

# *Guidelines for Good Music*

## *What kind of music truly honors God?*

Ernest Pickering lists ten primary guidelines for Christians to follow (*The Kind of Music That Honors God*, pp. 11-12):

1. The lyrics are Scriptural (Col 3:16). Good Christian music must present a message that is true to the Word of God and doctrinally sound.
2. It should lead us to think in Biblical patterns and not be suggestive of evil either in message or in musical arrangement (Phil. 4:8). The text and music should not be cheap or tawdry.
3. It should help us to honor God with our bodies (I Cor. 6:19-20). Music which tends to imitate the effects of godless rock upon the human body or which either destroys or impairs one's hearing is not Christian music.
4. It will maintain a balance between "spirit" and "understanding" (I Cor. 14:15). Music that is primarily emotional froth would not fulfill this requirement.
5. It will contain words that are full of beauty, dignity, reverence and simplicity, words that are worthy of the worship of a holy God (Isa. 6:1-6).
6. It will be free of mental association with worldly musical styles and evidence a holy consecrated character (Rom. 12:2; I Jn. 2:15). Music that seeks to "copy" the worldly approach is not honoring to God.
7. It should be expressive of the peace that accompanies the Christian life, not the clamor, confusion, din, and turmoil of the world (Col. 3:15-16). The various forms of rock music do not contribute to peace of heart but partake of the constant jangle of the sinful world. Christ promises peace to His people (Jn. 14:27).
8. It should be characterized by musical preciseness, finesse of poetic technique and should evidence a structure of harmony and order. God is a God of order and not disorder (I Cor. 14:40).
9. It should promote and accompany a life-style of godliness, modesty, and holy quietness, and not modish fashion, suggestive acts, or sexual aggressiveness (1 Pet. 1:16; Tit. 2:11-12).
10. It should not contribute to the temptation of new or weak believers (Rom. 14:13, 21; 15:2). Music that reminds newly-saved converts of their old life of sin is to be abhorred and rejected.

# What is Christian Music?

*(From an editorial response to an ACCC [American Council of Christian Churches] resolution on CCM)*

**1. Music is an art.** Because music is an art, it must be understood and evaluated in artistic and aesthetic categories. Knowing what music is better is not a matter of taste, but of criticism. We may, and often do, develop tastes for things that are worse. Criticism exists to correct our tastes. Critical training and musical accomplishment, however, are different things: many fine performers are incompetent critics.

Style is not the major issue in evaluating music. Classicism and romanticism are not styles; fugues and sonatas are not styles; even jazz and rock are not styles. It is far more important to ask what a particular musical form exists to do, and whether a given composer has employed the form adequately for his purpose.

**2. Music is a language.** In common with all good art, music is written to say something. Quite apart from any lyrics with which it may be associated, music carries meaning. Of the two, the music speaks more powerfully. The best lyrics can never redeem music which communicates a false message, though second-rate lyrics have often been elevated in the hands of a great composer. It is often pointed out that music communicates subjectively, as if this should preclude our evaluating it. But what is subjective is not therefore unreal. It may be a subjective assertion that sunsets are more pleasant than garbage dumps; it is also a truth. For a person to say that he prefers garbage dumps would alter our judgment of the person, but not of the garbage dump. The question is not what a piece of music means "to me," the question is what it means. This judgment must precede all moral and religious judgments with regard to the composition.

**3. Music is a moral phenomenon.** If music conveys meaning, then every musical composition may be judged in moral terms according to its truthfulness and propriety. Herein lies the error of those who claim that God has not revealed what "style of music He prefers." To the contrary, God has clearly told us what He expects of our communications in general and of our worshipful communications in particular. To judge the meaning of a musical piece obligates us to judge its morality.

**4. Music is a Christian duty.** This is emphasized, not only by New Testament teaching, but also by those psalms that call upon "all that hath breath" to praise God with music. Music is the one art that all God's peoples, in all times and places, are required to practice. Therefore, we had best take it seriously. It is not a public relations tool, nor does it serve a merely social function. It is with music that we worship God and edify one another. We dare not tolerate the tawdry, the base, or the thoughtless.

These same psalms name virtually every known category of instrument. We need not ask whether we can worship God with stringed instruments (e.g., guitars). The question is, which guitar: Christopher Parkening's or Jimmy Page's?

**5. Music is the church's heritage.** Those who lack critical training must look to the church's past for direction. The apostles did not invent a new music, but adopted the musical heritage of Judaism. Generation by generation this heritage was handed down, elaborated, criticized, corrected, and developed. Medieval plainsong was a direct descendent, and its use led eventually to the development of the various polyphonic forms. The hymnody of the Reformation stands in this tradition, as do the hymns of the Pietists and the Awakeners.

Only after the Enlightenment did Christians assume that they could safely dispense with the heritage of the church. Chiefly in America did they wish to ground worship in forms which were separated from the culture of the church. When one speaks of what represents the Body of Christ, he ought to include the whole Body, and not merely the current generation.

# A Philosophy of Music for the Local Church and Family

*(adapted from the Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA)*

1. Every aspect of music in the church and family must be submitted to the Lordship of Christ.
2. Music in the church serves various functions, and while they should all be biblical, these functions infer and result in different parameters and guidelines. Most notably, musical activity outside corporate worship will have some different parameters than music within worship services.
3. Our lives are to be characterized by the worship of God, and in this respect all musical activities for the individual Christian should be, in some sense, acts of worship.
4. Music is to be thoughtful and excellent—so these qualities should pervade all areas of musical activity in the church and the home.

*“Praise the LORD!*

*I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,  
in the company of the upright, in the congregation”—Psalm 111:1.<sup>1</sup>*

## Worship Music

Music employed in corporate worship should be **biblical**.

As our rule of faith and practice, the Word of God is our authority. It contains sufficient patterns, precepts, and principles to inform our concept of worship music. Music serves in worship as praise, prayer, and proclamation (Ps. 96; Ps. 51; 1 Chr. 25:1), and has been historically used to codify doctrine, unify believers across the ages, and glorify God. Although there are distinctions, in these ways music shares similar roles and goals with preaching, although it should not take its place as being the primary element of worship. Music may carry our thanksgiving as well as our lament and cries for mercy (Ps. 95; Ps. 102). It should include psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, voices, and instruments (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16–17, Ps. 150). Instrumental and sung texts must not conflict with the teachings of Scripture, and the Scriptures themselves are the best texts for worship (Ps. 119:54, 2 Tim. 3:16).

Music employed in corporate worship should be **God-centered**.

Texts and hearts should be focused on God, who is both the subject and object of worship (Ps. 22:22; Ps. 100). The music is offered principally to Him, rather than to each other, and it is for His glory, not for our own. Yet it should also edify, admonish, and teach the body of Christ (1 Cor. 14:26, Col. 3:16). It is a corporate activity. We should always present music so as not to draw undue attention to the vessel through which the music is offered (Rom. 12:1; Php. 2:5–7, Mt. 6:1). We should avoid association and the use of music that entertains.

Music employed in corporate worship should strive for **excellence**.

Excellence is, first of all, an attribute of God (Gen. 1:31; Ps. 8:1). We should offer him the best we can and nothing less. This has to do with the intrinsic and extrinsic qualities of our music—its melody, harmony, rhythm, tone, form, and texts—which are judged according to musical standards of excellence, as well as appropriateness for worship and its delivery by the musicians offering it. Excellence should never become a goal in and of itself, however, and it does not substitute for offering music with the proper spirit.

Music employed in corporate worship should be **of the Spirit**.

Without the work of the Holy Spirit, our efforts are meaningless (John 4:24, 6:63; 1 Cor. 2:13). Music is not intrinsically worship. Without due caution, one can actually be guilty of worshipping the music that one enjoys. It is important to be mindful of the distinction between spiritual truth and musical pleasure. Worship directed anywhere but to God is idolatry.

Music employed in corporate worship should be **in truth**.

Truthfulness in worship refers to the actions we take, the attitudes of our hearts, and the intentions of our minds, in other words, our worship should have integrity. These should align with biblical teaching on worship (John 4:24). Our musical offerings should be genuine and offered to the best of one's ability. The congregation and its leaders should sing psalms and hymns with understanding and with conviction—with the mind and the spirit (1 Cor. 14:15).

Music employed in corporate worship should be done **skillfully**.

According to Psalm 33:1–3, we are to compose, sing, and play skillfully to the Lord. This demands that those leading in public worship music should be sharpening their musical skills to be the best they can be in leading music. Those participating in public worship should also sharpen their musical skills so that their offering is the best they can offer. The music that is chosen (e.g. hymnal) should be of a high quality in music and text.

Music employed in corporate worship should be **prepared**.

Because our music should be excellent and skillful, it follows that it must be carefully chosen, adequately rehearsed, and presented by musicians who have prepared themselves before God (1 Chr. 25:6–7). Choirs, ensembles, soloists, and instrumentalists should be well-prepared for the significant roles they will play in corporate worship. Worship is not an opportunity to “try out” one's ability or to showcase anyone or anything.

Music employed in corporate worship should be **meaningful**.

Our musical offerings must be intentional and have purpose. They should never be trite or perfunctory (Mt. 6:7, 15:8–9). The leaders carefully select the psalms and hymns that are to be sung or played in worship. The leaders are to be the guardians of the people's praise (1 Chr. 15:22).

Music employed in corporate worship should be **of the people**.

Music will find its basis in congregational song, the most important kind of worship music. It also means that the congregation should be fully involved in singing, listening, and learning (Ps. 111:1, 149:1). This characteristic informs our musical choices—that generally our music should be accessible to the people (or made accessible/taught by communicating information about it) although it is directed principally to God. This does not mean, however, that music selected will not require thought or that it will be “popular” in nature or immediately accessible to all who hear it.

Music employed in corporate worship should be **joyful**.

One of the most significant aspects of music in worship is that it should reflect the joy of being a Christian (Psalm 47:1) and a thankful, grateful spirit (Eph. 5:19). There are many other emotions inherent in music-making, and the book of Psalms provides examples of the musical expression of many of these within the context of worship.

Music employed in corporate worship should be **intelligible**.

This parameter has ramifications for sung language, which on most occasions should be English. Language used in worship should be comprehensible. When other languages are used, a translation will be given so that worshipers can fully interact with the textual and musical meaning (1 Cor. 14:7–10, 19). Musical style should also be intelligible—clear, understandable, explained when unusual or difficult, etc.

## **Concert Music**

Concert music, by definition, is music performed in programs called “concerts” or “recitals” that are outside the context of regular worship services. Concerts are not worship services, although one is certainly capable of worshipping in a concert context, and the performers' work can be a musical offering to God. Some of the parameters such as theme, language, applause, and other protocol for a concert, however, will be different than those in force in the context of worship.

Concert music should be **to the glory of God**.

All music is offered *Soli Deo Gloria* irrespective of its origin, compositional language or the composer's intention. Audience and performers should internally acknowledge that it is all “from him and through him and to him”—Romans 11:36.

Concert music should be written and performed with **excellence**.

Excellence is, first of all, an attribute of God (Gen. 1:31; Ps. 8:1). We should offer him the best we can and nothing less. This has to do with the intrinsic and extrinsic qualities of our music—its melody, harmony, rhythm, tone, form, and texts—which are judged according to musical standards of excellence, as well as appropriateness for worship and its delivery by the musicians offering it. Excellence should never become a goal in and of itself, however, and it does not substitute for offering music with the proper spirit.

Concert music should be **artistic music**.

Most music performed in concert contexts will be art music or sacred music. Art music is music that exists for purposes beyond function, though it may be functional. This is different from popular music, commercial music, patriotic music or other idioms. Art music primarily includes the genres of “classical” music, although other forms of music fit here as well. The amount of repertoire and variety of styles and forms that fit these classifications are incredibly large, spanning more than one thousand years.

Concert music should be **edifying to the saints**.

Concerts should be a means of bolstering both the spirit and the mind. Concerts should encourage believers in their faith, musical understanding, and artistic experience. As such in addition to the qualities listed above, verbal or written notes aid in these types of programs.

Concerts can be used as an **outreach to the community**.

Concert programs draw some environments who do not attend regular worship services. There should be an aim to give verbal witness to Christ and the Christian faith in concert programs.

Concerts can be used as a **venue for Christian musicians**.

Concerts exist to provide an opportunity for Christian musicians to offer back to God what he has called them to do and to be as artists. This should involve within the local church as well as Christian brothers and sisters from other fellowships.

### **Music in Non-Worship Service Settings**

Music may be included in other activities, such as Bible studies, small groups, banquets, meetings, retreats, conferences, and other church functions. All music for these activities should be God honoring and biblical with regard to text and music, in keeping with the principles outlined in this document.

### **Music Education**

The church has a responsibility to educate its people in the music of the church and to teach Christian principles through music. The music of the church should fulfill the functions of codifying doctrine, unifying believers through the ages, and glorifying God. Church music education takes place in many forms. Some of these ways are through:

**Hymn singing**—Congregational hymnody and psalmody teach and propagate our faith even as we sing to God. They bear witness to the lost and help the Christian recall biblical teaching. They also are means for every Christian present to be a musical participant in worship and to join the heavenly choirs that praise God without ceasing (Eph. 5:19–20; Col. 3:16–17; Rev. 4 and 5).

**Singing Schools**—Of particular importance is the training of children to sing and to be musically literate (Ps. 8:2; 78:1–8, Mt. 21:15–16). The example of Scripture is for parents to teach children, who will in turn, teach their children (1 Chr. 25:6–8). Since our churches and culture today do not have sufficient musical literacy or education to do this, we should provide general musical education for our children. This education is grounded in tonal and rhythmic foundations and is expanded on in choral experiences as well as hymn study and memorization.

**Choral ensembles**—Ensembles can provide opportunities for many to learn more about vocal technique and music in general, to have fellowship with other believers, and to exercise and develop their musical abilities.

**Hymn services**—Periodically the church can plan and lead the congregation in a brief hymn service preceding or following a normal, scheduled meeting of the church. This forum provides contextual information and teaching about psalmody/hymnody so that the congregation is intellectually engaged with what it sings.

**Songs-of-the-Month**—Each month new or less familiar hymns can be included during worship services with the goal of expanding the congregation's hymn repertoire.

**Concert Series**—The church can plan or sponsor concert events for members and guests to experience many different types of art music performed by a wide array of musicians. The musical mediums include solo and ensemble, vocal and instrumental, old and new, classical and sacred, chamber and symphonic. Performers offer verbal commentary about the music being played or sung, thereby providing a link for the audience to both music and performer.

**Written articles**—Musically trained members of the church can write or compile articles for the congregation that describe the repertoire for an upcoming musical event, issue a call for involvement, explain a facet of musical worship, or relay a need or opportunity having to do with the music ministry.

## Music and the Individual

The following concepts and Scripture passages are offered for consideration when choosing music for oneself or for one's household:

1. Music is an integral part of the Christian life and should be encouraged in the home, particularly in family worship. Luther (with hymnody) and Calvin (with psalmody) both encouraged singing in the home. Singing and learning to play instruments is consistent with biblical teaching (Ps. 92:1–3, Ps. 98, Col. 3:16, Eph. 5:15–21). Singing is, in fact, one of those few activities that we know is eternal (Rev. 4 and 5). It also gives opportunities to glorify God inside and outside the church.
2. Music is a powerful medium that teaches and communicates things in deep ways. It can overpower other verbal or written teaching with ease. There is good and bad music. Music is not neutral—it will affect those who listen either positively or negatively. As such, musical choice is essentially an ethical choice. Texts that are anti-God, anti-authority, or humanistic (which can appear in any musical style) will have a negative effect. Styles that are associated with baser things will not be edifying and are best avoided. Fathers under the guidance of the Holy Spirit need to determine and implement what is God-honoring in this regard.
3. Most people identify with a certain style of music or several styles as a means of defining themselves (sociologically, intellectually, and in other ways). The music to which we listen shapes our character, personality, and mind. Music is not without moral substance or consequence. Parents especially should be mindful of this on behalf of their children and be cognizant of aesthetic concerns as well.

*“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”—Philippians 4:8.*