

# Every Man Prays in His Own Language: Worship Through the Art of Jazz

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## Abstract

*God calls us to worship whole-heartedly, utilizing the gifts that he has given us. It is God alone who can truly judge our motivations. Our duty is to examine our intentions and put Him first in everything we do. Duke Ellington, one of the most respected jazz musicians of all time, aimed to do this through his music. He composed three sacred concerts, all of which drew heavy criticism. Even with all the criticism, Ellington believed that "every man prays in his own language and there is no language that God does not understand."*

The issue of music in the church has always been a sensitive one. I have found myself to be closer to this situation than most because I am a musician; more specifically, a jazz musician. Growing up in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, my career choice has been a difficult thing for people to understand because of the negative stereotypes that come with it (Walser, 1999). Because of these stereotypes, my musical style has not been considered as an appropriate form of worship. Don't get me wrong; God has placed certain church members in my life who have given me an outlet to worship through jazz. Even so, I have often wondered why I continue to be part of a church where my utmost gift to God is considered inappropriate. I believe this issue of acceptance (not just in music) is one of the greatest shortcomings of the Adventist

Church and its inability to keep young adults and other age groups in the church.

## The Worship War

I'm not saying that a church should hire Van Halen for their house band every Sabbath in order to keep young people "entertained." What I am saying is that everyone should have an outlet where they can use the gifts God has given them. Of course everyone has experienced, in one form or another, a "worship war" where "conservatives" versus "liberals" or "traditionalists" versus "progressives" fight over what style of worship will be most acceptable to God. After awhile, churches split, members leave, and sometimes pastors are even moved. Why? Because one group determines a given style is not acceptable to God. What does this say to people outside of the church?

## **The Sacred Concerts of Duke Ellington**

Consider the following words spoken by one of the most respected jazz musicians of all time, Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington (1973, p. 262): "Every man prays in his own language and there is no language that God does not understand." Ellington has written countless compositions such as "Take the 'A' Train" and "Satin Doll" which are still considered standards in the jazz repertoire. His composition style and his ability to write specifically for each band member remains an inspiration for many of today's composers. He is also considered one of the great innovators of contemporary jazz piano and has influenced many jazz pianists. Ellington's band survived for over forty-five years and is regarded as one of the most successful of the era. Even with all of these accomplishments, Duke Ellington felt the need to compose sacred works and regarded his sacred concerts as his "most important work" (Ellington 1973, p. 269). The sacred concerts contain some of his most progressive writing and each concert had a central theme; creation, love, prayer, and worship. Ellington communicated each of these elements in the best way he knew how, through the art of jazz music. In the last ten years of his life, Duke Ellington poured everything he had into these sacred concerts.

Ellington's motivation to write these concerts came straight from his relationship with God. He considered himself "a messenger boy, one who tries to bring messages to people, not people who have never heard of God, but those who were more or less raised with the guidance of the church (Ellington 1973, pp. 267-268)." Ellington grew up in two different religious communities, the Methodist tradition of his father and the Baptist tradition of his mother. Both of these views gave contrasting church musical experiences but Ellington himself

acknowledged that these two churches provided him with the same core theological beliefs (Ellington, 1973). He also stated that both of these experiences influenced his early musical development and throughout his early career he aimed to include elements of the church in his music (Chung & Sawyer, 2008). It was these views that led Ellington to use jazz as a means of communicating his spiritual beliefs. Reverend Dean Bartlett (who served as Ellington's spiritual advisor while touring) wrote of the sacred concerts, "Is liturgical worship the only form of public prayer? We believe not! Among other forms surely must be included all expressions of the creative and performing arts. Especially where such expressions are offered consciously by the artists and performer 'to the service of God'" (Ellington 1973, p. 265).

Ellington's sacred concerts received many performances around the world and were received well by everyone who heard them. Even so, Ellington also received many forms of criticism regarding his sacred music. Some stated that Ellington wanted to gain a profit by creating a new musical genre: sacred jazz (Hill, 1995). Other critics stated that this was some of Ellington's "lesser" work (Collier, 1987). He was criticized for his intentions to write and perform the First Sacred Concert at Grace Cathedral both before and after its debut. One account came before a concert at the famous Constitution Hall in his hometown of Washington DC. The 250 member Baptist Ministers Conference of Washington went on record to say that they were "refusing to endorse the concert" while some complained his music was too "worldly" (Hasse, 1993). Even members of Ellington's own band worried about how people would receive sacred music being performed in a jazz setting (Dance, 1999). Still others showed concern as to whether jazz belonged in a church or not. These criticisms would not deter Ellington's goal as he expressed a desire to offer the Sacred Concerts to fulfill his

duty as “a messenger boy” for God, all the while keeping his own unique style as an integral part of his music (Giddins, 1981).

## **Communication**

In response to his critics, Ellington explained why he chose to use jazz as a way to communicate his spiritual beliefs:

“Communication itself is what baffles the multitude. It is both so difficult and so simple. Of all man’s fears, I think men are most afraid of being what they are – in direct communication with the world at large. They fear reprisals, the most personal of which is that they ‘won’t be understood.’ How can anyone expect to be understood unless he presents his thoughts with complete honesty? This situation is unfair because it asks too much of the world. In effect, we say, ‘I don’t dare show you what I am because I don’t trust you for a minute but please love me anyway because I so need you to and, of course, if you don’t love me anyway, you’re a dirty dog, just as I suspected, so I was right in the first place.’ Yet, every time God’s children have thrown away fear in pursuit of honesty – trying to communicate themselves, understood or not – miracles have happened (Ellington 1973, p. 261).”

This statement by Duke Ellington describes his outlook and motivation behind all of his sacred works. Ellington firmly believed that this form of communication was acceptable to God. The Baptist Ministers Conference placed judgment on Duke Ellington’s motivation to write these concerts; Ellington believed God was the judge. “You can jive with secular music,” Ellington said in response to why he felt so strongly about his sacred music, “but you can’t jive with the Almighty” (Ward and Burns 2000, p.453).

## **Sincere Worship**

Later in his autobiography, Ellington (1973) continued to describe his views on how God accepts our worship:

“Wisdom is something that man partially enjoys – One and only One has all the wisdom. God has total understanding. There are some people who speak one language and some who speak many languages. Every man prays in his own language, and there is no language that God does not understand... It has been said once that a man, who could not play the organ or any of the instruments of the symphony, accompanied his worship by juggling. He was not the world’s best juggler but it was the one thing he did best. And so it was accepted by God. I believe that no matter what the skill of a drummer or saxophonist, if this is the thing he does best, and he offers it sincerely from the heart in – or as accompaniment to his worship, then it will not be unacceptable because of the instrument upon which he makes his demonstration, be it pipe or tom tom. If a man is troubled he moans and cries when he worships. When a man feels that which he enjoys in his life is only because of the grace of God, he rejoices, he sings, and sometimes dances. In this program, you will hear a wide variety of statements without words, and I think you should know that if it is a phrase with six tones, it symbolizes the six syllables in the first four words of the Bible, ‘In the Beginning God,’ which is our theme. We say it many times and many ways (p. 262).”

Ellington has described the very essence of how God wants us to worship Him – sincerely from the heart. If we can look past the drum set or electric guitar and understand that this person is offering a gift to God sincerely from the heart, then we come to a closer understanding of how God views us. This can only be accomplished with the help of God.

### Are We Listening?

These ideas are not presented for the purpose of convincing the church that everything should be acceptable within a worship service. Of course there are things that are not part of God's plan for our lives or our church. God makes us aware of these things as we draw closer to him in a mutual relationship. An emphasis on relationship is important because it shifts the focus away from us and places it solely in the hands of the Creator. For example, when we focus on the relationship instead of how someone spends the Sabbath, we are closer to becoming a more accepting community. The Pharisees of Jesus' days are prime examples of twisting God's law to fit an agenda. The irony of the situation is that they were fighting against the Son of the very One who they were supposedly following. How did Jesus handle it? With love, kindness, and an invested interest in the person as a human being. Are we twisting God's law into something that fits our own agenda? This question could be asked of both sides in any church debate.

It is important to remember that everyone worships in a different way. In an article in the *Adventist Review*, William Johnsson (2000) responded to the concern of worship music in the church by stating, "Music that sounds strange to my ears may become a vehicle for devotion, adoration, and praise to Jesus as Savior and Lord (p. 5)." Do we as a church accept people who are offering their talents for the service of God? I suggest that we not

judge others' motivations, but let God guide our minds and hearts to make sure our own motivations are correct. How can we truly understand people if we are not willing to let them communicate through the things they do best? When we let God guide us, we will come to understand that "every man prays in his own language and there is no language that God does not understand" (Ellington, 1973, p. 262).

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