

MUSIC MINISTRY MATTERS

No. 1 - Authentic Worship and Music Ministry

Hi there!

This newsletter is part of a pre-publication launch process for my book, *Servanthood of Song: Music, Ministry, and the Church*, which will be published by Cascade Books, a subsidiary of Wipf & Stock Publishing Company. *Servanthood of Song* is a large-scale history of American church music with a focus on societal and theological currents over the generations which continue to shape the church's music to this day. It surveys parallel developments in American Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, liturgical versus non-liturgical worship, African-American sacred music from slavery to the 21st century, and the many faces of revivalism.

This is a time of critical change/transition in church music, the roots of which are firmly planted in our history. For at least 150 years, pundits have referred to music departments in churches as "war departments" because of disagreements about musical preferences among church people. In my very first church position, we were struggling with the place of "youth" music in the church. It was the late 1960s, and churches all across the country were dealing with the same issue. I remember introducing the "Rejoice Mass" by Herbert Draessel to a small Baptist Church in Virginia. The controversy generated was less about a mass in a Baptist church than the appropriateness of guitars in Sunday worship! In the years since then, we have seen the ascendancy of Contemporary Christian music, guitars and other rock band instruments, synthesizers, and an almost total dependency on electronic amplification. Since the 1990s, many churches have abandoned pipe organs and choral music almost entirely. Overhead projection – usually text only – is commonly chosen to replace hymnals. Understanding the historical and theological backdrop of the late 20th century is critical to assessing where church music is today and how to move forward.

I am admittedly a classically trained musician, but I believe musicians in music ministry are called to a different standard than those in the secular concert hall (where I have also done much work). It's a challenging road. With the help of the Spirit and God's grace, church musicians must dedicate themselves to meeting the needs of all kinds of people and do it with love, integrity, and excellence. You are not just a "choir director". You are, like it or not, a minister shepherding people and helping them to see that this is not just about entertainment. It is not about pretty tunes used to fill in the few moments of silence left in our chaotic lives. Rather, music and text can unite to become one of the most powerful avenues for God to capture our hearts. Music can draw us to prayer and contemplation. It can express our joy or devotion in ways transcending speech. It can challenge our shallow thinking or even frighten us when that is needful.

The controversy over "contemporary Christian music" is just one of many over the last three centuries. I feel that such battles, at their core, are not really about the music, but about the need for authenticity in worship – worship in which we find ourselves in the presence of God. Authentic worship, which is grounded in solid theology and a respect for Christian traditions, can occur in many formats and enlist many styles of music. I think it's actually wrong to brand any entire genre



of music as inappropriate for worship. Such branding is like racial prejudice. Humanity always seems to prefer knee jerk generalized acceptance or condemnation to the hard work involved with thoughtful discernment. It's much easier to dismiss an entire race of people just because they look different than to do the work of getting to know people on an individual basis and making decisions based on that. Classical musicians choose to discount "praise music" out of hand as bad music. Meanwhile, contemporary musicians discount organs, choral music, and hymns of the church as relics of a dead past. Neither polemic is helpful. The questions to be asked are these:

- "Can effective worship happen through any particular medium of music (you choose)?"
- "If so, in what physical or liturgical setting?"
- "If so, in what theological mindset?"

If the answer is yes to the first question, the mudslinging can stop. But, the other three questions are just as important. We are in a materialistic, profit-driven society where many would prefer to think 'one size fits all', but it doesn't. Get over generalizing!

It's true that some contemporary Christian music is crap. It's an industry. Just get on the mailing list for one of the big corporations like Integrity Hosanna! and you'll see what I mean. Look back to *Gospel Hymns, 1-6*, the mammoth historic collection of gospel songs and hymns which came out of the Moody/Sankey revivals of the 1870s and 80s. You'll find much expendable junk there too – and that is a collection which, in its time, was rivaled only by the King James Bible in volume of sales. The same can be said of the thousands of Sunday school hymns produced by Bradbury, Hastings, and others. Choosing traditional church choral music also requires a discerning eye. There is much there, some quite well written, that is inappropriate in certain worship settings.

In reality, *both* well-chosen contemporary and traditional worship music can be effective and vital. Remember that some contemporary pieces which seem repetitive and shallow, only seem that way because they are being used in the wrong worship environment. A song that is truly inspired in a non-liturgical, free worship setting, will often seem out of place and trivial in a formal liturgical setting. Classical music can also be mis-used in the same way, trivializing the music and causing people to dislike it.

Music ministry, my friends, is a *Servanthood of Song*! We are called to minister, to serve and lift up those in the community we serve. We must do that with integrity, musically and theologically, whatever the genre we choose. Our worship style should be the one that best expresses the faith of the community in question. Widely diverse communities may require a wide variety of musical languages to reach all in the pews. But, whatever the path that is chosen, we should strive for engaged, vital, and authentic worship. If the Holy Spirit is moving among us – whether it's via Mercy Me or Mendelssohn, Dorsey or Lecrae, Palestrina or Schutte – that's all that's important.

Best wishes and Peace,
Stan McDaniel

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I hope you enjoyed this first installment of "Music Ministry Matters". If you did, PLEASE sign up to be on the mailing list for this website and have access to additional monthly installments of "Music Ministry Matters" free of charge.