

THUMPUS UNINTERRUPTUS

To Beat or Not to Beat?

In practically every discussion or article on the subject of "music for the Christian", whether it be contemporary Christian music (CCM), "Christian" or other rock music, and also just plain popular music, the matter of the "beat" inevitably comes to the fore. We often hear or read such statements as:

"It is the *beat* which makes it sound 'primitive' and evil, it is the *beat* which is hypnotic, and it is the *beat* which works young people into a frenzy."

"It need not surprise us that this type of music, which is all *beat*, leads to sexually suggestive behavior and performances."

"We must stay away from the overriding *beat* and suggestive language of rock."

In response to the concern about "suggestive language" and "filthy lyrics" one teenager declared that it shouldn't really be a problem. "We don't listen to the lyrics. All we care about is the *beat*."

Many people indeed maintain that the "beat" is the culprit. The "savage and unrelenting beat" or the "thumpus uninterrupted" is given as the reason why our young people should not listen to this type of music. If we can somehow get rid of the *beat* we could reconsider our position on the whole matter of listening to rock music. If we could interrupt the "thumpus uninterrupted", or at least "tone it down a bit", our problem would be solved. "To beat our not to beat" seems to be the question.

In "Music for the Christian, Rock or Not", Br. Bill Selles correctly states: "The fact that rock music has a *beat* is the one characteristic which tars all of this genre black, including contemporary Christian music."^(a) He also notes that "it is not a question of 'to beat or not to beat.' Rather, it is a question of degree of the beat." We can, to a degree, agree with this statement. However, we would add that those who point to the *beat* as the culprit are not too far out in their assessment, even though they may not always know precisely what it is about the beat that prompts them to "tar this entire genre black."

As we will see, we are indeed dealing with "primitive" music, not simply because it has its origin with the uncivilized tribesmen in Africa, but because this "music" is a style or genre of music in which "the *primary* manifestation of rhythm dominates or exists at the *expense* of the *secondary* manifestation of rhythm." And the "savage and unrelenting beat" or the "thumpus uninterrupted" certainly has something to do with that.

In *Pop Rock and Sacred*^(b) Dr. Herman Berlinski deals with some of the purely musical factors involved in judging music. He deals specifically with the debate as to whether rock music can serve as an effective and valid liturgical idiom in the worship services. The issue of the "beat", or more correctly, the complex matter of "rhythm" in music is considered in detail. At the risk of getting a little too technical, what Dr. Berlinski writes is worth repeating.

Dr. Berlinski notes that when we speak about *form* we do not intend to consider the contrapuntal, the sonata forms or other varieties of sub-forms. Under *form*, we understand the basic *organization*, not accumulation, of the music materials. The structural elements of such an organization do not have to reveal themselves any more to the unprepared ear than the steel structure of a finished skyscraper has to be visible to the eye. But in both cases, neither the musical work nor the building can function without form or structure. *All* music forms can be brought under one common denominator; unity and diversity.

Music as an art cannot be based upon a sheer accumulation of heterogeneous ⁽¹⁾ materials. The aural ⁽²⁾ memory depends upon a pattern which it can recognize and remember, and, at the same time, by a seemingly contradictory attitude, revolts against the automatic repetition of the basic pattern. The sophisticated listener wants to proceed from unity to diversity and from diversity to unity. These laws remain the same in monothematic ⁽³⁾ or polythematic ⁽⁴⁾ forms. Structure-less, heterogeneous accumulations are bewildering and confusing. Automated repetitions can only create a hypnotic state in which cognitive ⁽⁵⁾ perception is turned off.

A great deal has been claimed for the rhythmical element in jazz, pop and rock music. It seems, to many a layman, that rhythm was invented by these media and therefore is completely absent in western art music. Of course this is utter nonsense. Such erroneous views are based upon a lack of understanding as to what we understand as *rhythm*.

It is necessary, here, to distinguish between *two* different and yet closely interrelated manifestations of rhythm. The *first* and primary rhythmical manifestation is the *beat*, the process of life itself. The heart, the pulse, day and night, the seasons, the constellations and movement of the planets: Life is rhythm. Our whole lives are lived in moving process, and process in its bare temporal continuity is unbearable, vague and unintelligible - indefinite, formless and meaningless. If we are not to be driven insane by it, we must give it temporal pattern by dividing it into repeatable units; endow it with structural form apprehended as such, measure it and count it. For the totally non-structural is the totally formless, unacceptable to apprehension, inconceivable, not merely unreliable, but unthinkable. Music symbolizing life processes could not exist without any primary manifestation of rhythm. Such a manifestation is present in music on almost every conceivable level of its evolution.

The *second* manifestation of rhythm in music is the subtle symmetric ⁽⁶⁾ and asymmetric ⁽⁷⁾ subdivision in the organization of the time element. (metre) These organized time patterns act as if independent from the basic pulse of the music, just as the body of the dancer is capable of a multitude of motions seemingly independent and yet eventually also controlled by the beat of the heart and pulse, without which no motion whatsoever is conceivable. The primary manifestation of rhythm (the beat) is completely divested of syntactic ⁽⁸⁾ meaning. It comes to us from the non-verbal dimension of expression. Its presence means life and its absence means death and this perhaps explains why, in our death-oriented society, youth, which wants to live, clings so desperately to a music in which the primary manifestation of rhythm (the beat) dominate so much over the secondary manifestation, which in turn derives its meaning from music as a symbolic language.

In this secondary manifestation, time patterns are organized into a musical syntax, ⁽⁹⁾ with its rhythmical climaxes and anticlimaxes produced by retraction and expansion of the time units. Western music as a liberal art developed over the centuries an intricate relationship of the two

rhythmical manifestations. One might be tempted to establish some kind of an ideal ratio or balance between the two elements. This would be utterly naive, for the first rhythmical manifestation (the beat) is incapable of change and evolution. It is and must remain constant. It is only syntactic rhythms - the second manifestation - that are capable of such an evolution. **The rhythmical criteria in music, therefore, must consist in an evaluation of the relationship between primary and secondary syntactical rhythmical manifestation.**

When we speak, therefore, about a rhythmical idea, we understand this to be juxtaposition, ⁽¹⁰⁾ of the two manifestations of rhythm. If the primary manifestation of rhythm dominated or exists even at the expense of syntactical rhythm, we call such a rhythm *primitive*. If, on the other hand, syntactical rhythm dominates the primary rhythm to such a point as to obliterate it, we consider such a rhythm as to be without rhythmical élan. ⁽¹¹⁾ The relationship between the two manifestations is a very delicate one. It has to be determined by the whole plan of the musical work under consideration. **One cannot speak about a refined sophisticated rhythmical constellation if only one of the two elements dominates the other one consistently.**

In the case of rock, "one of the two elements, the *beat*, dominates the other one consistently", and therefore the rhythm, and consequently also the music, is indeed *primitive*. When the listener submits himself to the *beat* he loosens his mind from its moorings in space and time; no longer does he feel a separation between himself and his surroundings. The difficult world of external objects is blurred and unreal; only the inner pulse is real, the *beat* is the outer projection. Earthly worries are submerged on a tide of rising exaltation. Dream and dreamer blend, object and feeling jell; the whole universe is compressed into the medium of the *beat*, where all things unite and pound forward, rhythmic, regular, not to be denied.

"Rock" is the only form in modern music which deliberately seeks these effects and no others. "The method is to reduce melody and lyrics to a minimum and beef up a pounding *beat* that has the unaccented regularity of the metronome and the urgency of a war drum."^(c) Rock is a style of music that accents *beat and repetition* in order to convey a message. This kind of popular music dulls the capacity for attention; the steady *beat* or "*thumpus uninterruptedus*" creates a kind of hypnotic monotony.

The statement that "there is no scientific proof ^(d) that a *beat alone* induces hypnosis" ^(e) has some validity. It is not *only* the *beat*, it is *also* the "dissoluteness and normlessness" (G.J. Nijhof) of this music that deadens cognitive perception. The bulk of this so called music has little or no artistic merit when judged by purely musical standards or norms. And therefore, whether by design or default, ultimately there is nothing much left but "to rally to the *beat*." We then set the stage for an environment "in which cognitive perception is turned off."

At this point some consideration must be given to certain hedonistic attitudes pertaining to music. Hedonism is the doctrine that *pleasure* is our only proper goal or aim. In our discussions about music, hedonistic principles so easily permeate our thinking. There is no doubt that some music can provide an almost instantaneous satisfaction, nor is there any reason why these satisfactions should be rejected as such. However, like everything else in life, there must be a scale of values in general. On this scale, all that which is easily obtainable and easily surrendered is also cheap. Religion in the Judeo-Christian tradition is deeply adverse to hedonistic principles. This does not imply, necessarily, a puritanical outlook on life. It requires, however, a sense of *appropriateness* which permits us to experience music on a variety of levels. Religious or sacred

music obviously cannot be expressed on a level which functions as a sex stimulus or even as a commercial Madison Avenue jingle. Dr. Berlinski notes that we should be concerned about "the naiveté with which such music is lifted from its *original assignment* and transferred into the realm of praise and worship of our God, at which point it must enter into conflict with theological and historical-aesthetical concepts."

It is obvious from Dr. Belinski's explanation of the purely musical factors involved in judging music that "rock music cannot serve as an effective and valid liturgical idiom in the worship services." Music, bound by inherent laws, moves from unity to diversity and from diversity to unity. It moves propelled by an intricate balance, between the two manifestations of rhythm. To judge by these criteria Rock is *not* music. It does *not* bind itself to the inherent laws. The complete domination of the beat or "thumpus uninterrupted" at the cost of the metre makes Rock "primitive." It appeals to the base instincts and gives rise to hedonism. It is a heterogeneous accumulation "causing bewilderment and confusion." Its automated repetitions can only create a hypnotic state in which cognitive perception is turned off.

Rock music cannot (should not) be used to communicate the gospel. "This music itself possesses the power of revolution through its dissoluteness and normlessness..." (G.J.Nijhof) Baptizing rock music with the word "Christian" does not change that fact. "Christian rock" is as much a contradiction in terms as "Christian occult." Let us learn to discern!

"In this regard, it is most relevant to realize - with gratitude - that we in our western culture are heirs to a very rich history of music written from the perspective that life makes sense in Jesus Christ, that the Father is worthy of our praise day by day... In Jesus Christ there's plenty of reason for us and our youth to make music. Let it be done as an expression of faith in the risen Saviour. ^(f)
Ron Dykstra

(a)(e) *Music for the Christian, Rock or Not!* Bill Selles, Reformed Perspective, April-May/95.

(b) *Pop Rock and Sacred*, A.G.O.-R.C.C.O. Magazine, January/71. The explanation of some of the technical matters of music is quoted/paraphrased from this article by Dr. Herman Belinski.

(c) *Disco:Thumpus Uninterruptus*, Readers Digest, July/79.

(d) We shall, for now, disregard the matter of "scientific proof." It will, D.V., be dealt with when we discuss the power of music.

(f) *Rock Music: For the Christian or Not?*, Clarence Bouwman, Reformed Perspective, Feb./95.

(1) Heterogeneous = composed of diverse elements / dissimilar in character.

(2) Aural = of or using the ears or hearing.

(3) Monothematic = mono: *prefix* meaning "single"

(4) Polythematic = poly: *combining form* meaning "many"

(5) Cognitive = *adj.* Cognition = *n.* act or experience of knowing or acquiring knowledge.

(6)(7) Symmetric/asymmetric. *adj.* Symmetry = regularity in form or similarity of structure. Asymmetry = lack of symmetry.

(8)(9) Syntactic/syntax = Syntax = *n.* the arrangement of words in a sentence showing their constructional relationship.

(10) Juxtaposition/juxtapose = *v.* put side by side.

(11) Elan = *n.* style and vigor.

Some Thoughts on the Ubiquitous Music Debate in our Reformed Churches

By Wes Bredenhof

Everyone, it seems, is talking about music. Nearly every Canadian Reformed publication has had something to say on this highly-charged topic. Until now I have restrained myself from commenting directly--though indirectly, through analyses on different artists in Reformed Perspective, I have made some of my views known.

I love music. I always have. Perhaps I should clarify: I love listening to music. I can't play it and can barely read it. I definitely do not qualify as an authority on the technical side of things. But what I do bring to this debate is knowledge of popular culture and music. For several years I was deeply immersed in our sinful popular culture. I breathed, ate, and drank the music of the world. I fell asleep to music, I woke up to music. I went to catechism with music; I went to church on Sunday morning with music (and not Genevan tunes). I may confidently say: I have danced with the devil and have looked into his eyes to see the hell within.

Please do not jump to too many conclusions upon reading that last paragraph. You may get the impression that my musical tastes have always been rather shady - hardly so. For even when I was a fool in love with all sorts of trashy music, I would often listen to Bach, Beethoven, or Mozart. I have always enjoyed military music. Jazz has also been a favorite. By no means have I ever restricted myself to one genre. But enough of that, what about the debate itself?

To begin with, I must say that I am inclined to agree with those who take a negative stand towards so-called "Rock" music. But at the same time, I think more thought has to go into our opposition. First, no one has really defined what this "Rock" music is. Must it contain a syncopated rhythm? If so, then many Beatles' songs (i.e. Hey Jude, Yesterday and many others) do not qualify. Must it express sinful sentiments? If so, then many Joe Satriani (a musician who produces mostly instrumental music) songs do not qualify. And so we could go on. There seems to be in this debate a nebulous idea of what "Rock" music is. Such a nebulous idea is not very helpful to young people (or even older people), who are struggling with the question.

Furthermore, it is important for us to realize that genre boundaries are often crossed. Songs which can be heard on country music stations often make their way onto rock stations and vice-versa. Sometimes even so-called "Rock" songs are re-done by classical musicians and can be heard on CBC or other radio stations playing classical music. Is then the genre-idea really helpful in this discussion? Does it help in the formulation of a practical approach to this thorny issue?

I am of the conviction that the most helpful approach to this debate is to take a more particular line of "attack." Broad generalizations are quite useless for debating music which defies generalization. Rather than generalize, it is best to focus on the individual artists and songs themselves. While doing this it will be necessary to start, as in every endeavour, from what the Scriptures teach. What are the Scriptural guidelines for evaluating music?

Music is good and has been created by God, but as with all good things, man has come along and perverted it for his own sinful purposes. How are these sinful purposes realized in the production of music? How can we objectively recognize the effects of sin in music? Perhaps one

way would be to think in terms of the fruits of the Spirit and the fruits of the flesh mentioned in Galatians 5. Lyrics can be objectively judged according to this standard, but when we analyze the music itself, the analysis becomes, to a certain degree, subjective. The degree to which it becomes subjective, I suggest, is directly proportional to the spiritual state of the analyst. God has promised to give us His Holy Spirit and to write His law on our hearts and minds--perhaps this is a helpful starting point for our analysis. I am not altogether certain on this point, and I welcome any interaction on this thesis. And if you disagree with this thesis, please be encouraged to develop your own Scriptural approach to analyze music objectively.

As I already said, when we study individual artists and music we can often see an intermixing of genres. Popular music artists do not restrict themselves to one particular form. Tom Petty, for example, is always mixing rougher sounding music with folk/country music. The lines are blurred. That is why we often have to narrow down our analysis to particular songs. Some Tom Petty songs contain beautiful elements, others contain elements which fall in accord with the fruits of the flesh. Obviously, to be involved with popular culture is no easy task. It means hard work and analysis, something most people are not eager to do, nor often prepared to do. It would be on this basis that I would stress that young people and others avoid popular culture. God has given us a cultural command, but if we are unwilling to fulfill that command then there is no sense in aimlessly playing in the fields of the devil. We may just as well listen to psalms--for we cannot be led astray by such.

Finally, I often sense that the debate loses track of the other evils in the musical world. Country music, though it does not seem to appeal to our youth, is often an evil no less insidious. And what do we make of Rap? What about Reggae? Dance music (David danced too, you know!)? And so we could go on. There is much work for us to be done in this field. It must be well-researched and well-thought out work. Reading a book or a few magazine articles is not always sufficient to acquaint one with the complexities involved. Nor is it enough to offer blanket condemnations without offering positive alternatives. The problems we have with so-called "Christian" rock is an indictment of our failure as Reformed Christians to be involved in cultural endeavours. If you take away the teenager's rock music, what are you going to replace it with? Neil Diamond? Frank Sinatra?

I believe that as with everything else, the Christian Contemporary Music scene does have its moments of beauty. Though some artists are rather questionable, there are many times when a contemporary Christian musician does play something beautiful and edifying which is also appealing to young people. We must be discerning if we promote this as a positive alternative. We cannot come with a blanket endorsement of Christian Contemporary Music, especially when so much of it consists of Arminian saccharine and man-centered emotionalism.

I offer these thoughts to you in the hope that it will stimulate the discussion to greater depths. I would like to stress two points in conclusion: let us always make the Scriptures the starting points in our deliberations--our emotions may certainly play a role, but they must be analyzed and framed by the light of Scripture. My second point is that oft-repeated motto: no neutrality! There is none. Music is good or bad. Period! With my proposed scheme for musical analysis this thought ought always to be foremost in our minds. The truth is out there. It is not beyond the reach of spiritually-minded Christians who tackle difficult issues with their open Bibles in their hands.