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# CARING ABOUT MUSIC IN THE CHURCH

*Larry Warkentin*

*Living in community requires both grace and judgment in order to come to terms with diversity.*

Christians do not gather on Sunday mornings to drink coffee, or have group therapy, or hear an impressive lecture on religion, or admire beautiful art, or listen to well rehearsed music. All of these experiences are available in other settings, and usually with more professional quality. A gourmet coffee shop, a psychologist's office, a university classroom, a museum or a concert hall can usually out-class the typical Sunday morning church gathering.

Christians gather on Sunday morning to worship God; to declare the *worship* of the one true God, the Creator, Sustainer and Savior of the universe. Everything else is secondary. However, the fact that some things in the church are secondary to the central act of worshipping God should never be seen as license for mediocrity in presentation. The Bible does command worshippers to bring to God sacrifices of the highest possible quality. The injunction to concentrate on the *worship* of God is important because it reminds believers to keep their priorities in order. The focus of Christian worship is on God. It is not centered on feelings, or fellowship, or testimony, or even evangelism.

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But worship of God must be expressed in terms and forms that can be communicated and understood by the gathered community. This is why believers spend so much energy and time with what are actually secondary matters. And since unique genetic and environmental backgrounds cause each individual to experience language and meaning differently, these secondary matters often become fuel for misunderstanding.

In truth, we do gather on Sunday mornings to drink coffee (fellowship), to encourage each other (group therapy), to hear a sermon (a biblical lecture), to enjoy beautiful art (church architecture and decorations), and to hear music (choirs, instruments, and congregational singing). The balance between these human activities and their divine goals is not always easy to maintain. That is why some people may fight for their favorite hymn, or song, or style of worship with an emotional intensity that seems out of character with their devotion to God. And we are not the first generation of Christians to get caught up in this tension between the Eternal and the temporal.

It is difficult enough to express ideas in words, but when the medium becomes metaphorical as in poetry, or symbolic as in art and music, the possibilities for misunderstanding become innumerable. No wonder Mennonite Brethren congregations along with most churches around the world are asking questions about modes of worship, especially in relationship to music.

### ***Balance and Excesses in the Church's History***

Music has been a part of the Judeo-Christian tradition since the writings of Moses (Gen. 4:21, Exod. 15:1), the history of David (1 Chron. 13:8), and the epistles of Paul (1 Cor. 14:15). This involvement with music in worship continued in the early Christian church. Most hymnbooks include poems by Clement of Alexandria (170-220 AD) and Synesius of Cyrene (375-414 AD). And music always has required guidance. Music is such an emotional vehicle for the spiritual message that there is danger that the message may be consumed in the medium.

King David gave specific instructions for proper performance of temple music. Lazy church musicians are quick to quote David in Psalm 100 "Make a joyful noise" and just as eager to forget the entire 25th chapter of I Chronicles in which he gives instructions to musicians "trained in music," 288 of whom are listed by name.

St. Paul gives thought-provoking advice to the believers at Corinth when he writes that they are to "sing with the spirit and with understanding" (1 Cor. 14:15). He seems to be keenly aware of) the necessary but potentially dangerous interconnection between ecstasy and intellect. Augustine, the

great fourth-century church leader, writes in his *Confessions* that he was torn between the pleasure and the purpose of music in worship.

Thus I fluctuate between peril of pleasure and approved wholesomeness; inclined the rather (though not as pronouncing an irrevocable opinion) to approve of the usage of singing in the church; that so by the delight of the ears the weaker minds may rise to the feeding of devotion. Yet when it befalls me to be more moved with the voice than the words sung, I confess to have sinned penally, and then had rather not hear music. (Augustine, 195)

And in the early Christian church, abuses associated with music led the Council of Laodicia (367 AD) to prohibit the congregation from singing. Music was to be performed only by the choir of priests, and they were to sing only words from Scripture.

This injunction was the formative influence on music in the Christian church tradition until the time of Martin Luther. Among the many disagreements he had with the Catholic church was his conviction that worship should include congregational singing. His hymns, most notably *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, brought new vigor to the church.

Luther wanted to make music a meaningful experience for the congregation in the worship service. But he was not quite ready for the emotional innovations his own proposal engendered. While Luther was in protective custody at the Wartburg in 1523-24 a group of "enthusiasts" came into Wittenburg. These "schwaermer," as Luther called them, had some connections with the Anabaptist movement and were encouraged by Luther's nemesis, Karlstadt. Their preaching proclaimed more liturgical freedom and emotional exuberance in music than Luther could tolerate. With great vehemence he preached a series of sermons and published an essay denouncing them and drove them from his sphere of influence.

But so it goes, when one brings the disorderly masses into the picture. Due to great fullness of the spirit they forget civil discipline and manners, and no longer fear and respect anyone but themselves alone. This appeals to Dr. Karlstadt. These are all pretty preliminaries to riot and rebellion, so that one fears neither order nor authority (Luther, 105).

### ***The Mixture of Spirit and Intellect in Anabaptist Music***

The Anabaptist movement, which is the 16th-century root from which the Mennonite Brethren church has grown, made its own unique contribution to church music, the *Ausbund*, which was a collection of martyr hymns first published by Anabaptists in 1565. It has the distinction of being the oldest Protestant hymnbook in continuous use. It has gone

through numerous transformations and is still used by many Amish communities. Preceding each text in the book is the title of a melody to which it is to be sung. These tunes were not written down and were apparently familiar to the people. Some of the titles can be identified as contemporary folk melodies, and others, following the example of Luther, were drawn from well known melodies of the Catholic tradition. The melodies have been transmitted by oral tradition from generation to generation for more than 400 years. Over the centuries, these melodies have been highly elaborated and elongated and are sung in a slow chant-like style. It could take as long as 20 minutes to complete the many verses of the longest hymns (Warkentin, 30).

An outside observer might find these hymns confusing and unemotional. Yet the Amish congregations sing them with intensity and obvious inspiration. Their music serves to teach us that the mixture of *spirit* and *intellect* that motivates people is a culture-based phenomenon. What one group may find boring and cold may be moving and warm to another. Because of cultural conditioning one congregation may find satisfaction only in rhythmic melodies with repetitive texts, while another may find fulfillment in stately hymns with complex texts.

Music also appeared significantly in the emergence of the Mennonite Brethren church, which grew from the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition in 1860 in Russia. P. M. Friesen, in *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia 1789-1910*, mentions music and singing as characteristic of the fledgling Mennonite Brethren congregations.

The disequilibrium between emotion and intellect in worship music anticipated by King David, St. Paul, the early Church Fathers, and experienced by Luther, seems to have appeared in Mennonite congregations in 19th century Russia. From 1845 until nearly 1860 a very dynamic and musically gifted revivalist named Eduard Hugo Otto Wuest preached in the region where the Mennonites lived in South Russia. The theme of his message was *free grace* and his emotional presentation drew many enthusiastic followers. Much to his dismay after seven years of preaching, a group of his followers carried spiritual emotionalism farther than he could have anticipated:

Consisting of extremists, these more fanatical than pious people interpreted Wuest's bold ideas and his naively joyous and energetic manner in a distorted way, and when he began to oppose them, at first in a friendly manner, then more earnestly and finally quite decisively, they called him a pharisee who had denied his own gospel. In the fall of 1858, at a conference in connection with a mission festival in Rosenfeld (in Wuest's parish), these "joyous brethren," with a certain Kappes, a former school teacher in the Mariupol colonies, at their head, left the church amidst singing and shouts of joy. Kappes was endowed with an

excellent memory, was a gifted speaker, possessed a rich imagination and wit, and was a good singer. He became the ugliest caricature of Wuest and his worst rod of correction (Friesen, 223).

### ***The Mennonite Brethren “Joyous Movement”***

This outbreak of misdirected enthusiasm occurred two years before the Mennonite Brethren church was formed but it was not easily dismissed. On January 6, 1860 the Mennonite Brethren Church was created when a group of eighteen heads of families signed a “Secession” or “Founding Document.” Not without many difficulties this small beginning developed into an active denomination. And among the new members were some who had been influenced by the “joyous movement.” By 1861 this movement was clearly evident among the Mennonite Brethren. On June 11, 1861 Jacob Becker, a church leader from Rudnerweide, wrote to Johann Claassen, another church leader who was representing the new church in St. Petersburg:

Sunday we were so lively [in Jakob Reimer’s home in Gnadenfeld] that the brethren leaped and danced, while we were near the water [where Jakob Reimer, the owner of the house, was baptized]. Old brother Strauss and several others could not endure it and went into the old grandfather’s house. . . . On the Tuesday evening before Pentecost, Wilhelm Bartel was with us [in Rudnerweide], and we sang outside before the door, giving thanks and shouting for joy with one another. And the world shouted back at us. . . It gathered at the street fence and listened. . . . W. Bartel went out to preach the gospel to them (Friesen, 266).

Jacob Reimer was not so pleased with this emotional display. He wrote to Claassen on June 18:

Brother, I do not wish to accuse anyone, nor am I regarded very highly any more by those who are too much disposed toward the unrestrained expression of joy because I do not retract the statement that I will no longer tolerate such bedlam in my home as took place last Sunday, May 28, in my shed (Friesen, 266).

It eventually became Claassen’s responsibility to gain control of this situation. He began gently in a letter of June 18-20, 1861 by asking them to restrain their behavior because their activities were giving their enemies a cause for criticism.

Dear brother, if you were to shout or rejoice ten times harder than you already do—and if your voice were ten times stronger than it is, God’s mercy would still be greater, higher, deeper, longer and wider than you

could ever shout it out. . . . Of course, I can understand that brothers and sisters filled with new wine cannot leave off shouting. Nor do I demand this of them, for I myself have felt and tasted how kind the Lord is. . . . And so, since things are the way they are, judge and be sober, and do not immediately think, if for some reason you sometimes shout for joy, that Christ, our bridegroom, is therefore lowered one rung in heaven! (Friesen, 269).

By June of 1865 the churches had come to a resolution of the “enthusiastic movement.” Among the agreements read at the Gnadenheim church was this statement:

The wild expressions of joy, such as dancing, were unanimously declared as not pleasing to the Lord; the drum (actually a tambourine), was not to be used any longer since it had caused much offense. Music that had been used in an unseemly, loud, and provocative manner was to be performed in a pleasing and harmonious manner instead. The joy in the Lord should not be prohibited, but everyone was to behave in a manner that “edifies.” (Friesen, p 276)

This rather notorious episode in Mennonite Brethren history was resolved, or at least redirected. But people possess both intellect and emotion. It is not by accident that St. Paul’s injunction in 1 Cor. 14:15 includes both aspects. “I will sing with the **spirit** and I will sing with the **mind** also.” And, therefore, it is not surprising that the present-day church is struggling with this same question. Few people have the self control or grace to eliminate all “secondary” matters from the worship service as do the Silent Quakers. So it is that nearly everyone cares about church music, not because they are concerned with the “art” of music, but because they are concerned with the outcome of its use in worship.

If strong Christians with an unshakable faith and a profound understanding of God’s greatness were the guaranteed product of only one certain kind of music in worship, there would be little argument. Everyone should sing that particular kind of music. And if a particular type of music could be shown to consistently produce weak, misdirected Christians, then it would be easy to discredit it. But, human beings are far too diverse for that and music is much too ambiguous for that. In any case it takes nearly twenty years to see the result of a particular choice and by then no one can prove what is cause and what is effect.

### *Addressing the Disequilibrium of Extremes*

Calvin Johansson, in his recent book, *Discipling Music Ministry*, makes some bold assertions regarding music. For him, certain harmonies,

rhythms and melodies actually have moral significance. He understands the Christian's calling to be one of discipleship, which should be built on discipline, not on emotion or amusement or ego satisfaction. The music he recommends must have characteristics that reflect the same sense of discipline.

In general, music is disciplined to the extent that it moves toward the ascetic. Harmony which is lean, spare, and rather austere is more disciplined harmony than the lavish and rich harmonies of the super-romanticists, the sweetish supper club harmonies of added and parallel seconds, sixths, ninths, and thirteenths, or those associated with barber-shop quartet music with their parallel rising dominant sevenths. These do not have the bite we expect in a disciplined music. Rigor, pungency, and straightforwardness are better suited to ministry than lassitude, sweetness, and insipidness. (Johansson, 71).

The unique thing about Johansson's book is that he devotes his attention to the nature of music, whereas most church music writers concentrate on the words. His thesis is nearly impossible to prove scientifically but his observations are persuasive.

A thoroughgoing discipleship has an equilibrium that avoids extremes, emphasizing necessity instead of indulgence, simplicity rather than extravagance, sparseness instead of excess, clarity not garishness, creativity in place of banality, straightforwardness rather than sentimentality, and honesty above manipulation.... Disciples are neither flagellants nor revelers, but biblical ascetics. (Johansson, 64)

Donald P. Hustad, former organist for Billy Graham, has written a provocative article entitled "Let's Not Just Praise the Lord." He warns that some simple songs may lead to shallow views of worship. He contrasts the praise chorus "Let's Just Praise the Lord" with the hymn "Praise to the Lord the Almighty". It is clear in his analysis that the hymn "wins" and the chorus "loses." But the outcome might be just the opposite if a single-issue hymn like "Wonderful Grace of Jesus" were compared with a chorus like "I Will Sing of the Mercies of the Lord." The hymn concentrates on the individual's problems and how Jesus is going to make everything feel good, while the chorus concentrates on the Lord with words drawn directly from Scripture.

Such debates could go on endlessly, and they are in fact going on endlessly. The test is not in the music, but in the strength of the faith it encourages. Strong faith balances emotion and intellect, and strong music balances emotion and intellect. The shape of this balance between the heart and the mind is primarily determined by the culture in which one lives (environment) and to a smaller degree by genetic inheritance (psychologi-

cal predisposition). It may appear in our era that the balance is controlled by generational differences, that young people are inclined to favor the emotional and elders favor the intellectual, but this is not necessarily so. Not all young people find satisfaction in rhythmical, high energy Christian music. And not all adults find satisfaction in restrained, intellectual chorales.

The high-energy songs of a Christian group like *Petra*, enjoyed by many young people, may at first hearing seem to be overboard on the side of emotion. But upon closer study, one finds that their songs have greater intellectual content than do most gospel songs, loved by the older generation. A recent study of this group's fifteen albums including 110 songs, showed a great variety of topics: "Living what we believe" is the subject of thirteen songs; "The sinfulness of man" 8 songs; "Encouragement in the faith" 7 songs; "Spiritual warfare" 5 songs; "Praising God" 5 songs (plus an entire album called *Petra Praise* devoted to this topic). Their imagery is free of 19th century religious cliches. It is direct, relevant, and challenging, as is illustrated by the following text:

Everything that you do and see, one more event in your memory.  
 Every bit takes another bite without control over wrong or right.  
 You must screen every entry made, the consequences must be weighed.  
 The only way to security is every thought in captivity.

#### CHORUS

Computer brains, put garbage in,  
 Computer brains, get garbage out.  
 Computer brains, programming you.  
 Computer brains, what can you do. Break out!

Are you a user or being used; has your memory been abused.  
 Take random samples from your mind and analyze what you may find.  
 You can clear all memory and be transformed when you find the key.  
 Think on the things that will bring you peace,  
 Confusing data soon will cease. (McCalister)

*Petra* and other groups of similar style have retained a "Christian" identity by concentrating their message on Christian themes. Some contemporary musicians, notably Amy Grant, have chosen to move into the secular arena. She began her career singing in churches and accompanying herself with a guitar. Today she travels with a band of musicians, a group of back-up singers, tons of light and sound equipment requiring several semi's and buses for transport. And she performs in the same venues and sometimes on the same programs with strictly secular groups. She does try to slip in a soft-sell Christian message, but her songs now seem

to have more “baby babies” than “Praise the Lord’s.” Her justification for her action is that she is doing exactly what many youth workers do. They provide recreation, social activities, and refreshments and then slip in the gospel message (Esau).

Amy Grant and *Petra* represent two extremes in the Contemporary Christian music world. But the challenges of church music extend to every corner of the Christian world. The Roman Catholic church opened a door which had been closed for nearly a thousand years when the Vatican II decisions were announced in the late 1960’s. The Council decided that Latin would be used only by clerics, and that the corporate act of worship would be performed in the vernacular.

The church leaders were aware that an entirely new body of music would need to be created. They instructed composers to create music of high caliber which complements the meaning of the text and challenges the believer to grow in faith (Abbott).

The challenge for all believers is to grow in the faith. Healthy growth requires both comfort and challenge; the Comforter and the Creator; **spirit** and **understanding**. The caution for all believers who express their worship through music is to maintain a healthy balance between these two important aspects of existence. They are not opposites, but rather two parts of the same being, just as the Comforter and the Creator are one. The two must always be present and must support each other. Churches that try to have one “praise” service and one “traditional” service must remember that both services must be tested by Paul’s injunction. The most exuberant expression of ecstasy must be tested by the intellect. And the most intellectual expression has no value if it cannot touch the heart.

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