

Lecture #21 – Evaluating Music for Church Use

I. Introduction

“Music is the finest of the fine arts, and sacred music ought to be the best of all.” – Andrew W. Blackwood¹

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. Evaluating Congregational Music

Special consideration should be given when considering music for congregational use. While most congregational songs are from a hymnbook, not every song in a hymnbook may be appropriate for an occasion or for a congregation’s skill.

“In short, the fine art of selecting hymns affords the minister an opportunity to school himself, while he is training the people to love the highest in church music.” – Andrew W. Blackwood²

First and foremost, congregational music must be **doctrinally sound**. It should align and complement what is preached and taught.

Second, it must be **free from worldly associations**. The text, tune, and style should not remind others of music that is not glorifying to God.

Third, it should be **accessible** to the congregation and musicians. There are many tremendous songs that are simply too technical for a congregation to sing. “The Hallelujah Chorus” is tremendous when done by a skilled choir, but most congregations cannot handle³ the parts and timing. Ask yourself, “Is this song singable?”⁴ Andrew W. Blackwood wrote, “As a rule, the best music for this purpose is simple.”⁵

It must be stressed also that the music must be within the skill of the songleader and musicians. If the songleader and accompanists are not confident, the congregation will not be either.

¹ *The Fine Art of Public Worship* by Andrew W. Blackwood. Abingdon Press, 1939. p. 95

² *The Fine Art of Public Worship* by Andrew W. Blackwood. Abingdon Press, 1939. p. 127

³ Get it? Handel?

⁴ Timing, range, etc.

⁵ *The Fine Art of Public Worship* by Andrew W. Blackwood. Abingdon Press, 1939. p. 115

This does not mean that you are stuck with low quality music. You can train yourself or your congregation to sing more advanced music over time.

Fourth, it must be of **good quality**. We should offer to Him the best we can. This applies to many areas, such as textually (grammar, expressions, vocabulary, expressions, etc.) and musically (melody, harmony, rhythm, etc.).

Fifth, it must promote a **proper response**. Scott Aniol gives these examples⁶:

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.

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

Sixth, it should help **form** the believer. It should increase their understanding of God and inspire deeper devotion to Him. It should guide the heart and mind with lasting effect.

Seventh, it should be **memorable**. Adults and children should be able to repeat the text and tune in their daily lives.

Eight, it should **display varied and appropriate emotions**. One of the great tragedies in modern churches is that the music often displays only positive emotions (praise, thanksgiving, etc.). Yet that is only a part of our human experience (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). The book of Psalms is not just about

⁶ *Worship in Song: A Biblical Approach to Music and Worship* by Scott Aniol, 2009. From chapter 16, “Making Sacred Musical Choices”.

praises, but a rich supply of fitting expressions for all of life's situations. Few realize just how few of the Psalms are wholly given to praise or positive emotions.

Ninth, it should **complement** the other components of the church service. Congregational singing is just one part of the service, and at best is the second most important (studying God's word is most definitely superior). Through careful use of music, the entire service can be enhanced.

Tenth, congregational **involvement** is key. The song leader leads the congregation in song and musicians accompany them, not the other way round.

Eleventh, congregational music should have **depth**. It is not just music to pass the time, but something that take up residence in the heart and mind, to be meditated on in the coming days. Shallow and repetitious songs are like cotton candy (fun for a moment, but no substance), while quality hymns and songs are like a good steak (savor it, chew on it, satisfying)

Last, it must **give glory** to God. Not the songleader or instrumentalists or the congregation. It should reflect His holiness and grandeur.

III. Evaluating Special Music

Practically all the previous observations apply to special music, whether by soloists or groups. It cannot be less God-honoring. However, there are areas of special concern with special music.

First, the **participants must be exemplary**. While everyone present participates in congregational music, only selected individuals must be allowed to do special music. Standards must be in place not only for talent but, more importantly, Christian character and faithfulness.

Second, there is a **broader range of music** to choose from. While congregational songs can and do make excellent specials, many songs simply work better for solos or groups. "How Great Thou Art" and "Old Rugged Cross" are examples of songs that simply work better as specials due to their rhythms.

But with this broader range comes a greater responsibility to evaluate. Most congregational songs are in the hymnbook that was approved for use. Specials can come from literally anywhere. Some questions to ask:

- "Who originally sang this song?"
- "Who made this song famous?"
- "Who wrote this song?"
- "Who holds the copyright to the song?"

Third, special music can be **more advanced musically** than congregational music. Typically, a soloist or choir is better trained or more talented than the average person in the pew. They should be able to handle a higher range or more difficult timing.

There is, of course, a balance to be had here. Music is not better just because it is more technical, and great talent does not mean God will be glorified. If not careful, musicians and singers can perform for other musicians and singers to show off their skills. When this happens, the congregation is largely unaffected, and God is robbed of His due glory.

Fourth, there is greater **temptation for novelty**. A “new song” or a “new arrangement” is given greater value than they often deserve.

III. Evaluating Instrumental Music

Again, everything said before applies here to instrumental music. It may be tempting to discount the words since they are not being sung aloud, but they are most certainly being sung in the minds and hearts.

A few considerations:

First, there is a **limited pool** of instrumentalists. Almost everyone can sing, but few can play instruments. Of those that play instruments, a smaller subset plays instruments that work well in church. Of those remaining, many are not experienced or competent enough to elevate the music of the church. It is a simple fact.

Second, many instrumentalists have **limited styles** they are comfortable playing. Few are comfortable playing for both Southern Gospel quartets and grand cantatas.

Third, **you cannot exceed the skill of your instrumentalists**. If they cannot play it, you should not sing it. You can challenge them from time to time, but you cannot expect them to perform above their talent or training.

Recorded Music

Modern technology is both a blessing and a curse when it comes to using recorded music. On one hand, a church without an instrumentalist can use recordings to sing with. On the other hand, worldly and showy backing tracks can change the dynamics of a service.

As a general rule, **live music is superior to recorded music**. There is something authentic and vibrant about live music, even with instrumentals that are not the most skilled. Recorded music adds an artificial feel to a service.

Whether or not to use recorded music is up to each church and its leadership. If the church is blessed with talented musicians, then recorded music should be avoided. If the church has no musicians, you will likely need to use recorded music. Most churches are somewhere in between those extremes.

The biggest danger of recorded music is that it draws so much attention to itself. If a traditional piano and organ are being used for congregational singing, then suddenly a soloist is being backed by a small orchestra then then it appears that more emphasis is on the soloist. Too many church specials today have turned into glorified karaoke shows.