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Music in the Church

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-- *Commentaries from past newsletters* --

I know that writing about music in the church will arouse much passion. It is as emotionally laden as any subject one can discuss. I have never been one to shrink from controversy, so I am not afraid to stir up a little emotion in some of you who have strong opinions about church music.

After I came to know the Lord 29 years ago, I went back to church for the first time in 22 years. It had been a dead church spiritually when I left, and it had not changed! The preaching was uninspiring, and the people were not too friendly. The organist still played with all stops open. One thing had changed--my appreciation of the music. On occasions tears would come to my eyes when we sang songs that expressed great spiritual truths. This occurred though I objected to the number of decibels that poured out of the organ.

Now I do not know what specific songs stimulated this response, but I know it happened. I knew the emotions I felt were love and awe. I felt them before I was saved, when I sang the national anthem, when a band played Stars and Stripes Forever, or when I heard America the Beautiful. I even experienced these same emotions when I heard a love song I associated with a then current love affair. I never felt them when I sang church music before I became a real Christian.

Initially I was embarrassed by my lack of emotional control, and tried to hide my feelings. It was not long, however, before I got involved in the lay renewal movement that was beginning in the church. In our retreats we sang songs that were not in the hymnal. They had a contemporary beat and the lyrics praised and gave thanks to God. These songs usually stirred me up emotionally.

The song leaders for our retreats were, for the most part, lay people, and they sang what the participants seemed to like to sing. Most of them were led by the Holy Spirit to begin with praise, and then to give thanks and sometimes to worship. Praise and thanksgiving songs were mostly used, because the testimonies that followed expressed their thanks for the gift of God's loving kindness evident in his salvation. All elements of the service created a desire to worship.

After weekends like these, we all went back to our churches, but back home the music did not do much for us. All of us wanted it to change but it was not possible to effect a change. We sang what was in the hymnal, or the hymn of the month. Because I chafed at the lack of moving music, I wanted to know why.

Being a researcher, I began to analyze the various factors that seemed to influence the selection and rendering of music in my own and other churches that I visited.

During the formulation of this project I remembered a story my aunt told me about my grandfather. Apparently the pianist who doubled as the choir director in his small country church was causing trouble for the pastor and the elders. My grandfather's comment was incisive and to the point. He said, "If you want to find the devil in the church, look behind the piano." I did, therefore, focus some of my investigation on how much church musicians, and their followers the choir, influenced the selection and rendering of church music.

I learned that in most churches, where the musicians are professionally trained, they often select the music. Many times they do so without consulting the pastor. In other instances he delegates the responsibility to them, because he learned little about music in his seminary. He (there were no she's in the pulpit in those days) left the music selection to the pianist, organist or choir director because they had training in church music.

Since many of these persons are first professional musicians and only secondarily Christians, their choices are influenced by what they consider musicologically proper rather than its spiritual and emotional message. Rarely is it correlated with the content of the message to be delivered. Most often I found that the selection of anthems is designed to showcase the talents of the musician(s), and not to stir up the spirits of the congregation. The message is not important. The performance is.

In a like manner the congregation has little say about the music. Generally they are considered ignorant and have to be taught to sing the "right music." Jane Marshall a musicologist at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas TX wrote an article in which she said that Christians need to be taught what is proper for them. This is similar to school musicians teaching classical music to inner city kids whose musical idiom in their environment is Rap or Bebop. They listen, but they don't hear. The same is true for most congregations in average churches across the country. Of course you may find a congregation that wants to hear only Bach, Handel, and Mozart. But they are few. I ran across such a church in Boston once where all the music was by Johann S. Bach. I didn't go there!

To illustrate the elitist attitude of many musicians, I cite an experience I had some years ago. In a large denomination a survey was taken in their churches asking the parishioners what they wanted changed most in their churches. Over 80 percent in most churches wanted the music changed. Did it happen? NO! The church had no way of dislodging professional musicians from their roles. In one church the organist refused to play the "common music" the congregation wanted. In those churches where the musicians were lay volunteers there was no

need to change the music. There the song leaders knew what the people wanted and sang it because they were one of them.

In one denomination the committee charged with revising their hymnal sought recommendations for inclusion in the hymnal. The committee rejected every one of the songs recommended by a large constituency because they were contemporary. A few were finally included when the editor used his authority to overrule the committee's decision. It is so sad that the pseudo-sophisticated culture of professional music does not understand the hearts of the people.

Now it is important at this point to realize that people under fifty (baby boomers and generation X-ERS) today have been exposed to contemporary church music if they have been exposed to church music at all. Through parachurch groups such as Young Life, Youth for Christ, and other such organizations they have learned and liked contemporary Christian music that is, for them, a familiar idiom. They have purchased tapes and CD's and listened to these songs repeatedly.

Charles Wesley, one of the great hymnodists of all time, once said, "Why should the Devil have all the good music?" He, therefore, often set the words he wrote to popular secular tunes. Contemporary hymnodists compose songs that are similar to some secular music of our day. If one listens to this music you can recognize country and western, southern gospel, pop, jazz, and what I call sweet (romantic) themes in their tunes. I have even heard a few contemporary Christian songs with a Latin tempo.

An article in the December 1995 *Charisma* magazine describes how contemporary praise and thanksgiving music is shaking the earth. They believe that the prophecy in Isaiah 61:11 "that God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations," is being fulfilled. There is a demand from the Christian community in all parts of the world to teach them how to praise and give thanks to God with music. Spiritually sensitive Western musicians are exporting their music. They also are encouraging indigenous people to compose and sing their own music. I have witnessed the effect that our American music has had in all parts of the world. We have heard our praise and worship songs in Czech, Polish, German, Spanish, Shona, Tagalog, and Amharic. We have heard music by indigenous composers in these same languages. Praise and thanksgiving music helps them to encounter God.

What does this all mean in the life of the church? To me it means that the role of music cannot be left to classically trained professionals any longer. This is not to say that professional musicians do not know what is musicologically good music. It does say that their taste in music is often out of step with what people in the pew appreciate. They select music because it showcases their talents, or their instruction was in a particular idiom and they never explored any other because of their prejudices. Persons who have trained in colleges or conservatories often

have a narrow view of music. Many have been taught that most contemporary music is written by uneducated clods and unworthy of their efforts.

In contrast it is also true that persons who have come out of the popular music culture may not want to play some great music of the past. We cannot throw away our great traditional music either. Charles Wesley, Fanny Crosby, Isaac Watts and John Newton wrote good music that is still appealing today.

Percy Dearmer a British theologian and hymn writer wrote a scathing denunciation of the use of uninspiring music (1920) in his book *The Art of Public Worship*. I quote, "We only made the mistake, some two or three centuries ago of giving up our own vernacular, and thinking it necessary to express ourselves in the quite different musical languages of France, Italy, Germany or the Slavs...For the music we like best, is that which is rooted in our own past, and, until we give people plenty of that, there will be no music in their hearts."

Karen Boring an ethnomusicologist with Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics) says, "Music, although a universal phenomenon, is not a universal language. It carries cultural meaning." Tome Avery with the same organization says, "In Brazil they want their music expressed in their heart language." As I have traveled in several cultures I have observed that Christians in those cultures want Christian music in their own idiom. They do not care for most of the uninspiring American or European music in the heart of Africa, or in the Philippines. The tunes do not speak to their hearts anymore than they do to ours.

In conclusion I want to say that music is as important in the life of the church as is the sermon. If it is expressed in a musical idiom they appreciate, it brings people into the presence of God. You cannot encounter him unless you are in his presence.