

The Song Goes On

by Ken Miller

The hymn *Holy God, We Praise Thy Name* describes a moving scene in which apostles and prophets and martyrs from ages past join the angels in praising God. It sounds easy as group after group falls into place and joins the “glad refrain.” And then we are told that “through the church the song goes on.” Hey, wait a minute. That’s us! It’s our turn to contribute to the increasing line of worshippers. It was easy for those who came before us; they were saints. But we have a problem - we have to contend with the worship wars.

We are not the first generation to experience the controversies that swirl around music and worship. From its very beginning the church has struggled with the issue. By looking at some examples, we can gain hope from knowing that others have weathered the storm and the church continues to worship. We can also learn that the decision to adopt or reject certain styles of music may have long-term consequences and should not be treated lightly.

A brief historical tour

In the first century, the young church faced challenges as it separated itself from Judaism and struggled to survive the Roman persecution and pagan influences. In its move away from the pagan, the early church banned instruments from its services. St. Jerome (about 340-420) even went so far as to say that “... a good Christian girl shouldn’t even know what a flute is.” Its use in the Dionysian rites was enough to deem it guilty by association.

Jerome’s contemporary, St. Augustine, articulated the dilemma that we often face. His bouncing back and forth on the role that music should play in the church is almost comical as he points out the good and the bad: “The delight of the ear drew me and held me,” he says, before noting

that “the gratification of my flesh – to which I ought not to surrender my mind to be enervated – frequently leads me astray.”

The man who baptized Augustine, St. Ambrose, also faced a situation that has a familiar ring. He lost converts to the Arian sect down the street, in part because of the snazzy new music style that they employed – hymns instead of the elongated plain chant. Ambrose responded by adopting the new style, and enjoyed the end result of an intact congregation and the beginnings of a hymnody that would grow throughout the millennia to come.

The church then settled into a mode of operation that involved little change until the beginnings of the Renaissance. In the 14th century, Philippe and others were so aware of their musical innovations that they boldly called the new style *Ars Nova* - the New Art. They knew they were changing the status quo by writing parts that

moved independently of each other and using unfamiliar rhythmic techniques. The church responded by rejecting the new music because it obscured the text. Many able composers chose to use their gifts outside the church, resulting in a talent drain from the church and the beginning of the court-sponsored composers.

The Reformation era had its share of controversy as well. Luther loved music and promoted hymn singing. In contrast, his contemporary Zwingli banned music from church services altogether. He was convinced that the beauty of music would distract from the corporate worship experience and his congregation’s ability to hear the Word.

Almost two centuries later, Bach wasn’t shy about writing beautiful music for



St. Ambrose was a man who knew how to adapt to the times without losing sight of the goal.



Martin Luther, aka the Wittenberg Nightingale, loved music and promoted its use in worship.

the church, cranking out an average of 20 pages of music per week for most of his adult life. His music generated its own share of controversy. Worshipers complained that the complicated organ parts obscured the words and made singing difficult.

The organ itself, that most staid of church instruments, was not universally accepted, especially in America. The “devil’s box of whistles,” as it was pejoratively called, eventually became part of the furniture in most churches.

And then there is that worldly four-part music which many of us, uh . . . affirm by. Many resisted its intrusion into our Sunday morning worship services a little over a century ago, and now many are resisting its demise.

Now what?

Looking at these episodes in church history, it is tempting to say it simply doesn’t matter. When change comes, we should accept it; those who resist are only interested in keeping the status quo for personal and emotional reasons. And certainly many times that is the case. The Reformation provides us with multiple reasons to distrust the motives of the established church during a time of change. But to unthinkingly accept every change that comes is dangerous.

Romans 12 tells us not to be conformed to the pattern of this world. So how do we engage culture and be relevant to it without being molded by it? Perhaps a helpful approach when facing the new is: to look for the good and to welcome it, to reject those aspects of change that are detrimental, and to pray to God for wisdom to distinguish between the two.

Looking for the good

Many good things have emerged from the most recent adaptation of pop music into the church. It has given us a new language to express our devotion to God, and has helped many re-engage the spirit side of the “spirit and truth” equation that at times has been out of balance.

We also benefit from the updated language in the new songs. Fewer *thee*’s and *thou*’s are popping up to make our worship appear to be some vestigial practice hung over from ancient times. This gives a feeling of freshness and realness, similar to the effects of reading a new translation of the Bible in the vernacular.

In addition to the words, the music itself is understood in our culture. It’s the music people listen to throughout the week; they understand its beat, its chord progressions, its cadences and even its dissonance and lack of resolution. Those coming from outside the church speak that language - it is more comfortable for them.

Our youth speak that language, too; they own the music and are involved in worship teams and in planning and leading worship services.

Working on the problems

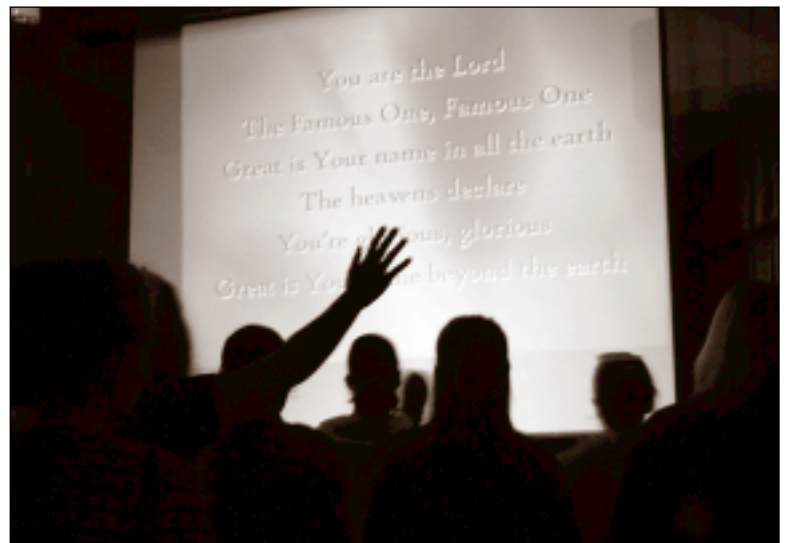
While we can welcome many aspects of the contemporary church music scene, we need to remember not to be molded by the world. The New Testament does not often address the topic of worship music, but when it does, it calls for breadth and variety. In

Ephesians 5:19 we are commanded to “speak to each other with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” Notice that the content has a strong horizontal component. We are to speak to *each other* through song. We are to edify and build each other up during our music times.

One difficulty with contemporary worship music is the narrow scope of themes. A great emphasis has been placed on God-directed songs: his love for us and our love for him. As central as that concept is, we need to broaden our themes to include all of God’s attributes and ideas that can



Playing the “devil’s box of whistles.”



Rosedale Bible College students “own the music.” (PHOTO BY ZACH GARBER)

be used to encourage each other in our Christian walk. Contemporary worship music has advanced in this area, but there is still room for improvement. John Frame, in his book *Contemporary Worship Music – A Biblical Defense*, says:

Contemporary worship music song writers should create more songs especially on the subjects of the Word of God, creation, providence, humanity as God’s image, sin, the Fall, the Resurrection, predestination, effectual calling, regeneration, saving faith, justification, sanctification and the return of Christ.

Another problem area is disposability. In the rush to create the new song, we have forgotten the old ones. Our culture has handed us the Top 40 play list, and almost any song more than five years old is off-limits. It is difficult to develop classics when we don’t allow time to weed out the weaker songs that are generated each year. We simply pitch them all to make room for the new wave.

We need to reject the idea that our music and poetry are disposable. Ephesians 5:19 covers centuries of music. We have the Psalms, which were written over a thousand-year period and were part of the established liturgy, and we have spiritual songs, which may have been songs that were improvised or inspired by the Holy Spirit - the new and the old mixed together.

Keeping the old and adding the new also makes for more varied worship. The Psalms express a wide range of emotions that range from “I love you, God” and “I love your Word” to “I hate my enemies and wish they were dead.” I’m still working on how to handle that last one, but it leaves room for lots of variation. And variety in worship helps keep the mind actively engaged. Sometimes the repetition of yet another Top 40 worship time becomes an exercise akin to staying awake during an all-night drive. The mind functions by sheer force.

Our culture appreciates variety. Brian McLaren and others associated with the emerging church say that postmodern Christians want a mix of musical styles in their worship. They are open to the new, but also appreciate the old, and enjoy the juxtaposition of genres as different as rock and classical in the same service.

Space constraints prohibit touching on other key topics: performance music vs. worship music; our culture’s attraction to the ugly and how that affects our music; the theology reflected in dissonance and random chord placements; amplified sound and how that robs the voice of the congregation; the cultural informality that permits us to address the King of creation as our buddy; and the difference between the classical approach, designed to change the individual for the better, and the pop-culture approach, designed to please and gratify.

Obviously, we have a lot to talk about. In this discussion, let’s remember that God is pleased when we worship Him and displeased when we His children fight about it. He has chosen us, an imperfect collection of believers, to be His worshipers, and it is through us that the song goes on. Can we bow before the Lord of all and join the glad refrain together?

Ken Miller teaches music and directs the Rosedale Chorale at Rosedale Bible College.

