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Sound Stewardship : How Should Christians Think About Music?



by Karen A. DeMol

Introduction

As someone has said, "Nobody doesn't like music." Take a moment to consider the wide range of human experiences that music accompanies. Think of the number and the range of experiences in just one day that might be engaged with music. We may begin the morning by singing in the shower or listening to cheerful early morning music on the radio, bright brass perhaps. At work music makes our tasks more pleasant or even more efficient. We whistle or hum as we go about our daily activity or have recorded music in the back-

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ground or use songs that help to coordinate physical motion. At dinner we may sing hymns as part of family devotions. We sing happy birthday to a chortling two-year old, tucking her into bed with lullabies afterwards. At an evening sports event we might sing the school Alma Mater or the national anthem. We might relax at the piano or engage in an activity that is partnered by music, dancing perhaps, or skating, or watching a film. Or we might listen to great masterpieces of music on the stereo or live in concert. Yes, music is a common and a rich part of every-day life. Music is also a part of every stage of life. Small children sing, crooning sing-song tunes of their own making, chanting to themselves of the day's events, and singing the childhood songs of their culture. Young lovers have "their song." Mature artists perform on the concert stage. Aged saints, dying, sing Psalms though they are past talking. Music is also part of every culture. It is prominent in both the folk art and the "high art," the treasured masterpieces, of a culture. And all cultures use music in worship.

No, enjoying music and finding generous place for it in our lives is not a problem. But when we seek to articulate a Christian perspective for music, we can get caught short. How, exactly, does this wonderful world of music fit into a Christian understanding of the world and of our place and task in it? How should we engage in music as part of our lives as Christians? How are we to evaluate music? What on earth does "giving glory to God" really mean when it comes to music? Reformed Christians have sought to

understand all areas of life as under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and in relation to the overarching realities of Creation, Fall, and Redemption, and the Eschaton. That approach is best for music too, to have a sound foundation for our understanding of music. In this article, I intend to present an overview of the implications of these great realities for music, though I realize it is impossible to explore fully their enormous implications for any aspect of life.

The four themes of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Eschaton also help us keep our heads and our practice straight in a world where there are major challenges from those who do not believe any of these realities and also from fellow believers, who may stress redemption, but not creation, who stress salvation in the world to come, but not the reality of God's Kingdom now. A sound view of music should be based on creation and kingdom as well as on salvation. For our world belongs to God, in the beginning, now, and in the future!

Creation

The foundation of our activity in music is the creation. "In the beginning," Genesis 1-2 tells us, God by his Word called into being all that is. The Genesis list of created things is familiar to us—light, the waters, land, plants and trees, sun, moon, and stars, day and night, sea creatures, birds, and animals. This catalog of God's works is comprehensive, but it is not complete.

In the beginning: God's gifts in creation

Not specifically mentioned in Genesis but surely made by God are color, fragrance, flavor, texture, the law of gravity, the speed of light. Also not specifically mentioned in Genesis but surely made by God are the materials of which music can be made: sound itself, including sound waves, the overtone series, the resonating properties of larynx, wood, metal, and reed. God created the properties of sound and determined the physical laws governing the transmission of sound. God also created time. And God pronounced it all "good." "Good" here means perfect in the sense of being without flaw and also in the sense of being complete and satisfactory. God's creations are good "as is." Color is good! Sound is good!

However, they also can be made into other things, and in the cultural mandate, God commanded us to do so. Clay is good "as is" and can also be shaped into pottery; vines are good "as is" and can also be made into rope and baskets; sound is good "as is" and can also be formed into language and music.

The raw materials of music—pitch, resonance, time—were created by God. When we work in music, we thus work within the givens of creation; no one makes music with other than these raw materials. That we are entrusted with these materials, materials declared good, materials with rich potential for development, should lead us to worshipful awe and grateful response. That we work within their limits should lead us to humble acknowledgement of our creatureliness and finiteness.

God not only created but also sustains his world. Were he to stop, the overtone series would collapse into chaos and our voices fade to nothing. This is not a random universe nor one run by a capricious God, but one sustained by a constant and loving Maker. Musicians can trust that because of his sustenance, the materials of sound will not change. Our energies need not be taken up by testing each morning whether the properties of sound are still the same but can be concentrated on making good use of those properties. More good cause for gratitude!

Understanding what God did and did not provide at creation is important for the understanding of certain issues regarding music. First of all, understanding Creation shows us that, even though there are hints of music in nature—hints of rhythm in thunder and ocean wave and of melodic mottos in bird song, for instance—, God did not create music. Rather, he created the raw materials and enabled humans to imagine ways of making them into music. Composing and performing music is thus essentially a human activity. Some may say that "music is a great gift of God;" others may assert that "God gave me this song." We can admire the gratitude and humility in statements like these; we recognize the possibility of divine inspiration and realize that all good things ultimately come from God's hand. However, we ought to be clear that 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. Music itself is a cultural product, something humankind has made with the materials God provides. Music is a conscious and deliberate (and therefore creaturely) shaping of sound, for which we are responsible. A worrisome consequence of asserting that music in general or a specific piece is a direct gift or creation of God is that music is then set beyond criticism—how could we dare to critique a song if the composer were God? Such a claim becomes a barrier to the discerning and judging necessary in a world with both musical trash and musical masterpieces. On this matter William Edgar provides valuable insight, contrasting in depth the biblical view of culture and the views of culture of other religions, ancient and modern, and of philosophers, such as Rameau and Rousseau. He writes, for example: “The first thing we learn from the much neglected fourth chapter of Genesis, then, is that music-making is human activity. The ancient world believed otherwise.” And “The problem, then, with finding a ‘rival’ source of music in nature is not that there is no music there, at least in some sense, but that we forget music’s creatureliness, and man’s crucial role as primary agent in the development of the musical process. Nature does not generate music independently from man, or from human agency (or angelic agency).”¹

We should also note that music is physical; it is made with our earthly bodies and with instruments made of created materials. We must take care not to think music is super-human or to “spiritualize” it or to put it on a supernatural pedestal—traps easy to fall into because of music’s power to move and, perhaps, because of music’s age-old association with the rites of worship. Music is as much a human activity as carpentry and photography, as playing and cooking.

Then we should note that God called it all good. All. The resonating qualities of the wood out of which violins and clarinets can be made is good, and the resonating qualities of the human larynx are good. That would seem to suggest that both vocal/choral music and instrumental music are valid, and not to be prioritized. Instrumental music is different than vocal music, but it is not inferior because violins do not sing words.

Another understanding from creation is that God modeled for us amazing richness and diversity. In lavish, overflowing, joyful creativity, he created amusing armadillos and somber dachshunds, waddling penguins and elegant butterflies, delicate roses and sturdy redwoods, lemon yellow and deep purple, rough mountains and smooth lakes. His variety shows us that a rich diversity of design is valid; we need not seek a single “ordained” musical style, nor hesitate to explore and enjoy new sounds and styles in music.² We may revel extensively in God’s garden of sound!

What on earth does “giving glory to God” really mean when it comes to music?

Human created-ness and God’s world of sound.

Into this garden of delights, God placed us. What are the God-given characteristics of humankind that relate to music? First, let us rejoice that he made us with ears—ears not only to hear each other speak, but also to hear the rustle of leaves, the growl of thunder, the purr of kittens—ears to hear the sounds of creation, ears to hear the music to be made out of the materials given in creation, as well as minds to appreciate them.

God also endowed us with creativity, the ability to imagine, to “think up” things, and to make them. All of us have this ability to some degree, while some of us are uniquely gifted in specific areas. But none of us can create out of nothing. Rather, we all work with the raw materials that God provided in his creation.

In our creativity we realize that we are dependent creatures in that we need other people and community for support, for ideas, and for the benefit of others’ gifts. “It is not good for man to be alone” applies to our creative work too. Our work in music stands on the shoulders of musicians both around us and preceding us. Mozart and Beethoven could not write their intricate harmonies without the work of those in the Middle Ages who first began to write harmony.

They, in turn, could not weave melodic lines together without the work of those who first devised a system to codify and notate melody. Musicians thus work in community, both local and historical. The concept of community is built into our humanness; its best expression is in the Body of Christ, with its acknowledged and celebrated dependence of all parts on each other.

Another important part of our created-ness is this: Every person is created with an aesthetic dimension—an ability to appreciate nuance, expressiveness, and beauty. Although “aesthetic” is hard to define, it includes the ability to perceive and appreciate balance, order, and expressiveness in the things we see and hear. It includes, but is not limited to, the appreciation of beauty. This capability must be both recognized and nourished. Just as we care for ourselves and for others nutritionally and spiritually, so we must do aesthetically.³ Although innate ability to perceive aesthetic qualities may differ from person to person, and although other duties do compete for our time, attention, and resources, none of us may set aside the development of our aesthetic sensitivities and skills. Even though some people are especially gifted in this area, all people can discern and enjoy/appreciate the aesthetic qualities of God’s creation and the aesthetic qualities of things that others make of God’s materials.

The gifts of creativity and aesthetic appreciation are not limited to believers. They are part of human nature created by God and are negated neither by the fall nor by unbelief. Even though the world has been tainted by sin, the aesthetic aspect of humankind and the ability to make things and to respond imaginatively within creation continues to be part of the calling that holds for believers and unbelievers alike. This is of enormous importance as Christians consider whether they may listen to music written or performed by non-Christians. Giving thanks to God, we may indeed enjoy music by non-Christians, acknowledging that their gift is from God and that the materials of sound they work with are from God’s good creation; at the same time, we need to discern what is misdirected about their work, as well as about our own.

The cultural mandate and its implications for activity in music.

God not only created the materials and the ability to be imaginative, but He also gave a charge to develop them. In making man and woman, God decreed, “And let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Gen. 1:26b). After their creation, God blessed them with the commandment to be in charge: “And God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground’” (Gen. 1:28). God blessed us thus!

Our activity in any area is thus in response to having been created with a task. That charge entails developing a culture.⁴ Believers, knowingly, and unbelievers, unknowingly, alike are busy at this work. Developing sound—part of the creation that God called “very good”—is included in this charge. Sound is part of the Creation that God put us in charge of, to care for, to explore, and to develop.

We call this a “task”—but what a task! Genesis says God blessed them with this task. Not a burden, but a joy. What a gift—to be let loose in a garden of great wonders and delights and enormous potential and to be told by God himself to “play” in it. “It’s all good,” he said, “very good! See for yourself! See what you can make of it now. Have a good time at it! And remember—you are accountable to me.”

Of course no one is able fully to respond to all aspects of creation; no one of us has either time enough or the specific gifts fully to explore and develop every aspect of creation. Even in regard to just one aspect of creation—sound—there are various “specialists” who respond in different ways. Physicists develop the understanding of the nature of sound. Technicians develop the measurement of sound (as with clocks and oscilloscopes, tuners and metronomes) and the harnessing of sound (as with public address systems and radio and recording technology). Musicians respond to sound by developing its aesthetic possibilities, shaping it for expressive purposes. In fact, music can be defined as an aesthetic response to creation in the area of sound.⁵

In sum, we, made with an aesthetic dimension to our being and an ability to create, are called to live in a world in which sound has been made by God Himself and declared very good. God has set us in charge of both keeping and developing His world of sound, as well as the rest of creation. Music-making is thus a part of our humanness and part of our task in God's world.

Various elements of music are responses to specific elements of creation. Rhythm, which includes tempo, meter, and the duration of notes, is an aesthetic response to or development of time, the temporal and sequential aspect of creation. Melody and harmony (uses of pitch) are aesthetic responses to or development of the aspect of sound called frequency (high and low pitches). Dynamics are aesthetic responses to or development of the property of sound called amplitude or volume (the ability of sound to be loud or soft, with any number of gradations in between). Tone color or timbre is an aesthetic response to or development of the timbral or resonance qualities of materials such as wood, metal, skin. All people at all times and in all places and in all cultures still have all of these and only these aspects of music to work with. We have all of these—a rich supply of materials; and we have only these—we work within their limits. Every time I read a new music appreciation book or a world music book, I find it begins with a chapter on the materials of music; the materials discussed in every book are rhythm, melody and harmony, dynamics, and tone color; and they are all directly tied to elements of creation.

In addition, music obeys the command to develop creation by molding musical order and musical shape. In fact, music can be defined as the deliberate or conscious organization of sound, in contrast to noise. There are of course no direct models in creation for specific musical designs such as minuets or twelve-bar blues. However, music is engaged in configuring order and design, as are all the arts.

Over the long centuries and in all places and cultures of the world, people have responded to sound in God's creation in an amazing variety of types and styles of music, from the improvisatory groupings of melodic and rhythmic fragments of the East and the rhythmic intricacies of Africa to

the highly harmonic styles of Europe, from childhood songs to worship music, from chants and folk songs to symphonies, with voices, percussion, wind, and string instruments—a lavish, rich, diverse display.⁶

The Fall

To our grief, human sin in the fall and in our daily lives ever since has stained and warped everything. Sin's role in physical illness has produced not only cholera and cancer but also tinnitus and deafness. Sin spoils our ability to make good things, it interferes with our aesthetic

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perceptions and our enjoyment, it taints our motives, it confuses our ability to discern. We ourselves are sinful; our cultural products also, our responses to creation, are muddied both by our own sin and by sinful influences.⁷ We may not want to believe that sin affects so abstract or so beloved a thing as music, but our music-making is not exempt from sin's long shadow. We can perceive its effects in music in a sad multitude of ways. In our engagement with music, which often focuses on the pleasure of music, we must not fail to discern these effects and seek to correct them both in our own lives and in our culture. Consider the following examples.

1. The *actual musical content* can be spoiled by sin. It is intriguing to conjecture what music sounded like before the fall, but also futile, for we have no information at all. It is also impossible to know whether the fall affected the basic created materials of music. For instance, was the overtone series actually different before the fall? Was the resonance of wood richer? Did Adam and Eve have perfect pitch memory? We cannot know.

Surely, however, sin does affect the content of the music; I speak here specifically of the music itself, the words or lyrics being a separate, though related, issue. We cannot say that "sins" exist in the "notes" of music as if they were moral sins,

like embezzlement or gossip. In music sinfulness shows up in the taint of mediocrity; music can be trite, boring, shoddy, redundant, or shallow. Music can be poorly crafted, with mediocre melodies, trite harmonic progressions, and unimaginative repetition. It can carry weak, poorly constructed texts or texts with deceptive concepts. Music can be pretentious, which is related to dishonesty. Music can be crafted or used to manipulate, which is devious.

The mixture of influences is also evident in musical style. As an example of the dilemma, the music of Mozart and Haydn has superb qualities of orderliness and balance that reflect the orderliness of creation but also reflect the rationalism of the Enlightenment; it has grace and elegance, which reflect the beauty of unmarred creation, but also reflect the aristocratic mannerisms of the French court.

2. Our *understanding of music* can be spoiled by sin. We can have too low a view of music, considering it outside the domain of Christian service and sanctification, or one to be "indulged" only when "more essential" areas of life are well in hand. This view is common in our culture, showing up, for example, in educational priorities. Or we can have too high a view of music, paradoxically also a strong trait in our culture. We can pridefully hold music-making to be a "higher" calling than, for instance, computer science or plumbing. We can think music a badge of our superiority, either personally or culturally. We can "idolize" musicians; a tendency to do so began in the Western world in the nineteenth century, which regarded artists as extra-human, elevated, super-beings, and continues in our own time, with adulation both of rock stars and of concert artists. We can even idolize Christian artists, as if they are some sort of super-Christian. Artists themselves can adopt this attitude, displaying an unbecoming arrogance.

3. Our *aesthetic sense* has been spoiled by the fall. Our ability to appreciate and to discern aesthetic matters is spoiled. Further, it is difficult to distinguish whether our aesthetic capabilities are limited by sin, by differences of gifts, by human finiteness, or by a mixture of these. Certainly our culture flattens and deadens our aesthetic perceptions; our culture has even been called

"aesthetically dysfunctional." Enabled by the resources of technology, our culture plays music so continuously and so pervasively that our ability to appreciate it and to be discerning is blunted.

We can also be lazy or not interested in learning discernment about music and the other arts. We are content to enjoy music in only a superficial way, rather than striving to appreciate the wonders of God's creation in it. We can desire immediate musical gratification instead of striving for excellence and refinement. Our music-making is handicapped when we do not try for our best, either in our practicing or in our attitude. We can fail or even refuse to use our God-given ability in music. In addition, physical impairments resulting from sin's brokenness handicap composers, performers, and listeners. Some of us have damaged our hearing or even gone deaf. Others' keyboard dexterity has been crippled by arthritis. The pianist Leon Fleischer has lost the use of his right arm, while clarinetist Robert Marcellus went blind, no longer able to see the printed score.

4. Our *use of music* can be spoiled by sin. We can use music thoughtlessly or engage in it in ways that humiliate others or use it to prove our social status. We can use music destructively; note the current warnings that the volume of much contemporary music is physically damaging to our hearing. We can use music too extensively; for example, our culture plays music so constantly in every situation that our ability to "hear" it is deadened—we have learned simply to tune it out. We can confuse the appropriate uses of music; for example, Neal Plantinga, writing of sin as pollution and perversion, points out that "when a church uses hymns primarily as entertainment, it simultaneously perverts the hymns and pollutes worship by introducing entertainment into it."⁸

Sin can infect music as it interacts with other fields. For example, when music is published, it legitimately interacts with business. However, an inordinate concern to make money can compromise or even dominate the music-making process, musicians being pressured to write or record what will sell rather than focusing on excellent aesthetic work. We can use music merely as a tool to sell something, from beef and plane tickets to the Gospel itself.

And music can even become our god.⁹ In the words of a contemporary testimony, “We abuse the creation or idolize it.”

Our original task stands: to keep and develop God’s world of sound. But because of the fall, we now must also become discerning about the implications of sin for music, counteract its effects, and restore an appropriate view and use of music.

Redemption

But the great good news for us and for the marred creation is this: Christ through his atoning work has brought redemption. We now have yet more cause to respond in gratitude, obedience, and service! “The man whose life has been saved by God responds, with patterned sounds, in the joy of thankfulness. This is more than pleasurable sensation. It places the emotional meaning of music, or rather its way of meaning, in the context of the covenant. To be sure, his heart is renewed by God’s grace. He can sing a ‘new song’ because he is a ‘new person’ in Christ.”¹⁰

Believers, now both responding to the original cultural mandate and thanking God for salvation, are called to work at redeeming the entire creation. Just as all of life falls under the cultural mandate, and just as all of life was contaminated by sin, so now all of life, having been redeemed by Christ, needs healing. We are called to be engaged in the restoration of God’s broken world.

However, Christians have differing views of the importance of cultural activity since the fall and since Christ’s redemptive sacrifice. Some Christians believe that the most urgent task is the saving of souls for the world to come, that this world and its culture is now just a “vale of tears” which will pass away. In this view, artistic activity would be legitimate if there had been no fall, but because of the fall and of the urgent need of humankind for knowledge of salvation, all Christians must be engaged either entirely or primarily in evangelism and missions. First things first. The arts count only as a tool for outreach.

For others, redemptive tasks fall in a hierarchy: missions and evangelism first, then works of healing, such as medicine and nutrition, with perhaps agriculture education to the Third World following close behind, then education; some areas, such as business, sports, the arts, and

politics, are either at the bottom of the list or considered inappropriate for Christians.

Christians in the Reformed tradition, however, believe that this world and this time are part of the Kingdom of God. In fact, “the goal of redemption is nothing less than the restoration of the entire cosmos.”¹¹ The realities of the fall and of redemption neither erase the creation nor negate the cultural mandate.¹² If anything, there is now yet another reason for Christians to be busy in all areas of life. Through human sin, not only we humans but also our entire planet Earth is marred. “The whole creation groans,” says Paul. In every

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area of life—physical, moral, emotional, intellectual, social, and artistic—the whole creation groans, screeches, cracks notes as it were, plays out of tune, misses the beat. The whole creation—not our souls only—needs redemption.¹³ Christ is Redeemer and King not only of our souls and for eternity, but also of human culture and for now. The task of the redeemed Christian is to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel both to unbelievers that they may swell the chorus in heaven, and also to our culture, that in its expressions and structures it may bring honor to God now.¹⁴ We press the claims of Christ into all of life and into every area of culture: the social structures that could oppress, the commercial ventures that could exploit, the illnesses that maim and kill, the artistic expressions that could debase. Polluted rivers are to be cleansed, disease conquered, artistic life cleansed, enriched, and marked by new integrity. Abraham Kuyper’s famous statement that “There is not a square inch in the world that does not fall under the Lordship of Jesus Christ” can be applied to music; we claim that there is not an inch of audio tape, or a measure of printed music, or a minute of performance, that does not fall under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In doing so we proclaim that this world counts, here and now, because God made it and because God redeems it.¹⁵

Service/Task

The task relative to music does not belong to musicians alone.¹⁶ All people have an aesthetic dimension and must attend to this aspect of themselves and of their lives. As we enjoy music (as all of us do), we should seek to enrich both our enjoyment and our discernment in our musical choices. Musical lay-people can and should seek to discern musical quality, to use music thoughtfully, and to recognize and work against distortion and evil when it occurs in music. According to Seerveld, this is part of sanctification, which includes more areas of life than we might think; while obedient aesthetic life is not exactly a matter of heaven or hell, it is part of sanctification.¹⁷

We are to be willing to be served in this endeavor by those uniquely gifted in music. Just as we look to those gifted and trained, say, in medicine, dietetics, and exercise for the well-being of our bodies, so we should look to those gifted and trained in music and the arts to tend our well-being in the aesthetic areas of life.

Those who are uniquely gifted in any field are to be willing to develop their gifts and to use them for the building up of the Body of Christ. Practically speaking, this means that some of us will be busy in evangelism and some in pastoral work, some working in economics and some in agriculture, some in commerce and some in the arts.¹⁸ The Christian community has long acknowledged the varying gifts of talent, at least in concept. In actuality, it can have more difficulty with some fields of endeavor than others. For example, some people have difficulty with the possibility or legitimacy of Christian activity in business or politics. Others have difficulties with science as dangerous or the arts as irrelevant or dangerous or both. We need to reaffirm that all areas are worthy fields of endeavor for Christians.

As we seek wisdom in our view of gifts and service, we can be instructed by examples in the Bible that illustrate both the giving of design and crafting skill in the arts and the calling of those into the service of the community. At the construction of the Tabernacle, Moses said to the Israelites, "See, the Lord has chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—to

make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic craftsmanship. And he has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others. He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as craftsmen, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers—all of them master craftsmen and designers. So Bezalel, Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the Lord has given skill and ability to know how to carry out all the work of constructing the sanctuary are to do the work just as the Lord has commanded" (Exodus 35:30-36:1).

In another passage God refers to skilled craftsmen thus: "Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so they may serve me as priests. Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron, to give him dignity and honor. Tell all the skilled men to whom I have given wisdom in such matters that they are to make garments for Aaron, for his consecration, so he may serve me as priest" (Ex. 2:1-3). And again in Ex. 26:1: "Make the tabernacle with ten curtains of finely twisted linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, with cherubim worked into them by a skilled craftsman."

Music too in the Old Testament had specific and demanding requirements and was under the direction of head musicians. The Tabernacle musicians, identified by name, "performed their duties according to the regulations laid down for them" (I Chronicles 6:31-46). Specific individuals, who are listed by name and of whom Asaph was chief, were to play lyres and harps. In addition, "Asaph was to sound the cymbals, and Benaiah and Jahaziel the priests were to blow the trumpets" (I Chronicles 16:3-6, 42).

These passages apply to worship. What about concert music, folk music, dance music? Because all of life is religious, in all its dimensions rooted in our relationship to God, God's servants today too must see that the gifts of creativity and skill given to artisans and musicians are to be recognized and put to use by the musicians and community alike in all areas of life where the arts come into play.

For the musicians themselves, the tasks can be summed up as three-fold. One task relates to the cultural mandate: to make music and make it well, imaginatively developing the created domain of sound, in obedient, humble, and joyful response to the mandate to develop God's good world. Musicians are to choose and to write music of quality and integrity and to perform it well. They may choose to do so within familiar musical styles. But also, secure in the knowledge that the world of sound is God's world and that he himself was not timid in the diversity of his creations, musicians are free to strike out boldly into new styles as well. Artists who are Christians can be and should be in the forefront of musical creativity and authenticity.

That task alone could well take all the musicians' time and energy. But there is another task, too, one necessitated by the fall: to identify, along with the layperson, the distortions and evils relative to music and to work both to counteract them and to promote the good.

In both these tasks musicians fulfill the third task: to serve the Body. As servants we are to make music not only in obedient and joyful response to God our Maker and Redeemer, but also in humble and loving service to our neighbor. We carry out our musical work in concern for our neighbor's well-being, because that is the way all God's gifts of talent and ability are to be used. For there is a splendid economy and a wonderful match: each person, created by God, has many aspects and many needs, including an aesthetic side and 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. Artists are servants among servants. As the dietician tends our nutritional needs and the physician our medical needs, so the musician tends our aesthetic needs.

Serving demands both a servant's attitude and quality of service. It is true that the sincerity of the server's heart is important. It is also true that the serving heart will seek quality workmanship. Sincerity of heart does not excuse poor compositional craftsmanship, grating tone quality, bad tuning, and unbalanced ensemble. As someone has said, "Holy shoddy is still shoddy." Yet, at the

same time, without sincerity of heart, our most perfect music is but a "sounding gong." Aesthetic excellence and true service are mutually inclusive. Serving as a 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 a musician means seeing to it that music does not fail our neighbor aesthetically. Serving as a musician means choosing to do that which builds our neighbor musically. Musicians do this by composing and performing music of high aesthetic quality, by choosing appropriate music for the many situations of life, and, in a

*There is not an inch of
audiotape or a minute of
performance that does not
fall under the lordship of
Jesus Christ.*

world that includes both musical mediocrity and trash as well as musical greatness, by helping others to build discernment about aesthetic quality.

Shalom

In all these endeavors in music we are working for a right understanding and a good practice of music, working in obedience to God's mandates, and working for shalom. Shalom is more than peace; it is wellness, wholeness, completeness, perfection, and security in every area of creation, in every area of personal, social, intellectual, and artistic life. Shalom is what we work toward now as we press God's claims over all of creation; it is what will be made perfect in the new earth, when the whole creation will be purified and made new.

Just what might shalom mean for music? We cannot now fully picture what such wholeness and perfection will be like in the new heaven and new earth. But we can imagine, and work toward now, a development of music attuned to the original mandate to develop God's good world of sound, a use and development of music free from the handicaps and confusions of sin. In a culture of shalom, music will be an integral part of the whole of life, neither reserved for moments of high

worship or high art concert life, nor regarded as optional or as frivolous entertainment. Music, never cheap or self-seeking or unthinkingly used, will be appropriate and of outstanding quality throughout this culture.

In a culture of shalom music will interact well with many other areas of life, and yet maintain its essential aesthetic integrity. In a culture of wholeness, music will be an integral part of and contributor to the health and well-being of every aspect of personal and collective life. In such a culture, by doing and being these things, music will truly be for the glory of God.¹⁹

And when shalom is made complete in the new heaven and new earth, what will music be like then? Isaiah foretells that “the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue will shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. And a highway will be there: it will be called the Way of Holiness” (Isaiah 35:5-8). Once again the earth will be perfect, unspoiled, harmonious. God and his people and his creation in perfect harmony! God's original creation perfectly restored! What earth-bound words can guess at the splendor of that City of God, what words hint at the glory of the music in that perfect place? Beyond our greatest present imagination, that we know. Yet we can now imagine that then each piece—simple song or intricate symphony—will have its own perfect integrity. Form will align perfectly with function. “All God's children will have a place in the choir”—and with such voices, the voices of resurrected bodies! Those same bodies, never subject to fatigue, will be capable of astounding feats of bowing and double-tonguing but will never do them just for show. And with nothing suspect, with jealousy eternally banished, and with every barrier to enjoyment gone, all musical efforts will be appreciated to the fullest. Will there still be diversity of talent? If so, no barriers will impede the full expression of that talent. Will there be diversity of style, in this city to which “the kings of the earth bring their cultures”? If so, there will be no shabbiness; all

the music will be perfectly well-shaped, balanced, and expressive. And all done to the glory of God and in joy by his people.

What a day that will be! This is the day, this coming time of shalom, to which our present lives must now point. “Our daily lives of service [now] aim for this moment” when “we will join in the new song to the Lamb without blemish, when everything will be made new, and every eye will see [and every ear will hear] that our world belongs to God!”²⁰ Amen! Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

Issues

As we Christians seek to bring all areas of life now under the lordship of Christ, we encounter questions either in our own minds or in the Christian culture at large. I hear these questions raised by students, by performers, by members of church music committees, by those deciding which radio stations to tune into and which CD's to purchase. Is there a Christian musical style? The currently prevalent term “Christian music” suggests that there is. What makes it so? May we listen to music by non-Christian performers or perform music by non-Christian composers? Can music lead people to believe (as is the hope with evangelistic music) or to sin (a common fear with rock and rap)? How shall we be guided to understand these concerns?

How shall we understand the term “Christian music”?

All the preceding discussion of this article, with its emphasis on the great realities of creation and Kingdom, factors into a Christian's comprehensive understanding of music. Unfortunately, the term “Christian music” is currently in common use in a different sense. A common attitude or hope is that there is or should be a distinctively “Christian” kind of music; in the same vein, a common concern or fear surrounds using music composed or performed/recorded by non-Christians.

It seems to me that these are exactly the points where an awareness of the creation and our place in it can lead to a proper understanding of music. Let us restate that all humans are given the ability to shape things out of the materials of Creation. Further, special gifts to be creative in certain areas

are not limited to those who acknowledge God. Just as he sends rain on the just and the unjust, God endows both Christians and non-Christians with skills to make beautiful and useful music. We cannot say that all music written or performed by believers will be aesthetically better than that by unbelievers; believing is not a pre-requisite for making aesthetically good music. The spiritual distinction between those who have faith in Christ and those who do not does not result in two inherently different kinds of music, Christian and non-Christian. Because both believers and unbelievers work with the materials given in creation, they will both work within the givens of the overtone series, the principles of acoustics, the resonances of various woods and strings, and other givens of creation. It follows, then, that we cannot say that certain instruments made of those materials are "Christian" and others "non-Christian." And although it may seem too obvious for some, let us also state that Christians won't use different notes or chords or resolve them differently than unbelievers do.

In addition, Christians composing music who are seeking to write aesthetically good music do not necessarily come up with a different style. At the present, "Christian music" is a term in common use, but it is more likely an industry term than a judgment about musical style. The term "Christian music" is usually applied to music with Christian lyrics in a popular style, a style that began in an effort to provide an alternative to the lyrics of popular music. "CCM [Christian Contemporary Music] came into being when artists and executives took the traditional themes found in church music (evangelism, worship, and ministry) and placed them in music with a contemporary sound. This model legitimized for the church the use of 'secular' popular styles, whether light rock or heavy metal."²¹ The CCM musical style itself is thus derived from commercial popular music; the music itself is not in a unique, specifically "Christian" style. This situation is true of any musical style: we do not achieve a uniquely Christian musical style simply by grafting Christian lyrics onto a style of any type. The presence of explicitly Christian lyrics says something about the lyrics; it does not necessarily say anything about the music.

Those who assume that "Christian music" exists only in the lyrics soon encounter a dilemma: how to understand music without explicitly Christian lyrics. Recently a new album by a well-known artist who is a Christian has drawn fresh attention to the dilemma. Describing the situation, William Romanowski writes in *Christianity Today* that although some praised this album, "a music buyer for religious stores countered, 'It's not a Christian album. A Christian album should be clear on the person of Christ, and these lyrics are not.' Trying to avoid confusion (or perhaps deflect criticism) concerning the album, a CCM notice alerted

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prerequisite to making
aesthetically good music.*

religious radio programmers: 'As far as the lyrical content is concerned, there's no evangelical bent, no mention of God. If the music you play has to have either of those two elements, you might not want to play it.'"(44) The discussion about this album is likely more a matter of marketing focus than of Christian aesthetics; but it also reveals a very limited understanding of music. What is especially troubling to me in this situation is the apparent equation that Christian music equals explicit Christian lyrics.

In addition, trying to make all music have an explicit evangelistic statement not only narrowly limits the understanding of the musician's task, but can also result in both gimmicky composition and a manipulative use of music.²² When we understand creation and our task in it aright, we can see that our task in music is much more wide-ranging and comprehensive. Our task does include composing and performing songs specifically about God and his works and our relationship to him, music for worship, music to express our penitence, music to celebrate redemption. Our task allows also for singing about a wide range of human experiences, human joys, societal sorrows. It allows for us to sing lullabies. It allows for Leslie Basset, a Christian composer, to write *Collect*, an anthem of penitence sung against a tape of the sounds of war. It allows for J. S. Bach, a Christian

composer, to write the *Peasant Cantata* about country life. And our task allows for writing and performing music without any words at all. Christians can dance to music that is simply for dancing—no need for any text at all. Christians may and should write and perform pieces without deliberate programmatic²³ intent such as piano sonatas, guitar solos, orchestral symphonies; these forms too care for and develop the creation.

May we use music written or performed by non-Christians?

What about using music written or performed by non-Christians? Again, unbelievers are gifted to compose and perform excellent music that does indeed nourish us and help us to grow aesthetically. We may use and enjoy such music, giving thanks to God for the gifts he poured out on these musicians. Because the handiwork is not the maker, we can enjoy the good music of a non-Christian while at the same time not accepting misdirection or unbelief or immorality in the life of that person (or in our own).

If, however, using this music is a stumbling block to any Christian, that person should not use it. Sometimes the associations with certain kinds of music (the life-styles of the musicians, the venue of the music, etc.) are such that it would be wise to distance ourselves from them. That is a matter of individual and/or collective judgment and wisdom. A few examples illustrate. During the 1930's in the United States the locale in which jazz was often played—brothels and speak-easies, often sponsored by the Mafia—considerably tainted the image of jazz. Decent people did not frequent those places; by implication, it was assumed that decent people did not listen to or play jazz and even that jazz was non-Christian. As the associations fell away, however, it became evident that the music of jazz itself—the actual notes and style of Dixieland, for instance—do not necessarily mean prostitution, drunkenness, or crime; jazz has come to be judged by musical, aesthetic standards. In the 1990's we need to make a similar distinction about rock and rap music, discriminating between the context in which rock is played and the musical value in the music itself. Whenever the Gospel comes to a new cultural area of the world, the dilemma is faced anew. New Christians might

want to disassociate themselves from an indigenous style of music that is associated with their former paganism. Then again, they might wish to use a style of music indigenuous to them but in a new and believing context. We need to discern whether the situation and also the solution are in the music itself or in the associations of music.

How do intentions fit in?

Then there is the matter of intentions. Whether with texted or non-texted music, intentions do count. We find them expressed in a variety of ways—the prayer of dedication before the choral concert, the stated intention of the CCM artist who “just wants to praise the Lord,” and the notations of J.S. Bach, who wrote at the start of each composition *Jesu, juva* (Jesus, help) and at the conclusion, *Soli Deo gloria* (to God alone be the glory). The attitude of the heart and the intention of the will are indeed critical. Without them, our finest music is in God's ears but a tinny gong and a clanking cymbal.

But how those intentions play out is also of critical importance in the content of the music—the “what” and the “where” and the “how” of the music. It figures in the content—in what happens between the *Jesu juste* and the *Soli Deo gloria*. It is important that the singer in church be sincere in his musical offering; it is also important he choose a well-crafted and appropriate piece and sing it in tune. It is important that the composer wish to honor God with her compositions; it is also important that she use good harmonic craftsmanship and write well-shaped lines.

Our intention to serve God will impact not only the content but also the venue of the music, not only what we do but also where we do it. And the playing out of that intention will have a wide and various scope. As we seek to care for our neighbor in music, we recognize that the Lordship of Christ over all makes every area of life an appropriate neighborhood for service. A musician need neither scorn local neighborhood service nor fear the professional “big time.” The intention to serve may lead a musician to seek service in the Boston Symphony Orchestra or in a small Dakota town, in a school or a concert stage or a film studio. All these areas—local, national, even international—are valid arenas of Christian service. The

neighbors we serve may be the audience in 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 are worthy of our musical care.

And the intention will have impact also on how we do it. We will seek in all matters musical to serve our neighbor, from the conduct in our rehearsals to the disciplined use of our practice time to the attitude of service in the selection of concert material thoughtfully chosen both to delight and to stretch the listeners.

Our intention to serve God encompasses all of these—the “what,” the “where,” and the “how,” which are all part of our spiritual service. “Human life in all its aspects is a thoroughly spiritual affair,” writes Albert Wolters.²⁴ In professional as well as in private life, in cultural enterprises as well as in moral behavior, and in the content and conduct of all of them, we are to seek spiritual wisdom and understanding—to develop spiritual discernment!—and claim God’s promise to guide us.

How does music carry “meaning”?

A complicating factor in evaluating the music, in contrast to evaluating the texts, is that music does not carry meaning in the same way and with the same clarity that other arts do or that anything with text does. (I have been writing here of music as music; any text or lyrics associated with the music of course affects the meaning.) First of all, the meaning of music is primarily musical, not conceptual; a melody or a chord progression is not capable of carrying a specific conceptual meaning as can a poem or story or even more, an essay. Going to creation is again instructive. We can learn from God’s handiwork, from the trees and mountains, petunias and polar bears, that there is a God, that he is someone of power and imagination, and that he is to be acknowledged and worshipped. But we cannot learn from creation about God in his entirety, cannot learn his plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. To learn those things we must go to his Word, to the Scriptures and to Jesus Christ Incarnate. Similarly, a piece of music is the handiwork of some person; the piece of music can tell us of the existence of a composer or performer and

something of his style and skill, but it may not convey his worldview; for that we must talk with the person or read his specific statements. Often, rather than formulating a judgment from a single piece or two, we must patiently review a broad segment of musicians’ work, spread over years or even a lifetime, to formulate a reliable judgment about their intentions and worldview. Of course, a musician’s own statements about his work help to clarify his intentions and views; they should be both sought and encouraged.

As we consider how music carries meaning, we need to recognize that music also carries meaning

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by association. Some of the “sacred” and “secular” meanings attributed to music are not inherent in the music but accrue to it by association. We associate “Christian values” with a given tune because we sing it with Christian words or hear it in church; we associate “secular values” with a given tune because we hear it on a concert stage or in a pub. We associate “pagan values” with given musical materials because the culture out of which they come was originally pagan. Music easily picks up meaning from its context. It is important, therefore, to distinguish intentional meaning in music from meaning by association.

While we acknowledge that music is not clear about conceptual meanings, and also picks up meaning by association, we need also to state that well-crafted music does show a correlation between the materials and shape of the music and the use and purpose of the music or the text, if there is one. In addition, musicians are informed by their own worldview, but also influenced by the spirits of their time. The correlations and influences may be dramatic and obvious, but they also may be subtle or obscure. Discovering the correlations and distinguishing the influences are important tasks in which we should seek to develop discernment. Such discernment, however,

is not gained quickly or through a surface assessment, but is developed through careful and thoughtful study of cultural and musical history and of musical structure.²⁵

Can music make us sin or believe?

Music can be powerfully moving. Its intricate connection with emotions is a topic for another paper than this one. However, we can discuss briefly here the limits of music's power. Because music is emotionally moving, some fear that it will influence us to evil. Parents fear that rock and rap will lead their children into immoral behavior and rebellious attitudes. Others hope that by using it, they can influence others to certain actions or beliefs. Advertisers believe or at least hope that the tunes in commercials will be influential in selling their product. Some evangelists believe or at least hope that the right music will put people in a "mood" for worship and help them come to Christ. Can it actually do so?

First, let us be clear that we are each responsible for our own behavior. We cannot blame our sins on the music! At the same time, we acknowledge that music can influence people and that we must be discerning about what we choose to listen to or perform. If listening to certain songs encourages our vulnerability to think greedy or lascivious thoughts, responsible action on our part includes putting those songs out of earshot, even if another person can listen to them without danger. Even though music does not have the inherent power to shape our choices, we are individually responsible for the music we choose to listen to and also for that which we choose to present to other listeners.

Similarly, music does not have the power to "make" us believe. Only the Holy Spirit has that power! Planners of music for worship and evangelistic events should take heed of the limits of music. Selecting music to express the service and move the listener is one thing; seeking music in hope of manipulating the hearer is quite another.

How do we evaluate music?

Where do the standards come from?

If the main criterion for music is not whether it can be classified as "Christian" or not, what are the standards for evaluation? Is music to be evaluated by the internal quality of the music itself or by the

direction of the musicians' hearts or both? Of what does good quality in the music itself consist?²⁶ 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 makes a good melody 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 we find no inherent music that could serve as model.²⁷ We could infer some general principles about variety and about the union of form and function. Some people, in fact, have worked at finding aesthetic principles in the natural world but find it easier to do so in terms of the visual arts. To my mind, they have not yet found specific musical guidelines.

From what, then, do we derive our guidelines for actual musical composition and performance? The norms for composition come from the art of music itself.²⁸ 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 music, be it high art music, folk, or popular. Then let us consider standards for our attitude toward and use of music.

Technique or craftsmanship: To evaluate music, we consider technique. In performance, good technique means getting all the notes right and playing them in tune, with reliable rhythm, and with good articulation. Good technique includes appropriate and lovely tone quality and requires an understanding of style. As we become more advanced, technique becomes more multi-layered.

It calls for scholarly insight, so that we play not only on a good instrument, but also on an instrument appropriate to the style or historical period of the music; not only with a balanced orchestra, but with a historically appropriate size of orchestra; not only in tune, but also according to the tuning system of that style or that time.

In composition, technique is better called craftsmanship. Good craftsmanship includes consistency in the handling of the musical materials (the themes, harmonies, rhythms). Craftsmanship includes observing the specific compositional practices associated with the style chosen. For example, in certain classical Western styles, composers avoid parallel fifths, particular note doublings, and bumpy chord connections. In jazz, composers handle scales in particular ways. 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: the instruments themselves are in tune, the performance space—hall, church, room—is acoustically alive and balanced, the sound system, if used, is working, of good quality and monitored carefully, and the recording technology and equipment are of fine quality.

Expressiveness: To evaluate music, we also consider expressiveness. Excellence is not only getting all the correct notes. We have all heard flawless performances that are wooden and have sensed that something essential to music was missing; what is needed is expressiveness. Excellence is not merely technical perfection. In fact, in these modern times we should beware of buying into a false understanding of perfection from the recording industry, which by means of the technique called “patching” can splice corrections into recorded tape, thus achieving a flawlessness rarely possible in live music-making. In fact, while a certain amount of proficiency is foundational to expressiveness, technique does not have to be flawless before expressiveness can begin.

What is expressiveness? 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 move a yearning note upward, how far to flat a blue note. It is knowing, after getting all the rhythms metronomically correct, when to stretch a note, and how much, and why. It is knowing how to shape a melody. It is not only accurate but also sensitive timing. It is that moment in a recent rehearsal of the orchestra I play in, a rehearsal when we were all preoccupied with not getting lost in the first read-through of a challenging new piece, when a trumpet player shaped a soft solo with such lovely delicacy that we all sensed a unique and essential quality in the passage.

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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. William Edgar calls it “metaphor,” signifying a way of experiencing time and space.²⁹

Though difficult to define, expressiveness 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 skaters to stay 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, expressing our joy, loneliness, or grief, or may effectively serve 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 fine poem or a speech instead.

Because expressiveness is difficult to capture in words, 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 familiar and new music learn to discern it only under the tutelage of those with an ear to hear. 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 teacher 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, an article such as this cannot articulate much further what creates aesthetic expressiveness. However, all of us are encouraged and challenged to embark on the journey of learning, starting wherever we are, and moving

to understand, discern, and appreciate musical quality ever more deeply.

Technical excellence and musical expressiveness are criteria that exist for music in all styles and at all levels. Of course, what can be achieved by a mature professional is at a different level than that of a student. Our conception of excellence thus includes a sense both of the best possible and of a point of development, both destination and 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.

Given these criteria of technical and expressive excellence, we can ask if only certain styles qualify as excellent. The exploration and development of sound has resulted in a multiplicity of musical styles, a diversity that is legitimate and rich. But are some of these styles capable of greater aesthetic richness? The concept of relative excellence applies here: 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 it seem to be a musically modest genre only until the masters Haydn and Mozart set their hands to it?

Integrity of musical materials, shape, and function: A third main area of evaluation is in the matching of the music with its intended use or purpose. As indicated earlier, music functions in life in a multitude of ways. 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.³⁰ Music is used for personal things too. Whether or not some "purists" approve, music is used for relaxation. It is used to

make work more pleasant and more efficient. It plays a role in entertainment and amusement. And it is used simply for listening.

These correlations 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. Music can enhance the efficiency and pleasure of work; it even helps to coordinate the motions of those needing to work together in rhythm, as a heritage of sea chanties, railroad songs, and other work songs attests. Its expressiveness partners well with whatever carries emotion, be it funerals or celebrations.

In evaluating music, we must consider how well the music matches 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 it, but with it?

If the music is for pure listening, the technique and expressiveness, both in composition and performance, are the principal components. If, however, the music is for an activity or function, it is not only technique and expressiveness, but also how well it fits the situation that counts.³¹

We need it all. For if we focus only on the function and forget about technical and expressive quality, music becomes only a tool. It is inadequate to claim that as long as the music is functional, it is good, 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. To be good, music should serve its purpose well and at the same time exhibit high musical quality, both technical and expressive.³³ When we say

music is bad, it may be that it is poorly crafted or expressively barren or unsuited to its use, or all of these.

It is important to note that in this discussion of evaluating the music itself, we have not used any terminology about “Christian music,” but rather discussed the hallmarks of quality. Richard Wright asserts, “The Creation brings glory to God; its goodness speaks of his goodness, its beauty of his beauty.” Our work too, our music, brings glory to God by being good—that is, well-crafted, richly expressive, integrated, with form related to function, and authentic.

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Much has already been said in these pages about our attitude and use of music. We must assess not only the objective quality of our handiwork, our music, but also the direction and attitude of our hearts. Those who compose or perform offer up their music to God as worship, in any and all occasions, in concert performance as well as in communal worship services. Those who listen also offer the music they hear up to God as their own offering. And we do this not only in Christian worship services, but in all occasions. In communal worship the people in the pew say the “amen” in their hearts to the music of the organ or choir. In non-liturgical situations, too, such as concerts, the listener can acknowledge and give thanks for the gifts of the Giver as revealed in the skills of the performer and of the composed music. We are to make, use, and enjoy music in the humble consciousness and gratitude that we are God’s creatures. We are to make, use, and enjoy music as delighted stewards in a world we acknowledge to be his. We make music to build the Body, as part of neighbor-keeping, to nurture ourselves and others. Doing this is our reasonable service; doing this brings glory to God.

END NOTES

1. William Edgar, *Taking Note of Music* (London: SPCK, 1986) 24, 29.
2. In this paper, the term "music" includes all music—not only "art" or "high art" but also folk music, popular music, what is now called "world music," etc. See Edgar (45-47) on music as art and as high art.
3. Calvin Seerveld, in *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (Toronto: Tuppence Press, 1980), expresses this thought strongly: "Aesthetic obedience is required of everyone by the Lord," and "People need to find the way of the Lord for the aesthetic dimensions of their daily lives."
4. Richard T. Wright, in *Biology Through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), writes, "God has given us the responsibility of developing a culture, of learning to use the creation responsibly to form a human society that will express all of the good potential that exists in both the human mind and in the creation" (47). "These tasks—subduing, having dominion, cultivating—all point to the development of a culture. And since all of this is God's clear intention for humankind, the term cultural mandate has been used to describe this most basic of human responsibilities before God. We have a mandate from God to be the cultivators of the good things of his creation. This mandate means that God has intended for humankind to interact with his creation in such a way that we would develop a culture. In doing so, we use the created elements and so demonstrate clearly our dominion" (169). See also Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984) and Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).
5. Edgar defines music as "human, cultural activity, ordered by the covenant, in the aspect of sound" (45).
6. "God speaks one Word. A thousand cultures respond. 'In the beginning was the word' Ever since, people have been responding to that Word through the art, music, and traditions of their cultures. Some cultures respond with primness, neatness, and order; some with exuberance, joy, and passion. Some respond more intellectually; others more emotionally. Some with prayer and fasting; others with hospitality and song. Out of that variety of responses, God creates a beautiful mosaic of color and motion, a unity out of diversity. Enjoy that mosaic; celebrate the color and motion; praise God for both the unity and the diversity." Synodical Committee on Race Relations advertisement, *The Banner* (July 1, 1991) 29.
7. Wright expresses it thus: "The very culture that we develop will also show the impact of the Fall; two forms of its expression will appear, reflecting the two kingdoms that are now at war—God's kingdom and Satan's. The entire range of human activities becomes a battleground, for there is nothing in the creation or culture that remains unaffected by sin" (171).
8. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 43.
9. "We abuse the creation or idolize it." *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1989) par. 16.
10. Edgar, 68.
11. Michael Williams, "A Restorational Alternative to Augustinian Verticalist Eschatology," *Pro Rege* XX: 4 (June 1992) 19.
12. Again see Edgar, ch. 2. "Genesis 4 speaks against divinizing art, but it also speaks against secularizing it. Although the Fall has troubled man's pursuit of the original mandate of Genesis 1:28, it has not interrupted it, contrary to our first impressions" (33-34).
13. It is significant that one of God's covenants, the one after the flood, was with the animals as well as with Noah: "Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: 'I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock, and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood'" (Genesis 9:8-11).
14. C.f. I Cor. 10:23-11:1; II Cor. 10:3-6.
15. Wright explains, "Our stewardly task is therefore extended beyond basic management and wise use; it now involves an opportunity to participate in this redemption by bringing healing to the creation and the restoration of goodness to the culture" (176).
16. For a wise and thoughtful discussion of service, see Ch. 5 of Edgar's *Taking Note of Music*.
17. Seerveld, 61.
18. Edgar expands: "In the biblical view, everyone can sing, but not everyone belongs to the family of musicians. Everyone is called to participate in the enjoyment of music, but not everyone is qualified to be called a musician. This is not a kind of elitist privilege, but a genuine vocation, to be accomplished with skill and hard work" (36). Thus, he says, Jubal, who made musical instruments, is the father of musicians; all could make music by singing. "So calling attention to the instruments focuses on the specific art of music to be developed by those who belong to that family, in the same way that having cattle [Gen. 4:20] focuses on those who belong to the family of herdsmen. All are not qualified in the same way. Adam probably could sing ([Gen.] 2:23 is likely to be a song), but is not the father of every skill" (36). Also, "Music, then, is a divine calling. Not in some mystical, individualistic way, but because of the structure of the cultural mandate" (36).
"Music, insofar as it belongs to human, cultural activity, is a divine calling. Even fallen Adam could not escape his obligations as a culture-builder. Despite the pain of labour after the Fall ([Gen.] 3:17-19), despite the rebellious orientation of much cultural activity ([Gen.] 4:22-4), by God's grace, we are still called to build culture, to enjoy it, to exercise the functions outlined in the original mandate. Jubal's double apologetic is clear: music is human activity, but it is also a divine calling" (37).
Further, man has a "royal office, exercising dominion over God's world in the name of God and to his glory. In fact, man is a kind of royal priest, who stands before God and brings all the fruits of his dominion to him as an adoration-offering. Culture receives its full meaning within this context" (41). There is a social dimension to culture-building

(thus a familial and communal aspect to cultural activities) and a geographic dimension: "human beings were to multiply and replenish the earth. Even after the Fall this has been realized. A provision was made from the beginning for the tremendous, bewildering diversity of cultural expression" (41).

19. "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*, par. 10.
20. *Our World Belongs to God*, par. 57 and 58.
21. William Romanowski, "Where's the Gospel?" *Christianity Today* 41:14 (December 8, 1997) 44.
22. "Music and the Witnessing Church," Ch. 10 of Harold Best's *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), presents helpful hints into "witness music."
23. "Programmatic" here refers to the musical meaning, not of being on a concert program, but of having "a program" or intentional non-music reference, i.e., a related story or non-musical depiction. Non-programmatic music is also called non-referential music or abstract music.
24. Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 31; see 24-25 for a thorough discussion of spiritual discernment.
25. See Edgar (75-78) regarding worldview and music.
26. Harold Best's *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* further addresses issues of quality in music. See also "On Musical Excellence" by Karen DeMol (*Pro Rege* XX: 4, June 1992) for a more elaborate presentation of the material in this section.
27. There are bird songs, of course; but although they are a sort of incipient music, I have not yet found an generally-accepted aesthetic of human music based on them, the work of Oliver Messiaen notwithstanding.
28. In *Rainbows for the 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 honoring 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 artifacts 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" (13-14).

29. Calvin Seerveld, 105; see also Edgar, third chapter.
30. 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).
31. We note briefly here the question of whether music for a function is inferior or superior to music purely for listening. Some would label art for art's sake elitist or irrelevant, while others consider functional music pedestrian. The dilemma is a false one, however, and can be set aside by what we learn from God's creation, where intrinsic worth and function are integrated. An instructive verse is Genesis 2:9, where it is said that the trees God made were "pleasing to the eye and good for food." "Everything that God creates has intrinsic worth and everything has worth functions. And He calls this total integration good; beauty, worth, usefulness, and function are united at every turn" (Best, Ch. 3). We thus conclude that music for listening is not necessarily "better" than music that accompanies a dance or a worship service.
32. 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).

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