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Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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Music and the Christian

How shall we listen?

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Introduction

Music is a pervasive part of contemporary culture. We hear it on elevators, in restaurants, on telephones while we wait for our party to answer, in offices, in hotel lobbies, and in virtually every corner of contemporary life. In fact, it permeates the airwaves so thoroughly we often do not realize it is there.

Television uses music not only in musical programs but also in commercials and program soundtracks. Movies also utilize music to enhance the events shown on the screen. Radio offers a wide variety of music around the clock. The availability of recordings allows us to program music to suit our own listening tastes, and we can hear them in virtually any location. Concerts, especially in large cities, offer a potpourri of music to choose from.

There is also great variation in musical genres. Rock, with its assortment of styles and labels, rap, country and western, jazz, Broadway, folk, classical, new age, and gospel provide us with a dizzying assortment of listening and performing options.

Such permeation and variety provide us with a unique opportunity to practice discernment. Some may think this is unnecessary because they claim to listen only to "Christian" music. Nevertheless, the broader population of the evangelical community spends innumerable hours absorbing music, whether "Christian" or "secular."

I. Christians and the Arts

Why should a Christian be interested and involved in the arts, music in particular? In his excellent work, *Theology and Contemporary Art Forms*, John Newport lists several points that are especially helpful. (Also see *The Christian and the Arts* outline in this notebook.)

The first reason Christians should be interested in the arts is related to the biblical teaching that God reveals and carries on his redemptive purpose in time and history. The Christian community . . . cannot cut itself off from the characteristic artistic vitalities of -- and present. Second . . . the arts give a peculiarly direct access to the distinctive tone, concerns, and feelings of a culture. . . . The artists not only mirror their age in its subtlest nuances, but they generally do it a generation ahead of more abstract and theoretical thinkers. Third . . . the arts focus (in a remarkably vivid and startling way) on the vital issues and themes which are the central concern of theology. Fourth . . . the arts spell out dramatically the implications of various world views. { 1 }

The second, third, and fourth points are especially applicable to music. If music mirrors culture, if it tells us of important issues and themes; and if it shows the implications of various world views, it can tell us a great deal about our culture. Lyrically, music can be used as a medium for criticism, commendation, reflection, questioning, rebellion, and any number of other thoughts or emotions. When the musical language is employed to relay these thoughts or emotions the result can be significant. History is replete with examples of the ways music has been vitally employed within various cultures. One of the more prominent examples of this can be found in the Psalms, where lyrics were merged with music to form a strategic voice for Israel's life. The same is true in contemporary life. The themes of rock, rap, and country music demonstrate how music can be a notable voice for the spirit of a culture, whether for good or evil.

In order to affect our culture we must listen to that voice. We must hear its questions and be sensitive to the needs that cry out for the answers God provides.

2. Judging Music

One of the continuing debates among evangelicals centers on how music is to be judged. Some hold that there is a particular musical style that is distinctly Christian. Others reject such a proposition. Some believe that some musical styles are intrinsically evil. Others reject this. The examples of such conflict are numerous. It is important that we join the dialogue. In the process we will observe several ways we should respond to the music of our culture.

A. *The term "Christian music" is a misnomer.*

1. *The ingredients of music.* Music cannot be declared Christian because of particular ingredients. There is no special Christian musical vocabulary. There is no distinctive sound that makes a piece of music Christian. The only part of a composition that can make it Christian is the lyrics. In view of the fact that such phrases as "contemporary Christian music" are in vogue, this is a meaningful observation. Perhaps the phrase "contemporary Christian lyrics" would be more appropriate. Of course, the lyrics may be suspect doctrinally and ethically, and they may be of poor quality, but the point we are making is concentrated on the musical content.

It is possible that misunderstandings regarding the idea of a Christian music are the product of cultural bias. Our "Western ears" are accustomed to certain sounds. Particular modes, scales, and rhythms are part of a rich musical heritage. When we hear music that is not part of that heritage we are tempted to label it inaccurately as unfit for a Christian's musical life.

2. *Music of different cultures.* We should realize that music is best understood within its culture. For example, the classical music of India includes quarter tones, which are foreign to our ears. They generally sound very strange to us, and they are often played on instruments that have a strange sound, such as the sitar. But we would be guilty of flagrant prejudice if we were to maintain that such music is un-Christian because it does not contain the tones that we are used to hearing.
3. *Music in the Bible.* Another example of the way evangelicals tend to misapply the term "Christian" to music can be understood by reflecting on how music may have sounded during biblical and church history. Significant scholarship has begun to demonstrate that the music of both Old and New Testament history may have been comprised of tonal and rhythmic qualities that were very different from what we are accustomed to in Western culture.
4. *Luther and Calvin on music.* The attitudes of Luther and Calvin toward the use of music show a disagreement concerning the truth of a particular Christian style. Charles Garside provides intriguing insights: "Luther had openly proclaimed his desire to use all available music, including the most obviously secular, for the worship of the church. Calvin, to the contrary, now absolutely rejects such a deployment of existing musical resources." {2} It is obvious that these great men did not agree on the nature of music.

Our musical preconceptions do not die easily, and they seem to recur periodically in church history. Once a style becomes familiar enough, it is accepted. Until then, it is suspect. More recent examples can be found in the controversies surrounding the use of certain instruments, such as percussion and guitars, during worship services, as well as the use of rock music. Evangelicals need to be alert to their biases and understand that "Christian music" is a misnomer.

2. *No Music Is Intrinsicly Evil*

1. *The power of music.* The second proposition is that no musical style is intrinsicly evil, a premise that should be supported by evangelicals.

It is often claimed that music has "power" to manipulate and control us. If this were true, Skinnerian determinism would be correct in asserting that there is no such thing as personal choice or

responsibility. (See the *Human Nature* outline in this notebook.) Music, along with other "powers" found in our cultural settings, would be given credit that is not legitimate. Best and Huttar address this by saying: "The fact that music, among other created and cultural things, is purported by primitives and sophisticates alike to have power is more a matter of the dislocation of priorities than anything else." {3} Such beliefs not only stimulate a "dislocation of priorities," they also stimulate poor theology.

The Bible tells us that early in their relationship David played music for king Saul. On one occasion what Saul heard soothed him, and on another occasion the same sounds infuriated him. In reality, though, the reactions were Saul's decisions. He was not passive; he was not being manipulated on either occasion by the "power" of the music (1 Sam. 16:14-23; 18:10-16).

Much contemporary thinking tends to place the blame for aberrant behavior (sexual misconduct, rebellion, violence, etc.) on the supposed intrinsic potency of music to orchestrate our actions. Some extend this to the point of believing that music is the special tool of Satan, so when such behavior is exhibited he is the culprit. Again, Best and Huttar offer pertinent thoughts. They write: "Ultimately the Judeo-Christian perspective maintains that man is interiorly wrong and that until he is right he will place the blame for his condition outside himself." {4} Admittedly, my point is a subtle one. We must be cautious that we do not imply music cannot be used for evil purposes. But we must realize that the devil goads people who use music; the devil does not empower the music itself.

2. *The example of rock music.* Current controversy among Christians concerning the rhythmic content of "rock" music is an example of the tendency to believe that some musical styles are intrinsically evil. For example, Steve Lawhead has demonstrated that the music of the early slaves probably did not include much rhythmic substance at all. The plantation owners would not have allowed drums because they could have been used to relay messages of revolt between the groups of slaves. This observation is central to the issue of rock music, because some assert that the syncopated rhythm of rock is the product of the pagan African backgrounds of the slaves. In reality, the music of early American slaves centered around the playing of a "banya," an instrument akin to the banjo, and not drums or other rhythmic instruments. {5}

Rock music is not intrinsically evil. It did not originate in a pagan past, and even if it did that would not mean that it is intrinsically evil. Nevertheless, since it has been a prominent and influential part of American culture for several decades, it demands the attention of evangelicals. The attention it is given should begin with the understanding that the problems that are a part of rock do not reside in the music itself; they reside in sinful people who can and

frequently do abuse it. The same can be said about any musical style, or any other art form.

3. *Quality in Music*

Music should be evaluated based on quality. It is true there is no such thing as "Christian music," and it is true that no musical style is intrinsically evil, but these statements say nothing about the quality of music we choose to make a part of our lives. A proposal that includes judgments of quality is a challenging one. Evangelicals will find this especially difficult, because the subject of aesthetics is not a prevalent part of our heritage. (See *The Christian and the Arts* in this section of the notebook.)

Evangelicals tend toward lazy thinking when it comes to analyzing the music of their culture. As Frank Gaebelien has said, "It is more difficult to be thought-fully discriminating than to fall back upon sweeping generalization." {6} There are several factors to be weighed if discriminating thought is to take place.

We should focus attention on the music that is offered within Christian life. This applies not only to music that is heard during times of worship with a gathered church, but during those times when music is heard via radio, compact discs, concerts, and other sources.

Lack of quality is one of the major themes of those who have written about contemporary church music. Harold Best writes: "Contentment with mediocrity as a would-be carrier of truth looms as a major hindrance to true creative vision among evangelicals." {7} Robert Elmore continues in a similar vein: "There are even ministers who feed their congregations with the strong meat of the Word and at the same time surround their preaching with only the skimmed milk of music." {8} If negative declarations such as these are the consensus of those who have devoted ardent attention to the subject, what are the contents of a positive model? The answers to this are numerous. We will only relate some of the insights of one thinker, Calvin Johansson.

1. *Movement*. The first insight refers to movement. Music must move. "The principle here is that music needs to exhibit a flow, an overall feel for continuity, that moves progressively and irresistibly from beginning to end. It is not intended to hammer and drive a musical pulse into the mind." This principle can be particularly applied to the incessant nature of the rock rhythm we have previously discussed.
2. *Cohesion*. The second insight has to do with cohesion. "Unity is an organic pull, a felt quality that permeates a composition so thoroughly that every part, no matter how small, is related."
3. *Diversity*. The third insight relates to "diversions at various levels. . . . Without diversity there would only be sameness, a quality that would be not only boring but also devastatingly static."

4. *Dominance.* The fourth insight concentrates on "the principle of dominance. . . . A certain hierarchy of values is adopted by the composer in which more important features are set against the less important."
5. *Intrinsic worth of each component.* The fifth insight shows that "every component part of a composition needs to have intrinsic worth in and of itself. . . . The music demonstrates truth as each part of the composition has self-worth." {9}

These principles do not contain ideas the non-musician will necessarily understand. Indeed, most of us are not accustomed to using language to discuss the quality of the music we hear other than to say we do or do not "like" it. But if we are going to assess the music of the broader culture accurately, we must be able to use such language to assess music within our own subculture. We must seek quality there.

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