

Dream Bigger:

Christian Music and the Search for Cultural Relevance

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Abstract

Christian music seems isolated from the culture in which it resides. Only Christians listen to it. If the goal is to reach the lost with the message of Christ, can there be a better way? This paper will look at the history of music and the sacred/secular dichotomy and attempt to draw lesson from master of the past. How did they successfully influence culture writing both sacred and secular music? Also aesthetic excellence in music will be examined. Academic work on what makes good music will be researched.

Furthermore, the church and the culture are continually at odds legally and politically. The reasons for this can be examined and perhaps explain why Christians have withdrawn into only Christian media outlets. Lastly, universal truth shows that there are experiences common to all mankind that can open doors for sacred and secular music to traverse boundaries thought to be limiting.

Christian music and the search for cultural relevance

Music is more available today than ever before. Recording media and technology have advanced to the point that almost limitless libraries are instantly at the fingertips of even the most novice of internet adventurers. Music is produced, consumed, and forgotten seemingly in an instant when compared with the great masterworks of ages past. In such a dynamic environment, it can be difficult to remain relevant and fresh. But such are the capitalist challenges facing any creative or entrepreneurial endeavor in an active marketplace today. Then there is the case of the Christian musician; seemingly ostracized from a culture working hard to expel religion from its daily life. What is a struggling Christian musician to do in order to be relevant, impactful, or effective for the kingdom?

In order to have a broader reach and be a more culturally relevant influence, Christian artists might want to consider abandoning the sacred/secular dichotomy in the way they think about music. If the goal is to reach the lost than a better approach might be to create excellent music for play in any setting. A return to an expectation that the best music in the world is coming from Christians might be possible. Christian musicians might benefit from not thinking about music in terms of sacred or secular but rather in terms of what music is excellent and what is not. An example and a bevy of lessons can be gleaned from the great masters of the baroque, classical, and romantic eras. Their ability to live with character and work prolifically in both the sacred and secular realm holds some excellent truths for today's Christian musician. Christian musicians might benefit from expanding out of an environment of mediocrity pervasive with a lack of creativity. There could be higher standards of excellence and a change the message and intended audience. For the sake of cultural relevance, Christian musicians might want to embrace universal truth and speak to the human experience on the common ground of the authentic reality

that humanity exists in. The Christian musician has the opportunity to dream bigger than Christian music for the art of music and for the influence of God's kingdom. It is important to consider changing the approach in Christian music because there are forces working to continually shrink the footprint of Christian music on society. The call to be a great musician is and should be a daunting one and not for the faint of heart; but if God is for us, who can be against us?¹

Lessons from the masters of ages past.

In any discussion regarding music, it is important to look at history and try to find traditional origins and lessons. As April Vega points out in her article *Music Sacred and Profane*, this debate and discussion goes back to the 16th century and beyond.² Music of course is an ancient practice, but contemporary Christian music is based on western musical traditions that have developed largely in the last few hundred years. Music historians categorize the periods of music in western culture according to prominent eras of different style.

Often times in our culture today, we ignore the past at the expense of the present. There is much to be learned from history; and so a look at the history of music and the sacred/secular dichotomy is warranted. Many of the great composers of music in centuries past found ways to lead lives of principle and in most cases, godliness; while, for the most part, attempting to honor God in their daily lives. Their music was and still is appreciated by all. These men certainly were not living in the age of transparent social media. However, they were as far into the limelight as they could be for their day. Furthermore, their lives have been dissected and studied in

¹ Romans 8:31 (New American Standard Version)

² Vega, April, "Music Sacred and Profane: Exploring the Use of Popular Music in Evangelical Worship Services." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 24, no. 3 (2012): 365-79. Accessed September 29, 2014. ProQuest, 367

excruciating detail since their passing. It is unlikely any of them realized the extent to which their work and their lives would be examined long after they had passed. Despite the contemporary fame that each of them did deal with in their own way, each of them made special, and lasting contributions to sacred music, specifically; and to music history as a whole. They serve as a potential example of how one can have mass appeal, set a standard in musical excellence, and serve God all at the same time. The composers are listed chronologically with the eras of musical style that they are associated with.

Starting with the baroque era, George Frederic Handel. Handel lived from 1685 to 1759. While he was born in Germany, he was most well-known for his time and work in London, England. Handel is an excellent place to start because the work for which he is most famous, *The Messiah*, is widely regarded as one of the greatest compositions of its time. It is performed endlessly throughout the holiday season all over the world. *The Messiah* is performed not for Christians or religious folk alone, but for music lovers and fans of Christmas anywhere and everywhere. *The Messiah* is important because it was an oratorio. The oratorio was a type of sacred music that was new in the baroque era. It was the sacred counterpart to opera, a more secular form of entertainment music and art.³ These show productions, both the sacred oratorio and the secular opera, were a blend of choral and instrumental music that was popular both with the musically educated and uneducated folk of the day. Handel managed to compose in both genres. Handel's *Renaldo*, written in 1711, was an Italian opera and one of the earliest operas to gain widespread praise in London.⁴ Building on this success, Handel would go on to write several other operas, oratorios, orchestral music, and keyboard and chamber music. *The Messiah*

³ Ibid. 245.

⁴ Ibid. 234.

came later in 1742 and remains a principal example of an oratorio to this day. Despite his work with sacred music, Handel was immensely popular in a country that he was not even born in. In fact, so pervasive was Handel's popularity both among the people and among the leaders of the land that he was afforded a special privilege upon his death. At the time, the idea that composers were on the same level as poets or other great artists was new to culture. And yet, so popular was Handel, that he is buried in the "Poet's Corner" in Westminster Abbey, an honor reserved for only the most revered of artistic national heroes.⁵ Handel is the beginning of a pattern to be seen in other composers that would follow. He was a composer who wrote great music and was widely accepted and celebrated by his culture. Yet he was also an artist whose work in sacred music was equally prolific.

Moving on from Handel, is a contemporary of Handel's, Johann Sebastian Bach, who lived from 1685 until 1750. Bach is fascinating; because of all the composers in this list, he would appear to be the most overtly sacred in focus. Upon examining many manuscripts written by Bach, one can observe the initials S.D.G., which means "To God alone be the Glory."⁶ Furthermore, the post for which Bach is most well remembered was his position as cantor of Saint Thomas's Church in Leipzig. A large amount of his sacred output came while he served in this post.⁷ At first glance, Bach would appear to be in only one category of music, planted squarely on the sacred side of the discussion. But that is not the case. In a 1730 letter to a friend, Bach deals with the frustrations common to musicians walking in both the sacred and secular circles of their time. He mentions that his best times come when the church is experiencing a

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Vroon, Donald. "Soli Deo Gloria." *American Record Guide* 64, no. 2 (March 2001): 22. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 27, 2015).

⁷ Bonds, Mark Evan, *A History of Music in Western Culture*. (Boston: Pearson Education, Inc. 2013), 250.

higher number of funerals than usual. He mentions the need to find profitable work outside of his church duties.⁸ So here is an artist who has to look forward to the death of someone else to earn his living. He is a man who responds to the duties and demands of his time and position while also struggling with a job in the sacred realm.

Bach also composed music not specifically set aside for a sacred purpose. He wrote orchestral music, the most well-known of which might be the *Brandenburg Concertos* (1717). He wrote chamber music, organ music, harpsichord music and more. In everything he did, Bach devoted himself to the utmost in excellence and technical proficiency. He was a master of the Fugue, one of the most complicated and difficult musical genres to create and to perform. It is true that Bach was not highly appreciated in his own time. But since his death, he has been celebrated as one of the founding masters of basic musical principles. For Bach, being a man of God and signing many manuscripts with the initials S.D.G., did not ultimately limit his influence or appeal. And yet Bach did enjoy writing music to be taken less seriously, for example, the *Coffee Cantata*. This cantata serves as an example that for Bach, everything is sacred under God, but not all is necessarily serious.⁹ This attitude of balance can be a valuable lesson for worship leaders and songwriters today. Maybe not everything that is written, or sung, or sold needs to be about God directly, in order to be acceptable and have musical value.

Moving to the end of the baroque era and transitioning into the classical is Georg Philipp Telemann, who lived from 1681 until 1767. Telemann is unique because unlike Bach, who was unpopular in his time and gained notoriety posthumously, Telemann might have enjoyed more fame and prestige in his own life than any other composer on this list saving perhaps Haydn, who

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *The Stations of Bach*, Filmmakers Library, 2003. Accessed April 23, 2015, <http://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/1785277>.

will be studied in a moment. Yet, today, Telemann has slipped into obscurity due to many of his works initially having been falsely attributed to Bach. Music historian Richard Petzoldt considered Telemann one of the most beloved composers of his generation who died at the height of his powers.¹⁰ Like many of his contemporaries, Telemann was prolific with sacred music. He composed many passions, oratorios, and cantatas. He was also influential in so-called secular music; writing several concertos, orchestral suites, operas, and a great deal of keyboard and chamber music. While Telemann was able to tread in both circles of sacred and secular, he was more focused on appealing to as many people as possible. This focus existed in Telemann more so than many of his contemporaries. In fact, one could go so far as to say that if a work was unpopular, for Telemann, it was a waste.¹¹ Consider the following quote by Telemann, “I tell you furthermore: who for the many writes, serves better than he who few entertains, in music easy played and heard the multitude delight, more happy he who for their taste takes pain.”¹² Telemann points out the limited influence of those who serve the few in their creative efforts. He also mentions how much more rewarding it can be to appeal to the masses. Telemann can be seen as a man whose mission was to appeal to the masses and in his own lifetime and he succeeded. He achieved great fame and wealth by contemporary standards. But as has already been stated, his voluminous output traverses both the sacred and secular domain. For Telemann, music was music; and wherever it was played, and however it was played, it should have been good and popular.

¹⁰ Petzoldt, Richard, *Georg Philipp Telemann*. Translated by Horace Fitzpatrick. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 65.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 102.

¹² *Ibid.*

Moving on from Telemann and the baroque era, we land squarely in the classical era with Joseph Haydn. Haydn lived from 1732 to 1809. Haydn is another composer whose output is staggering. In total he wrote 106 symphonies. Beyond the symphony, he wrote string quartets, keyboard sonatas, and later in life was also involved in sacred music with several settings of the Mass Ordinary, and two oratorios. Throughout his career, Haydn was usually in a good position to create great music.¹³ Unlike Mozart or Bach, Haydn did not struggle at times to simply make ends meet. Of the various appointments and directorships that Haydn held throughout his life, by far the most important was that of assistant music director to Prince Paul Anton Esterházy in Eisenstadt. This appointment allowed Haydn to exist in an environment where he was free from any concern other than simply writing great music. There were occasionally demands upon him by his sponsors in terms of music for a specific instrument or style. But for the most part, Haydn was free to travel and compose as he saw fit in the employment of the Esterházy family. It is because of this situation and the work that Haydn produced during this time that Haydn is to be respected. In his text, Bonds has this to say about Haydn,

A lesser composer might easily have fallen into a comfortable routine, churning out symphonies, sonatas, and quartets according to his patron's requirements, but Haydn imposed astonishing demands on himself. Beyond certain outward similarities, every one of his works seems to define its own issues and standards.¹⁴

The emphasis is on the value of each and every composition and the apparent lack of monotony. The drive to not slip into a mundane routine of churning out mediocre music serves as an example for any musician who is in a place of comfort. This topic will be discussed further in another section of this paper. Haydn had the opportunity to be sloppy and survive with the bare

¹³ Bonds, Mark Evan, *A History of Music in Western Culture*. (Boston: Pearson Education, Inc. 2013), 330-331.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 330.

minimum, but his excellence is celebrated and his legacy is secure long after he stopped putting pen to paper.

Along with Haydn in the classical era is one of the most well-known composers of all time, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Like the others already listed here, Mozart produced large amounts of sacred music including one of his most famous pieces, a requiem. In fact so pervasive was church music in Vienna where Mozart was, that the emperor at the time, Joseph II, actually issued decrees to limit the scope of sacred music.¹⁵ Of course, Mozart's secular output is well documented. With over 40 symphonies, 27 string quartets, multiple operas, and many other solo and chamber works including piano sonatas and concertos, his output is mind boggling considering his short life of only 35 years (1756-1791). Bonds portrays Mozart as the picture of an artist who struggled personally and professionally at different times throughout his life while still managing to produce both sacred and secular music. Much of Mozart's personal struggles have been attributed to his childhood fame as a touring musician with his sister and his father. But that was not ultimately enough to completely derail his genius.

The last composer to be examined in this is Ludwig van Beethoven. Beethoven lived from 1770 until 1827 and is another one of the most widely recognized and regarded composers of all time. Beethoven is remembered primarily as an instrumental composer, but he was involved in a large amount of vocal and sacred music having written two substantial settings of the mass ordinary and an oratorio among many other vocal works.¹⁶ And while it may not be overtly obvious to some, Beethoven at times wrestled a great deal with cataclysmic spiritual

¹⁵ Ibid. 350.

¹⁶ Ibid. 350.

themes in his instrumental music. In this quotation from one of his letters, it is clear that Beethoven thinks spiritually about himself and his music.

When I open my eyes I must sigh, for what I see is contrary to my religion and I must despise the world which does not know that music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy, the wine which inspires one to new generative processes, and I am the Bacchus who presses out this glorious wine for mankind and makes them spiritually drunken. When they again become sober they have drawn from the sea all that they brought with them, all that they can bring with them to dry land. I have not a single friend; I must live alone. But well I know that God is nearer to me than to other artists; I associate with him without fear; I have always recognized and understood him and have no fear for my music - it can meet no evil fate. Those who understand it must be freed by it from all the miseries which the others drag about with themselves.¹⁷

Beethoven represents an artist who struggled mightily with God, with his emotions, with his circumstances (going deaf) and at times with life in general. This visceral struggle and tension is evident in much of Beethoven's music and is part of his distinctiveness. He was fleshing out his pain and his thoughts in the only way that he knew how, through his music.¹⁸ The authenticity and the reality of a man who contemplated suicide at times can be attractive when all of us face troubles that might not get play on more conservative airwaves or venues. We can relate to his despair, and so his music speaks to us as we share the experiences of suffering common to mankind. The influence of Christian artists might be expanded to have a greater impact if they too were more authentic about their struggles that might exist.

What we have seen now is a collection of men who represented the best music had to offer in their time. Each of them faced different circumstances and each of them offer unique insights that can be instructional for Christian musicians in the current day and age. Some of them were more famous in their time and others not so much. However, each of them in their own way, tread in both the sacred and the secular circles. But for each of them the music was the

¹⁷ Downs, Philip G, "Beethoven's "New Way" and the *Eroica*" *The Musical Quarterly* 56, No. 4, (1970): 603.

¹⁸ Bonds, Mark Evan, *A History of Music in Western Culture*. (Boston: Pearson Education, Inc. 2013), 390.

main point. As with any musical choice, context is important. A requiem is appropriate for a funeral, a dance for a wedding, a symphony for a national holiday etc. Their music certainly served different functions at different times, but they were by no means limited to only sacred or only secular. They simply wrote the best music they could in the situation they were in.

The culture of Contemporary Christian Music.

Today the landscape of sacred and secular music is different from the times of those past masters. The bulk of music by Christians for a sacred purpose has been relegated to its own genre called Contemporary Christian Music (CCM). But the nature of CCM is a bit enigmatic. It is difficult to define exactly what CCM is. It is difficult to say who is performing CCM and who is not. For the scope of this paper, CCM refers to the artists and the music played on mainstream Christian radio stations. At times, Christian music appears isolated in a subcultural bubble. The bubble phenomenon is the idea that Christian culture sometimes exists in an isolated bubble. In this bubble Christian people speak to other Christian people about Christian things, and they do it in Christian places. Obviously this is dangerous for a faith that claims to hold evangelism in such high regard. How can one evangelize when one does not encounter or engage with those one is trying to convert? Furthermore, there is another more insidious and possibly more dangerous consequence of existing in the bubble. When we speak only with likeminded people there is no one to challenge our point of view. Offering creativity to those who share a worldview is a much safer place to make a contribution. There one is far less likely to face criticism or rejection in such an environment. Unfortunately, this environment does not necessarily foster excellence. Sometimes criticism or rejection is precisely what an artist needs to refine their craft or improve their skill. Therein lies a problem for the CCM culture and community. Writing music only for Jesus and His people not only excludes those in most need of the gospel, but it creates an isolated

environment for music about Jesus that potentially encourages mediocrity and a lack of creativity. This is accepted because it is understood as God honoring by the church. There is an entitlement among many Christian artists that because their music was given to them by God, and because it is for God, then it must be excellent even if it is not excellent in the opinion of musicians with more skill and experience or a more diverse background. So the question still remains can excellence be defined and can CCM be held to those standards? Furthermore, the Christian bubble might need to be examined and the separatist mentality in both government and pop culture that led to its existence.

Firstly, the topic of excellence in music. At first glance, defining this seems like a fool's errand. Excellence in music seems like such a subjective concept and discussion. But academic work in defining excellence in music does exist. In addition, a distinction is warranted between excellence in music and preference for a particular musical style. The work of Dr. Allen Schantz can be helpful in this discussion. Allen Schantz is a retired Stolba professor of music and the former dean of the School of Music, Theater and Arts at Colorado Christian University. His book *Music, the Arts, and the Bible* will serve as a guide in discussing excellence in music.¹⁹ Schantz puts forth a definition of aesthetic excellence that may prove useful. His definition states, "Aesthetic excellence is unity, variety and fittingness-intensity in the form and other raw elements of a particular work in the arts."²⁰ Schantz goes on to explain that aesthetically excellent tunes are easy to remember while aesthetically poor tunes are easily forgettable. A unified work of art has a central theme or idea. Notice that Schantz includes variety as a critical component of aesthetic excellence. So aesthetically excellent music should be varied and

¹⁹ Schantz, Allen, *Music, the Arts, and the Bible*. (Aesthetic Arts Press, 2015).

²⁰ Ibid. 52.

interesting, occasionally with contrast in themes or ideas but able to exist in the unity of the work itself. The third component of the definition seems imposing, fittingness-intensity. The question to ask is how intense or allusive is the music? How expressive is the music? “Fittingness-intensity is how strongly the use of the raw elements and form reflect patterns that are built into human experience (dramatic shape, emotions, senses, i.e., mood, sound, color, smell, taste, feel, balance, etc.).”²¹ Another way to think about this concept is how relatable is the music? How much does it speak to the human experience? Because as will be demonstrated later on, it is in these categories especially of variety and fittingness-intensity that CCM falls short of this standard of excellence.

As was mentioned earlier, a distinction must be made between artistic excellence and a preference for style. As Schantz puts it, “Artistic excellence is not style. Style (the characteristic way of presenting the elements of a work) is different than aesthetic excellence. Aesthetic excellence or mediocrity can be present in any style.”²² One may not have an appreciation for the styles of rap or R & B. But according to this definition, there must be rap that is excellent as well as rap that is terrible. Obviously the same can be said of CCM. Hopefully, there is CCM that is excellent. But then there also exists CCM that is not excellent. So preference for style must be excluded from any objective value statement of a piece of music. Schantz includes a quote from Francis Schaefer, “There is no such thing as godly style or ungodly style.”²³ Unfortunately, many worship pastors and CCM artists do not want to hear that there is excellence, mediocrity, or poor quality altogether in any work offered to God. Such an assertion could not be made by other aspects of church ministry. For example, carpentry is a skill and to

²¹ Ibid. 50.

²² Ibid. 47.

²³ Ibid. 47.

some an art form. There can be excellent carpentry as there can be poor carpentry. A carpenter may offer his church pews to God as an offering, but if they are poorly constructed, they will collapse and drop the parishioners onto the floor, regardless of how well intentioned the heart of the creator was. Simply because music is created to glorify God specifically, does not mean that it is intrinsically excellent solely for that reason. Schantz puts it more simply, “Just because a work presents a Christian message does not make it excellent.”²⁴

The CCM community does itself a disservice by cutting off from the larger musical community of our culture. In most cases, the bigger the talent pool, the stiffer the competition. And when the competition is stiff, the best rise to the top. There appears to be a disconnect between CCM and mainstream Christian radio with music and pop culture at large. In trying to explain this disconnect and what is bothersome about it, one blogger had this to say, “If a person feels musically inclined, he or she can honor God with their music, but this does not necessarily mean that every song they sing contains the words ‘Jesus’, ‘God,’ or ‘saved’ anymore than saying that every pancake they cook has to have Jesus on it.”²⁵ How did CCM and mainstream Christian radio become so estranged from culture and human experience, that even members of the Christian community are rising up to criticize it? There may be a myriad of reasons for this result. Just a couple of them will be examined in the following pages.

In examining the separation of CCM and mainstream Christian radio from the culture in which it exists, it may be necessary to consider the history and results of the larger entities involved. Specifically, the concept of the separation of church and state in conjunction with the voluntary withdrawal of the Christian subculture is the issue. Phillip Hamburger, an American

²⁴ Ibid. 48.

²⁵ Patton, C Michael, “Why I Don’t Like Christian Music,” *Credo House* (blog), October 13th 2010, <http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2010/10/why-i-dont-like-christian-music-2>.

legal Scholar, in his book *Separation of Church and State*, has already gone through a detailed history of the development of this concept in this country.²⁶ The goal is not to duplicate the excellent work already done on this topic by Hamburger and others; but rather to highlight a few of the primary issues related to the development of this concept and its relevance to music and Christianity. The concept of separation of church and state has developed as a result of cultural pressures from the popular majority in this country throughout the last several centuries. Many Americans today believe the separation of church and state to be a founding principle of this country. But in fact this concept is not even in the constitution. This concept as it is known today is very different from what was originally sought by the first amendment according to Hamburger. He states that the first amendment was designed to prevent the establishment of a state religion, but it has mutated into a distortion wherein religion is actually limited by government due to a misunderstood need for separation.²⁷ He stresses that religious freedom is actually undermined by the first amendment now where that liberty was intended to be guaranteed originally. Hamburger writes, “. . . the First Amendment, which was written to limit government, has been interpreted directly to constrain religion.”²⁸

One of the achievements that this country's constitution was originally supposed to have gained was the idea that the rights of the minority would be protected from the majority in a democracy. Unfortunately, according to Hamburger, as it pertains to constitutional religious freedom of Americans that has failed to be true. Hamburger states, “. . . it becomes clear that the constitutional religious freedom of Americans developed in accord with popular expectations—

²⁶ Hamburger, Philip, *Separation of Church and State*. (Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press, 2002), Accessed April 26, 2015. ProQuest ebrary.

²⁷ Ibid. 479

²⁸ Ibid. 484

that minority rights were redefined to satisfy majority perceptions of them.”²⁹ This discussion is relevant to our debate about music, religion, and current culture. Here is Hamburger on the nature of the interaction between religion and politics.

Ironically, even as religion has been separated from politics, politics has become, in a sense, religious. Although this peculiar development has had many causes, including a general secularization, it surely is no coincidence that many of the very groups that have sought to exclude churches from politics have pursued their political goals by appealing to religious passions and aspirations— to the intense feelings and improbable hopes, including aspirations for purity and transcendence, that have, traditionally, seemed unlikely to be satisfied in this world.³⁰

If religious concepts, imagery and appeals of passion can have a place in the cold and adversarial arena of politics, surely there is a place for religious concepts in the music of a culture. Hamburger spends a great deal of time walking through the history of the journey our culture took from the establishment clause to misinterpreting the constitution to limit religion wherever possible. This journey is representative of a climate change as it pertains to the sacred. This climate change cannot be dismissed. In fact, it could be partly to blame for the nature of CCM and Christian radio today. As the culture and the laws of this land have grown more and more antagonistic towards Christianity, there has been an only human tendency to withdraw into that Christian bubble that was mentioned earlier. It seems logical that where culture and politics have attempted to push religion out of many public aspects of our lives, we have also sought to withdraw to the safe havens of separate radio stations and venues that could be controlled by religious authorities. These were places where Christians felt comfortable and uninhibited. This seems only natural, but it begs the question is this what Christ intended when he warned that he

²⁹ Ibid. 483.

³⁰ Ibid. 491.

was sending us out as sheep among the wolves?³¹ Perhaps the marketing approach of CCM and mainstream Christian radio needs to be examined.

A concept that is common in mass media production is the idea of a target market. Or in the case of radio, a target audience. Generally speaking, the idea is that everything done and said is geared to attract and appeal to your target audience. It so happens that the driving forces of CCM and mainstream Christian radio do indeed have a target market, but exactly who that is may be surprising. David Murrow is an author and speaker raising awareness about some of the cultural problems within the church today. In his book, *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, David takes a fascinating look at the church culture at large and who they are trying to reach. Murrow has a background in sales and marketing and understands the nature of the target audience. He relays an experience he had sitting in church where he suddenly realizes that the target market for the vast majority of mainstream Christian culture is actually women in their early fifties.³² The entire premise of the book is that men dislike the contemporary Christian culture and that includes everything from the average church environment, to the average Christian bookstore, to the average broadcast content on mainstream Christian radio. David looks at a wide range of issues throughout the church and Christian culture at large, but the focus here will be on CCM and mainstream Christian radio in order to restrict the discussion to the implications for music.

Initially, it can be difficult to put a finger on exactly what is distasteful about CCM and mainstream Christian radio today. One example of the approach of mainstream Christian media today comes from the slang term JPM, or Jesus's Per Minute. This slang term is common in the mainstream Christian media business. The idea here is that in order to be acceptable for

³¹ Matthew 10:16 (New American Standard Version)

³² Murrow, David, *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2005), 68.

broadcast through Christian media, any content must have a certain ratio of JPM. In other words, there must be enough Jesus, or Jesus's in it, or it does not get played.³³ And so while one might relate and speak to a secular world in a certain way, there are limits placed on how we will broadcast. This is because mainstream Christian radio is not trying to reach the lost at all. They are trying to reach those who care enough to donate to the radio station: the Christian mom. Murrow points out that “women are more likely than men to shop at a Christian bookstore, watch a Christian TV station, or listen to Christian music.”³⁴ Furthermore, the participation of women is higher. While some men do contribute, a vast majority of Christian media (print or otherwise) is produced by women. Murrow states that CCM draws an audience that is 63% female and 37% male.³⁵ Here is an excerpt from Murrow's book:

K-LOVE, America's largest syndicated Christian music radio service, with affiliates in 189 cities and towns, targets its programming at eighteen to forty-five year old women. The K-LOVE disc jockeys have created a mythical average listener, whom they call Kathy. She is a mother in her midthirties[sic] with two kids, a minivan, and a mortgage. Kathy is very busy, driving her kids to soccer practice, piano lessons, and youth group. As she drives, she listens to K-LOVE. Kathy's name comes up frequently during staff meetings, and the DJs make sure their on-air antics won't upset or offend her sensibilities.³⁶

This information is not on K-LOVE's web site and one can understand why. Here exists a powerful tool of influence, scope and reach, that being music over radio. But rather than try to actually reach the lost with the gospel message, the overarching goal is to drive donations to the station by reaching the most influential demographic for their product. Now it should be pointed out that the ministry of K-LOVE and similar media companies does have a place. There is nothing wrong with encouragement for the people of God throughout the day. The problem

³³ Burnett, John, “A Christian Musician with More Questions than Answers.” *Ecstatic Voices*. NPR Music. 2013. <http://www.npr.org/2013/12/26/255454906/a-christian-musician-with-more-questions-than-answers>.

³⁴ Murrow, David, *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2005), 68.

³⁵ Ibid. 68.

³⁶ Ibid 68.

comes when this is the primary focus and the main outlet for expression of music for Christian artists. Ministering to the church is important but should not be our only goal and focus, it should not be the end. Christ made it clear with the great commission that ministering to and reaching the lost should be the ultimate goal.³⁷ Sadly most Christian artists seem more concerned with speaking “Christian speak” to other Christians already in the bubble than in actually branching out and reaching people for Christ. Perhaps this is why feedback from those who do not enjoy Christian music seems to be that it is fake, sappy, and inauthentic.

The strategy of a large Christian media outlet that is proven to not be geared toward the lost, in and of itself may be a problem. But David Murrow points out that the lack of focus on men is of particular concern to the church itself. In trying to reach the church and not the lost the plan is still poorly executed if “Kathy” is the target audience. The entirety of Murrow’s book is based on the idea that the church needs the leadership and participation of men in its own community and culture in order to be more relevant and more successful. Murrow is careful to make a distinction between the reserved and soft natured men that are frequently pressed into church leadership already, and the passionate, visionary, daring, and bold men that are often missing from the church scene altogether. Bringing in these types of leaders is difficult when you're trying not to offend “Kathy's” sensibilities. Ultimately Murrow boils it down to the bottom line saying that men bring their money and their families to the church in addition to their leadership and vision. He uses an oft quoted statistic that a mother coming to Christ leads her family to Christ 17% of the time. But a father coming to Christ leads his family to Christ 93% of the time.³⁸ Murrow takes it a step further and points to a model of success, Islam. He describes

³⁷ Matthew 28:16-20 (New American Standard Version)

³⁸ Murrow, David, *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 2005), 47.

Islam as the fastest growing religion in the world and states that not coincidentally Islam is extremely popular with men.³⁹

As stated earlier, the mission of CCM and mainstream Christian radio stations like K-LOVE may have a place in the church today, even if that place is only to encourage a subset of the church population. But the point in exposing all of this is that the particular mission of reaching “Kathy” should not be the primary focus and the ultimate goal of Christian music. There is too much at stake. As the culture works harder, even through means of legislation, to banish religion from society, it becomes ever more important that we change our target audience to the culture we are trying to reach and influence. Christian Musicians can raise the standards to the highest degrees of aesthetic excellence as previously described by Schantz. CCM cannot afford to go on existing in the bubble for the simple reason that the bubble will continue to shrink as long as there is refusal to go outside of it. The bubble will gradually and slowly shrink in relevance and influence more and more until it disappears in this land completely. CCM might want to consider abandoning the concern for the JPM ratio and find a way to build common ground with the culture in which it exists. It might be possible to build a bridge to culture through universal truth.

The implications of universal truth as the potential common ground.

Orthodox Christianity is built on the widely held beliefs that there is absolute truth and that all of that truth ultimately comes from God. On a more basic level, the Bible speaks of the camaraderie that believers and nonbelievers alike share in humankind. As Jesus says in Matthew, the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike.⁴⁰ There are certain emotions and experiences that

³⁹ Ibid. 48.

⁴⁰ Matthew 5:45 (New American Standard Version)

are common to all of us as human beings. We all share similar struggles and face difficult circumstances throughout our lives. Similarly, there is great joy and fulfillment in this life that is shared by all human beings regardless of their faith orientation. Bridging the gap and moving outside the bubble, means that these similar experiences need to be addressed in authentic ways while holistically dealing with the full breadth and width of human experience. Some of that is joyous but some of it is offensive. Because truth is universal, music can have a common ground in the authentic reality and experiences of mankind. In other words, every good and poignant song comes from God in some way. Taking a song and calling it Christian music or music from Jesus falsely implies that there is music not from God. As in life, the best music deals with the good, the bad, and the ugly. Moving beyond the potential appropriateness of secular music in church,⁴¹ we come to a place where sacred music, if done the right way, should be appropriate in the secular realm under the same principles of universal truth.

In an article about popular music and Christian faith, Brad and Pamela Lau make the case that meaningful truth can be communicated through a variety of avenues and be valuable even if it is offensive to some.⁴² Furthermore, the concept of universal truth moves beyond culture and the arts. It is born out of deep theological discussion. In the book *Created in God's Image*, Anthony Hoekema takes a good look at universal truth in a discussion about common grace.⁴³ Essentially Hoekema, with a Calvinist perspective, states that sovereign truth and divine beauty can come from anywhere, even those who may be lost. God's common grace restrains sin and produces fruitful creative results in all of humankind but especially in those faithful to Jesus

⁴¹ Thompson, Robert, *Oil and Water Make a Good Mix*. (Unpublished manuscript, Colorado Christian University, 2014).

⁴² Lau, Brad A., and Pamela Havey Lau, "Popular Music in Conversation with Christian Faith-A Review Essay." [*Christian Scholar's Review* 42.1 (2012): 57-67], 58

⁴³ Hoekema, Anthony A., *Created in God's Image*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Paternoster Press. 1986), 190.

Christ. So the building blocks are there. There is common ground, common experience, and common beauty that can create a form of dialogue and engagement between the sacred and secular. Like the great masters of the art music of the past, today's church and the CCM culture might need to find a way to exist in this common space.

One of the obstacles facing CCM is the nature of its moniker. The term Contemporary Christian Music reduces the vast and expansive implications of a Christian world view to be merely a genre choice at the retail shelf. Christian music should not be a genre next to country or R & B etc. Building on the concept of universal truth previously established, music that is true and beautiful comes from God regardless of the road it takes to come to us. In fact, according to Hoekema, the act of creating anything at all is an aspect of our being made in God's image.⁴⁴ Schantz weighs in on this topic as well, saying that creating music of any kind is to mimic God's creativity and therefore be innately Godly.⁴⁵ Schantz declares that our task in creative activity is to be transformed into the image of God through discovery of what God has built into his creation. So both Christian and non-Christian musicians can come to know God better through creating music. Sadly, Christianity is neutered when it becomes an adjective for music. Perhaps that is why so called Christian music often lacks grit or authenticity. Hard truth about experiences, common to mankind is not always going to be pretty, or sugary, or "positive and encouraging."⁴⁶

But all of us deal with those realities and look for outlets of expression in those moments of intense feeling. Ironically, this truth is not lost on God. When reading through the Psalms or Prophets, one regularly encounters intense moments of pain, despair, and terrible suffering. Men

⁴⁴ Hoekema, Anthony A., *Created in God's Image*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Paternoster Press. 1986).

⁴⁵ Schantz, Allen, *Music, the Arts, and the Bible*. Aesthetic Arts Press, 2015, 21.

⁴⁶ This is K-LOVE's self-proclaimed slogan. K-Love. 2014. <http://www.klove.com/>

cry out to God and question Him or themselves. There is often bitterness and topics of a grotesque nature such as murder, prostitution, and thievery.⁴⁷ God did not deem these topics so inappropriate or offensive that he should not include them in his revelation to all mankind, and yet these topics are censored in CCM and mainstream Christian radio. So bizarre and vague is the CCM moniker that professional music critics cannot even fully identify it. Schantz put forth unity as a portion of aesthetic excellence. One problem with CCM at large is that there is no unified sound or sonic code that clearly identifies it or distinguishes it from other genres.⁴⁸ Scholars agree that the basic building blocks of any music transcend religion and hold great relevance to the human experience. Schantz puts it this way,

The western arts reflected their Biblical roots (the norms of God's creation) and took on a special position:⁴⁹ Western Music has done for mankind something similar to what Greek sculpture, architecture, logic, and mathematics did: it strongly set forth classic fundamentals of universal character . . . This above all explains the diffusion of Western music today in all parts of the earth. Its 'world empire' rests essentially upon its immanent universality.⁵⁰

Music has universal properties that can be leveraged to relate to others of a different worldview.

A focus on to those properties and on stepping outside of the bubble could be helpful.

Even though music itself may be universal, not every musician is. Many references have been made thus far to the fake quality of CCM, meaning that it is not authentic to real human life. Part of this may stem from the hypocrisy of those involved in the Christian music business. Because many mainstream Christian artists do not deal with their own failures and the hard hitting topics of ugliness that are pervasive in daily life, they can sometimes come across as

⁴⁷ New American Standard Version. Bible Gateway. Web. 11 Nov. 2014

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+samuel+6%3A12-23&version=NASB>

⁴⁸ Howard, Jay R. and John M. Streck, *Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), p9.

⁴⁹ Schantz, Allen, *Music, the Arts, and the Bible*. Aesthetic Arts Press, 2015, 29.

⁵⁰ Wiora, Walter and Stolba, K Marie, 1965. *The Four Ages of Music*. New York: W.W. Norton, pp127-128

hypocritical. Charlie Peacock is a prominent Christian music songwriter and producer with his finger on the pulse of the CCM culture.⁵¹ In a news article,⁵² Peacock is quoted as speaking at a symposium where the discussion was centered on music and the church.⁵³ In his comments, Peacock made reference to the sad reality that Christian music is under the control of secular music companies for the most part. Naturally, in such an environment, the return to the shareholder is the bottom line. And so there is pressure on the media outlets as well as the artists to produce music that sells. Any good sales campaign must have a target audience. And so we have come back to “Kathy” and her sensibilities being affected by the JPM ratio.

There are many stories of prominent Christian artists renouncing their faith and heritage and coming out as atheist or something else, thus going further than an artist simply trying to make a quick buck. A prominent example of a popular artist today who has rejected her Christian heritage is Katy Perry. But what about an artist who made it big as a so called Christian band leader? Could such a person turn their back on their faith and the genre that delivered them to prominence? Such is the story of Newsboys co-founder George Perdikis.⁵⁴ Perdikis goes on to paint a bleak picture of the Christian music business at large saying it contributes to his rejecting the faith. His insider view of the Christian music business does not hold the artists and executives in that realm in a positive light. He plainly states that there are many bands not living out the lifestyle they are singing about; thus, they are only there for the paycheck in a diminished realm of music where the competition is a little less fierce than on the Billboard top 100. In front

⁵¹ Bustard, Ned, *It Was Good: Making Music to the Glory of God*. (Baltimore, MD: Square Halo Books, 2013).

⁵² Beliefnet.com. “Christian Music Controlled by Secular Music Industry” *Beliefnet.com*. 2002. <http://www.beliefnet.com/News/2002/11/Christian-Music-Controlled-By-Secular-Music-Industry.aspx?p=2>

⁵³ <http://www.baylor.edu/mediacommunications/news.php?action=story&story=4195>

⁵⁴ Perdikis, George, “I Co-Founded One of the Most Popular Christian Rock Bands Ever... and I’m Now An Atheist.” *Patheos*. January 21, 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2015/01/21/i-co-founded-one-of-the-most-popular-christian-rock-bands-ever-and-im-now-an-atheist/>

of a worldly culture already looking for reasons to criticize Christians, stories like this continue to be damaging. That is, of course, ultimately the problem with avoiding harsh realities or grisly failure in subject matter on life. When an impossible standard of perfection or positivity is perceived, the moment suffering and failure come along, as they always do in life, efforts are undermined. In order to reach a lost culture, a better approach might be to appear to them as equal sinners redeemed by God's grace, rather than as enlightened artists with all the answers.

So how do sinners redeemed by God's grace achieve mass appeal with excellence and integrity in order to communicate universal truth common to the human experience? C.S. Lewis, that great Christian thinker, offers some guidance for us here:

I believe that any Christian who is qualified to write a good popular book on any science may do much more by that than by any direct apologetic work.... We can make people often attend to the Christian point of view for half an hour or so; but the moment they have gone away from our lecture or laid down our article, they are plunged back into a world where the opposite position is taken for granted.... What we want is not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects—with their Christianity latent. You can see this most easily if you look at it the other way around. Our faith is not very likely to be shaken by any book on Hinduism. But if whenever we read an elementary book on Geology, Botany, Politics, or Astronomy, we found that its implications were Hindu; that would shake us. It is not the books written in direct defense of Materialism that make the modern man a materialist; it is the materialistic assumptions in all the other books. In the same way, it is not books on Christianity that will really trouble him. But he would be troubled if, whenever he wanted a cheap popular introduction to some science, the best work on the market was always by a Christian.⁵⁵

Lewis's point is so simple that it might elude some. He was speaking about books, but the truth he proclaims might apply to music as well. Lewis says that Christians should not write Christian music. Lewis says they should devote themselves to writing the best music in the world and allowing that to speak for itself.

⁵⁵ Lewis, C.S., *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethic*. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1972).

Conclusion

So what now? Why is this discussion relevant? Why should we care what the great masters of history did with their music? So what if music in the CCM culture is mediocre, it still gets the job done right? And what about universal truth, we're all in the same boat in a way so what does it matter what we believe? As stated previously in this paper, everything is at stake. Christianity is under attack in the arts, in politics and in culture at large and musicians wield a powerful weapon if they choose to. Musicians can contribute to the cause by creating great music as an honor to their God and their heritage. Music is powerful and influential. Plato did not underestimate the impact of when speaking several millennia before any of the great masters mentioned earlier were even born.

‘To put it briefly, then,’ said I, ‘it is to this that the overseers of our state must cleave and be watchful against its insensible corruption. They must throughout be watchful against innovations in music . . . counter to the established order, and to the best of their power guard against them’⁵⁶

Plato appears to be advocating for government regulation of music and the music industry. While that approach is too extreme for a culture of free expression, his esteem for music and its power is evident. This statement is made before music began to even take on most of the recognizable characteristics that we see in popular music today. What would an artist who were to achieve this lofty goal look like? Once again we can look to the example set down by the great masters of the common practice period. Imagine what would be possible if Katy Perry had maintained her Christian heritage and were as phenomenally successful in the CCM culture as she is on the Billboard top 100. How

⁵⁶ Plato *Republic* Bk. IV

much cross cultural influence would such an individual have to advance the cause of Christ and lobby for virtue in our culture?

The analogy can go in reverse as well. One of the biggest stars in the CCM scene today is Chris Tomlin. How much influence would Chris Tomlin have if his records were at the top of the Billboard top 100 charts as well? How many more millions would his message impact through that avenue? Perhaps such an artist would go on to define music for his generation in the same way that Bach or Haydn or Beethoven did. Mozart's influence was so pervasive that his output influenced the laws of his hometown, Vienna. Such an ideal artist seems lofty indeed. Unfortunately nobody appears to even be trying to achieve something like this. Rather than try to be the best and allow God to take care of the rest, there is an attitude of settling for the label of Christian music and being relegated to CCM and mainstream Christian radio where they cater to “Kathy” day after day. Maybe such a standard seems impossible. Recall that Christ routinely asks us to accomplish the impossible in our daily lives and promises God's assistance in doing so.⁵⁷ Christian musicians have the chance stop settling for Christian music and grow beyond that to great music in the name of God.

⁵⁷ Matthew 19:26 (New American Standard Version)

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