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P A P E R S
towards a biblical mind

Music, worship and the church

by *Christopher Hayward*

Summary

Music has enormous power to engage the emotions, and the Bible resounds with praise and thanks to God through music. In the Old Testament music played a number of different roles, including assisting in the memorisation of God's truth and in reminding God's people of their fallenness and salvation. In the New Testament God's people gather together to express their praise to him and to build one another up in the faith. A rich variety of music that is in harmony with the ministry of God's word is a significant part of the life of the church and points towards the role of music in our praise of God in heaven.

Overture: The marvel of music

The other day the morning service at the theological college where I live was graced by the dulcet tones of a very able cellist. As people drifted in, their countenances brightened noticeably as they realised here was no jamming session from the Director of Music and the usual suspects. Here was real class. And beauty. Melody that soared and sang, rhythm that lilted, harmony that soothed.

Good music has wonderful power to excite, console, cheer, tug at the heartstrings and simply take our breath away. My wife recalls an A-Level music class comprised entirely (excepting herself) of rock musicians, sitting spellbound through Fischer-Dieskau's recording of Schubert's chilling song *Der Doppelgänger*. Whatever our stylistic preferences, well performed, high quality music is able to inspire and move. Indeed Mozart's music is known to help those with mental illness. What a marvellous gift from our Creator God, whose entire creation sings, shouts, plays and claps his praise!¹

Prelude: Low notes and high notes

Not that music is always appreciated. 'Take away from me the noise of your songs', commands the LORD to a disobedient, hypocritical people; 'I will not listen to the melody of your harps'.² And the writer of Proverbs wisely observes: 'Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.'³ Music can certainly be misused.

On the other hand, music comes good in the end. Song is the medium through which the seven angels praise God in Revelation 15:

...with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!⁴

The Bible, as we shall see, is full of the musical praise of God. Chronicles contains detailed instructions for the music of the Solomonic temple, and the Psalms are peppered with references to music in the adoration of God, culminating in the paeon of praise which is Psalm 150. Indeed the Psalms from beginning to end are a continuous song of praise (in sadness and in joy). The poignancy of music is illustrated by David's soothing harp playing for King Saul,⁵ as well as by the hymn-singing (probably the traditional Passover sequence, Psalms 113–118) of Jesus and his disciples as his hour of crisis loomed.⁶

What kind of music pleases God? Is it organ or guitar? Formal or informal? Old or new? In his *Young Lutheran's Guide to the Orchestra*, the American writer Garrison Keillor discusses (with tongue firmly in cheek) which instruments are suitable for a good Lutheran to learn:

If your talent is choir or organ, there's no problem. Choir members and organists can be sure their gift is from God, because who else but God would be interest-

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1 Ps. 98:4–9. All Bible quotations are from NRSV.
2 Am. 5:23.
3 Prov. 25:20.
4 Rev. 15:2f.
5 1 Sam. 16:23.
6 Mt. 26:30.

ed? Just like nobody gets fat on celery, nobody goes into church music for the wrong motives.⁷

That may be the view of an American humorist, but the Bible's perspective on music is overwhelmingly positive, despite the sounding of certain cautionary notes.

Exposition: Music in the Old Testament

Music expresses thanksgiving to the LORD

In Exodus 15 Moses and the newly redeemed people of Israel respond to their miraculous escape through the Sea of Reeds and the destruction of the Egyptians with antiphonal praise.⁸ 'I will sing to the LORD', sing Moses and the Israelites (verse 1). 'Sing to the LORD', replies Miriam (verse 21, literally 'she answered them'), to the accompaniment of tambourines and dancing.

In this chapter, as so often throughout the Bible, the engagement of the emotions by means of voices, instruments and movement is matched by propositional content, recounting the salvific deeds of the LORD (verses 1–13), which in turn leads to an affirmation of trust in the LORD for his future faithfulness to his people (verses 13–18).

Music addresses God and man

Much of the song of Deborah in Judges 5 is taken up with praise to God for the judgement he has wrought on Israel's enemies, and the kings of the earth are summoned to take note of this (verse 3). This coupling of praise with proclamation or evangelism occurs elsewhere in Scripture, e.g. Psalm 96:1–3, where singing to the LORD is paralleled with proclaiming his salvation and declaring his glory among the nations. Indeed, frequently in the Book of Psalms, speech *about* God in the third person alternates with direct address *to* him in the second person. This is also common in Christian hymnody: 'There is a Redeemer... Thank you, O my Father'.⁹ Note too Paul's perspective in 1 Corinthians 14:22–25, where he insists that behaviour in the Christian gathering take account of the possibility of 'outsiders or unbelievers' being present.

Yet Pete Ward, in a detailed comparison of youth songbooks published and popularised over the past few decades,¹⁰ has bemoaned a 'centripetal [i.e. introspective] movement'¹¹ in youth group meetings, away from an evangelistic concern for the outsider, via a focus on the importance of the church fellowship, to a flight 'for refuge, escaping [from the world] into the comforting arms of the Father'.¹²

Music reminds us of our fallenness

A very different kind of song is given to Israel by Moses at the end of his life in Deuteronomy 31 and 32. Moses commands the people, 'Now therefore write this song, and teach it to the Israelites; put it in their mouths, in order that this song may be a witness for me against the Israelites.'¹³ The song itself contrasts the greatness and faithfulness of the LORD with the unfaithfulness of his people. The significance of this song for the people of Israel is underlined in the concluding paragraph:

Moses came and recited all the words of this song in the hearing of the people, he and Joshua son of Nun. When Moses had finished reciting all these words to all Israel, he said to them: 'Take to heart all the words that I am giving in witness against you today; give them as a command to your children, so that they may diligently observe all the words of this law. This is no trifling matter for you, but rather your

very life; through it you may live long in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess.'¹⁴

Music assists in the memorisation of truth

The song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32, then, is an *aide memoire* for Israel, and it is to be assumed that the role of the music was to fix the song in the people's minds. Here, then, we see one of the great values of music: it assists in the memorisation of truth. Indeed it is often observed that songs are far more memorable than sermons and that the music director or song leader may in consequence be the most influential theologian in a congregation! No wonder the Reformers were so eager to popularise their message in song as well as in sermon, and that John Wesley's homilies were complemented by his brother's hymns. Indeed, from Ambrose to Redman, the spread of the gospel has often been accompanied by a creative outpouring of song.

Music ought to reflect the breadth of Scripture

It is important, given how memorable songs can be, that the words we sing accurately reflect biblical truth, including both thanksgiving for God's salvation and victory (Exodus 15) and the acknowledgement of human weakness, oppression and sin deserving the judgement of God (Deuteronomy 32). This variety is borne out supremely by the Book of Psalms, where psalms of thanks and praise sit alongside those of lament and despair.

This balance is not always reflected in Christian hymn and song repertoire. For example, of the 150 songs in *Spring Harvest Praise 2002*, the most recent music book from the largest annual gathering of evangelical Christians in Britain, I noted that only twenty or so songs engage to some extent with issues of weakness, sin and suffering. Some of these songs make only a passing reference to suffering or evil and they all express confidence in God's transforming power. There is little or no parallel in this repertoire to the almost total despair and questioning of, say, Psalm 88, a psalm which is representative of a literary corpus that cannot lightly be dismissed as pre-Christian.

The practice of chanting the psalms has largely disappeared except in the somewhat rarefied setting of choral evensong. Metrical psalms have been the staple of some denominations and have sometimes been considered the only legitimate songs of praise to God.¹⁵ For a variety of approaches one may consult the two volumes of psalm settings produced by the Jubilate group,¹⁶ and material from the Iona Community,¹⁷ the St Thomas More Group¹⁸ and writers such as Martin Leckebusch, who plans to produce texts based on all 150 psalms.¹⁹

Music-making must be matched by obedience

Obedience is of course implicit in the very meaning of the word 'worship' (see below), but is discernible too in passages such as 1 Chronicles 13 and 15. In the earlier chapter, David and the people attempt to bring the ark of the covenant to the newly established capital Jerusalem, 'dancing before God with all their might, with song and lyres and harps and tambourines and cymbals and trumpets'. But David fails to follow the instructions given in Exodus and Numbers concerning the transportation of the ark. The result is one fatality and the delay of the ark's journey.

Chapter 15 narrates the successful second attempt to bring up the ark. This time, correct procedure for carrying the ark is matched by elaborate musical preparations involving the Levites in a way that anticipates their future service in the temple.²⁰ The instruments are to be played in certain prescribed ways and one 'Chenaniah, leader of

7 G. Keillor, *We Are Still Married*, Faber and Faber, 1989, p.30.

8 Ex. 15:1–18

9 From 'There is a Redeemer' by Melody Green.

10 *Growing Up Evangelical. Youthwork and the making of a subculture*, SPCK, 1996, pp.107–142. The songbooks in question are *Youth Praise* (mid-'60s), *Sound of Living Waters* (mid-'70s) and *Songs of Fellowship* (mid-'80s).

11 *Op. cit.*, p.141.

12 *Loc. cit.*

13 Deut. 31:19.

14 Deut. 32:44–47.

15 Though Ian Murray has recently given a sound defence of a broader approach in *The Psalter – the only hymnal?* Banner of Truth, 2001.

16 *Psalms for Today and Songs from the Psalms*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1990.

17 *Psalms of Patience, Protest and Praise*, Wild Goose Publications, 1993.

18 In such volumes as *Sing of the Lord's Goodness; Come to set us free*, OCP Publications, various dates.

19 *Songs of God's People. The Psalms made for singing*. Vol 1, Kevin Mayhew, 2001.

20 See 1 Chr. 25.

the Levites in music, was to direct the music, for he understood it'.²¹ David's music, well prepared and executed, is acceptable when it is accompanied by obedience to the LORD's stipulations.

Godless choirs or self-promoting music groups, however brilliant musically, would seem to have little place then in God's plans. Whether it be a music-dominated choral evensong, or a contemporary service in which most of the time is taken up by singing, with little serious study of the Bible, one wonders how pleased the Lord is. By contrast, a minister friend of mine recalled a competent music leader he had known who could not wait to 'fling his guitar down' when the sermon began, grab his Bible and get his nose into it.²²

Development: The perspective of the New Testament²³

In the New Testament the familiar 'religious' concepts of the Hebrew Bible are transformed. Jesus himself is the temple,²⁴ the eternal divine Word who 'tabernacled' among us,²⁵ and it is through Jesus that earth and heaven can meet.²⁶ Since God himself now dwells in and among his people, the body of the individual Christian²⁷ and the corporate body of believers²⁸ may also be spoken of as God's temple or the temple of the Holy Spirit. In other words a building (the OT temple) has been replaced by a people (Christ and his followers).

Special individuals have been replaced by a special people. So, whereas the OT priesthood was open only to descendants of Levi (albeit in the context of Israel's corporate priesthood among the nations),²⁹ now all believers are priests,³⁰ with access to God through the priestly work of Christ himself.³¹ The perpetual annual and daily sacrifices of OT religion have been superseded by the single sacrifice of Jesus on the cross *once for all*.³² The physical altars of the Pentateuch have been replaced by the altar of grace.³³

Sinai and Zion

The relationship between Old and New Testaments is a complex one, including areas of continuity, discontinuity and development or fulfilment.³⁴ Take Hebrews 12, for example, where the writer contrasts the two mountains, Sinai and Zion. Sinai, both physically and theologically one of the high points of the Old Testament, was a place that could be touched and where a truly awesome, indeed unbearably terrifying, presence of God was experienced.³⁵

Yet it is not to Sinai that the recipients of Hebrews have come, but to Zion, the heavenly city of God the judge, of Jesus the mediator and of the angels. The visible gathering on earth is part of a vast invisible gathering.³⁶ Essentially, experience of God (Sinai) has been replaced by faith in God (Zion), and the original readers of Hebrews are in danger of seeking 'experience' by a return to religion – a temptation into which we Christians have repeatedly fallen over the centuries.

Yet even the immediately post-Sinai generation is made aware of the unrepeatable nature of that event. Moses is clear in Deuteronomy 5:1–4 that God's words spoken on that previous occasion are just as binding for his contemporary hearers as they were for Israel forty

years previously. He even goes as far as to say that the Sinai covenant the LORD made was not with their fathers (the Sinai generation) but with the present generation on the verge of entry into the promised land. The New Testament is fully in agreement with this stance. Note especially Hebrews' repeated injunction (quoting Psalm 95), 'Today if you hear his voice...', and the celebrated description of God's word as 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.'³⁷

Clearly the Christian gathering ought to model this perspective. Music ought to be subject to and support the ministry of the word, since the word of God (words, sentences, propositions, commands, narrative, poetry, etc.) is the means by which God works in human hearts. That word of God can be conveyed powerfully by means of music, but it is a mistake to try to recreate a 'Sinai' experience in the church today, as though God's presence is somehow made more tangible through the medium of music.

Worship

Another important example of the continuity/discontinuity aspect is the meaning of 'worship'. Though some of the worship vocabulary of the Old Testament (as it appears in the Septuagint, the second and third centuries BC Greek translation of the Scriptures) can still refer to activity in the gathering of God's people,³⁸ it is now applied more broadly to the entire Christian life. Thus in Romans 12 Paul commands 'worship' as the proper response of the believer to the truths of the gospel he has elaborated in the first eleven chapters. Worship is the 24/7 sacrifice all Christian individuals are to make (verse 1), involving change of mind and attitudes (verse 2ff). Indeed the remaining chapters of Romans can be seen as an exposition of the meaning of worship, as Paul speaks of obedience to civil authorities (13:1–7), love and concern for fellow Christians and others (most of the remaining passages), and his own missionary enterprise, which he describes in terms very reminiscent of Old Testament priestly roles (15:16).

So, the Epistle to the Romans uses worship vocabulary to speak of the Christian life of service, obedience, love and evangelism. According to the New Testament, this is true worship, or 'worthship' – we 'ascribe worth' to God not merely by our words (or songs), but by our lives, by practising what we preach. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it: 'Through [Jesus], then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.'³⁹

We ought to be careful, then, about referring to the activity of singing as a 'time of worship', as if the reading of God's word, or the sermon, or the giving of money to God's work, or indeed the whole of the Christian life, were less than an act of worship. Of course Christians do not cease to worship God when they meet together. Rather, the whole of the life of the believer is to be words and works of worship.

Edification

What then is the purpose of the Christian gathering, and what is music's place within it? The New Testament speaks of the gathering of believers on a number of occasions. The book of Acts describes the early corporate life as centred in apostolic teaching, fellowship (practical love, including the sharing of possessions), breaking bread (the Lord's Supper and/or shared meals), prayer, miracles, joy, sincerity and praise of God, with the church expanding daily.⁴⁰ In 1 Corinthians 11–14 we are given a lengthy description (and trouble-shoot!) of aspects of the gathered church at Corinth, including the conduct of women, the celebration of the Lord's Supper and the

21 1 Chr. 15:19–22.

22 He was apparently a Pentecostal and his black Bible was allegedly bigger than his guitar!

23 For more detailed treatments of these themes, see David Peterson, *Engaging with God. A biblical theology of worship*, APOLLOS, 1992, D. A. Carson, (ed.), *Worship by the Book*, Zondervan, 2002, ch.1, and Vaughan Roberts, *True Worship*, Authentic Lifestyle, 2002.

24 Jn. 2:21.

25 Jn. 1:14.

26 Jn. 1:51.

27 1 Cor. 6:19.

28 1 Cor. 3:16f.

29 Ex. 19:6.

30 1 Pet. 2:9.

31 Heb. 10:19.

32 1 Pet. 3:18.

33 Heb. 13:9f.

34 See especially the helpful distinction drawn by Don Carson between systematic theology and biblical theology in D. A. Carson (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.15–18.

35 Heb. 12:18–22.

36 Heb. 12:22–24

37 Heb. 4:12.

38 Acts 13:2.

39 Heb 13:15f.

40 Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–35.

exercise of spiritual gifts (especially tongues, prophecy and interpretation).

1 Corinthians 14:26 speaks of a 'free' meeting in which many contributions, some musical, are made. Paul writes neither approvingly nor disapprovingly of the Corinthian approach, but does insist that it result in the 'building up' of the church, an emphasis that is shared, albeit with different vocabulary, by the letter to the Hebrews. Hebrews 10:19–25 speaks of the believer's privilege to approach God through the cleansing from sin that Christ's death obtains for us. In this context, the writer exhorts his readers: 'And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.'⁴¹

The writer urges believers to meet together for mutual encouragement so that they can love one another and be engaged in good works, especially in view of the certainty of Jesus' return. Here a horizontal purpose is expressed for the Christian gathering: mutual encouragement or edification. Thus one must ask the question of any musical item or approach, 'Will this song or hymn, choir item or instrumental piece edify God's people?' Only so will it be pleasing to God.

Singing and making music

Ephesians 5 contains one of very few explicit references in the New Testament to music in the church gathering:

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves [literally, 'to yourselves' or 'to one another'], singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.⁴²

Paul here gives a number of marks of being filled with the Spirit: singing to (or among) one another, singing and making melody to the Lord, giving thanks to God and submitting to one another.⁴³ As in Hebrews, there is a horizontal dimension to the gathering, but in addition, Paul draws attention to the importance of the vertical – 'to the Lord'. This is of course axiomatic. Mutual edification (the horizontal activity) cannot take place unless God addresses his people through his word (see Colossians 3:16, the vertical dimension), and his people respond to him in thankfulness (also vertical of course).

A variety of musical genres is in view, ranging from *psalms* (the OT Psalms and perhaps other poetic items [alleged New Testament 'hymns', such as Philippians 2:6–11, have been suggested]), through *hymns* (songs in praise of God) to *spiritual songs* (a catch-all covering any other material). The whole is characterised by thankfulness and mutual submission and comes in the context of more general ethical (lifestyle) teaching beginning at chapter 4.

In Colossians 3:16, the same trio of musical genres occurs, as well as the focus on horizontal (manward) and vertical (Godward) dimensions, and the emphasis on thankfulness (and submission in

the following verse). Noteworthy here is the substitution of 'the Spirit' we found in Ephesians 5 with 'the word'. This is fully consonant with Paul's emphasis elsewhere, such as in Ephesians 6:17, where he states that 'the sword of the Spirit...is the word of God'. Note too John 6:63: 'The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.'

Graham Kendrick, comparing the Ephesians and Colossians texts, puts it this way:

And as we let the word of Christ dwell in us richly, and as we are filled with the Holy Spirit, and as we take these truths upon our lips in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs for the sake of building one another up in the faith, we will find an ever greater response rising from our hearts bringing pleasure to God.⁴⁴

But this is not specific enough. In both Jesus and Paul, as we have seen, word and Spirit are interchangeable – they are simply two ways of expressing the same truth. It makes no sense to say something like 'You have the word, but I have the Spirit', or *vice versa*. As God's word is read, taught, studied and taken to heart, the Spirit is at work in the life of the believer.

Recapitulation: music that serves the word

We began by celebrating the marvel of music. Its universal appeal knows no national boundaries (unlike verbal languages) as it can speak directly to the heart, to the emotions. Of course this means music has the power not only to move but also to manipulate. One might ask about church music: 'Does it support or supplant the word?' 'Will it edify or only entertain?' 'Is it true or trite?'

We conclude from our discussion of the biblical material that it is vital for music to be subject to the authority of the word of God and to serve the ministry of that word in our churches. Is music essential for effective biblical ministry? Perhaps not. But let it be said in the strongest possible terms that vibrant, lively, varied, engaging music is a huge boon, which significantly strengthens word ministry and enables believers to respond to God in heartfelt, genuine thankfulness, as well as in prayer and intercession.⁴⁵ As Christians gather together in thankfulness and adoration, as well as to edify and to evangelise, they experience a foretaste of heaven, where 'every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, [sings], "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!"'⁴⁶ In the words J. S. Bach appended to his compositions, *Soli Deo Gloria* (to God alone be the glory).

44 In *Spring Harvest Praise 2002*, Spring Harvest, 2002, p.247.

45 For further reading, see D. Montgomery, *Sing a New Song: Choosing and leading praise in today's church*, Rutherford House/Handsel Press, 2000.

46 Rev. 5:13.

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41 Heb. 10:24f.

42 Eph. 5:18–21.

43 Verse 21 is part of the sentence that begins in v.18 in the Greek text, and indeed there is no break or restatement of the verb to submit as we reach v.22.

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