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Having Ears that Hear: A Practical Guide to Discernment in Contemporary Music

Denis D. Haack

Within the church, and without, discernment in music has become an issue. Within, believers debate the merit of “contemporary” vs. “traditional” styles in worship, and without, politicians accuse record companies of undermining the morals of young people. Interestingly, though we usually consider them to be separate debates concerning different issues in music, they do share at least three things in common. First, in both debates feelings run very deep, participants see their convictions as largely self-evident, and opponents tend to be demonized. Second, in both debates the argument is often finally resolved primarily through the exercise of power. And third, the debates over music both within and without the church reveal the need for Christians to develop skill in discernment concerning music.

For all its importance to the Christian mind and life, however, few believers have given much attention to discernment in music. “Most of us do not think about music objectively,” theologian and jazz pianist William Edgar writes. “We either pay no particular attention to aesthetic questions, and simply give way to what is happening, or else we nurture our likes and dislikes, our favorite traditions, and leave criticism to those who seem to care.”¹ Give way to whatever is happening or nurture our likes and dislikes—this sums up well how most Christians approach music, yet neither approach is sufficient. What is needed, obviously, is for believers—both musicians and nonmusicians—to be discerning in music.

Five Reasons Christians Need to Be Discerning in Music

1) Discernment concerning music is simply one aspect of Christian discernment, and discernment is essential to Christian discipleship. If our goal is to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5), it will hardly do to exclude all those which happen to involve music.

2) Music plays an important role in the life of modern young people. “Day in and day out,” the authors of *Dancing in the Dark* note, “contemporary youth live simultaneously in the world of their parents and in a separate generational enclave created by the electronic media.”² It is not unreasonable to suggest that a significant portion of the younger generation will have their worldview molded in large part by pop culture. “Indeed,” the same authors continue, young people today “frequently shape the important stuff of their lives from the cues marketed by corporations rather than from those offered by parents, pastors, teachers, and community leaders.”³ Even if Christian young people are sheltered from modern pop culture—something which can occur only in part in any case—their peers, among whom they must eventually live and evangelize, will be shaped by it. To prepare them to be faithful servants of Christ, our young people must be equipped to be discerning in music.

3) Technology is advancing. A few years ago, my oldest daughter arranged for me to speak on Christianity in a “Philosophies of Life” class in her public high school. One of a series of outside speakers, I was given fifty minutes in three classes to present “What I believe, and why.” What was most striking, however, was what I observed between classes. Each hour as the bell rang to signal the end of class, a significant portion of the student body instantly entered the electronic world of pop music. The bell would not have finished ringing before earphones were donned, and students walked to their next class listening to CDs or tapes. The halls were filled with young people immersed in an electronic culture of music, made possible by modern technology. Pop music may not be any more important to today’s generation than it was to their parents, but today people have access to it far more of each waking hour.

4) Cultural discernment is necessary for apologetics and evangelism. Modern pop music is like a window of insight into

the hearts, minds, and imaginations of the non-Christians around us. When Paul wanted to understand the Athenians, he read their poets; if we wish to understand our generation, we will listen to its music, which is its most popular and powerful form of poetry. And like Paul using a pagan altar as a point of contact with the unbelievers he wished to reach, we can learn to use pop music as a place to begin discussing the Big Questions of life.

5) Neither debate over music—within or without the church—will be resolved unless the participants approach music in an objective fashion. Developing a thoughtful process by which to be discerning about contemporary music is needed if believers wish to shed light instead of simply adding to the heat of the debate. What is not helpful is simply more voices clamoring for their particular “taste” or seeking to gain enough popular support to overwhelm their opponents. What would be helpful is for discerning Christians to enter the debate with an approach which takes music seriously enough to be both objective and practical.

But Is It Possible to Be Discerning in Music?

“But, wait a minute,” someone might say. “That’s all fine and good in theory, but I’m not a musician. I can’t even carry a tune—unless it’s on a record. To suggest I can be discerning in music is ludicrous.” Not so. As with all aspects of discipline, the call to discernment is part of our faithfulness as stewards. We are responsible to be discerning in music to the extent music is a part of our lives, and in light of the knowledge and gifts we have been given. No doubt musicians bear an added responsibility before the Lord, but that does not mean the rest of us bear no responsibility at all.

It is true, however, that like developing skill in any aspect of discernment, growing in an ability to be discerning in music takes a bit of work. Mind renewal, in the transforming sense that the apostle means in Romans 12:1-2, is never instant-

neous or effortless, but to say that is only to remind us that there is a cost to discipleship.

More to the point, we should ask instead whether we dare remain unable to be discerning in music. “Our excuse for our esthetic failure has often been that we must be about the Lord’s business, the assumption being that the Lord’s business is never aesthetic.”⁴ Music is far too important, both within and without the church, for our involvement in it to be left to either the winds of culture or the tastes of fallen people.

As Edgar points out, the Scriptures are full of music, and simply to list the various “song species from the Bible shows both the extensiveness of musical function and the Godward commitment of the various forms.”

Work songs (Num. 21:17-18; Isa. 16:10; 27:2; Jer. 25:30; 48:33; Hos. 2:17; Zech. 4:7).

Music connected with war, marching and victory (Num. 21:27-30; Ps. 68; 2 Chron. 20:21; Num. 10:35-36; Ex. 15:20; Judg. 5:1; 1 Sam. 21:12; Ps. 24:7-10).

Songs for instruction, prophecy and mutual edification (Deut. 3:19; 1 Kings 3:15; 1 Chron. 25:1-3; Col. 3:16).

Love songs, wedding music, songs of seduction (Ps. 45; Song 2:12; Ezek. 33:32; Isa. 5:1; Gen. 31:27; Jer. 25:10; 33:11; Isa. 23:15-16).

Entertainment (Job 21:12; Isa. 24:9; 2 Sam. 19:35; Lam. 5:14; Dan. 6:18; Amos 6:5).

Music with dance (Ex. 15:20; 32:18-19; 1 Sam. 18:6-7; 21:12; 29:5; Ps. 30:11-12; 68:25; 87:7; Matt. 11:17).

Songs of derision (Job 30:9; Lam. 3:14; 63; Isa. 14:4).

Mourning and lamentation (2 Sam. 1:18-27; 1 Kings 13:30; 2 Chron. 35:25; Ps. 69:12; Job 30:31; Eccl. 12:5; Jer. 9:16-17; 22:18; Ezek. 27:30-32).

“A close examination of any of these references,” Edgar argues, “will reveal that in no case is the use of music neutral. It is religiously conditioned, either in covenant obedience or rebellion.”⁵ The same is true of music today, and it is the goal

of Christian discernment to distinguish between music which is covenantally faithful and music which serves as a vehicle for fallen creatures to rebel against the Lord of glory.

Further, Christians have always believed that there is an objective standard for beauty—at least this was believed until the dawn of the modern age. God has revealed Himself as God the glorious, and glory is an aesthetic as well as a theological category. “The Mighty One, God, the Lord,” Asaph writes in Psalm 50:1-2, “has spoken, and summoned the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth.”

The notion of objective beauty is as essential to a Christian worldview as is the notion of objective truth or objective morality. To suggest that some standard for beauty resides outside or behind God is to engage in blasphemy. God is glorious, and that means that all beauty is found in Him alone. “To believe in God,” Clyde Kilby wrote, “involves accepting Him as the sovereign perfection, not only of truth and goodness but also of beauty, thus enabling the highest possible conceptions of excellence. *Whatever the difficulty of actual application, the standards remain, and the believer orients himself toward them*” (italics mine).⁶

This glorious God has revealed Himself to us, and we can catch a glimpse of His beauty in creation (Ps. 19), in Christ (John 1:14), and in the Scriptures (2 Cor. 3:12-18). “[T]he beautiful is not the product of our own fantasy, nor of our subjective perception,” theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper wrote,

but has an objective existence, being itself the expression of a Divine perfection. After the Creation, God saw all things were good. Imagine that every human eye were closed and every human ear stopped up, even then the beautiful remains, and God sees it and hears it, for, not only His Eternal Power, but also His Divinity, from the very creation, has been perceived in His creation.⁷

This means that in music—as in the rest of life and reality—we are not left merely to endless arguments over personal taste or preference, for three simple reasons: God exists, He is the final absolute for truth, goodness, and beauty, and He has revealed Himself to us. Christian discernment in music is not only possible, it is essential for all those who wish to be faithful stewards of the One whose glory will someday cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

Music Discernment: A Practical Approach

John Mason Hodges, a symphony conductor, composer, and thoughtful evangelical musician, has outlined a four-part strategy Christians can use to be discerning in music.⁸ John and I have used this approach as part of a wider effort to train believers in discernment skills, as a guide to help Christians reflect biblically on music, and in evangelistic settings.

This strategy has several important strengths. First, it takes music seriously. Too often in discussions of music, music lovers suspect those persons raising questions or objections either don't appreciate music or don't take it seriously as an art form. Since the strategy outlined here is based on the nature of music itself, the discussion can proceed without any hint of such bias. Second, this strategy provides an objective framework for discussion. The four points allow the participants to examine the music itself, instead of simply debating differences in personal preference. This is especially important in our modern era with its emphasis on the subjective. Third, it is practical. Even those of us who, unlike Hodges, are nonmusicians can begin to reflect on music and discuss it with others. And fourth, this strategy moves us past unhelpful categorizations. Contrary to popular opinion, not all Christian contemporary music is "good," and not all "secular songs" are "bad." Using this four-part strategy allows us to get beyond such simplistic—and mistaken—generalizations.

This strategy for music discernment examines the four

components which are important for every piece of music.⁹ This process does not require a technical knowledge of music, though it does require a willingness to learn and an openness to listen with care. Any single piece of music may be deemed good or poor in one or more of the components, or in all of them. The four components include:

1) **Message.** The message communicated by the words and the music, i.e., what the song or piece of music says.

2) **Composition.** The form by which the music and words communicate the message, i.e., the excellence and appropriateness of the music and poetry.

3) **Performance.** The particular rendition—whether live or recorded—of the piece being considered.

4) **Personal taste.** Whether I like the piece and why.

Let's consider each of the four in more detail:

1) Message. The message communicated by the words and the music, i.e., what the song or piece of music says. Here we need to consider both the music and the words, for both have objective content, both communicate some sort of message. "All art is communication," Hodges stresses. "To know the content or message of the piece, we ask the question what? What is the artist saying?"¹⁰

The message or content of the words. Most people readily understand how the words of a song—the poetry which has been set to music—communicate some sort of message. They have objective content which can be examined in the light of Scripture, and which does not depend on whether we like the song, or on how it makes us feel. The task of discernment is to identify that message and then to determine whether it is true, partly true, or false. For example, a few years ago a praise song made the rounds which said that even if it turns out what we believe is untrue, we will have had such a wonderful life that it will still be worth it. The writer may have wanted to compose a nice sentiment, perhaps, but the message of those words was a simple contradiction of what the Scriptures teach in 1

Corinthians 15:19. At stake is not that only certain topics can be celebrated in song, for Christ is Lord of all. The issue is rather the content of those words, and whether they are true, partly true, or false.

The message or content of the music. Music also has a message, an objective content which does not depend on whether we like the piece or on how it makes us feel. Even a piece of music which has no words at all communicates something. Most people may have little understanding of this, but it remains true nonetheless. Some technical knowledge of music is useful at this point, but even nonmusicians can learn enough to be discerning. In any case, the goal remains the same: to identify what the piece is saying and to determine whether it is true, partly true, or false. Consider just three of the elements of music: melody, harmony, and rhythm. Now hum to yourself the opening notes to Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus," from his *Messiah*. Even without the three-fold repetition of the word "Hallelujah," that opening line as Handel wrote it expresses something of boldness, majesty, and great pomp.

Some questions to help discern the message of a piece of music:

What is the message of the words? What does it claim or assume to be true, good, or beautiful? What does it claim or assume to be false, bad, or ugly?

What is the message of the music?

Where do we agree? Where do we disagree? Why? If we disagree, how important should that be to our enjoyment of or use of the song?

Where the song deviates from the truth, why do we believe the biblical position? How can we communicate that truth in a way that makes sense in our modern pluralistic culture?

2) Composition. The form by which the music and poetry communicate the message, i.e., the excellence and appropriateness of the music and poetry. Here our concern is not

truthfulness of the song's message, but rather with the craft, excellence, and appropriateness of both the poetry and the musical composition. "This category," Hodges says, "evaluates the way the composer has said what he has said. To discern here we ask the question *how?* How has the composer reflected the content in the composition of the music and the poetry?"

The Old Testament people of God were required to bring not just any lamb to sacrifice; they were required to bring one which had no blemish or imperfection. When we considered the song's message we determined whether it was a lamb or llama; here we examine the lamb to determine its quality. Once again, the composition can be examined objectively, and does not depend on whether we like the piece or on how it makes us feel.¹¹ Some technical knowledge of poetry and music is helpful here, but once again, these are skills that do not require majoring in either music or literature.

The composition of the words or poetry. There are two considerations here: whether the words are well crafted as poetry, and whether the form is appropriate to the message. The words may be true, i.e., consistent with a biblical worldview, but the poem itself may be poorly composed. True ideas can be found in bad poetry, and false ideas can be made to sound good if they are part of a well-written poem. The form makes a difference—there's nothing wrong with the limerick as one type of poetry, but it probably isn't an appropriate form for a solemn meditation on God's holiness. The words of some praise songs, for example, are unimaginative and limited, and as a result have to depend on mantra-like repetition to have the desired effect. They might not be untrue, per se, but the writer, either through lack of talent or effort, was satisfied with a poorly composed poem. There's an old hymn called "Even Me" which speaks of "showers of blessings"—fine in itself—but one of the lines reads, "Let some droppings fall on me." It's hard to sing that without thinking of birds flying overhead.

What is to be discerned is the creativity and appropriateness of the form the words take.

The composition of the music. Here the concern of the discerning is whether the music is well crafted, and whether the form fits the words. Music can be simple or complex, thin or substantial, long or short, somber or light, martial or romantic, amusing or anguished. The composition and the words should compliment each other. An amusing light-hearted tune, for example, is hardly appropriate for words which meditate on Christ's agony in the garden. Sometimes it is obvious the words have been forced into the composition, so that in some places the singer must race through too many words for the notes in that line. Even nonmusicians can consider the three elements of melody, harmony, and rhythm and gain some sense of the quality of the composition. Considered in terms of composition, most CCM is, unfortunately, aesthetically immature.

Some questions to help discern the composition of a piece of music:

Is the music interesting and creative, or unimaginative and repetitive?

Considered by itself, apart from the words, what mood does the music seem to evoke?

Are the words creative and interesting, or unimaginative and repetitive?

Is it good poetry or bad?

Do the music and the words compliment one another?

3) Performance. The particular rendition—whether live or recorded—of the piece being considered. Here the quality of the musicians, the arrangement, and the recording can all be considered. And once again, notice that this does not depend on subjective considerations: if the performance is sloppy, liking the song doesn't alter that fact. A vocalist who sings off-key can ruin a fine piece, and good musicians can make songs full of bad ideas sound attractive—even compelling and beau-

tiful. The performance should also compliment both the words and the music. A showy and light-hearted rendition of a great hymn merits criticism even if the performer is a believer. John Hodges points out, for example, that many communities host "Messiah Sing-Alongs" where people can sing through Handel's piece over the course of an evening. The composition is grand, the words are magnificent, but the performance usually leaves a great deal to be desired. This doesn't mean such evenings can't be enjoyed; it simply discerns an objective fact.

Some questions to help discern the performance of a piece of music:

How good is the vocalist(s)? The recording? The instrument(s)? The arrangement?

Does the performance fit or complement the piece?

4) Personal taste. Whether I like the piece, and why. Personal enjoyment is a part of the experience of music, and should not therefore be excluded as if unimportant. In one sense this is the most subjective of the four components, but it is not merely subjective. The reason is that taste can mature over time. I can change what I happen to like, and the argument should be made that Christian maturity includes aesthetic maturity. Still, what I like need not always correspond with what is objectively best. I have heard better recordings of the Mozart piece my daughter played at her piano recital, for example, but I still like her performance best. Taste, in other words, may be, but is not necessarily always, a moral issue. On the other hand, discernment in music should have aesthetic maturity as one of its goals. To be theologically literate and biblically knowledgeable while remaining aesthetically immature is hardly a worthy goal for the Christian who desires God's glory across all of life.

Some questions to help discern personal taste: Why do I like this piece of music? Or, Why do I dislike it? Are these adequate reasons? Why or why not?

If the composition is poor, and/or the lyrics questionable, and/or the performance poor, does it matter if I still “like” this piece? Why or why not?

What plans can I make to mature in my musical tastes?

Conclusion

These four categories provide a practical strategy for enjoying and reflecting on music with a Christian perspective. The strategy can be used by an individual, in Christian groups, or in evangelistic settings. The process does not, obviously, provide all we need to be discerning in music. For example, just because a song has words that are true and is set to well-composed music may not mean it is appropriate for corporate worship. As well, this process is most easily applied to pop music, hymns, and contemporary Christian music. (Though the identical components are found in orchestral and operatic music, for example, the components are not usually as readily accessible to the nonmusician.) Nevertheless, the process outlined here represents a place to begin for every Christian who desires to take seriously Christ’s Lordship in music. Far too many believers follow the pattern of the world. After a long day at work, they sink back and relax as pop music—either CCM or secular—washes over them. In a fallen world, that is a foolish and dangerous way to live. The call to discernment does not end at suppertime, but will continue until the Lord returns to consummate His kingdom. The prophet Zephaniah promises that when the King is revealed, there will be divine music, indeed: “The Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy. He will be quiet in His love. He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy” (3:17). When we hear the Lord sing, it will be, among other things, the long-awaited signal that the need to be discerning in music is at last over.

Author

Denis Haack, after studying at the University of Minnesota and the University of New Mexico, worked for seven years on staff with Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship. In 1982 He and his wife began Ransom Fellowship, a speaking and writing ministry which helps Christians develop skill in discernment. A speaker and writer, he edits *Critique*, a newsletter which seeks to help believers apply the truth of Scripture to the issues confronting them in their life, work, and culture. He also is author of the book, *The Rest of Success* (IVP). A ruling elder in a Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), he lives with his family in Rochester, Minnesota. Inquiries regarding this ministry can be addressed personally to Denis at: Ransom Fellowship, 1150 West Center Street, Rochester, Minnesota 55902.

Endnotes

- 1 Edgar, William. *Taking Note of Music* (London:SPCK; 1986), 1.
- 2 Quentin J. Schultze, et. al. *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1991), 47.
- 3 *Dancing in the Dark*, 8.
- 4 From “Christian Imagination” by Clyde S. Kilby quoted in *Culture in Christian Perspective: A Door to Understanding and Enjoying the Arts* by Leland Ryken (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah, 1986) 59.
- 5 Edgar, William. *Taking Note of Music* (London:SPCK, 1986), 48-49.
- 6 Kilby, Clyde. *Christianity and Aesthetics* (Chicago, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 22.
- 7 Kuyper, Abraham. *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1931), 156.
- 8 Mr. Hodges edits a quarterly newsletter on Christianity and the arts, *Crossroads*, and is a winsome and thoughtful speaker, as those who have attended L’Abri Fellowship conferences in the U.S. can attest. For more information contact

him at Ars Nova Chamber Orchestra, 1801 Carr Avenue, Memphis, Tennessee 38104.

9 The division of a piece into these elements, especially the first two, is, of course, artificial, and rather similar to trying to divide soul and spirit. A piece of music contains them, but they exist together, are experienced together, and have to be understood together, each influencing the other. They are divided here in order to allow for the process of learning and discernment.

10 This and subsequent quotations of John Hodges are from unpublished lectures and personal communication.

11 The process of discernment requires people to develop skill in observation. "Rather than saying, 'I feel excited when I hear this,'" Mr. Hodges is fond of saying, "We should be saying things like, 'The speed (tempo) of the piece is fast, there are lots of punchy accents in unlikely places, and the melody has lots of short fast notes in it.' The result of this may indeed be that the piece leaves me excited and breathless, but we need to describe *it*, not *me*, at least in the initial steps of discernment."