

MUSIC and FAITH

Theological musings about music, faith and life

By Benjamin Ho

It is widely known that the famous German composer Johann Sebastian Bach used to append his musical compositions with the initials “SDG” (Soli Deo Gloria – Glory To God Alone). What is probably less well known was the extent to which Bach’s Christian faith had inspired his works, and that many of his works were in fact an expression of his faith and understanding of the character of God. As Bach himself puts it, “The aim and final end of all music should be none other than the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul”.

As such, how we view our music has much to do with how we relate with our faith and ultimately, with God himself. As Christians, we are called to place our lives under the Lordship of Christ, that is to say, to have Christ rule over every sphere of our lives and in all that we do. In the words of the Dutch Reformed minister and statesman Abraham Kuyper, “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, mine!” In other words, if we understand our faith correctly, then the domain of music is surely one such area that we ought to rethink our priorities and practices.

According to musico-theologian Jeremy Begbie, two pitfalls, namely, *theological imperialism* and *theological aestheticism* needs to be avoided when we attempt to think about music. In the case of the former, “theology swells its chest and music is stifled. Out of a concern for doctrinal orthodoxy, music is not given room to be itself, not allowed to glorify God in its own way. In the case of the latter, music is viewed as autonomous and that there are no objective standards with which to assess the beauty of a piece of music.¹ Seen in such a vein, music becomes an end by itself and in certain cases, is taken to be a “new theological master”, supposedly giving us unfettered access to God or some undefined spiritual realm.²

¹ An example would be the piece 4.33 by the 20th century composer John Cage, which purports to consist of the sounds of the environment that the listeners hear while it is performed. But as the 20th century theologian Francis Schaeffer notes, Cage does not quite apply the same spirit of “chance operations” to his love of mushrooms for if Cage were to do start picking mushrooms by chance, “within a couple of days there would be no Cage!” See Francis A Schaeffer. *A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture. The Complete Works, Vol One* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1982) 78-78

² Jeremy Begbie. *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007) 22-23

Unfortunately in the world today, we see much of the church falling into one of either camps. Theological imperialism rears its ugly head in many so-called traditional churches, where music is seen as secondary – even peripheral – to the practice of faith. The term “worship” is used synonymously with the 15-20 minutes before the preaching of God’s word; in these cases, the only role of the musician – no matter how skilled or proficient – is limited to the extent in which he or she is able to play a couple of familiar tunes for the sole purpose of congregational singing – which too often is used as buffer time for late-comers to arrive at church. Such a view of music runs contrary to what the Bible says concerning the character of worship. As the Psalmist puts it, to worship God is to worship “in the splendor of his holiness [where] all the earth tremble before him”. Closely tied to our worship of God then, is our view of God. Unless we are able to recapture a sense of God’s holiness and majesty, our worship will be mechanical and ultimately, lifeless.

On the other hand, there are many contemporary, modern churches that have highly elaborate worship teams, armed with state of the art audio-visual gadgets. Oftentimes, the music that is played is used to evoke an emotional response from the audience. Repeating choruses (often of a simple 1-4-5 chord progression), sentimental lyrics and pietistic sounding phrases that lack any real content are used as spiritual anesthesia to dull the minds of the worshipper. Instead of having his mind and heart renewed, revived and reformed, the worshipper becomes a subject of the musical experience. Instead of writing music to the glory of God, music is now being venerated as God. In the process of doing so, God becomes relegated into the music. In the case of many modern songs, one could easily replace “God” or “Christ” with any other name and it would not make a difference to the overall meaning of the song.

With these two pitfalls in mind, how then should Christians approach the field of music? I would suggest the following three areas: (i) to be competent music-makers, (ii) to stay committed in our faith and (iii) having compassion to those who may not share our musical or faith dispositions.

We need to be competent music-makers. This may sound obvious; unfortunately there are many involved in music ministry who have little business being there. This does not mean that everyone who is a choir conductor or a musician needs to have a perfect pitch or is a conservatory instructor; however he or she needs to possess basic music skills or is at least able to keep in tune. Just as one would not employ a non-swimmer to be a lifeguard, those who are tone-deaf or who have no sense of musical rhythm ought not to serve in the music ministry. Of course, this does not mean that one is unable to pick up musical skills; in fact, I am of the persuasion that musical abilities can be honed – provided one is humble enough to learn. With the right attitude and lots of hard work, competency can be cultivated.

We need to stay committed in our faith. If music is among one of the most precious gifts that God has bestowed upon us, then surely faith and music ought not to be viewed as disparate fields, but rather as mutually engaging spheres that reinforce each other. For instance, in setting the Nicene Creed to music for the *Mass*

in B Minor, Bach's understanding of the crucifixion as being central to his faith prompted him to move the "Crucifixus" chorus from the fourth of eight movements to the fifth of nine movements.³ Likewise, the experience of singing the final movement of Mahler's 2nd Symphony in which the theme of the resurrection reaches its majestic climax is a thoroughly spiritual and profoundly moving experience; one is almost able to feel the power of the resurrection permeating in and through the music. In both cases, we see music and faith interacting with each other and in the process, enrich our experiences of life.

Finally, we also need to *demonstrate compassion to those who do not share in the same sentiments that we do in regards to our faith or music*. The Bible relates that God has given us different gifts (Rom 12:6) and that there are those who are still living on milk, not solid food (Heb 5:11-12). In other words, there are many Christians who may be impervious to the deeper dimensions contained within music and faith. To them, music is simply just another art form peripheral to life while faith is viewed as a privatized expression that has little or no bearing to everyday life. But to those of us who are able to plumb the depths and length of these things, we ought to relate to those who are "out of tune" with a spirit of generous compassion and godly love. This means taking the effort and having the patience to work, relate and communicate with others.

Looking at these challenges, the work of the music minister can indeed be a daunting proposition. But as many of us who have spent our time in the field of music can attest to, these are moments spent that are etched deeply in our memories, reminding us of a yet grander purpose to come...

³ Calvin R. Stapert. *My Only Comfort: Death, Deliverance and Discipleship in the Music of Bach*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 89-90