

Sacred Serenade: The Role of Music in Spiritual Formation

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The Universal Appeal of Music

Music is a universal language. Regardless of the culture or part of the world, music plays an integral part. In fact, people are often identified by their music. A national anthem expresses a nation's unique musical signature. Generations in American history are recognized by their musical favorites. Married couples often have their own special song. Individuals enjoy a particular style or have a preference for music as distinctive as their unique DNA.

Music has become so much a part of our culture and everyday life that it is often unnoticed. Imagine watching a movie sans music. Though frequently subtle, a cinema production without music would not be the same. A film's musical score can create or relieve tension, enhancing a scene that would otherwise be silent or perhaps even boring. Yet when asked, "How did you like the movie?" few people would respond, "It did not have much of a plot, but I just loved the wonderful background music!"

The Power of Music to Touch the Soul

For centuries, people have used music to express their deepest feelings and emotions. Many, such as the Psalmist David, used their music to speak both to and about God. David wrote, "I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me" ¹ (Ps.13:6). It should not seem unusual then, that the Holy Spirit

would use music to speak to people, Christian or pre-Christian. In fact, the Psalmist illustrates this fact, "By day the LORD directs his love, at night his song is with me" (Ps. 42:8).

Music has an inherent ability to appeal to the emotions and mend the soul. Who hasn't been misty-eyed at some point by a "tear-jerker" song? This has been a staple of popular music, both country and gospel, for more than a century, probably longer. I have a recording in my antique collection of a fashionable song from the 1890's titled, *In the Baggage Coach Ahead*, which tells the story of a man holding a crying baby while riding a passenger train. As fellow travelers angrily complain about the crying baby and ask why the man doesn't call for the baby's mother, he quietly explains that his wife is dead in a coffin and riding in the baggage coach ahead. The atmosphere changes as people empathize with the man and begin to help him with his crying baby. The lyrics conclude, "Each one had a story to tell in their homes of the baggage coach ahead."²

While the above mentioned song seems sappy or cheesy by today's standards, no one can deny that a story set to music has the power to grab your attention, engage your emotions, and move your heart. Over the past few years, popular songs such as *Christmas Shoes* by NewSong or *Jesus, Take the Wheel* by Carie Underwood have brought a lump in the throat and tear to the

eye of many Americans. The power of these songs is in their ability to emotionally move us with a well-crafted story with setting, conflict, climax, and resolution, along with a pleasing melody, all taking place in a time frame of less than four minutes.

William Congreve, an eighteenth-century English dramatist penned the words, “Music hath charms to soothe the savage beast, to soften rocks, to bend a knotted oak.”³ The words or melody of a song can reach beyond a sin-hardened façade and water the soil, providing an opportunity for the implanted seed of God’s Word to germinate. Using the tool of music, God’s Spirit can miraculously accomplish this in a moment of time. Pentecostals have long been aware of the link between music and the work of the Spirit, and have leveraged that union with great success.

Having been raised in a Christian home where church attendance was not optional, I gave my heart to Christ at an early age. My earliest memories are of my parents and Sunday School teachers singing hymns and gospel songs. From *Jesus Loves the Little Children to Deep and Wide*, those songs are forever etched in my memory. By the time I was ten years old, I could probably recite the words and sing the melodies to hundreds of songs. This sacred serenade helped form my character and nurture my faith in Christ.

In his insightful book on evangelism, *More Ready Than You Realize*, Brian McLaren uses the song as a metaphor for coming to faith in Christ. He observes, “So the gospel comes to you not like a commercial on the radio or TV or a political slogan in a campaign or a scientific formula in a classroom, but like a song. It sneaks up on you, and then sneaks inside you.”⁴

Music and Worship

There is something about seeing God’s creation and being thankful that unleashes a song in our spirit. “How Great Thou Art” is the response of a grateful soul. *The Westminster Catechism* states it well, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”⁵ Since nearly the beginning of human history, music has been used to glorify God by those with appreciative hearts.

The chief end of true worship is to glorify God and experience his presence. Research by George Barna suggests that we might be missing the point in today’s church. He states, “Our studies show that fourteen percent of adult believers admit that they have never experienced the presence of God. In a typical worship service, about half claim that they did not experience God’s presence or feel they interacted with Him in a personal way.”⁶

Sally Morgenthaler, author of *Worship Evangelism*, devotes much of her book to answering the question: “Do worship and evangelism go together?” She responds: “What does happen when seekers intersect with God’s manifest presence? They experience something they will not find anywhere else in the world.”⁷

Even in today’s most seeker-sensitive church environments, music can play a vital role in reaching people by seeking to find points of common interest on not only a cognitive, but also an emotional level. In reaching many generations, music and worship offer a powerful means to reach the soul. Because it engages on both an emotional and spiritual level, music frequently shows itself to be more powerful than intellectual arguments in preparing hearts for the Gospel.

Music as a Catalyst for Spiritual Formation

Dallas Willard describes the importance of vision, intention and means as a general pattern of personal transformation, and specifically spiritual formation in the Christian tradition. Willard believes that the lack of these three elements “is the explanation of the widespread failure to attain Christian maturity among both leaders and followers.”⁸

Certainly there are more elements than these involved in what can be a very complicated process. Like a physical fitness program, a program or plan of spiritual formation must be tailor made by the Spirit to fit the uniqueness of the individual. Though not often considered, I believe music can play a crucial role in facilitating the vision, intention and means for spiritual formation.

On more than one occasion, I have sensed the convicting power of the Holy Spirit while listening to the lyrics or melody of a song. Music can sometimes touch the heart and bring focus on eternal values more effectively than a sermon or pedantic lesson. The Christian church has a vast and growing repertoire of music. There are Christian hymns and songs which can effectively illustrate virtually any doctrine or biblical truth. Ken Osbeck explains, “The church hymnal is one of the finest collections of man’s thoughts and feelings about God. When these choice responses are further enhanced with appropriate melodies, harmonies, and rhythms, there exists a reservoir of unusual spiritual strength and encouragement.”⁹

The Biblical Context For Music: New Testament Instructions

Besides music in corporate worship, music played a major role in the life of ancient Jews. One writer notes, “Music in ancient Israel was live, lively and probably made by almost everyone. The people of Bible times seem to have made almost every unusual occasion an excuse for music and singing.”¹⁰

In the New Testament, we notice that Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn following the last supper (Matt. 26:30). The Passover meal was one of many occasions for song in ancient Jewish life. These musical rituals helped form tradition and shaped both the community’s and individual’s perspective on God and His purposes for life itself.

While captive in the Philippian jail, “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25). Character is both revealed and refined in the crucible of suffering. Because Paul and Silas had learned the importance of worship and praise during more pleasant circumstances, they were able to do so during adversity as well.

Paul instructed the Ephesian believers to, “Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19b). The biblical term for “heart” (Gk. *kardia*) implies both thoughts and feelings. Paul makes no plea for talent or excellence in music. Musical ability is not a prerequisite for true worship from the heart.

Music and the Community of Faith

Paul also encouraged the Ephesian Christians to, “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19a). Writing to the Colossian believers,

he stated, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col. 3:16).

Corporate worship has a rich and deeply entrenched heritage in the Christian church. From the biblical perspective, music is a worship mandate, not an option. Music invites participation, which is why music is such a fundamental part of corporate worship. Musical activity by the congregation can combine the elements of evangelism, discipleship, worship, and fellowship into a transforming experience.

Music has a tremendous power to bring people together. Affinity for various genres or styles of music can bring together people from diverse backgrounds. Music can cut across racial, social, and economic lines, breaking down barriers that would otherwise hinder interaction between groups. When the focus is truly on Christ, people are able to enjoy and experience cross-cultural musical elements.

The Historical Use of Music in Spiritual Formation

As a child, I learned the books of the Bible while singing a song. Many of the great Bible stories, from Abraham’s legacy to Zacchaeus and the tree, were learned musically. Today’s innovative ministries are producing similar results from media such as *Veggie Tales*, which use the mediums of video and music to teach ancient truths to contemporary children. What seems obvious from the perspective of children’s ministry should also be obvious in adult applications: music is an effective means of training and empowering people in their faith.

In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther understood the power of song. Possessing a good voice and affinity for music, Luther’s parents sent him into the streets as a youth to supplement their income as a street musician. Luther was the father of modern church hymns and wrote dozens of them which he used to persuade the common people concerning biblical truth. He re-introduced the concept of congregational singing into the church which was one of his “protests” against the Roman Catholic Church of his time. One cannot sing the strains of *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* without recognizing the powerful biblical content. J. Sidlow Baxter wrote, “The Roman Catholic Church complained that Martin Luther had sung many more people into Protestantism by his hymns than he ever preached into it by his sermons.”¹¹

John Newton (1725 - 1807) wrote *Amazing Grace* as a testimony of God's grace in his own life. The former captain of a slave ship, Newton had a miraculous transformation when he came to Christ. He was a contemporary of, and influenced by both George Whitefield and John Wesley. John and brother Charles Wesley together wrote more than 6,500 hymns!¹²

Although at first not accepted in the Anglican Church because of his lack of formal education, Newton eventually became pastor of the church in Olney, England and was ordained in 1764 at the age of thirty-nine. In 1767, William Cowper settled at Olney and became a member of Newton's church. The two collaborated as hymn writers. Together, they wrote and published hundreds of them, many of which survive today, such as Cowper's *There Is a Fountain Filled With Blood*. Newton himself wrote dozens of songs, including *How Sweet The Name of Jesus Sounds* and *Glorious*

Things of Thee Are Spoken. But the most famous and enduring is *Amazing Grace*.

In later life, Newton ministered at St. Mary Woolnoth Parish, a London church. As portrayed in the recent movie *Amazing Grace*, Newton was influential in helping abolish the slave trade in Britain by influencing William Wilberforce, a Member of Parliament, who became a champion for the abolition of slavery.¹³ Knowing the power of both story and music, Newton was published widely during his lifetime.

One example of Newton's pulpit ministry while ministering in London reveals his grasp of the power of music as a means to spiritual formation. The immense popularity of *Handel's Messiah* did not go unnoticed by Newton. He used the opportunity to preach a series of messages using the *Messiah* as a basis during the years 1783-1784. In 1786, those messages were published in two volumes. He wrote in his memoirs:

Conversation in almost every company, for some time past, has much turned upon the commemoration of Handel, and particularly on his oratorio of the *Messiah*. I mean to lead your meditations to the language of the oratorio, and to consider, in their order, the several sublime and interesting passages of Scripture which are the basis of that admired composition.¹⁴

Today, it is considered a cutting edge trend for pastors to use current media such as music, television, or movies to bridge the gap between popular culture and the gospel. Newton was doing it at the time of the American Revolution!

Music and Evangelism in American History

American evangelicalism has a rich heritage of using music as an evangelistic tool. During the 1820's, Charles Finney was holding "revival meetings" and gained notoriety for his practice of extending an invitation for salvation and receiving an immediate response. Many clergy and parishioners up to that time felt that such a response would be no more than emotional and would not result in true conversion. One Finney biographer mentions the use of music in those early meetings, "Something else during the Utica revival worthy of mention was the use of Thomas Hastings as leader of the choir during the meetings."¹⁵

In later years, both Philip Bliss and later Ira Sankey became famous as evangelist D.L. Moody's soloists and song leaders. Though Moody himself could not carry a tune, he recognized the influence of music. George Sweeting explains, "During their 1873-1875 British campaign, Moody and Sankey became world-famous. Moody said that Sankey sang as many people into the kingdom of God as he preached."¹⁶

Billy Sunday was a beer-guzzling, carousing major league baseball player before entering the ministry and becoming America's best known preacher of the day. Joel Carpenter describes how Sunday came to faith in Christ:

His conversion came in 1886, in Chicago, and shunted his success drive into more sanctified and bourgeois channels. Billy had been drinking when he heard evangelistic singers from the Pacific Garden Mission. Soon after, he visited the mission and "got saved."¹⁷

Missional Music

Because of his own experience, Billy Sunday recognized the power and influence of music in evangelism. He later recruited Homer Rodeheaver to lead the singing and choirs in his city-wide crusades. In the early twentieth century Rodeheaver led the largest choirs in America, with between two and three thousand participants. In his day, Rodeheaver was as popular and well known in this country as the evangelist with whom he worked. He used the medium of contemporary media to spread the Gospel. Rodeheaver recorded hundreds of gospel songs and hymns for a variety of record labels, to include Victor and Edison, during the genesis of the recorded music industry in America.

Rodeheaver leveraged the power of music to influence a crowd but he was always cognizant of music's ability to spur an individual to service and faith in Christ. Widely criticized among the church for his "worldly" style and methods, he was particularly targeted for the song, *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*, which was first published in 1913 and wildly popular across America. The tune became the theme song for the Billy Sunday crusades and Rodeheaver recorded seventeen versions of it for a variety of record labels over the years.

Although the song mentions, "the Bright and Morning Star" and "the Bread of Life," the lyrics are not overtly Christian and the song was not considered "spiritual" by many people. That Rodeheaver would sing such a song and partner with secular record companies was scandalous to many in the church. Rodeheaver responded to his critics as follows:

It was never intended for a Sunday morning service, nor for a devotional meeting—its purpose was to bridge the gap between the popular song of the day and the great hymns and gospel songs, and to give men a simple, easy lilting melody which they could learn the first time they heard it, and which they could whistle and sing wherever they might be.¹⁸

The missional purpose of the church is to reach the lost. The church cannot afford to lose sight of that mission while arguing about preferences in musical taste or style. Yet even today, nearly a century after Homer Rodeheaver and Billy Sunday, people often make distinctions about music used in the "Sunday morning service" versus music used in other venues. There is no biblical mandate for any particular music style, nor for the content of a "Sunday morning service." The main thing is reaching people for Christ. If music can be both understandable and meaningful, reaching the heart of a seeker and pointing him or her to Christ, why not allow the Holy Spirit to use it as an effective tool for evangelism?

"Just As I Am"

"Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me." Anyone who has ever experienced a Billy Graham crusade or an altar call in an American evangelical church is familiar with the melody and lyrics of this invitation hymn by Charlotte Elliott. Even *Wikipedia* states, "*Just As I Am* is one of the most well-known hymns of all time, popularized especially as an altar call song in the Billy Graham crusades."¹⁹ Billy Graham appropriately titled his autobiography, *Just As I Am*.

The composer of the hymn was a popular portrait artist in Britain and an author of humorous verse. Stricken with a debilitating illness, she became an invalid for life at the age of thirty. Becoming listless and depressed, she was visited by an evangelist who declared, “Charlotte, you must come just as you are – a sinner – to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”²⁰ She received Christ and experienced inner peace and joy which continued, despite her physical impairment, until her death at age

82 in 1871. From the time of her conversion, she wrote more than 150 hymns.

The Holy Spirit used the words of an evangelist to plant biblical truth in Charlotte’s heart. This was an appeal to her will and her response was a key part of her process of spiritual formation. As she grew in faith, the truth which had been so meaningful to her took voice in a song. In turn, her song has influenced multitudes toward faith in Christ, illustrating once again the power of a sacred serenade.

¹ All biblical references, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version.

² Gussie L. Davis and Stephen Danker, *In the Baggage Coach Ahead*, Recorded by Steve Porter ca. 1899. Public Domain. International Lyrics Playground website available at <http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/i/inthebaggagecoachahead.shtml>. Accessed 14 July 2006.

³ Charles R. Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 405.

⁴ Brian D. McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 16.

⁵ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, ca. 1647 available at http://www.reformed.org/documents/WSC_frames.html. Accessed 14 July 2006.

⁶ George Barna, *Growing True Disciples* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2001), 59.

⁷ Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 99.

⁸ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 85.

⁹ Osbeck, op. cit., 7.

¹⁰ J.A. Thompson, *IVP Handbook of Life in Bible Times* (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 1986), 249.

¹¹ J. Sidlow Baxter, *Rethinking Our Priorities* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 167.

¹² “Charles Wesley Article” from *Answers.com* available at <http://www.answers.com/topic/charles-wesley>. Accessed 14 July 2006.

¹³ J.D. Douglas, *Who’s Who In Christian History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1992), 506.

¹⁴ John Newton, *The Life of the Rev. John Newton, Rector of St. Mary Woolnoth, London: Written by Himself* (London: The Religious Tract Society, undated antiquarian volume), 123.

¹⁵ Keith J. Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney, Revivalist and Reformer* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 86.

¹⁶ George Sweeting, “Moody’s Legacy.” *Moody Magazine.com*, available from http://www.moodymagazine.com/articles.php?action=view_article&id=559. Accessed 14 July 2006.

¹⁷ Mark A. Noll and others, *Eerdman’s Handbook to Christianity in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman’s Publishing Company, 1983), 371.

¹⁸ Harry Eskew, “White Urban Hymnody” from *New World Records*, available from <http://72.14.203.104/search?q=cache:55Z-pN-ayQEJ:www.newworldrecords.org/linernotes/80224.pdf+rodeheaver+yesterday%27s+voices&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=2>. Accessed 14 July 2006.

¹⁹ “Just as I am” (hymn) from *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just_As_I_Am_\(hymn\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Just_As_I_Am_(hymn)). Accessed 13 July 2006.

²⁰ Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace, 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1990), 183.