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Mind Games Survival Course Manual



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Music and the Christian

How shall we listen?

Jerry Solomon

III. Music in the Culture

Another factor in musical discrimination applies to the way we approach music outside the Christian subculture. The Christian is free to enter culture equipped with discernment, and this certainly applies to music. (See the *Christianity and Culture* outline in this notebook.) We need not fear the music of our culture, but we must exercise certain cautions.

Assessments of quality also apply here. The Christian should use the principles we have discussed when approaching music of the broader culture. We should also be aware of the blending of music and message, or lack of it. The ideal situation is when both the medium and the message agree.

Too often the music we hear conveys a message at the expense of musical quality. Best explains:

The kind of mass communication on which the media subsist depends on two things: a minimal creative element and a perspective that sees music only as conveying a message rather than being a message. Viewed as a carrier, music tends to be reduced to a format equated with entertainment. The greater the exposure desired, the lower the common denominator. { 10 }

The messages of our culture are perhaps voiced most strongly and clearly through music which is subordinated to those messages. The music is "canned." It is the product of cliches and "hooks" that are designed to bring instant response from the listener. As Erik Routley has stated, "All music which self-consciously adopts a style is like a person who puts on airs. It is affected and overbearing." { 11 } This condition is so prevalent in contemporary music it cannot be overemphasized.

Another concern is found in certain features of what is usually called "popular culture." Music is a major part of pop culture. Kenneth Myers, among others, has asserted certain culture types beginning with "high," diminishing to "folk," and plummeting to "popular." Popular culture "has some serious liabilities that it has inherited from its origins in distinctively modern, *secularized* movements." Generally, these liabilities include "the quest for novelty, and the desire for instant gratification." {12} In turn, these are found in "pop" music.

The quest for novelty is apparent when we understand, as Steve Lawhead states, that "the whole system feeds on the 'new'—new faces, new gimmicks, new sounds. Yesterday in pop music is not only dead; it is ancient history." {13} The desire for instant gratification is the result of the fact that this type of music is normally produced for commercial reasons. Continuing, Lawhead writes that:

Commercialism, the effective selling of products, governs every aspect of the popular music industry. From a purely business point of view, it makes perfect sense to shift the focus from artistic integrity to some other less rigorous and more easily managed, nonartistic component, such as newness or novelty. Talent and technical virtuosity take time to develop, and any industry dependent upon a never-ending stream of fresh faces cannot wait for talent to emerge. {14}



We do not consistently offer God our best when we employ this approach. Additionally, we do not honor God when we make the products of such thinking a consistent part of our lives.

Notes

1. John P. Newport, *Theology and Contemporary Art Forms* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1971), 17-24.
2. Charles Garside, Jr., *The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music: 1536-1543*, by the American Philosophical Society (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, August 1979), 19.
3. Tenney, ed., *Zondervan Pictorial Dictionary*, s.v. "Music," by Harold M. Best and David Huttar.
4. Ibid.
5. Steve Lawhead, *Rock of This Age*, updated and expanded edition of *Rock Reconsidered* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1987), 51-52.
6. Frank E. Gaebelain, "The Christian and Music," in *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 446.
7. Harold M. Best, "Christian Responsibility in Music," in *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand

- Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 402.
8. Robert Elmore, "The Place of Music in Christian Life," in *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 430.
 9. Calvin M. Johansson, *Music & Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1984), 93-95.
 10. *Ibid.*, 412-13.
 11. Erik Routley, *Church Music and the Christian Faith*, with a Foreword by Martin E. Marty (Carol Stream, Ill.: Agape, 1978), 89.
 12. Kenneth Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989), 59-64.
 13. Steve Lawhead, *Turn Back the Night: A Christian Response to Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1978), 97.
 14. *Ibid.*, 98.

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