

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”¹

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”²

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.”³

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

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

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

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

⁴ <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.

Component	Language	Music
Phonology	<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
Morphology	Structure of individual words	Multiple <i>notes</i> make up <i>chords</i>
Syntax	Structure of multiple words in a sentence	Multiple <i>notes or chords</i> make up a <i>song</i>
Semantics	Additional meaning in words (e.g.: figurative or emotional)	Additional meaning, feeling, or association beyond musical tones.
Pragmatics	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.”⁵

⁵ *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* (1st 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.”⁶

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.

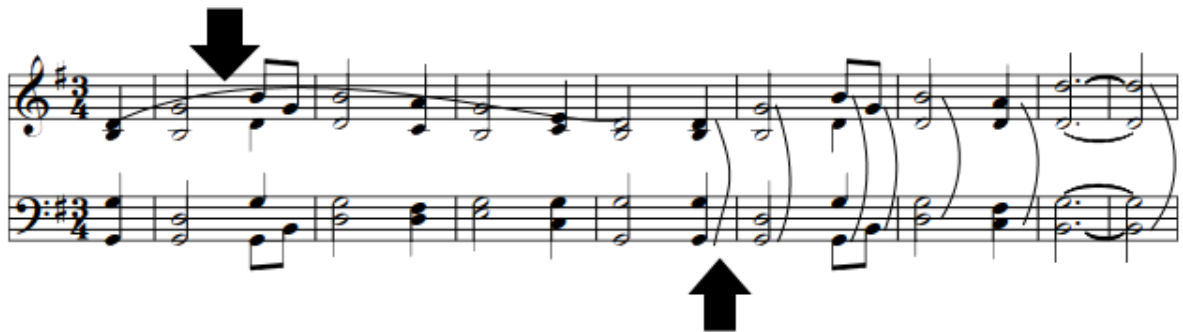
HARMONY

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.”⁷

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

A musical score for the hymn "Amazing Grace" in 3/4 time, key of D major. The score consists of two staves: a treble clef staff for the melody and a bass clef staff for the harmony. The melody is written in a single line, and the harmony is written in a single line below it. A large black arrow points down to the melody line, and another large black arrow points up to the harmony line. The melody line shows a sequence of notes: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The harmony line shows chords: D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, F#4, E4, D4. The notes in the harmony line are positioned below the notes in the melody line, illustrating the concept of vertical music.

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

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

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

⁷ <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.”⁸

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.”⁹

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.

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

⁹ <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 the 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.¹⁰ 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. Prominence of Music in Scripture

The Bible is a musical book. The largest book (Psalms) is the songbook for the nation of Israel. Music can be found from Genesis to Revelation.

X. Musical Survey of the Old Testament

This list is not exhaustive to all references to music, but it should illustrate the pervasiveness of music in the Bible.

Pentateuch

Genesis 4:21 – Jubal was the father of instrumental music (strings and wind).

Genesis 31:27 – Laban mentions music as used to celebrate a parting of friends.

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

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Exodus 15:1-19 – Moses leads Israel in singing a song celebrating deliverance at the Red Sea

Exodus 15:20-21 – Miriam leads in singing.

Exodus 32:18 – The people sang as they worshipped the Golden Calf.

Numbers 21:17-18 – Singing at the well of Beer-elim

Deuteronomy 32:1-43 – The Farewell Song of Moses

Historical Books

Judges 5:1-5 – Deborah and Barak sing a song of victory.

Judges 11:34 – The tragic celebration of Jephthah's daughter.

I Samuel 10:5 – A company of prophets have instruments.

I Samuel 16:15-16 – The effect of music on the spirit of Saul

I Samuel 18:6-7 – Women sing a song of victory after David defeats Goliath.

II Samuel 19:35 – Barzillai says he cannot hear the singing of men or women.

I Kings 1:40-41 – Music is part of the celebration of anointing Solomon as next king.

I Kings 10:12 – Solomon made instruments for Temple music.

I Chronicles 6:31-47 – Roster of Levite singers.

I Chronicles 15:16 – Music celebrates the arrival of the Ark at Jerusalem.

I Chronicles 15:19-22 – The musicians of the Levites.

I Chronicles 23:5 – 4,000 members in Temple orchestra.

I Chronicles 25:1-31 – The organization of the Temple musicians.

II Chronicles 5:11-13 – Music as Ark was placed in the Temple.

II Chronicles 7:6 – Music in the dedication of the Temple

II Chronicles 9:11 – Solomon makes instruments (I Kings 10:12)

II Chronicles 23:13 – Music celebrating the anointing of Joash as king.

II Chronicles 29:25-29 – Music as part of revival of Temple worship under Hezekiah

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Ezra 3:10-11 – Music at dedication of Second Temple.

Nehemiah 12:24 – Music leaders of Second Temple.

Nehemiah 12:27-31 – Music at dedication of wall of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 12:42 – Temple singers named.

Poetical Books

Job 21:12 – Music as part of the mirth of the wicked.

Job 30:31 – Music used in mourning.

Psalms – TOO MANY TO LIST HERE!

Proverbs 25:20 – Power of music to make low emotions even lower.

Ecclesiastes 2:8 – Music as part of the pleasures Solomon tried.

Prophetical Books

Isaiah 5:12 – Music as part of the revels of the wicked.

Isaiah 14:11 – Music as part of the splendor of Babylon

Isaiah 16:10 – Music as part of the joy that was removed in judgment.

Isaiah 23:16 – Music as a tool of the harlot.

Isaiah 24:8-9 – Music as part of the joy that was removed in judgment.

Isaiah 30:29 – Jews would sing after fall of Assyria.

Isaiah 30:32 – Music celebrating as Assyria fell.

Jeremiah 31:4 – Dancing as part of joy.

Ezekiel 26:13 – Music as part of the joy that was removed in judgment.

Ezekiel 28:13 – Music and King of Tyre / Satan

Ezekiel 33:32 – Illustration of beautiful music that is heard but not understood.

Ezekiel 40:44 – A place designated for singers in Ezekiel's Temple.

Daniel 3:4-7,10,15 – Description of Babylonian orchestra.

Amos 5:23 – God can reject our songs.

Amos 6:5 – The Jews were creating new music that did not honor God.

Amos 8:10 – Judgment changes songs of joy to mourning.

Habakkuk 3:1-19 – A song or prayer of Habakkuk

XI. Musical Survey of the New Testament

Gospels and Acts

Matthew 9:23 – Music used in mourning or funeral.

Matthew 11:16-17 – Illustration of children playing using music.

Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26 – Christ and disciples sang, probably the *Hallel* from Psalm 113-118.

Acts 2:46 – Paul and Silas sang in the jail at Philippi

Epistles of Paul

I Corinthians 14:15 – Singing (with understanding) as part of church worship.

Ephesians 5:19 – Music in the life of the believer.

Colossians 3:16 – Music in the life of the believer.

General Epistles

Hebrews 2:12 – Singing as public testimony.

James 5:13 – Singing psalms in times of joy.

Revelation

Revelation 14:2-3 – Music at the entrance of the Lamb and the 144,000

Revelation 18:22 - Music as part of the joy that was removed in judgment.

XII. 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.