

Evaluating the music of praise and worship: 2

Second of two parts

By John Dawson

In the first of these two articles I made my best effort to address what I see as the real issue in the challenge of incorporating or simply discerning the possibility of incorporating newer forms of music into liturgical settings, as I believe this is of critical importance. In this article I want to address, in a spirit of open, critical dialogue with anyone interested in this issue, our search for ways to have as much consistency and objectivity as possible in judging whether a style of music is appropriate or inappropriate for liturgical use.

In the last article I applied the term *aesthetic agenda* to that aspect of liturgical decision-making that concerns the liturgical appropriateness of something (music in this case) from the *formal* and *stylistic* points of view. By *formal* and *stylistic* in regards to music, I mean extra-textual musical content. It is not entirely unreasonable to suggest that in parishes, the appropriateness of a musical style in liturgy, when discussed at all, has thus far been chiefly a matter of subjective interpretation based on the opinion of a pastor and/or liturgical coordinator. If they don't like it, it is

considered inappropriate and is not used. It is this process that I wish to address in proposing my model of discernment for evaluating new and unfamiliar music. While subjectivity is always an issue when it comes to art, I believe that my proposal will help us engage in a more critical and informed dialogue with new music.

The catalyst for this discussion began with some concerns regarding praise and worship music. I began with some critical observations concerning what I think lies at the heart of some of this music and its liturgical implications. Praise and worship is very foreign territory for many Catholic churches, but as its sound has begun to resonate with greater frequency within our parishes and youth celebrations, many alarms have started to go off. Some parishes have embraced it wholeheartedly while others have written it off completely; to others the only place to be right now in this dialogue is on the fence. Whatever your position, I believe that this particular style of music represents something much bigger than itself and is forcing us to look at larger issues.

I believe that praise and worship, as well as its more commercial counterpart "Contemporary Christian" or simply

“Christian” music, is by and large reactionary. This statement may seem redundant, as most art is usually some form of reaction but let me continue. At its highest, praise and worship music in

particular is an apparent reaction to a genuine encounter with the Holy Spirit; at its most industrial/commercial it is a reaction to the great chasm that exists between the church and mainstream culture in North America. It reacts by attempting to bridge the gap and hook people by pushing the right sonic and aesthetic buttons to convince people that Christianity can look and sound “cool” or something to that effect. Again, I don’t wish this to sound like a negative indictment

of the artists who create this music, but if you have any doubts, just read your average Christian music review in our Catholic newspapers or watch one of the many music-oriented shows on a Christian network and I think you’ll see what I mean.

DIVERGENT AGENDAS

I suspect that the cause of this chasm is basically a divergence of agendas. The value of music in mainstream culture, secular or Christian, is largely determined by its ability to please. In this sense pleasure runs along a wide spectrum from “feeling good” to the emotional affirmation of God’s love and care. On the other hand, liturgical music is valued for its ability to facilitate

“full, active, conscious participation” on the part of the assembly. Pleasure is secondary; participation in a mystery is primary. In short, secular and most praise and worship/Christian music is steeped in sentimentality while most liturgical music is engineered from the point of view of functionality. That’s not to say that liturgical music can’t be sentimental (sometimes to a fault) or vice versa; however, I think this generalization would be valid in the majority of cases. Music ministers’ efforts to include praise & worship/Christian music in Catholic liturgies appear to me to be an attempt to reconcile these agendas. So far the result has often been one big sentimental, but functional, mess.

Inasmuch as we should not deem a style of music inappropriate because we don’t like it, the opposite course of action should be equally discouraged. The liturgical destiny of new styles of music needs critical assessment, careful discernment and openness on the part of those responsible for the decision to include or exclude new music. This requires some kind of model and to that end I would like to recall the words of my composition professor at York University, David Mott.

MUSICAL STYLE TYPES

In my third-year composition class, David Mott was giving a lecture on musical style in which he presented a very simple paradigm that immediately struck me as having some interesting implications. He drew a large square on the board and divided it into four sections. He then placed one of the following headings in each section: the visceral/physical, the sentimental/emotional, the cerebral/intellectual and the transcendental.

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To Mott these four categories represented the basic overall musical style types. While most styles of music will absorb more than one type, there is usually a tendency to lean more towards one or two. For example, rock music, hip-hop or dance music will lean heavily towards the category of the physical/visceral style, while chant would lean heavily towards the transcendental. He argued—and I would agree with him—that pop music, as well as praise and worship music, relies heavily on the sentimental/emotional to achieve its desired affect.

Sometime after this discussion, I thought of the biblical paradigm of “body, mind, soul and spirit.” Body = physical/visceral, mind = cerebral/intellectual, spirit = sentimental/emotional, and soul = transcendental. Then it hit me! We are called to bring our *whole* selves to the liturgy and the music we choose should reflect a similar level of integration. The key is balance. Many different points in the liturgy will emphasize one or more of these areas and music, regardless of its style, that successfully reflects that area can be considered stylistically appropriate. For example, a gathering song during the Easter season may be a point at which music with a powerful visceral affect would be useful—in which case praise

and worship might work well. Conversely the preparation of gifts, which is often interpreted as “we should play a slow song now,” may be a time when the music should stimulate our intellectual, reflective capacities; we thus might shy away from the overly sentimental qualities of some praise and worship ballads in favour of a simple instrumental or more stylistically neutral piece.

The obvious drawback is that one person’s *visceral* may be another’s *sentimental*. One may have a *transcendental* experience at the sheer enigmatic character of Schoenberg’s Piano Concerto which is derived from an extremely *intellectual* compositional technique. The important thing here is to distinguish between our subjective relationship to the music and the intention of the art or artist insofar as we can understand it. We must be able to recognize these elements in music being considered for liturgical use. I suspect that deep down we know when we are hearing a piece of music that is playing on our emotions or trying to move us physically. While we may be very sentimental about the heavy metal music we listened to in high school, I think that the intention of that music is more related to the visceral than to the sentimental in terms of its intended affect. The key ingredients here are

