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On Musical Excellence



by Karen A. DeMol

Excellence and music seem to go hand-in-glove. Excellence is an essential part of the territory in which musicians work, the *sine qua non* of their field. Indeed, musicians do have a good time making music, shaping expressive things out of the created world of sound, and being playful about it. But they are also serious about it, working hard and committing much time and intense effort to being very good composers, performers, and teachers. Usually they spend

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more time producing excellent music than talking about it.

Excellence is also the territory of *academia*. A glance at the college advertisements in *Campus Life*, for instance, reveals many proclamations of excellence. Taylor University says we'll find academic excellence there. So do Messiah College, Toccoa Falls College, Malone College, The King's College, and Houghton College. Southern California College claims that study there leads to excellence in the workplace. Sterling College is devoted to excellence in teaching. LeTourneau states that Christianity plants within us the desire to excel. And at Wheaton College the faculty demands musical excellence. Not one of them proclaims the pursuit of mediocrity!

But what is excellence in music? It is difficult to define. Part of the difficulty is that in conversation or in articles, we must resort to words for discourse about music; and words don't do well for music. Words may be adequate for discussing politics or philosophy or even poetry, but they are quite inadequate for music. To communicate what excellence means in music, one can best present examples of the best, and of merely good, and of downright poor in music, whether classical, jazz, or folk. But that cannot be done in print. In conversation or in teaching we can communicate best by playing examples; we sing the little lick, play the fragment on a nearby piano, put on the compact disc, saying, "*This is what I mean.*" We use the materials of music itself to "talk" about music. When we do try to use words, we often tend to talk structurally (and end up missing the aesthetic essence), or we talk about emotions and effect (and end up sounding subjective and sloppy). However, when our discourse consists of the music itself,

when we use examples, we find that quality is identifiable. Across the centuries and even across cultures, there is music about which people say, "Aha! That's it! That's really good!"—even if they can't identify why or find words for it.

Another part of the difficulty is that a sense of quality in music is built over time through experience, not simply appropriated from a statement, a definition, or even a well-written article. Discernment is developed gradually by repeated exposure to good and less good music.

Nevertheless, I am going to discuss what musical excellence is, to explain with mere words the concept of excellence in *music*, to explain what excellence is in the *music* itself, and what excellence is for *Christian* musicians. I am going to try to identify what excellence is so that we can be more aware of what we do in music and so that we can better understand musical excellence in the light of our call to Christian servanthood. Such understanding is needed for professionals and future professionals in music and also for "lay" people such as seminary students, church worship committee members, and curriculum committee members of a school board; in fact, it is valuable for all Christians, for music touches all our lives.

I am assuming, of course, that seeking excellence is valid and appropriate. It is worth taking a moment to reaffirm this, for we live in a time when some question such a search in many and various ways. They view advocating quality as elitism and seeking "good music" as snobbery. They consider values—moral, political, aesthetic—mere opinion and taste. Their individualism ("I like what I like") has made questioning another's taste a breach of manners; they may even see criticism as libel! Then, too, in some quarters accepting people has become so important that accepting all they do is thought to be not only considerate but necessary. Those who worry about the self-esteem of performers hesitate to identify quality because doing so implies some musicians or compositions don't have it, certainly a damaging blow to the artists' self esteem! Evidently low self-esteem is more serious than certified mediocrity. Also, today people express concern if something is racist or sexist or Euro-centric or all sorts of other "ists" (and in many instances rightly so), but not if something is mediocre. In fact, in some arenas "mediocre" may not be an acceptable word; soon it may be politically correct only to say that something is "aesthetically challenged!"

But Christian schools don't seem to buy into that, at least not according to their published stances. Those college advertisements in *Campus Life* certainly advocate excellence.

And they are in good company, for the Bible doesn't seem shy about excellence, either. The building of the tabernacle, for example, was entrusted to the gifted and the skilled.¹ The training of the musicians in the Old Testament Israelite community was specific and demanding and under the direction of head musicians.² The New Testament even charges us to think about those things that are lovely, excellent, and of good report.³

Let us assume, then, that the pursuit of excellence is worthy and that we all seek it, and now go on to discuss what comprises excellence in music.

I think there is a tension in the Christian community between musical excellence (which musicians learn in lessons and graduate schools and in the so-called "professional" world) and Christian service (on which we focus in church, chapel and private devotions), as if they are mutually exclusive: either we are very, very good at music-making, or we are in Christian service. This tension exhibits itself in doubt about the propriety for a Christian to have a career in "professional performance"; we wonder if a concert career is valid as service—unless, of course, the music has Christian words. It exhibits itself in many of the dilemmas of church music; as for example, in the perceived conflict between excellence and the participation of many members. It exhibits itself in our fear of elitism and in conflicting perceptions and worries about what constitutes "Christian music" and "Christian service."

I suggest that servanthood and musical excellence belong together, that both are components of true Christian excellence, along with some other components, and that all of them are necessary and work together.⁴ In discussing the integrity of these components, I will focus on the music itself, the use of music, the attitude of the heart, and the result in the total fabric of the community. Along the way a definition of excellence will be constructed.

Excellence in the Music Itself

Of what does excellence in the music itself consist?⁵ How do we perceive goodness and badness, quality and mediocrity in music? And where do we get our standards?

In all our concerns, we should always look first to the Bible. Here, however, we do not find directions for the actual notes of music. The Bible does not tell us which chord to use, or what scales are ordained, or how many steps should be in an octave. What we find here are general admonitions to quality. Here we find norms for our attitude and for the use of music (and everything else) for the building of the body of believers. And here we get our concept of who we are, what kind of world our music is part of, and whose world it is. But the Bible does not help us in choosing notes.

Then we look to God's other revelation, the Creation. In the natural world, however, we find no inherent music.⁶ We might infer some general principles about variety and about the union of form and function. Some people, in fact, have worked at finding aesthetic principles for music in the natural world, but they find it easier to do so in terms of the visual arts than the sound arts. However, to my mind, they have not yet found specific musical guidelines.

Where then do we derive our guidelines for composition? The norms for composition come from the art of music itself.⁷ Common general norms for all music include craftsmanship; unity and variety; aesthetic expressiveness; integratedness of materials, shape, and use; and authenticity, all of which apply in a rich variety of national, historical, and cultural styles. Of these, let us here consider especially three: craftsmanship, expressiveness, and the integrity of materials and function. These criteria apply to all musics, be they Western high art music, Western pop, or musics of non-Western cultures. The examples I use here, however, come from Western Classical music, simply because that is what I know best.

It is often said that music is a great gift of God. However, while I admire the spirit of gratitude and worship in which this statement is made, I believe it should be clarified, for music is not a direct gift of God. It is the potential for music, the raw materials—the overtone series, the resonating qualities of larynx, wood, and metal—that are the great gift of God, as is our ability to shape something of them. But music itself is a cultural product, something mankind has made with God's raw materials. An unfortunate consequence of asserting that music is a gift of God is that music is set beyond criticism. This claim becomes a barrier to discern-

ment and necessary judgment in a world that contains both musical trash and musical masterpieces.

*Excellence consists
of good technique*

In performance, excellence is technique, getting all the notes right and playing them in tune with good articulation on an instrument of superb quality. As we get better, technique becomes more multi-layered. It includes scholarly insight, so that we play not only on a good instrument, but also on a historically accurate instrument;⁸ not only with a balanced orchestra, but with a historically appropriate size of orchestra; not only in tune, but

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according to the tuning system of a given style or time. Music teachers and scholars spend their lives at this, teaching students from the bottom up to play the right notes, to develop an appropriate and lovely tone, to understand the style, and to improve all the other components of technique.

In composition, excellence is craftsmanship. Craftsmanship includes consistency in the handling of the musical materials (the themes, harmonies, rhythms). Craftsmanship includes observing the specific compositional practices associated with certain styles. For example, in certain traditional styles, composers avoid parallel fifths, particular note doublings, and bumpy chord connections. In jazz, certain scales are to be used. In any style, craftsmanship includes writing within the capabilities of the instruments chosen, even writing idiomatically for them. In any style, good craftsmanship requires writing with a coherence of materials.

Then there are technological accompaniments in the area of technique. The instruments themselves are well in tune. The performance space—hall, church, room—is acoustically live and balanced. The sound system, if used, is working, of good quality, and monitored carefully. The recording technology and equipment are of fine quality.

So: *excellence consists of good craftsmanship, good technique.* But not only of that.

*Excellence also consists
of expressiveness.*

Excellence is not only getting all the correct notes. It also consists of expressiveness. We have all heard flawless performances that are wooden and have sensed that something essential to music was missing. And while a certain amount of proficiency is foundational to expressiveness, technique does not have to be flawless before expressiveness can begin. Excellence is not merely technical perfection. I wonder how many young musicians have been discouraged from music by an over-emphasis on technical perfection, which can be manifested in a no-mistakes approach in piano lessons, or in a diligent hunt for technical errors in written music exercises and a neglect of the gracious bits of melody in the same exercises. And I wonder about the extent to which we have bought into flawlessness by the flawless but false recordings made possible by the patching techniques of recording technology, a flawlessness rarely possible in live music-making. There is a telling story related by William Edgar:

When the great pianist Artur Schnabel finished his monumental recordings of the complete Beethoven sonatas, the studio engineer came to him and explained that there had been a number of mistakes here and there. If Schnabel would come down to the studio he could play those measures and they could be dubbed in. Schnabel refused the offer. He even offered to do the entire thirty-two sonatas again, incorporating whatever new mistakes might be involved! But under no circumstances would he allow the studio to spoil the unity of the original performance, with the mood and ambience he had created.⁹

So excellence in music requires expressiveness. What is it? Here words falter while examples would flourish. However, we can say briefly that in performance, expressiveness is knowing, after getting all the notes in tune, when to bend a pitch, and how much, and why. It is knowing how much to stretch a yearning note upward, how far to flat a blue note. It is knowing, after getting all the rhythms right, when to stretch a note, and how much, and why. It is that moment in a recent rehearsal of the orchestra I play in, a rehearsal when we were all tired and perfunctory, so tired that all we wanted was to get the right notes and then go home, when the bas-

soonist shaped a brief solo so exquisitely that all heads turned and all eyes brightened.

In composition, expressiveness is nuance, subtlety. It is suggestiveness, shape. It is the choice of all the right materials at a given moment to achieve the desired musical effect.

It is the expressive aspect of music that aestheticians try to capture and explain—confined, again, to words. Calvin Seerveld says it is allusiveness, suggestiveness.¹⁰ William Edgar calls it “metaphor,” signifying a way of experiencing time and space.¹¹

Expressiveness is hard to define, because, again, words are not suited to the task. Nevertheless, it is expressiveness that is at the aesthetic heart of that shaping of sound we call music. We assert this while at the same time acknowledging the role of function (for dance or liturgy or celebration), the connection to emotion (music to express or correlate with our deep feelings), the importance of textual content, and the political and social implications and context of music. The aesthetic is central. Even when music is present in a situation where the emphasis is on something else, the aesthetic is paramount. Music may have a didactic purpose: we may find or devise a tune to help us remember the letters of the alphabet or the books of the Bible or the names of Jesus’ disciples or the directions for sailing across the Pacific; but if that tune is not aesthetically rich, we will have a good mnemonic device but not good music. Music may have a liturgical or ceremonial purpose; but even if the music enables all the graduates or the bridesmaids to walk in step, or the ballerinas to dance together, or the congregation to proclaim the words of a Psalm together, if the music is not aesthetically rich, we will not have good music. Music may have emotional significance in expressing our joy, loneliness, or grief, or a political purpose and unite the patriots of a cause or a country, but if the music itself is not aesthetically rich, we will not have good music. Even when we write or choose music to carry a Christian text, we need musical expressiveness. For if the music isn’t aesthetically good, we may as well dispense with it and use a poem or a speech instead.

That expressiveness is difficult to pinpoint, however; we catch the idea more than we are taught it. Performers catch it from great performers, teachers, and artists who model and instruct. Listeners both to traditional Western music

literature and to compositions and styles that are new to us learn to discern it only under the tutelage of those with an ear to hear. Rules don't help much; it seems that within an hour of formulating a tidy set of rules or guidelines about what makes, say, a good melody, one can find half a dozen examples that mist the eyes and catch the throat—and escape the guidelines. We learn quality in musical expressiveness not from a lecture, but from exposure to good music, under the tutelage and/or encouragement of an expert in the field. One needs a friend who says, "Listen to this now. Hear how the little twist in the melody here fits the hidden suggestion in the text, or sets us up for the next section, or keeps the harmony the same yet different. Here right now, in this piece, this is evidence of expressiveness." And by discerning the same in numerous different instances, we build up a sense of expressiveness, and become sensitive to pieces and performances that are both well-crafted and richly expressive, and begin to distinguish them from those that are well-crafted but devoid of expressiveness, from those whose craftsmanship is flawed and yet are expressive, and from those that are both shoddy and soulless. Because this tutelage, this entry into the perception of musical quality, is best guided by an insider in a style, requires musical examples, and takes considerable time, I cannot here articulate much further what creates aesthetic expressiveness.

So let us summarize what we have so far:

Excellence is

superb craftsmanship

*in composition and technique in performance
wedded to aesthetic expressiveness.*

Acknowledging that excellence exists in performance and in composition, in both technique and expressiveness, we should press on to seek it, to encourage others to seek it, to show them where and how to find it.

Yet we also take note of levels of excellence. We acknowledge a sort of absolute or ideal excellence: the finest compositions performed with outstanding technique and superb artistic/aesthetic expressiveness. It is the best that has yet been done, the best that can be done. This excellence is an ideal, a goal, a destination. I suppose that we would admit that this being the limited and imperfect world that it is, the highest level of excellence experienced in our world is still not the best possible, the best

that we will experience in the new heaven and the new earth. I like the words of Stanley Wiersma: "It sounds as though we expect A+ from [our] life, when all we have ever achieved is a C."¹²

But it is appropriate also to acknowledge a relative excellence. When I judge a junior high festival, for instance, if I were to hold to standards of absolute excellence, I would give everyone a "poor" rating. Instead, I use a standard of excellence related to what younger adolescents are capable of. This excellence is a way-station on the road of excellence, a point on an infinite line. I must point out quickly, however, that affirming relative excellence does not at all mean affirming anti-

*The potential for music
is a great gift of God. But
music itself is a human
cultural product.*

aestheticism or the lowest common denominator or tolerating lack of growth.

We also acknowledge and work for personal excellence. Actually, all of us are operating in a context of relative excellence, limited by our own ability, training, and resources. This is true even of world-class artists and of the great masters of composition. Excellence is doing my best, my best at this point. All of us are finite, and all of us are flawed; all of us also are, or should be, in progress.

Our conception of excellence thus includes a sense of the best possible and of a point of development, both a destination and a journey. Part of the challenge and the difficulty of discernment in music is that we must constantly be judging the appropriate level of excellence to expect in each situation.

What, then, is excellence in music?

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pursued toward the ideal

at the presently appropriate level.

All of it. For it won't do to perform with technical virtuosity but with no soul, or to hamper expressiveness with inadequate technique, or to lavish performing excellence, both technical and expressive, on mediocre music. Excellence requires all of it.

A question that arises here is this: obedience to the cultural mandate, either knowingly or unknowingly, has resulted in the development of sound in a multiplicity of musical ways and styles, a multiplicity that is legitimate and rich. But are some of these styles capable of greater aesthetic richness? I suggest that the concept of relative excellence applies here, that some styles lend themselves to a higher level of excellence than others. It is possible and appropriate to say that two pieces of music are each excellent among their kind, but that one style is capable of a higher, broader, or deeper level of craftsmanship or expressiveness. It is worth considering if there are ceilings on what we can expect in the quality of certain styles, of Christian Contemporary, for instance, or rock, or even classical. It could also be debated whether certain styles only appear to be limited, until later or deeper masters show the higher quality of which they are capable. Was the classical symphony, for example, excellent in the hands of Stamitz and Sammartini, or did that seem to be a musically modest genre only until the masters Haydn and Mozart set their hands to it?

Other questions also arise. One is the question of worldview and music. Surely excellence includes consistency with a Christian worldview. Others concern the power of music to move us, to influence our emotions and behavior. However, although both issues are important, they are beyond the scope of the present article.

Finally, we must be aware of some traps as we pursue musical excellence. One is discouragement. If we focus on ideal excellence out of balance with contextual excellence, we may intimidate or discourage others or ourselves. However, if we focus on relative excellence out of balance with ideal excellence, we hinder growth. "Good enough for now" can too easily become "good enough." We need both to set and seek high standards and to do so in a spirit of encouragement.

Another trap is to worship excellence and those who exhibit it and to feel superior to those whose level of discernment and appreciation is "below" ours. Related to this is a sort of idolatry of the artist and a belief that the artist's pursuit of excellence is such a high and exclusive calling that it exempts him or her from other duties in the Kingdom.

Excellence in the Use of Music

Secondly, let's consider the use of music. For music does not just hang on the wall. It functions

in life. It is for use. Music is for life, and life is not limited to sitting quietly and listening, to what Wolterstorff has called "aesthetic contemplation,"¹³ although that is indeed one fine use of music.

For most of us, music functions in a variety of ways. In a given day we may put the Canadian Brass on the stereo during breakfast and turn it up loud, too, to encourage a cheerful attitude. During chapel time we sing as we worship communally. At dinner we sing, in assorted family voices, "Happy Birthday" to a chortling one-year-old and shortly after, put him to sleep with lullabies. Then we're off to help chaperone a junior high skating party, where the music is to skate with. Or we might attend a concert or listen to a compact disc, where for the first time this day we simply sit and take it in, engage in "aesthetic contemplation." Is the concert the only valid use of music? I don't believe so.

Music is appropriately used with actions and activities, such as liturgy and dancing. It highlights ceremonies such as weddings, parades, birthdays, and inaugurations. It is a partner of theater and dance. It is used in and for therapy.¹⁴

Music is used for personal things too. Whether or not some "purists" approve, music is used for relaxation. (Is that invalid? It would be curious if we approve the use of music for therapy but not for regaining our own serenity through relaxation.) It is used to make work more pleasant and more efficient. (Is that okay? Again, it would be curious if, while teaching historic work songs such as sea chanteys and railroad songs to our grade school children, we pull up our noses about the idea of music in offices.) It is used for entertainment and amusement. (We might theoretically doubt the validity of that, but it is difficult to tell where aesthetic enrichment leaves off and good entertainment begins).

These associations come in part because music partners well. It is a ready and appropriate companion to many other activities and functions in life. The dimension we call rhythm, that shaping of the time element of creation, goes well with other activities that work in time, such as drama and dancing and parades and processions, which leads to its role in celebrations such as graduations and inaugurations. It can enhance the efficiency and pleasure of work, as the heritage of sea chanteys and railroad songs attests. Its expressiveness partners well with whatever carries emotion, be it funerals or celebrations. These partnerships are valid, and,

I would suggest, not less worthy than music for pure listening.

And herein lies a further criterion in the evaluation of quality: how well does the music join that which it is partner to? How well does the music fit and serve the liturgical action? How well does it help carry the play? Can one march well with the parade music and dance well with the dance music—not to, but with?

If its function is aesthetic contemplation—pure listening—it is only the technique and expressiveness, both in composition and performance, that count. If, however, the music is for an activity or function, it is not only technique and expressiveness, but also fittingness to the situation that count.¹⁵

Once again, we need it all. For if we focus only on the function and forget about technical and expressive quality, music becomes only a tool. We could claim that as long as we can dance to the dance music, or as long as the offertory music matches the time it takes the deacons to pass the plates, or as long as the choir music stirs an audience or congregation to religious feelings, or as long as the advertising ditty sells the product, or as long as people are entertained by the performance, the music “works” and is therefore good; what else could one want? What we want, of course, is also aesthetic and technical excellence.¹⁶

Contrarily, if we consider only aesthetic excellence, we may not have a good fit to the occasion. I think here of church music: one of Bach’s masterpiece preludes and fugues just might not make the best offertory for a given congregation on a given Sunday.

It is not either/or, but both/and. To be good, music should serve its purpose well and at the same time exhibit high musical quality, both technical and expressive. When we say music is bad, it may be because it is poorly crafted, or expressively barren, or unsuited to its use, or all of these.

Some concerns and questions arise here too:

a. If well-crafted and aesthetically expressive music fits its use well, will it necessarily also be suitable for sheer listening? Mozart’s background music for garden parties—his *divertimenti*—make charming concert pieces. Should that be true of all music with specific functions?

b. Some may claim that music for pure listening (such as a symphony) is higher or better than music to relax by or work to. But is that true, or is that simply elitism?

c. We should consider whether music is indeed needed for every situation. For example, given the long association of music with work, we ought to consider what sort of music (if any at all) is *good* as office/work music. Office music, store music, elevator music can well be questioned. Often such music is bad or unnecessary or both. I confess that I frequently feel depressed when I must endure grocery store or elevator music. It’s not only that the music is there, but that it’s aesthetically depleting rather than aesthetically enriching. Yet sometimes the music is also unnecessary. While we acknowledge that music is an appropriate partner of many actions, I question whether every activity

*Music partners well
with many other activities
and functions.*

and place must be bathed with music of some sort. We should be able to shop or wait for the dentist or be on hold on the phone without always being immersed in music. The continual presence of music works against both discernment and enjoyment, for we learn simply to tune it out.

d. A question for schools to ponder is the relation of the music department and its curriculum to the role of music in the total life of the school. If the use of music is an important and legitimate concern, shouldn’t the study and performance of music go beyond that normally associated with the recital hall? By concentrating only on concert presentations we forget that music has many uses. But if music is important in all of life, our focus should be broadened. We should work for excellence whenever music touches life. We should be willing to offer our expertise to work for good music that fits other situations, too.

So what is excellence in music?

Excellence is

superb craftsmanship

in composition and technique in performance,

wedded to aesthetic expressiveness,

pursued toward the ideal

at a presently appropriate level,

*together with an integrity of the materials and
their shape*

with the use for which the music is intended.

Excellence in Servanthood

Excellence in music also means having our purposes straight. Here especially we can look for guidance to the Bible, God's rule for faith and life. We are to make music as creatures and as servants.

As God's creatures we make music in obedient, humble, and joyful response to the cultural mandate, the invitation and command to tend and develop God's good world of sound. We make music in awareness that we are tending God's garden in the area of sound. It is in response to this command that we are not only interested in but also committed to writing high calibre music and performing it at the best possible level. All the qualities of musical excellence are related to this command. We do this in response to God and His Creation.

As servants we make music in obedient, humble, joyful, and loving service to our neighbor, in concern for our neighbor's well-being. To respond to the command to serve our neighbor we work not only to develop quality in the music itself, but also to develop and exercise pastoral judgment in music. We do this first of all—and we would do it even in an unfallen world—because all God's gifts of talent and ability are to be used that way. For there is a wonderful match: each person, created in the image of God, has many aspects and many needs, including an aesthetic side and therefore aesthetic needs. Others have been gifted to meet and to serve those needs. These gifts have been given, not to mark us as superior, or to give us private pleasure, but to equip us for service. My neighbor, the dietician, helps me tend my nutritional needs and looks after my physical well-being. I, the musician, tend her aesthetic needs and look out for her aesthetic well-being.

Let me pursue the analogy with my neighbor the dietician. For dieticians, service means serving food that is both delicious and nutritious: both/and. A good dietician serves the best. A good dietician also refuses to serve the bad and does some teaching about why it is bad. A good dietician won't just serve what is wanted if it is not also good for us. A good dietician (like our mothers) also expands our repertoire of foods as we grow, from one good (milk and cereal) to other goods, as we are able. Likely we get stuck at times, refusing to eat eggs when we are four, and disdaining all but pizza and potato chips when we are fifteen. But our good dieti-

cian never thinks that we can't grow beyond that. Likewise, we musicians are to tend and nurture our neighbor's well-being in the aesthetic area, to serve up music that is both "delicious and nutritious," both enjoyable and aesthetically building. Serving as dietician means serving quality food. Serving as an auto-maker or mechanic means seeing to it that our neighbor's brakes do not fail. Serving as musician means seeing to it that music does not fail our neighbor aesthetically. Serving as musician means choosing to do that which edifies our neighbor musically. We cannot do that with sloppy performance, ill-chosen music, mediocre instruments, trite composition. Choosing music of high quality and performing it well *is* a way of being our neighbor's keeper.

We would do this even in an unfallen world. But it is a fallen world, and there is musical mediocrity and musical trash as well as musical greatness. Since sin has spoiled everything, including our aesthetic artifacts and our aesthetic perceptions, we have the added task of helping to sort out the good from the mediocre and the downright poor. Seeing to the well-being of my neighbor includes providing some guidance in musical discernment.

I referred earlier to a perceived tension between musical excellence and Christian service. The apparent tension occurs when we do not keep a balanced picture in mind. We can become so focused on the "serving" that we ignore the other components of excellence we've been outlining here. We like to say, "It's the heart that counts." And it is. But the truly serving heart will serve up quality, not aesthetic stones. For example, some would hesitate to deny a questionable musical offering in church because the well-meaning but unprepared singer "is so sincere." And it's true that sincerity of the heart of the giving musician is necessary. But that does not make good workmanship unnecessary. It is not true that sincerity of heart is so important that poor compositional craftsmanship, bad tuning, and unbalanced ensemble don't matter. Yet, at the same time, without sincerity of heart, our most perfect music is but a "sounding gong."

A balanced approach that understands aesthetic excellence and true service to be mutually inclusive helps us out of the sticky wickets that would be there if we considered only musical excellence or only usefulness or only (superficially) pleasing our

neighbor. Having the genuine well-being of our neighbor and community in mind will help us stand up for excellence and against mediocrity with no more fear of elitism than the nutritionist who advocates a low-fat diet. Seeking the genuine well-being of our neighbors may help achieve the balance between usefulness and aesthetic concerns when a church or a wedding party or the PTA want music for a "function." Seeking the genuine well-being of our neighbors helps to match the type and level of excellence to the situation—a balancing act of musical and pastoral judgment.

All, says Paul, is to be done for the building of the Body. We champion music of high technical and expressive quality not as an end in itself, but for the well-being of our neighbors and for the well-being of the community. We make music well not as a badge of our own skill and achievement, but to tend our neighbors' well-being in the world of sound, for we are our neighbors' keepers in the area of musical aesthetics.

So what is excellence in music?

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their shape
with the use for which the music is intended,
undertaken in joyful and obedient response to
God's commands
to develop His good creation of sound
and to serve our neighbor.¹⁷*

Excellence

within the Total Fabric of the Community

Because we are called to serve, every area of life is an appropriate neighborhood. We may be set in a neighborhood, or we may choose one, matching it to our gifts, expertise, and sense of calling. Some persons, because of their gifts and opportunities, may be called to the concert world of high art, others to the local school or town, their neighbors in each case being those in that world. Our neighbors may be the audience at Carnegie Hall or the child in our care, the worshippers in a church

or the children in an elementary school, the students in the small college or those in a great university. All these neighborhoods—local, national, or even international—have equal status as arenas of Christian service.

The result will be a total fabric of life of which music is an integral part and in which music contributes to a wholeness of life, a whole cloth with health and well-being in every aspect of personal and collective life. In this fabric, music is not compartmentalized, or utilitarian, or frivolous, or self-seeking. In this fabric, good music is an integral part of the whole of life, not reserved for moments of high worship or high art concert life, nor re-

*Good music serves its
purpose well and exhibits
high musical quality.*

garded as optional entertainment. Wherever music appears, it is excellent and appropriate.

In the total fabric of life, music will interact with other areas of life, such as business (as in the music industry) and politics. As it does so, music must not lose its integrity. Integrity includes maintaining its essential nature: aesthetic expressiveness. Integrity also includes not being bumped off-center or compromised by the dilemmas and problems of the other areas of life with which it interacts. For example, as music interacts with business, its aesthetic integrity must not be compromised by any concerns of business that are sinful. As music interacts with and is influenced by political concerns, it must not be compromised by them. In short, wherever music interacts with other areas of life, musicians must be on the lookout lest the problems, imbalances, and "fallenesses" of those areas "leak over" into the world of music.

For what we are working towards and looking for is a whole and wholesome culture in which, as Scripture says, even the cooking pots and the bells on the horses will be inscribed "holy unto the Lord,"¹⁸ and the lullabies, too, and the symphonies, the dance music, and all the songs, a culture that exhibits "life under the covenant, life in relation to Jehovah,"¹⁹ a culture which is, to use an Old Testament term, a community of *shalom*.

Summary

So what is excellence?

Excellence is

composing and using music of the highest compositional craftsmanship and aesthetic richness and performing it superbly, matching music with function, doing both in gratitude to God and in service to our neighbor, doing it all toward the end of *shalom*.

Excellence is

superb craftsmanship in composition and technique in performance, wedded to aesthetic expressiveness, pursued toward the ideal

at a presently appropriate level, together with an integrity of the materials and their shape

with the use for which the music is intended, undertaken in joyful and obedient response to God's commands

to develop His good creation of sound and to serve our neighbor

toward the end of the glory of God and of the well-being of the total fabric of the community.

May God bless our work to that end.

END NOTES

- 1 Exodus 26:1; 35:30-36:1.
- 2 I Chronicles 6:31-42; 16:3-6, 42.
- 3 Philippians 4:8.
- 4 Note that the summary of the law instructs us both to love God with all our *mind* and to love our neighbor as ourself (Matthew 22:37-40).
- 5 A forthcoming book, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* by Harold Best (Christian College Coalition, expected March, 1993), will further address issues of quality in music.
- 6 There are bird songs, of course; but although they are a sort of incipient music, I have not yet found an aesthetic of human music based on them.
- 7 In *Rainbows for a Fallen World*, Calvin Seerveld writes: "When you want to find out how God ordered plants to grow, you don't go study the synoptic Gospels: you go examine plants with a sharp knife and microscope. If you need to discover what chinks in a person's emotional makeup are apt to crack wide open in later life and how you should put an arm around such a one to help hold them together so they can heal, you don't go read Proverbs for details on neuroses and psychoses: you study the case histories of emotionally disturbed people and examine others who display psychic health, make notes, reflect, and bite your fingernails as psychotherapist lest you mess up the life of somebody Christ died for. If you must decide, so you can give leadership, on whether Chagall's stained glass window honouring the late Mayor Daley in the Art Institute of Chicago is more or less significant than the striking piece by Abraham Rattner that takes a whole wall of the downtown loop synagogue, you don't go read Paul's letters, the Psalms, or even Isaiah 40 to look for information on 'beauty': instead, you go study the art for hours, learn the composer or artist's whole oeuvre to get context, examine the history of music, memorial and cult artistry, take a considered stand on the nature of art and slowly begin to discern what counts. All of this scrutiny is exceedingly difficult, because cultural artefacts complicate creation by slipping in also the committed slant of a man or woman's heart; but you make, perhaps in a communion with others, an aesthetic judgment that will bring relative blessing or a curse to those whom it influences." (Toronto: Tuppence Press, 1980) 13-14.
- 8 By this illustration I do not wish to assert the necessity of using historical instruments, but only point out that certain matters of scholarship are matters of technique rather than of expressivity, although they should be undertaken for the purpose of enhancing musical expressivity.
- 9 William Edgar, *Taking Note of Music* (London: SPCK (Thirdway Books), 1986) 14.
- 10 Calvin Seerveld, *Rainbows for a Fallen World*.
- 11 See also Edgar, Chapter 3.
- 12 *Adjoining Fields* (Grand Rapids: The English Department of Calvin College, 1987) 33.
- 13 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).
- 14 Dale Topp in his *Music in the Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) presents these "uses" of music in connection with various areas of life: music and serenity (therapy and relaxation); music and friendship; music and declaration (political statement); music and action (liturgy, dance, play); music and amusement (entertainment); music and education (cultural understanding).
- 15 It could be said, of course, that pure listening is also an activity. I make here a distinction between music for pure listening and music with another function to highlight some of the issues involved in this discussion.
- 16 Some Christians see Genesis 2:9 as presenting a model for both aesthetic value and usefulness in the arts: "And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food." (NIV)
- 17 "As God's creatures we are made in his image to represent him on earth, and to live in loving communion with him. By sovereign appointment we are earthkeepers and caretakers: loving our neighbor, tending the creation, and meeting our needs. God uses our skills in the unfolding and well-being of his world." *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony*, in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1989) 1022.
- 18 Zechariah 14:20.
- 19 Edgar, 49.