

A Musician's Perspective on Contemporary Christian Music

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'I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me... Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun' (*Ecclesiastes 2.8, 9, 11*).

THE MUSIC used in contemporary Christianity is a sad testimony to the decline of reverent worship and intelligent praise in many so-called reformed churches. Popular music forms have been incorporated wholesale into many churches, while traditional, simple psalms and hymns have been sidelined or degraded through modern rearrangements. This article briefly looks at some of the reasons why certain musics are inappropriate for the dignified worship of Almighty God. The focus here will be on the music itself (with examples taken from artists who have performed at Louie Giglio's Passion Conference) rather than the lyrics or the statements and antics of secular pop artists.

Modern popular music is an industry which by its nature seeks to turn musical artists into commodities for mass consumption. The propagation of solo singers' music in particular is achieved by establishing a marketable image and constructing an identity for the artist, which is then sold through large-scale advertising to the general public. A singer's identity is intimately connected with his or her voice, which itself is a construction, insomuch as –

'the vocabulary of professional singing is full of subtle tricks which form a cultural code of emotional sincerity, perhaps most obviously seen in the way everyone from operatic tenors to female popular singers all allow the voice to break, employing breath noises, catches and glitches in the sung line and the vocal timbre that indicate the depth of their emotion, something heard in vocalists from Pavarotti to Alanis Morissette. But these are the tricks of the professional singer and so, paradoxically, the very mechanisms employed to convince the audience of the singer's sincerity are arguably a form of deception.' (Janet K Halfyard)

This kind of 'deception' can be heard in the close mic-ed recordings of Passion artists such as Kristian Stanfill whose very limited harmonic and rhythmic material also creates quite a hypnotic effect in its near-static development. The official description of a recent Christy Nockels album stated that the

– 'production places the focus on Christy's incredible voice at the focus. Well-respected in the industry as a "singer's singer", she has a gift for imbuing each lyric with an authenticity and emotional integrity that resonates with the listener.' (Passion website)

Note that the lyrics are described not as having authenticity and integrity but being imbued with these. A cursory listen to the material reveals breathy, forced vocals, 'ooh' and 'uh' suffixes often being added to words. A great deal of melisma is employed at times. Some words such as 'Alleluia' become totally broken and fragmented. Nearly all the slower songs have a predictable build to anthemic choruses with full band accompaniment.

No doubt Nockels is a very able singer, with a strong tone. But the style is so soloistic that it is totally at odds with the requirements for congregational worship. In this music, any corporate sense of coming together as a people to address Almighty God is discarded. With this template, when the instrumentalists do drop out for the mandatory a cappella section, everyone 'worships' in this very

subjective, personal style for the whole time. The vocal style trains people to sing in their own way, and as individuals, rather than with the people of God.

The now disbanded David Crowder Band's music again uses the close mic-ed intimate vocal technique, which is also mirrored by the guitar. There are often times when an acoustic guitar is played on a crystal clear recording, so that one hears the distinctive scratching noise of fingers moving over the fret board (so called 'fret noise'). This backs up the intimate vocals by bringing the instrument into sharp focus, to the end that when the songs reach their electronically frenzied triple-guitar climax, the senses have been softened and drawn in so that the impact is all the more overpowering. It's as though someone has whispered to you for sixty seconds and then yelled directly into your ear. The theatricality of this technique is wholly at odds with dignified, sincere worship.

Shane & Shane use similar techniques in their song 'Though You Slay Me', in which they blend audio samples from a sermon by John Piper with a very visceral bass drum thud and close mic-ing. The limited ability of the guitarists is evident from their use of simplistic chord shapes and a capo, which seems to be the *lingua franca* for CCM guitarists.

No doubt this type of folksy simplicity would be defended with the arguments of having a broad appeal and accessibility, but really it seems to be a veil for a lack of genuine spiritual content in the words. It appeals to the lowest common denominator, most of whom have been brainwashed by secular pop music all their lives. Chris Tomlin plays in almost exactly the same way, rejoicing in his mediocrity behind a façade of humility.

Local churches often try to mimic CCM artists with half a band in a small congregation, without any of the technological gloss that their musical heroes have at their disposal. The result of this is usually extremely embarrassing for members of the church and off-putting to the unbeliever. Reformed worshippers certainly value simplicity in their worship, but they are not holding up their musicians as superstars and claiming their compositions to be significant works of art. It might also be worth considering that even the most able CCM artists and their work are usually viewed with utter disdain by secular artists, perhaps in part due to its message, but more often due to its poor musical quality.

Frank Breeden, president of the Gospel Music Association, defends the use of popular music styles by claiming that 'there really is no such thing as a Christian B-flat. Music in itself is an amoral vehicle.' This may sound plausible on the surface, but no one is simply sounding a B-flat and foolishly claiming that individual pitches are good or evil, so the argument is a straw man. Without recourse to vague notions of the power of music, it is easy to demonstrate that music is more than a sum of its parts. It is quite obvious to any listener that our B-flat played with a D and an F has a different function to when it is played with an E-flat and a G-flat. A chord played forte and staccato by a brass band has a different impact to the same chord played pianissimo and sostenuto by a string quartet.

Mood of music

As for the statement that 'music in itself is an amoral vehicle,' and without regurgitating Marshall McLuhan, we should perhaps in response consider the question whether music can sound angry. Most would agree that it can. Is it possible then, that in identifying closely and often with angry music people might themselves become angry, even sinfully so? If this were the case, should that music be used to worship the holy, gracious God? The same test might be applied to other feelings and ideas conveyed in music. If we view music as itself containing information, then we may find styles

which are sensuous, violent, hypnotic, etc. If the information contained in the music can be assessed morally, then perhaps music is not an amoral vehicle.

It is with these thoughts in mind that we now consider Christian rap artist Lecrae and hip-hop in general. The rapper has had much success and is very popular in new Calvinist circles. Lecrae seems to have the personality, the voice, the look, the style which popular music by its nature values so highly. Rap music is so very much about individuals, and Lecrae doesn't fail to deliver as an artist. His antics on stage are overtly masculine and aggressive, removing his clothes, jumping and strutting with a physical stance indistinguishable from any pride-ridden secular rapper. His vocal style is punctuated with growls, yells and shouts setting forth the kind of machismo that any male rapper on MTV (music satellite television channel) would utilise.

Lecrae's voice relies heavily upon its tone, inflection and energy, all of which are expanded with compression, vocoder and autotune effects. The music itself obviously employs the usual kinds of up-tempo drum loops which are the engine-room for every song. Even in a number of the slower tempo songs, the actual rhythms employed by the drums are based on 16th and 32nd note patterns, creating a high energy double-time feel. This is a music of extreme contrasts: beats disappear for small sections and then return with incredible force. With raised hands, a capella moments again serve as a foil to the high energy songs that inevitably follow. The harmonic material is predominantly in the minor, yielding an increased pathos, emotional pull, and often a sense of menace. Some of the long choruses have very little content musically or lyrically, eg: 'Don't stop, get your hands up.' There may be some lyrical substance, but the music primarily takes momentum from its emotional thrust.

Unsuitable for corporate worship

Though people can sing along with rap if they know the words, the nature of the melody is that it relies more on individual voice inflections, and so is particularly unsuitable for corporate worship. The lighting display is heavily synchronised with the music, adding structural punctuations to the form. Strong lasers, strobes and a plethora of other lights wash over the entire performance. This all adds to the overwhelming sensual effect of the music. Yet Lecrae assures us, 'I don't need my name in lights.'

Some new Calvinists are sincerely giving excellent-sounding principles for assessing what music is appropriate in worship, but they still actually leave the issue of genre and styles untouched. In using these principles, it is possible that some will choose to avoid worldly music forms; however, many will not and will instead feel that they have justified their continued use of such music. Few seem to have the boldness to take a clear stand against pop music and apply the clear teaching of Scripture:

'Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.' (2 Corinthians 6.17)

'Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.' (James 4.4)

'And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.' (Romans 12.2)

The plain meaning of these well-known verses of Scripture teach the principle of separation from the world and a shunning of its culture. To try to teach the opposite of the Bible's emphatic instruction in this matter is spiritually disastrous.