



The Present State of Church Music: Historical and Theological Reflections

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To say there is diversity in church music at the end of the twentieth century is an understatement. One can visit church services and find almost anything: Gregorian chant; a Mozart mass—either for the ordinary of the mass itself or in pieces as anthem material; a cappella singing and singing with every kind of instrumental accompaniment—from organs to percussion to electronic; instrumental and choral music from virtually every period—of the highest quality and the most banal; classic hymn tunes and new hymn tunes—some carefully crafted, some poorly crafted; Broadway hits and popular tunes; hymns meant to appeal to “outsiders,” performed by choirs and electronic media with little congregational participation; high decibels and low decibels; psalm settings in all styles—with and without congregational participation; African-American and southern white spirituals; and a variety of Asian, African, American Indian, and Hispanic materials. Any of this may be executed ably or abysmally, may follow the latest performance practice standards or ignore performance practice issues altogether, may engage congregations or bore them.

When one looks at this massive variety, the first impression is confusion. The tendency is to see no order whatsoever. That tendency is increased when one realizes that denominational boundaries do not necessarily provide help in sorting out musical matters. Two Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, or Lutheran churches may be as different musically from one another as they are like their sisters and brothers in another denomination. Careful listening and looking can usually reveal roots that differ, but, depending upon the congregation, the

musical practice of two parishes in different denominations often can be deceptively similar.

Old alignments may be breaking down. We may be in a period of fundamental shifts, not unlike the time of the reformation. We certainly are fashioning an expanded musical syntax in worship, simply because families, communities, schools, and churches now have numerous ethnic, confessional, and musical memories in their midst—as well as increasingly perplexing personal and social challenges to face. This is very painful: the promise of rebirth is here, but so is the reality of death.

Though old alignments maybe breaking down, enduring problems have not changed. Making sense of them is one way to sort out the confusion. H. Richard Niebuhr’s typological framework in *Christ and Culture*¹ provides a helpful grid for the sorting.

I. THE POLAR TYPES

In the United States, groups called “evangelicals” or fundamentalists—often identified with some Southern Baptists, the Assemblies of God, television evangelists, mega-churches, and those who choose these as their models—appear to live at the polar extremes of Niebuhr’s types: in both the “Christ of culture” and “Christ against culture” folds. They hold these poles together not in paradox or schizophrenic confusion; they simply apply them to different areas.

In order to appeal to a popular minds et and thereby “bring people to Christ,” they use popular musical styles without hesitation or embarrassment. There is no concern here about whether or not the musical medium is superficial or whether (since “the medium is the message”) it communicates less than the fullness of the faith or something different from the faith. The point is to utilize what the people know and hear in their daily lives—for example, in popular music or in television and radio commercials. This is a Christ of culture position.

At points of moral teaching, however, these same groups tend to argue against any “liberal” drift. They are therefore likely to oppose anything that would appear to accommodate moral ambiguity or a pluralism which might challenge, say, prayer in schools. This is Christ against culture.

Holding these two poles together is no sleight of hand or devious trick. (There is hypocrisy in this camp, of course, as the recent debacle of television evangelists has indicated; but there is hypocrisy everywhere, and its presence or absence does not make or break a position.) It works because these people locate sin only at certain points in the culture. Musical syntax and associations do not fall at those points so long as the music is put to “saving” purposes. That means people in this group can use radio and television and all the modern electronic technical wizardry available, while at the same time attacking the media and even popular music for its godless slant. It means they can use the sounds of popular culture while attacking the immorality of the culture. It means they are not so concerned about an assembled and singing body of Christ as they are about decisions for Christ and the emotive power to propel those decisions—whether that happens in

¹H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

huge throngs carried along in a wash of electronic sound, or through watching such events in living rooms on television screens.

II. THE MEDIATING TYPES

The three mediating types—traditionally identified with Roman Catholics as “Christ above culture,” Reformed bodies as “Christ transformer of culture,” and Lutherans as “Christ and culture in paradox”—live in states of deeper complexity and ambiguity. They and their concerns require people gathered in one place in order to be nourished by word and sacraments, and in different ways they all require a gathered body that sings. They cannot therefore embrace radio and television the way the more “evangelical” groups can. They are also nervous about sound which submerges the people or substitutes amplified decibels for congregational singing. (It should be noted that similar concerns have been expressed in the past about organs or other instruments, so this is not a new issue. Now, however, the increase in the perception or actuality of loudness, coupled with the artificiality of speakers rather than acoustic instruments, divorces

what is heard even farther from the natural human voice.)

1. *Christ above culture.* The Christ above culture folk use sounds from the popular culture in such a way that they lead beyond themselves to something like the purity of Gregorian chant and its polyphonic progeny. Sound itself is not even an end, however. It is a means of entry into the “salvific mystery,”² or it points beyond itself to the silence of pure love.³ The congregation may therefore not sing vigorously (there is a theological reason why Catholics don’t sing), or they may participate in the music by listening to a choir. But they need to assemble to do this, and sound which might submerge them or substitute for them is only a passing cultural accommodation to get to what is of more value.

2. *Christ the transformer of culture.* Those who take this position may be understood at one level to identify with what is popular in music. Music for Calvin was like a funnel through which words “pierce the heart more strongly.”⁴ But Calvin emphasized the necessity of “weight” and “majesty” in church music, and he distinguished it carefully from the music one uses “to entertain” people “in their houses.”⁵ Here the issue is not that music leads beyond itself, but that the music transforms (actually the Holy Spirit transforms, by means of the psalms dressed in moderated melody). As Francis Williamson⁶ recently suggested to me, psalm singing for Calvin was a sanctifying activity. This makes the singing of the people extremely important, and the absence of instruments in Geneva and Reformed practice more generally was no accident. Those who stand in this tradition, though today they may have accepted instruments, still find anything that substi-

²See Joseph Gelineau, *Voices and Instruments in Christian Worship* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1964) 10.

³See Gelineau, 27-28, and Henri Davenson, *Traité de la Musique selon l’Esprit de Saint Augustin* (Neuchatel: Les Cahiers du Rhone, 1942) 186.

⁴Charles Garside, Jr., “Calvin’s Preface to the *Psalter*: A Re-Appraisal,” *The Musical Quarterly* 37 (1951) 570-571.

⁵Ibid., 568.

⁶Francis Williamson teaches at Albright College in Pennsylvania and has spent his life working at these matters. His Th.D. dissertation, “The Lord’s Song and the Ministry of the Church” was completed in 1967 at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

tutes for the people’s song to be misguided, and their major concern is clearly the people’s transformation.

3. *Christ and culture in paradox.* For those who see Christ and culture in paradox there is no possibility either of a wholesale embrace of the culture or a wholesale rejection of it, because it is fully sin-soaked and yet the object of God’s grace. Like Luther, they know about the possibility of perverting the gift of music with “erotic rantings,”⁷ and, also like Luther, they regard music as one of God’s greatest gifts,⁸ which is to be used with gratitude from any source—as long as well-crafted and durable creations result.⁹ Today, however, they do not have Luther’s luxury. Luther could carve out a setting of Psalm 46 or Psalm 130 from the hardy quarry of German folk song, but to attempt the same thing in our commercial culture from the idiom of a Coca-Cola or Honda jingle or a popular song is quite a different thing.

III. ADDITIONAL MATTERS

1. *Faceless public.* It is true that there is great diversity; any group may sound like any

other group: Roman Catholics and Reformed like Methodists or Episcopalians, etc. People in any group also look over their shoulders and seek to imitate other groups. The strongest pull at the moment is for the mediating types to imitate the Christ of culture type because it seems to be able to appeal to our mass culture. The mediating types are currently under attack, therefore, because they are seen to be ineffective, at least as far as numbers are concerned; and in a capitalistic mass culture, numbers are the means by which we norm ourselves.

The Christ of culture appeal is also its liability. One of our current cultural tendencies is to treat people like a faceless public. Shopping malls bring many people together, but we gather there not in dialogue or contact. We gather there as unrelated pieces of jetsam or flotsam with no relation or responsibility to one another; our only value is that we are bearers of money which we may be convinced to part with.

To adopt the culture as a model means appealing to it with music that manipulates the hearer the way commercials manipulate us to part with our money. When the church does this it too treats people like a faceless public. Such a posture poses a serious problem for the mediating types because baptism and the Lord's supper imply a different notion of humanity. Baptism immerses us into Christ's death and resurrection, and the drenching propels us into the world on behalf of others. The bread and wine of the supper are "for you." These realities mean it is not possible to treat people like a faceless public; people are persons for whom Christ died, not to be manipulated by music or anything else, but to be treated with the utmost value and respect with which Christ treats us. So for the mediating types the music we use must value the hearer and singer.

2. *Violence and the sweet sound.* Our society is violent. Each day we hear reports about someone else who has been violated, abused, or killed. My daughter recently

⁷Martin Luther, "Preface to George Rhau's symphoniae iucundae, 1538," *Luther's Works*, vol. 53, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) 324.

⁸*Ibid.*, 321-322.

⁹See Carl F. Schalk, *Luther on Music: Paradigms of Praise* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1988) 51-52.

told me she learned in her college psychology class that television gives us five acts of violence per hour at prime time, twenty acts of violence per hour during cartoons, and the average young person will see 13,000 television murders during the elementary and junior high years. My point here is not to bash television, but to indicate how deep the tentacles of violence reach.

The society often uses sweet and sentimental sounds to insulate us from the violence. The church has in many ways, across the various types but especially where the culture provides the norm, responded similarly with music that is sweet. Sweet sounds, in conjunction with other sounds, certainly have their place. The problem is that too much that is sweet and confectionary insulates us from society's violence and provides an escape that keeps us from trying to confront the horror. The result is a fairyland which in the final analysis avoids the gospel, its realism, and its ethical fervor. As Joseph Sittler once told me, "It is not hard like the word of God."¹⁰

3. *Reductionism.* As one listens to discussions about music in worship, arguments are being made for minimalist participation by the people, with music which imitates popular styles. For those who embrace historic liturgical forms, this leads to arguing that the people's part is essentially brief acclamations. For those who reject historic liturgical forms, this leads to arguing

that the people's part is essentially what George Shorney and others have called "teeny hymns."¹¹

The argument here is buttressed by four presuppositions: the culture is making a shift from the intellectual to the emotive; this is a new thing in American religion; we live in a post-literate age; and popular and rock music are in the ear of the culture—not classical music.

The first three of these propositions are inaccurate. In pre-marital counseling and other contacts I encounter more and more people who, though they have appreciated worship earlier in their lives, now stay away from it because they find the preaching and the music so shallow and superficial, even vapid. They indicate anything but a turning away from the life of the mind. As to the emotive being new, while American religion has had its thinkers like Jonathan Edwards and Reinhold Niebuhr, much of popular American religion has been essentially emotive, and the dialogue between the intellect and the emotions is hardly new: revivalism and both Great Awakenings generated it again and again. What we have today looks pretty much like a variation of what we have had in the past, varied, of course, by concerns about minority rights and patriarchy, interpretive modes that center in the "I," and the pluralism of the global village—all of which enlarge the debate, but which do not make the emotive something new. Third, if we live in a post-literate age, where is the memory that marked pre-literate humanity, and why do we have so many books which are supposed to be things of the past? Even more important, is the point of this argument that the church ought to support the absence of literacy? It is surely true that television is a visual medium, that it has generated a visual memory, and that we no longer live in the

¹⁰I don't know of any printed place where Joseph Sittler makes this precise comment, but in "Liturgy and the Prophetic," *Grace Notes and Other Fragments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 34, he parallels it when he warmly embraces vestments and then points out that "chasubles can mask uncharity, and vestments can adorn triviality."

¹¹George H. Shorney, *The Hymnal Explosion in North America* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope, 1988) 7.

reformation's love affair with movable type or even Wesley's world of words. But that is not the same as presuming a literary absence; it simply means the field of play is larger.

The fourth presupposition, that popular and rock sounds are in the ears of the culture, is probably accurate, but it begs the question. It assumes that, in Christ of culture fashion, worship can or should merely imitate the culture. That does not necessarily follow. In part, our worship must use the culture's sounds because, in order to sing, we have to employ what is in our ear's memory bank. But the memory bank of the church extends beyond the culture's current fads. It has in it sounds which are primeval and archaic because the story they carry reaches before our period, back to God the Alpha, before the creation, even before the morning stars sang together. And it searches out sounds which are perpetually new, pushing beyond our period, because they carry a story that reaches to God the Omega at the end of history.

These observations simply question the accuracy of the analysis that is currently taking place in many churches. In part they take themes from H. Richard Niebuhr's mediating types or from his Christ against culture type and apply them to music. Taken together they suggest we are tilted toward neglecting the life of the mind. This is not to say that recent right brain and left brain discussions or broader categories like aural-verbal and symbolic-visual are not helpful, or that we should neglect the emotive, intuitive, and psycho-motor parts of our being. It is to say that reductionism is dangerous and that a balance, not an imbalance, is necessary.

IV. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The mediating types have often assumed a stance of maintenance rather than mission. They have also sometimes succumbed to another Christ of culture type than the one described above, one which identifies a common spirituality or undefined love and mystery with a Christ principle. The current challenges to the mediating types are therefore healthy.

But that does not mean the enduring problems have gone away. We delude ourselves if we think they have. No matter what our configurations and context may look like at the moment, the issues remain and cannot be avoided. If we avoid them, we will be poorer, and future generations will have to confront the truncated creations we bequeath to them.

Our task as a church, it would seem, is to get some perspective on the whole of the gospel and allow our music to reflect that wholeness and authenticity on behalf of the world. Simply celebrating the diversity we are experiencing or allowing everything to be pulled to a Christ of culture position seems ill-advised.

As we expand our musical syntax, a better approach would be to take our various traditions seriously, not for the sake of tribalism or warfare, or because we want to replicate some past of our futile imagining, but precisely for responsible evangelicity and for the contributions we each have to make to the ecumenical mosaic. This is not to suggest that Methodists suddenly restrict themselves to Charles Wesley, Calvinists to metrical psalters, Lutherans to chorales and pieces built on chorales, Roman Catholics to Gregorian Chant and Palestrina, African-Americans to spirituals, southern whites to shaped notes, Welsh to William Williams and Welsh tunes, and Episcopalians to Tallis and Tye—though we all would

be well-advised to use our traditions and treat them with respect rather than beat up on them. The fundamental point, however, is not only to use them with a muscular humility, but to understand them and embody what lies behind them—for our own sake, for the sake of the whole body of Christ, and for the sake of the world.

Of course we need to use what is contemporary as well, and we need to expand our own traditions for the sake of the wholeness of the message among the people we serve in specific places. But we need to do that in the context of who we are and what we each have to offer the whole. In spite of the fact that many people live in mixed marriages and have crossed denominational boundaries or that communities are a mix of multiple memories, we still live in churches with confessional histories and loyalties. Those histories and loyalties point to profound and enduring realities. To collapse everything into a mindless diversity as a norm or thoughtlessly to embrace a fleeting cultural moment is to treat ourselves, the people we serve, and the world beyond with a contempt that flies in the face of Christ's example. The gospel speaks a different message. So should our music.