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John MacInnis

Dordt College, john.macinnis@dordt.edu

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What Makes Music Christian?

Abstract

"Music, cultivated as it should be, awakens our senses and our understanding of what is possible in this good world."

Posting about defining Christian music from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/what-makes-music-christian/>

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Comments

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What Makes Music Christian?

 [inallthings.org/what-makes-music-christian/](https://www.allthings.org/what-makes-music-christian/)

John MacInnis

What makes music “Christian” or not? The problem with this question is that applying the label “Christian” to anything invites reasonable exceptions. For example, what if God is the topic of a song, but the melody is practically unsingable? What if the melody and harmonies of a song are well formed, but the words are questionable in some way? What if the words and music are great, but the performance has errors? Is it still a “Christian” song?

I sometimes begin a music class by singing the well-known Celtic song “[Danny Boy](#).” My students and I talk about the haunting and memorable melody, and we name the elements that make it a good song. Then, we sing “[I Cannot Tell](#),” a text about the life and eventual return of the Lord Jesus, found in many hymnbooks and set to the same tune as “Danny Boy.” I ask my students if the music, now including Christian lyrics, is properly considered “Christian,” whereas it was not before. By the end of class, we are mostly in agreement: it is not the lyrics or topic that make music Christian.

Timothy Keller [has said](#) that Christian pilots should certainly “land the plane” but that there is more to working Christianly than simply doing our jobs well. Similarly, it would be a mistake to assume that God has no intentions with regard to music other than a flawless performance or that the Christian faith has nothing significant to say to those who are called as musicians and music lovers. The following are a few brief considerations for those of us who wonder when one can conclude that music is doing what it’s supposed to do in the Kingdom of God.

Music should speak truly to our lived experience

Music (and all art) offers an account of being in the world.¹ That is, music is characterized by human experience; it is shaped and shared through a dynamic process of habituation and enculturation. So, if the lived experience of humans is bound up in the music we make, that music should speak truly about the world we live in, what’s right with it, what’s wrong with it.

Music also addresses how an individual responds to her world because music is versatile in expressing the complexities of our emotional lives. I myself recently heard a student perform Ottorino Respighi’s [Notturmo](#) on his senior recital at Dordt College, and I found that the music spoke to me deeply in a season of many responsibilities and busyness. The music, by virtue of its construction and artful performance, reminded me that I always have the freedom to respond with grace and poise. In that moment, the music resonated with and enriched my lived experience.

Music can also lie. It is no hard task to find songs that twist the truth concerning what it is to be active and accountable in God’s good world. For music that includes no words, this consideration of musical meaning is more difficult—not because it is impossible, but because it requires more technical vocabulary, experience, and mentorship. As a place to start, I recommend Kofi Agawu’s book [Music as Discourse](#).

Music should nourish and refresh

The composer J. S. Bach is thought to have said that “The ultimate end or final purpose of all music . . . is nothing other than the praise of God and the recreation of the soul. Where this is not taken into account, then there is no true music, only a devilish bawling and droning.”² This word from the so-called [Fifth Evangelist](#) is good, and it is important to note that Bach is not referring to purely sacred music. *All* music has the potential to glorify God and sustain our inner life.

But, if music can nourish and refresh, it can also degrade and destroy. How many young men and women have

been chewed up and spit out in the idolatry of music competitions with their demand for absolute perfection? Instead of letting music pull people together, we too often use music to pit them against each other. In his book, *How Musical is Man?*, John Blacking argues that the human predicament centers on our failure to love and that we all have much to learn from our sisters and brothers in African cultures for whom “the chief function of music in society and culture is to promote soundly organized humanity by enhancing human consciousness.”³

Similarly, musicians can easily suffer physical injury, and they should have [proper training](#) in healthy musical practices. [Recent research](#) highlights that fatigue, pain, and negative musculoskeletal symptoms are all too common among musicians, for reasons that include poor training, struggling with excessively demanding literature, and a mismatch between a person’s body and his instrument. There is also the matter of injury to music listeners. For example, the American Osteopathic Association [reports](#) that hearing loss is on the rise among teenagers, due to the prevalent use of headphones. I think it safe to say that God’s intentions for music do not include injury to our bodies.

Music should cultivate our creative potential

The human capacity for music making is extraordinary and widespread, observed indiscriminately across time and geography. This is John Blacking’s point when he critiques Western societies and their apparent reserving of musical training and expertise for the clever and the privileged. Blacking asserts that humans “are more remarkable and capable creatures than most societies ever allow them to be. This is not the fault of culture itself, but the fault of man, who mistakes the means of culture for the end, and so lives *for* culture and not *beyond* culture.”⁴ My conclusion here is that musical practices, fostered faithfully, open doors of opportunity and occasions for personal development for all humans. Furthermore, music, cultivated as it should be, awakens our senses and our understanding of what is possible in this good world.

On the other hand, music may also leave us numb and detached. This is a consideration for music students, who are careful to keep their practice sessions on task and productive, and also for music listeners, who seek out new sounds and new musical experiences.

So, what makes music Christian? The question is obviously complex, and it surely involves our heart as much as our musical skill. C. S. Lewis put it this way: “The test of music or religion or even visions, if one has them, is always the same—do they make one more obedient, more God-centered, and neighbor-centered and less self-centered? ‘Though I speak with the tongues of Bach and Palestrina and have not charity....’”⁵

Footnotes

1. For an explanation of the generative power of art to construct meaning and not just reflect it, consider Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 755ff. [↩](#)
2. John Butt, “Bach’s Metaphysics of Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 52-53. [↩](#)
3. John Blacking, *How Musical is Man?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973), 101. In this context, Blacking is specifically referring to musical practices of the Venda people in South Africa. [↩](#)
4. Blacking, *How Musical is Man?*, 7. [↩](#)
5. Walter Hooper, ed., *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 732. [↩](#)