

# WORSHIP MUSIC OR MUSIC WORSHIP?

How Music Functions in Congregational Worship

- Bob Kauflin -

Next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts, and spirits... Our dear fathers and prophets did not desire without reason that music be always used in the churches. Hence, we have so many songs and psalms. This precious gift has been given to man alone that he might thereby remind himself that God has created man for the express purpose of praising and extolling God. However, when man's natural musical ability is whetted and polished to the extent that it becomes an art, then do we note with great surprise the great and perfect wisdom of God in music, which is, after all, His product and His gift; we marvel when we hear music in which one voice sings a simple melody, while three, four, or five other voices play and trip lustily around the voice that sings its simple melody and adorn this simple melody wonderfully with artistic musical effects, thus reminding us of a heavenly dance, where all meet in a spirit of friendliness, caress and embrace. A person who gives this some thought and yet does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs. (*Martin Luther, 1538, in his Forward to a collection of chorale motets*)

## I. Introduction

- A. Music is a unique art form.
- B. Music functions as art, entertainment, vocation, mood setter, consumer influencer, crowd uniter, passion stirrer, political change catalyst, historical narrator, heart comforter – and as worship.
- C. The Seeming Omnipresence of Music in Worship
- D. Issues in History
  - 1. How much music is too much?
  - 2. Universal or localized?
  - 3. Liturgical or free form?
  - 4. What is the BEST music?
  - 5. Choir or congregation?
  - 6. Instrumental or vocal?
  - 7. One extended section or broken into segments?

Only after we understand what true worship really is are we free to study and draw from the vast assortment of worship styles and activities that are available. Then we can understand how often we succumb to worshipping worship or worshipping about worship. (*Harold Best, Music Through the Eyes of Faith, p. 148*)

## II. General Thoughts on Music and Worship

A. Worship is more than music.

“Christian musicians must be particularly cautious. They can create the impression that God is more present when music is being made than when it is not; that worship is more possible with music than without it; and that God might possibly depend on its presence before appearing. “ (Harold Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, pg. 153)

B. Music is not always worship.

C. Music CAN be worship.

1. Music is truly worship when three things are true.

- a. When it is being offered BY CHRISTIANS.
- b. When it is being offered INTENTIONALLY to honor God.
- c. When it's offered IN FAITH through the finished work of Jesus Christ. (Hebrews 10:19-22).

D. Music SHOULD be worship.

“We do not sing in order to worship, nor do we sing as if this were all worship is. We must of necessity sing because we are at worship, because God is now here, irrespective of our contrivances to get Him here. (Harold Best)

## III. The primary purpose of music in corporate worship is to facilitate and strengthen faith-filled congregational song.

A. The majority of musical references in both Old and New Testaments are to singing.

B. Music heightens the impact of truth upon our hearts

C. Music invites participation and expression (1 Chron. 13:8, Eph. 5:19)

1. Music expresses and evokes our emotions. (1 Sam. 16:23, Lk. 7:32)

- a. Music in worship is not meant to simply produce an emotional high or give us a “fix.”

- b. However, strong emotions are pleasing to God when they are a response to truth, deepened by their association with music.

"The duty of singing praises to God seems to be given wholly to excite and express religious affections. There is no other reason why we should express ourselves to God in verse rather than in prose and with music, except that these things have a tendency to move our affections." (Jonathan Edwards, The Religious Affections p. 44)

- c. Times of listening can actually encourage participation.
- d. Wise musicians leave space that invites people to engage with and reflect on what they are singing. Rests, space, and pauses give meaning to sound.

D. However, support for singing is not the only purpose of music in worship.

**IV. A secondary and equally valid purpose of music in corporate worship is to accompany and enhance all the other reasons God's people gather, including exaltation, proclamation, sanctification, prayer, fellowship, teaching, and mission.**

- A. Music enables meaningful transitions and support
- B. Music deepens our sense of unity with our forebears and each other
  - 1. Using music of the past
  - 2. Singing with one voice
- C. Music manifests the multi-faceted nature of God's glory.
  - 1. Stylistic variety makes possible a broader range of responses to God, opens our eyes to the greatness of God, and enables people of different backgrounds, preferences, and experiences to worship God wholeheartedly together.
  - 2. Requires instruction, example, and patience.

3. Stylistic variety practically expresses God's heart for all nations and cultures.

It is fruitless to search for a single musical style, or even any blend of musical styles, that can assist all Christians with true worship. The followers of Jesus are a far too diverse group of people – which is exactly as it should be. We need to welcome the experimental creativity that is always searching out new ways of singing the gospel, and banish the fear that grips us when familiar music passes away. For this kind of change is the mark of a living church – the church of a living God, who restlessly ranges back and forth across the face of the earth seeking out any who would respond to his voice. (David Hamilton, *The Triumph of the Praise Songs*, Christianity Today, 8/12/99)

## V. A Final Word on Music – Faith, Hope, and Love

- A. Music, no matter how beautiful, skilled, complex, earnest, or diverse will fail to accomplish God's purposes for worship unless it is accompanied by faith in the hearts of those who participate.

1. God is not against skill in music, or unskilled, but sincere offerings of worship. He is against pride, self-worship, and self-sufficiency.
2. The very things that the idolatrous mind pursues and bows before become, in the faith-filled mind, tools for the worship and glory of God.

Every musical groove we establish is a potential rut. Every way of worshiping is a potential *object* of worship. (Reggie Kidd, RTS Professor)

3. Faith enables us to experience old music in a new way, and new music in way that sounds familiar.

Christians are the only ones on earth truly equipped to encounter the unfamiliar and to do so with rejoicing, without confusion, without bafflement, or without worshiping newness for its own sake...Honorable people, following their convictions as to what the Scriptures actually allow and making music out of their conscience-informed creativity, will never want for quality or authenticity, simply for having limited themselves. (Harold Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, pg. 154, 184)

- B. The fact that music in this age is an imperfect representation of the music to come, should remind us of Christ in us, the hope of glory. The best is always yet to come!
- C. Music is an expression of God's love for us, as well as a means for us to demonstrate His love to each other and those around us.