

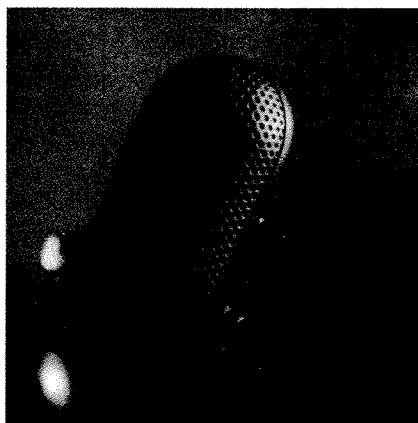


LIFT UP YOUR VOICE!

# Church Music *and* Contemporary Culture

**M**y students tell me that their high schools are segregated according to music tastes. Some teenagers like pop; others like rap. And then we have the heavy metal head-bangers (themselves divided into factions favoring death metal, thrash, Goth, and other musical sects). Then there are the "alternative" fans, the devotees of techno, and those who listen only to dance music. In addition, we must remember the "goat-ropers" who favor country music, not to mention the avid fans of contemporary Christian music.

In the high school social scene, groups of kids who like the same music hang out together. The fans of the same music typically share not only the



same tastes but the same values. Music is more than entertainment; it is an expression of identity.

Another facet of the high school social scene is often forgotten by nostalgic adults. These different groups, defined by their music, tend to conflict. They don't like each other's music. And they don't like each other. Defining your own group against another is

just one more way of establishing an identity, so such adolescent cliques are not surprising, nor are they necessarily vicious. But feelings can run high, and the arguments are often over music.

The problem is, adults tend to play the same game. When today's aging baby boomers were teenagers, their music defined their generation. They pitted their rock 'n' roll against their parents'

by GENE E. VEITH

music. And to this day, boomers listen to their oldies stations, which ceaselessly spin the music they listened to when they were teenagers. Ironically, they often sound just like their parents, inveighing against the music their kids are listening to, lauding the Beatles like their parents lauded Frank Sinatra.

When baby boomers were young, there used to be a "top forty," consisting of a single slate of best-selling records played by identical-sounding radio stations across the country. Today, though the charts still exist, the musical landscape is far more diverse. So many different genres of popular music compete and the audience is so segmented that there is no one style of contemporary music that defines the times. Now there is an abundance of mutually antagonistic musical styles, each championed by equally antagonistic groups. And so, just as the big

three television networks have lost much of their audience to the scores of specialty channels on cable or satellite, the music industry has had to adjust to a market of "narrow casting," a phenomenon that is only accelerating with Internet radio and MP3 files.

No wonder churches today find themselves fighting over music, which seems to raise more passions and hard feelings than theology. It is no wonder the "worship wars" can get so bloody.

What are churches to do in this musical and cultural climate? Since there is no one contemporary style, how can church music be contemporary? Since music is tied to group identity, how can worship leaders avoid antagonizing diverse members of their congregations by championing one particular style? Can music be used to forge the congregation, in all of its musical diversity, into a single body of

believers, unified not only with each other but also with fellow believers throughout the centuries?

### **Genre and Purpose**

**F**irst of all, the warring factions should realize that, in spite of the way the argument is usually framed, the issue is not whether or not it is appropriate for music to be contemporary. New church music is being written and published every day, including new music by arch-traditionalists. As a committee member working on the new Lutheran hymnal, I have been introduced to many newly written hymns, which are wonderful and prompt no complaints, even among the most rigorous liturgical purists. These new hymns are contemporary in their language, their imagery, and their music. They are, however, definitely *hymns*—

that is, songs written specifically for congregational singing during worship.

Not all music works well for group singing. Most music today, including the various styles of pop music, is written for individual *performance*. A congregation cannot sing together an Amy Grant song (although I have seen it tried) any more than it could sing together a Pavarotti aria. The music performed by these professional artists hinges on expression, phrasings, note-bendings, and *coloratura* (or elaborate embellishments) that cannot be duplicated by a large group of musically untrained church members trying to sing in unison.

Most large groups singing together include different voices and ranges, some who can only sing high, and some who can only sing low. A hymn must suit them all. So hymns are typically written in

parts, taking advantage of the vocal diversity by employing schemes of harmony. They typically have a clear melody line, which makes it easier for everyone, including those who cannot handle the harmony and cannot read music. The lines, rhythms, and meter tend to be stolid and regular, for good reason; otherwise, singers would get confused and could not keep up. Put more positively, a song written for group singing should allow everyone to participate together in an act of common worship.

With hymns, not only is the music written to be sung collectively, the content should apply to everyone. So the words must not express an individual experience, but, rather, either objective truths or an experience that all Christians share.

Thus, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come," "There is a fountain filled with blood," and "A mighty fortress is our God" all express, with emotional and poetic intensity, biblical realities. When hymns use the first-person pronoun, they should express not some unique personal history but something universally true for every Christian. Every Christian can say and sing "I once was lost, but now

I'm found." But being "seated one day at the organ," whereupon "I struck one chord of music/Like the sound of a great Amen"—well, every Christian has not done that. That song may be fine in other contexts, but not in collective worship.

Of course, there are other kinds of church music. Our Lutheran hymnbook committee is also looking at new musical settings for the great texts of the liturgy, those scriptural passages that have been used in the Church's worship for centuries; for example, the *Kyrie* ("Lord, have mercy upon us"), the *Gloria in Excelsis* ("Glory be to God on high"), the *Agnus Dei* ("O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world"), and so on. These typically employ the musical genre known as chant.

Go to a Jewish synagogue and you will hear the cantor *singing* the words of the Hebrew Scriptures. This is chanting, which renders a prose text in a flowing, irregular musical line. In Christian worship, chanting is associated with Roman Catholics (e.g., their Gregorian chant); and it is integral to an Eastern Orthodox service. But Anglicans have also

contributed much to church music with their plain song chant, and Lutherans regularly chant both the liturgy and the Psalms.

Chant allows music to be attached to the direct, word-by-word text of Scripture. Any Bible translation, as well as any prose passage, can be set to music by means of chant. Translation into English poetry is not necessary to fit the metrical requirements of a particular tune. In chant, the tune changes according to the words, rather than vice versa. Historically, the Psalms—which were originally written to be sung—have been chanted.

Some Reformed Christians believe that *only* the Psalms, and no other hymns, should be sung in church. Typically, however, they sing metrical Psalms, a rhyming, rhythmic translation of the biblical text. We Lutherans wonder why they do not just chant them. That way they could sing *them* word for word from Scripture.

I realize, of course, that this solution is unlikely, and I am not urging Christians who do not have this tradition to endorse it. One principle of church music is that it should be faithful to the particular

theological tradition of which the congregation is a part. Because music helps to define and forge an identity, members of a particular denomination undoubtedly have their own musical heritage, which they should respect, continue, and enlarge.

Chant illustrates another, more universal, characteristic of church music: It exists to serve and be subject to God's Word. Chant embodies this in its very form, but hymns should also be grounded in Scripture. However poetically elaborated it may be, a hymn should be just as biblical as a metrical Psalm.

This does not mean that songs that are not biblical are bad or may not be sung—it just means that they are not appropriate in worship, which should be deliberately saturated in Scripture. Thus the beloved Christmas carol "We Three Kings" is not in our Lutheran hymnal. Scripture does not specify that they were three, or that they were kings, or that they traversed afar through field and fountain, moor and mountain. That's okay. We don't object to the song being played softly in the background at the shopping mall. But we don't sing it in worship.

So old, beloved songs may be just as inappro-

priate in worship as new, contemporary songs. And this raises another important principle for church music: We can enjoy a particular song or style of music without demanding that it be employed in church. There are many different musical styles, which we are free to enjoy. But not all of them meet the specific aims of a worship service.

"Jerusalem the Golden" just does not make it as a party tune for a beach volleyball game. "Louie, Louie" would be more fitting for that purpose. By the same token, "Louie, Louie" does not fit in a worship service, even if its words are slightly altered. A Christian can play volleyball and go to church without confusing the two activities and without demanding one musical style in both settings.

### **Sacred Music and American Culture**

Some people may consider it ironic, but Christian music has been profoundly influential in American culture, including in popular music. Christians have a history of actively shaping culture, including music, and not just following trends.

As far back as 1770, churches in the South were

sponsoring singing schools where members would gather to learn how to sing. The shape note tradition taught even unlettered students how to read music by using a musical transcription that portrayed the fa-sola tones with different shapes in addition to the lines on a staff. This resulted in what music historians call a major democratization of music.

The so-called Sacred Harp tradition (named for the title of a popular songbook in the mid-1800s) was a means of devotion, meditation, and fellowship with other Christians. Originally, this music was not intended for Sunday worship, nor was it any sort of choir practice or a means to practice special music for church. It was not designed to be performed publicly. In Sacred Harp music, the singers face each other in a closed circle or square, with the goal of never dominating as a solo performer or excelling to impress people. They faced each other so that they could hear each other's voices blend. They were singing to God and to each other. Both the musical and the spiritual goal was harmony.

In this tradition, church members would get together to sing, just as they might get together for

Bible study or in a prayer group. Though these songs influenced what was later sung in the sanctuary, from the beginning they had a life of their own outside the church.

The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of camp meetings and evangelistic revivals, which featured songs from this tradition of popular Christian piety. The term *gospel music* came out of these revivals, referring specifically to songs that carried an evangelistic message, the salvation of sinners through Christ. Gospel songs typically followed the pattern of the other evangelistic messages proclaimed at these meetings—the personal testimony, a narrative of confession in which a Christian told about his life of sin and his conversion through faith in Christ.

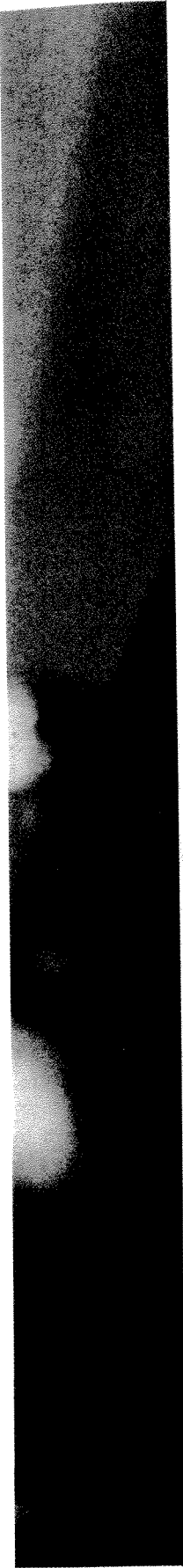
Evangelistic camp meetings were not, however, the same as church services. They were directed at nonbelievers, although Christians from many different church bodies attended them in droves. They were not construed as worship services but as outreach tools. Emotional, informal, and highly personal, these meetings were held outside the church

in tents and were distinct from the more formal and traditional liturgies of church worship services.

Denominations with strong theologies of worship—such as Presbyterians and Episcopalians—maintained this distinction, but with the rise of the Pentecostal movement in the early twentieth century and the emphasis on revivals among Baptists, Methodists, and other groups, the line between camp meeting and church service began to blur.

In the ensuing controversies over what music was appropriate for what purpose, the musical genres became further refined. Hymns were understood as directed upward, from the person to God. Gospel, on the other hand, was directed outward, from one human being to another. One preacher, the Reverend Phil Kerr, put it this way: "A hymn is a *prayer* set to music," and should be sung reverently. "A gospel song is a *testimony* or *exhortation*, set to music" and should be sung "with the same enthusiasm and earnestness and victory with which a testimony or exhortation would be delivered."

Early gospel music was not just vapid piety, however. Gospel songs tended to be forceful, dramatic



stories about temptation, backsliding, death, damnation, and being washed clean in the blood of Jesus. They were down-to-earth, real-to-life narratives that never flinched from the dark side of the human condition—songs often described as blood music.

Thus, the Louvin Brothers, as late as 1959, recorded an album entitled *Satan Is Real*. It includes such harrowing songs as "Dying from Home, and Lost," "The Drunkard's Doom," and "Satan's Jeweled Crown." But not everything is brimstone here. The album also includes songs of grace and salvation, such as "The Angels Rejoiced Last Night," "The River of Jordan," and "He Can Be Found." There is also the pointed evangelism of "Are You Afraid to Die?" Perhaps most representative is the old tune popularized by the Carter Family, "The Kneeling Drunkard's Plea," about an alcoholic at the end of his rope turning in repentance to Christ.

As the music became more commercial—and as American Christianity lost its theological intensity—gospel music began to lose its edge. Groups such as the Happy Goodman Family began to stress happy, optimistic inspirational and uplifting songs about moralism and sentimental family values, as opposed to the blood songs of tragedy, repentance, and bloody redemption.

Music historian Bill Malone claims there are now more genuinely Christian themes—more earnest, honest, emotionally searing blood songs—in country music than in today's sanitized gospel music. "Country singers are much more likely to sing the old-time 'blood songs' and world-rejection songs of early Protestantism than are the gospel singers. As gospel music has prospered and fused more directly with pop music, it has shorn itself of the sectarianism that once gave it strength and identity."

Indeed, as is evident in the film, as well as the best-selling soundtrack *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, gospel songs once mingled seamlessly with secular songs about love, work, and troubles. The old blood songs are still part of the repertoire of bluegrass music, which also blends songs of faith with those of everyday life without any sense of contradiction.

In the meantime, African-Americans were developing gospel music of their own. Expressing both intense suffering and intense joy, black gospel would mutate into the blues, jazz, and rhythm 'n' blues.

When these two strains of music by poor Southerners, white and black, came together—guitar-driven country plus rhythm 'n' blues—the result, for better or worse, was rock 'n' roll. As popular music drifted farther from its roots, taking a multitude of different forms, it became more and more commercial, and less grounded in its moral and religious tradition.

Ironically, it is this late, vapid, and purposefully

superficial music that many Christians today want to bring into the church. As cultural critic Ken Myers has shown in his book, *All God's Children and Blue-Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture*, pop culture has a way of driving out both the high culture of serious artistic creation and the folk culture of authentic human communities.

Christian musicians attempting to be contemporary today would do well to draw on the rich heritage of Christian music, both that of serious musical artistry and the folk traditions that gave Christian music its authenticity and its energy. They should also remember that there can be a distinction between Christian music addressed to unbelievers and, thus, set in the world, and Christian music written for worship in the community of faith. Another legacy of the history of America's sacred music is that a Christian can live in several realms simultaneously and that even the secular sphere, in its very secularity, already belongs to God.

### The Church Culture

So what does this all mean for churches embroiled in worship wars? Although Christians live in a culture, they also constitute a culture of their own—the community of faith that is the church.

Christians who have a vocation for music—the God-given gifts, talents, and opportunities that define a musician—should certainly exercise their callings. Vocation is generally lived out in the world. The culture needs Christians in the music business at every level. A Christian musician need not be involved in a music ministry to serve God because, as Christians have expressed through the biblical doctrine of vocation over the centuries, all honorable work—secular as well as religious—affords them a way to serve God by serving their neighbors. Consequently, Christians can pursue their musical callings in secular as well as religious settings. Of course, Christian musicians remain under the moral law—and their acknowledgment of this may distinguish them from their colleagues—but they need not fear being innovative and should pursue their art wherever it leads them.

As for Christians who enjoy music, their tastes may be wide ranging, and will depend on many factors, including especially their personalities and the groups with which they belong and identify. Again, Christians, as all people, are under God's moral law; and this may influence what music they feel free to enjoy. Yet barring that, Christian freedom opens up the whole spectrum of music because the whole aesthetic realm is part of God's creation and his gift.

So what kind of music should we use in church? Many Christians, in trying to reach "the" culture,



miss the point. In today's postmodern society, there are *many* cultures and subcultures, and *many* musical styles. There is no one kind of contemporary music. Nor is there one contemporary culture that can be reached.

But once we have set aside the specifically theological issues that may come into play, we can still say this. In today's climate, if a church seizes upon one particular style of popular music, then that will privilege those whose music is chosen and alienate everyone else. And it is not just that young people's music will hinder elderly members from fully participating in worship, as serious a breach of Christian compassion as that is. (I have heard men and women who have devoted 50 years and more to their congregations, and who, facing impending death, are in need of its ministry, express feeling cut out of their own church by saying, "I don't recognize my church anymore.") More than that, the very young people whom the church is trying to reach prefer different styles of music, not all of which are likely to be represented. In fact, what usually happens is that a baby boomer is given authority and implements as "contemporary" the style of music that he grew up with thirty years ago. Younger people may very well mock that music, seeing it as 1960's Peter, Paul, and Mary music or as the music the Christian subculture at the high school listens to, which may not commend it.

It is good that churches want to reach the unchurched. Yet it is a mistake to think that nonbelievers are likely to appreciate praise songs projecting a very intimate, emotional relationship to Jesus Christ. Usually, those songs make the nonbeliever feel even more out of place. Nonbelievers become believers by hearing the gospel, which is conveyed by God's Word. Music that points to that Word and that proclaims that gospel will be far more effective evangelistically than out-of-date pop songs that are platitudinous and sentimental. Those songs can make Christianity seem fake and superficial. And to seem unreal is to seem untrue. And making the gospel seem untrue is, unfortunately, the end result of many platitudinous and sentimental pop songs used in some contemporary church services.

The church must offer people something *different* from what they have already experienced. To offer people, trapped in a materialistic world of commercialism and hedonism, a taste of transcendence and holiness can awaken their deepest spiritual needs. Ironically, an alien musical style can seem more "new"—that is, different and fresh—than some clichéd style with which we are all too familiar. Consequently, the church should affirm its own rich and diverse musical heritage. By doing so, it can draw people into a new corporate identi-

ty—that is, into its own culture as the body of Christ, the people of God.

God's church consists of people "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Rev. 7:9) and from every generation. Every group and every generation have contributed its own contemporary church music. Yet the church is always more than any one of its groups or generations.

So, instead of imposing one musical style and one cultural identity upon everyone, it is better for churches to use music that does not belong to any specific group or generation. The church's music, in its vast range, is not anybody's music. In a typical church service, there can be hymns in many different styles, from varied nations and eras. A song based on a sixteenth-century chorale can be followed by a nineteenth-century hymn filled with Victorian earnestness, interspersed with a Psalm from ancient Israel, followed by a medieval response, even as the choir sings an African-American spiritual in a twenty-first century arrangement.

When people return home from church, they may listen to Big Band music, alternative country, jazz fusion, or teeny-bopper pop. But while in a service, they can all join together in the music of the universal church. And, thus, a local church's music may truly come to embody the communion of the saints, the full diversity and yet the deep unity of the body of Christ, from whom arises a chorus that every Christian must join. ■

*Gene E. Veith (Ph.D., University of Kansas) is professor of English at Concordia University-Wisconsin, cultural editor of World magazine, and a member of the Council of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. Dr. Veith's most recent book is God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life (Crossway, 2002).*

Professor Veith's section entitled "Sacred Music and American Culture" is adapted from his book with Thomas Wilmeth, *Honky-Tonk Gospel: The Story of Sin and Salvation in Country Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), pp. 19–24. The quotation from the Rev. Phil Kerr is taken from Dorothy Horstman, *Sing Your Heart Out, Country Boy* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press, 1996), p. 33; and Bill Malone's remarks can be found in the liner notes to *Country Gospel, Vol. I* in the series *The Greatest Country Music Recordings of All Time* (The Country Music Foundation Official Archive Collection).

