

Music, Worship and Creation in the Church of God

by Ward Fenley

Music in the church is a much discussed and much debated subject, and often can cause great division because people have such great convictions about what music is correct in the church. Discussion about the theology of certain songs is often a main topic. From the fulfilled perspective, some rework old hymns to make the hymns fit their eschatology. They often change the fourth verse of many hymns. Some traditionalists oppose this. However, theology is important. Yet when I am in a fellowship where the perspective on eschatology is different than mine, and they start singing the futuristic fourth verse, I still appreciate the music and think, "Hey, that already happened to me. Thank God." And thus, with a pure conscience I may worship.

When I sing the Psalms I usually keep them as is. I read them as is, so why not sing them as is and simply know in my heart those things are fulfilled in Christ? After all, I read hundreds of prophecies in the major and minor prophets as is, but get amazing satisfaction out of merely thinking about the reality that they are fulfilled in Christ.

And, while we are on the subject:

I have no problem singing songs which continue a repeated phrase of biblical significance. One Psalm repeats "For His mercy endures forever" over and over again. And at the same time I think there is a reason when God does that, if you know what I mean. It's basically God saying, "Don't forget my mercy." I am a huge fan of both traditional and contemporary music. I still enjoy:

"I've got a river of life flowin' out of me
Makes the lame to walk and the blind to see
Opens prison doors, sets the captives free
I've got a river of life flowin' out of me

Spring up O Well
Within my soul
Spring up O Well
And make me whole
Spring up O Well
and give to me
That Life Abundantly"

That song is so cliché yet so wonderfully metaphorical and speaks volumes of truth.

But my greatest moments of spirituality in music in the past 23 years have been in listening to the music of the chorales of Bach, and the Masses of Mozart and Bach; as well as the sacred music of Mozart and the Passions and Cantatas of Bach. No music or theology in music has ever been so perfectly intertwined and stirring than

the above—for me. Granted, a reasonable understanding of Latin and German is necessary but I will say it is worth it to gain a beginning familiarity with those languages to experience the divinity of those works.

My take on music is similar to my love of mountains, cascading tiers of endless sandstone canyons, rushing rivers, or my children: if I perceive the beauty and majesty of the living God in it, and am drawn to thanksgiving and worship, that is God's way of revealing the joy of heaven to me. I am fairly liberal in my approach to conscience and beauty: whatever directs my heart to be thankful and worship God, that, for me in my own conscience, is inspired from God. This is a theology which has changed my view of worship in a dramatic way. That is, I had to ask myself the question: If, in my heart I am drawn to thank and worship the God of heaven through Jesus Christ our Lord, with a miniscule understanding of His absolute grace and perfect and permeating sovereignty over all things, visible and invisible, could there be error in it? Perhaps there may be in my understanding. But how can thanksgiving and worship, guided by those immutable truths be anything but divine? As David said:

1 Chronicles 29:10-14 Blessed be thou, LORD God of Israel our father, for ever and ever. (11) Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all. (12) Both riches and honour come of thee, and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. (13) Now therefore, our God, we thank thee, and praise thy glorious name. (14) But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? for all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee.

Notice the last statement: "Who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly...for all things come of thee and of Thine own have we given thee." That coupled with Psalms 110:3: "Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth..." has entirely changed my perspective of worship. Some would argue that my perspective doesn't deviate from the "regulative principle" of worship. However, I find the regulative principle dismally confining and misleading to the heart and conscience of the individual. I am in the kingdom of heaven and with the saints and spirits of just men made perfect as I sit here alone at 3:28 am in apparent solitude. Yet I am presently listening to an organ work by J.S. Bach entitled "Kyrie, Gott heiliger Geist", translated "Lord, God Holy Ghost"; and though there are no lyrics, I have a profound sense of the presence of God and His people. In a post AD 70 era, scripture supports no form of worship outside the body of Christ. That is, though we may be physically alone in our worship, we are inseparable from the communion of saints. There is no male or female, Paul says, for we are all one in Him (Gal. 3); and therefore our worship, though potentially subjective in interpretation, in spirit is divinely unified with the heart and spirit of the Church of Jesus Christ. And God receives it as such. The phrase "collective consciousness" forms a negative picture in the mind of many evangelicals. However, when guided by the framework of the deity and cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is uniquely applicable and pertinent to the Christian life. This is why, though while in disagreement with soteriological doctrine of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic

"churches", I am deeply moved by the words of the mass, particularly the "Gloria", especially when conjoined with music which inclines my heart to worship. Consider the words:

"Gloria in excelsis Deo. Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis. Laudamus te. Benedicimus te. Adoramus te. Glorificamus te. Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam. Domine Deus, Rex coelestis, Deus Pater omnipotens. Domine Fili unigenite, Jesu Christe. Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris, Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis. Qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram. Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis. Quoniam tu solus Sanctus. Tu solus Dominus. Tu solus Altissimus, Jesu Christe. Cum Sancto Spiritu in gloria Dei Patris.. Amen."

Translation:

"Glory to God in the highest. And on earth peace to people of good will. We praise You. We bless You. We worship You. We glorify You. Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father almighty. Lord Jesus Christ, the Only-begotten Son. Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father. You who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.. You who take away the sins of the world, receive our prayer. You who sit at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us. For You alone are holy. You alone are Lord. You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the Glory of God the Father. Amen."

Very moving to me is a section of the Nicene Creed. Even though I have disagreement with some details, this section is exquisite:

"Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, factorem coeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium. Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum, Filium Dei unigenitum. Et ex Patre natum ante omnia saecula. Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine, Deum verum de Deo vero. Genitum, not factum, consubstantialem Patri: per quem omnia facta sunt. Qui propter nos homines, et propter nostram salutem descendit de coelis. Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine: Et Homo Factus Est. Crucifixus etiam pro nobis; sub Pontio Pilato passus, et sepultus est. Et resurrexit tertia die, secundum Scripturas. Et ascendit in coelum: sedet ad dexteram Patris."

Translation:

"I believe in one God, The Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Only-begotten Son of God. Born of the Father before all ages. God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God. Begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father. By whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. And became incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary: And was made man. He was also crucified for us, suffered under Pontius Pilate, and was buried. And on the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father."

Perhaps the most blessed moment in my life, next to the understanding of certain theological concepts and subsequent fellowship with God's people in those

concepts, and of course experiencing my children, was when I was about 18 or 19 and I heard the "Et In Carnatus Est" from Mozart's "Great Mass in C Minor". At the time I had no understanding of the Latin, and yet wept for an extended period at the beauty of the music. I immediately searched out the translation and was even more moved, as I understood the words.

For me, the experience was superbly divine. Others who may not appreciate the style, might not have the same experience. This is understandable, considering the diversity God has created in all of us. But how much more is that a testimony to how significant our union in Christ is in spite of our differences? Therefore, though my conscience be free and appreciative of this music and other music, yet I can rejoice in God and His congregation.

Though there are varying nuances in my philosophy, I use the same to interpret the world as a whole. The universe is designed to be appreciated in all its beauty through the eyes of Christ. But only the Christian can see God and heaven through it ([Psalm 19](#)). Others are sadly limited to appreciating the mere representation. How then shall they be thankful for the God creation represents if they do not know that it represents God and the New Creation? This is true of music. The Bible is filled with passages which speak of music and worship, as well as creation and worship. It seems fitting that we who dwell in the tabernacles of the most high should be those who appreciate these things most, as we are those who have had our eyes enlightened in the presence of Christ to the understanding of these things.