musically of Scriven's "What a Friend we Have in Jesus" and at the same time grasp the historical meaning

of Heber's "The Son of God Goes Forth to War," the harmonic beauty of Ewing's "Jerusalem the Golden" or the melodic line of Hatton's "Duke Street."

### Conclusion

What are the important considerations? How is the Christian teacher to proceed in the process of integrating faith and learning in the area of church music? Here is a synopsis of the arguments presented. God, the Creator of every good and perfect gift, made the world and man who was created in his image. The creation as it came from the hand of God showed that He is a lover of the beautiful and the aesthetic. Man being in the image of God had power to think, imagine and create. Man sinned and as a result his creative abilities were affected. By redemption there is a provision for a restoration. Even now man can still create and reproduce in the area of music compositions which, though imperfectly, reflect the image.

The entrance of sin has made discernment between right and wrong very difficult at times. There is a mixture of the arguments of truth and error; the leaning of the majority towards error; the bias of culture; personal tastes and prejudices. All of these are compounded by the dominance of commercialism in all areas of life including church music.

In the light of the foregoing, the Christian must first be aware of all the factors which impact upon the area of church music. Secondly, he must be conscious of the meaning and purpose of worship. Thirdly, he must have a sincere and earnest desire to know what is right and to do it. Fourthly, he must not allow his views or



feelings about church music to be so paramount that in dealing with others he is intolerant, hurtful, and demeaning. Finally, "the power to discriminate between right and wrong we can possess only through individual dependence upon God. Each for himself is to learn from Him through His word. Our reasoning powers were given us for use, and God desires them to be exercised." Ed. p. 231.

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