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# CONFESSIONS OF A CHURCH MUSICIAN

Larry Warkentin \*

On my library shelf are three books about music history. One contains an analysis of what is called "classical music." It begins with the obscure musical philosophies of the ancient Greeks, then traces the music of the medieval church composers, the sophisticated compositions of courtly musicians, and the emotional symphonies of the nineteenth century romantic composers.

The second book traces the simple songs of English and American folk music. No famous composers are mentioned. No dominating styles and schools of thought are reviewed. No epoch making works are analyzed. Rather, the book speaks of human feelings and emotions as expressed in clear and straightforward words and tunes.

The third book is a study of American popular music. The author introduces charismatic performers and writers who have caught the imagination of various generations. He writes about advertising techniques, ever-changing hit parades, and the chameleon character of public taste.

Scholars spend lifetimes dividing, sifting, categorizing, and organizing; and it is interesting to observe how neatly these writers have separated their subjects. It all seems clear cut and logical until one meets an exception. One soon learns that for every system of genders there is a hermaphrodite. And when the classification system is too rigidly accepted, the deviant is castigated.

How should we react when we meet with music that does not seem to fit any of the usual categories? We can condemn it. Or we can exploit it like a freak in a side show. We can attempt to press it into one of the traditionally accepted molds and hope that its peculiarities will disappear. Or we can watch it for awhile to see if it can survive and reproduce its own kind. Then it can become a new type, a new species.

It seems to me that much of the church music that has developed since the late nineteenth century does not fit the usual categories. I would like to have another book, yet unwritten, on my library shelf. It would be a study of church music since 1950.

How would the author delineate his subject? Traditionally, books on church music have spoken about Gregorian Chant, or hymnology, or the works of leading composers. Some have even written about the late nineteenth century gospel songs or folk songs and choruses for children. But the author of the book I have in mind would have to discuss religious rock music and the sentimental cantatas which are heard by thousands in churches each Christmas and Easter.

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In my travels as a church choir director I have discovered two well-defined attitudes concerning this new music. Everyone, young and old, asks me what I think of it. One group obviously hopes I will give them a decisive insight that will condemn this style and forever ban the pulsing woofers and piercing tweeters from their sanctuary. The other group asks with a defensive glint in their eye which suggests that I had better pronounce my blessing on the new trend or forever be branded as an outdated classical relic. I seldom have time to give a complete answer because my questioners usually wander away when they realize the response is more than a simple “yes” or “no”.

In the paragraphs that follow I would like to present my answer. It is, of course, an answer that is in progress; and I expect it to change as my experience broadens. But it does reflect a great deal of reflection and contemplation. But first I would like to tell the story of a young musician whose experience may help to define the problem more clearly.

This past summer I became acquainted with a young man who had chosen music as his life’s vocation. He wanted more than everything else to dedicate himself and his musical talents to the work of Christ. And yet he was experiencing tremendous conflict in his church work.

With a voice nearly choking with emotion he related to me the tensions within his church. The young people and some of the more “with-it” parents were excited with the new type of music that is spreading across the country. The older people and some of the more “serious minded” young people were convinced that the stately and solid hymns should be the basis for church music. A small but influential group were insisting that the congregation be exposed to the “more refined” types of classical music. And somewhere in between were advocates of gospel songs, choruses, and simple folk music. The story, which follows, is presented with his permission.

My parents were not particularly musical, but they loved the Lord and they loved church music. From the time I learned “Jingle, Jingle Happy Bells, Jesus Is Born” in the cradle roll class until I learned “It Is No Secret, What God Can Do,” I never missed a Sunday in church. Even on vacation we would always find a church or Sunday School.

One of my most thrilling mornings away from home was the weekend we spent in Long Beach and attended the Sunday morning broadcast of the “Old Fashioned Revival Hour.” There, for the first time in my life, I heard, in person, my ideal church pianist. When we got home from that vacation I spent hours at the piano until I could play “Heavenly Sunshine” with the same flair and spirit as the accompanist on that broadcast.

There followed several years in which I found real purpose and satisfaction providing music at church services, Rescue Mission services, and banquets. Some problems began to develop, but they were not too serious. My piano teacher gave me Beethoven to work on, and the church music committee wanted variations on “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Once I played a Polonaise by Chopin in a Sunday evening service and one kind gentleman told me that it bothered him because he didn’t know the words to that song.

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But the real blow came when a music teacher whom I greatly respected said, “That pianist on the Old Fashioned Revival Hour is probably the worst worship service pianist in the world.” I was so angry that I wouldn’t speak to that teacher for a week. But then I began to think.

Is there a difference between a radio revival service and a Sunday morning worship service? If this were true, then I would have to tailor my music to suit the occasion. Perhaps this was the answer. And for some time this was a satisfactory explanation. Different types of services needed different types of music.

However, as I continued to practice, and my technical ability began to expand, I found greater satisfaction in Beethoven and Chopin than I did in “Heavenly Sunshine” and “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Finally, the invitations to play in church became fewer and fewer. With a few more years of training in music I was asked to direct a church choir. “Here at last I will be able to serve,” I said to myself. Choir music must have words. If the words are powerful and are clearly expressed, then the congregation will find a basis for blessing. And so I chose anthems that had significant texts, usually based on scripture; and I also chose music that reflected significant musical thought. The first year things went fine. But after that the choir began to dwindle to a devoted few, the comments from the congregation began to be filled with suggestions about familiar tunes and the desire for “lighter” anthems, and even the pastor lovingly suggested that we needed to minister to all segments of the congregation.

Then the church hired a youth minister. It seemed like a good idea when he decided to start a youth choir. After all, it would be healthy for the adult choir to have experienced young singers moving up in a few years. And was he ever successful! One of the “with-it” parents, who happened to have adequate finances, gave him *carte blanche*. He bought an expensive sound system, pre-recorded musical backgrounds, and bright outfits for the youth choir. In three weeks he had fifty singers—some from our church and many from neighboring churches. They sang at special meetings. They traveled to a special conference in Texas, and they began making plans for a trip to Hawaii.

About December of that year I got an anonymous note suggesting that my choice of a Bach cantata for the choir’s Christmas program was the most disastrous thing that ever happened to Christmas. I could have fought. Any musician knows that there is nothing wrong with the music of a Bach cantata, and any theologian who cares to study Bach’s text would agree that it is appropriate. But I had doubts. What if I was really out of step with the times? What if a Bach cantata was the right thing in the wrong place?

If the controversy it caused was greater than the blessings it provided, then it wasn’t a good choice.

I read books about educating the congregation, about introducing a new hymn each month, about choosing anthems that related to the sermons; but somehow I couldn’t get rid of the feeling that what the

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church really wanted was the musical equivalent of hotdogs because they didn't want to take the time to enjoy a steak dinner.

I hung on until spring. Then I decided that I would find a church where I wasn't known as a musician, a church where I could worship and participate without causing problems. Certainly I should be able to separate my vocation of music from my participation in a church. I would work with music during the week just as a brick layer does his job, and then on Sunday I would come and worship.

But I'm not happy with that decision. I feel there is so much that worshippers are missing. What can I do?

How do we handle diversity in a church congregation? How do we meet the needs of the highly trained musician and at the same time minister to the typical "folk" musician in a congregation?

One solution would be simply to remove all music from the service. But the history of worship in the Bible and the testimony of every worshipping tribe and civilization known to ethnomusicologists tell us that music is an essential ingredient of worship.

Another solution would be to compromise—to find some style of music that is somewhere in between: neither too sophisticated nor too common. This would be doomed to failure from the beginning. Another compromise, equally doomed, would be for each segment of the church to have a time for its favorite musical experience. But this tends to divide and splinter the congregation rather than give it the unity described in the New Testament.

*I would suggest that the question is not "Shall we have hymns, or rock, or country western music in the church?" The question should be "What kind of hymns, or rock, or country western music should we have?" The Bible teaches those who follow Christ to strive for that which is "true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, excellent, and worthy of praise." Does the music we use, in church and out of church, reflect this ideal? Can our musical favorites stand the following tests?*

IS IT TRUE? Can the music stand the test of time? Truth requires more than a sense of contemporary convenience. That which is true should be appropriate in a variety of times and locations. Negative examples would be hymns that imply mistruths such as "Far, Far Away, in a Heathen Darkness Dwelling," which makes us feel good about where we live and casts suspicion on those who live in distant places. Perhaps this hymn was more true in 1886 when Mr. McGranahan wrote it. But I suspect that not all the "heathen," even in the late nineteenth century, lived far away. It certainly is not true today.

A more contemporary example would be those songs and musicals that over-emphasize the "imminent return" of our Lord. I meet more and more young people who firmly believe that the second coming will take place during their lives. Truths, even glorious truths like that of Christ's return, can be so emphasized that they lead to what is untrue. History is full of stories of individuals and groups who have made a mockery of Christian faith by setting limits and time schedules to the message of the Bible. Fads lead to the development of abnormalities. They also provide the opportunist and the egotist a theatre in which to flourish.

Pilate knew he was posing a difficult question when he asked, "What is Truth?" But it is an important question and we must constantly be working out an answer. And the fact that the perfect answer will not be found on this earth should not make us impotent. We must continue searching, and we must continue working.

IS IT HONEST? This is a slightly different question from "Is it true?" Honesty is a more personal matter. Something may be true in a broader context, but it may not be honest for an individual to say it. An unbeliever may write a Christian musical that presents a true message, but his motivation may be dishonest. I am tempted to cite the example of "Jesus Christ Superstar." The message of this rock opera, when carefully studied, is true. But the motivation behind it is largely the desire to produce a flamboyant, successful, entertaining, profitable, theatrical event. In one sense, at least, the work is honest. The creators of it do not pretend that it was intended to be a profound Christian work. Their aim was to create a successful theatrical event. And they succeeded.

But is it honest for everyone to show Christ as a simple clown-like character? Is it an honest understanding of scripture to portray characters as such clear-cut types: Mary Magdalene as the hardly converted prostitute whose every thought is physically motivated. Herod as the arch-typical glutton, Judas as the political activist. Life is not usually so clearly defined. In fact, one of the strengths of scripture is its portrayal of true humanity as a mixture of good and bad.

And honesty is called into question at an even more significant level. What motivates the planners of church services? Is a profound spiritual experience their concern? If so, then why is their conversation so often filled with terms such as "entertainment," "preliminaries," "guest artist," and "special number"?

I know of a church which requires auditions for "performers" in the Sunday evening service. Is it any surprise that Sunday evening attendance is small when there is no special feature? Better entertainment can be had on television at home!

What is honest about a musical group that depends on pre-recorded tapes, flashy outfits, and professionally modulated sound systems to bring off an "impressive performance." There is just about as much honesty there as in the painted face of an aging actress.

And why do the congregations condone all this? Some, for fear of being called out-dated. Some, because they see how happy the young people look. Some, so their church will be as "with-it" and "spiritual" as other churches in town. And some, because it is fun. Yes, it is fun. It sends chills up your spine.

One pastor described it to me as bait. "Like a good fisherman we must always have the right bait," he said. After all, a fisherman does not have to eat worms; he uses them to catch fish." One hardly needs to comment on the gross dishonesty of this idea. Nor does one have to stretch his imagination too far to envision the type of appetites found among this angler's congregation.

Paul never used a "sales" approach to the gospel. He did start with the simple milk of the Word and then progress to the tougher roast beef. I doubt that he would have tried to entice anyone with Dr. Pepper.

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Honesty follows truth and is subservient to it. Truth is not modulated by honesty, but honesty is the practical application of truth in a given context.

**IS IT JUST?** This question has two thrusts. On one hand it asks for the fair and the equitable, and on the other it raises the whole spectrum of righteousness and justification.

The music program of a church can take an inordinate amount of a congregation's energy, time, and finances. Only a few churches can justify the purchase of a \$200,000 pipe organ, or the hiring of an orchestra for a major performance. Some churches can justify a complex music program with choirs for all age groups. But in all these cases this effort must be balanced by equal efforts in other Christian activities.

Actually, many churches in my experience have erred in the opposite direction. Too often they have no person to guide in the understanding of musical expressions. The singing of the congregation, the playing of the organ, and the singing of individuals and choirs make up nearly half of the time spent in worship. Who guides growth in these activities? Will I request the same hymn for my funeral that I learned at my first communion? Does the love song from the latest Hollywood movie express the love I share with my bride? Justice calls for a fair amount of concern and effort and education in the understanding of hymns and other music in the church.

The other meaning of "just" is theological and I must leave the larger discussion of this topic to theologians. Perhaps it is enough to remember that the words we say, the notes we sing or play, and the attitudes with which we do these must stand before the judgment of God. In one sense this is the very heart of what I am trying to say in this article. We must be conscious of what we are doing with music in the church. Just because we may not be musically educated we are not free from a sense of responsibility for our activities in music. By our fruits we shall be known. What comes out of our mouths reflects what is in our hearts. It does not necessarily follow that we will have to eliminate certain styles of music from our churches, but we can not escape the necessity for responsible judgment simply by disguising our words and actions with melody, harmony, and rhythm.

On the whole, the Bible encourages the expression of spiritual ideas in music. The Psalmist, for example, calls us to praise God with all manner of instruments and dance. But even the Psalmist tells us that music is not always appropriate. Psalm 137 says, "We hanged our harps upon the willows," and "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" It seems there are times and places where music is not to be used. And the example of Salome, whose seductive dance earned her the head of John the Baptist, should remind us that music and dance can be misused. It is not likely, nor is it even desirable, that an index of acceptable styles could be published. But we must be alert and sensitive.

**IS IT PURE?** Can music be pure? or is it our use of it that must reflect purity?

When we speak of purity in music we are not talking about the beauty of a melody or the clarity of a violin's tone. Pure music is music that tends to be free from the baggage of past history. We have to face the past history with which we associate a melody. The tune for "My Country 'tis of Thee" means

something different to a British citizen than it does to a United States citizen. The rollicking rhythms and subtle turns of phrase found in “post-Beatles” music might mean one thing to a parent whose teenager had been drawn into dope by this movement and quite another to a teenager who found Christ through the ministry of a “gospel-rock” group.

The fact is that no music can be truly free of a past history either in its usage or in its style. So the question of purity must go back to the question of honesty.

But what of our spirit and attitude in our use of music? Jesus taught, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” The purity spoken about was a singleness of heart; spirit that is unencumbered by divided loyalties or by compromise and deceit.

Solists who stand before a congregation must search their hearts and must evaluate their motivations. This is no place for the enjoyment of personal delight, for the display of technique, for the thrill of a grand climax. Purity is the singleness of purpose found in the praise of God. The pure heart seeks not merely the gifts of God but seeks God himself.

IS IT LOVELY? Paul does not overlook any of the great philosophical questions. What is beauty? Thousands of pages have been written on this question and a whole category of philosophy called aesthetics has developed around it. So has a good bit of folk wisdom: “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” and “I know what I like and I like what I know.”

I wonder why the translators of the King James Version chose the word “lovely” instead of “beautiful.” In order to save us a time-consuming detour into philology, we shall assume that they chose the word “lovely” for several reasons. “Lovely” clearly has meaning for both that which is loved and the one who loves. It also carries with it the profound meanings associated with love for God and love between persons on this earth.

When we apply the question “Is it lovely?” to church music, we are first of all asking, “Is it worthy of love?” Can we really presume to answer this question? I think so. At least in part.

The kind of music one loves is often an indication of one’s inner thought life. Leonard Meyer suggests in one of his books that music, like language, is a system of patterns and conclusions. In language we set up a certain pattern and we learn to anticipate its logical conclusion. We do not always know when a sentence will end, nor exactly what it will communicate; but we do expect it to have a subject and an action, a noun and a verb.

Music also sets up certain patterns of expectation. Meyer’s theory is that persons who need immediate satisfaction, who are made uncomfortable by prolonged delay of an anticipated conclusion, will relate most closely with music that is presented in short, balanced, predictable units. Much popular music is of this sort; so is much of the music of folk cultures. Much classical music, particularly music of the twentieth century, requires a longer delay before the anticipated conclusion is reached.

When applied to the question at hand, this theory does not suggest that one type of music is more worthy of love than another, but it does imply that we can grow in our love for music. It also indicates that the music one chooses

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to hear should provide an opportunity for growth. Music should challenge my mind. It should invite reflection and it should provide new insights each time I hear it repeated. It should also have the potential to elevate my thoughts and heighten my sensitivity. Music which dulls the senses and permits me to escape from the reality of my existence, either through hypnotic repetition or excesses of rhythm or dynamics, does not serve a constructive function.

There is a difference between puppy love, courtship, and marriage. And there is a difference between honeymoon love and silver wedding love. This difference is the result of growth. This kind of growth does not just “happen.” It takes conscious effort and, at times, self denial.

Growth is not always an easy experience. It is not by chance that we have the term “growing pains” in our vocabulary. For me, opening and reading a new book is frequently an awesome and frightening experience. I am frightened because I have an aversion to difficult words and complex sentences and because experience has taught me that behind that ominous syntax confusion or emptiness often cowers. Mostly, however, I am afraid that the exercise of discovery will lure me away from the conformity on which my security is too much built. But if I want to grow, I must “grow in understanding.” And the music I love must be able to nourish that growth.

Some of the “new music” being promoted by church music publishers is what I would call “movie starlet” music. It comes with a flashy cover, a well-developed promotional brochure, and a rhythmical accompaniment. Who can resist!

But is our “movie starlet” truly lovely—that is, worthy of love? Will she be a faithful fiancée and a fulfilling bride? Will she have the depth of character and strength of personality to build a marriage that grows in meaning and joy throughout life?

Let us go to the second aspect of “lovely,” the aspect that refers to the one who loves. What kind of lovers are we? Do we want immediate fulfillment? Do we pursue that beauty which is only skin deep? Are we easily swayed by first impressions? Or do we honestly yearn for greater understanding?

In terms of music, this does not mean that we should grow toward sophistication, but rather toward an understanding maturity. Those who truly understand and love music are not exclusive. Understanding does not narrow one’s vision, it broadens and clarifies perception. The sophisticate is looking for status. He wants to be invited to a party not so much to enjoy the event but to feel that he is someone set apart, someone special. The person who truly loves music embraces all of it that is lovely.

IS IT OF GOOD REPORT? I mentioned something about the “historical baggage” associated with music in the discussion of purity, but I should like to add a few comments. Just because a tune has a questionable past does not mean that it cannot be used in the church. In the sixteenth century the reformers often borrowed secular folk tunes for their newly written hymns. Martin Luther is supposed to have said, “I regret that the devil got this tune first, but that will not keep me from using it for God’s glory.” And worshippers in my grandfather’s generation did not hesitate to sing “Wir warten auf den

Heiland bis er kommt” to the tune of “She’ll Be Coming Around the Mountain When She Comes.”

But we cannot deny the danger of guilt by association. We must know and empathize with our congregation. I learned this lesson in a dramatic way during a choir tour in Europe. We were presenting a concert in a castle high on a wooded hill in Austria. The foundations of the castle were laid in the twelfth century and the walls of our rehearsal room were fifteen feet thick. As the concert hour approached we saw people from the quiet village below begin winding their way up to the concert room.

I had arranged for the perfect prelude. Austria was the country of Franz Joseph Haydn. Haydn was the composer of the tune “Austrian Hymn” which is found in most Protestant hymnbooks. So I had one of the students play Haydn’s variations on this tune for the prelude.

Just as the prelude began our host nervously called me aside and reminded me that the tune “Austrian Hymn” had been appropriated by the Hitler regime as the German national anthem and its stirring refrain “Deutschland Ueber Alles” had been sung in this very castle when the Nazis occupied Austria. What could I do?

But the story does not end with disaster. The choir sang and the audience responded with enthusiastic applause. And at the reception that followed we sensed a warmth and love and unity we had not expected. The people had forgiven my lack of sensitivity and I learned a new fact.

Surely this is how unity is achieved in the church. Not through compromise or division, but through love that is willing to deny itself when appropriate, and love that is willing to learn and grow.

In conclusion, Paul summarizes his principles for Christian living with two grand statements, which will serve as my conclusion as well: “If there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, fix your mind on these things.”