

What is Christian in Music?

Terry B. Ewell
West Virginia University



Terry B. Ewell is Chair of the Division of Music at West Virginia University and Associate Professor of Bassoon and Music Theory. He holds a Ph. D. in Music Theory from the University of Washington. He has performed as Principal Bassoon of the Hong Kong Philharmonic, the Wheeling Symphony, the West Virginia Symphony Orchestra. He has recorded for Musical Heritage Society, Hong Kong Records, Pickwick Records, and Cambria Records. His writings appear in the *NACWPI Journal*, *The Double Reed*, the *International Double Reed Journal*, and *Scrapes*. He is the author of the Bassoon-Family Fingering Companion on the World Wide Web: <http://idrs.colorado.edu/bsnfing/finghome.htm>.

Recent attempts by evangelicals to define Christian music as opposed to secular or "worldly" music have highlighted the complex relationship between the Christian faith and music. Most if not all Christian denominations share the view that music should be selectively chosen for worship services, mass, communion, personal listening, etc. The difficulty, however, lies in the criteria by which the choices are made: precisely what is it that makes Christian music "Christian?" This paper presents a brief overview of some historic and contemporary criteria for Christian music. It then proposes ethical principles for musical activities based upon an analogy to food or drink. My assumptions for the paper are not just theistic (as in Muslim, Jewish, etc.) but more precisely Christian. Thus, I make use of doctrines and select passages drawn from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible as a foundation from which to draw conclusions in this paper.

A Very Brief Historic Summary

The Christian church of the first two centuries sought to avoid any mixing of pagan musical practices with their own religious experiences. Clement, for instance, forbade the singing of psalms and the reading of Scriptures in profane meetings so that Christians would not be confused with the "wandering minstrels, singers and tellers of tales of high adventure, who perform their art for a mouthful of bread." [1] All instruments were banned from Christian worship due to their association with pagan ceremonies and the low reputation of instrumental musicians. Although there are numerous references in the Old Testament to instrumental accompaniment in Jewish worship, by the end of the first century even the Jews no longer featured instruments in their liturgy. Musical instruments were absent from the synagogues since the Exile, and with the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD instruments disappeared from Jewish liturgy altogether.

Unlike the mystery cults that believed in the power of musical incantations, the early church Fathers affirmed that the word (*logos*) held primacy over the music. The early church Fathers often admonished musicians to keep the words audible and to avoid excessive musical elaboration. Solo songs and unison chants were preferred features of musical worship in that day. Writings by Basil indicate that men, women, and children all participated in singing.[2] The texts for the songs were based upon Old Testament scriptures (principally psalms) or drawn from Christian doctrine found in writings comprising the New Testament.

One distinguishing feature of the early church was its devotion to musical improvisation often connected with charismatic utterances. In the first letter to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul writes about singing with the spirit (I. Cor. 14:15). Tertullian later noted that in second-century Christian gatherings, "anyone who can, either from holy Scripture or from his own heart, is called into the middle to sing to God." [3] In succeeding centuries, however, this musical improvisation was abandoned in favor of a codified collection of chants or melodies.

Church music changed in several respects in the next millennium. In the ninth century part-singing contained two melodic lines sung in fifths or fourths. Centuries later independent melodies were sung in counterpoint to the main vocal line. At first instruments were introduced into Christian worship sparingly. One of the first instruments in liturgical services was the organ, which would reinforce the main melodic line--the tenor part.[4] Later other instruments were introduced, but not just because they were popular in secular settings. In the 1500s the violin was considered an instrument appropriate only for dances or weddings, yet within a century it displaced its string counterpart of the viol family and became an important instrument in sacred music.[5] By the sixteenth century instrumental music was fully welcomed in Christian liturgy and a variety of instruments would often perform with or without soloists or choirs. St. Mark's cathedral in Venice, for instance, boasted two organs and "orchestras" of wind and string musicians.

The Reformation and Counter-Reformation greatly changed music of Lutheran and Catholic churches. Martin Luther took an active part in the preparation of a new repertoire of church music, with congregational singing encouraged. The Lutherans set German texts to new melodies and Catholic hymns. The use of *contrafacta*, that is the setting of Christian text or poetry to secular music, was widespread among Lutherans at this time. The Catholic church at the Council of Trent reacted unfavorably to the new German songs in part because some of these texts, such as the original text of *Ein Feste Burg*, condemned the papacy and customs of the Catholic church.[6] The Council of Trent also sought to restore piety to the liturgy by banning "compositions in which there is an intermingling of the lascivious or impure, whether by instrument or voice" and by asserting that nothing may be sung in church unless it is taken from Sacred Scripture, or is at least in accord with it.[7] As a result of the Council of Trent the Catholic church censored music and musicians more vigorously.

This overview of music in the Christian church while far from comprehensive does provide us with some points of discussion. In its nearly two millennia of existence the Christian church has employed roughly four criteria to determine what music is appropriate for Christian worship. These are instrumentation, style, lyrics or song text, and judgments concerning the results of the music. Although the context of music in contemporary churches may widely differ from historic

churches, the same criteria have surfaced in current discussions. Briefly let's explore a few examples.

A Brief Summary of Music in Contemporary America

Instrumentation is a critical issue for many of our churches today. For instance, the *Digest of Regulations and Rubrics of Catholic Church Music* written in 1961 states that, "The use of the piano is forbidden in church as also that of all more or less noisy instruments, such as drums of any kind, cymbals, bells, and so on." [8] While many churches today accept the piano as a suitable instrument, percussive instruments are often excluded from worship. Similarly electric guitars and saxophones bear the stigma of popular culture and they are seldom found except in the most "progressive" denominations.

The success of Christian artists with both religious and crossover hits in the recording industry highlights issues of musical style and lyrics. Pastors and priests, families and churches struggle to discern the hazy demarcation between unsuitable secular music and music that is appropriate for private listening or for church services. Some churches have purged all traces of popular music, while others, however, appear to embrace it by singing secular tunes recast with Christian lyrics. The reuse of secular melodies bears a similarity to the contrafacta of Luther's time. Some may view a style of rock music or heavy metal appropriate so long as the lyrics are Christian in nature, yet others would consider this music a mockery of Christianity.

Last of all the "good fruit" criteria is commonly employed by some Christians to determine appropriate music. The good fruit criteria is based upon biblical passages such as Matthew 7:17-20 and James 3:9-13 that state that only good fruit can come from good trees and fresh water from a good spring. Proponents of this criteria assert that the product of the music, such as conversions to Christ or a more fervent religious life in a listening believer, provide evidence of the music's suitability. Since the result of the music is good, the music itself must be good. They may also assert that only Christians are able to produce Christian music.

Our overview of Christian musical history and our brief assessment of music in American churches today clearly does not reach consensus on all four criteria of instrumentation, style, text, or good fruit. Acceptable instrumentation differs from church to church and styles of music greatly vary. The good fruit criteria is problematic, for some music may benefit one Christian yet harm another. Thus, the music could be said to bear both good and bad fruit. For the most part Christians have agreed only on the criteria of text: words should be biblically based or in accord with Christian doctrine and theology.

Upon examining the musical choices of Christian churches today and in the past, a skeptic might convincingly assert that apart from text there is no element or elements that make certain music distinctly "Christian." The criteria by which Christians have chosen music is ambiguous at best and sometimes even contradictory. Yet I and perhaps others are not comfortable with the conclusion that the only "Christian" element in music is the text. Surely we experience other Christian elements in music.

The Analogy to Food or Drink

Fortunately the 14th Chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans offers some insights that at least partially point to a resolution of this issue of what is Christian in music. Paul writes concerning circumstances under which food or drink is appropriate for Christians to consume. These circumstances may be summarized under three principles that are those of taste, conscience, and the law of love. Paul states that all foods are clean and are appropriate for Christians to eat (vs. 14). However, individuals may decide when and what to eat as a matter of taste (vs. 6). Some are further restricted as a matter of conscience in their choice of foods or drink (vs. 2, 21). Last of all the law of love constrains us to avoid harming others with our choices of food or drink (vs. 15, 21).

Let's explore the analogy between food or drink and music. In verse 14 of Romans chapter 14 Paul asserts that God created all food elements (apples, lambs, etc.) so that none is unclean. Elsewhere Paul writes, "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness" (I. Cor. 10:26). We may extend this concept of the goodness/cleanness of God's creation to music. God has created a temporal-physical-spiritual-conceptual environment in which musical elements can exist. Just as elements of God's creation (apples, lambs, etc.) are good/clean, so also the elements and elementary concepts of music (pitch, rhythm, etc.) are good/clean. Thus, an apple or the note "C" sung by a human voice similarly partake of God's original creative act and his continuing sustenance of His creation (Col. 1:16-17).

There is a distinction, however, between God's creative actions and those of people.

The Hebrew scriptures assign different verbs to God's original creative act (creating something out of nothing) and man's refashioning of God's creation.[9] There is a further distinction between God's creative acts and those of people: a difference in morality. God's creative actions are always good/clean (Gen. 1:31, James 1:17); those of people are not necessarily good/clean (Rom. 3:10-18). Although people may begin their creative acts with good/clean elements from God's original creation, the creative actions of people determine the goodness/cleanness of the final product. Relating this to music, it is not the elements of the music but rather people's interaction with the elements—composing, performing, singing, or listening—which color the musical experience as good or clean, even Christian or non-Christian. Thus, the note "C" sung by a human voice, for instance, is unclean not in its essence, but rather could be unclean due to the context in which it is employed.

Our difficulty with determining which music is or isn't Christian results from the assumption that Christian music (apart from text) contains musical-spiritual encryption that is absent in non-Christian music. This is similar to asserting that Christian food contains dietary or spiritual supplements different from non-Christian food. The essence of the Christian experience resides not with the musical object (a song, a recording, a rhythmic pattern, an instrument, etc.) or cuisine, but rather with our interaction with and our attitudes towards music or cuisine. Paul clearly makes this distinction when he writes:

If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake. But if anyone says to you, "This was offered to idol," do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience' sake." (I Cor. 10:28-29, New King James Version)

Paul's point is that the food offered to an idol and food not offered to an idol are equally nutritious for a Christian and neither will spiritually harm the Christian. Offering the food before an idol has not physically or spiritually transformed the food. The setting in which the food is served--informing diners that this food was offered to an idol, for example--does, however, mark the act of eating the food as clean/good or unclean/evil. By analogy Christians may likewise "consume" music in appropriate or inappropriate contexts. Here the object--food or music-- is not at issue but rather it is the situation that determines the ethics. Paul writes in the letter to the Colossians:

And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." (Colossians 3:17, New King James Version)

The experience of Christian eating is that done to the glory of God; likewise the experience of Christian music making is also marked by a dedication to the Lord.

Paul writes in Romans 14:6 that food choices are a matter of individual taste. In music individuals prefer different instruments and varied styles of music often not of necessity but rather of preference. This also holds true for corporate bodies such as churches. Just as regional or national cuisines develop in different parts of the world, musical traditions have and should develop in churches throughout the earth. A variety of musical styles should be encouraged in the church. Our brief survey of music in historic and contemporary churches indicates that Christians have served the Lord with great musical ingenuity throughout the centuries. We must realize, however, that our preferred musical traditions may not suit others. Paul cautions us against despising the eating habits of others, so too we should seek to avoid judging the listening habits of others in matters simply of taste. That food which tastes good to us may not satisfy another. That song which draws us closer to God may leave another's heart unstirred.

Paul cites the example of a vegetarian who out of conscience cannot eat meat and the Jew who cannot eat anything that is unclean according to their dietary code (Romans 14:2). Above we have already seen in the first letter to the Corinthians that food sacrificed to idols may also violate a person's conscience (I Cor. 8:4-13.) Bringing the analogy to music, there are people who for the sake of their consciences should not partake of certain music. This may be due to cultural upbringing or the association of a musical style or instrumentation with demeaning and sinful practices. Just as an alcoholic may not return to the bottle, certain people cannot return to the music associated with a demoralized period in their lives. These matters of conscience are distinguished from matters of taste since a person transgressing their conscience experiences spiritual harm. No where does Paul encourage a person to violate their conscience, rather they should follow its guidance.

Paul admonishes the Christian who is free from restrictions of taste and conscience to be sensitive nevertheless to the needs of others when choosing food or drink:

It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak." (Romans 14:21, New King James Version)

In private I might eat a chocolate candy bar, but if I know I am in the presence of someone struggling with dieting I would abstain from the candy. By analogy what I listen to in private may not be appropriate in a public setting such as a church service. The law of love needs to guide our musical choices in public.

At this point many may be uncomfortable with the notion that Christian music should be chosen strictly by internalized criteria. Please understand that I am not proposing purely subjective ethics for the choice of music, for indeed Chapter 14 of Romans does not advocate moral choices absent from God and His character. The passage must be interpreted in light of God's authority and justice:

So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. (Romans 14:12, New King James Version)

Paul clearly recognizes that individual consciences may be faulty. Some consciences are described as weak (Rom. 14:2), others have "seared" or evil consciences which provide defective moral guidance (1 Tim. 4:2, Heb. 10:22). All, however, will be judged according to God's own immutable character and His righteousness.

A Few Last Thoughts

An important part of Christian service to God is bringing the heavenly kingdom to earth (Matt. 6:10), that is, the universals of God's character and actions into our everyday existence. Christians are exhorted to imitate God's nature and His work (Matt. 5:48, I. Cor. 11:1, 1 Pet. 4:1). Paul asserts that Christians both have the capacity to recognize what is good/clean and the ability to engage in ethical actions. Along these lines Paul admonishes the Philippians:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. (Philippians 4:8, New King James Version)

Christian musical experiences should be characterized as true, noble, just, pure etc. However, the cultural manifestation of these qualities may differ due to the "Babelization" of the world (Gen. 11) and cultural or historical differences. For instance, a historic church forbade instruments during times of worship while a church today finds instruments a vital part of worship. Both churches are seeking to worship God in spirit and in truth yet the manifestation of the worship differs significantly. Within each culture, however, the intent and actions of both churches do indeed exhibit the worthy qualities noted by Paul.

Here I must note one caveat. Although the character of God is true, noble, just etc., above all God is a redeemer. There are times in which God will use the ugly, despised, and cursed to bring about His plan and purpose. He took the cursed serpent of Genesis 3 and lifted it up as a symbol of healing for the Israelites in Numbers 21. Likewise God took the curse of the cross and transformed it into a great symbol of salvation (Gal. 3:13-14). It is not beyond the power of God

to transform and to redeem people through music normally associated with debased and degenerate practices. In these instances, in fact, His greatest mercy is shown.

In closing, the writings of Paul provide an answer to what is Christian in music. Paul's solution to Christian dietary dilemmas of his day was to avoid labeling types of foods as "Christian" or "pagan," rather he focused on the experience of the believer to determine what was right before God. Taste, conscience, and the law of love provided guidance for the Christian to determine which foods to eat and when to eat them. Likewise taste, conscience, and the law of love provide guidance for our musical choices.

Endnotes

[1] J. P. Migne, ed. *Patrologiae cursus completus: Patrologiae Graecae* 1 (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1857-1866), p. 432. As translated in Robert F. Hayburn, *Papal legislation on Sacred Music: 95 A. D. to 1977 A. D.* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1979), p. 12.

[2] *In famem et siccitatem homilia.*

[3] *Apologeticus*, chap. 39, sect.18.

[4] In the middle of the 9th century the church revised its prohibition of all instruments and accepted the organ into its liturgy. Perhaps the most celebrated example from this early period is the Winchester Organ of c. 950. See "organ" by Percy Scholes in Dennis Arnold, ed, *The New Oxford Companion to Music*, Vol. 2 K-Z (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 1348.

[5] Philibert Jambe de Fer in his *Epitome musical...* (Lyons, 1556) notes that only the viols are used by people of taste.

[6] The original text of the hymn *Ein Feste Burg* contained the words "save us from the murderous Pope and Turk."

[7] F. Romita, *Jus musicae liturgicae* (Rome: Edizioni Liturgiche, 1947), p. 59. As translated in Robert F. Hayburn, *Papal legislation on Sacred Music: 95 A. D. to 1977 A. D.* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1979), p. 28. *Concilium Tridentinum: Diariorum*, ed. J. Massarelli, 9 vols. (Freiburg: 1901-1924), 8: 421, no.6, II. 14-16.

[8] Robert F. Hayburn, (Boston: McLaughlin and Reilly Company, 1961), p. 18.

[9] The Hebrew verb transliterated as "bara" always indicates divine activity.

Paper delivered at the Christian Scholarship Conference, University of Colorado—Boulder. Reworked Nov. 1997