

Good Music

by Bob Jennings | hwymchapel.org | illbehonest.com

Music is big in our world, both sacred and secular. It is big in importance; it is big in industry. We have a very musical world.

Music is a marvel often taken for granted. Cows can't make music. Frogs and birds come closer. But man is musical.

Angels are musical, as it is written,

- Job 38:7 *The morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy.*

In Duncan Campbell's account of the 1949 Hebrides Revival in the north of Scotland, there were two angelic visitations – singing. And the devil, the top angel, is musical, as it is written,

- Isa 14:11 NAS *Your pomp and the music of your harps have been brought down to Sheol, and,*
- Eze 28:13 KJV, *Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God ... the workmanship of thy tamborines and of thy pipes was prepared in thee in the day that thou wast created.*

The Lord Jesus is musical, as it is written,

- Heb 2:12 *in the midst of the congregation I will sing Your praise, and*
- Mat 26:30 *After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

God Himself is musical, as it is written,

- Zep 3:17 *He will joy over you with singing.*

He is the origin of music. There would be no music if not for the Creator. It is a marvelous gift.

But not all music is good. We should not be surprised, for, if angels can inspire doctrines (1Tim 4:1), surely they can inspire music. The devil takes what is good from God, and corrupts it. So, what makes good music?

I - Words are a very important element in good music

Words are important in God's economy. One of the names of the Son of God is "the Word." God has given us a book filled with words. God has chosen preaching, and what is it but words?

Understandability

If musicians could only understand that their words must be understood. It is rare to hear a soloist that can be understood. Most music on the radio, whether secular or sacred, cannot be easily understood. I've been to concerts where I could not understand 90% of the singing or preaching. It is barbarianism, as it is written,

- 1Cor 14:11 *If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be to the one who speaks a **barbarian**, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me.*

The point of music is not that you have music and you want to adorn it with words, but rather that you have a message and want to adorn it with music. If the musician can't get his message across by turning the music down or voice up, then how will the church be edified? How will another say "amen", as it is written,

- 1Cor 14:16 ... *how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the "Amen" at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying?*

Blurriness in speech is likely a mark of the spiritual condition of the nation. Mushy theology produces mushy speech, and much of our music is slurry, wimpy, and whiny rather than bright, cheerful, bold, and straight-forward. But it is not humble to mumble. Rather clarity is a service to the listener.

Content

The content of the words makes for good music. Often Christian music is experience-centered, man-centered, and self-centered – 'give me, give me'. The content is inferior, lacking sublimity, magnificence, glory, weight, beauty, skill, and theology. The word of Christ is not "rich" in many songs, as it is written,

- Col 3:16 *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly ... singing.*

What makes good music? Words. Words that are understandable, and words that are rich in truth.

II – The music itself, the tune can make for good music

Is there such a thing as a good tune? That is, apart from the words, apart from the listener's connotative associations and memories, apart from the musician's spiritual state, can a given tune be good or bad?

First, let's forget the good or bad aspect and try to demonstrate that music can communicate, that is, it can give off a message. The Lord Jesus teaches this in

- Mat 11:17 *We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.*

A given tune was expected to produce a certain effect.

There are three elements that determine the quality of a piece of music – the notes, the rhythm, and the volume.

Notes

Granted individual notes are neutral. Like bullets, notes are neutral in themselves; it is only a matter of what is done with them. Or, like letters of the alphabet, they are neutral; it is only a matter of how they are put together. Play the chord CEG on the piano. Now move one finger and play CEF. It is quite a different effect, a different mood. The first is resolution and rest. The second is tension. The first is pleasant and the second is discord. You don't need to know a thing about music to feel that. There is an inherent message in the sound. An ambulance siren does not need an interpreter. When watching a movie, it is easy to tell by the music that danger is approaching before ever it is seen on the screen. The point? Music by itself communicates by way of the notation.

Rhythm

The beat, that is, how long notes are played makes music speak. Take two hymns, *Leaning on the Everlasting Arms*, and, *My Faith Has Found a Resting Place*. They are similar in content, but due to the different rhythms, one is lively, and even lends itself to clapping, whereas the second calls for resignation. The composer uses staccato for a reason. Even accent in our speech gives out a message. One might say, "I can tell by the way you said that, you are angry." Tribal musicians work warriors into a murderous frenzy with drums alone. The drums of a marching band can make the hair stand up on the back of your head with a sense of foreboding power and aggression. Someone observed, beat is needed, but, like heart beat, too much means trouble.

Volume

How loudly notes are played makes music speak. Composers put crescendos in there for a reason. Seventy-six blaring trombones give off quite a different effect than just one playing the same thing softly. Contrast the delicacy of an instrumental quartet with the swelling tide of a philharmonic orchestra or the scream of a rock band. Musicians know volume communicates and they use that plaintive softness or threatening loudness.

A Powerful Medium

Musicians know music is a powerful medium and intend to communicate by music. You would insult a musician if you told him after the concert that his music did not move you. Dr. Max Schoen in his *Psychology of Music* says, "Music is the most powerful stimulus known among the perceptive senses." Saxophonist Clarence Clemons summed up his new instrumental CD, *Peacemaker*, this way, "I said what I wanted to say." Instrumental! The high school pep band expects (obvious by the name) to give off a different message than the chamber band at baccaulaureate. The US military used music to drive Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega out of his stronghold. Advertising companies spend big money researching the effects of music. A tune can make words stick in the mind for days. What was so great about the Beatles' *I Wanna Hold Your Hand*? It was not the words. Texas barrelhouse piano player Robert Shaw boasted he could throw his hands on the keyboard and make the audience move the way he wanted. In 1913 Igor Stravinsky produced a classical instrumental, *The Rite of Spring*, specifically to create chaos. At the first concert a mass riot occurred and the theater seats were torn up. My wife and I both witnessed our oldest two children each at age two go into the appropriate dance when a piece of music came on the radio. They could not have learned the dance; moreover they had never seen it.

Jimi Hendrix said, "Atmospheres are going to come through music, because music is a spiritual thing of its own." He boasted he could hypnotize people with music. Another rock star says, "Don't listen to the words; it's the music that has its own message ... I've been stoned on the music many times." The preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "We can become drunk on music. There's no question about that. It can create emotional state in which the mind no longer functions as it should be and no longer discriminates. I have known people to sing themselves into a state of intoxication without realizing what they were doing." The medical, psychological and other evidence for the non-neutrality of music is so overwhelming, that it is amazing that anyone would seriously say otherwise. Music is never neutral. Words say more, but in varying degrees it will speak.

If music then does give off a message, it easily follows that a given piece of music can be good or bad.

That is, music can indeed communicate a message that fits Christianity or does not. It can minister an attitude, stir a mood, create an atmosphere, and make an effect that will express a worldview – either Christian or not. Just as words can rightly or wrongly represent Christianity, so also does music.

Underlying Principles for Discerning

How can we judge music? Here are some Biblical guidelines, some underlying principles that can be applied.

Is the music proper; is it fitting? Certain things are fitting among the saints. Some things are appropriate; some are not.

- Eph 5:3 *as is proper (fitting) among saints.*
- Php 1:27 *conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.*

Just as a suit and tie is not fitting for digging ditches, so we should analyze what conduct is fitting for saints (holy ones). Does this piece of music fit a Christian worldview? One Christian artist says, “Here’s a sound your parents will hate.”

Is the music peaceful and restful?

- 1Cor 14:33 *For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace.*

Lively music is fine, but screaming, harsh, driving, pounding music is another thing. Dave Roberts, a columnist for the CCM magazine *Buzz* says, “Heavy rock is body music designed to by-pass the brain and with unrelenting brutality induce a frenzied state among the audience.”

Is the music humble?

- Mat 11:28 *I am meek and lowly of heart.*

Does the music minister submission to the King of kings or does it speak aggression and rebellion? Does it call for surrender to the Majesty on high or is it pushy, daring, and lawless? Does it make you feel like a tough-guy? It is unseemly to have a singer snarl out a commitment to Christ.

Is the music melodious?

- Eph 5:18 *singing and making melody in your hearts.*

Is the music melodious, bright, cheerful, hopeful, and bold, or is it wimpy, whiny, slurry, and lacking resolution after tension? David made sweet music (2Sam 23:1). The music of heaven is sweet, like harps (Rev 14:2). The harsh, strident, distorted, nasty music does not fit Christianity. Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones says, “It’s a noise we make. That’s all. You could be kind and call it music.”

Is music ordered?

- 1Cor 14:40 *all things be done decently and in order.*

Is the music ordered or is it chaotic? Some is so unordered that it does not make for congregational singing. It does not fit among the saints.

Is the music sensual or is it spiritual?

- James 3:15 *this wisdom descends not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.*

Does the music tempt me to move my body in sensual way or does it remind me I am not a debtor to the flesh, to live after the flesh (Rom 8:12)?

Is there such a thing as a sensual song? We could cite many men of God who would affirm it, but maybe they are biased, old-fashioned, and narrow-minded. If we won’t receive the counsel of godly, then listen to the ungodly. What do the rock stars themselves say?

- Sex and Rock go together like wheels on a car.
- Rock music is sex and you have to hit teens in the face with it.
- The purpose of rhythm is to get into an orgiastic state of losing yourself.

And their bold testimonies continue ...

- Rock has always been the devil's music and you can't convince me that it isn't.
- Rock and Roll doesn't glorify God. I was one of the pioneers of that music, one of the builders. I know what the blocks are made of because I built them.
- Rock is the perfect primal method of releasing our violent instincts. He calls his music Combat Rock and speaks of raping his audience.
- We communicate aggression and frustration to an audience, musically and visually.
- Rock and Roll brings out violent emotions.
- I am sorry that I was involved in the beginnings of Rock and Roll. It has helped to destroy untold millions of young people the world over.
- If I told you what our music is really about, we'd probably all get arrested.
- When performing I don't know who I am. If someone walked on the stage I'd probably kill. We wanted to blow their minds with our music.

III – The Musicians Themselves Should be Considered

Ironically and admittedly good people can make bad music and conversely, bad people can make good music. But God is nevertheless concerned about who is carrying the ark (2Sam 6:3f). He does not need a demonized girl to preach even if she is preaching truth (Acts 16:16).

The Bible is replete with warnings against false leaders, hypocrites: Mat 7, Acts 20, Rom 16, Gal 1, Eph 4, Php 3, 2Cor 11, 1Tim 4, 2Tim 3, 2Pet 2, 1Jn 4, and Jude. False leaders are *many*, as it is written,

- 2Cor 2:17 *For we are not like **many**, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.*

We are to beware of evil workers (Php 3:2). We don't want to endorse an unregenerate piper, pastor, music leader, or piano player.

False ministers are *peddlers* of the word.

- 2Cor 2:17 *For we are not like **many**, **peddling** the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.*

They are merchandisers, concert-hopping, money-loving, fame-promoting, compromising entertainers. It is a modern manifestation of the sins of Jeroboam (1Kg 12:30, 14:16) – do anything to get the people. They are crowd manipulators, skilled at working the crowd up into a high – high places that should be torn down.

- 2Chr 15:17 *the **high places** were not taken away.*

The world does it better. Let them do it. Was the past not enough for us?

They are not *sincere*, but are show-offs.

- 2Cor 2:17 *For we are not like **many**, peddling the word of God, but as from **sincerity**, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.*

They are not worship leaders but performers, pretending some sensual ecstasy with their eyes closed, breathing out their breathy lyrics with the mic at their mouth. Are they servants or stars?

Are they gathering followers for Christ or fans for themselves? As someone observed, they are not saying, "Behold the Lamb", but they are saying, "Behold me saying, 'Behold the Lamb.'" Some admit they intend to entertain. Some get the girls to scream at them. It is a fair show in the flesh. It is strange fire (Lev 10:1). And there is this continual attempt to say it 'cool', to be a 'character', to be cute, clever, and even goofy. But buffoonery and cleverness nullify the cross, as it is written,

- 1Cor 1:17 *For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, **not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.***

One band, speaking of the resurrection of Christ, says, "You can't keep a good man down." It is cheap blasphemy. What happened to simple sobriety and sincerity? How different these men are from the gravity characterizing men of God. How different from the fearful atmosphere of the great revivals when God was present in a manifest way? How different from Paul the apostle, as it is written,

- 1Cor 2:3 *And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.*
- Acts 20:31 *Therefore watch, and remember that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.*

Paul's ministry was *in the sight of God.*

- 2Cor 2:17 *For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the **sight of God.***

He was God-centered, God-fearing. They are afraid to be different from the world and are ashamed of Christ. One Christian artist mentions the name of the Lord Jesus once in nine songs. Some musicians are so vague that it is not possible to distinguish if they are singing about some lover or about Christ. No wonder they are sponsored by beer companies.

Now, it must be admitted that there are gray areas in music. It is an art, not a hard science like math, though God has more math in it than most realize. Each song must be analyzed. And, as we go on in the Christian walk, our tastes and choices are purified. We grow. This is the way of grace. There is much to learn.

- Psa 119:7 *I will give thanks to You with uprightness of heart **when I learn Your righteous judgments.***
- Php 1:9, 10 *And this I pray, that your love may abound still **more and more in real knowledge and all discernment**, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ.*

Again, behold the power of good music. When Paul and Silas sang, the earth shook and the jail rattled (Acts 16). When Jehoshaphat went out to battle, he put the singers in front of the army and God set up ambushments (2Chr 20:22). David's harp drove off evil spirits (1Sam 16:23). When Elisha called for the minstrel, it invoked the hand of God and a spirit of prophecy (2Kg 3:15). Good music pleases God, as it is written,

- Psa 69:30 *I will praise the name of God with a song ... it shall **please the Lord better than an ox or bullock that has horns and hoofs.***