

THE POWER OF MUSIC

There's No Neutrality!

In the current volume of Reformed Polemics we encounter no less than half a dozen editorials, articles, or readers responses on the subject of music. It was noted that many will agree with those who take a negative stand towards so-called "rock" music, particularly "Christian" rock. At the same time it is recognized that "more thought has to go into our position."(a) We need to define what this "rock" music is. It was also suggested that "perhaps what is needed at the outset... is the accurate definition of terms and the setting of well-defined parameters."(b) That is indeed what we have endeavored to do, even at the risk of getting a little too technical. We have concluded that "rock is not music. It does not bind itself to the inherent laws." (see Reformed Polemics, Nov. 23/96) Therefore "rock music cannot (should not) be used to communicate the gospel.

In the editorial *Music for the Christian?... Let's Talk About Rock*(c) we mentioned G.J.Nijhof's assertion that "the revolutionary thought in pop music is not so much a matter of *words*, but of *music*." Music has great power or effect. The music *itself* has the potential to convey messages that are positive or negative. Music is not neutral. This thought is clearly driven home when we read the reviews of some of the rock concerts that were held in the city of Vancouver, B.C.

"The crowd just kept roaring and screaming and going absolutely (bleeping) mental..., singer/guitarist James Hetfield like some slightly crazed beast barking his lyrics... The kids in the cheap seats were giving the Satan salute and stomping around as much as the lucky stiff in the front row... and they went nuts... sheer pandemonium... Three thousand five hundred young'uns in black leather and blue jean jackets screaming "Die! Die! Die! Die!" over and over, faster and faster: now that's what I call participation."(d)

The revolutionary message which music itself can convey through its "dissoluteness and normlessness" manifests itself not only at rock concerts, but also at organ recitals. "Listening to Messiaen's miscellaneous hoots, tweets, grunts, groans, whistles and bleats is laughable at first until one realizes that he is really serious in his attempt to make the organ as much of a musical monstrosity as is humanly possible. I am convinced that most organists play Messiaen because they feel duty bound to find grace and favour with the musical elite."(e)

What is so easily forgotten in the whole debate about "music for the Christian" is that music has great power or effect and that there is no neutrality in music. John Makajina reminds us of the foundational principle that "music is a language that is designed to communicate to and affect the emotional and psychological faculties of human beings. Therefore, instead of relaying cognitive information, music speaks to us in terms of common feelings, moods, and emotions... and since not all feelings, emotions and moods are good, it is only reasonable to conclude that music has the power to communicate evil... It (rock music, RD) encodes emotions, feelings and moods that are unquestionably incompatible with the Christian message.

Music is far from being a benign instrument waiting to be used for God's kingdom. It by itself has the potential to convey messages that are positive or negative... Rock music communicates values that are unsuitable for Christian synthesis."(f)

In a homily delivered by Rev. John Anderson, an accomplished organist, the matter of the power or effect of music was given due consideration. He observes that "music can capture excitement and express feelings as nothing else can... There is great power in music - power to move nations to war; power to lead slaves to freedom; power to end war... All the great moments of history, good or evil, have depended on the power of music to set moods and to inspire hearts to loyalty. The first 21 verses of the 15th chapter of Exodus are devoted to two songs: the Song of Moses and the Song of Miriam. These were the words in the hearts of the Israelites as they marched out of Egypt toward the promised land - a song on their lips and a melody in their hearts: "Sing to the Lord, because He has won a glorious victory; He has thrown the horses and their riders into the sea."

These songs still inspire us - not just the words, but equally the music to which Handel later set the text in "Israel in Egypt". There is an almost timeless power in Israel's songs of deliverance that stretches across the centuries to move hearts of faith, and through the talents of composers to translate into relevance ancient words that might otherwise be lost to us...

But look also at the other side of the power of music. Remember the songs of Hitler's youth corps and the stirring marches of the Nazi war machine that led people to forsake the sacredness of life, and turned a civilized nation into an organized monster, insane with a lust for killing...

Music can inspire us to greatness, but it can also spur us to hatred. This is the great danger in music. It can be hypnotic; it can mesmerize with the effects of a narcotic... That is why your responsibility to select good music with solid theological texts that convey the meat of faith, rather than the pabulum of sentimentality, is vital for the formation of faith with substance in the hearts of worshippers."(g)

Calvin said that "singing has great power and vigor to penetrate and enflame the heart of man ardently to seek and adore God", but he also said that "every bad word perverts good manner, but when the melody is with it, it pierces the heart much more strongly."(h)

In a letter to the editor of *The American Organist* magazine the matter of the effect of music was also the subject of discussion. In response to the conclusion that the *only* definite criterion for church music is the text, we note the following reply: "Although the text is a primary consideration, other purely musical factors are also involved. Some music by nature inspires religious feeling, and some music degrades the soul."

The well-known music therapist and counselor, Hal A. Lingerman, author of *The Healing Energies of Music*, states that "certain music has the effect of depleting one's energy systems and causes confusion in thinking, disorientation of feeling and a reversal of value systems... Listening to too many discordant sounds produces numbness in the body and confusion between the two sides of the brain... This seems to impair the person's sensitivity so that ugliness becomes an addiction."

Here Lingerman is referring to rock music and jazz, but most 20th century atonal pieces also fit in this category. Studies have shown that this music has little or no beneficial therapeutic effect. This music (or anti-music) does not elevate: it kills one's finer sentiments... Simply put, the music does not uplift: it degrades. One leaves, not enlivened, but depressed. Clearly music has great power and is by no means neutral. Music has the potential to convey messages that are positive *or* negative. Therefore our music should stand the test of integrity of both composition and text.

Sacred and secular music can be defined and judged by the fundamental characteristics appropriate to the genre. The fact remains that the composition of music for purposes of worship and devotion tends to produce stylistic properties that are associated with sacredness while other stylistic properties tend to connote secularity.

Twenty years ago, if we had pressed a competent, articulated church musician for a definition of "sacred music" we probably would have received a fairly cogent (if perhaps opinionated) reply...the fundamental characteristics appropriate to the genre would have been expressed with remarkable consistency. The late Professor Archibald Davison of Harvard University states them precisely: "A rhythm that avoids strong pulses; a melody whose physiognomy is neither so characteristic nor so engaging as to make an appeal in its own behalf; counterpoint, which cultivates long-breathed eloquence rather than instant and dramatic effect; a chromaticism which is at all times restricted in amount and lacking in emotionalism; dissonance, used only when it is technically necessary in the interest of text emphasis; and modality, which creates an atmosphere unmistakably ecclesiastical."

When we closely examine this definition of what constitutes sacred music or music which encodes emotions, feelings and moods that are compatible with the Christian message, we will indeed be hard pressed to reconcile this definition with what rock music is all about. Prof. Howard Slenk of Calvin College has written that "all three of the elements of rock (insistent beat, obsessive repetition, and high sound level)... have convinced me of the basically sense-indulging, near hypnotic, meaning and effect of this music."(i)

Others, in the secular press, have readily concurred with these sentiments. "It's all a matter of attitude. And rock music, particularly heavy metal, does not promote graciousness or mutual respect."(Denny Boyd, Vancouver Sun newspaper, Aug 19/92) In "The Music of Hate", Patric Sampler also wrote that rock is "a genre of pop music unyielding to innovation; a dead music... The sound of this music is violent, heavy and oppressive..."(j) Statements such as these confirm our conviction that music has great power and is by no means neutral. Rock music through its "dissoluteness and normlessness" communicates a clear message, but this revolutionary form of music leaves no room for "stylistic properties associated with sacredness", or "an atmosphere unmistakably ecclesiastical." Rather, as we noted earlier, rock is not music because it does not bind itself to the inherent laws of music. There is nothing sacred about rock, nor about the common feelings, moods, and emotions it engenders.

Dr. William Edgar writes: "Music has both meaning and power. Music is not neutral. Music comes in the context of the covenant. Music, as a human activity, has meaning in this covenant relation. Music is an activity with a divine blessing. The power of music is that it somehow articulates the meaning of the life of the covenant; the joys, the sorrows, and all kinds of experiences of life."(k)

"Music is decidedly subjective. But all music, sacred and secular has three basic elements to which we can appeal for concrete standards of judgment: rhythm, melody, and harmony. These three elements do affect the emotional life of man either for good or for ill... Careful discrimination rather than careless accommodation is the hallmark of every Christian musician who seeks to glorify God, edify His people, and testify of Him to the World. (l)

Ron Dykstra

- (a) "Another View of the Music Debate", Wes Bredenhof, Reformed Polemics, Nov. 23/96.
- (b) "Face to Face: RP Meetings", Sarah Vandergugten, Reformed Perspective, Sept. 1996.
- (c) Reformed Polemics, Sept 28/96.
- (d) Vancouver Sun, Dec. 20/86, May 25/92.
- (e) Who's on First?, Raymond A. Brubacher, RCCO Magazine. (date unknown)
- (f) Rock Music and the Question of Neutrality, John Makajina, Reformed Perspective, July/August, 1995.
- (g) The Power of Music, Rev. John Anderson, AGO, Jan/1990.
- (h)(i) Learning to Discriminate Between Music, J. Tuininga, Outlook, Jan/83.
- (j) The Music of Hate, Patric Sampler, Vancouver Sun newspaper, week-end edition, Saturday Review, May 14/94.
- (k) Music: Soothing the Savage?, Dr. William Edgar, (source unknown)
- (l) Church Music: Accommodation or Discrimination? Laurie Vanden Heuvel, Outlook, April 1982.

God's Gift of Music

By Jonathan D. Male

God has gifted many composers down through the centuries to edify us through great music. How many of us have been lifted up spiritually as we have sung or listened to Handel's Messiah? Mendelssohn's Reformation Symphony stirs the heart of any Protestant as it concludes with Luther's Ein' Feste Burg, and his Elijah calls us back to the Lord as the true God. Who is not thrilled with the music of Bach in his Magnificat, his B minor Mass, his cantatas, or his St. Matthew's Passion? Can anything surpass Brahms's German Requiem for beauty and comfort as he puts music the words of Scripture? In our day of evolutionary thinking, we need to listen to Haydn's Creation to have a correct view of our origins. Some of us have the privilege of singing these masterpieces, but all can enjoy them through recordings. Most public libraries have them available free of charge.

Instead of listening to the experts who recommend cutting out of your budgets our tithe to the church, pulling our children out of Christian schools, and dropping piano lessons, maybe we should refuse to buy our children the latest Nintendo street fighter game and decide not to get season tickets to the Colorado Avalanche. Let us set aside regular blocks of time to practice an instrument, either the ones we can purchase or the one with which God has gifted us all. Then we can make melody to the Lord as long as we live, edifying both ourselves and others as well.

[Part of an article in New Horizons, March 1997]

WHAT ABOUT THE CHURCH?

At one of the Evangelical Outreach days Henk Binnendijk asked his audience what was most important to them. In his answers to this rhetorical question he showed that God is of primary importance in our lives. He is at the top! But what follows next? Binnendijk wrote that number two and three should be family and work. What about the Church? Well, he didn't forget it. It became number four. We belong to those who wondered, when we heard points one and two, what about the Church?

God Must Be First

Our first thoughts must be toward God. That is something with which we can heartily agree. He is the Creator. As such He is the Owner of the whole world. It is He Who made our lives - those lives that we constantly damage with sin. From this Creator - Sustainer came the birth of His Son. That Son Who reopened the way back to God for us. Everything in life centers around God. He has placed our lives under the direction of His Word. Regarding the questions in life we will need to consult that Word of God. Surely, everything that we do ought to be done in the light of God's Word. That's why it is absolutely correct that we must begin with attention for God. He must be first! His Name must receive all honour. This eternal God will once require of us how seriously we have taken Him. To this extent we could heartily and happily agree with what we heard from Mr. Binnendijk. After assigning such an honourable position to God, the next priorities are to follow. Indeed! For someone who gives such a high position to God in his life can not do so only with his mouth. His deeds will also witness of such a choice.

Truly, all the various aspects of life will be affected by the choice of putting God first in your life.

The Church Follows Family and Work

Family and work were put in the second place. The thought here apparently runs as follows: God is very closely connected to family. It is He, after all, that brought man and wife together, as if it were, by His own hand. The children of the family are gifts from Him. And we are commanded to raise those children to know who He is. They must sing His praises and eventually publicly profess His Name.

In the same way we can image several reasons why one could give our daily work such a high priority. God, Himself, has guided us to our work in order that we might be able to earn our daily bread. And it was His Son who taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread". In this very petition you can recognize the close connection that Jesus has placed between our work atmosphere and His Father in heaven. Family and work do not superficially pass by in our daily lives. They affect the personal lives of men and women. After God as our first priority it is clear that the attention of the Christian will focus on family and work as the second and third priority. One's whole personality is affected by them.

The church, in fourth place, is a place where you can acquire some of the things you need. Things you need for service before the face of God, in family and at work, can be acquired at the church. That is where you can acquire what you need to live as a responsible family member and work associate. The church has fulfilled her task when she has thus equipped its members. Then one can carry on. In this way the church becomes a type of care-giving institution in the same manner that a dentist might supply dentures. Then it's not the dentist that is the focal point, but the dentures and their function. One still needs the dentist to service the dentures otherwise difficulties might occur. The church is considered to serve a similar function for life before God in family and society.

In Search of the Correct Care

It will certainly not have been the intention of the aforementioned speaker to dissuade people from the church. Very likely the church will have been praised as an excellent care-giving institution. Those who seek God, but can not find Him, can be helped in the church by the Word of God.

But God is first! If you have met God, then together with Him you stand above the church, which comes in the fourth place. In this Binnendijk and his co-workers have legitimized the E.O. (E.O. stands for Evangelise Omroep, an evangelical outreach in the Netherlands, translator). There, at the E.O., you are with others who have found God. That is your communal focus; that is your joint unity.

But let us take a look beyond the E.O. Does such an attitude also appear in broader circles? Let us stay in our own circles when we consider this. How do we go to church? What motivates us to participate as a member of the church? Surely, a number go to church because, just as at the dentist, they will receive care. The underlying thought then is, that, if I do not hear my problems and questions spoken about then I have not been addressed. Uncommitted such people continue to listen to the preaching of God's covenant word. And in this way they leave the measuring rod of church attendance and church choice with themselves. If the involvement of the church does not sufficiently touch family and work then she has failed in her task as care-giver. And why would a person still sit under such preaching? People with these types of questions go searching for preachers that fit their taste. One can hear such an attitude described today with the modern word - shopping. An appropriate word! You grab from the shelves whatever you need and you leave the rest behind. You make your own decisions about what you need for your family and work life before God and the rest you leave. Whatever God brings to you in the preaching of His word only receives our attention in the fourth place!

So we see that man becomes the centre around which everything turns. Or, to be fair to Binnendijk, everything centers on God: family, work and church must all serve that focus. Whenever you believe that the church damages the relationship of God-family-work then you are free to make other choices. On your own volition you may do what is best.

Appreciation for the Church

The question that continues to nag us is if fourth place for the church is the right one. Does our interest for the church only come at that point? What about those people who fought so valiantly in the days of church reformation? At times it even cost them their daily bread! Yes,

there were even brothers and sister who paid for their choice with their lives. They choose for Christ and His grace. Obediently they followed Him in His church gathering work. Included with that choice was the whole-hearted conviction that the church must continue to be reformed. This conviction could not be separated from the call to church reformation. Simply think about the days of the Reformation of the 16th century. The Roman church had become the false church where an accursed idolatry could be found (Lord's Day 30). It had become a church where true believers of Christ were being persecuted. (Art.29, Bel. Conf.) At the cost of family and work, brothers and sisters chose in favour of this reformation. Later in history other brothers left the Hervormde Kerk (in the Afscheiding - the Secession). And wasn't this same call of reformation present during the time of the Liberation?

Because of obedience to God there is no freedom to make our own church choice!

Christian Reformed Membership Loss Speeds Up: 30,551 Members Lost in Five Year Slide

The Christian Reformed denomination has lost members for an unprecedented fifth year in a row, a loss now totaling over 30,551 -- more than the total memberships of almost all the North American Reformed and Presbyterian denominations with which the CRC maintains ecclesiastical fellowship. The current CRC membership stands at 285,864 -- a level last seen 26 years ago in 1971. Nearly two-thirds of the loss can be attributed to four groups of churches which are largely composed of seceders from the Christian Reformed denomination. While many mainline denominations are used to reporting annual declines, until five years ago the CRC had been quite different. Prior to the beginning of the secession, the CRC had only experienced two years of decline in its 140-year history, the largest of which was prompted by the 1925 secession which began the Protestant Reformed denomination.

Classis Dakota of Chr.Ref. Church Objects to Orthodox Presbyterian Church Involvement in Doon CRC Secession; Presbytery Moderator Calls CRC "False Church"

When Doon Christian Reformed Church voted by a two-to-one margin to secede from the CRC on February 19, the consequences of the secession rippled far beyond the membership of Doon CRC and further damaged relations between the CRC and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Meeting on March 4, Classis Dakota of the CRC voted to send a complaint letter to the Presbytery of the Dakotas objecting to the role in the secession of OPC pastor Rev. Timothy Perkins, stated supply of the Doon church for the last three years. Now the OPC's Presbytery of the Dakotas has replied with a strong defense of Perkins and the presbytery moderator has warned that the CRC is a false church. The Doon situation can hardly make things easier between the CRC and OPC, whose 1996 General Assembly voted to suspend fraternal relations with the CRC because of its decision to allow the ordination of women and cut off relations entirely at this summer's General Assembly unless the CRC changes its stance on women's ordination and other issues.
