

# ARTICLES

## MUSIC AND THE WORSHIP OF GOD

Donald Hustad\*

It is a privilege and a pleasure to share this auspicious occasion\*\* with you. Perhaps nothing would be more appropriate than to make a few comments about “Music and the Worship of God.” As a basis for our thinking, I read the scripture passage which is the starting point for most liturgical theologians.

In the year of King Uzziah’s death I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the skirt of his robe filled the temple. About him were attendant seraphim, and each had six wings; one pair covered his face and one pair his feet, and one pair was spread in flight. They were calling ceaselessly to one another,

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts:  
the whole earth is full of his glory.

And as each one called, the threshold shook to its foundations, while the house was filled with smoke. Then I cried,

Woe is me! I am lost,  
for I am a man of unclean lips  
and I dwell among a people of unclean lips;  
yet with these eyes I have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts.

Then one of the seraphim flew to me carrying in his hand a glowing coal which he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said,

See, this has touched your lips;  
your iniquity is removed,  
and your sin is wiped away.

Then I heard the Lord saying, Whom shall I send? Who will go for me? And I answered, Here am I; send me.

(Isaiah 6:1–9, NEB)

\*Dr. Donald Hustad is Professor of Church Music at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky

\*\*This is an address delivered at the inauguration of the William Earle Chair of Music at Asbury Theological Seminary on April 25, 1973.

It should be apparent that the central figure of worship is not the worshiper, but the God who is worshiped; God who is the perfection of holiness (as proclaimed by the angelic song we know as the **Tersanctus**—"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts"); God who is the perfection of power (for "the threshold shook to its foundations"); the God who remains finally somewhat inscrutable and incomprehensible to finite minds (as suggested by that image, "the house was filled with smoke.")

They tell us that our modern word **worship** is derived from the Anglo-Saxon **woerth-scipe**, signifying the "ascription of worth." Every man has his god; in every man's heart there is an altar. The Christian worships the true and living God, as revealed in the scriptures and supremely in Jesus the Christ, because He alone is **worthy** to be worshiped. His holiness qualifies him to forgive us and to make us holy. His power enables him to regenerate and transform. And the mystery which must surround Him both inspires our awe and demands our faith. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. This is the very word of the Lord." (Isaiah 55:9, 8, NEB)

For our few moments together today, we will think of music and worship in three ways: as **dialogue**, as **incarnation**, and as **offering, or sacrifice**.

In the simplest and broadest terms, worship has been defined as "any proper response to God's self-revelation." In this holy conversation, it is God who makes the first move, who says the first word. Follow the dialogue then in Isaiah chapter six.

God says: "I am that I am—all holy, all powerful, yet mysterious."

Man responds: "Woe is me! I am lost—a sinner!"

God quickly replies to our confession: "Be forgiven; be cleansed; be healed."

While we are yet wondering at His grace, His voice continues:

"I need you." Is it possible that the transcendent God **needs** the "man of unclean lips," to do His work in the world? Yes, it is wonderfully true, and our only logical answer can be: "Here am I, Lord, Send me."

This then is the dialogue which should take place in every worship service. But I fear that we frequently forget who is talking to whom. Sometimes it appears that the minister and the choir are engaged in antiphony, or perhaps the congregation and the preacher. When Kierkegaard speaks of worship as a drama, he insists that the congregation are the actors and that God is the audience. The minister and the

choir, he says, are “prompters”—those offstage individuals who remind us when we forget our lines!

When the minister preaches, he brings us word from God and at the same time reminds us what our response should be in the dialogue. When he prays, he does so vicariously on our behalf—speaking to God for us—and at the same time encouraging us to whisper our own prayer.

The choir’s anthem is not planned for your pleasure alone. The singers express praise of God for themselves and for you too. Hopefully, if the well of your heart only seems to have gone dry, they will prime the pump, and your personal adoration will flow Godward again.

Furthermore, the most significant music in worship is not that of the choir or even of our favorite gospel soloist, but that which we sing for ourselves. For when we join in the congregational hymns, we are, in Calvin’s words, the “church’s first choir.” It is then that the human-divine dialogue can be most direct and powerful.

. . . . .

When we suggest that “worship is incarnation” we are trying to say that worship is not alone something we do. A worshiper is something that we **become**, with our whole being. The British Baptist cleric Stephen Winward has said:

Both as revelation and response, worship should involve the whole personality of man, the body and senses as well as thoughts and words, movement and action as well as listening and understanding.<sup>1</sup>

As I look back on my early spiritual pilgrimage, I am afraid that I developed the idea that true worship is largely cerebral and propositional. Today’s young people have reminded us—after we got over the shock of “choreography” in church—that the body is not intrinsically evil, despite the fact that this Platonist heresy has crept into our evangelical thinking. Some of us should have remembered our heritage of the camp meeting, for there was great significance in kneeling at the wooden altar, in lifting the hands in prayer, and even in the occasional holy “dance before the Lord,” always ecstatic and, I believe, usually reverent.

I only wish that someone would remind my fellow Baptists that the admonition to “present our bodies as living sacrifices” certainly includes the use of the lungs, the tongue and the vocal chords in singing the hymns in church. Somehow about 40% of church-going Baptists seem to have picked up the idea that “singing in church is for singers.” The truth is that “singing is for believers.” The relevant question is not, “Do you have a voice?” but “Do you have a song?”

. . . . .

There is a close relationship between today's emphasis on man's **corpus**, his body, and his **psyche**, his emotional self. It is here that we musicians make our greatest contribution to worship. For music has been called the "language of the emotions." Its communication transcends that of words alone for it helps to reveal the numinous, the transcendent. It aids us in our attempts to express the inexpressible.

In my younger, more-strongly Calvinist days, I was sometimes irked by the well-wisher who wanted to thank me for the singing of the Moody Chorale, saying "the music was a blessing." Invariably I wanted to conduct a theological inquisition by asking "What did God say to you?" or "What did you say to God?" The great Marian Anderson was once asked to delineate in words the meaning of a song. Her reply was: "If I could have said it in words, I would not have sung it!" For too long we have downgraded the importance of emotion, even ecstasy, in worship. As the Apostle Paul said, "I will pray . . . I will sing . . . with the Spirit,"<sup>2</sup> and that is praying and singing that is, at least occasionally, more emotional than rational. As the old mountaineer once said, "Some things are better felt than telt!"

At the same time we must not belittle the second half of Paul's comment on his personal liturgical practice. "I will pray . . . sing with the Spirit, and with the understanding also." Hymns, anthems and solos have words, as well as melody, rhythm, and harmony, and it is proper for the individual worshiper to judge the theology of the "youth musical" as well as that of the sermon. God may be speaking to you through the words and ideas of the hymnal as well as those of the Sunday School quarterly.

Yes, worship should involve and transform the mind, as well as the body and the emotions. It may be that we church musicians often underestimate the potential of the tool within our control. For when words and music are happily married, idea is coupled with emotion. It is then that we may best expect the Holy Spirit to speak in power, and to effect an action of the human will.

This then is the ultimate in the process of incarnation in worship. This is worship that springs from our innermost being. This is "singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord."<sup>3</sup> Worship is finally **submission**. It is best expressed on the bended knee, with words "Here am I; send me."

I think we all agree that each minister of God should have his own personal heart searching and confession before entering the pulpit on

Sunday morning. My suggestion for myself and other ministers of music is that we read God's thundering words as spoken by Amos in chapter 5, verses 21 to 23 (NEB).

I hate, I spurn your pilgrim-feasts; I will not delight in your sacred ceremonies. When you present your sacrifices and offerings I will not accept them, nor look on the buffaloes of your shared offerings. Spare me the sound of your songs; I cannot endure the music of your lutes.

Some of us may guess that Amos is speaking as a music critic and that he was condemning the ancient prototype of the southern quartet "all-night sing" or the rock-gospel musical. The chances are this was the well-rehearsed traditional song of the levitical priests, every one a talented, trained and dedicated professional. Culturally, the music was probably related to the best cantata performance of the First Methodist Church. The problem was not musicological, but spiritual. The voices were singing—gloriously, perhaps—but the hearts of the singers were mute and cold. We need only to add the next sentence of Amos' challenge:

Spare me the sound of your songs; I cannot endure the music of your lutes. But let justice roll on like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (vv. 23,24)

. . . . .

For our last image of worship, we reach back to the oldest biblical concept, one which is missed by many modern churchgoers, even by so-called evangelicals. For too many people, worship is simply "getting a blessing." Fundamentally, worship is an offering—giving, more than getting.

The Old Testament is replete with references to music in worship as a "sacrifice." Psalm 27:6 reads, "Therefore will I offer in his tabernacle sacrifices of joy; I will sing, yea, I will sing praises unto the Lord." Hebrews 13:15 (NEB) makes it clear that this sacrifice in worship is appropriate in our day of the new covenant: "Through Jesus, then, let us continually offer up to God the sacrifice of praise, that is the tribute of lips which acknowledge his name . . ."

It is only fair to remind ourselves that the question of acceptability goes back to the very first sacrifices of Cain and Abel. In Hebrew cultic practice, animals chosen for sacrifice were required to be the best of the lot, without blemish or disease. In Paul's call to Christian consecration, he says that the "offering of self should be 'a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance.'" 4

Obviously, the questions of quality and acceptance should be considered in connection with our "sacrifice of praise." Through his

creative life-time, Johann Sebastian Bach labored with great diligence to produce a stream of musical masterpieces, each of them inscribed with the words **In nomine Jesu**—"in the name of Jesus." The American Guild of Organists urges its members to strive for excellence under the motto **Soli Deo gloria**—"To God alone be praise." Today's church musicians give themselves to years of study of their art, that they may properly lead God's people in worship. Our choir members gather regularly for long and painstaking rehearsal in order that they may offer a worthy "sacrifice of joy" to God.

Of course, there is no room for either pride or scorn in our striving for excellence. To be sure, God's ears are not tickled by the tunes of his servant Bach. Nor is He displeased with the simple songs of the mountaineer strumming his dulcimer. But for each of us the demand is the same. Our sacrifice in worship must be **our best**, involving body, emotions, mind and will in a total response to God's self-revelation.

The word "sacrifice" of itself denotes something that is costly. I am often reminded of the story of King David's worship of God conducted on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, told in 2 Samuel 24. I read from verse 20:

When Araunah looked down and saw the king and his servants coming over towards him he went out, prostrated himself low before the king and said, "Why has your majesty come to visit his servant?" David answered, "To buy the threshing-floor from you to build an altar to the Lord. . . ." Araunah answered David, "I beg your majesty to take it and sacrifice what you think fit. I have here the oxen for a whole-offering, and their harness and the threshing-sledges for the fuel."

Araunah gave it all to the king for his own sue and said to him, "May the Lord your God accept you." But the king said to Araunah, "No, I will buy it from you; I will not offer to the Lord my God offerings that have cost me nothing." (NEB)

I think it is fair to ask the people of God—the leaders in worship as well as the whole congregation—What has it cost you to offer to God your "sacrifice of praise?"

There are times in human experience when all the human and divine requirements are met, and music seems supernaturally to bring us into the very presence of God. Such a time was the dedication of Solomon's temple:

Now when the priests came out of the Holy Place, . . . all the levitical singers, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, their sons and their kinsmen, clothed in fine linen, stood with cymbals, lutes, and harps, to the east of the altar, together with a hundred and twenty priests who blew trumpets. Now the trumpeters and the singers joined in

unison to sound forth praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, and the song was raised with trumpets, cymbals, and musical instruments, in praise of the Lord, because he is good, for his love endures forever; and the house was filled with the cloud of the glory of the Lord. The priests could not continue to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God. (2 Chronicles 5:11–14, NEB)

It is sobering and humbling to realize that this can happen in conducting a ministry of music. Some of us have experienced it once or twice in our lifetime. And our prayer is, “Do it again, Lord. Do it again!”

---

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>S. F. Winward, *The Reformation of Our Worship* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1965. American Edition), p. 7. The outline of this paper has been borrowed from Mr. Winward’s book.

<sup>2</sup>I Corinthians 14:15.

<sup>3</sup>Ephesians 5:19.

<sup>4</sup>Romans 12:1, NEB.