

## ***The Christian & Rock Music: A Review Essay***

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. . . In religion  
What damned error, but some sober brow  
Will bless it, and approve it with a text,  
Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?  
—Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, III.ii

What music is appropriate for Christians? What music is appropriate in worship? Is there a difference between music appropriate in church and music appropriate in a youth rally or concert? Is there a difference between lyrics appropriate for congregational singing and lyrics appropriate for a person to sing or listen to in private? Are some types of music inherently inappropriate for evangelism?

These are important questions. Congregations have fought over them and even split over them.<sup>1</sup> The answers given have often alienated young people from the church and even driven them to reject God. Some answers have rejuvenated congregations; others have robbed congregations of vitality and shackled the work of the Holy Spirit.

What is generally called Contemporary Christian Music (or CCM) embraces a wide variety of musical styles. What they have in common is that they are contemporary, in some way Christian, and music. CCM includes the work of Ralph Carmichael and the Gaithers. It includes both the gentlest of folk music and the hardest of heavy metal and rap. It includes praise songs, scripture songs, country music, white gospel and black gospel, jazz and blues, reggae and ska,

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<sup>1</sup> I watched attendance at one large church drop by half over several years when a new minister of music ruled that only “serious music,” preferably instrumental and played by professional musicians, could be performed there. If there had to be congregational singing, it should be limited to a handful of great anthems. The pastor, cowed by this woman, accepted the argument that God could not accept as worship or praise what was imperfect.

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celtic music, bluegrass, and much more. What draws the most attention—and the most concern—is Christian rock of various sorts. The sales are immense, and so is the influence.<sup>2</sup> Some people find this deeply threatening.

Books by Christians opposed to rock music have been coming out for forty years. I remember when the Beatles first visited America. I knew their names and faces from articles in *Life* magazine, even though I first heard their music several years later. I was in elementary school and had no access to a radio. Before I heard their music, I heard that I shouldn't listen to it because my heart would synchronize with the beat. This synchronization would make my heart beat faster than normal. As I look back on this argument, I know there's a certain truth to it. But now I have the sense to ask, "Why is that a problem?" My heart speeds up when I sit up in the morning or walk up the stairs. My heart is designed to do that. It's normal.

In the 70s and 80s there was a flood of books revealing the real or imagined problems of rock music. These were sometimes true, but often sensationalistic, exaggerated, and even built on half-truths. There was a serious tendency to quote and understand literalistically what was said ironically. Supermarket tabloids were cited as reliable sources. False claims were passed from book to book. People with no scientific training were cited as "research scientists" on the cutting edge because they'd made some daring claim supposedly based on research.

Because there was virtually no Christian rock in those days, few of the books mentioned it. In the 90s Christian rock began to draw criticism from these authors, as well. Because the Christian musicians, though fallible like the rest of us, pretty much kept their noses clean, those opposing them used as their primary weapon guilt by association. The Christian musicians might not be satanic or promiscuous or drug users, but because some secular musicians were, the Christians too were tarred and branded.

### Big Sales and Big Influence

In 2000 Samuele Bacchiocchi self-published *The Christian & Rock Music*.<sup>3</sup> The sales and profits have been surprisingly good for a self-published book.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Last week the Grammy award for best album of the year went to a collection of gospel hymns and other country songs from decades past, "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" Here is a best-selling CD that has shared the gospel message with millions.

<sup>3</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi, ed., *The Christian & Rock Music: A Study on Biblical Principles of Music* (Berrien Springs, Mich: Biblical Perspectives, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> I refer to profit for the author, not for the publishing house. Publishers usually pay between 7% and 15% royalties to the author (so 10,000 sales of a \$20.00 book would earn the author between \$1,400.00 and \$3,000.00), whereas by self-publishing, the author's profit is often 80% or more. For example, a 384 page trade paperback selling for \$20.00 costs the author only about \$2.00 per copy with a 10,000 copy print run. Even if the author sells it at "half-price," he still makes about \$8.00 per copy. There are many books that have sold more copies than *The Christian & Rock Music*, but little of that money has gone to the author.

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The book includes seven chapters by Bacchiocchi, two by Calvin M. Johansson, and one each by Brian Neumann, Eurydice V. Osterman, Güenter Preuss, Tore Sognefest, and Wolfgang H. M. Stefani.<sup>5</sup>

I greatly admire Dr. Bacchiocchi's many personal qualities, and in the past he has published some outstanding work on the New Testament and church history that I cite and praise in my Bible classes. I wish I could praise this new book, but I can't. It has all the problems found in the anti-rock tirades of the 70s and 80s, mentioned above (not surprising, as it mines them for information). If the book had drawn no attention, I would not bother to review it, because I don't like to say negative things about a book, especially a friend's book. However, it has had so much influence that young people, parents, and church leaders frequently ask me what I think of it. I believe its influence is damaging their relationships by leading to tensions between the young and their elders.

In this essay I will review *The Christian & Rock Music* by presenting a series of quotations from the book—more or less in the order they are found there—and commenting on them. My comments will suggest what I consider to be a more appropriate way of dealing with the issue. I hope these comments will lead to healing, to learning to tolerate the praising of God in ways we ourselves don't enjoy, to worship renewal and personal renewal, and to better relationships between parents and children, closer walks with God, and more effective evangelistic witness.

The genesis of *The Christian & Rock Music* illustrates the thinking behind the book. It began when Dr. Bacchiocchi was visiting Australia in October of 1999. He had been invited to attend a church campmeeting and speak in the "Connections" tent (age thirty and up) for a week. The night before he was to speak, however, a Christian band played a concert in that tent. As he describes it,

For the first one hour, from 7:30 to 8:30 p.m., they played and sung jazzy, night club type of music, with various percussion instruments. The men of singing group on the platform were jumping up and down as if it were a night club performance. In all my travels across the USA I have never witness such a heavy beat, night club type of music, even in the so-called 'celebration churches.'<sup>6</sup>

He was so offended that he refused to speak in that venue if such music was played. The next day the music planned was cancelled, so he spoke, but after

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<sup>5</sup> Bacchiocchi has been a professor of religion at Andrews University. Johansson teaches music at Evangel University, and Osterman teaches music at Oakwood College. Stefani and Preuss have both written dissertations on church music. Sognefest and Neumann have both been musicians in rock bands.

<sup>6</sup> Endtime Issues No. 29, 17 October 1999, available at [www.biblicalperspectives.com/endtimeissues/eti\\_29.html](http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/endtimeissues/eti_29.html). Other issues of the newsletter dealing with music or printing early drafts of chapters found in the book are no. 30 and 33–41. These are all available on the web site.

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that he was replaced and given another venue at a different time. He began speaking against this music, and the response was so positive that he decided he should write a book about how Christians should respond to the use of this music for supposedly sacred purposes.

Dr. Bacchiocchi maintains an extensive e-mail list-serve of people interested in his work, as well as a web site ([www.biblicalperspectives.com](http://www.biblicalperspectives.com)). When my name was added to the list-serve there were, as I recall, some 6,000 people on his list, and I believe that number has doubled since then. Bacchiocchi sends e-mails telling us where he's been speaking and will be speaking, giving us his take on current affairs in society and the church, sharing early drafts of his latest work, and offering special discounts on his many books.

Because I receive these e-mails, I heard about the Australia experience a few days after it happened, and I was among those who received and read the chapters of *The Christian & Rock Music* as they were written. In the e-mail quoted above, Dr. Bacchiocchi solicited our comments: should he or should he not write about music in the church.

Given his reference to “jazzy, night club type” music and his response to the music, it was clear to me that he didn't know enough about contemporary music to write convincingly about it. I sent him an e-mail (4 November 1999) pleading with him to drop the project. I told him I didn't think he had enough first-hand experience with rock music, didn't know enough about it, to write such a book. I told him he seemed to be using the same questionable arguments used for years. He responded that he was reading many books on the topic. What's more, there would be professional musicians writing some of the chapters. I'm afraid my fears have proven true, and this, combined with the book's popularity, leads me to respond.

#### **Where I'm Coming From**

What follows will be better understood if I explain the perspective from which I view the issue. I began listening to rock music in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I can still whistle most of the top forty hits of that year, should I hear their titles. By the time I was sixteen I was playing electric guitar in a band, reading *Rolling Stone* cover to cover, and experimenting with drugs. In college and graduate school I listened to rock for hours every day. My mind was filled with the music and the words. I couldn't get them out of my head. My actions—or at least my dreams—were influenced by these words to some extent.

After marrying, when I was 28 I began walking with God, or at least toward him, and I began to realize that the music I listened to was not godly and was holding me back. I began pleading with God to free me from it. One night I awoke sensing God had opened the door to freedom, if I were willing to walk through it. I spent the rest of the night looking at each album, looking at the names of the songs and thinking about them, then renouncing them. By morning I had said goodbye to 300 albums.

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I consider my deliverance from this music to be supernatural. I can still recall the songs, but I don't choose to, and they aren't running through my head. It should be clear from this confession that if I disagree with Dr. Bacchiocchi over the suitability of Christian rock music, it is not because I like or listen to this music myself.

I don't often listen to music these days—I prefer silence—but when I do it's usually hymns: choral, *a cappella*, orchestral, folk, or bluegrass. For me, the great old hymns found in our hymnal have a wonderful ability to focus the mind on God and help one say no to temptation.<sup>7</sup> I enjoy classical music of many sorts, though I seldom listen to it. I also enjoy some types of jazz, especially clarinet solos, and bluegrass, though I rarely listen to them. I used to love opera, especially Mozart and Verdi, but when I read the librettos in English and discovered their focus on sin, I stopped listening, though I still enjoy the overtures.

I took an instant dislike to praise songs when I first heard them. The primary reason was that they were replacing the hymns I loved—so rich and meaningful—with simplistic melodies, words, and emotions. The second reason is that I'd heard praise songs sung well, so they powerfully moved the audience, but never in the church I attended. However, I've come to understand that praise songs really are what they claim to be: they do praise God, and well. Though I can't yet bring myself to sing them in church, I no longer fight them, and I enjoy accompanying with my guitar those who sing them. Who knows, someday I may burst into song.

Five years ago I would have agreed with Dr. Bacchiocchi's general conclusions, though not with the sources he cites and many of his claims. Two insights have turned my thinking around.

A few years ago I was invited to speak at a conference at the University of North Carolina. Sunday morning, driving home to Pennsylvania, I grew weary of sermon tapes and turned on the radio, looking for some classical music. I was approaching Lynchburg, Virginia, Jerry Falwell country, and just about the only thing on the radio other than rock music was various sorts of contemporary Christian music. I had virtually no knowledge of this music, though I had scoffed at it for years.

I found myself listening to a song, and before long several hours had passed, and God was revealing to me a lesson as important (to me) as Peter's lesson about not calling people unclean in Acts 10–11. I realized that while I didn't like this rather sappy music, vaguely country-western, it was sung from the heart. These were songs about struggle and victory, about searching and finding, about turning to God for help over the little things. These weren't hymns. There weren't appropriate for church. But they were Christian songs,

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<sup>7</sup> I've also found that the lyrics are often stirring and beautiful. My three-tape collection of 155 hymn lyrics read as poetry is available from American Cassette Ministry ([www.americancassette.org](http://www.americancassette.org) or 1-800-233-4450). Wonderful though the melodies may be, they often obscure the beauty of the verse.

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whether I liked them or not. I saw as if on a screen housewives doing their chores, struggling to keep their faces turned to God, struggling to believe, struggling to put meals on the table and keep clothes on the kids. I sensed their radios on, filling their lives with songs I scorned, yet songs that touched them and strengthened their faith. May God rebuke those who disparage music that draws people to God, however it may sound. It's odd how quick we are to call sinful what we simply don't like.

Insight number two. The next summer my sons Paul and Peter returned from a week at junior camp excited about the camp theme song—a song from a Christian rock CD. Paul sang it to us in the car. I was astonished that such music was heard at camp. Why would counselors introduce my children to music from which I'd carefully shielded them, not wanting them to have the trouble with rock music I had had? My first thought was to say, "I do not want you to sing that song again." But I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to have an argument on the way home. I could tell them later.

That night Paul, then eleven, came to my room. "Dad," he said, "you know that song we learned at camp? The words really got me thinking, and I decided to recommit myself to God."

I was thrilled, of course, but I could hardly breathe. In my heart I was saying, "Oh, God, I nearly bawled him out for liking a song that brought him to you. Thank you so much for shutting my mouth!" Now, at thirteen, Paul dreams of becoming a youth pastor. He understands a love for CCM to be a requirement for being a youth pastor. We've made a deal that he can listen to any music he likes, so long as it's Christian. He listens to Christian rap and Christian punk, and we have wonderful, open-hearted conversations about the relative quality of the bands he likes and the effect of their lyrics, and about God and the Bible.

There is nothing I want more than for my children to share eternal life with me. May God rebuke those who turn away these little ones from God and his church because they don't realize God can be praised in any language and with any music. To deny this is to deny the clear evidence of conversions and transformed lives. May our teaching be based on evidence, not on our prejudice.

### Quotes and Comments

Before commenting on a series of quotations from *The Christian & Rock Music*, I'd like to mention several points on which I think Dr. Bacchiocchi and I would agree. It is true that some rock stars live lives of sin and excess, though not all do.<sup>8</sup> It is true that the lyrics of many rock songs extol the pleasures of various sinful acts (this is also true of country-western songs, show tunes, and

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<sup>8</sup> A rather accurate portrayal of the temptations facing heavy metal stars can be found in the film *Rock Star*, starring Mark Wahlberg, who recently gave his heart to God and joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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even the ballads of centuries past).<sup>9</sup> Even those lyrics that don't celebrate sin may be problematic, because they focus the mind on secular things, such as romance, instead of on God and our search for him and walk with him. Maintaining a walk with God over a lifetime is so difficult that we should consider leaving behind anything that threatens it. In this light, "neutral" lyrics, like "harmless" television and reading and sports, may actually threaten our relationship with God by robbing from us the time we need to keep it fresh. I want to make it clear that while I will argue in this essay that any style of music can be used with lyrics that praise God, and by so doing lead people to God and keep them with God, I think Christians would do well to turn away from any music with secular lyrics, or at least limit themselves to small doses of secular lyrics that are not problematic for Christians.<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Bacchiocchi writes, "Listeners to religious rock will never be humbled by the majesty of God, nor will they be convicted of God's moral claims upon their lives" (30). This is a rather bold claim. The fact is, I know many who listen to religious rock who have been "humbled by the majesty of God" and admit his "moral claims upon their lives." They sit in my classes. They sat in his classes, too, I'm sure, though I'm not sure he realized it. It's a brave thing to make such a claim. It's the equivalent of stating *ex cathedra* that "listeners to religious rock" will not be saved. I'm not sure humans have that power before God.

What should we do with a statement like this? "The Sabbath teaches us to respect the distinction between the *sacred* and the *secular*, not only in time, but also in such areas as church music and worship. To use secular music for the church service on the Sabbath is to treat the Sabbath as a secular day and the church as a secular place" (36). The distinction between the sacred and the secular is much stressed in this book, but the Bible says, "The earth is the LORD's, and the fullness thereof" (Ps 24:1; 1 Cor 10:28). That makes it harder to separate the sacred from the secular. Does the opposite hold true as well? Do we despoil the sacred by singing sacred songs on secular days? "This is the day the Lord has made" (Ps 118:24). I'm not arguing that we should sing secular songs on the Sabbath, but wondering if there are "secular" days of the week, or even if Christians should be singing secular songs on any day. Besides, the only people I know who think we should sing secular songs on the Sabbath are those who, like Calvin Johansson, think "serious music" without words is appropriate for worship simply because it's "great," even if it is written by those who deny

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<sup>9</sup> Consider, for example, the many old English or Scottish ballads with gentle tunes but lyrics dealing with adultery, violence, or magic. Even when the lyrics show the negative effects of these things—and they often do—providing a positive moral dimension, they still keep the mind on worldly things rather than on spiritual things.

<sup>10</sup> For example, my grandmother used to love to watch The Lawrence Welk Show on Saturday nights. This is an exceptionally clean-cut show, of course, and none of the songs have lyrics that might make a grandmother blush. On the other hand, could that time have been better spent reading the Bible or some devotional book?

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God or live lives of sin, as if they were rock stars. I don't know of anyone who likes Christian rock who thinks we should sing the Rolling Stones' song "Dancin' With Mr. D" for the opening hymn. To insinuate that those who like CCM might do that is like an attempt to win an argument using false statistics.

A number of times in *The Christian & Rock Music*, Bacchiocchi makes inferences based on misreadings of biblical texts. He writes, for example:

Twice in Daniel 3 there is a long list of the different musical instruments used to produce 'every kind of music' (Dan 3:7, 10). . . . Could it be that, as in ancient Babylon, Satan is using today 'every kind of music' to lead the world into the endtime false worship of the 'beast and its image' (Rev 14:9)? Could it be that a Satanic stroke of genius will write Gospel songs that will have the marking of every taste of music: folk music, jazz, rock, disco, country-western, rap, calypso? Could it be that many Christians will come to love this kind of Gospel songs because they sound very much like the music of Babylon? (37)

This implies that one of the reasons why the three Hebrew worthies did not bow to the image in the plain of Dura was that "every kind of music" was playing. Nothing in Daniel 3 leads us to think the instruments are the problem, nor even the way they were played. The problem is in bowing in worship to an image of anything or anyone. There is no evidence that Satan was using these instruments because they tend to lead people into false worship in and of themselves. By definition, "Gospel songs" are meant to lead people to Christ, not to Satan. To suggest a relationship between pagan worship and "Gospel songs" is an example of the rhetorical fallacy of *non sequitur*. Rhetorical fallacies often convince people to accept ideas, whether true or false, but their intent is to convince through deception, not through clearly presenting the evidence.

As I will show later on, there are some substantial contradictions in the book. At some points plainsong is praised, while at other points rock music is blasted for not maintaining a balance between melody, harmony, rhythm, and tone or for not being sufficiently "serious" or difficult. Bacchiocchi writes, for example:

The solemn, awe-inspiring music of the early church [such as Gregorian chant (50)] was driven by a lofty view of God. Its avoidance of the secular associations that musical instruments might bring is particularly relevant to the current debate over the use of music and instruments associated with the rock scene. (51)

Is he saying here that we shouldn't use musical instruments in worship because they have "secular associations"? No, he is saying we shouldn't use instruments "associated with the rock scene." But what instruments used in churches is not also used in rock music? The piano and organ are staple instruments in rock music! He admiringly quotes Lois Ibsen Al Faruqi, who writes, of early Christian and Islamic music,



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“Performance practice, relying on the human voice, has avoided the secular associations which instruments might bring, as well as the chordal harmonies which could be suggestive of emotional or dramatic effects. Even the use of the human voice or voices . . . has avoided the sensual and imitative in order to enhance the spiritual effect on the listener.” (51)

Are we then to oppose harmony in the church, or the use of chords? Plainsong was and still is highly conducive to trance states, even though beat free and drawing words from the psalms. Also, the sense of God moving in the person was very important among the monastics. We see here the rhetorical fallacy of “special pleading.” Instruments used to play the music Bacchiocchi dislikes are not acceptable because they are “associated with the rock scene,” but the same instruments are acceptable if they play music he likes. If he were to argue that no instruments should be used at all, he would at least be consistent. Of course, given that Bacchiocchi is best known for his excellent book *From Sabbath to Sunday*, showing the influence of the early Roman church on the change in the day of worship, it’s odd that he would recommend to us the example of Catholic monks. Necessity acquaints one with strange bedfellows.

To immediately follow one cliché with another, it is said that the proof of the pudding is in the tasting. Similarly, Jesus said, “By their fruits ye shall know them” (Matt 7:20). Bacchiocchi, it seems, prefers another cliché: the apple never falls far from the tree. He writes, “If the church uses a rock type of music, which is associated with sex, drugs, satanism, violence, and the rejection of the Christian faith, it obviously is not able to challenge the youth to live up to the moral claims of the Gospel (97).” He assumes that if secular rock has these associations, Christian rock must, as well. This is a bit like saying that because some cultures combined worship and prayer with sacred prostitution, we should not worship and pray to God. The fact is, Christian rock music has proven over and over that it *is* “able to challenge the youth to live up to the moral claims of the Gospel.” In fact, the type of CCM I least enjoy, Christian rap, proves to be the most hard-hitting in its challenge—much harder than most preachers I’ve heard.<sup>11</sup>

Guilt by association is a long-used tool for controlling people and stifling what may be a harmless style. I remember being told in academy, as a teenager, that Christians shouldn’t wear jeans because that’s what rock musicians and drug users wore. Similar arguments are still being used. Bacchiocchi writes:

Can rock music, which in the sixties rejected Christianity, glorified sexual perversion, and promoted drugs which claimed the lives of some of its heroes, be legitimately transformed into a fitting medium to worship God and proclaim the Gospel’s message? In answering this question, it is important to remember that *the medium affects the message*. If the medium is associated with the rejection of Christian-

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<sup>11</sup> For example, the group from Philadelphia called the Cross Movement.

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ity, sexual perversion, and drugs, it cannot be legitimately used to communicate the moral claims of the Gospel. (84)

The medium of television, the medium of books, and the medium of magazines are all associated with “the rejection of Christianity, sexual perversion, and drugs,” yet Christians use them all to spread the gospel, consecrating them to the work of Christ. A number of previous musical styles—some now considered “serious music”—were to some extent associated with sex and drug use or considered risqué or dangerous. Recall, for example, some of the romantic composers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>12</sup> or the opera, or the waltz. Haydn’s tune used for the German national anthem,<sup>13</sup> “Deutschland über alles”—made notorious during the Nazi period—is now the tune of a favorite hymn, “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken.” If we must believe that secular connotations negate the spiritual force of sacred music, we would do well not to forget the first and last two lines of the second verse of this anthem: “Deutsche Frauen, deutsche Treue, / Deutscher Wein und deutscher Sang.”<sup>14</sup>

What makes a book worth citing? Is it scholarly accuracy, or first hand authority, or is it salacious rumor-mongering? Bacchiocchi writes:

In his book *Dancing with Demons*, Jeff Godwin gives startling evidence on a number of popular rock musicians who have studied the ancient beat of satanic worship. These rockers include Brian Jones (Rolling Stones), John Phillips (The Mamas and the Papas), and Paul McCartney (The Beatles). These men have studied with satanic masters in order to learn how to use effectively the hypnotic power of the rock beat in their songs. (89)

One reviewer says Jeff Godwin is “much given to misinterpretation, misquoting, general cluelessness, and outright lies.” His approach is to find satanic conspiracies everywhere in rock music, on the flimsiest of evidence, such as supermarket tabloids. This is typical of many of the sources quoted in *The Christian & Rock Music*. None of the three men mentioned above were drummers. Jones was known for introducing the marimba, the dulcimer, the recorder, and the harpsichord to rock music. Philips is best known for his song “California Dreamin’” and McCartney for his song “Yesterday.” Ancient satanic beats? Hardly.

Bacchiocchi writes, “The defining characteristics of good music is a balance among three basic elements: melody, harmony, and rhythm” (129). Wouldn’t this mean that early church music, which didn’t use harmony or rhythm, was unbalanced? Does the balance have to be exact? What about an *a cappella* solo performance of a hymn? It seems that by Bacchiocchi’s definition, such a per-

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<sup>12</sup> Among those whose work I’ve heard played in church, Berlioz wrote a symphony while using opium, Schubert was a heavy drinker and had syphilis, Chopin and Liszt are notorious for their sex lives, and Brahms got his start in music playing in bars.

<sup>13</sup> The words were written in 1841; Haydn wrote the tune in 1797 for an Austrian patriotic song honoring the emperor, “Gott, erhalte Franz, den Kaiser.”

<sup>14</sup> “German women, German fidelity, / German wine and German song.”

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formance could not possibly be “good music.” He adds, “Rock music inverts this order by making rhythm its dominant element, then harmony, and last melody.” If they are balanced, then they are equal, so there is no order to be inverted. However, why is it necessarily wrong to have rhythm stronger than harmony or melody at times? Surely there are a great many instances of “great music” where this is the case.

When people make categorical statements defining “good music,” they often open themselves to ridicule. Bacchiocchi is no exception. He writes:

In any good piece of music, the strongest beat in a pattern (measure) is the downbeat (the first beat in the pattern). If a pattern has four beats, the strongest [in “good” music] is the first, and the second strongest beat is the third, . . . Rock music reverses the common order of the beat by placing the emphasis on what is known as the offbeat. In the offbeat, the main emphasis falls on beat four and the secondary beat is on beat two. (131)

It is true that the usual definition of a downbeat is the accentuated first beat in a measure, or the first and third beat of a measure in 4/4, while an upbeat is generally defined as the unaccented second and fourth beats of a measure in 4/4. However, this is actually arbitrary: the first beat in the measure is stressed because that’s the way composers have been taught to do it. Does this mean that melodies always begin with a stressed note? Not at all! How, then, does a composer write out a melody that begins with an unstressed beat? The composer begins with an incomplete measure, so the first stressed beat will fall at the beginning of the first complete measure.

However, the fact is that this works on paper, but our bodies don’t have the sheet music. Our bodies recognize the rhythms inherent in songs, not the artificial system of measures. Most people can’t read music, but they sense rhythmic patterns and respond to them. For most people, the notes before the downbeat are part of the entire rhythm. It is true that rock music often (but certainly not always) accentuates the second and fourth beats of the measures, but to some extent this is because the songs are written out by people who haven’t learned the “rules” for how to do it right. Have you ever listened to your heart with a stethoscope? Which comes first, the stressed beat or the unstressed beat (or can you hear more than that)? A cardiologist might be able to tell you, but for most of us, whether our hearts sound like “dub-DUB-dub-DUB” or “DUB-dub-DUB-dub” is a trick of the ear not trained in the physiological facts. What really matters for most of us is not which beat comes first, but that they continue beating.

To show the weakness of Bacchiocchi’s assertion—a favorite of anti-rock crusaders for decades—it suffices to consider the *actual* beat in several of our greatest hymns (I am basing this, remember, on how they are sung, not how they may look on the page). “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” has this “rock” beat. So does “The Old Rugged Cross” (and it is also “anapestic”—a beat condemned later in this essay). “O Worship the King,” “O Word of God Incarnate,” and “O

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Little Town of Bethlehem,” among many others, use this beat. This is the beat in the march “Stars and Stripes Forever” (though not on the sheet music). This is also the beat found in poetry written in iambics (probably 90% of metric verse in English)—one reason it’s common in hymn settings. On the other hand, it might be worth mentioning that bluegrass music is characterized by the beat Bacchiocchi requires for “good music” (though with the guitar chords played on the second and fourth beats). I don’t know how he feels about bluegrass, but I’m sure his co-author Calvin Johansson, whose chapters are discussed below, would not consider bluegrass “serious music,” as he calls the music he likes. It is true that there are certain ways of playing this “reversed” beat Bacchiocchi complains about that can make people want to dance, but that in itself is not sinful.<sup>15</sup>

He continues, “The fundamental problem with rock music is its relentless beat which dominates the music and produces an hypnotic effect.” It is true that some rock music has a “relentless beat” that can cause a trance-like state (though not literally “hypnotic”). However, many forms of music have a similar effect, when people allow themselves to concentrate on the music to the extent that they tune out what is happening around them and almost seem to enter the music or have the music enter them. For example, in orchestral performances of classical music, it is common to see people in the audience with their eyes closed and their hands surreptitiously conducting the music or keeping the beat. At band concerts one often finds people tapping their feet during marches without realizing it. The Gregorian chant Bacchiocchi celebrates in his book is deliberately designed to induce a trance-like state in which one feels very close to God, and it certainly succeeds, if one is willing to relax one’s analytical faculties and surrender to the music. Experiencing this trance-like state is not in itself necessarily a bad thing. It’s pleasurable, relaxing, and not generally harmful. It becomes dangerous when it leads to violence or other sinful activity, or makes one more likely to accept sinful ideas found in song lyrics. But if the words heard during this trance-like state induced by the “relentless beat” of Christian rock are “Lord, I praise you,” where’s the problem? Many of us are so rational that we have a very hard time surrendering to any beat, and for us to “lift up holy hands in prayer” (1 Tim 2:8) while singing praise songs is unimaginable. But perhaps that is our loss. Why should we impose our own failures on those able to praise God with greater enthusiasm than we ourselves can muster?

Here is another categorical “good music” statement. “Good music follows exact mathematical rules, which causes the mind to feel comforted, encouraged, and ‘safe.’ Musicians have found that when they go against these rules, the lis-

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<sup>15</sup> One might say I am quibbling here, that Bacchiocchi is talking about deafeningly loud rock ‘n’ roll drumming, not about the rhythms found in hymns. This may be the case, but he doesn’t say so. Instead he categorically condemns a specific rhythm found not only in songs but in poetry. I assert that the inaccuracy of his language makes my comments appropriate and suggests that he hasn’t really thought through the implications of his statements. Neither, unfortunately, have many of his readers, judging from the influence the book is having.

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tener experiences an addictive high” (134). Given that the musical scale we use is based on “exact mathematical rules,” “bad” music also follows exact mathematical rules, or we wouldn’t recognize it as music. But does “good music” always make us “feel comforted, encouraged, and ‘safe’”? The “Dies Irae” (“Day of Wrath”) section of Verdi’s *Requiem* is generally considered “good music,” but the music is terrifying—fitting for the topic. Beethoven’s fifth symphony is generally considered “good music,” but it hardly makes one feel “comforted, encouraged, and ‘safe.’” Even jazz and blues music, which “bend” notes away from the strictly mathematical scale, achieve their effect only because there *is* a mathematically described scale against which they can push. Furthermore, if “Musicians have found that when they go against these rules, the listener experiences an addictive high,” then we would all be addicted to atonal music, which is not the case. Can people grow so fond of music that their lives seem empty without it? Yes, of course, but this isn’t quite “an addictive high,” and it happens with all types of music. Do some types of rock music have physical effects that some listeners crave? Yes, but not all types, and not because the music doesn’t follow “mathematical rules.” Do some people gravitate toward music that makes them feel depressed, angry, or frightened? Yes, but this doesn’t characterize the majority of rock music.

Here’s an interesting question: “Ultimately, the question is: *Should church music stimulate people physically or elevate them spiritually?*” (138). The answer is *both*, because they are related. Physical stimulation in moderation makes people more receptive to spiritual influence, putting them in a good mood, with a smile on their face, ready to learn and to hear God’s voice.

Bacchiocchi writes, “As Christians, we need to be aware of the fact that music is perceived through the portion of the brain that receives stimuli for sensations and feelings, *without being first screened by the brain centers involving reason and intelligence*” (139) While there may be some truth to this, it is also true that the reason and intelligence immediately set to work on the stimulus, deciding whether they like the music or not, if it’s well performed, if mistakes are being made, if the lyrics are true. Furthermore, this applies to all music, not merely rock music. Consider, for example, the thundering pipe organ in church. Does that affect us? Can some organ music make us feel hopeless or worried? Yes! The fact that such music is “serious” and of a high quality does not mean it is necessarily conducive to worship.

Here’s another categorical assertion: “The Christian commitment to Christ leaves no room for Christian artists to cross over into the secular rock scene.” (147). This is a little like saying, “The Christian commitment to Christ leaves no room for Christians to associate with non-Christians in order to share God’s love with them.” Are there dangers inherent in trying to be a Christian in the “secular rock scene”? Of course! But there are also dangers in going to a foreign land as a missionary. Furthermore, it is also difficult to be a Christian musician per-

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forming in secular symphony orchestras. There are tough decisions to make. But people do it.

For biblical scholars, some of the most worrisome of Bacchiocchi's statements are those deriving principles from the Hebrew cultus, as it has so little relationship to our worship today, and he frequently misinterprets the passages he cites. He writes:

Those who believe that the Bible gives them the license to play any instrument and music in church, ignore the fact that the music at the Temple was not based on personal taste or cultural preferences. This is indicated by the fact that other instruments like timbrels, flutes, pipes, and dulcimers could not be used in the Temple, because of their association with secular entertainment. (178)

Bacchiocchi is basing this comment on 2 Chron 29:25, referring to the reconsecration of the temple under Hezekiah. The verse reads, "He stationed the Levites in the house of the LORD with cymbals, harps, and lyres, according to the commandment of David and of Gad the king's seer and of the prophet Nathan, for the commandment was from the LORD through his prophets" (NRSV). There are a number of problems with Bacchiocchi's statement. First, there is nothing at all in this text or in any associated text (such as 1 Chron 25:1, 6) that says other instruments couldn't be used because of "their association with secular entertainment." After all, "cymbals, harps, and lyres" were *also* used for secular entertainment. Second, the text does not say these were to be the instruments used in the temple for all time. Third, if we assume this command still stands, we must exclude the piano and organ from the worship service. (Certainly the guitar is more like the harp and lyre of David's day than is the organ, and drum sets have cymbals.)

It would be interesting to know more about music in the temple services, but our lack of knowledge should not be seen as an invitation to invent what is not provided. Bacchiocchi cites admiringly a studies by John W. Kleining A. Z. Idelsohn that claim that in the temple services the cymbals and trumpets did not accompany the singers, but were used only to introduce songs and mark ends of lines or stanzas (206–207). He claims that only the lyres and harps were used to accompany the singing, citing 2 Chron 5:12–13 as supporting this (207). However, 2 Chron 5:13 tells us explicitly that the trumpeters and singers sang and played *qōl-ʿehad*, "as one" or "in unison." Then it adds that the singing was done "with trumpets and with cymbals and with the instruments of the song" (my own awkward but exact translation). Note that the word *with*, repeated three times, makes it clear that all these instruments *accompanied* the singing and didn't merely indicate stanza or line breaks.

Bacchiocchi writes, "Some argue that if we are to follow the example of the Temple, we need to eliminate in the church such instruments as the piano and the organ, because they are not string instruments. Such an argument ignores the distinction between a biblical principle and its cultural application. The biblical

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principle is that instrumental music accompanying the singing should aid the vocal response to God and not drown it. . . . Another point is that instruments like the organ or the piano were unknown in Bible times” (209). This is again the rhetorical fallacy known as “special pleading.” Bacchiocchi makes this plea for acceptance of what he approves of on the basis of the “cultural application” of a “biblical principle.” He ignores the fact that the electric bass, keyboard, and drum kit also didn’t exist in Bible times. In fact, the organ in some churches does drown the singing. Also, if people are singing enthusiastically, the instruments may have to get pretty loud before they are drowned out. Again, even electric guitars and drums can be played more quietly than the singing of a congregation.

Consider, too, the singing of heaven. When the huge army of the redeemed sing, they sound “like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting,” “like the roar of rushing waters and like peals of thunder” (Rev 19:1, 6). If they are playing harps at the same time, the harps may need to be electrified if they are to be heard. Then again, “like peals of thunder” sounds rather like a rock concert! If we are to admit 2 Chron 29:25 as relevant, then we must go all the way: we must have 288 musicians who play in groups of twelve, with each group playing for two weeks a year (1 Chron 25:6–31). Also, we must have only men in our choirs, and we must put an end to congregational singing. We must also have people assigned to the “ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals” (v. 1; NIV; v. 3 defines “prophesying” as “thanking and praising the LORD”). While we’re at it, we should dismiss any pastors, elders, or deacons who can’t prove themselves descended from the tribe of Levi. We should also start offering animal sacrifices.

In truth, the instruments used in services at Solomon’s Temple are completely irrelevant to the question of what instruments we should play today when praising God. The temple services were very different from church services today, and the function of the temple was also far different than the function of today’s church. Consider that the primary purpose of the temple was not worship, but sacrifice. Consider that worshipers could not enter the temple. They probably couldn’t even enter the courtyard. The temple was the way God was able to have his presence among his people. It was not a place of communal worship, in general, but a way of segregating God from his people so he didn’t destroy them with his holiness. What was appropriate in the temple, in the presence of God, may not be what is appropriate in our churches today.

Our churches are more like the synagogues of Jesus’ day. Whether or not instruments were played in synagogues is immaterial, because the Bible gives us no command about synagogues. If we must do in our churches what was done in the synagogues, then pastors must stand when they read the Scriptures and sit when they explain it. When we sing “The Lord Is In His Holy Temple,” we speak metaphorically. Our bodies are the temple of God today (1 Cor 6:19), and the body of believers called the church is the temple of God (2 Cor 6:16). If God

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is more fully present in the church building than elsewhere, it is only because there are believers gathered together in his name, so there he is (Matt 18:20). This makes it much more difficult to distinguish between sacred and secular, because we may defile the temple of God by defiling ourselves, but even so we still *are* that temple. This means we should *always* be careful what we do or say or listen to.

Bacchiocchi writes, “No ‘Jewish’ or ‘Christian’ music concerts were performed by bands or singing artists at the Temple, synagogue, or Christian churches. Religious music was not an end to [*sic*] itself but as [*sic*] a means to praise God by chanting His Word” (193). He neglects to mention that there were also no sacred concerts of “serious music,” either. To be consistent, if Bacchiocchi is right, we should no longer sing hymns whose lyrics are not in the Bible. We should not sing in any case, but chant. We should have no more vocal solos, no more instrumental performances without singing.

He adds, “Pleasure in singing comes not from a rhythmic beat that stimulates people physically, but from the very experience of praising the Lord” (193). Actually, “pleasure in singing” can be had from a wide range of music, while much of what passes for “praising the Lord” is far less than enthusiastic. If *true* pleasure in singing comes when praising God, does that logically mean that this must not be accompanied with “a rhythmic beat”? Most hymns are best sung with “a rhythmic beat.” Indeed, according to Bacchiocchi’s definition of “good music” as “a balance among three basic elements: melody, harmony, and rhythm” (129), singing without “a rhythmic beat” cannot be “good music.”

He also claims that David’s dancing before the Lord (2 Sam 6:14) led David into serious error. In the excitement of this dance David seems to have removed his royal robes—probably rather hot and heavy—and danced in “a linen ephod.” Bacchiocchi writes, “Nowhere does the Bible suggest that the ephod could be legitimately worn by someone who was not a priest” (226). This is true. However, there is also nowhere where the Bible says a linen ephod is to be worn only by a priest. (Some people say, “What is not specifically allowed is not allowed.” Another type of people say, “What is not specifically forbidden is allowed.” I believe Christians should be among the latter group.) We don’t really know much about ephods. In some cases they seem to be something used for telling the future or inquiring of God (Judg 8:27; 17:5; 1 Sam 23:9; Hos 3:4). More often they are garments worn by the high priest and containing the stones used for inquiring of God. They are also the simple white garments worn by priests. Were they also worn by others? Is ephod a word for the garment worn under the outer robes? We don’t know. But nothing tells us it was only for priests. Bacchiocchi then says “By offering sacrifices dressed like a priest, David was assuming a priestly role in addition to his kingly status. Such an action cannot be easily defended biblically.” How dancing led to this, I’m not sure. However, when 2 Sam 6:17–18 says David offered sacrifices before God, that does not mean he himself performed the priestly duties. More likely he offered the sacri-



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fices expected of a king, or had them sacrificed for him. Bacchiocchi also writes, “But it would appear that during the dance, David may have become so excited that he lost his loin cloth.” He bases this on the accusals of David’s wife Michal in 2 Sam 6:20. Given what we know of mores in ancient Israel, it seems highly unlikely that David danced “before the Lord” without his loincloth, or that “the vulgar fellows” did so. It seems much more likely that Michal is exaggerating, making what was innocent seem perverse and sinful. Bacchiocchi does the same throughout *The Christian & Rock Music*. In our eagerness to call sin by its right name, we can sometimes label as sinful what is simply different.

Bacchiocchi devotes about ten pages of his chapter on “Biblical Principles of Music” to the relationship between dancing and music (218–228), though scholars might see his explication, as is so often the case in this book, not as exegesis but as wriggling away from texts that weaken his thesis. While this paper is not about dancing but music, this section of the book deserves comment.

The most important texts he needs to deal with are Ps 149:3 (“Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.”), and Ps 150:4 (“Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!). Both “dancing” and “dance” in these verses are from the same word in Hebrew, *māḥôl*. This and the related word *m’ḥôlâ* are used in two-thirds of the references to dancing in the Old Testament. They are the usual, general words for dancing, and they are not used figuratively, but always literally, though for various types of dances, some of which might be used for praising God and some of which would dishonor God. (Similarly, we use the general word “dance” for classical ballet, the Jitterbug, and break dancing, different though they may be from each other.)

Eager to avoid admitting that we can praise God by dancing, Bacchiocchi suggests (fairly) that the noun *māḥôl* may be derived from the verb *ḥûl*, but then quotes the speculation by the 18<sup>th</sup> century commentator Adam Clarke that *ḥûl* means “to make an opening” (that may be the idea behind *ḥûl*, but it is not the meaning of the word). He also emphasizes the dubious marginal note in some KJV Bibles that the word might refer to a pipe. Thus, for Bacchiocchi, dancing has been turned to piping. However, the more authoritative Brown, Driver, and Briggs translates *ḥûl* as “whirl, dance, writhe,” including writhing in the pains of childbirth. Only two or three times is the word *ḥûl* translated as dance, but it helps us understand the nature of dance in the Old Testament: it whirled and writhed. It was not necessarily stately or balletic. There is no suggestion in the BDB that *ḥûl* might mean piping.

A favorite trick of Bacchiocchi is to call figurative what he doesn’t want to be literal. There is some figurative language in Pss 149 and 150, but not where the dancing is involved. The most important question for him is whether dancing occurred in Solomon’s temple, but I’ve shown above that for Christians, the temple ceremonies have nothing to do with the Christian worship service.

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Psalm 149:1 seems to indicate that the setting is “in the assembly of the faithful,” but of course the “assembly of the faithful” never entered the temple, and only those who were sacrificing, it seems, could enter the inner courtyard. Psalm 150:1 says, “Praise God in his sanctuary,” but the parallel line says “Praise him in his mighty firmament!” This may suggest that God’s true sanctuary is not on earth but in the heavens. Thus, neither psalm says beyond doubt that it is talking about the worship service in the temple. Furthermore, “let them sing for joy on their couches” (149:5) can’t possibly refer to the temple, and 149:6–9 calls on God’s warriors to praise God while slaughtering their enemies, which again wasn’t supposed to be done in the temple.

It is true that these psalms don’t necessarily refer to sanctuary worship, even though Ps 150 may be speaking of the sort of worship *the people* did outside the temple, especially on feast days, even if the priests were more restrained. However, Bacchiocchi has missed the most important implication of these chapters for his thesis: the irrefutable evidence that the psalmist here urges the people, whoever they may be and wherever they are, to *praise* God *while* singing, dancing, playing stringed instruments, wind instruments, and various loud percussion instruments. Whatever people may have done during worship services at the temple, the psalmist tells us that praise and dance and percussion instruments go together. Indeed, the word “praise” is in the imperative—a strong urging, or even a command. Whether or not these instruments were all used by Levites in the formal temple services is beside the point. These psalms clearly suggest that the whole gamut of instruments in the psalmist’s day could be used to praise God. If we want to talk about “biblical principles,” *there* is the biblical principle: any instrument today can be used to praise God—even the needle on the record turntable scratched back and forth by rap DJs.

I’m not eager to see “liturgical dance” in the worship service today, but the Bible explicitly calls on believers to praise God while dancing. Last semester I had a Messianic Jew in my Old Testament Literature class, and it turned out that she is the dance instructor for her synagogue. The religious folk dances that are an important part of worship in the Messianic Synagogue are fun for the children and draw many people who would otherwise not at first be interested in the message of Messianic Judaism. I’m not urging that we too dance as part of worship, but neither can I biblically condemn those who do.

Like Calvin Johansson (below), Bacciocchi draws from the idea of the unblemished sacrifice the idea of unblemished music, as if making a mistake in a performance were a sin. He writes, “As He required the burnt offerings to be ‘without blemish’ (Lev 1:3), so it is reasonable to assume that He expects us to present Him with the very best musical offering. There is no biblical basis for believing that the loud, noise-making music or questionable lyrics are acceptable to God” (198). Contemporary Christian music is not, of course, known for “questionable lyrics.” No one is proposing that “questionable lyrics” be sung in church. If God “expects us to present Him with the very best musical offering,”

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does that mean he wants us to hire professional musicians to play for him? If, in order to present “the very best musical offering,” we exclude congregational singing and turn to choirs and professional musicians, then we are counting on others to do for us what, since the cross, we ourselves can do. We don’t need an earthly musical mediator to translate our praises into a style God can appreciate any more than we need an earthly priestly mediator to pray for us. Similarly, I love to hear my children sing God’s praises, no matter how out of key they may be.<sup>16</sup> I think God feels the same, even if the music is loud.

Bacchiocchi writes, “The frequent references to praising God among the heathens or Gentiles (2 Sam 22:50; Rom 15:9; Ps 108:3) suggest that singing was seen as an effective way to witness for the Lord to unbelievers. However, there are no indications in the Bible that the Jews or the early Christians borrowed secular tunes and songs to evangelize the Gentiles” (198). This is the rhetorical fallacy known as the “argument from silence.” We know nothing about the tunes or songs used “to evangelize the Gentiles.” We don’t even know if songs were used for evangelism, or only to praise God when *among* Gentiles. (The music scholar Suzanne Haik-Ventura believes the Hebrew Old Testament text contains notation allowing the entire Old Testament to be sung, but few Hebrew scholars agree with her.<sup>17</sup> In any case, if her tunes are correct, Old Testament singing was wildly different indeed from both our hymns and the singing in the synagogue today—beautiful, but rarely in stanzaic format. What is more, we don’t know the tempo or rhythm with which they were sung. Haik-Ventura believes the songs would have been sung slowly, but they might just as easily have been sung with a strong rhythm, like Jewish folk-singing today. If the scales she posits are correct, we might also argue that in light of sacred song in the Old Testament, we should usually sing in minor keys today. I’d rather not.)

If we should try to do things as they were done in the time of Christ, perhaps we should allow no musical instruments at all in church. Bacchiocchi writes, “Apparently Christians followed the tradition of the synagogue in prohibiting the use of musical instruments in their church services because of their pagan association” (216). Should we do the same? Do our instruments, such as the piano, have any less pagan association? Anyway, where does the New Testament say instruments weren’t used in Christian worship because of their pagan association? This is simply Bacchiocchi’s guess, and again it is an example of the rhetorical fallacy of the “argument from silence.” Perhaps the average person didn’t know how to play a musical instrument!

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<sup>16</sup> Which is not to say that they necessarily sing out of key, given that they have all sung for years in a very rigorous classical children’s chorus.

<sup>17</sup> Suzanne Haik-Ventura, *The Music of the Bible Revealed: The Deciphering of a Millenary Notation*, trans. Dennis Weber (n.p.: D. & F. Scott, 1991). There are tapes and CDs available of her transcriptions being performed by professional musicians. The music is beautiful, but certainly not singable by an untrained congregation.

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If we follow the Bible, perhaps we should not only have no musical instruments in the church, but not allow women to take part in worship music. Bacchiocchi has little biblical footing when he opines,

Why were women excluded from the music ministry of the Temple, first, and of the synagogue and early church later. . . . From a musical perspective, the style of music produced by women had a rhythmic beat which was better suited for entertainment than for worship in God's House. . . . Women's music was largely based on a rhythmic beat produced by tapping with the hand the tabret, toph, or timbrel. . . . From a sociological perspective, women were not used in the ministry of music of the Temple because of the social stigma attached to their use of timbrel and the entertainment-oriented music. . . . The lesson from Scripture and history is *not* that women should be excluded from the music service of the church today. Praising the Lord with music is not a male prerogative, but the privilege of every child of God. It is unfortunate that the music produced by women in Bible times was mostly for entertainment and, consequently, not suitable for divine worship. (228–231)

The Bible does not tell us women were “excluded from the music ministry” of the Temple, synagogue, or early church. It simply tells us the singers in the Temple were men. Nothing in the Bible suggests that women did not sing in the synagogue or early church (which is not the same as proving they did, of course). Nothing in the Bible tells us women were excluded from singing because their music “had a rhythmic beat which was better suited for entertainment than for worship in God's House.” This is mere *eisegesis*, forcing one's own prejudices onto the text. In 1 Sam 18:6 women sing “joyful songs” while praising David and Saul, but to call this “entertainment-oriented music” is misleading. The “lesson from Scripture and history” Bacchiocchi draws is a *non-sequitur*. Nowhere are we told in Scripture that they were excluded because they played rhythm instruments. We simply find no women performing in the temple. If there is lesson we should draw from the temple in considering our actions today—and I don't think there is, given that the temple was not a church as we use the word—then that lesson, logically, is exactly the one Bacchiocchi disavows: we should have no music by women in the church. If they didn't do it then, we shouldn't do it now. Essentially, Bacchiocchi's argument is as follows: (1) women didn't sing in the temple back then; (2) their not singing then is significant for us today; (3) so women *should* sing today, but without singing “women's music.” This is not a logical syllogism.

As for women as entertainers, we might consider three great hymns by women: the song of Moses and Miriam (Exod 15:1–21); the song of Deborah (Judg 5); and the song of Mary<sup>18</sup> (Luke 1:46–55). The reversed narrative order in Exod 15 is quite common in Hebrew, but it can mislead English speakers.

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<sup>18</sup> Miriam and Deborah are called prophetesses in the Bible. Mary is not, yet she too speaks prophetically in her song.

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Following the story of the destruction of the Egyptians in Exod 14, chap. 15 devotes eighteen verses to the song sung by “Moses and the Israelites.” Where did that song come from? This is the question readers might ask. We find out in vs. 19–21. “Miriam the prophetess,” beating a tambourine, and followed by “all the women,” also beating tambourines and dancing, sang this great hymn, for-bear of the song of Moses and the Lamb sung in Rev 15. Miriam sings the song alone, with accompaniment. Note that in v. 1 “Moses and the Israelites” sing it. Where did they learn it? Surely they didn’t all sing it together without ever learning it! The answer is that they learned it from the one who sang alone, from Miriam, its probable author. We see thus that rhythm instruments can be fitting accompaniment to praise given to God.

Having considered seven chapters by Samuele Bacchiocchi, we now turn to Tore Sognefest’s essay “The Effects of Rock Music.” Again, while some of the claims may be correct, the implications seem to have been insufficiently thought out. He writes, [T]he rock beat places the human body under stress by increasing the pulse rate, the blood pressure, and the production of adrenaline” (236). Later he adds,

[E]xposure to music with ‘disharmonic’ rhythms—“whether it be the ‘tension’ caused by dissonance or ‘noise’ or the unnatural swings of misplaced rhythmical accents, syncopation, and polyrhythms, or inappropriate tempo—can result in a variety of changes including: an altered heart rate with its corresponding change in blood pressure; an overstimulation of hormones (especially the opiates or endorphins) causing an altered state of consciousness from mere exhilaration on one end of the spectrum to unconsciousness on the other; and improper digestion.”<sup>19</sup> (241)

While these physiological effects may indeed occur at times, they are effects not only of listening to rock music, but of vigorously singing hymns, of listening to marches, and of watching sports. One might also ask, “Why is this a problem?” Speeding up the pulse is one of the goals of exercise. It’s good for us, within reason.<sup>20</sup> The production of adrenalin is a natural phenomenon. Vigorous walking and vigorous hymn singing both lead to the release of natural opiates and endorphins. That’s why one feels better after doing them, more relaxed, less sensitive to pain. Dissonance can make one tense, but the organist in my church frequently uses dissonance in the hymn reharmonizations she writes. It’s true that “misplaced rhythmical accents, syncopation, and polyrhythms” can make

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<sup>19</sup> Sognefest is quoting Carol and Louis Torres, *Notes on Music* (New York: 1990), 19. This is a 52 page book by evangelists.

<sup>20</sup> On p. 246 Sognefest writes that after five minutes of exposure to hard rock, the pulse rate of high school students increased by seven to twelve beats per minute. By contrast, vigorous walking can easily increase the heart rate by fifty beats or more per minute. So can *lifting* hard rocks, rather than listening to hard rock.

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one want to hop around, but given the many references to God-approved dancing in the Scriptures,<sup>21</sup> this is not necessarily a problem, in its place.

Sognefest writes, “Critics of rock music generally appeal to the harmful physical effects of its rhythm which overshadows the melody and lyrics. They explain that good music should consist of a combination and balance of five basic elements: Melody . . . Tone color . . . Harmony . . . Rhythm . . . Tempo” (240). Categorical prescriptions for “good” music like this make me roll my eyes. One is very hard pressed to find a rock song that does not “consist of a combination and balance” of these five. If by “balance” Sognefest means an *exact* balance, how can one ever tell if these five are in exact balance? How does one balance a tempo with a melody? In any piece of music—or in various passages of a single piece—some of these receive more emphasis than others. There is nothing wrong with that. If many rock songs emphasize rhythm more than melody, surely that doesn’t mean they are not music.

Consider a few problem cases. Have you ever heard a solo sung *a cappella*? It has no harmony! Is it then not “good” music? Gregorian chant, praised earlier in the book, turns out not to be “good” music because it attempts to avoid rhythm and so lacks “balance.” Does a song stop being “good” music if it is played too slowly, unbalancing the tempo? Surely the waltz, the march, and many other musical forms have emphatic rhythms.<sup>22</sup>

Where Bacchiocchi condemns what poets call an iambic rhythm as particularly alien to true Christian worship, Sognefest condemns the anapestic rhythm.

Particularly harmful is the rock music which employs an ‘anapestic’ beat, where the last beat is the loudest, such as ‘da da DA.’ . . . the anapestic beat, characteristic especially of rock music, is disruptive because it is the opposite of the heartbeat and thus places the normal body’s rhythm under stress. This results in perceptual difficulties and manifestations of stress. In young people these manifestations may include decreased performance in school, hyperactivity and restlessness, decreased work output, more errors, and general inefficiency. In adults the symptoms include reduced decision-making capacity on the job, a nagging feeling that things just are not right, and the loss of energy for no apparent reason. (245)

Sognefest goes on to cite a study showing that a man’s strength is “reduced by about a third” when he listens to an anapestic beat. If this is so, then why are heavy rock songs played at professional football games? So the players will be weak? No, because the music pumps up the players so they can play harder, less bothered by fatigue.

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<sup>21</sup> For example, Exod 15:20; 2 Sam 6:14, 16; Ps 30:11; 149:3; 150:4; Eccl 3:4; Jer 31:4, 13; Matt 11:17; Luke 7:32; 15:25—12. out of seventeen times the words “dance” or “dancing” occur in the NIV.

<sup>22</sup> In the church hymnal, “Onward, Christian Soldiers” is a march, while “Morning Has Broken” is a waltz.

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What is this “anapestic beat”? It’s a rhythm used on rare occasions in English poetry. For example, it is used in the following lines from Coleridge’s poem, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” in which I’ve used bold type for the stressed syllables (the first line has four anapestic feet, the second line two—get ready to rock!:

For the **sky** and the **sea** and the **sea** and the **sky**  
**Lay** like a **load** on my **weary eye**, . . .

One great hymn that has an anapestic rhythm is “Immortal, Invisible God, Only Wise.” Strange that I usually feel stronger after singing that hymn. Perhaps it’s the lyrics that strengthen me. “How Firm a Foundation” has an anapestic rhythm, and so does “Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown.” Bach’s well-known “Bourée in E min” is also in anapestic rhythm (according to its melody, regardless of how it might sound on a page).

I think what Sognefest is talking about is a 2/4 time signature with two eighth notes followed by a quarter note, played by the drums, or the equivalent in 4/4. This is the drum beat in the Beatles song “Magical Mystery Tour,” for those who might recall it. The drummer for the Rolling Stones often uses a more sophisticated version of this beat. It is certainly conducive to making people want to move in some way, but that is not necessarily bad in itself, provided the movement does no harm. Music by Mozart or Haydn might help relieve stress when I’m writing or grading papers (though I prefer silence), but if I were stacking a cord of firewood, a strong anapestic rhythm or a vigorous march would help me work harder than Mozart (unless it were the overture to *The Marriage of Figaro*).

Calvin M. Johansson is a professor of music at Evangel University, an organist, and author of books on church music. He is also, unfortunately, a musical elitist championing an ideal far removed from the likes of most church-goers. He seems unaware that many of his elitist complaints about rock music also apply to hymns. He writes,

The first and most obvious trait of all pop music is that it is entertaining, . . . No matter how vehemently people deny it, pop entertains. That is why it exists. . . .

Pop’s musical composition insures that this is so. Entertainment occurs when music is crafted devoid of musical reason. Harmony, melody, rhythm, and timbre are shaped to be fun and viscerally stimulating. Without theoretical depth, pop utilizes a construction which is empty of serious musical thought. It is one-sided, costing the listener little in the way of intellectual investment. (277)

It is true that popular music is, by definition, accessible to the populace, the people, and if they enjoy it and want to listen to it, it must be entertaining in some way. Of course, where one finds music not meant to entertain in some way one finds music virtually no one wants to listen to. If one wants to share the gospel using music as a tool, one would do well to choose music people under-

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stand and enjoy. If one wants to touch lives, more lives are touched by what is popular than by what is understood only by some musical elite.

Is the listener's "intellectual investment" a crucial aspect of music acceptable in a worship setting? Very few hymns require such an investment, though the lyrics may reveal their meaning through study. Indeed, most "serious" music was also written to entertain. Did Mozart write to instruct? Did his patrons hire him to write a new symphony so they could be educated? I think not. Did patrons flock to the opera to be instructed? I think not. Did Bach compose his fugues to instruct worshipers in "serious musical thought"? I think not. Handel's *Messiah* richly rewards careful study, but it's popular because it's *popular*, even though it is also "serious."

Johansson writes, "Entertainment occurs when music is crafted devoid of musical reason." This is elitist and simply untrue. On the one hand, if "musical reason" weren't entertaining, P. D. Q. Bach would lose the audience of those who can understand his musical jokes. Some of the best-reasoned compositions are among the most delightful, even to the barely initiated. On the other, a good deal of popular music is crafted with great care and complexity.<sup>23</sup> It is true that many popular rock musicians are not well-educated musically, and some rock music is primarily guitar and drum bashing. However, even that can be done with skill and by design. Those who understand such music have no difficulty distinguishing between bands with talent and bands without.

When I see a sentence like "Without theoretical depth, pop utilizes a construction which is empty of serious musical thought," I get nervous. Why? Because the same thing said about popular music goes for hymns. Many of the best hymns have lyrics by talented poets, though few indeed have lyrics by what are generally considered great poets. The music, though delightful and satisfying to me, is also popular and seldom betrays "serious musical thought." I get nervous because if Johansson bothers to apply his dictum to hymns, what will we sing in church? Johansson writes, "Gut-wrenching, life-changing redemption has little in common with amusement" (278). That may be, but it also has little in common with "serious musical thought."

When I imagine the sort of church Johansson prefers, I picture a century old red brick mainstream Protestant church peopled by pillars of the community who wouldn't reveal an emotion in church even if they sat on a tack. I imagine a church where worship is not a group activity, but something interior, private, not

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<sup>23</sup> Jazz is especially well known for its complex "musical reason." I might mention Dave Brubeck, Charlie Parker, Benny Goodman, Miles Davis. However, a number of rock musicians are classically trained, and this shows in their work. For example, the band Steely Dan in the *Aja* period, Billy Joel (whose CD of piano pieces written in homage to Rachmaninoff, Chopin, and others is presently at the top of the classical charts), Paul Simon, the band Emerson, Lake, and Palmer (which introduced a generation of young people to classical music, including me). Others, not classically trained, have still developed very complex music, such as Joni Mitchell, Randy Newman, and Tom Waits.



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to be shared. I imagine a church people attend because it's the socially correct thing to do, even though the membership is half what it used to be. That is to say, I imagine a dead or dying church. He writes:

It should be obvious that to use popular music of any type in worship simply turns worship into entertainment, no matter what category, stripe, style, or subspecies of music it is. Whether rock, CCM, swing, or ragtime is used, the end result will be the same: convoluted worship, trivialization of the faith, and immaturing of the believer. On the other hand, great music edifies the listener. The composer invests in the musical traits which call the listener to reflect seriously on levels of musical content that go beyond the temporal. With emotional and intellectual balance as a result of competent craft, musical depth in great music sympathetically resonates within the heart and mind of the listener in the manner of a gestalt. (278)

"Great music" may edify Johansson, but many people do not respond to it. Furthermore, to "reflect seriously on levels of musical content" is not what I want people doing in church. I want them to feel emotionally exposed to God. I want them to feel like part of one body of believers, joyous and enthusiastic and glad to be together. I want them to receive and embrace God's word for them. This happens best through vigorous hymn-singing, testimony, and prayer.

Certainly "great music edifies the listener," but it is also entertainment. Whether it be "great music" or popular music, "special music" is essentially entertainment. "Great music" may require more skill and training than popular music, but they both entertain, and they both focus the congregation on the performer rather than on God. When people in the congregation sing their hearts out, they sing to God and give him glory. When they listen to a performer, they may say amen, they may applaud, but *they* are not glorifying God. The problem is more severe with instrumental solos. If the music is drawn from a well-known hymn, it may call to people's minds the words of that hymn, and so lead them toward God, at least fractionally. If the music is not drawn from such a hymn, it is secular music. Some classically trained musicians fondly imagine that if it's classical, it's suitable for the worship service. This is not true. Neither the lack of words nor the quality of the music makes it sacred. Is it performed by a musician who wants to give the glory to God? Fine, but that doesn't mean it is leading the congregation to do the same. We don't worship God well by giving him the best quality of music we can dig up, but by giving him our hearts. Listening to "serious" music is not conducive of that.

What is more, "great music" may help people be introspective. It may give them an opportunity to examine themselves. But the effect of this music is to bring the pulse back to barely thumping. In the church I attend, we have a somewhat lively song service and testimony period, accompanied by a piano, and people begin drawing together, preparing themselves for hearing God's word to them. They sing a hymn, which also helps. However, then there is five minutes of reverent organ music while the money is collected, then "special mu-

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sic” also dampens the spirits. The result is that the congregation rarely lets out an “amen” and the pastor says, “Are you awake out there?” No response. I don’t believe in speaking in tongues or being slain in the Spirit, but I’ve got to say that charismatics know a whole lot more about really worshiping and maintaining that emotional and spiritual connection with God and each other for a long time than do the worship leaders in the churches I generally attend.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps that’s why they often attend church because they love it rather than because it’s the thing to do. Johansson imagines that people attend such churches because they want to be entertained, but I would suggest that they are more likely to attend such services because they don’t want to be entertained but want to worship and feel the Spirit active in them. I would suggest that those who want to be entertained are more likely to go to churches where “serious music” is the norm. There they can enjoy the beauty of the music, enjoy the sermon, all in silence, without having to participate in any worship. Watching worship happen is not the same as worshiping.

Some people are edified by “great music” (I am, though that’s not what I want to hear in church). But no one is *saved* by “great music,” or brought to Christ by “great music,” unless it is music like *The Messiah*, combining glorious music with a glorious message. Even then, to be really moved by *The Messiah*, one needs to give in to it, let the music and the message inhabit one. Is this a form of trance or hypnosis? Yes, it is, to some extent, but it’s a holy trance. This is why I can’t listen to *The Messiah* with my heart without tears. Of course, I get the same result with “God Be With You Till We Meet Again” (the original 1880 tune by W. G. Tomer, though I like Ralph Vaughan Williams’ setting, too).

Johansson writes, “The competence of compositional craft determines the work’s integrity. Both imagination and craft are necessary.” What he is saying is that unless you are trained as a composer, your music will lack “integrity.” “Integrity” sounds like something music offered to God should have, doesn’t it? However, this is like saying that only the greatest theologians and preachers are able to bring people to Jesus. This is certainly not the case. Indeed, some theologians have a hard time communicating on the level of the common people (though they have an important work to do). Most people brought to Jesus are brought by family or friends: people who often know relatively little about the Bible, but know a God worth trusting. Similarly, more people are brought to Jesus by a simple song that touches their heart—however lacking in the “competence of compositional craft”—than by anything Chopin ever wrote, much as I enjoy his music. If the church service is about bringing people to God and keeping them there, the question should not be “Is there any room for contempo-

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<sup>24</sup> Not all emotions are holy, of course, and there are times when one wonders just what spirit is driving some behavior in charismatic churches. In some cases the spirit seems to be granting license to excess, and that is problematic. I am praising, rather, the best of the often noted surrender to worship in song and praise and response to the Word and the spirit of love and unity often seen. I myself am so self-conscious, alas, that I can only sit quietly and observe in such meetings.

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rary Christian music,” but “is there any room for classical music and pipe organs.”

Here is a categorical assertion likely to surprise people who appreciate popular music. Johansson writes,

Popular music does not aspire to the highest degree of creative excellence. It is too facile, too obvious. It lacks the musical craft and imagination of great music. While some pop songs may be better than others, none rise to the level of excellence found in serious music. It may be novel, but it does not have Godly creativity. Since pop has no musical depth (as an art music), the inevitable conclusion is that pop creativity and Godly creativity run counter to one another. This makes pop an inadequate medium for theistic witness. (280)

Johansson confuses “the highest degree of creative excellence” with “Godly creativity.” Is the purpose of worship to watch the trained musical elite perform with “the highest degree of creative excellence”? Is that what it means to “make a joyful noise unto the Lord”?<sup>25</sup> Is that what fills us with joy and leads us to praise God with all our hearts? We need only watch the congregational reaction to such music to see that while the saints may appreciate the “creative excellence” (I do), it does not fill them with joy, reveal to them the mighty acts of God, nor result in praising Christ for the salvation he has made available to us. It may have “musical depth,” but unless there are words that guide us to God, “serious music” has little if any *spiritual* depth, and so its appropriateness in the worship service is debatable. One might even argue that its emphasis in mainline churches has had a sizable influence on their general lack of spiritual fervor.

Is popular music “an inadequate medium for theistic witness”? Most hymns are “popular music” written not by great composers exhibiting “the highest degree of creative excellence,” but by less-educated composers and lyricists who love God. It will not do to say “Oh, those are hymns, but when I say “popular music” I mean rock music and things like that.” One cannot fairly argue that older popular music is acceptable, but contemporary popular music is not. I will not dig out the old argument that many hymns were derived from barroom songs,<sup>26</sup> because I consider it irrelevant. Popular music is by accurate definition music appreciated by the people, whether that means top forty rock music or hymns or praise songs, and whether the venue is a barroom or a church. Certainly its “musical depth” varies, but we can admit that it is rarely if ever at the depth of “serious music.” But I would respond that “great music” is rarely an adequate “medium for theistic witness.” When was the last time Wagner brought anyone to Christ? “Just As I Am” is not “great music,” but probably millions have sung it while giving their hearts to God. Very few of the “great composers”

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<sup>25</sup> Encouraged in Ps 66:1; 81:1; 95:1, 2; 98:4, 6; 100:1.

<sup>26</sup> Though one of the most popular hymns in my congregation these days is sung to the tune of “Danny Boy,” which is still a favorite barroom ballad in Ireland.

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wrote music for evangelism. Indeed, many of them had a rather tenuous relationship with God.

Johansson writes, “The general aesthetic principle upon which pop is based in immediate gratification. . . . Little aesthetic subtlety exists in pop” (281). This is true, but the same goes for hymns. If a hymn needs to be studied in order to be appreciated, it cannot do its intended work. What Johansson writes about the musical excellence of “serious music” compared to that of “popular music” is generally true. The problem is that he assumes there is a correlation between musical excellence and spiritual depth.<sup>27</sup> There isn’t. To say that God is best praised by giving him the best compositions written is like Cain arguing that God is best praised by giving him the best vegetables. It is like saying that God is better praised by a Rembrandt nude than by a Harry Anderson painting of the resurrection and second coming. It’s like saying that God is better praised by a Hemingway novel than by a conversion story in a church paper.

How hard should we have to work to understand worship music? Johansson writes,

The primitive seeks almost immediate gratification for his tendencies whether these be biological or musical. Nor can he tolerate uncertainty. And it is because distant departures from the certainty and repose of the tonic note and lengthy delays in gratification are insufferable to him that the tonal repertory of the primitive is limited, not because he can’t think of other tones. It is not his mentality that is limited, it is his maturity. . . . The opposite corollary of immediate gratification is delayed gratification. It is one of the key aesthetic principles employed in creating music of integrity and worth. My experience over a lifetime of rehearsing college and church choirs has been that music of delayed gratification wears well over weeks and months of rehearsal. But popular music of whatever ilk does not fare as well. Choristers tire of rehearsing its predictable tunes and harmonies. (281–283)

This may well be true,<sup>28</sup> but the fact is that it’s hard to find a great hymn that doesn’t return to the tonic, to “certainty and repose,” within eight bars. They all

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<sup>27</sup> Perhaps what Johansson has done is to take the standard arguments used in “Music Appreciation” class to convince students that classical music has excellences that make it more deserving of study than popular music and applied them to worship. I use similar arguments when I lead students through great poetry and help them appreciate its glories, but I don’t argue that the most complex poetry is the most suitable for worship. In the classroom setting, rather than the worship setting, his arguments have merits. I see no problem with helping students appreciate elitist music, because such music adds richness to their lives, and appreciating it often requires training. What he has failed to notice is that the worship service is not the proper setting for such a class. Worship is inherently “popular” in a church setting, because it is something all the people are called to do.

<sup>28</sup> Though to be fair we might point out that the “primitive” drum polyrhythms of Africa sometimes take ten minutes or more before they come together and the rhythmic scheme can be comprehended. The Grateful Dead are famous for using a similar approach to their songs, sometimes keeping the audience in suspense for twenty minutes before the instruments gradually come together.

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get back home by the end of the verse and chorus, which means a delay of no more than about twenty seconds. It may well be true that singing hymns bores choirs addicted to “music of integrity and worth,” but such choirs singing such worthwhile music rarely have an evangelistic impact. The purpose of hymns is to have an immediate impact, not to engage listeners with complex music that delays their gratification. Enjoying “great music” is so pleasurable that I think everyone should be taught how, but it is a *learned* ability requiring a good deal of musical sophistication. We can no more *expect* seekers to come to us with such abilities than we can expect them to be able to find the various books of the Bible when they first pick one up. People can be trained to enjoy this music, but the worship service is not the place to do it, and if we play this music in church, we are catering to the elite.<sup>29</sup>

Johansson writes, “Gut-wrenching, life-changing redemption has little in common with amusement” (278). It has even less in common with “serious music.” He writes that popular music “is unable to display general revelatory gospel witness. Pop music simply has little in common with the gospel” (284). Frankly, I can’t figure out how he could come to such a conclusion if he had the slightest familiarity with popular Christian music. For example, Thomas Dorsey composed jazz and blues songs before he turned to gospel, and that background is always evident in his music. His song “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” is still a favorite of jazz and soul singers and instrumentalists. But Dorsey’s life was dedicated to “gospel witness,” and that song reveals in essence the correct stance for the repentant sinner, as described by Jesus (Luke 18:13). It reveals it even in smoky nightclubs.

Again, Johansson writes, “[M]usic of artistry assumes the normalcy of high expectations. Composers don’t write “down” to an audience, even at the subconscious level. Unlike pop composition, which exists within an assumed framework of the necessity of mass acceptability, art music expects the listener to rise to the standard set by art work” (284). Thus, such music doesn’t reach most people. By definition, this *limits* its use as a vehicle of the gospel. He writes, “[G]race calls us to a higher standard than the law ever did” (285). This is true, but it doesn’t call us to a higher *musical* standard. We are not *saved* by “art songs.” Salvation does not depend on appreciation of “serious music.”

Once one gets started pointing out the holes in Johansson’s arguments, it’s hard to stop. He writes, “[N]o composer worth his salt would allow his musical integrity to be compromised by strictures to his compositional technique. The making of a genuine work of art is not tied to acceptability” (288). Surely Mozart and Bach, among many others, often had to write what they were told to write. If “a work of art” isn’t accessible to the audience, reviews are bad, people

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<sup>29</sup> When I was in college I attended a local Unitarian Church a number of times as part of a class assignment. What I noticed was that the music was always superb, catering to the intellectual elite, and the sermons were also intellectually satisfying, but didn’t mention the Bible. Bible teaching and “art music” don’t really go together very well.

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don't come to performances, and commissions dry up. Verdi, Puccini, and Gilbert and Sullivan were all under intense pressure to produce "hits." Even Handel wrote *The Messiah* hoping it would be a hit.

He complains, "Thus, churches have to pay a royalty to use most CCM. . . . Although the gospel is inherently noncommercial, commercialism shapes the church's worship when religious pop music is used" (289). What he neglects to mention—though as a choir director he surely knows it—is that churches have to pay to use "serious music" under copyright, too, or at least spend hundreds of dollars for choir parts, which has the same effect. Dare we mention that many ministers of music and soloists also expect to be paid?

The chapter by Güenter Preuss is titled "Rock Music and Evangelism." Preuss is a church music director who was finishing his dissertation on "reformed hymnody between 1700 and 1870" at the Sorbonne when he contributed this article. What is the difference between "sacred" and "secular" music? Preuss writes, "There are those who contend that music per se is neither sacred or secular—it is a neutral thing. For them, what makes music 'sacred' is not its style, but its lyrics. This popular view is flawed both historically, theologically, and scientifically" (303). He continues,

Sanctification presupposes a separation from the world in order to be set aside and consecrated to the service of god. Whatever is used for the service of God is sacred, that is, set aside for holy use. This is true not only of music but of speech as well. The profane language used in the street is inappropriate in church. In the same way, rock music used in bars or nightclubs to stimulate people physically cannot be used in the church to elevate people spiritually. (303)

I don't know about Preuss, but I speak the same language "in the street" that I speak in church: English. Perhaps he'd prefer a return to a Latin liturgy, but that too was a street language when it entered the church. Certainly there are words I *hear* in the street that are not appropriate in church, but of course they aren't appropriate in the street, either, and I don't use such language. Also, I don't hesitate to speak about God in the street (or in my classroom in a secular university). I know a few people who only talk about God in church, but I question their Christian commitment. It's true that "sanctification presupposes a separation from the world," but only in a manner of speaking, and not in the way he claims.

I cannot say that I've ever heard in church "rock music heard in bars," unless the song had Christian lyrics (and rock songs with Christian lyrics are occasionally heard in bars). On the other hand, I've often heard in church the compositions of Chopin or Debussy, and I'm not aware that these compositions are considered sacred. They are certainly much heard in the secular concert hall. Even the work of Bach, who understood himself to be writing to the glory of God, is not inherently sacred. If we see his fugues as sacred, it is only because we've heard some of them in church. I'm fond of "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring,"

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but I don't know any other words from the song, and without those words I'd have no way of knowing the song was to be considered sacred. The psalms sung in the temple services were available for anyone to sing while plowing a field. Today our bodies are temples of the Holy Ghost. This suggests that we should avoid defiling them with what is impure—including music—but it also means there is no difference between what is appropriate music for Christians in church and what is appropriate for Christians anywhere else, except that when Christians worship together, they should avoid music that offends some who are present.

Are some types of singing more appropriate in the worship service? Johansson writes, "Rock singing does not use the techniques of classical music based on a relaxed larynx and rich harmonic overtones. Instead, it employs high-pitched strained voicing" (304). This is not strictly true. Many of the top R&B singers use these classical techniques. These techniques were perfected in and for the opera, but opera is far from sacred. The techniques are beautiful to those who have learned to appreciate them (as I have), but they are artificial. They help singers achieve volume and control and protect their voices, but that doesn't make them holy. Indeed, the very artificiality of the operatic voice lessens its effectiveness in evangelistic witness, even with an inherently evangelistic song, because the vocal style is beautiful but seems insincere. There's more sincerity and authenticity in the cracked and scratchy voice of an out of tune old saint humbly singing God's praises than in the glorious voices of Placido Domingo or Leontyne Price, much as I enjoy them. Of course, most hymn-singers don't use these techniques either (though I do). When it comes down to it, we aren't saved by "relaxed larynxes," and "rich harmonic overtones" bring few people to God.<sup>30</sup>

Preuss writes, "Musically speaking, most 'Christian' rock is no different from secular rock, except for the lyrics" (306). Musically speaking, Verdi's *Requiem* isn't much different from his opera *La Traviata*, either, except for the lyrics, but we know better, I would hope, than to perform the latter in church.

What is "vain repetition"? Preuss writes, "Two major problems with CWM [Contemporary Worship Music] is that it generally incorporates rock rhythms with a heavy bass line and is very repetitious. Jesus warned against using vain repetitions in worship (Matt 6:7)" (306). This is not, of course, what Jesus meant by "do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do." What about the four living creatures of Revelation 4, who "never stop saying: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come'" (v. 8)? Repetition is not *vain*

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<sup>30</sup> I might also mention that the "high-pitched strained voicing" of many popular singers is just as deliberate as the operatic voice of Luciano Pavarotti, though less trained. The best of these singers have very distinctive, recognizable voices admired and praised by those trained to appreciate them. Most aspiring popular singers fail to develop such a voice. Just as one can learn to appreciate the excellences of the operatic voice, one can learn to appreciate the excellences and variations found in popular singing.

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unless it is *in vain*. When the heathen pray to gods of wood and stone, they are not heard—their prayers are in vain. They repeat their prayers over and over because they think this will help their gods hear them.<sup>31</sup> That's not why we repeat the Lord's Prayer year after year. We may ask God many times for something, such as healing or safety, but that is not "vain repetition." We may say "Lord" or "Father" many times in our prayers, but that's not "vain repetition," either, even though it may be so redundant as to sound more like a hiccup than a consciously called on name.

We sing many hymns that repeat words or phrases in choruses, such as "When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder."<sup>32</sup> What about "Praise Him, Praise Him, Jesus Our Blessed Redeemer"? Is that too repetitive? What about "So Send I You" or "Amazing Grace" or "Lift Up the Trumpet"? By condemning Contemporary Worship Music Preuss implicitly condemns many of the favorite hymns of our past. It is true that when praise songs are sung in charismatic churches, they are often repeated several times, and this can have an emotional effect on audiences, but these emotions are holy. May God forbid that musical elitists should try to keep the people of God from praising him over and over as best they know how. The first praise song known to have been written in English is also the oldest surviving English poem, "Caedmon's Hymn." It was composed by an illiterate herdsman and preserved for us by the greatest theologian of his day, Bede.<sup>33</sup>

Preuss writes,

Christian rock artists, stemming from different churches, espouse virtually the same expression of a minimal Gospel. Doctrinal differences do not really matter and should not be expressed in song. What matters is joining together in praising the Lord. . . .

Evangelistic music, instead of bringing people from the world to Christ, often brings the world's agenda into the church, thus undermining the identity and mission of the church. (308)

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<sup>31</sup> By contrast, when Roman Catholics say the rosary, it is not because repetition makes it more likely God will hear them, but because it both focuses the mind on God and clears the mind of the detritus of worldly worries, making it easier for God's voice to be heard.

<sup>32</sup> That was a favorite hymn of mine when I was a child, but I thought the phrase was "When the road is called a pyonder," and I often wondered why it would be called that.

<sup>33</sup> Bede writes of Caedmon, in *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (ca. 731), "It often happened that his songs kindled a contempt for this world and a longing for the life of Heaven in the hearts of many men. Indeed, after him others among the English people tried to compose religious poetry, but no one could equal him because he was not taught the art of song by men or by human agency but received this gift through heavenly grace. Therefore, he was never able to compose any vain and idle songs but only such as dealt with religion and were proper for his religious tongue to utter." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Middle Ages*, seventh ed. (New York: Norton, 2000), 24. Note that these were popular songs, composed and sung by an untrained man.



## CHRISTIAN: THE CHRISTIAN & ROCK MUSIC: A REVIEW ESSAY

We might note that the church hymnal has relatively few hymns dealing with doctrinal distinctives. Indeed, most were written by Christians of other denominations. Some were revised to remove doctrinal ideas we do not accept. Hymns cross denominational lines quite easily. For example, the song “Majesty,” a praise song often sung in the church I attend, was written by a leading charismatic pastor, Jack Hayford. There is a big difference between bringing “the world’s agenda into the church” and using songs written by Christians from other denominations. It is, rather, “serious music” that brings in the world’s way of judging quality and places “art” above popular congregational appeal.

### Conclusion

Though I have not discussed the final three chapters of *The Christian & Rock Music*, I think I’ve made my point sharply enough. There are some good things about the book. Osterman makes some good points, though her comments about various types of African-American music and some of their characteristics seem unfair, and some of her arguments are simplistic. Stefani’s chapter is not objectionable, and he has more reputable sources than the other authors. I was drawn to Brian Neumann’s personal testimony as a person who has actually been a successful rock musician with hit records but given it up. I agree with all of the writers that rock music with secular lyrics poses real dangers for Christian young people, easily turning their focus away from God. Trying to stay close to God while listening to a lot of secular rock music is a bit like trying to remain a virgin while sharing a bed with your boyfriend. It can be done, but it makes life a lot more difficult.

There are several places where the book fails. It fails to realize the serious difference between CCM and secular popular music. If the authors had bothered to spend a few days reading the lyrics of CCM songs and reading interviews with CCM musicians, the book might have been much different. There are certainly problems with a lot of secular music and the musicians who perform it. That does not mean it is fair to also tar Christian musicians whose music may sound similar, though the words and philosophy are wildly different. Similarly, there are problems with a lot of secular *people*. Does that mean all secular people should be avoided? Does it mean Christian people should be avoided, since they too are people? There are young people with wild hair and clothes and tattoos and body piercings who make appallingly bad choices. I’ve also had students who look like that who are seeking God. We must judge a tree according to its fruits, not its leaves.

The book fails because the authors fail to notice that CCM of all sorts has a huge positive influence on listeners. Most of the musicians I’ve read about seem to see themselves primarily as missionaries. That doesn’t mean they are necessarily seeing conversions and baptisms, though many do. In some cases their lyrics are quite elliptical, and it takes a good deal of thought to recognize the

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religious content.<sup>34</sup> Sometimes this is because the musicians are trying to reach out to people who have an antipathy to Christian triumphalism. At other times it is because they see themselves as musicians who are Christians, rather than as Christian musicians. In this case the lyrics reflect the questions and struggles of the Christian heart in a truthful way. We can't all always be bubbling over with Jesus' love, and sometimes we need to know that others face the same problems.

The book fails because its "research" is based primarily on sensationalistic sources and on the work of other writers who haven't thought out the implications of their arguments and whose claims are inaccurate and based on literalistic readings of their sources. The writers seldom turn to primary research by scientists publishing in scholarly journals for their information on the physiological effect of music, for example. Also, nearly all the bad examples are drawn from the most notorious secular rock musicians. This may help us understand the ideal relationship between the Christian and secular rock music, but it doesn't help us understand the ideal relationship between the Christian and Christian rock music. If there is a difference, and there is, it should be acknowledged.

The book fails because of its shocking lack of tolerance of differences in taste. As I read the book, with a couple exceptions, what I sensed over and over is that what these authors consider acceptable music for everyone is the music they themselves like, and what they consider unacceptable music is the music they don't like. I myself don't listen to CCM by choice, but I do listen to it with my sons when they ask me to, and I judge it according to what it is and is trying to do, not according to whether or not I like it. I try to judge the music according to its fruits. How does it make people behave? Does it lead them to sin? Does it lead them to Christ? Experience proves beyond doubt that Christian rock in its many forms is leading many listeners into a closer walk with God.

Finally, the book fails because time after time its biblical support is based on *eisegesis* rather than *exegesis*. I've seldom seen in one book so many weak interpretations and so few sound ones. The subtitle of the book is "A Study on Biblical Principles of Music." Frankly, the Bible says virtually nothing specifically about music that helps us determine biblical principles. There are two texts that give us principles we can use. One is Phil 4:8: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." The other is Col 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Whatever combination of words and music meets those criteria is fine for praising God, whether or

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<sup>34</sup> Just as Johansson argues that "serious music" doesn't reveal itself all at once, the same is true with serious poetry and lyrics. There is a place for Christian lyrics that take some work.

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not I like it. That doesn't mean it's necessarily appropriate in church, where there is a need for unity and there may be many people who don't like it, but it's appropriate for those who like it, whether they be alone or in a group. Also, if any combination of words and music that meets these criteria proves itself able to touch the hearts of unbelievers, it is fine for evangelistic purposes, even though it might not be appropriate in an actual evangelistic campaign with a wide range of people attending.

As I said at the beginning of this review, these authors are my brothers and sisters in Christ, and many are friends. If the book were not selling well, if it were not having an influence on pastors and church members, I would not devote my energy to exposing its weaknesses. However, because it is in fact having a large influence, I provide this (though it goes to a much smaller audience) so others can refer to it as necessary.

As I've also said earlier, the fate of our young people is far too important to allow the influence of one ill-considered book to turn them away from God. They need our friendship and counsel, and they want it. We need to know the right things to say and the right way to say them.

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