

Toward an Understanding of Biblical Music Standards

by

Pastor Mike Harding

Music sales in the USA amount to twelve billion dollars annually. This art form is part of nearly everyone's life at home, work, and church. It is important that we consider what standards we should employ for good art in general and good music specifically.

God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Gen 1:26). God, the creative genius, spoke all things into existence and then made man analogous to God. Like God, man is inventive, imaginative, creative and thus able to arrange and depict God's world in an orderly way.

"God saw all that He had made; and behold it was very good" (1:31). The biblical basis for the production and enjoyment of artistic expression is simply that God declared it to be very good. All of His creation is very good including man's sanctified creativity which is part of the image of God in man.

When man sinned, however, by wanting to be God, his creative imagination was no longer perfect or holy, but instead was marred by sin. Apart from the grace of God, both common and saving, man no longer necessarily reflects the order, beauty, loveliness, or virtue of God and His creation in his artistic creations. Now we have the possibility of good art and bad art on a continuum. Man struggles to produce good art and music. We, therefore, must use the special revelation of God to interpret God's general revelation in order to discern good artistic expression from bad artistic expression.

How can we judge good artistic expression from the bad? Good art is the work of man by which man uses his God-given creativity to produce artistic expressions for the enjoyment of man and the reflection of God which meet God's standards of contemplation.

Philippians 4:8 gives us a divinely inspired formula which authoritatively guides us when choosing those artistic expressions in the world which are conformable to the virtues of the Lord Jesus Christ and His Gospel.

Philippians 4:8 Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things *are* honest, whatsoever things *are* just, whatsoever things *are* pure, whatsoever things *are* lovely, whatsoever things *are* of good report; if *there be* any virtue, and if *there be* any praise, think on these things.

Philippians 4:8 is unique in Pauline literature and is similar to Hellenistic moral literature. These six adjectives and two nouns are the objective standards by which we "take into account" these virtues in the world which are conformable to Christ. We are to examine, consider, evaluate, reflect upon, and take into account (λογίζεσθε) the artistic expressions of man in the world and see if they are praiseworthy in the light of Christ and His Gospel message. Whatever is right for the Christian must be defined by God and His character. We are to "examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thess 5:21-22).

I. **Good Music Must be True** (ἀληθής – true, truthful, honest; real, genuine)

Truth and truthfulness are the first standards by which we are to judge an artistic work. In secular pop culture many songs croon about the pleasures of one-night stands and sinful relationships while ignoring God's moral viewpoint of those relationships and the tragic consequences of guilt, illegitimate births, abortion, divorce, violence and the welfare state. We must remember that the so-called "real world" is not the temporal one which will be judged by God and burned with fire, but is the eternal one where we strive for God's ideal in the present age and will experience in its maturity during the age to come. Truth is what God has said or would say about any fact in the universe.

Truth and truthfulness are particularly necessary in sacred music. Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth." We must not communicate in our musical lyrics that man is his own ultimate savior as he arrogantly decides whether or not he will open the door of his heart to a weak and powerless "Jesus." It is God who ultimately opens hearts and illumines human minds, drawing men and women to His Son through the Gospel and the effectual work of the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:1-4).

Denice Williams sings, "Somebody Loves You" from her album *Special Love*:

He's waiting for you. Oh, he understands the pain you're going through. There is no problem that my Jesus just can't help you solve. For he can do wonders. Won't you open up and let him touch you?

This Christian song is about salvation from the pain and trouble of life with no mention of sin, redemption, repentance, or eternity.

Another common deception in sacred music is the "easy love" syndrome. Love is described by many Christian artists in every possible way except as obedience to God: "If you love me, you will keep My commandments" (Jn 14:15). Such a shallow and varied understanding of God's love leads to marital unfaithfulness and emotional sentimentality which has plagued the Christian music industry in particular and the Christian Church in general. Theologian, Alva McClain, once defined biblical love as "That quality in God which moves Him to give of Himself and His gifts to creatures made in His own image" "to give sacrificially, eternally, righteously, and unconditionally, without regard as to merit or response." You seldom hear of Christian love sung in those kinds of terms today on the typical Christian radio station.

II. **Good Music Must be Honorable** (σεμνός^ς - noble, of good character, honorable, worthy, respectable)

Good music goes beyond mediocrity. It has outstanding musical qualities. It is well-crafted, polished, inspiring the hearts of its listeners to noble character and affections. The opposite of nobility and honor is to be shallow, banal, simplistic, and trivial. Too often Christian music aims for the lowest common denominator in a hedonistic pop culture resulting in the loss of aesthetic beauty.

If Christian music fulfills its so-called mission of evangelism by adding salvific Christian cliches to poorly crafted music, then the very question of the quality of the music itself is ignored by Christian leaders today. The assumption is that the Lord has no aesthetic concern for excellence, beauty, loveliness, attractiveness, or an honorable reputation.

III. Good Music Must be Righteous and Just (δίκαιος – conforming to the standard, will, or character of God; upright, righteous, good; just, right; proper; fair, honest; innocent)

Much secular music today could not be considered righteous or just when it comes to social issues, egalitarianism, multi-culturalism, or environmentalism. Nature worship, the noble savage, the insightful street bum are all common themes in pop, rock, and modern country. Popular music in Western society usually reflects the wrong ideas of our culture, the unjust notion of calling good evil and evil good. Right from wrong is mitigated as relativism is propagated resulting in the graying of absolutes. We should not be surprised that suicidal music became very popular in the styles of grunge and metal.

IV. Good Music Must be Pure (ἄγνός – pure, holy; chaste; innocent)

Good music should promote purity in thought, word, and deed. The MTV video clearly demonstrates that most pop, rock, modern country is impure. Immodesty, sensuality, vulgarity, and brutality abound in the visual displays of these musical performances. The music videos embody a chaotic, fragmented view of God's world where the moment is all that matters, and sex and death are what sell best. There is little portrayal of human relationships or the world as God would view them. Art communicates ideas through the mind to the affections and ideas have consequences. One famous secular musician defined MTV as "vulgarians entertaining barbarians."

V. Good Music Must be Beautiful (προσφιλη – lovely, that which causes delight)

This concept applies to well-crafted, poetical lines and to the melody, arrangement, instrumentation, and performance of the piece of music. There has been a neglect of training young people, particularly young men, in music because we have a deep misconception about the true nature of beauty. Young men are well-trained today in a culture of blood, but they are largely ignorant regarding beauty, music, art, and literature. The word on the street is that aesthetic appreciation is at best "for sissies." However, beauty is beyond sugar and spice and everything nice. Beauty reflects both masculine and feminine qualities. Beauty is born of divine, almighty power. There would be no creation, no flowers, no birds, no mountains, no oceans and no stars were it not for the power of God's voice calling them into existence and sustenance. Both the rose petal and the mighty redwood were made and sustained by the beauty of God's almighty imagination and creative power. The power of God's voice was so great that the Israelites asked Moses to speak with them himself lest they die (Ex 20:19).

What makes a song lovely, delightful, and beautiful? Melody is the key to the beauty of a song. Arrangement, instrumentation, and performance follow the beauty of the melodic line. Great production cannot redeem a poorly crafted melody. A good melody is gripping and memorable so that it may be recalled for meditation. Beauty which is easily forgotten is not very beneficial.

Secondly, melody must be well crafted into a finished arrangement decently and in order according to the accepted principles of music theory and composition. It takes a great deal of musical skill and training to have dominion over the art of music and thereby produce songs that are lovely.

VI. Good Music Must be Admirable (εὐφημος – worthy of praise, commendable, with deference to the transcendent, out of respect for those of high status)

When the standard of Christian music becomes evangelism rather than excellence, then the art is no longer categorized as being good or bad, excellent or mediocre. Rather, it is simply categorized as being secular or sacred. Those who have an appreciation for good art and good music often lose respect for the Christian music world simply because Christian music sometimes lacks excellence in melody, craft, composition, and skillful performance. It is simply not admirable, worthy of praise or deferent to that which is transcendent. Admirable music stimulates one's thoughts and emotions in edification and sanctification. It captures one's attention in a positive and relevant way.

VII. Good Music Must be Virtuous (ἀρετή, – moral excellence, goodness) **and Worthy of Praise** (ἐπαίτιος – commendation, approval; a praiseworthy thing)

These two terms summarize the six previous excellencies. Virtuous, praiseworthy music leads man toward God and an appreciation of His attributes. It communicates God's view of the world as opposed to man's view of the world. God's Word provides the spectacles with which we can properly interpret God's world and thereby accurately reflect the biblical world view in our artistic expressions and appreciation. Rather than pitting God's Word against God's World, we should reflect God's World through the lenses of God's Word.

In a materialistic universe paintings are mere collections of different molecules. Musical notes are merely different frequencies of sound. For the materialist there are no absolutes at all, no truth, no virtue, no right or wrong, no beauty or ugliness, because in a purely materialistic world there is no Creator. To a secular materialist a cesspool and a garbage dump are theoretically as lovely or unlovely as a rainbow and sunset. Only in a Christian world view can truth, beauty, loveliness, and laws be accounted for as reflections of the character of the God of the Bible.

Conclusion

On account of common and saving grace, both unbelievers and believers can produce good art. The distinction, however, is that good art produced by an unbeliever cannot be considered a good work. Nevertheless, the art itself can still be objectively good. Good works, however, must be done in faith for the glory of God. On the other hand, the believer may at times be deceived by the world in which he lives and actually produce art based on a non-Christian world view, thereby reflecting the meaninglessness, ugliness, and relativism so prevalent in a non-Christian world view. Those who constantly reiterate that artistic expression does not have moral influence over the affections, thoughts, ideas, and values of its audience fall into this category.

Christians should endeavor to produce good art which is also a good work (Col 3:23; 1 Cor 10:31). We need Christians that will work at their craft with intelligence, skill, beauty, creativity, and virtue. John Adams once said, "I must study politics and war that my sons may have the liberty to study mathematics and philosophy . . . in order to give their sons a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain." Adams knew that in a lawless and pagan society good art and good music do not flourish. Art is religion externalized – a reflection of the values, beliefs, and ideas of a culture. For this reason we must encourage Christian artists to achieve their calling with excellence and virtue.