

With the advent of new styles and permissiveness in Christian music, the definition of church music has become very indistinct. New is not necessarily bad, nor is old necessarily good. However, what is known as Christian music has become indiscernibly different from any other genre of music, and sadly is often written and performed much more poorly than any other genre. Because of this, it is important to understand the historical background of Christian music. Understanding where it has been may aid in giving direction for the future.

The concept of sacred music began long centuries before what is known as the Church even existed. Biblical references to sacred music begin at Exodus 15, where the children of Israel sing praise to God for His deliverance in parting the Red Sea. In 1 Chronicles 16 we see the great psalmist, King David, appointing musicians specifically for the service of sacred music. Music played a large part in Old Testament worship, and the Psalms give us an excellent sampling of the depth and grandness of these songs. The New Testament brings us the first references to hymns, even as early as the life of Christ. (Matt. 26:30) The text of several hymns of the early church is included in the New Testament. (1 Tim. 6:15-16; 1 Tim 3:16; 2 Tim 2:11-13; Phil 2:6-11; Rev. 15:3-4; [also probable: Col. 1:15-20; Titus 3:4-7; Heb. 1:3-4; Rev. 1:6-8, 4:11, 5:9-13, 11:15-18, 12:10-12])

As music notation and theory developed and progressed, it gave rise to the metric forms of hymnody we are familiar with today. Many of the great hymn writers such as Martin Luther, Charles Wesley, William Cowper, and Phillip Bliss gave us timeless and profound lyrics that are versatile musically, because they are strongly metric poetry. Often the tunes in our hymnals can be interchanged with multiple hymn lyrics. This has great benefits in some regards, and drawbacks in others. The main drawback is the fact that many of these great hymns do not have a tune written specifically for the lyrics, but rather a tune that happens to fit the metrical and rhythmic pattern of the lyrics. The result is some tunes that fail to emphasize and support the message in the lyrics.

In modern times, with the advent of electronic instrumentation, there have been drastic and sometimes shocking changes to the face of sacred music. As the term "Christian" has come to loosely refer to a multitude of things, from the sacred to things most decidedly non-Christ-like, so the term "Christian music" has come to encompass a bewildering variety of styles and messages. The last fifty years alone have so drastically altered what was clearly defined as "church music" that it has now become an indistinguishably vague label. Trying to define "sacred music" or "church music" today is like trying to find shapes in clouds. This raises the question, "Should there be a form of music specifically for the Church?"

To answer this question, consider the culturally relevant types and forms of music today. Though even secular genres are becoming muddled and blended, it is still usually fairly easy to define the culture behind specific genres. For instance; a southern twang and steel guitar still evoke thoughts of a "country-style" culture – typically defined by romance, family, and the crowd of good-ol-boys at the rodeo or in the local bar. A "screaming" vocal style with heavily distorted guitars and an overload of drums quickly lets you know that the culture behind the music is fast, angry, and consuming. The culture behind this style usually consists of the "extremes" – whether in sports, life, or attitude. The acoustic fiddle/ banjo/ guitar style of music usually brings to mind the down-home side of life. The culture behind this folk & bluegrass music is generally that of the "front porch, home cooking, and simpler way of life." "Pop" music, like the "pop" culture it embodies is very much a free-for-all trying to capture pieces of anything that will sell and amalgamate them into something that is tolerable to the widest variety of people possible. A reggae island lilt, earthy blues, or upscale jazz all typically embody the culture they are trying to reflect.

So, what does this have to do with church music? Nearly every culture, subculture, and cultural fringe group has a music that reflects that culture. The Church, as the body of Christ, should be a culture reflecting the principles Christ demonstrated in His life and the truths found in God's Word. Therefore, church music should reflect these same life principles. Historically, Psalms and hymns have given the Church a music that was representative of its culture. However, strictly adhering to only the old and familiar hymns does create a unique problem. Imagine if a pastor had only a few books of sermons from which to preach, and those books had mostly the same sermons. Ultimately, it would leave the pastor with only 600 – 700 sermons – the same set that had been preached by most pastors for the last century or more. The moment he let his congregation know which sermon he would preach, they would tune out mentally and emotionally no matter how great the oratory skills of the preacher. This is exactly what has happened to the great familiar hymns. Most people are so familiar with the texts and the tunes that they tune out mentally and emotionally while singing or listening to them. The result is stale, unthinking, unemotional, and meaningless corporate worship. No matter how great the musicianship or how deep the lyrics, it is all lost in familiarity.

What then, is the solution? Many have proposed (and tried) scrapping hymns altogether, and embracing the “new” or “edgy,” which almost always entails embracing the music from other “cultures” and value systems and attempting to conform the message of Christianity to them. Most often, the result is a huge gain in the emotion and stimulation, with a nearly complete loss of the theological and intellectual depth found throughout the history of Christian music. The solution is taking the music of the church seriously. Should it be fresh? Yes! Should it contain emotion? Absolutely! Should it maintain the integrity of Christ's life and reflect the depths of truth found in Scripture? To do anything else demotes the image of the Body of Christ, weakening it and making it laughable to outside observers.

Modern hymnody attempts to provide a solution to the musical dilemma facing the Church today. One way to accomplish this is to write fresh and relevant music for deep, quality hymn lyrics or Psalms. Simply “pop-ifying” them is not a solution, but rather taking the lyrics and supporting them with quality musical arrangements that draw the singer's attention and give emotion to the text. Another much-needed method is the writing of new hymns. There are very few modern hymnists, and there should be many more. The need for deep, high-quality hymn lyrics is great. Hymns are written specifically for congregational singing and do not sell as well for entertainment, so there are very few writers willing to make a sacrifice. Instead, churches are attempting to take songs written as solos and teach them to congregations – a combination that spells disaster for a large group, and usually ends up excluding almost everyone but the select few on stage. The Church needs to have a distinct music that fits the Church's very distinct purpose and the culture taught by Jesus Christ.

Where is sacred music heading in the future? Will there still be a style of music that is distinctively Christian? The history of Christian music is at a crossroads in time, culture, and purpose. The legacy is long, filled with incredibly talented psalmists and hymnists, and marked by earth-shaking events. It is time to take that history and legacy seriously. Whether you have been entrusted the awesome responsibility of writing music worthy of a holy God, or get the joyful experience of aiding corporate worship, take the responsibility seriously and wholeheartedly. Help maintain the sanctity of sacred music. Show the sin-saturated cultures and sub-cultures around you that the culture of Christ shines with something that is unattainable any other way. The future history of Christian music depends on what happens in your church this week, and every week.

Please note: This article is not lengthy enough to address the principles of Christian music in the home, so the focus has remained on music in the church. Every home has its own sub-culture, and it is up to the leadership in the home to determine the music that will best reflect and strengthen that culture. Also not addressed is the issue of church music and ethnicities. This article was written from a Western-world mindset, where metric hymns are the historical base of church music. A brief history of Christian music for Africa, Asia, or some other places in the world would be drastically different, resulting in different styles or thought processes in the music of those parts of Christ's body. The principles, however, remain the same. Ultimately, it still boils down to this question: Does the music of the Church reflect the same unique principles that Christianity itself presents, or is it merely demoting the sanctity of the Gospel through cheap imitation? Study Colossians 3 and attempt to pattern the music in your church on solid biblical truth – not flimsy cultural trends.

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