

ARTICLES

The Christian's Measure of Music

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Music is thought by most authorities to have existed for nearly as long as speech. A rather enchanting paraphrase of Genesis 1 would have us view the beginning even as God gave songs to the birds, rhythm to rippling streams and thunder, and the love songs to "beasts of a kind." Whenever music first appeared, it is certain that man had an early awakening to its possibilities. He found it could express any emotion and successfully run the gamut from the most base to the most sublime.

An obsessive preoccupation of basically egocentric man has long been that of assigning everything and everyone to a "place." This desire to create a rigid structure has been particularly evident in the area of social issues, but the humanities have also come in for their share at the hands of self-styled determinists. One is tempted to wish that a formulated creed could be arrived at for the Christian—a neat prescribed capsule. But, typically, specifics are elusive in music. One is brought instead to a premise which is deeply subtle but nonetheless inescapable: The genius of Christian experience, known to the full, is bound to involve the humanities; therefore, enter music.

The Christian would do well to begin with Fetis' definition of music as "the art of moving the emotions by combinations of sound." Broad as it is, this definition provides a springboard and places music firmly within the boundaries of an art form. The utilization of nature's gifts in a creative sense stimulates the mind to endless surmise regarding the standard for what is worthy or unworthy. Given this start, the scale for measuring the spiritual ministry of music can develop some musical and philosophical validity.

The obvious pitfalls of oversimplification stand out in bold relief as a Christian endeavors to analyze what his own reactions are, or should

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be, in the wide area of music. If he admits at the outset (he is in deep trouble if he does not) that this is a highly subjective area, the prospect is secure for some startling and rewarding discoveries. The "measuring stick" itself may prove to be the problem. Like it or not—use it or not—each person possesses such a device. And it is forever undergoing changes.

Like the famed Revolutionary War general who boasted of knowing only two tunes, the one "Yankee Doodle" and the other "was not," many evangelical Christians seemed able for years, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century, to live in contradictory compartments. Often with a carefully cultivated taste for the best in the other arts, they would permit only the least worthy material musically and textually in their devotional lives, because of the grossly erroneous idea that nothing but the simple and trivial was spiritual.

The Christian, it is safe to assume, is not his own. As a redeemed creature with full access to the rich gifts of the spirit of God, he is given discernment. There are a multitude of ways to amplify this quality, and do it he must. There is also one other highly cogent factor. The Christian lives to serve; if he is in any sense a minister of music, his first thought must not be for his desires, but for the needs and just desires of his associates. This significant principle is apt to change remarkably the aspect of his measuring stick!

One might suppose, superficially, that the basic requirement for the measuring stick would be integrity. In Paul's long list ("think on these things") truth takes its place with purity and goodness. However, the truth component has always led the contemplative soul into trouble. The current "tell it as it is" cult sometimes finds amazing delight in wallowing in a "reality" which is anything but redemptive or elevating. In contrast, and perhaps just as undesirable, religious music can have a saccharine quality which is unnecessarily ethereal; therefore, the balance which indicates the essence of the Christian mystique is always to be sought.

The Christian, before condemning any new forms, finds that he must grant to discovery and the questing spirit its truly delightful due. Among the great procession of venerable saints march a steady train of innovators who easily surround themselves with an aura of "new," worthy music: Gregory the Great, Palestrina, Bach, hymnists like Watts, Luther and Wesley, who brought text and tune together in a phenomenal way. Each of these "greats" launched out in some new direction of major proportions, but neither the direction nor the degree of success could be totally evaluated in the generation that gave rise to the innovation.

How do we decide what is good and to what degree? First, hymns, anthems and oratorios, bound as they are to texts, will aid in establishing

scriptural and doctrinal standards. Then, as we proceed into new adventures with "absolute" music, an analysis of our own subjective reactions after several hearings is not remiss. What does this music say to *my* spirit? The responses may not be easily identifiable—some of the deepest are not, of course. But can they be correlated with worship or at least with wholesome aesthetic experiences? If exposure to better and better music can produce growth in appreciation, how much more will such procedure, carefully nurtured in the new Christian, lead to growth. The process will involve both acceptance of standards set by serious musicologists and a constantly increasing sensitivity to Christian orientation.

We must keep the active verb "communicate" before us. We live now in the heyday of "Soul," expressed in no uncertain sound by Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan and others. The erstwhile blatant Beatles, turned religious, have indicated an interest in the sort of thing typified by Simon and Garfunkel in "God Bless You, Please, Mrs. Robinson." These are not just random voices in the darkness, but insistent efforts to grapple with religious truth in unshackled forms. Father Beaumont's American Folk Mass and Repp's Catholic service and hymns are saying something valid to youth of today, building somewhat on experimental works of both Protestant and Catholic writers for youth in the fifties.

We have not yet entered Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World," but we may expect bombardment with an ever-increasing cacophony of new sounds from now on. Until we hear the "last trump" and participate in the perfect Alleluias of the new Zion, it will behoove us to use the sensitivities God gave us as we listen, participate, and share. We have by no means arrived at Everyman's musical Utopia, as evidenced by the present untenable state of New York's and Atlanta's great Centers for the Performing Arts, and by the fact that the Church is often a place where nothing happens to thrill the soul.

The Spirit of God has a distinctly positive way of making Himself felt if the person communicating is a vessel of experience. This fact is proven over and over in the presentation of Christian music, from the simplest gospel song to the most florid aria. The form, aptly chosen with the spiritual benefit of the hearer in mind, is the answer to effective communication.

Therefore, let "God's Trombones" be heard, let the Statesmen evoke genuine rhythm, let a personal testimony be sung, let a soft folk-rock melody give its straight message, let the congregation find corporate strength in a familiar hymn or a new thrilling setting, and let us, if we wish, find true re-creation in the rejuvenating strains of both popular and classic symphonic forms. But for the Christian, let the measure be one of integrity at least for himself and those in his sphere of influence. God is still

creating. Too glibly has it been stated that every tune has been written. We have no idea what delights yet await us. The greater the variety we find pleasing and edifying as we grow here, the greater could be our thrill of discovery when we hear the perfect music of Eternity.