

# CHURCH MUSIC: "ANYTHING GOES" OR "CERTAIN RESTRICTIONS APPLY?"

David W. Music

Many church leaders and musicians face a dilemma when "styles of church music" or "styles of worship" (they are frequently equated) are discussed. On one hand, these leaders do not want to be guilty of being considered narrow-minded (in human terms) or of "quenching the Holy Spirit" (in spiritual terms). On the other hand, they sense that perhaps not everything we do in the name of God has equal validity.

The church's music, of course, has become one of the central areas of dispute in the life of the church during the years leading up to and into the 21st century. Many books and articles have been written and many discussions carried out on the appropriateness of various types of music for the purposes of the church. The present article will in no way provide resolution to the issue—and, indeed, may leave more questions than answers—but will hopefully provide another philosophical perspective from which to approach this thorny problem.

## No Music Is Off Limits

Most theologians and church musicians would fully agree with the notion that God has not ordained (or excluded) a particular mode or type of music that is to be used in his service. God has given humanity a marvelous universe of beauty and diversity, all of which is intended to glorify and magnify him. Music is a part of this created order, and it, too, is full of beauty and diversity. If music is part of the creation over which God pronounced his blessing—"God saw that it was good" (Gen. 1:10b)—then how can we call anything "unclean" that God has said is "clean" (Acts 10:14–15)?

The Bible itself seems to demonstrate that there is no "accepted" style or type of worship music. The two principal modes of worship of the true God in the Old Testament—the "priestly" and the "prophetic"—exhibited radically different approaches to music. The priestly cult was characterized by formality (proper actions done in the correct way) and a distinct corpus of songs (psalms) that were to be performed and led by persons specially appointed to and qualified for this task (Levites). The prophetic cult, on the other hand, was informal (no specified set of actions), improvisatory, and ecstatic. While there were certainly "prophetic guilds" in the period of the Old Testament, there was apparently no special appointment or qualification required for membership except the obvious one of being called by God.

And, of course, the basic functions of the two groups were significantly different: the priestly cult was designed to carry the people's prayers and praises to God, while the prophetic cult sought to proclaim the Lord's word to the people. It is undoubtedly an oversimplification, but it is probably fair to say that the focus of the priestly cult was largely on praising God for his past activity

(including the recent past) while the prophetic cult emphasized how the community of faith should live in the here and now, as well as the future.

The Old Testament also suggests another historic/contemporary basis for worship song. Over and over, the Psalms (as well as other Old Testament books, particularly Isaiah) admonished the people to sing a "new song" to the Lord.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, at the rededication of the Temple under King Hezekiah, the Levites were commanded to sing to God using "the words of David, and of Asaph the seer" (1 Chron. 29:30), people who had been dead for nearly 300 years. Presumably, the songs commanded by Hezekiah included some of the very psalms that encouraged singing a "new song" to the Lord.

Much the same situation is reflected in the New Testament, though references to music are much sparser. When Jesus and the disciples sang a "hymn" at the conclusion of the Last Supper, they most likely raised their voices in the last portion of the Hallel psalms (Psalms 113–18), which had been a common part of the Passover ritual for centuries.

Scholars disagree over the precise meaning of Paul's admonition to sing "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16): was he using a rhetorical device for emphasis or was he referring to three distinct styles or types of song? If the latter, this suggests the use of traditional, historic material (psalms) as well as more recent productions (hymns and spiritual songs). Viewed another way, Paul may be suggesting that the churches employ both wordy, rational types of song (psalms and hymns) and pieces that are more emotive (spiritual songs). The latter interpretation seems to correspond with Paul's vow to sing "with the spirit" and "with the understanding" in 1 Corinthians 14:15.

Finally, the book of Revelation, like the Psalms, also models the use of a "new song" (Rev. 5:9, etc.). At the same time, it balances the Song of Moses (presumably that sung at the crossing of the Red Sea, Ex. 15) and of the Lamb, thus linking the central events of the two testaments, the Passover/Deliverance from Egypt and the Crucifixion/Resurrection (Rev. 15:3). But the sample song that follows (vv. 3–4) seems to consist of verses centered from the psalms!<sup>2</sup>

The fact that the Bible prescribes no one "correct" form of music for worship is reflected by human nature itself. People respond to music in different ways, depending upon their ethnic, cultural, educational, social, and religious background, or other factors. Furthermore, music has a variety of purposes: to sell products; to provide distraction from the cares of life; to raise, express, or set cultural standards; and so on. Even in church, music might undertake several functions: to provide a glimpse of heaven, to facilitate prayer, to be a means of witness to the unconverted, etc.

Beyond all this is the complex makeup of the human psyche. While people will usually have a favorite type (or types) of music, their "tastes" and tolerances are usually much wider than even they themselves realize or admit. Different times of day, various moods, or different occasions are likely to cause them to respond to various types of music or to the same piece of music in different ways.

For example, a person who mainly listens to country music on the radio may in the course of a week hear rock music on a television commercial, a symphonic score at a movie, easy listening music in an elevator, and a Baroque organ work in church, often without thinking twice about whether or not this is the listener's "favorite" music or whether it means more or less to him/her than country music does.

The premise that there is no single acceptable standard for church music thus appears to have considerable support. In this view there is no music that is specifically "sacred" and it is only the use we make of it, the habits we have formed, or extramusical associations that determine such categories. Another way this proposition is often stated is that there is no such thing as a "sacred quarter note" or a "sacred B-flat."

## There Are Standards for Church Music

While fully acknowledging and honoring that principle, however, there remain nagging questions. Are there then no objective standards by which to judge church music? Is everything to be decided by personal taste or choice, or by the pragmatic philosophy of "whatever works?" Is there no such thing as "sacred music?"

When one examines the Bible for answers to these questions, there are few clear guidelines that are directly related to music. Part of the challenge is that music was not a significant part of the Mosaic law that prescribed how worship at the Tabernacle (and later the Temple) was to be carried out.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, music did not become a significant element of Jewish worship ritual until the time of David and Solomon.

It may be noted, however, that there are passages in the Mosaic law that seem to indicate by way of analogy that not all songs may be equally acceptable. To choose but one example: on the annual Day of Atonement the people were to bring animals for sacrifice. Not just any animals would do, however—they had to include "one young bull, one ram, and seven male lambs." There were further restrictions: the lambs were to be "a year old," and all the animals were to be "without defect" (Num. 29:8, NIV).

But we might ask: Is the wool of a two-year-old lamb less valuable than that of a three-year-old lamb? Does the flesh of a bull that is lame burn any differently than that of one without a blemish? Of course not, but God laid down specific requirements suggesting that in his eyes all cattle and sheep were not equal in their suitability for sacrifice.

The principal point, of course, was that God demanded the strongest (the males) and the best (not what we can do without anyway), but the fact remains that while cows, ewes, just-born lambs, and defective animals might have seemed to the Israelites to be just as good as bulls, rams, and year-old lambs without blemish, they were not equal in

God's eyes. And, indeed, in the later history of the Hebrews the people often tried to get away with unworthy substitutions, for which they were frequently condemned by the prophets.

But the prophets also had words for the Israelites about their music: "Take away from me the noise of your songs" and "the songs of the temple shall be howlings in that day" (Amos 5:23, 8:3). While the point of the prophet was probably less about the style or content of the songs employed than it was about the spiritual state of the singer/hearer or the purpose for which the song was sung, passages such as these certainly contradict an "anything goes" or "there are no standards" attitude.

Again observing that Paul may have been using a rhetorical device to suggest the use of "all manner of music," it is important to note that in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 he specifically mentioned only three categories of song—psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. He took no notice of two popular song types of his day, the Greek *skolion* (drinking song) or *dithyramb* (a form associated particularly with the theater). The three types he did mention all seem to have a "sacred" aura about them, though whether that was because of their lyrics, the context in which they were sung, a musical feature, or some combination of these, it is now impossible to say.

The understanding that there is not a universal standard for church music has led to arguments that the type of music used really doesn't matter as long as it is sung or played from the heart. It is an undeniable biblical truth that the heart must be engaged in our

acts of worship or they become mere mechanical actions and are not worship at all. Presumably no one would argue that a piece of music that does not come from or engage the heart represents true worship.

But the first sentence of the preceding paragraph sounds a lot like "it doesn't matter what you believe (or do) as long as you are sincere." Over and over, the Bible and church history show us that our beliefs and actions do matter, regardless of our level of sincerity or engagement of the heart. Nadab and Abihu were undoubtedly sincere in thinking that they could offer "strange fire" before the Lord (Lev. 10:1–2). The Pharisees believed they were doing the right thing in tithing "mint and rue and all manner of herbs," and in making long prayers (Luke 11:42, 20:47). Arius was assuredly convinced that Jesus could not be both human and divine, and he and his followers wrote popular songs to proclaim this message. But in none of these instances did the sincerity of their beliefs make their theology or actions acceptable.

Human nature also supports the notion that the music we select for the church *does* matter, for humans make value judgments about music all the time. We say that the operas of Mozart are better than those of Salieri, and that Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* is superior to the same composer's *Symphony No. 4*. Grammy Awards are doled out to the songs and performances that are judged to be the best in a given year, and Top 40 lists—while measuring sales, not inherent quality—also represent a value judgment by consumers who spend their money on what they consider to be of worth. A higher artistic

merit is placed upon Handel's *Messiah* than upon "Frère Jacques."

Some would argue (with good reason) that it is unfair to compare *Messiah* and "Frère Jacques" because they are intended to fulfill different functions. "Frère Jacques" is a children's song—and a good one at that, as is evident from its longevity and worldwide use. Children cannot reasonably be expected to understand—much less sing—*Messiah*. As children's songs go, "Frère Jacques" is a classic—and many people might prefer to sing or hear "Frère Jacques" rather than *Messiah*.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that *Messiah* is widely acknowledged as being among the greatest artistic achievements of music, while "Frère Jacques" holds no such exalted position. This is not to suggest that there is anything wrong with "Frère Jacques," merely that it is manifestly not on the same level as *Messiah*.

Thus, to say that musical style makes no difference or that one piece is as good as another for the church (or anywhere else, for that matter) is a cop-out. The critical faculties with which we were endowed by our Creator tell us that this cannot be so.

But let us examine the idea of functionality more closely. It is readily apparent that church music itself may have more than one function. Even leaving off evangelism, fellowship, ministry, and education, and concentrating solely on worship, music may be expected not only to provoke prayer and meditation but to proclaim God's word, to provide a means of response, to be a vehicle for adoration or rejoicing. These various needs may call for different types and approaches to music.



Southern Methodist University, one of the nation's premier private universities, offers quality professional preparation with a strong emphasis on the liberal arts. For more information regarding performance programs in organ and harpsichord, contact Dr. Larry Palmer, Head, at [lpalmer@smu.edu](mailto:lpalmer@smu.edu) or visit [meadows.smu.edu](http://meadows.smu.edu). For more information regarding the Sacred Music program, contact Dr. C. Michael Hawn, Director, at [mhawn@smu.edu](mailto:mhawn@smu.edu) or visit [www.smu.edu/theology/academics/degree/degree\\_msm.html](http://www.smu.edu/theology/academics/degree/degree_msm.html).

**Faculty**

- Dr. Larry Palmer  
Professor of Organ & Harpsichord
- Dr. C. Michael Hawn  
Professor of Church Music
- Dr. Christopher S. Anderson  
Associate Professor of Sacred Music
- Dr. Pamela Elrod  
Associate Professor of Music and  
Director of Choral Activities

**Degrees Offered**

- B.A., B.M., M.M.
- Artist Certificate Organ/Harpsichord
- M.M. Choral Conducting
- M.S.M.

M.T.S. in Church Music and Worship  
Scholarships and stipends available  
for qualified applicants.



**"...one of this country's leading conservatories"**

—the New York Times

**STRADER  
ORGAN SCHOLARSHIP  
COMPETITION:**

**March 8, 2008**

First prize: \$2,000 + tuition  
Second prize: \$1,500 + tuition  
Third prize: \$1,000 + tuition

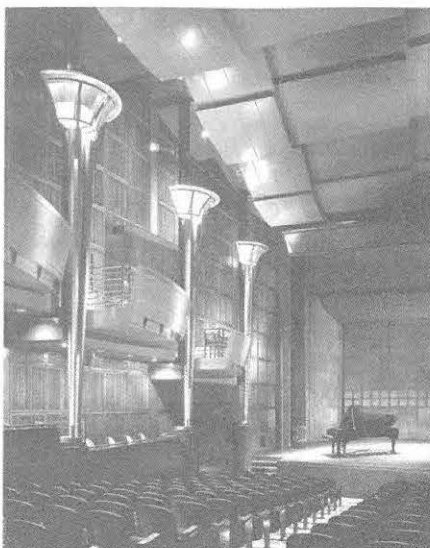
*All applicants must be accepted for admission to  
CCM's graduate program in order to be a finalist.  
Preliminary auditions may be by tape, or in  
Cincinnati on:*

Jan. 12 • Feb. 2 • Feb. 23, 2008

**Juget-Sinclair studio organ**

*Scholarships, assistantships and financial aid  
available to those who qualify*

**Roberta Gary,  
Professor of Organ**



CORBETT AUDITORIUM

for further information:

ccmadmis@uc.edu  
513-556-5463  
www.ccm.uc.edu

UNIVERSITY OF   
Cincinnati

College-Conservatory of Music

# Foley~Baker Inc.

Quality Pipe Organ Services  
Throughout America

## Upcoming Work:

Cable Replacements – Electrical update of: Casavant, Opus 3607, IV/80, c.1986

Cathedral of the Incarnation, Garden City, NY

Lawrence Tremsky, Organist and Master of the Choirs

1-800-621-2624 • info@foleybaker.com • www.foleybaker.com

Music is usually produced with a specific function in mind, and some types and styles are almost universally considered to be appropriate for fulfilling this function. One piece that is intended to satisfy the expected role may do it better than another, so within the genre there is a hierarchy of value. This is how we can say, as noted above, that one Beethoven symphony is superior to another Beethoven symphony: both pieces were intended to fulfill the same function.

But the more important question is: are there intrinsic characteristics in music that make some pieces appropriate for certain functions and not for others? To choose a slightly offbeat—but no less telling—example, why is one not likely to hear Gregorian

chant at a dance? Is it because Gregorian chant is inferior music, because dancers don't like it, because the text doesn't mention dancing, or simply because dancers have become so tradition-bound that they are slow to open themselves up to new ideas?

The answer to all of these questions, of course, is "no." Gregorian chant is not performed at dances because there is something intrinsic in the music that makes it inappropriate for dancing: it lacks the strong, steady beat that dancing requires.

Gregorian chant may not be appropriate for dancing, but—unlike dance music—it is almost ideally suited to fostering prayer. Dance music tends to be too regimented for this purpose. It calls attention to itself, its

rhythmic drive does not allow for the free exercise of the mind and spirit, and it makes one want to, well, get up and dance. Dance music can be—and often is—just as meaningful and musically fine as Gregorian chant. It is not inferior as music, plain and simple, and it is perfectly acceptable as music for dancing. But as "prayer music" it is not on the same level as Gregorian chant, which exudes otherworldliness, humility, a giving up of control, a general aura of spirituality, and tends to promote reflection and quietness.

In a famous modern dictum, Marshall McLuhan observed that "The medium is the message."<sup>4</sup> McLuhan's perceptive observation applies to music just as surely as it does to the electronic media that formed the substance of his discussion. Dance music, whether or not it is accompanied by words, and regardless of where or when it is played, has one message: "Get up and dance!" Whether or not one understands the Latin words, or the piece is performed in a church or a bar, Gregorian chant has a different message: "Get on your knees and pray!"

Obviously, the contrasts that have been drawn between dance music and Gregorian chant reflect the widely divergent styles and functions of the two types. But that is exactly the point. Following a "there is no standard for church music" approach, when carried to its logical conclusion, would suggest that Gregorian chant and dance music are both equally appropriate for dancing and for fostering prayer. But there are intrinsic musical elements in the two forms that contradict this.

At this point it might be useful to reflect again on the idea that there is no such thing as a "sacred quarter note" or a "sacred B-flat." That may be true in the abstract, but no one ever performs quarter notes and B-flats in the abstract: these musical elements are connected with other rhythms, pitches, harmonies, and sometimes words in the context of a piece of music.<sup>5</sup> We can say (with accuracy) that quarter notes and B-flats are part of God's good gift to us of music. But at the same time we have to recognize that, like everything else God has given, humans can twist and pervert quarter notes and B-flats to evil or unacceptable purposes. A B-flat may not be evil in and of itself, but when combined with a particular set of pitches (and rhythms) in the "Horst Wessel Song," this heretofore innocuous musical element has been twisted into a glorification of Nazi thuggery.

This might suggest that the answer to our dilemma lies in the context in which the music is rendered: if it has sacred words and is performed in a religious setting or on a religious radio station it must be appropriate music for the church. But that cannot be true. Just because a piece of music is sung or played in a religious setting, mentions God or Jesus, or is based on a Bible verse or story, it does not automatically become appropriate for corporate public worship. Simon and Garfunkel's "Mrs. Robinson" and the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby" both deal with themes of Christian religion, but are not appropriate song material for worship. Some of Handel's oratorios are based on biblical characters (Saul, Samson, etc.), but certain elements of their text, structure, and music make them unsuitable for worship. Both the '60s pop songs and the Handel oratorios might be used effectively and appropriately in certain contexts (as sermon illustrations or as

“sacred concert” material, for example), but as “everyday worship music” they have severe limitations.

### What Constitutes Proper Church Music?

So what is it that determines proper church music? Context? Function? Association? Intrinsic musical characteristics? Probably all of these and more. This is perhaps where we can bring the two truths into balance:

1. There is no single, set standard for church music in terms of style or type. Since the church (and worship) has a variety of functions, a variety of musical idioms may be called for. Christian pop, sacred classical music, and all types in between are part of God’s good created order, and the church may use all of them in carrying out its ministry to God and its mission to the world.

2. At the same time, the style and form of the music *do* matter, for while all sorts of music may have functionality in the church, not all music is appropriate for every function. Christian pop is not valid for every function of the church; neither is sacred classical or any other kind of music. Furthermore, music does not merely carry the message—it is part of the message itself.

Thus, the dance music discussed earlier may certainly play a significant role in the life of the church: it might be used as an inroad for evangelistic outreach, as an expression of extreme joy when bodily movement is appropriate (e.g., King David dancing before the Ark, 1 Chron. 15:29), or as exercise music in a church gym. But we should not attempt to use dance music to stimulate prayer, any more than we should use Gregorian chant to accompany an exercise class.

It also follows that there are some occasions and settings in the life of the church in which it will be important, even crucial, for the accompanying music to be as much like that of “the world” as possible. On the other hand, there will be times when the church’s music must have a special character that sets it apart from ordinary, everyday music. The challenge will be for pastors, musicians, and congregations to exercise the discernment necessary in order to recognize when, where, and how to apply the principle that “anything goes . . . but certain restrictions apply.”

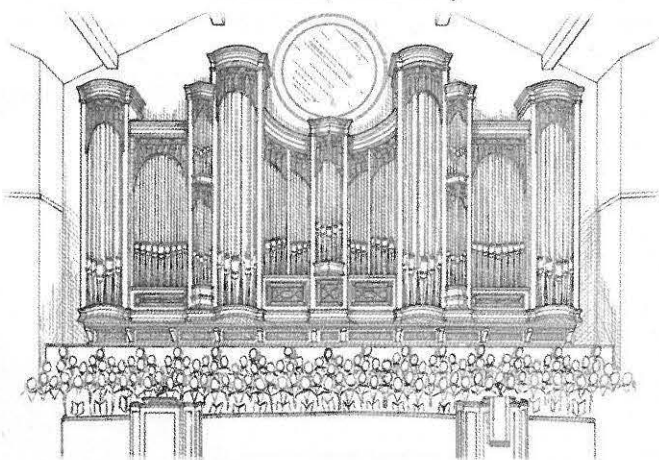
### NOTES

1. These passages are sometimes interpreted to mean that we are to sing with new hearts, whether the song itself is of recent or earlier origin. When we sing with a new heart, even an old song becomes a new song.
2. This was pointed out by the Puritan Divine John Cotton in his *Singing of Psalmes a Gospel Ordinance* (1647), p. 29.
3. This should remind us that music is not essential to worship: worship can happen without music, and just because music is being performed does not guarantee that worship is happening.
4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 2nd ed. (N.p.: Signet Books, 1964), Chapter 1.
5. See Dan Lucarini, *Why I Left the Contemporary Christian Movement* (Evangelical Press, 2002), pp. 88–90.

David W. Music is professor of church music at Baylor University, Waco, Tex. His edition of *A Selection of Shape-Note Folk Hymns* was published by A-R. Editions in 2005.

## CHRIST CHURCH UNITED METHODIST

Louisville, Kentucky



WE are pleased to announce the commissioning of a new pipe organ for Christ Church United Methodist in Louisville, Kentucky. The new instrument, our Opus 107, will enjoy pride of place at the front of an all-new sanctuary designed by Sherman Carter Barnhart Architects in collaboration with acoustician Dennis Fleischer. The organ’s stoplist was designed in consultation with Christ Church’s Director of Music, Dan Stokes, and will offer a total of 53 stops over three manuals and pedal, including two divisions under expression, an 8’ Tuba stop on high wind pressure and two 32’ ranks. For more information about this instrument and others, please visit our website at:

[www.letourneauorgans.com](http://www.letourneauorgans.com)

## ORGUES LÉTOURNEAU LIMITÉE

**United States**  
1220 L Street NW  
Suite 100 – No. 200  
Washington, DC  
20005-4018  
Tel: (800) 625-PIPE  
Fax: (202) 737-1818  
LetoUSA@aol.com



**Canada**  
16355 avenue Savoie  
St-Hyacinthe, Québec  
J2T 3N1  
Tel: (450) 774-2698  
Fax: (450) 774-3008  
mail@letourneauorgans.com  
www.letourneauorgans.com

*Susan Jane Matthews*

2008 Recital Tour

GOSPEL PRELUDES

by William Bolcom

~ in celebration of Bolcom’s 70th Birthday ~



Photo: Lorraine Dotson

[www.SusanJaneMatthews.com](http://www.SusanJaneMatthews.com)