

Lecture #15 – Evaluating Music for Church Use

I. Introduction

The music we use in our churches must be used purposefully. It must fit the setting and purpose of its use. We generally would not sing “I’ll Fly Away” at a funeral, or “Precious Memories” at a Missions Conference.

With the wide variety of music that is available to us today, who can we know if a song or a hymnbook fits our church? Here are some considerations:

II. From *Worship in Song* by Scott Aniol¹

Appropriate Responses

Does the music prompt the proper response? Does glorify God or does it stir sinful lists?

Sentimentalism vs. Adoration – Just because a song stirs the emotions does not mean that it does so in a proper way. We can be stirred by nostalgia, for example, instead of the truth of a song.

Joviality vs Joy – There is a difference in the deep-rooted joy of a Christian and the silly antics of a high school pep rally.

Levity vs. Community – Oftentimes we fall into a trap of irreverence to build camaraderie in a service.

Romantic Affection vs. Reverent Love – God’s love for us, our love for Him, and the brotherly love of Christians is not the same as the romantic feelings we have.

Sadness vs. Sorrow – Sorrow is a true and valid response that God desires (Psalm 51:17), but this is not the same as removing all joy from life.

Familiarity vs. Paternity – While God is our Father, we should not refer to Him as our “Daddy”. Yes, we have a close relationship with God, but we cannot stoop to irreverence to describe it.

Somberness vs. Sobriety – While we should be serious about our worship, we should never be gloomy or overly grave.

Triviality vs. Simplicity – To make something simple is to make it accessible. To make it trivial is to make it of little or no value.

¹ *Worship in Song: A Biblical Approach to Music and Worship* by Scott Aniol, 2009. From chapter 16, “Making Sacred Musical Choices”

Virtuosity vs. Excellence – While we should offer God our best, we should not draw attention away from him by our own actions or performance.

Appropriate Congregational Worship Music

Consider the Textual Content. Is it doctrinally correct? Is the text appropriate for congregational worship? Is the text congregationally-oriented? Is the text understandable?

Consider the Textual Form. Consider the vocabulary. Consider the grammar. Consider the structure.

Consider the Associations.

Consider the Intrinsic Meaning. What does the music sound like? Is the general mood appropriate for congregational worship?

Additional Considerations

Is it written well?

Is it singable?

Is the hymn memorable?

“If we are going to please God with the music we use in our congregational worship, we must be more selective and careful with what we choose. We must carefully examine our music to determine if its meaning is pleasing to God. God is not pleased when we choose things that are shallow, trite, sentimental, or that express sentiments inappropriate for a relationship with Him. He wants us to choose music that communicates messages that fit our purposes for congregational worship.”²

III. From *Music Matters* by Cary Schmidt³

Guiding Principles for Godly Music:

1. It should not sound like "war in the camp." (Exodus 32:17-18)
2. It should sound like praising. (2 Chronicles 5:13)

² *Worship in Song: A Biblical Approach to Music and Worship* by Scott Aniol, p. 221.

³ *Music Matters: Understanding and Applying the Amazing Power of Godly Music* by Cary Schmidt, 2013.

3. It should be different from the world. (Romans 12:2)
4. It should be psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. (Ephesians 5:19)
5. It should be "singing with grace." (Colossians 3:16)
6. It should be a new song (different from the world). (Psalm 40:3)
7. It should facilitate the filling of God's Holy Spirit. (Ephesians 5:18-19)
8. It should instruct me in God's Word. (Colossians 3:16)
9. It should be spiritual, as opposed to fleshly or carnal (melody led rather than beat driven). (Ephesians 5:19-20)
10. It should facilitate God's transforming work and combat the world's conforming work. (Romans 12:1-2)
11. It should witness to others of Christ. (Psalm 40:3)
12. It should repel evil spirits and welcome God's Spirit. (1 Samuel 16:23)
13. It should strengthen my life. (Psalm 81:1)
14. It should be pleasant. (Psalm 81:2)
15. It should be joyful. (Psalm 100:1)
16. It should be understandable. (Psalm 47:7; 1 Corinthians 14:15)
17. It should let God's peace rule in my heart. (Colossians 3:15-16)
18. It should express thanks. (Psalm 100:4)
19. It should produce godly emotions. (Isaiah 65:14)
20. It should produce spiritual fruit in my life. (Romans 6:16)
21. It should help to protect my heart. (Proverbs 4:23)
22. It should worship and extol my God. (Psalm 29:2)
23. It should be orderly and not of confusion. (1 Corinthians 14:10, 14:33)
24. It should glorify God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

IV. From *Sound Worship* by Scott Aniol⁴

Musical Communication Choices

| Corrupt | Edifying | | |
|-------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|--|
| Avoid At All Times | Fitting | | Unfitting |
| | Negative Association | Positive Association | Avoid For This Occasion |
| | Avoid For This Occasion | Room for Preferences | |

V. From *Church Music for the Glory of God* by Gunnar Urang⁵

This lengthy quote is from Chapter 6 – “The Songleader: Pepe or Preparation?”

II WHAT TO SING? THAT IS THE QUESTION

"To sing or not to sing" is no question. Tradition and habit have settled it for us. But “What to sing?” - that is a problem. Every songleader must face that problem and decide what principles ought to guide his choosing.

Such principles are necessary, if congregational singing is itself necessary. We soon detect the lack of these principles or of their application when the closing hymn clashes with the theme of the sermon or when a frivolous chorus shatters the solemn atmosphere of the worship service.

Every songleader has principles, but too often they are inadequate. Sometimes he will make familiarity his exclusive principle, selecting four or five songs which he feels sure his people can and will sing, but giving little thought to the theme or the occasion or the quality of the song itself. Too often the songleader will confine himself to personal favorites. In that case the congregation finds itself singing the same few pets week after week until the songs are worn threadbare and their message all but lost through the familiarity which breeds thoughtlessness and indifference.

⁴ *Sound Worship: A Guide To Making Musical Choices in a Noisy World* by Scott Aniol, 2010. Chart is from page 80.

⁵ *Church Music for the Glory of God* by Gunnar Urang, 1956. Quotes from pages 62-72.

We can distinguish three sets of principles in choosing songs for congregational use: those relating to the song itself, those relating to the congregation, and those relating to the occasion. In other words, a song should be good, it should be familiar, and it should be appropriate. Here we shall consider only the first of these, the quality of a song or hymn.

Let us consider first the quality of the words and later the suitability of the music. It may seem strange that the songleader should have to ask about a song, "Is it good?" for a fairly prevalent attitude seems to be, "If it's in the book, it's good." Now it is true that the very existence of a hymn-book implies a process of weeding out which guarantees that the songs which appear in the book are better than average quality. But the standards of the hymnal compilers are not necessarily those of the songleader, and hymnals vary considerably among themselves as well. In the final analysis it is up to the individual songleader to choose the best.

A good song ought to have something to say. I do not mean by this that every gospel song ought to be as profound as our richest hymns. There is a place for both the involved and the simple, both the sublime and the commonplace. But there is no place for trite, meaningless phrases culminating in empty rhymes, like the "June-moon" of the popular hits.

A good song should have poetic language. A good hymn is not necessarily of top literary quality, because a hymn is not primarily an artistic object but a useful one. Nevertheless a good hymn or song must have some of the qualities of lyric poetry. It must be couched in the language of emotion – language which is concrete rather than abstract, figurative rather than literal, and sensuous rather than intellectual. Take, for example, the following stanza from the famous hymn by Isaac Watts, "Our God Our Help in Ages Past":

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,

Bears all her sons away.

They fly forgotten, as a dream

Dies at the opening day.

Is it not significant that those of Watts' hymns which are truly poetical have survived, whereas those which merely rhymed theology have long since died?

A good song should have practical usefulness. For one thing it ought to fill a definite purpose. If it is a hymn it should express some aspect of devotion and worship; its thought should be primarily Godward. If it is a gospel song, it should present some useful message of testimony or exhortation; its thought should be basically manward. Furthermore, the message of a song should be simple enough so that all can understand. There is no place in hymns and gospel songs for the involved figures and erudite allusions of George Herbert or John Milton. Finally, if the song is to be useful the message must be capable of general application, not too individualistic and personal.

I think I should add at this point that a good song ought to be theologically accurate. Here is a point where many of our modern-day gospel songs fall short. Whereas the authors of most of our older hymns were preachers and teachers, the author of a modern gospel song is just as likely to be a more or less professional musician with only a fair-to-middling grasp of theology. The problem of theological accuracy will perhaps take on added significance if we stop to consider the

fact that many church-goers pick up their theology more from the hymns they sing and unconsciously memorize than from the sermons they hear and consciously forget. One often hears a testimony like this: "You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart." Very fine sentiment, but very weak theology!

Let us now consider briefly the music which accompanies the words of the hymn or gospel song. The standard is not "good" music but suitable music – suited to the sense and spirit of the words and to the ability and tastes of the congregation.

In a few cases one encounters a song in which the accents of the music do not coincide with the emphasis in the words. Only one example comes to mind at the moment, a hymn in which the last two lines must be sung with the following emphasis:

Root-*ed* and *fixed* in God,

Root-*ed* and *fixed* in God.

But this kind of discrepancy is not nearly so serious as the more subtle lack of correspondence between the spirit of the words and that of the music. Once in a while one hears a hymn with serious words set to a bouncy, rollicking tune, or one whose austere message is rendered ineffectual by sickly sentimental music. And of course, the opposite can also occur. One of the reasons for the rise of the lighter gospel song was the exclusive and unreasoning use of slow, stately hymns, sung at tempos which changed stateliness to sluggishness.

I have found it helpful to compile my own personal hymnal, applying these principles to the church hymnal. Such a selection of "good" hymns, gospel songs and choruses is not a sealed book which can never be added to or subtracted from, but a handy reference in choosing songs for the various church services.

In applying such principles to hymns and songs the songleader may in a sense be anticipating history. Here is what I mean. Charles Wesley wrote some 6500 hymns during his lifetime. Many of them were sung only a few times before they were discarded. Some passed out of use with the changing times. But most of them died simply because they were not intrinsically worthwhile enough to endure. As a result, of Wesley's 6500 hymns our present-day hymnals contain about ten or twelve. If history has so sifted the work of one of the greatest hymn-writers of all time, then the songleader is surely justified in exercising great care in his selection of hymns and songs. And the first principle on which to base that selection is contained in the question, "Is it a good song?" The mere fact that a song is pious and in print does not put us under obligation to use it. We must decide for ourselves on the basis of certain principles whether a song is good in itself and useful in a particular situation. Previously we have seen that the first principle for choosing hymns and songs is that of intrinsic worth – answering the question "Is this a 'good' congregational song?" We further found that a song or hymn is good if the words are Christ-centered in thought content, poetic in form and feeling, and accurate in theology, and if the music reinforces the letter and the spirit of the words.

Such discriminating choice is not literary prejudice or musical snobbery. In hymnody history has done the choosing for us, culling out through the centuries those hymns which were inferior in quality or in usefulness. Some of the hymns of Isaac Watts fell by the wayside because they were

not poems but simply rhymed theology. Many hymns written by genuine poets are no longer in use because they were good poetry but poor theology. A number of songs which were once very popular have been forgotten because they embodied mere religious sentiment rather than abiding truth. It is part of our responsibility to anticipate, as it were, the verdict of history and to winnow the modern product in Christian music, allowing the chaff to blow away.

All very well, someone will say, but why such care? The average Christian does not analyze what he sings. Such a statement is true on the surface. But it is false in its implications, for it suggests that the Christian is not influenced by the song he sings unless he analyzes that song. Poetry and music are more subtle than that. It isn't analysis of a march tune which sets one's foot to tapping nor research in the field of jazz music that sways the bodies on the dance floor. And one does not have to write book reviews about the paperbacks to have his mind polluted by trashy novels.

Suppose a congregation is brought up on a musical diet of vague religious sentiment and sloppy theology. Because they sing those songs over and over again the words of the songs become a part of their unconscious memory and of their vocabulary. Eventually they will find their brand of religion influenced considerably by the content of the words and the spirit of the music. I see in our careless attitude toward church music one prominent cause of that great problem of present-day evangelical Christianity - superficiality, sentimental theology, a religion of "feeling" teetering on a frail foundation of objective truth. Obviously the other extreme is just as dangerous in its own way. There are church groups who glorify austerity and intellectualism in church music and whose personal religion is a sterile orthodoxy with a considerable foundation but no building. And to those who would see in the music an effect rather than a cause of the problem I would point out that the whole process is a vicious circle. Superficiality in theology and in experience begets superficiality in church music, which in turn influences theology and experience.

We have a right, then, to choose carefully because history reveals a principle of "survival of the fittest" in the great body of hymnody. More than that, we have a duty to choose carefully because the Christian is deeply, even if unconsciously, influenced by what he sings.

But there are other principles for choice beside that of intrinsic worth. Familiarity is one. People like to sing what they already know. And the old songs have rich associations for those who have walked with God for many years.

But it is possible to run familiarity into the ground. There are pastors and songleaders who will never ask a congregation to sing anything but "old favorites." If the words of a hymn or song are good and if the tune is suitable and singable, then the congregation ought to learn the song. Education is especially needful today in the case of the old hymns. There are young people in our churches who do not know "Rock of Ages" or "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," not to mention "O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go" or "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah." The songleader should take time now and then to introduce a "new" hymn, taking care to teach it slowly and thoroughly and to use it often so that it too becomes in time an old favorite.

But even with the carefully compiled list of good hymns and songs the songleader or pastor cannot just choose, "eeny-meeny-miny-mo," four hymns for the morning service and five songs for the evening. Along with intrinsic worth and familiarity stands the vital principle of appropriateness. Heretofore we have considered the hymn in itself and the hymn in relation to the congregation.

Now we consider the hymn in relation to its use – appropriateness, to the purpose of the service and to the progress within the service.

Appropriateness to purpose is more easily illustrated than defined. The lack of it is obvious when for instance a gospel song of invitation is used in the early part of what is supposed to be a worship service, or when the over-zealous hymn enthusiast jars the joyous informality of the gospel meeting with an austere and solemn worship hymn. "All People that on Earth Do Dwell" may not have much to contribute to the spirit of the Sunday evening service. And in the worship service the choice ought to be restricted more or less to those hymns which are Godward in direction and which magnify His attributes of holiness, justice, mercy, and love. We need not apologize for such a standard. The primary activity of the redeemed man is worship, both now and throughout eternity: and the primary purpose of the Christian's life is to glorify God. And as there is a place for music which fulfills the purpose of worship so there is a place for music which fulfills the purpose of the "gospel" service – with its emphasis on testimony, exhortation to the saint, and invitation to the sinner.

Music in the Sunday school and the young people's meeting offers other problems. We all recognize the fact that young people enjoy singing songs which are rhythmic and melodic ("catchy"), and that for this reason the gospel chorus finds acceptance among them. But we sometimes fail to remember that both these organizations are in the business of Christian education, and that young people need education in worship music as well as in the other types. It seems to me that worship hymns ought to be used in Sunday school and in young people's meetings, and that they should not only be used but should also be taught.

Hymns and songs should be appropriate to the purpose of the service as a whole. But more than this they must be appropriate to the situation within the service. Within each service, in other words, there ought to be a kind of progress. Just what this progress should be depends partly on the occasion, partly on the sermon topic, and – in the worship service – partly on the nature of worship itself.

Consider this last point for a moment. We have in the sixth chapter of Isaiah an account of a real worship experience in the life of that man of God. We find that that experience consisted of: a vision of the majesty and holiness of God, a recognition and confession of human sinfulness and unworthiness, a purification, a call to service, and a response to that call. Taking this as our model we could plan a worship service the music of which would include:

A hymn of praise emphasizing the greatness and goodness of our God ("Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty," or "O Worship the King").

A hymn of personal devotion expressing our own unworthiness and our gratitude to Him who has made us acceptable ("Beneath the Cross of Jesus" or "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross").

A prayer-hymn, perhaps just before the sermon ("Lord, I Have Shut the Door").

A closing hymn or response ("O Jesus I Have Promised" or "Take My Life").

The Sunday evening gospel service, on the other hand, may commence with a "peppy" song of joyous testimony ("Love Found a Way" or "I Will Sing of My Redeemer") and continue with others in the same vein, changing to a quieter devotional song before the prayer, going on then

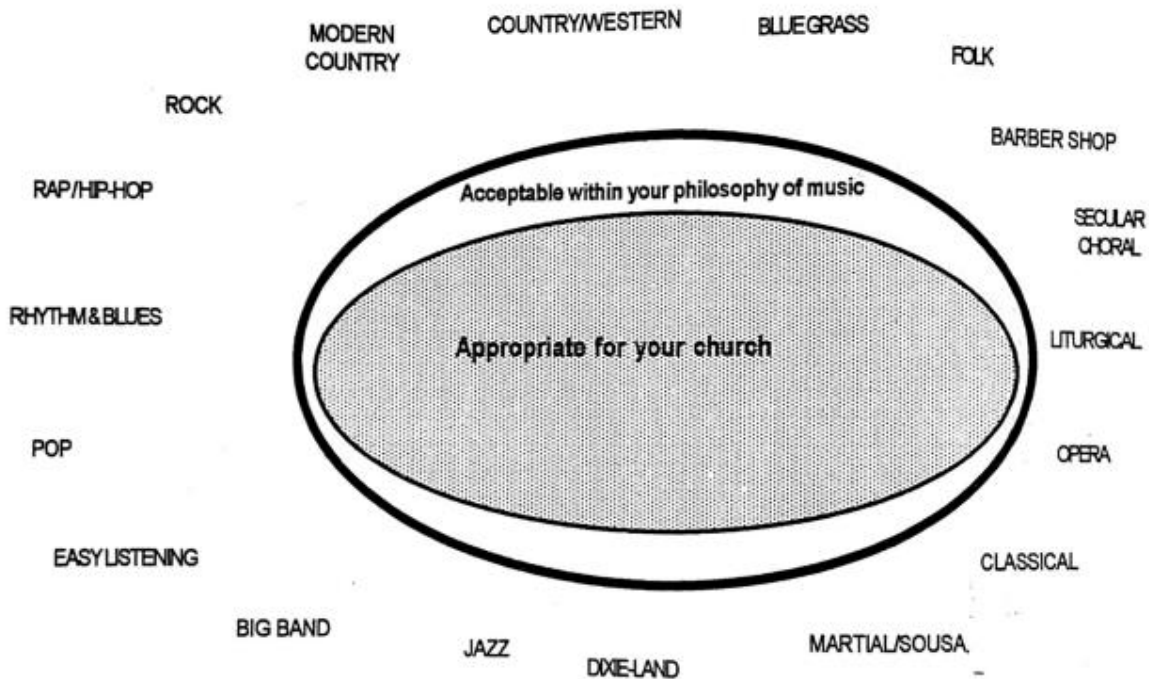
with songs of exhortation to the Christian ("Trust and Obey" or "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus"), including a prayer-hymn before the sermon ("Open My Eyes, that I May See"), and closing with an invitation song or a consecration response.

To summarize then. The songleader or pastor has the right, yea, the duty, to choose the songs with care. He should choose them on the basis of certain criteria, among which are: 1. The intrinsic worth of the words and the suitability of the music. 2. The familiarity of the hymn. 3. The appropriateness of the song, to the purpose of the service and to the progress within the service.

One word more. It is a good thing for the one who leads the service to let the congregation know the purpose and plan of the service. This does not call for a lengthy lecture on criteria for choosing hymns or the nature of true worship. All that is necessary is a comment here and there, brief and well-chosen. But the result will be for the congregation a service which has meaning.

VI. From Andrew Johnson's Notes⁶

Acceptable vs. Appropriate⁷



⁶ That I just happen to have scans of.

⁷ My scan made this a little wonky.

Marks of Christ Honoring Music⁸

Purpose of Christian music: Reveal Christ, Bring Praise to God, Edify the believe.

Four qualities that characterize Christian music:

- 1.) Correct in doctrine. (Words of Christ). *Very serious matter*
- 2.) Exalts deity, specifically Christ. (Any modern music that handles the name of Christ irreverently, or in a vain manner should be avoided. Exodus 20:7.)
- 3.) Has real depth. "Dwell richly, wisdom, teaching and admonishing." One phrase songs, often repeated, are trivial and hypnotic.
- 4.) Fits a biblical category.
 - a. Psalms- Scripture set to music. Psalms carry idea of scriptural accompaniment; "Rejoice in the Lord Always", "This is the day", "The law of the Lord".
 - b.) Hymns- Are objective, focusing on God and exalting Him. God centered; "A mighty fortress", "Holy, Holy, Holy", "O worship the king", "Be thou exalted", "Crown Him with many crowns", "All hail the power". Often these songs do not have a refrain or chorus that repeats. If found it is usually listed in the verses and is not its own refrain. The verses build on each other, sing them all!
 - c.) Spiritual songs- Emphasizes the spiritual, songs of testimony of what God has done for me. Mandates biblical content.

Scriptural Message

- Must be true to the Word and doctrinal soundness.
- Leads us to think biblical.
- Should never be suggestive of evil in message or music.
- The message and music should not be cheap or tawdry. (Philippians 4:8)
- Should help us honor God with our bodies. Music that imitates the effects of Godless music on the body, or destroys or impairs hearing is not Christian music.
- Maintains a balance between spirit and understanding. (1st Corinthians 6:19-20, 14:15)
- Contains words that are full of beauty, dignity, reverence. Words that are worth of worship to a Holy God. (Isaiah 6:1-6)

⁸ These are from someone's typed notes. I think it is either Jacob Luman or Lee Davis.

- Free of mental association of worldly music or styles. (Romans 12:2, 1st John 2:15)
- Music that seeks to copy worldly methodology is not honoring to God.
- Expressive of the peace that accompanies the Christian life. (Colossians 3:15-16). Peaceful and thankful. God promises peace to His people. (John 14:27).
- Characterized by preciseness, harmony, order. (1 Corinthians 14:40). A= without, muse= to think, To be amused is to not think. The work and music of God should be done decently and in order.
- Promotes and accompanies Godliness and modesty. Points to Christ, (1st Peter 1:16). Not modish in fashion, no suggestive act or sexual aggressiveness. (Titus 2:11-12)
- Should strengthen new or weak believers, (Romans 13:14, 21, 15:2)
- Music that reminds us of prior life and sin should be abhorred and rejected.
- The erosion of music standards parallels the erosion of convictions and practice in all other areas. It is the law of reaping and sowing.