

Music

R. David Pogge
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Does it matter what kind of music we listen to?

Part 1

God has blessed us with music. From the very first bird that sang in the Garden of Eden, to the Angels that sang to announce Jesus' birth, to the songs that the redeemed will sing for all eternity, good music blesses all who hear it.

There is no question that music can have a powerful influence on people. I doubt that its influence is as strong as some people claim; but I certainly believe that music can affect how a person acts—to some degree. I don't believe that we can blame all the corruption in society on rap or rock music; but I can certainly agree that some songs are unwholesome, might encourage bad behavior, and should not be listened to. So, I consider myself to be uncharacteristically moderate when it comes to the subject of music. With that being said, let me share my personal opinion about what kind of music is appropriate for church and secular listening.

Many people listen to rap songs filled with profanity about killing other people and abusing women. I don't know if that promotes violence or not; but it is disturbing to me that anyone would want to listen to lyrics that are so violent. Several famous rap musicians have been murdered by other rappers; but I can't think of any famous opera star that has been murdered by another opera singer. Regardless of whether rap music causes violent behavior, or is simply the expression of a naturally violent character, the association of violence with the hip-hop culture is certainly stronger than with the opera culture.

Similarly, the screaming that passes for singing, and the frantic, distorted guitar solos in modern rock music, seem to give voice to an angry attitude. The "don't mess with me" attitude is glorified in this kind of music. Admittedly, I don't listen to rap or modern rock if I can help it, so I could be wrong on this point; but those two styles of music don't seem to include very many tender love songs.

Because there was such a controversy about Miley Cyrus' obscene performance at the 2013 VMA show, nobody seemed to notice that Lady Gaga stripped down to a thong and two sea shells during her performance, and then sat in the audience undressed that way for the rest of the performance. But neither of those two things were the worst thing that happened at that awards show. The music video "Same Love," which glorifies homosexuality, was given the award for "Best Video with a Social Message," and the MTV crowd roared in approval. Whether it was a case of "life imitates art" or "art imitates life" is irrelevant. Music and morality go together—and in some cases they have gone somewhere no one should go.

All is not lost. There are some modern, wholesome love songs on country radio. Some of them are happy songs about how wonderful it is to be together. Some of them are sad songs about how much it hurts to break up. In either case, the importance of love and fidelity is emphasized.

Some country songs, for example, "That's What I Like About Sunday," talk about the importance of going to church. God is frequently mentioned in country songs. Some country albums include a favorite hymn performed in country style with a steel guitar and fiddle accompaniment. Many country singers have recorded gospel albums.

Some country songs can make important moral or doctrinal statements without being preachy. For example, consider this song by Trace Adkins about baptism.

[music – Trace Atkins, “Muddy Water”]

Part 2

I doubt Muddy Water has been sung in very many churches. Perhaps it isn't sung in church because of the style of music. Perhaps it isn't sung because of who sings it. Trace Adkins is the same guy who sings “Honky-tonk Bedonkadonk,” so one has to wonder how clean that muddy water really got him.

Trace Adkins may not be a perfect Christian; but who is a perfect Christian? If we only listen to songs performed by perfect Christians, we won't hear any music. Real Christians aren't sinless, but they do try to sin less than non-Christians. We do expect a higher level of behavior from singers of Christian songs, and although country singers tend to be a little rough around the edges, several country singers were among the first to donate their time and money to relief efforts following the recent floods and tornados. Trace Adkins raised a whole lot of money for the Red Cross when he appeared on the Apprentice TV show, and is a prominent supporter of the Wounded Warrior charity.

Country songs with a religious theme can be very powerful because they are presented by someone down-to-earth who the listener can identify with. The message doesn't come from some high-and-mighty preacher. They come from some one with good, but not perfect, moral character. On the other hand, if a spiritual message is sung by someone who lives a blatantly worldly lifestyle, it makes the message of the song sound phony.

In general, it seems like country singers who perform music with a religious theme do tend to be conscious of their responsibility to live a life consistent with their faith. Their witness is particularly effectively when a song like this one, which presents the case for divine creation, is played on secular, country radio stations.

[music – Lee Ann Womack, “There is a God”]

Part 3

Despite the examples of the two songs we have played so far, not all country songs are wholesome. Although there are quite a few country songs that tell of the disastrous results of drinking—they are vastly outnumbered by the number of country songs that revel in the pleasure of getting drunk.

The lesson we can draw from this is that in any given musical style there are wholesome songs and unwholesome songs. It is unfair and unwise to judge a song based entirely on its musical style.

Let's not forget the reason why we are having this discussion. We are talking about the relationship between music and lifestyle. Can music corrupt, and can it ennoble a person? It certainly does seem like there is a general correlation between rap or hard rock music and violent, antisocial behavior, and there is a connection between country music and at least nominal profession of Christianity. Are they Christians because they sing country music; or do they sing country music because they are Christians? It is probably a little bit of both. Certainly more gospel albums have been sold by country artists than by rappers. Music does seem to be related to lifestyle.

Although there are many country songs with positive moral messages, there are a lot of drinkin' and cheatin' songs that would be best to avoid. The point I'm trying to make is simply this: A song is not good or bad simply because it is a particular style of music. Probably the best rule of thumb is to ask yourself if you think Jesus would listen to this song. That's not a perfect rule of thumb because there are probably some misguided people who think Jesus would enjoy listening to a song filled with profanity, racial slurs, and bragging about violent behavior. Hopefully, you have read the Bible enough to know what Jesus would and would not like.

Music does have relevance to our daily lives. It helps us express our emotions. Sometimes it makes us aware of emotions we didn't know we had. Love songs help us express how we feel about someone else. Patriotic songs are great motivators. That's why the armed forces all have bands. Music does have an affect on us.

It is inconsistent to listen to sacred music one day a week, and disgusting, vulgar music on the other six days. We should never be listening to immoral music. That's why Radio 74 plays music with a positive Christian message in a wide variety of styles every day of the week. We should listen to good music at home every day—but in church, the standard should be even higher. So, let's talk about how music affects our spiritual life. In particular, what kind of music is appropriate for church?

Music has always been an important part of worship. A large portion of the Old Testament is the book of Psalms. Psalms were worship songs. Unfortunately, we don't know anything about the rhythm or melody of any of the psalms, and we only know a little bit about the instruments used to play them. There isn't any sheet music from that period, presumably because it wasn't necessary. Everybody knew the melody by heart, and only needed to be reminded of the words to keep the verses straight.

In general, music is a more effective way of conveying emotion than speaking is. Yes, there are some great speakers who can get crowds all fired up; but in general, the spoken word is better for conveying factual information and music is better for creating an emotional response. Combining the spoken word with music is more effective than either alone because the sermon tells you what you need to know and the music encourages you to act on that knowledge.

That's why selection of the music is important. The music should fit with the theme of the service. If the service is celebrating a happy occasion, such as the birth of Christ, the music should be happy. It isn't appropriate to sing a funeral dirge on Christmas Eve. Denominations typically have hymnals with five- or six-hundred songs in them, organized by season or topic, to make it easy for the worship leader to find songs that are, pardon the expression, in harmony with the message.

In some denominations, practically the only time the congregation participates in the service is when they sing a hymn. Congregational participation is important because worship should not be a spectator sport. Without singing, the congregation would just listen to the leaders, and not really be involved (except when the offering plate is passed). Worship is something we all do together—it isn't something done for us by a priest. One of the things we can all do together as a congregation is to sing.

We like to use local, armature music as much as we can on The Word With Us. It gives people who might not be able to give an eloquent sermon a way to express their faith through music. For example, consider this song by Zoe Witzel, who was 8 years old when she sang it for us.

[music -- Zoe Witzel, "10,000 Reasons for My Heart to Sing"]

Part 4

Historically, Music has been an important part of the worship service. In 1 Chronicles chapters 15, 16, 23, 25, 2 Chronicles 5, and several other places, the musicians and instruments are mentioned by name. Here are just a few examples:

David told the leaders of the Levites to appoint their fellow Levites as musicians to make a joyful sound with musical instruments: lyres, harps and cymbals. [1 Chronicles 15:16]

The Levites thirty years old or more were counted, and the total number of men was thirty-eight thousand. David said, “Of these, twenty-four thousand are to be in charge of the work of the temple of the LORD and six thousand are to be officials and judges. Four thousand are to be gatekeepers and four thousand are to praise the LORD with the musical instruments I have provided for that purpose.” [1 Chronicles 23:3-5]

Four thousand, out of 38,000 Levites were church musicians. That’s more than 10%!

David, together with the commanders of the army, set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals. ... All these men were under the supervision of their father for the music of the temple of the Lord, with cymbals, lyres and harps, for the ministry at the house of God. [1 Chronicles 25:1,6]

Musicians were so important, Ezra made them tax-exempt!

You are also to know that you have no authority to impose taxes, tribute or duty on any of the priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers, temple servants or other workers at this house of God. [Ezra 7:24]

David told them what instruments to play, how to play them, and what the songs should say. Please notice that in the Bible text you are about to hear, David said there should be real substance to the lyrics. Worship songs should remind the worshippers about God’s character and what He has done for them. The songs should tell of His miracles and judgments and the covenant He has made with them. The songs should proclaim God’s strength and how God has used that strength on their behalf. Worship songs should remind the worshippers that God is the creator, sustainer, and ruler of our lives. Real theological substance should be conveyed through song.

They were to play the lyres and harps, Asaph was to sound the cymbals, and Benaiah and Jahaziel the priests were to blow the trumpets regularly before the ark of the covenant of God. That day David first appointed Asaph and his associates to give praise to the Lord in this manner:

**Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name;
make known among the nations what he has done.
Sing to him, sing praise to him;
tell of all his wonderful acts.
Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.
Look to the Lord and his strength;
seek his face always.**

**Remember the wonders he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced,
you his servants, the descendants of Israel,
his chosen ones, the children of Jacob.
He is the Lord our God;
his judgments are in all the earth.**

**He remembers his covenant forever,
the promise he made, for a thousand generations,
the covenant he made with Abraham,
the oath he swore to Isaac.
He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant:
“To you I will give the land of Canaan
as the portion you will inherit.”**

**When they were but few in number,
few indeed, and strangers in it,
they wandered from nation to nation,
from one kingdom to another.
He allowed no one to oppress them;
for their sake he rebuked kings:
“Do not touch my anointed ones;
do my prophets no harm.”**

**Sing to the Lord, all the earth;
proclaim his salvation day after day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous deeds among all peoples.**

**For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise;
he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and joy are in his dwelling place.**

**Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering and come before him.
Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.
Tremble before him, all the earth!
The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved.**

**Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let them say among the nations, “The Lord reigns!”
Let the sea resound, and all that is in it;
let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them!
Let the trees of the forest sing,**

**let them sing for joy before the Lord,
for he comes to judge the earth.**

**Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.
Cry out, “Save us, God our Savior;
gather us and deliver us from the nations,
that we may give thanks to your holy name,
and glory in your praise.”
Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting.**

... Heman and Jeduthun were responsible for the sounding of the trumpets and cymbals and for the playing of the other instruments for sacred song. [1 Chronicles 16:5-36, 42]

Some preachers object to the beat, style, or use of certain instruments. It is true that loud rhythmic instruments can excite unwholesome aspects of human nature. But I maintain that way the instruments are used, not the instruments themselves, is the problem. The Bible clearly says that trumpets, cymbals, and plucked stringed instruments were used for sacred songs.

My objection to most Christian Rock music is not the instruments used to play the music—I like the music. It’s the words in Christian Rock songs I object to. It isn’t that the words are untrue; it is that the words aren’t the whole truth. Most praise songs are so narrowly focused that they don’t present the full Gospel. They emphasize a subset of the Gospel that is easily perverted into a counterfeit Christianity.

Most people seem get so enthralled in the music that they pay little attention to what they are singing. If you just read the words of most praise songs without the hypnotizing music, and analyze the theology they convey, you might be shocked.. Granted, there are a few praise songs with appropriate lyrics, but I maintain that there are very few.

Most praise songs fall into one of two categories: About half of them say, in effect, “I’m great because I love God.” The rest say, “I’m great because God loves me.” They are called praise songs—but they are pride songs. They make the worshippers feel better about themselves by appealing to their pride. That’s why so many people love them. It gives them an opportunity to boast about their alleged relationship with Jesus.

Most praise songs don’t have any substance to them. That’s why many only have one verse, repeated over and over. They don’t address sin, judgment, service, humility, honesty, purity, divine protection, repentance, forgiveness, or anything else of importance. They just repeat over and over that God loves me just the way I am, no matter how much I sin, with the subconscious implication that there is no need to repent or even try to keep His law.

The message of nearly every praise song is, “God is love.” “God is love” is the truth; but it is not the whole truth. It is Christianity light. It is Christianity with all the calories taken out. It is Christianity with artificial sweetener. It isn’t harmful because it is poisonous; it is harmful because it isn’t nutritious. It has the appearance of Godliness without any substance.

Earlier in the broadcast Everett read a long passage from 1 Chronicles chapter 16, in which David gave instructions to the musicians as to the subject matter of sacred songs. It was a long passage because it outlined so many subjects that should be addressed in sacred music. It is too long to read again. Please

compare several popular praise songs to 1 Chronicles 16, and I think you will see that they just don't measure up to David's standard.

Granted, there are a few hymns in traditional hymnals that aren't any better, and they should not be sung in church for exactly the same reason. The fact that they were written in an old fashioned style doesn't sanctify them.

Many of the hymns in the hymnal were written by preachers rather than musicians, and it shows. They are unsingable. They should not be part of the worship service, either. If the words really are that good, then write a new arrangement for it, with guitar and drums if you like.

Music is an important part of the worship experience. Music should be performed well, and should reinforce the worship theme of the day.

Remember, the purpose of performing music in church is to worship God—not to show off for an audience, or lull the congregation into a false sense of security with some hypnotic music. God is not honored when the music does nothing more than satisfy the ego of the musician or the listener.

Music can bring the congregation closer to God, and allow the congregation to communicate with God. Any style of music that is consistent with the message is appropriate. Over the centuries, the styles of worship music, and the instruments used, have changed. If the musical style and instruments used convey a pure Christian message, isn't that all that matters?

For example, let's close our broadcast with this song which reminds us that the life we are living now is temporary, and that we should keep our vision on our eternal destiny, when we will sing songs that are unquestionably appropriate.

[music – Michael Harris, “The Holy City”]