

## **Lecture #1 – The Power and Purpose of Music**

### **I. WHAT IS MUSIC?**

Webster's 1828 Dictionary gives the following relevant definitions of music:

“Melody or harmony; any succession of sounds so modulated as to please the ear, or any combination of simultaneous sounds in accordance or harmony. music is vocal or instrumental. Vocal music is the melody of a single voice, or the harmony of two or more voices in concert. Instrumental music is that produced by one or more instruments.”

“The science of harmonical sounds, which treats of the principles of harmony, or the properties, dependencies and relations of sounds to each other. This may be called speculative or theoretical music”<sup>1</sup>

Merriam-Webster.com gives this two-fold definition:

“the science or art of ordering tones or sounds in succession, in combination, and in temporal relationships to produce a composition having unity and continuity”

“vocal, instrumental, or mechanical sounds having rhythm, melody, or harmony”<sup>2</sup>

The online OnMusic Dictionary defines music as:

“Any rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic grouping of sounds that is specifically composed and that forms a unity so as to convey a message, to communicate, or to entertain.”<sup>3</sup>

First and foremost, it must be understood that **music is a language**. Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow called it “the universal language of mankind”.<sup>4</sup> It is a language that can speak powerfully without words – a language of emotion and sensation.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/music> - Accessed 1-4-22

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/music> - Accessed 1-4-22

<sup>3</sup> <https://dictionary.onmusic.org/terms/2278-music> - Accessed 1-4-22

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/132-music-is-the-universal-language-of-mankind> - Accessed 1-4-22

Linguists have identified five basic components of language. All five are present in music.

<b>Component</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Music</b>
<b>Phonology</b>	<i>Phonemes</i> are the smallest units of sound (the <i>b</i> in <i>ball</i> )	<i>Notes</i> are the smallest units of sound
<b>Morphology</b>	Structure of individual words	Multiple <i>notes</i> make up <i>chords</i>
<b>Syntax</b>	Structure of multiple words in a sentence	Multiple <i>notes or chords</i> make up a <i>song</i>
<b>Semantics</b>	Additional meaning in words (e.g.: figurative or emotional)	Additional meaning, feeling, or association beyond musical tones.
<b>Pragmatics</b>	Altering language for desired goals or communication (e.g.: formal or informal)	The emotion or message conveyed by music to communicate to its audience.

## **II. POWER OF MUSIC**

It can bypass our minds and subconsciously affect our spirit.

Music is so pervasive in our society that it is easy to overlook its effects on our mind, body, and spirit. It is used at sports events to rally the fans to cheer. It is used in restaurants to mask crowd noise. It is used in advertising to tug at your emotions (and pocketbook). It is used in stores to get you to linger longer and shop more.

Music unites and divides. It seems that every section of our fragmented society rallies around a genre of music. We will see that this applies even in Christianity as music is a key divider between denominations and groups.

For the Christian, we must be aware of the power of music for good or evil. It can incite both lust and praise, or covetousness and worship. It can be a tremendous weapon in the hands of a capable servant of God. Many souls have been saved because of the effects of singing the Gospel. A congregation can be unified, divided, uplifted, or discouraged by the music in their church.

## **III. FOUR ELEMENTS OF MUSIC**

Music is made up of four elements: **melody, harmony, rhythm,** and **lyrics.** We will introduce these concepts here and later delve deeper into the science behind them.

### **MELODY**

Oxford Dictionary of Music – “A succession of notes, varying in pitch, which have an organized and recognizable shape.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.), p. 457

OnMusic Dictionary – “A tune; a succession of tones comprised of mode, rhythm, and pitches so arranged as to achieve musical shape, being perceived as a unity by the mind. In a piece of music where there is more than one voice, or where harmony is present, the melody is the dominant tune of the composition.”<sup>6</sup>

Melody is the series of notes/tones that make up the primary expression of music. When you hum a song, you are humming its melody.


## HARMONY

OnMusic Dictionary – “1. The combination of notes sounded simultaneously to produce chords. Usually, this term is used to describe consonance, however, it can also be used to describe dissonance. 2. Countermelodic notes to accompany a tune.”<sup>7</sup>

The Oxford Dictionary of Music – “The simultaneous sounding (i.e. combination) of notes, giving what is known as vertical music., contrasted with horizontal music.”

Two terms from the Oxford Dictionary of Music need defining. Vertical and horizontal music are ways of describing melody and harmony in a musical score. We will see that below in the first lines of “Amazing Grace”. The melody is the succession of the highest notes from left-to-right, so to read the melody we look at the progression horizontally. The harmony is the added notes below the melody note. Thus, we read them vertically as they are occurring at the simultaneously on each given beat.

Here, melody ("horizontal music") is the left-to-right series of highest notes



Here, harmony ("vertical music") are the added notes below each note of melody.

Harmony is the additional tones that add depth to the melody.

<sup>6</sup> <https://dictionary.onmusic.org/terms/2138-melody> - Accessed 1-4-22

<sup>7</sup> <https://dictionary.onmusic.org/terms/1673-harmony> - Accessed 1-4-22

## **RHYTHM**

OnMusic Dictionary - “The subdivision of a space of time into a defined, repeated pattern. Rhythm is the controlled movement of music in time. It may be defined as the division of music into regular metric portions; the regular pulsation of music.”<sup>8</sup>

The Oxford Dictionary of Music – “(in the full sense of the word) covers everything pertaining to the *time* aspect of music as distinct from the aspect of pitch, i.e. it includes the effects of beats, accents, measures, grouping of notes into beats, grouping of beats into measures, grouping of measures into phrases, etc.”

Rhythm is the pace and spacing of the tones in music. It is the heartbeat of music the progressions of tones as beats. These beats

## **LYRICS**

OnMusic Dictionary – “A term used for the words (or text) of a song.”<sup>9</sup>

Lyrics are the words sung to the melody and harmony of music. They are typically written in a poetic style (containing rhymes and metre).

Lyrics are not required for music to exist. Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* has no lyrics but no one deny that it is music. While instrumental music may convey emotions and feeling, it has no way to directly express human language.

## **IV. IS MUSIC MORAL OR AMORAL?**

This debate is ongoing.

The common argument today is that music is neutral. It is argued that the style of music (rock, country, classical, etc.) is irrelevant as long as the lyrics or intent are deemed acceptable.

My contention is that music is amoral in its essence but moral in its execution and application. I base this on the observation that music is a language. Is the English language moral or amoral? Are letters or their sounds sinful or pure? The elements of human language – letters, sounds, syntax, etc. – are amoral, but they take on a moral value when wielded by moral humans. A human can say kind words or cruel words, blessings or curses. The letters and sounds that make up those words become moral in their usage. It is the same with music. A “C” chord is not right or wrong, but what you use it for can be.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://dictionary.onmusic.org/terms/2896-rhythm> - Accessed 1-4-22

<sup>9</sup> <https://dictionary.onmusic.org/terms/2044-lyric> - Accessed 1-4-22

## **V. HOW MUSIC CAN BE ELEMENTALLY CORRUPTED**

Many Christians have little discernment when it comes to assessing music. They have some indefinable stance that U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously had concerning obscenity in the 1964 case *Jacobellis v. Ohio* – “I know it when I see it”.

Briefly I want to examine the four elements of music to illustrate how each can become corrupted. There are many other factors that we will look at later in judging the value of music.

### **MELODY**

This is least likely to be corrupted as an elemental. It can be corrupted through performance, by improvisation or exaggeration.

### **HARMONY**

Harmony becomes corrupted when it becomes unnatural. One of the hallmarks of modern music is use of nontraditional and exotic harmonies. But it is still rarely the cause of corruption in music.

### **RHYTHM**

Rhythm is one of the more obvious methods of corruption. Sometimes an unnecessary complex beat is added to a song. Other times the beat is simply overemphasized.

### **LYRICS**

This is the most obvious and immediately invalidates anything else that is good in the music. It should be obvious that songs about sinful things or that contain false doctrine are inherently corrupt.

## **VI. MUSIC IN BALANCE**

Quality music has a balance between its four elements. Any lyrics that are sung should be heard above the music that accompanies them and should be discernable in diction and feeling. The melody should be the prevalent musical voice, both in singing the lyrics and in playing instruments. The harmony should support but not overpower the melody, giving depth without becoming the focus. The rhythm should keep the progression of the song moving in an orderly and fitting manner without overpowering it.

No part of music can exist by itself and still be music. Lyrics would become a poem, melody and harmony just random tones, and rhythm just a sequence of beats. Great lyrics will be forgotten if the melody is not memorable and reproduceable. Melodies will lose their value without good lyrics and harmony. Improper rhythm will sabotage even the best of music.

## **VII. MUSIC AND MUSING**

Etymologically, the English words *music* and *muse* (to think) are linked.<sup>10</sup> These both developed from the idea of the Greek *Muses*, the nine pagan deities associated with the arts. This is just another indication of how music affects our mental state. We find this in Scripture that David played his harp to affect Saul's mental and emotional state (I Samuel 16:14-23).

A basic question that can be asked in considering the fitness of a particular piece or style of music is, "What does this make me think about?" Some music may lead us to think of the Lord and other music may lead us to feel sinful lusts. While this simple test may not be the strongest to build an argument on, it is an effective method of judging music.

## **VIII. MUSIC AND PURPOSE**

The biggest question we must ask ourselves is how are we to handle music? It is too powerful, too effective, and too often in Scripture to be taken lightly as a subject or tool. As in all things, its primary purpose should be to bring honor and glory to God (I Corinthians 10:31). When music cannot do this, it should be avoided.

## **IX. THINGS TO KNOW**

- The quote by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "Music is the universal language of mankind"
- The four elements of music.
- Is music moral or amoral?
- The link between music and musing.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/music>  
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/muse>