

Music and Evangelical Christianity

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We hear and read much about “priorities” these days. In an activist-oriented society, such as ours, it appears that establishing priorities is an imperative or we get nothing done. It is a temptation for the musician to be a practitioner and not a philosopher or theologian in these days when such a premium is put upon “performance” and repertoire.

The wide area of communication is formidable and at times devastating, to say the least. Granted that music is a major medium of communication and the Judeo-Christian heritage the one great religious block which vastly outshines others in its use of music, what is the place of music in the evangelical church?

Since this is manifestly too exhaustive a subject for a short treatment, a few premises to serve as guidelines for a necessary, fascinating and ultimately rewarding research should be of more than passing interest to every evangelical minister.

The day of fashionable ignorance in things musical is long past. It used to be possible to leave understanding and knowledge at the church door and in the hands of “professionals.” Evangelicals have been notably guilty of this inconsistency: While delving deeper and deeper into biblical and theological studies, too many were content with music which was totally unworthy, both in text and tune, of the gospel which we profess. Must we ignore the growing number of enlightened, aesthetic potential converts in our communication while we strive to reach the disinherited? St. Paul’s exhortation to be “all things to all men” is not a matter of weak and diluted compromise, but implies an honest effort at attaining the almost impossible goal of making an all-inclusive Gospel redemptive for all men through a many-faceted system of communication, among which music is close to chief. Routley, always incisive and spiritually sound, as well as aesthetically perceptive, says, “We have in these ugly productions [some church music] . . . the musical counterpart of meretricious and sentimental preaching, of cheapness and emotionalism in our public worship.”¹ He also says,

1. Eric Rontley, *Music, Sacred and Profane*, (London: Independent Press, 1960), p. 21.

We may take it that [Paul and Silas] sang psalms [like] "I Wait for the Lord," etc. . . . [in the prison episode] and we can take it quite literally and feel that in this sense all our church music should be evangelical, designed not only to delight the apprehensions of the musical and to express the aspirations of the godly, but also to be overheard by "the other prisoners," those to whom Christ might perhaps speak His first words through our music.²

We as Protestants have a tradition which includes certain eras of sterility like Cranmer's omission of all Latin hymns and the Puritans' holding all beauty suspect. There is a personal need for the beautiful in each man as surely as there is a "God-shaped vacuum." He must hear the Gospel for himself as perfectly and beautifully as possible.

This is far from being an argument for involved and intricate music, understood only by the elite. In fact, let us firmly attest to the need for strong simplicity as a basic tenet of spiritual integrity. Part of the genius of the Gospel is its simplicity as well as its profundity. The same is true of music; this is not a paradox but a delightful truth. To illustrate, at a well-known camp meeting a few years ago, a "group" "rendered" a "special number" complete with actions and a text which was abominably superficial, but which to do at all (because it was "tricky") took much talent and practice. The very most it did for the congregation was to leave them awe-stricken. It was necessary for the spiritually discerning preacher to request a great congregational hymn to restore proper attention and set the tone for the sermon. This is quite a different thing from the honest approach of *some* of the youth folk music of today, where rhythm becomes a vehicle for communicating truth as they "feel" it. Therefore, integrity is our stepping stone in music. From there, we must be keenly aware that we are "not our own." Since we are "bought with a price" and have a glorious redemption, we naturally have a song. Since we feel this, we also have a stewardship to communicate it to the listener and, where advisable, encourage him to join us in corporate musical endeavor. It needs some familiarity, but not of a type which leaves him wallowing in the same shallows where we may have found him.

You must have noticed how churches and movements of a pronounced evangelical note manifest the most shocking musical taste . . . many of our liveliest churches show them-

selves to be full of the most outrageous error as soon as they open their mouths in song . . . I contend, then, that it is wrong and misleading to represent the Kingdom as open to people who care nothing for music.³

Nothing in this life stands still, so the challenge to go deeper in experience applies to music as well as spiritual life. Indeed it is part of the same inseparable fabric.

There can be no stereotyping of . . . approaches . . . to perform the ministry of evangelism. It is only through prayerful consideration and careful study that one can be assured of finding that music which is designed to meet the need of each particular situation. Perhaps the best way is to analyze the many ways in which men can be reached for God.⁴

Much is said about balance in subjective and objective music, both in text and tune. A warning in this crucial area is appropriate. The dogmatist who stresses either to extremes is a contributor to a less-than-healthy spiritual life. Evangelicals cannot possibly conceive a purely objective stance toward our God and Savior, but we need nurture. (1 Peter 2:2,3)

The Christian church has a two-fold function to perform: that of leading and instructing believers in their worship of God and that of witnessing to those who are unsaved . . . it must be admitted . . . that in many of our evangelical churches our desire to see people reached with the Gospel . . . has resulted in almost every . . . service being an evangelistic type.⁵

Osbeck in his very practical survey of an evangelical ministry of music, stresses the need for balance to really get the job done.⁶

The fact of our need and its Supplier finds sensitive expression which cannot and should not be denied. But, at that very point begins a new and purer understanding of the worth of concentration on the objective. As an illustrative and rewarding exercise, observe carefully the Wesley hymn, "Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin?" (written upon his conversion); proceed to Watts' "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" and further into any of the greatest Psalm paraphrases like "Praise the Lord, Ye Heavens Adore Him" (Psalm 148).

3. *Op. cit.*; p. 138.

4. John Wilson, *An Introduction to Church Music*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), p. 61.

5. Kenneth Osbeck, *The Ministry of Music*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), p. 177.

6. *Op. cit.*; p. 185.

The fact that preachers are often exhorted to use their hymnals as second only to the Bible⁷ should not be dimmed by repetition. Worthy hymns are almost always scripturally based and certainly inspired. Here then is the next consideration: scriptural or theological content. If the text of the hymn or anthem is sound, the perceptive listener will gain. Only the sensitive musician can discern the most effective musical setting, but he must make it his business to do so and choose wisely. Principles of musical worth have been established through much careful, sometimes agonizing, deliberation. Let us not judge too quickly or harshly the person who cherishes the inferior because he “likes” it or feels comfortable, *until* we can help him to a serving of something better in a patient, understanding way.

Now, to a much more subtle and elusive element: instrumental music. Mendelssohn wrote a series of piano pieces, “Songs Without Words,” one of which someone had the audacity to use as a tune for a well-known hymn! In the area, sometimes plagued with a twilight zone, of absolute and program music, much room is left for individual interpretation. This is as it should be. Therefore, the only valid avenue open to the minister of music (he could often be the preacher or pastor) is to keep the context clear as he views it, hoping music will enhance or amplify the object. Otherwise, it has no excuse for existence and might better be omitted. “Verily,” in these days of cacophony and music to “shop by, eat by,” etc., periods of silence are welcome, needful and at times contributory to much more dramatic impact when music again enters the scene.

It is unfortunate to have to identify musical practices in the church as evangelical, as though it applied to a small segment when it should be universal. Realistically, however, our challenge is two-fold: to correct a defensive and limited negativism and to enlarge the horizons of revelation and faith, by all the elements which exist in music—beauty, emotion and creativity for the glory of God and the blessing of those who may be reached for Him, through music.

God is the instigator of all true worship,⁸ and we respond to Him. Music which is the implement of this interaction is worthy and the only kind to be endorsed in the evangelical church.

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7. Paul McCommon, *Music in the Bible*, (Nashville: Convention Press, 1956), p. 28.
 8. John Skoglund, *Worship in the Free Churches*, (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1965), p. 46.