



MUSIC
in the BIBLE
music on the RADIO
and music from the
CHURCH

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC
AND CHRISTIANITY

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INTRODUCTION

“The only Christian thing for you, young person, is total abstinence from rock music stations and the destruction of every hard rock record you own.” (Bob Larson, 1969)

One of my friends followed the advice of record-burning, actually CD-cracking, to be precise. My young converted friend was urged by a very zealous buddy, “If you truly want to follow the Lord, get rid of any CD that does not explicitly praise Jesus.” After cracking several hundred CDs of classical and pop music, imagine my friend’s surprise upon finding that his zealous buddy couldn’t bear to part with a Def Leopard CD. “O Thou, Hypocrite!”

As a new Christian and a college musician, I was confronted by a sincere brother who told me that music with a “beat” appeals to the flesh. He went on to make clear his conviction that all forms of contemporary pop music, regardless of the truth of the lyrics, are of the devil. While teaching guitar at a Bible college for three years, as you might imagine, I had some further opportunity to discuss the matter. And then after my seminary training, I served a church in which there were several prominent families who vehemently held the same contra-contemporary music view. I recall vividly one individual, rather outspoken over this and other issues, put me on the hot seat before the leadership of the church. Over time, I had ample opportunity and motivation to research, write, and discuss these issues with folks from all sides.

I had been a worship leader and college guitar instructor for over six years when a dear brother handed me, *Music in the Balance*. This gave me an opportunity to collate all that I had written and discussed on the matter into a *contra* contra-contemporary music paper. I worked through, for example, the Institute in Basic Life Principles (i.e., Bill Gothard) seminars, booklets and tapes. Mr. Gothard’s life-challenging seminars and publications raise important concerns about contemporary Christian music and popular music styles accepted in contemporary Christian music. Another book with which I interacted was, *Pop Goes the Gospel*, by John Blanchard, one of the first criticisms I read in the mid-1980s. Rev. Blanchard is a Reformed Baptist evangelist who has written many excellent books. His book on music discusses many of these same issues and is written in a most persuasive style. As it turns out, I have corresponded with or personally spoken with each of these authors, as well as many other pro and con authors not cited in the book.

While I had written a few unpublished papers and letters over the years,



this monograph is the expansion and revision of a paper delivered at the 50th annual meeting of Evangelical Theological Society in Orlando, 1998. I was surprised by the turn-out and response from the original paper. I have had quite a few dialogues on it since then as a version has been available online since 1999. After further revision I presented it for a Master of Theology course (2003) at Westminster Theological Seminary with Apologetics Professor, Bill Edgar.

As an analysis of music style and related matters as it relates to the Christian faith, this work aims at a theological analysis of the Biblical information on music. I try to summarize a mini-theology of music as the foundation for other questions. Then from Biblical considerations, I address the contemporary music style issue, which is often at the root of other questions relevant to evangelical worship, ministry programs, youth ministry, missiology, and cultural impact. I try to make my case informed with an exegetical and Biblical theology of music, as well as familiarity with the issues surrounding ethnomusicology. My effort is to take the best and most representative publications (contra-contemporary popular music) and illuminate some of the key problems related to criticizing music styles. As a conclusion, I try to provide some reflection on the larger issues of the relationship between Christ and culture and a Christian aesthetics. Since the original, I have added some examples of how the music on the radio arises from the Church.

To accomplish this, I have divided the work into three sections: (1) a study of Bible-times music, (2) a dialogue with critiques of contemporary music styles, and (3) some cultural analysis on aesthetic standard, music, culture, and Christians, concluding with some pastoral directives to young Christian musicians.

Augustine used the biblical idea of “plundering the Egyptians” (Ex. 3:22) to argue that we are free to use what is good and true from all sources, including pagans. I have had occasion to rethink this idea. Many do not wish to plunder the Egyptian’s music style. They hold that, after all, it is Pharaoh’s beat or King Tut’s groove, and inherently the devil’s music. Others say, “*Why should the devil have all the good music?*”¹ It seems, one way or the other, the devil has the music! Either, he has it and we should “plunder” it or he has it because it is his (contra-contemporary music proponents). Perhaps the question we must wrestle with is whether the devil should *keep* that music.

BIBLE-TIMES MUSIC

A Brief Biblical Theology of Music

The Scriptures recognizes music as a means for many things: praise (Acts 16:25; Rom. 15:9 [note the original reference in the Psalm]), a means of expressing joy (James 5:13), thanksgiving (Ps. 92:1–3), sorrow for sin (Is. 16:10), a means of prayer (1 Cor. 14:15; Ps. 72:20), and a means of teaching and spiritual communication (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19). Biblical music-makers are professional (1 Chr. 15:22; 25:7; Is. 5:11–12; Ez. 33:32), as well as nonprofessional (Ps. 100; Eph. 5:19). There are those who direct music (Ps. 4:1, 5:1, 6:1, etc.; Neh. 12:8) and teach music (1 Chr. 15:22).²

A study of the Psalms alone yield an impressive role for music in the life of Biblical people. The extolling of Yahweh through music is spoken of as congregational (149:1), individual (42:8) and for every situation (74:21). Music is used to praise God joyfully (100:1), loudly (47:1), melodically (98:5), and with a variety of instruments (150:3–5), from chordophones (lyres, harps, kin-nors), to membranophones (timbrels), to aerophones (flutes, shofars, pipes), to metalophones (cymbals). Such praise is associated with bodily movement and common expressions of joy and gladness, such as dancing (30:11, 149:3, 150:4) and the lifting of hands (63:4, 134:2). The psalmists command praise with skill (47:7, 33:3), to “make His praise glorious” (66:2). They frequently call the nations to make the sounds of praise (67:4, 22:27, 117:1, 108:3). A fitting close to the Psalter is the call for all that has breath to praise the worth of their Maker (150:6).

The use of singing in the assembly worship of the New Testament church has indisputable Biblical support (Matt. 26:30; 1 Cor. 14:19, 14:26; Eph. 5:18–20; Col. 3:16; Heb. 2:12). Interestingly, the primary church music texts in the New Testament (Col. 3:16 & Eph. 5:19) are commands, not primarily to sing or make music, but to “teach” and “speak” with “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.”

The people of the Bible overflow with music in every circumstance, including cultural uses placed in positive (1 Sam. 18:7) and negative terms (Ez. 33:32). Music sounded in every aspect of life—work, play, celebration, and even war (Is. 16:10; Jer. 48:33; Matt. 11:17; Luke 15:25; Gen. 31:27; Ex. 32:17–18; Judges 11:34–35; 2 Sam. 19:35). Jewish musicologist Abraham Idelsohn says, “As many references in the Bible to the music performed in secular life testify, Israel enjoyed life through music both vocal and instrumental, and associated music with dance and wine in which men and women participated.”³

Music and Language

Just as the sparse New Testament texts on music confirm, in the “Biblical-times music,”⁴ there is no strong dichotomy between speaking and singing. In Scripture, language is generally connected to the *life* of the person. For example, Isaiah confesses sinfulness by saying, “I am a man of unclean *lips*, and I live among a people of unclean *lips*” (6:5). Jesus says, “You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Matt. 12:34). “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles. . . . But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.” (Matt. 15:11–18). The concept of the mouth expressing the heart and the words of a person being taken as the essence or heart of a person is universal in Scripture. Likewise, it is the *Word* of God which is the instrument of regeneration (1 Pet. 1:23), the building block of faith (Rom. 10:17), and the standard of sanctification (2 Tim. 3:16). Jesus teaches that man shall not live on bread alone, but on every *word* that proceeds out of the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4; also Ps. 19, 119).

On the basis of what Scripture teaches about the words of man and the words of God, it is not surprising that there are no strict separations between praise and prayer which is spoken, sung, and shouted. All verbal activity manifests the heart and the Word of God changes the heart. The fruit of the lips is the result.⁵ Therefore, the redeemed of the Lord “say so” in a continuum of verbal expression from simply speaking, to speaking loudly, to singing, to shouting. In fact in some cases it is difficult to tell exactly what act the words are referring to (merely speaking, or singing, chanting, speaking loudly, etc.). Consider the Biblical parallels:

Ps. 33:3 *Sing* to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.

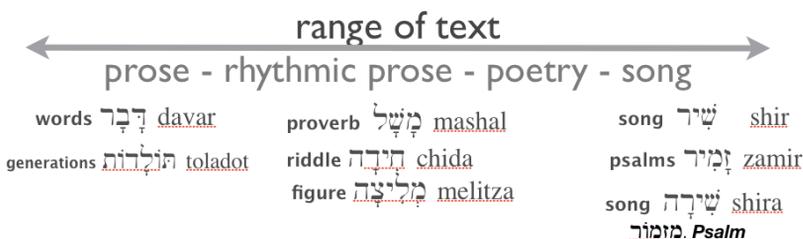
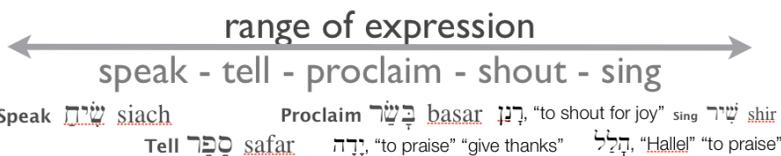
Ps. 71:23 My lips will *shout* for joy when I *sing* praises to you; my soul also, which you have rescued.

Ps. 81:1 *Sing* aloud to God our strength; *shout* for joy to the God of Jacob.

Ps. 96:2 *Sing* to the LORD, bless his name; *tell* of his salvation from day to day.

Ps. 105:2 *Sing* to him, *sing praises* to him; *tell* of all his wonderful works. (Emphasis added)

CONTINUUMS OF EXPRESSION



It seems that the rigid distinction between singing and other verbal activity in our Western contemporary use of language was not so distinct to the people of the Bible. In fact, it is often difficult to know the exact activity enjoined by many of the Hebrew terms for praise (e.g., *zamar, shyr, ranan, yadah, hallal*).

For example in Colossians 3:16 we are to teach and counsel (*noutheteo*) "with" (dative of means) psalms, hymns, and songs. It is "speaking with Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" in the parallel passage (Eph. 5:19). We instruct, counsel and speak by "means of" psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.

CRITICISMS AGAINST CONTEMPORARY MUSIC STYLE

*Now look at them yo-yo's that's the way you do it
 You play the guitar on the MTV
 That ain't workin' that's the way you do it
 Money for nothin' and chicks for free
 Now that ain't workin' that's the way you do it
 Lemme tell ya them guys ain't dumb
 Maybe get a blister on your little finger
 Maybe get a blister on your thumb⁶*

Having briefly considered the representative Biblical data regarding music. I will turn to the debate on music style (focusing on "pop" styles of music, such as rock, country, jazz, etc.). Is music style neutral? Are musical compositions

and styles inherently good or bad? This issue is addressed in terms of the “neutrality of music.” John Blanchard says, “When music is composed, it is not composed into a neutral nothing, but into a positive something—a form that is definite and meaningful, with colour and character.”⁷ Blanchard goes on to cite an impressive number of thinkers to support the contention that music, far from being a neutral force, moves people. Also, Leonard Seidel says, “The evidence is clear from history, music theory and Biblical examples—music is not neutral. Cynthia Maus has said it so eloquently: ‘Music soothes us, stirs us up; it puts noble feelings into us; it melts us to tears, we know not how. It is a language by itself just as perfect in its way of speech, as words; just as divine, just as blessed.’”⁸

It will be important here to define the question more sharply. The *status questionis* (state of the question) is not whether music, given certain conditions, “moves us” or “soothes us,”—no argument is needed to support this universal human experience—rather, the question is whether a particular music style or genre (such as rock, bebop, country, blues, punk, rap, or metal), or musical component (e.g., the beat) is intrinsically good, bad, or neutral. Neither is the question over the *use* of music. “. . . In no case is the use of music neutral. It is religiously conditioned, either in covenant obedience or rebellion.”⁹ There is no question that music creates powerful connotations, a reality continually exploited in advertising, or that music amplifies our emotional conditions—which is why the music *industry* exists. The first issue on the table, however, is the *ontology* and *meta-ethics* of music, the intrinsic value of music. This discussion is focused on popular contemporary music styles.

Two primary types of arguments emerge against contemporary music styles (hereafter, CM):¹⁰ aesthetic arguments and ethical-metaphysical arguments. Aesthetic arguments focus on the quality of the music and dismiss it as bad art, though not necessarily inherently evil. Though I will touch on this, my main concern is the ethical-metaphysical arguments. Ethical-metaphysical arguments focus on the inherent qualities of particular music genres (styles) or musical components (the beat). I am limiting my analysis to the style-genre, not the lyric content. The critical arguments cited have been addressed toward all forms of CM, including such expressions as “Country” and all the garden varieties of “Jazz” genres. Of course, of special interest will be the popular “Rock” and “Pop” styles which characterize “Praise and Worship” music.



The Natural Law Argument

Bill Gothard, a well-known critic of CM says, “There is no such thing as amoral music.”¹¹ He diagrams an analogy between other disciplines and music. He writes, “The following disciplines illustrate how the purity of an item can be corrupted by adding even a small amount of another element.”¹²

CHEMISTRY	LANGUAGE	MATH
H ₂ O + CN = Poison	Truth + Lie = Untruth	Solution + I = Incorrect

[What follows on the next page is the analogy to art and music.]

ART	MUSIC
Figure + Nudity = Pornography	Rhythm + Imbalance = Acid Rock

However impressive this line up is on first glance, this presentation actually *begs the question*; it assumes what must be proven. Namely, it has not yet been shown that “acid rock” music style (whatever it is) is, in fact, evil. When I think of “acid rock,” my first image is of Alice Cooper. Amazingly, he’s now a Christian. “Alice Cooper says he loves God but doesn’t want to become a ‘celebrity’ believer.”¹³

Back to the argument—it rests on an analogy between different disciplines. Gothard says, “Accurate evaluation of music is only possible as we integrate it with the related disciplines of mathematics, science, history, and medicine. The laws of these disciplines act as an authoritative reference to confirm that the musical expression is either following or violating established principles. . . . Just as there is a balance of power in the three branches of United States government, so the laws of related disciplines provide checks and balances for music.”¹⁴ However, until one can prove that a music style is analogous to poison, falsehood, mathematical inaccuracy, or pornography, the indicting conclusion is fallacious. The fallacy is sometimes called *the fallacy of false analogy*. How can the laws of unrelated disciplines be an *authoritative reference* regarding the ethics of music style?

There are a number of reasons why such analogies should not even be persuasive. (1) Contrary to what is asserted, unless the analogies are Biblically



supported they cannot be “authoritative” (*sola Scriptura*). (2) Some of the analogies themselves do not really have the impact intended upon further analysis. For example, what is poison in large quantities, may be medicine in small quantities; figure plus mere nudity does not equal pornography, cf. medical text books and much of classical art (e.g., *David*, Michelangelo). (3) “Imbalance” in the last of the series (rhythm + imbalance = acid rock) must be defined. If “imbalance” essentially means CM, the argument has not advanced beyond circularity.

The Bad Emotions Argument

Writers with a similar point of view, F. Garlock and K. Woetzel in *Music in the Balance*, argue a similar case, often syllogistically detailing their arguments (a welcome improvement over mere analogies).¹⁵ They offer the “bad emotions” argument. “Since music is an emotional language, and since some emotions are wrong for the child of God, then some music is wrong for the Christian.”¹⁶ Overlooking the fact that the syllogism’s terms “emotional language” and “emotions” do not appear to be the same conception, consider this argument in a tighter form:

- (1) All emotions are (in) music.
- (2) Some emotions are sinful.
- (3) Therefore, some music is sinful.

This is a valid argument, but the premises are not proven. How is one to prove the first premise, *all* emotions are in music? An even more difficult problem arises in the second premise, a problem to which the original writer of the argument (Tame) alludes: “Hate, when directed at sin, is good and acceptable . . . Anger is unacceptable except when the one who is angry is not sinning. An emotion like lust is never right.”¹⁷ Defining the ethical content of an emotion is difficult. How much more difficult when the emotion is represented in musical expression. The fact is, the Bible represents the same emotion, described with the same word, in some situations good and in others evil. For example:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire [lust] (*epithumia*) of the flesh. (Gal. 5:16)

But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire [lust] (*epithumia*) to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better. (Phil. 1:23)





Both passages use the term for “lust,” but each refers to a different object, one evil, one good. This is true with love (*agapao*, “loving darkness,” John 3:19) and other such expressions (e.g., world will “rejoice,” *chairō*, John 16:20).

Apparently, the same basic emotions can be sinful or acceptable, given the purpose and motivation. Thus, the syllogism is incomplete until the music critic can identify the specific content of the emotion in the music. One is hard pressed to identify the specific content of a CM style (especially apart from the lyric content of a song) with a specific sinful emotion. Certainly the emotional argument has not proven that any CM style is *inherently evil*.

The Beat

The thrust of many CM critiques is to demonstrate the sinfulness of “the beat.” Lawhead wittily calls this discussion, “Invasion of the Body Snatchers.”

Some suggest that when the beat becomes the main focus of the music, overwhelming all other components, that is when the trouble begins. The pulsating beat assaults the mind and puts it to sleep, so to speak, opening it to evil invasion while the listener is off guard. That is the assertion. But how is such a statement to be proven? Or disproven? The argument at that point moves from the realm of the concrete to the metaphysical. And metaphysical arguments cannot be settled in the laboratory.¹⁸

Gothard has even used, “metaphysical,” to refer the power of music. He says listening to Christian rock is “fellowship with demons.”¹⁹ Explaining the biological phenomenon, Gothard’s (and associates) information on the subject asserts rock music causes “a mix-up in the alpha waves between the two hemispheres of the brain, resulting in what some researchers call ‘switching.’ ‘Switching’ is a phenomenon which occurs in adult schizophrenics to produce regression to infantile, reptilian locomotion (where crawling is done with the same, rather than the opposite, arms and legs).”²⁰ This booklet comes complete with a picture of a crawling baby adjacent to an alligator.

Much of the behavioral research to which the above authors refer is based on the behavioral kinesology of Psychiatrist John Diamond. Diamond says that the anapestic beat (“da da DA”) found in some rock music causes muscle weakening, even up to a reduction of two-thirds. An example of this beat is that fine specimen of popular music, “Southern Nights” by Glenn Campbell. Some question these conclusions.²¹ As for a refutation, suffice it to say that



at every gym, when blaring such music while people lift weights, this theory is constantly being refuted. An instant autonomic reduction of strength is *de facto* not occurring during iron-pumping to anapestic back beats.

Garlock and Woetzel focus on the inherent immoral qualities of rhythm-dominant music. “The emphasis of most of contemporary sacred and secular music is on the rhythm. Rhythm is that part of music which elicits a physical response. Therefore, most of today’s music, secular and sacred, feeds and satisfies the self-seeking, self-centered, and self-worshipping part of man.”²² Here is another example of rhetorically impressive, syllogistically logical, but demonstrably fallacious reasoning. Either the argument is invalid because of equivocating on terms “physical response” and “self-seeking, self-centered, and self-worshipping part of man”—or, the authors are guilty of serious theological error in equating the physical part of man with the sinful part of man.

Is the physical part of man the sinful part of man? Surely not, without some important qualifications. The physical part of man cannot be equated with the sinful nature since the sinless Son of God was made flesh (1 John 4:2). The first man and woman were initially sinless, though incarnate. And we shall ever be incarnate after the Resurrection, yet without sin. Passages which use “flesh” (*sarx*) to refer to sinfulness (Rom. 6–7, Galatians 3, etc.) are not referring to *merely* the physical body, but the inherent sinfulness of fallen Adamic nature which permeates every facet of man — body, soul, spirit, mind, heart, bowels, brain, and spleen, etc.

Of the 147 times “flesh” (*sarx*) is used in the New Testament, only a small minority of passages have the sense of “sinful nature” (NIV). “Flesh” (*sarx*) is used in a number of ways both positively (Rom. 1:3, 2 Cor. 4:11), and negatively (Gal. 5:17). Fatal to the argument above is the clear teaching that the regenerate spirit of man is also still defiled. “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all *defilement of flesh and spirit*, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1). It is simply false to say that evil is to be equated with *embodiment*. The devils are not physical but are evil. To connect sinfulness with physicalness is the *Gnostic* heresy. This is a flat contradiction to the redemptive enterprise of the incarnate Jesus.

If Garlock and Woetzel are not Gnostics and really mean that rhythm appeals to the “sinful nature” (“falleness”), they would avoid a theological error of no small proportion. However, if rhythm appeals to the sinful part of man, it follows necessarily that *good* music should have *no rhythm at all*. But of course, this is not possible, since music involves sound in time.



Even when the rhythm argument is strengthened by clarifying and simplifying the terms, the premises are unsupported in Scripture. Consider a better presentation of the same argument.

- 1) CM is rhythm-dominant music.
- 2) Rhythm-dominant music is sinful.
- 3) Therefore, CM is sinful.

How could one prove the premises? Even the premise that “CM is rhythm-dominant” cannot easily be proven. For example, when people refer to a CM song, they sing the melody, not the snare drum part. When CM songs are performed in a solo situations, they are done with a piano, keyboard or guitar, not usually a soloist with drum set.

Amazingly Garlock and Woetzel are able to quantify it. They suggest that CM is 75% rhythm.²³ Music varies in its “rhythm-dominance.” Some, but not all CM, involves percussion instruments and a consistent, accented, rhythmic emphasis (such as the accent on beats 2 & 4 in 4/4). To say that CM is rhythm-dominant, in distinction to classical music which is melody-dominant is an extreme oversimplification in the analysis of music style.

Think about the very basics. All music involves rhythm, but not all music involves melody or harmony. For example, a snare drum solo is music, but has no “melody.” This example is certainly exceptional, but factual. What the Bible explicitly references about rhythm in music is irreconcilable with the above rhythm critics. So far from Scripture condemning the appeal to bodily movement and rhythm in music, dancing and percussion instruments go hand in hand:

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.” (Ex. 15:20-21)

Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre. (Ps. 149:3)

Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! (Ps. 150:4)²⁴

It is predictable that our CM critics do not bother with extracting Biblical principles from such passages.





The Origin of the Beat

If the reader tends to agree with premise two (Rhythm-dominant music is sinful), the implications are problematic—since, the music of many cultures (Latin America, Caribbean, African) is “rhythm-dominant.” Especially keep in mind, however, even though percussion and “beats” are prominent in so much of world music, they do not sound like rock music. A common pattern by CM critiques is to try to get back to the *origin* of the “beat,” i.e., claiming the beat is evil because it was derived from pagan tribalism and brought to America via slavery. This is what some call the *African Connection*. One proponent of this view says,

It is irrefutable that rock and roll music owes some of its roots to the tribes of Africa To declare that these are the only roots of rock music is to mislead and to be less than honest. A careful study of rock music reveals it to be more complex than that; however, to deny that an African connection to the rock rhythms of our day does not exist, is to be equally misleading and dishonest. To declare that a certain rhythm or beat is ‘evil’ cannot be proved entirely. What is far more important is the historical revelation that demonic activity has been observed in connection with rituals where drums and rhythmic beats have been the catalyst.²⁵

I appreciate the admission that “a certain rhythm or beat is ‘evil’ cannot be proved entirely.” Right. Actually no part of this can be proved at all. Snare drum beats on 2 & 4 are not demonic, as though the demonic legion were just waiting to seduce the world with a back beat. Despite millennia of wars, slavery, genocide, etc., the demonic hoard was saying, “Now we’ve got ‘em by the back beat, finally!”

Consider a little information about the beat. (1) The historical evidence that the “beat” of rock came via *demonic* Africa is quite dubious and probably just racist. Steve Lawhead observes that most slaves were from areas where the drum (and therefore, “the beat”) was not a significant instrument. The rock beat actually developed more from country-traditional music, e.g., “The Saddlemen.” “As for the charge that rock’s rhythm is demon inspired, most people overlook the fact that in other places where New World slaves landed (Jamaica, Haiti, the islands of the West Indies) nothing close to rock ever evolved.”²⁶ Island music is rhythmic, but does not sound like rock with consistent accents on beats 2 & 4.



(2) Unless someone can first show that the “beat” is evil, a proponent of the *African Connection* is simply committing the *genetic fallacy*. A bad origin for something does not necessarily make it bad. In music, arguing from origins is problematic since “Jubal . . . was the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe” (Gen. 4:21). Jubal was in the ungodly line of Cain. In fact, the rebel Lamech was Jubal’s father. William Edgar notes, “Jubal, the father of instrumental music, produced meaningful sounds because God made man to produce meaningful sounds because God made man to produce cultural artifacts (Gen. 1:28–30; 4:21).”²⁷ So to claim an element of music came from a non-Christian culture is not so persuasive. In the Bible we are directly told that lyres (stringed instruments) and pipes (wind instruments) came from first anti-God culture in the world, yet pianos (stringed instrument) and pipe organs (wind instrument) are completely acceptable.

(3) If music origins are translated into ethical norms, even the music of the Bible cannot clear itself from charges. Old Testament scholar Ronald B. Allen has rightly noted the Biblical use of “the devil’s instruments.” He explains, such instruments have “a long history of (mis)use in pagan circles before it became so dearly associated with the making of music to the Lord in ancient Israel.”²⁸ Ps. 93 was “written with a conscious attempt both to glorify God and to debunk Baal. The manner of singing would be very similar to the manner of singing in the worship of Baal. But the point of the song was opposed to all that Baal was supposed to represent.”²⁹ The preface to Psalm 8 says, “To the Chief Musician. On the instrument of Gath. A Psalm of David” (NKJV).³⁰ David praises God and prophecies of Christ with a Philistine musical instrument. David has plundered the Egyptians, musically.

AESTHETICS, MUSIC, CULTURE, AND CHRISTIAN FAITH Culture and “Good Music”

The “good music” Garlock and Woetzel, and Gothard, *et al*, reads Common Practice Period music (1600–1900) back into the Bible. It is plainly anachronistic. It is like saying Shakespeare did not use good English because it does not sound like the New International Version (1973) of the Bible. “Music is also considered to have three primary parts: melody, harmony, and rhythm.”³¹ Perhaps a starting place for evaluation is to see whether Biblical-times music could even be identified with the features of Common Practice Period music (hereafter, CPP music).

Certainly the descriptions of Biblical-times music style given by learned



experts cannot be understood as depicting “godly music,” according to the standard of such CM critics. The following selections from the entry on “music” indicates the features of Biblical-times music as follows:

1) **Modality.** A mode comprises a number of motives within a certain scale, each of which has different functions. The resulting composition is an arrangement and combination of these motives.

2) **Ornamentation.** The modes and their motivic partials are (1), *subject to ornamentation and decoration, often very florid and extended.*

3) **Rhythm.** Idelsohn incorrectly uses the term unrhythmical to describe Jewish chant. *The characteristic of Semitic music is its lack of regularly recurring meter. Nonetheless it is freely and richly rhythmic; its rhythmic structure is as complex as its ornamentation.*

4) **Scale.** The general nature of melody is diatonic, although this is mixed with *a certain feeling for quarter tones*, a distinctive which is foreign to most Occidental music.

5) **Monophony.** Jewish music is *unharmonized and depends for its beauty on elaborate ornamentation of the melody alone.* Occasionally in group singing intervals of fourths or fifths appear, more out of limitation in vocal range than an inherent harmonic vocabulary. When vocal music was instrumentally accompanied, *heterophony* (a way of embellishing the basic melodic line; a concurrent decoration) was often employed.

6) **Improvisation.** The performer and composer were the same person. The modal formulae were elaborated upon as seen in (1) and (2). A combination of long training and inherent ability were necessary to accomplish this.³²

Similarly music historian Donald Grout says of New Testament and early Christian music that it was like ancient Greek music, “In the first place, it was primarily monophonic, that is, melody without harmony or counterpoint . . . certain instruments would embellish the melody simultaneously with its plain performance by others in the ensemble, thus creating heterophony . . . no two performances of the “same” piece were exactly alike. Improvisation, in this or some similar sense, was characteristic of all ancient peoples. . . its melody and rhythm were most intimately bound up with the melody and



rhythm of poetry, and the music of the religious cults, of the drama, and of the great public contests was performed by singers who accompanied their melody with the movements of prescribed dance patterns.”³³

Ethnomusicologists associated with Wycliffe Bible Translators, Vida Chenoweth and Darlene Bee explain,

Christianity has certainly influenced the course of Western musical development; some of our greatest music has been inspired by a strong Christian faith. Nevertheless, we cannot say that our Western musical tradition is the same as the Christian musical tradition. It is not the musical idiom of the New Testament; the founders of our faith would have been ill-at-ease in it. There was no musical notation at the time of Christ so we will never know what melodies were sung by Jesus and His disciples. What we do know about their musical style is that it was Near Eastern. Our modern hymns are also different from Hebrew and Greek music, even though the gospel reached us through the cultural matrix of these societies. Our Western hymns are a heritage which we rightly cherish, but they belong to our faith through our culture.³⁴

As it turns out for those critics like Gothard, Garlock and Woetzel, their aesthetic turns out to be a metaphysic. They describe godly music as a hierarchy of melody, harmony, rhythm with a steady pulse but without a “beat.” They relate their anachronistic standard, metaphysically, to a trichotomist anthropology (man is body, soul, spirit). “The part of music to which the spirit responds is the melody.” “The part of music to which your mind responds is the harmony.” “The part of music to which your body responds is the rhythm.”³⁵ What follows from this? No rock, no jazz, no beat, no back beat, and dancing is out, too.

Even apart from the fact that Biblical-times music has almost no correspondence to such “good music,” there are more difficulties. If the spirit of man responds to the melody, as indicated before, what are we to say for the music of percussion instruments? Is it metaphysically possible to *praise Him with* timbrels, loud cymbals, and resounding cymbals (Ps. 149, 150) since those percussion instruments make no melody (and God is a spirit)? Are percussionists doomed to serve the basement of the physical, sub-spiritual, even sinful part of man. A little knowledge of Biblical-times music goes a long way toward preventing an ethnocentric standard from being disguised as “the” Biblical standard.



The Best of Music and the Worst of Music

Charles Dicken's line comes to mind: it was the best of [music] times and the worst of [music] times. For all the progress of music history, for all the heights of technological development and for all the global opportunities of exposure, study, and resources—one would think that music today would be at its best. Yet, our culture, inextricably connected to the production and sale of music, is in many ways at its lowest level in the history of the West. What shall we then say in the way of critiquing the CM world?

That which we've danced around in the first two sections is really the relationship of Christ and culture. The larger issue in the entire discussion of CM is Christianity and cultural change. How are we to see the basic relationship between the people of God and cultures of the world? To put it in Biblical terms, what are the full implications of being "in the world but not of the world" and doing all things to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Moreover, where do the Biblical principles of accommodation function—"And to the Jews I became as a Jew . . . I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some." (1 Cor.9:20-22)?

For my own commitments here, I believe that Christ will *transform culture*. Let me sketch the Biblical support for this view of culture transformation. (1) Missiologically, we have both the imperative and prophetic forms of world discipleship, implying that Christ will transform culture to some extent (Matt. 28:19-20³⁶ & Ps. 22:27).

(2) Eschatologically, Christ's second advent is sequenced by reigning at the right hand of God "until He has put all His enemies under His feet," the last of which is death which is demonstrably overcome at the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:25, 54-55). Hence those of His enemies which have cultural manifestations shall be affected in the present progressive reign of Christ.

(3) Culturally, the music of the redeemed shall flow from all *ethne*, loosely stated, from *all cultures*. For example, Isaiah commands, "Sing to the Lord a new song, sing His praise from the end of the earth! (Is. 40:10). "Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth" (Ps. 96:1). "New songs" are being commanded from other nations. Worship from other nations is a climactic hope in the drama of redemption. God desires for "the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy" (Romans 15:9-11). We should expect that a "new song" will arise from all nations. This is envisioned in Revelation. The elders with harps (*kithara*) give praise. "And they sang a new song . . . Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and



tongue and people and nation” (Revelation 5:8–10). A “new song” “refers to the introduction of a new composition for the purpose of celebrating...”³⁷ The call for a new song rings out seven times in Scripture (Pss. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa 42:10).

(4) Scripture itself recognizes change in cultural mediums of communication and allows for cultural differences and changes within time. Proof of this might be developed from observing the linguistic references throughout Scripture. “So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (Neh. 8:8, see also Matt. 1:23 and Mark 15:34). Cultural diversity and change is factually depicted and assumed throughout the Old Testament and New Testament. Moreover, the revelation of the Messiah is brought through the medium of the Greco-Roman language and culture with Judaistic roots rather than the language of the eras of Abraham, Moses, or David—remembering there were vast differences linguistically and culturally between even these patriarchs. When this is coupled with the “sing a new song” prescriptions, linked to ethnic groups (Ps. 96:1–2; Is. 42:10–11) with redemption intended for “every tribe and language and people and nation,” the ethno-musical implications are strong. The cultures of the world *will* and *do in fact* use their languages and musical expressions for praise.

Culture and the Heart-Language

Music changes with culture interactively. We can observe in the Bible and in our common experience, it is imperative to understand the musical heart-language of the people. Heart-language is the best medium for expression of heart-truth. This is difficult to work out. Chenoweth and Bee say, “When a people develops its own hymns with both vernacular words and music, it is good evidence that Christianity has truly taken root.”³⁸

Like it or not, a “red neck” will not sing, “I love thee” to his fiancé in the style of John Dowland’s renaissance lute songs (a sixteenth century court musician of Queen Elizabeth). Now we could start a program to try to force this vitally needed cultural transformation. We could offer scholarships for those in rural America to study lute. We could create a national John Dowland holiday when all the radio stations play the Dowland classic, “If My Complaints Could Passions Move.” Still, the heart language of red necks will not be Dowland’s renaissance style.

Adequate reflection on the issues that surround music and culture will





prevent us from adding to Scripture pseudo-absolutes. We will not be as quick to condemn the musical mediums of other cultures and subcultures by imposing an ethnocentric standard. Our North American culture is *certainly* not an authoritative standard by which we should judge other cultures. We have no more right to impose a CPP (1600-1900) style of music on other cultures than we do to make them have their services in Latin. (And we'd be probably be better off to impose Latin, rather than our current cultural norms.)

Protestants should believe “the holy scriptures are to be translated out of the original into vulgar languages” (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, 156) and that prayer is to be, “if vocal, in a known tongue” (*Westminster Confession*, 21:3). People also need the “vulgate” of music, that is music in their common tongue. Some level of intelligibility is required (1 Cor. 14:7-9, observe Paul’s very illustration). The irrelevance and ineffectiveness of the Church is often fostered by an unreflective stance against the new.

On all sides our shared concern should be for the communication of meaning and truth. Our music styles must comport with this. Calvin Johansson, critic of CM, pointed out the need for cultural and subcultural relevance in his stimulating book, *Music and Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint*.

Relevancy in church music is neither a matter of popularity nor of intrinsic worth, but a matter of identification with music. That is to say, the music must have something about it which is recognizable and ordinary, both in the configuration of the various musical elements and in its total impact . . . One must also pay attention to the peculiar musical culture of the congregation.³⁹

Changing Culture

Music, like language, is a manifestation of culture. It *changeth*. Though we must not fail to distinguish Biblical absolutes from cultural transition, this is not ethical or even aesthetic relativism. In fact, the individual who made the term “absolutes” part of the current Christian vocabulary, Francis Schaeffer, made this clear:

Let me say firmly that there is no such thing as a godly style or an ungodly style . . . And as a Christian adopts and adapts various contemporary techniques, he must wrestle with the whole question, looking to the Holy Spirit for help to know when to invent, when to adopt,





when to adapt and to not use a specific style at all. This is something each artist wrestles with for a life time, not something he settles once and for all.⁴⁰

Another facet of this prism is instrument technology. Music makers make sounds with the particular instrument-technology available. Further refinements culturally and technologically necessitate different musical sounds. Before the technology to make valves for brass instruments or hinged keys for woodwind instruments was available, wind instruments had a different sound with limitations in range and technique. It may surprise people, fond of “sacred” music, to realize that no Biblical-times music in any recognizable way resembled the sounds they call “sacred.”

I have met those who disdain even a piano as “less holy” than the organ. But the organ (which in its own right is wonderful) was developed to mimic other instruments. The organ’s stops represent the sounds of the symphonic instruments (including some percussion) — what a ridiculous perspective to deny the *actual* instruments, preferring the synthetic instruments produced by the organ. The great Southern Presbyterian, R.L. Dabney (1820–1898) argued against the use of organs in Presbyterian churches. “The instrument, by its very structure, is incapable of adaptation to the true purposes of lyrical music. It cannot have any arsis or thesis, any rhythm or expression of emphasis, such as the pulsatile instruments have. Its tones are too loud, brassy and dominant; all syllabication is drowned.”⁴¹ Most organs today digitally reproduce sounds (i.e., Allen digital organs), which technology is the very same in the keyboard sound of Van Halen’s “Jump” (1984 album).⁴² My point is not to criticize organs *per se*, but to show how our conception of the *sacredness* of sounds is quite culturally conditioned. The actual sounds of the music of the Psalms (in the time of David) with ancient instruments would probably scare the wits out of us.

These sorts of technological changes alone account for vast transformations, much less the profound philosophical, religious, and linguistic changes affecting musical-stylistical developments. One of my professors, composer Luigi Zaninelli, used to take exception to the idea that music has “progressed.” He would say it has simply “evolved” (i.e., no value judgment). Given the Biblical view of history, though, I would assert that indeed music has *progressed* since I believe, “the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our God and He shall reign forever” (Rev. 11:15). History proceeds



from creation, fall, and redemption which includes kingdom manifestation. The shadows of kingdom advance are seen in the arts. In terms of the cultural mandate, music has become more complex and intricate, being the occupation of the intelligence, feeling, ambition, and purposes of more and more people made in the image of God.

When new sounds are made and development takes place, the result is change in some aspect of that music. Eventually such changes make the music different enough to warrant the description that it has become a new style. For a mature Christian artist, new or expanding musical styles should be molded for the glory of God. Thinking Christianly about music and its aesthetic dimensions will provide the foundation for a philosophy of true beauty in music. If music abstractly expresses the beauty of God, music is inherently valuable within a Christian worldview.

I am not suggesting that such a renaissance is simple or quick, or that art in some alleged golden era in the past is to be forever xeroxed for the future. No, we should set our sights for even higher than a Da Vinci, for works more prodigious than a Mozart, for pictures not as bland as Picasso, for sounds wilder than Stravinsky, for portraits more enlightening than a Rembrandt. But all more deeply Christian, reflecting more of the Triune God and His creation.

Pop Goes Aesthetics

For quite a while, evangelicals have needed an aesthetic overhaul, complete with a new transmission to deliver the goods. It ought not be the case that those who have the truth of the gospel, lack a worldview inclusive of beauty and goodness—or worse, only accommodate art as a tool of propaganda.

Scripture strongly indicates the role of music in life and ministry, even apart from the function of the propositional word. Many reduce pop Christian music to communication of a verbal message. Communicating the gospel and related truths is all that matters. Wisely, C.S. Lewis said, “But usually ‘having something to say’ first and then finding the proper medium leads to propaganda art.”⁴³ Enter now the flaming words of post-evangelical Frank Schaeffer IV:

Today, Christian endeavor in the arts is typified by the contents of your local Christian bookstore-accessories-paraphernalia shop. For the coffee table we have a set of praying hands made out of some sort of pressed muck. Christian posters are ready to adorn your walls with suitable Christian graffiti to sanctify them and make them a





justifiable expense. Perhaps a little plastic cube with a mustard seed entombed within to boost your understand of faith. . . . On a flimsy rack are stacked a pile of records. You may choose them at random blindfolded, for most of them will be the same idle rehash of acceptable spiritual slogans, endlessly recycled as pabulum for the tone-deaf, television-softened brains of our present-day Christians.⁴⁴

So much of “Christian music” is nothing more than a decade old sound-coated tract, and one with bad art at that. “But don’t tracts have their place?” Maybe—I like the one that looks like a dollar bill. But you don’t want to leave it in place of a tip or use it to pay your bills. Evangelical subculture is in deep need of aesthetic reformation.

Walter Kirn targeted evangelical subculture in his September, 2002 GQ article, “What Would Jesus Do?” He spends a week in the evangelical “alterna-culture” of America. He explained that for seven days and nights he will “leave behind the fallen world of secular American pop culture and enter the self-contained parallel universe of American Christian pop culture . . .”⁴⁵ On Christian pop music he writes of a few groups, “They sound a bit like foreigners—highly talented Asian prodigies whose governments have equipped them with guitars and trained them in some elite punk-rock academy.” At a Christian bookstore he sees, a chart which “matches name-brand acts from secular radio with their closest sanctified equivalents. For the atheist teen who has suddenly been converted and wants to carry into his new life as many of his old attitudes and tastes as he can safely manage, such a chart would prove helpful, I imagine, much as a cookbook of sugar-free recipes might help a chocoholic with diabetes. For me, though, the chart confirmed a preconception that Christian rock is a cultural oxymorona calculated, systematic rip-off, not a genuine surge of inspired energy.” He laments that “the faithful should turn from their centuries-old tradition of fashioning transcendent art and literature and passionate folk forms such as gospel music.” At the end of the amusing article he concludes with a very accurate judgment: evangelical “culture is a bad Xerox of the mainstream, not a truly distinctive or separate achievement.” This ought not be.

Hear the refreshing wisdom of rock star Alice Cooper who declines to be a Christian celebrity: “I’m a rock singer. I’m nothing more than that. I’m not a philosopher. I consider myself low on the totem pole of knowledgeable Christians. So, don’t look for answers from me.”⁴⁶





Music and the Aesthetic Problem

Evangelicals desperately need the recovery that art *without utility* was ordained by God in worship (Ex. 28ff.). We often hear that worship rehearses us for heaven. It is most certainly true that those who do not worship God on earth will not worship God in heaven. Even more, seeing and experiencing *the beautiful* rehearses our souls for heaven. The deeper and richer our grasp of beauty, though dimly reflected in this world, the greater our comprehension of all the beauties of heaven and heaven's God. If this is true, it displays a miserable defect in evangelicals as a whole. The fact is, many unbelievers have a more *real* grasp of beauty in art and music, than we who love the gospel.

The most foundational basis for a Christian aesthetics is that God is beautiful. We are also told that, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth" (Ps. 50:2). The Hebrew term for beauty used here is also used of Queen Vashti, "she was beautiful to behold" (Esther 1:11).

In fact, the first person recorded as being filled with the Holy Spirit is not filled to give verbal message but to create works of art (Bezalel, Ex. 35:30ff.). "One thing I have desired of the LORD, that will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in His temple" (Ps. 27:4). The beauty we perceive in this fallen world is a dim reflection of God. Music as a non-verbal art can minister (1 Sam. 16:15–23) and can reflect the beauty of God (Ps. 27:4).

Theological Hope in Aesthetics

Upon theological reflection, it is the unique Christian reality of the Trinity which provides a basis for the equal ultimacy of unity and diversity. It can even be argued that non-Trinitarian world and life views will be unable to even account for the "one and the many" in thought, art, and experience.⁴⁷ This certainly has application to aesthetics.

This is good news when we cross some cultural boundaries only to discover that there's no conscious God-ward purpose in the art/music of that culture. Does this mean that God is not there? Of course not. Men cannot escape God's Word and world. Their conscious principles of worldview may tell them to fly out the window, since they make their own reality. They still have to walk down the stairs. Men, hostile in nature toward God, may intend their aesthetic productions to blaspheme the only God and Savior. In the most profane exploitations of "devil-worshipping" groups, they are at best distortions of the good gifts of our Father. And all the time demonic clones, as are featured



on many cable networks, profess their idolatry, they are only adding a chard of glass into the mosaic of creation, fall, redemption. While all the time they are slapping at the face of God, they can only do so because God is holding them in His lap.⁴⁸

We must rethink the power we attribute to music and art in general. There is a real sense in which critics of rock music attribute “power” to it which is overstated. While acknowledging the wonderful creaturely capacity of art, let us not fall into the “Byronic Fallacy,” as Charles Ives called it. He is referring to the poet and generally to the Romantic movement “in which the artist as prophet leads the rest of mankind into the truth of life through his own inner experience.”⁴⁹ Hans Rookmaaker, influential on Francis Schaeffer, speaks of the Enlightenment idea, “The artist became a genius, someone with very special gifts which could be used to give humankind something of almost religious importance, the work of art. Art in a way to the place of religion.”⁵⁰

I believe that many criticisms of CM, especially in its “pop music” manifestations, may be valid, purifying, helpful, and Biblically sound. The musical styles of the modern world are vibrations of the cultures of the modern world.

Music in Worship

This is not a study of the best or most appropriate music in worship. I have a whole other book on worship.⁵¹ Upon reading this, some may see my arguments opening the floodgates for any and every kind of musical expression in worship. But, it should be nuanced. Some kinds of expressions are rough and unsuitable for certain occasions. Anyone that thinks any musical sound, song, style or expression is acceptable in any Christian congregation because of the arguments here just needs to be punched or at least slapped into reality. Music is cultural and the micro-cultures of congregations should be considered in the inclusion of new musical sounds, styles and songs into such congregations. The Church should sing ancient, Reformational, and contemporary psalms, hymns and spiritual songs which serve the liturgy.⁵²

The Bible, a comprehensive display of human life, among other things, reminds us, “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (Ecc. 3:1 ff). Especially pertinent to our discussion is the wise observation, “there is a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:4, Ps. 149:3, 150:4). Take it on the authority of God’s Word: there is a time to mourn and a time to dance. Music is a divinely given aid for both of these expressions and all between.



Churchly Music in the World

In the “worship wars” a great deal of concern has been raised about *worldly* music in the church. Let us return to our original question: “plundering the Egyptians.”

But every woman shall ask of her neighbor and the woman who lives in her house, articles of silver and articles of gold, and clothing; and you will put them on your sons and daughters. Thus you will plunder the Egyptians. (Ex. 3:22)

Should we take the world’s music, like the the Israelites “stole” these valuables? Is this stealing? We must think through this a bit more. Egypt was gloriously prosperous in the time of the Exodus. But why? Was it not because of the labor of the Israelites? Better, was it not because God placed Joseph, the covenant great-grandson of Abraham, in the highest position in the world, as a leader and gave him wisdom? As it turns out it was God’s people that that created the prosperity in Egypt. Joseph’s wisdom was from God. Then, however, there arose a pharaoh who “knew not Joseph.” Remember that it was the Lord who gave Joseph a dream, a dream which made Egypt prosperous in famine. “The wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous” (Prov. 13:22).

In the history of music, we have a similar situation. Music in the Western world was developed and advanced through the Church into the modern era. The fundamental pallet of tones, scales, harmony and musical elements for music of our Western culture came from the Church in the West. The codification of this in the Western Art Music of the Common Practice Period (CPP 1600–1900) is the foundation for all the music on the radio, namely the diatonic system of scales and harmony, as well as rhythmic meter. To contrast this with what came just before, in our church (All Saints Church) we commonly sing music composed in the early 1500s, i.e., Reformation era Psalms (renaissance period music). These do not have measures or a time signature. The cadences at the end of lines often do not resolve to familiar sounding chords, either. Most of the elements of later hymns are there, but in seed form.⁵³

A subset of CPP music is what arose in the evangelical church in Europe and America. This music flowed from the recovery of the gospel in the Reformation which emphasized *sola fide and sola Scriptura*. Practically speaking this music arose as the renewed emphasis on congregational singing in protestant churches. Consider the example of the hymn, “Rock





of Ages.” The text was written by Augustus Toplady (1776) who was British. The traditional tune called, “Toplady,” was written by an American, Thomas Hastings (1830). This music is a straightforward 19th-century hymn, built upon CPP (1600–1900). With little innovation, all the chords and harmonic movements of that song show up in 20th century pop music. The chords are built upon the Major Scale (i.e., the I, ii, iii, IV, V, vi, vii chords) with the repeated IV/I, “Amen” figure, and dominant V chord cadences (V/I to V7 to I). This sounds like “church music” to us, but this chord sequence would have been very strange to hear prior 1500 A.D. It took about 200 or so years (1500–1700 A.D) for these chordal changes to harden like concrete in the ears of Western Europeans. Then from 1700 until now, we can hear them and extended versions of these chord changes everywhere.⁵⁴

The music we consider “pop music” is diverse and there are many sources and contributions. Each musician significantly contributes and the river continues to flow. I do not mean to minimize individual contributions. Musicians now recognize the sources of “roots” music, including blues, country, bluegrass, gospel, etc.⁵⁵ The roots of pop music clearly reach down to the rich soil and deep, underground river of the Church.

Consider a specific example, the Simon and Garfunkel song, “Bridge Over Troubled Water” (1970). This is a good example of a pop music tune which may sound merely folksy like 1970s music. However, an analysis of this harmony (chord changes) reveals its gospel roots. For example it has many IV/I changes (the “Amen” chord progression). There are also novel additions (e.g., the Major 7 chord in the lyrics “when tears are in your eyes”) which are extended jazz chord variations. But the gospel sound is foundational.

Aretha Franklin’s 1971 recording with a “Motown” sound makes it crystal clear that this is gospel music. The added opening chorus has the lyrics, “Still water run deep, yes it do.” This version features a peddle bass on the tonic of the “I/one chord” into the first part of the verse. The chord progressions and sound could resonate in any African-American church from 1940’s until present. The music is hymnodic altered to secular purposes. I think this was even intentional by the writer (Paul Simon). It was to sound vaguely gospel and church-like in order to convey the message of “you can depend on me . . . I’ll be your bridge over troubled water.” The gospel connotation is unmistakably clear in Paul Simon’s live version (Central Park 1991) which features a gospel piano introduction. This is quoting “gospel” music.⁵⁶

This is not the only example of music right out of the Church, playing on





the radio. Elton John's, "Don't Let the Sun Go Down" is also secular-gospel music. This song directly references gospel harmony. Perhaps one of the most ironic examples of gospel music in pop is the closing call chorus at the end of NBC's Saturday Night Live, called "Closing Theme (A Waltz In A)." Naming this a "waltz" is somewhat misleading. This song directly mimics the sound of gospel music. The context and effect of song as the credits roll is for all the cast and guests to hug and hold hands, showing a kind of unity. This sound is strongly connected to the feeling of unity because of its gospel connotations.

Blues and Gospel Music

This "gospel sound" is made up of at least two prominent threads: the harmony of hymns (featuring the "Amen progression") and melodic inflections of African-American Spirituals and blues. The music of Delta blues is plainly grounded on Spirituals (e.g., "Swing Low Sweet Chariot") with added elements and different instruments. One can hear this listening to the "father of Delta blues," Charlie Patton (ca 1887–1934). He sings "Lord I'm Discouraged" (a spiritual) among many "blues" songs (recorded from 1929–1934). The music is the same. The other "father of Delta blues," Son House (1902–1988) does the same. He sings blues beside gospel songs like "John the Revelator." The essence is the same. Unlike Patton, House developed a bottleneck slide guitar sound which added a characteristic element into the developing genre of blues.⁵⁷ With his style, he influenced perhaps the most famous bluesmen, Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. These musicians and their colleagues immeasurably shaped rock music, as a rock musician Eric Clapton admits. Of Robert Johnson, Clapton says his music "was so much more powerful than anything else I had heard or was listening to. . . . he's been in my life since I was a kid."⁵⁸ So the river of pop music flows from the Font of the Church.

Interpreting the meaning of blues and jazz, William Edgar, Professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary says, "The blues is stark and realistic, and it would be easy to conclude that this type of music is without hope or redemption. The realism of the blues does not stand opposed to hopefulness, but to sentimentality. The blues tells us how to live on earth in order to prepare for heaven. . . . its background is in the spiritual experience of African-American people, reared in slavery and nurtured on the Gospel. It carries the twin themes of suffering and hope, so characteristic of Black culture."⁵⁹

Blues expresses the harmonic and melodic expressions of both suffering





and hope. The blues modality change from major to minor is new in the history of music. It is implied in some Spirituals but develops fully in blues. For example, consider the classic blues song, “Sweet Home Chicago” (1936) as performed by bluesman Robert Johnson (1911–1938).⁶⁰ It moves from a major to a minor modality and resolves to a major modality. The sound of blues is from a “I chord” (e.g., C Major in the key of C) to the “IV7 chord” (on 4th note of the major scale of the key). It subtly implies a change to the minor modality. The tone that makes the “I chord” major moves down a 1/2 step in the IV7 which implies a minor “I chord” (e.g., C to Cm because the E tone of the C major chord moves to Eb in the F7 chord). By the time the “turn around” cadence happens, the V7 chord resolves to a definite major “I chord” sound (e.g., C Major with the key tone being E, not Eb). This is a new sound in the harmonic development of Western music. Blues is unique. Suffering is expressed in that minor “moan,” while the resolution is hopeful in going back to the major chord with the emphasis on the major 3rd (e.g., C major).

The music of African-American churches in the south prominently and directly influenced pop music through several connections beyond Delta blues. One being the blind prodigy, Ray Charles (1930–2004), who learned to play piano in the context of his Baptist church. This church music was “call and response.” Of his first nationally known hit, it has been noted, “The elements of ‘I Got a Woman’ [1954] included a mixture of gospel, jazz and blues elements that would later prove to be seminal in the development of rock ‘n’ roll and soul music.”⁶¹ Notice that both blues and gospel (and jazz) all have deep roots in the music of African-American churches. Hence the gospel music sound of these churches profoundly shaped pop music.

A second example is the influence of Elvis Presley (1935–1977) on pop music. I was born (New Albany, MS) and grew up (Aberdeen, MS) within about 30 miles of Elvis’s birthplace, Tupelo, MS. My mother (b. 1937) met and heard him play guitar at a family get together a few years before he became famous. He attended East Tupelo First Assembly of God for 13 years. His Pastor Frank Smith taught him guitar chords.⁶² The only integrated (whites and blacks) churches in the south at the time were Pentecostal churches. He gained fame regionally for his rendition of “That’s Alright Mama.” Journalists at the time described this as, “R&B idiom of negro field jazz.”⁶³ Elvis was surrounded in his later teen years by the blues of Beale Street (Memphis) where he moved (1948) and black gospel music, as well as the other roots and pop music influences of his day (pop of the day, country, bluegrass, etc). In his





first interview (1956) he made clear his dependence on black music out of the blues tradition. “They played it like that in their shanties and in their juke joints and nobody paid it no mind ‘til I goosed it up. I got it from them.”⁶⁴ It has been widely claimed that he “stole” black music. But of course, black music was gospel music first. A better claim would be that Elvis stole music from the Church and a lot of soul from the black Church in the south.

Most rock music doesn’t have the humility to acknowledge its roots in gospel. One exception is The Black Crowes 1992 album, “The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion.” The name comes from a Christian hymnal of 1835 compiled by William Walker. The song, “Thorn in My Pride” has a gospel piano break in the song. It is not different music at this point, it flows right through with the gospel piano section. The lyrics at this point are gospel-infused with a secular message, “Do you ever want to let it shine, your love light . . . let your love light shine, let it shine.” It culminates in a rock electric guitar solo.

I conclude that the musical pallet of pop music arises from the Christian West. The chord and harmonic patterns flow directly out of the music hymnody. Many pop elements have a “gospel music” background which depends on Spirituals and blues, as well as other music of the Church. Many of the innovations and developments of music advanced in pop music are grounded on the music of the Church. The music of the Church has been a gift to the radio.

How Should We Then Play? Suggestions for Musicians

With all this, what follows practically for Christians who want to pursue music. Or more positively, how would we recreate a 21st century Johann Sebastian Bach that could also really wail on the blues? A little review will help. Bach had several advantages: (1) He lived at a time when Protestant worldview Christianity saturated his culture. (2) His family before him were diligent musicians (“Bach” was nearly synonymous with music). (3) The music that surrounded him, from which he gained his beginning and even advanced skills, required high standards of dexterity, artistry, and robust harmonic contrapuntal development (many melody lines woven for the harmony). (4) He was in a church which breathed orthodoxy (both in Lutheran areas and the Calvinist court of Cothen). (5) He was personally faithful and committed to glorifying God with his musical gifts as his entire life ambition, *S.D.G.*⁶⁵ This outline may prompt to serve our imagination.

(1) Get a good education: Donald Hustad has made a powerful observation





in answering how a person should prepare to be a pastor of worship today. “First get a broad-based, classical, liberal arts education. You will never be able to understand or teach the significance of words in worship unless you understand and revel in the beauty and power of words in literature. Second, become familiar with all the traditions of biblical and Christian worship, including that of the temple and the synagogue of Judaism.”⁶⁶ Like Bach we will need to stop singing defeatist and escapist music, e.g., “I Wish We’d All Been Ready,” and reclaim a multi generational classical education program.⁶⁷

(2) Go to church: Musicians *as Christians* should make themselves accountable to Biblically sound, spiritually vibrant, local churches in which the elders of the church can shepherd and oversee the individual spiritual growth of the musicians, ministry activities, the doctrinal content of the songs, and the effectiveness of music ministry. Musicians *as ministers (servants)* should develop a Biblical philosophy of ministry under the oversight of the leadership of the local church. This kind of study could yield distinctions in purpose. Maybe you are to work within the jazz scene without overt religious music. Maybe you should concentrate on new Psalm settings. Maybe you should do pop music without doing religious lyrics, etc. This kind of oversight could provide theological challenge and practical direction for musicians. Musicians should develop a Biblical theology of music, that is, the comprehensive view of how all the Scripture’s teaching relates to music. As a result, the music, message, and purpose of the CM musician(s) could be brought into conformity to the Biblical teaching; thus, clarifying what is absolute from that which is changeable. As a Biblical study, one should work through the musical implications of the Psalms and historical church music.

(3) Grasp a Christian Worldview: Musicians, inasmuch *as they are visible/public representatives of the Christian community* should develop a comprehensive and articulated Christian worldview, relating music and its purposes to other areas of life. Music’s role is much larger than a vehicle for the propagation of religious sentiments. Musicians *as servants of God* should seek to serve in excellence, always being diligent to perform as well as possible to the glory of God. The growth of a musician in excellence is greatly facilitated by an appreciation and study of the great musicians/music of the past. Christian musicians of the highest caliber should be fluent in the great musical achievements of Western art music. Irrelevance is most often the result of historical ignorance.

(4) Grow in Discernment and Development: One could easily dish out the





advice that listening to, following after, and being consumed in pop music is usually a waste. Those who study music in an informed way are usually not groupies of commercial pop music, regardless of whether the words are religious or inspirational or pietistic or make you feel good in your heart. Good musical training covers a multitude of cultural sins. In my own life experience with my family, I practice *musical vaccination*. I regularly vaccinate my children with limited, but intentional exposure to all kinds of music: pop, folk, classical, other ethnic, good, bad, ugly. All the time I fear not the metaphysical sound waves demonically and parasitically possessing the souls of my children. Instead of fumigating the speakers with holy water, we just talk about it, listen and play music together. After ample exposure to blues, bluegrass, and rock, I go back to jazz standards—a few notes of which will ward off the pop music vampires like garlic.

(5) Gain exposure to “roots” music: In an interview with James Ward, musician at New City Fellowship (PCA) in Chattanooga, TN, he pointed out the need for church musicians to study jazz. If one does an undergraduate degree in music (but without reference to jazz), you will not have the skills to deal with CM material, world music material, or the grass roots of Celtic, Appalachian, or blues-influenced music. Ward sees the explosion of interest in the *O Brother Where Art Thou* music (2001) as an example of the Appalachian side of blues. All such blues are connecting to reality, since they are rooted in Christians expressing a real Fall, Redemption, and the hope of Glory, whether in the mountains or the delta.⁶⁸ In the development of young musicians, therefore, be sure to broaden horizons with the roots of pop music not just the (often rotten) fruits. Christians should be impressed with the spiritual focus of much of “roots” music.

(6) Study, play, and enjoy music: The experience of music is a gift of our good God. Our family regularly has musical people in our home to share music in playing and singing together. Informal musical *koinonia* transforms us.





Conclusion

Musical sounds develop over time and through culture.⁶⁹ Christ is saving a whole world of different cultures, thus the music of the redeemed will flow from all redeemed peoples and cultures. This is God's plan of world redemption. The nations will use their music in their language to glorify God. We must rejoice in this rather than restrict it. Our Triune God's praises cannot be exhausted. His fullest praise requires worlds of music for Mount Zion's Lamb of God. Hallelujah!



Endnotes

- 1 Sang Larry Norman about rock music. This quote is often attributed, probably wrongly, to Luther.
- 2 Citations from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960,1962,1963,1968,1971,1972,1973,1975,1977,1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
- 3 *Jewish Music: Its Historical Development* (New York: Dover, 1929 [1992]), 21.
- 4 "Bible-times music" is intended to designate music that is culturally Ancient Near-Eastern produced by Israelites, spanning from OT to NT time period (ca 1500 B.C. to 70 A.D.). For more discussion on Biblical instruments see the classic, Idelsohn, *Jewish Music: Its Historical Development*.
- 5 I am indebted to John Frame in his lecture, "Music and Salvation" for the seeds of thought along these lines. See also V. Poythress, "Ezra 3, Union with Christ, and Exclusive Psalmody," *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. XXXVII, 1974–75, 74–94, 218–235.
- 6 The first verse of "Money for Nothing" by Mark Knopfler and Sting, December 1984 from the Dire Straits album, "Brothers in Arms."
- 7 John Blanchard with Peter Anderson and Derek Cleave, *Pop Goes the Gospel* (Hertfordshire UK: Evangelical Press, 1983), 83.
- 8 Leonard J. Seidel, *Face the Music: Contemporary Church Music on Trial* (Springfield, VA: Grace Unlimited, 1988), 27.
- 9 William Edgar, *Taking Note of Music* (London: SPCK/Third Way, 1986), 49.
- 10 "Contemporary Music Style" is not really a precise term, but I mean pop, rock, country, jazz, etc. This music ordinarily has a "beat."
- 11 In the years 1990–1997, I attended all three public seminars that the ministry offered, Basic, Advanced, and the Ministers' seminar.
- 12 Bill Gothard, *Advanced Seminary Textbook* (Oak Brook, IL: Basic Life Principles, 1986), 27.
- 13 http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=26647
- 14 Gothard, *Advanced Seminar Textbook*, 123.
- 15 F. Garlock & K. Woetzel, *Music in the Balance* (Greenville, SC: Majesty Music, 1992).
- 16 Garlock and Woetzel cited this from D. Tame, *The Secret Power of Music* (New York: Destiny Books, 1984), 151.
- 17 Tame, *The Secret Power of Music*, 3.
- 18 Steve Lawhead, *Rock Reconsidered: A Christian Looks at Contemporary Music* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1981), 69.
- 19 Stated at the Memphis, TN, Minister's Conference, March 6, 1995. I corresponded to Mr. Gothard about this and other assertions following the conference. He referred me to his publication, *How to Overcome an Addiction to Rock Music*.
- 20 R. J. & I. Cannon *Striving for Excellence, How to Evaluate Music: A Course for Leaders* (Oak Brook, IL: Basic Life Principles), 12.
- 21 S. Miller, *The Contemporary Christian Music Debate: Worldly Compromise or Agent of Renewal?* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1993), 12ff.
- 22 Garlock & Woetzel, *Music in the Balance*, 67.
- 23 I am not making this up, see p. 68.
- 24 We should not imagine this music sounding like rock music, it was Ancient Near-Eastern in style and likely would have sounded vaguely Indian or Middle Eastern to modern ears.
- 25 Leonard J. Seidel, *Face the Music*, 41.
- 26 Lawhead, *Rock Reconsidered*, 57–58.
- 27 "The Message of Rock Music" in *Art in Question: London Lectures in Contemporary Christianity, 1984*, ed. Tim Dean and David Porter (Marshall Pickering/Zondervan, 1987), 40.
- 28 *Worship Leader*, April/May, 1992, Vol. 1, No. 2; 5, 44 (published in zSan Juan Capistrano, CA).



- 29 *Worship Leader*, No. 3, 5.
- 30 The Jewish Publication Society translation and others have this as "on the gittith," also in the preface to Psalm 81 and 84. While this term possibly refers to the name of a tune or "winepress," evidence points to an actual instrument just as the NKJV translates it. The ancient Targums (Aramaic version) has it as, "For praise, on the lyre that he brought from Gath. A hymn of David." <http://targum.info/pss/ps1.htm>
- 31 E.g., Garlock and Woetzel, *Music in the Balance*, 55.
- 32 Emphases mine in these selections from "Ancient Near-Eastern Music" in the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, M. C. Tenney ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 315–316.
- 33 D. J. Grout, *A History of Western Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 45.
- 34 V. Chenoweth & D. Bee, "On Ethnic Music" in *Practical Anthropology* 15(5), 205–212, 1968. This quote from pp. 211–212.
- 35 Garlock & Woetzel, *Music in the Balance*, 57, 58, 59, respectively.
- 36 The original Greek text says, *matheœteusate panta ta ethnœ*—that we are to "disciple all the nations"—not make a few disciples from the nations.
- 37 David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (Word Biblical Commentary 52A; Accordance/Thomas Nelson electronic ed. Dallas: Word Books, 1997), 359.
- 38 Chenoweth and Bee, "On Ethnic Music," 212.
- 39 *Music and Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), 39.
- 40 *Art and the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill: Inter-Varsity, 1973), 51, 55, respectively.
- 41 Dabney argued like others who hold to the "Regulative Principle of Worship," "instruments are excluded from Christian worship," but he added particular criticisms of the nature of the organ (say in comparison to the fluidity of the violin). Cited from his review of John L. Girardeau's, *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*. Available here: <http://www.naphtali.com/articles/worship/dabney-review-of-girardeau-instrumental-music/>
- 42 It's not my intention to denigrate great organs and their wonderful music. I have a functioning Victorian pump organ in my office. Sometimes when I bring people in and they ask if it works, I play Van Halen's, "Jump."
- 43 Cited by Edgar in *Taking Note of Music*, 132.
- 44 *Addicted to Mediocrity: 20th Century Christians and the Arts* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1981), 22–23.
- 45 Formerly, "Gentleman's Quarterly" magazine. These quotations are from an unnumbered reprint. Online: <http://www.gq.com>.
- 46 Cooper whose legal name is now Vince Furnier says in the article that now any song promoting promiscuous sex and drinking "gets the axe." Another interesting comment on new songs, "I tried to write songs that were equally as good, only with a better message." The article is here: http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=26647.
- 47 This thought has been notably articulated in the works of the late Cornelius Van Til of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA. For an example of the development of this thesis see, *The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy*, R. J. Rushdoony (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn, 1978).
- 48 This is an illustration from Van Til.
- 49 D.L. Roper, *Wanted: A New Song Unto the Lord*, second edition (Wellington, New Zealand: Foundation for Christian Studies, 1981), 11.
- 50 H.R. Rookmaaker, *Art Needs No Justification* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1978), 9.
- 51 *Worship and Worship Services*, available here: <http://www.wordmp3.com/details.aspx?id=1243>
- 52 For our own congregation, All Saints Church, we have a vision statement about music which has these categories: biblical, liturgical, Reformational and congregational. Available here: <http://all-saints-church.com/files/musicvision.pdf>





- 53 E.g., Psalm 150 Geneva. To hear an example of this: <http://www.wordmp3.com/stream.aspx?id=12344> and also view examples at <http://genevanpsalter.com>.
- 54 What I mean by "extended versions" of these chords, would be turning the V7 chord into a V11 chord which in the key C is an F major chord with a G in the bass. This sound for a dominant V chord is in Elton John's music frequently and was picked up in many 1970s–1990s praise songs.
- 55 <http://www.pbs.org/americanrootsmusic/>
- 56 After the first section it moves into the "Graceland" rhythmic emphasis of South African music.
- 57 Daniel Beaumont, *Preachin' The Blues: The Life and Times of Son House* (Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 58 <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1798862>
- 59 I presented much of the content of this study as a paper in his class Cultural Analysis (a post-graduate course). The citation above is from an interview with Glenda Mathes: <http://ascribelog.wordpress.com/2010/10/06/william-edgar-theologian-and-jazz-musician/>
- 60 Available on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/the-complete-recordings/id171066051>
- 61 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ray_Charles
- 62 http://www.journalnow.com/archives/article_f9d40d97-c14a-59da-a634-b5a4e6ea232b.html
- 63 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elvis_Presley
- 64 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_impact_of_Elvis_Presley
- 65 It is well known that Bach initialed his compositions with S.D.G., *Soli Deo Gloria*. He also used J.J., for *Jesu Juva*, "help me Jesus," and I.N.J., *In Nomine Jesu*, "in the name of Jesus." See *The Spiritual Lives of Great Composers*, Patrick Kavanaugh (Nashville: Sparrow Press, 1992).
- 66 *Worship Leader*, "An Interview with Don Hustad" by Ron Man, July/Aug 2002, 38.
- 67 Much could be said about the value of classical and Christian education. See, *The Case for Classical Education* an expanded version of *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning* by Douglas Wilson (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 2002).
- 68 James Ward, personal conversation May 12, 2003.
- 69 I am restating part of the conclusion in my chapter, "Musical Instruments" in Ned Bustard (ed.), *It Was Good: Making Music to the Glory of God* (Baltimore: Square Halo, 2013).