

God's Preferred Music

About 15 years ago I attended a wedding which was held in a large cathedral-like sanctuary. It was a new building, only a few years old, but it had been modelled after a Roman Catholic Church building in Croatia, with some modern features added. All the surfaces in the building were hard – drywalled walls and ceiling, marble floor, wooden pews. The ceilings were high, and the pews did not nearly cover the entire floor, leaving lots of exposed hard surfaces.

During the wedding, the couple had chosen to sing a couple of praise songs, led, rather surprisingly, by a nun playing an electronic piano. She was a good accompanist, and even though more than half of the people in attendance were familiar with the praise songs, the singing was abysmal. The problem was that praise songs have a rather upbeat tempo, but you can't sing fast songs in an echoey building. It doesn't work. The words and notes got all mixed up together.

In our sanctuary, there is little or no reverberation time. If someone claps their hands in the empty sanctuary of Nobleford CRC, the reverberation time is less than one second. (I tried it.) When the sanctuary is full of people, I suspect that there will be very little reverberation time at all. In that Croatian church, however, the reverberation time was 4-5 seconds. That means that if you clap, you will still hear it echoing after 4 seconds, even when the sanctuary was full of people. A praise song, which can have many as two or three syllables in one second, will fill the sanctuary with as many as 7 or 8 different notes. Singing quickly in a cathedral results in a terrible cacophony of noise that doesn't sound beautiful in any way.

As we well know, in Europe they started building big stone churches well over a millennium ago. We don't know much about the church music before then, for we have no recordings, but we can be sure that it didn't take long for musicians and composers to develop music that sounded beautiful in the cathedral. The notes would have had to be long, and the singing slow. A few years ago, Helen and I joined a group of people singing in a stone church in Jerusalem which had a reverberation of time of almost 10 seconds. We sang slowly, and it was beautiful. When the song ended, we could hear the last notes dying away, and because of the nature of the song, those notes blended together into beautiful harmony. Doing the same thing in our sanctuary would not have the same effect.

As these huge churches were being built across Europe, they were also looking for instruments that could fill the space. Twelve hundred years ago, the Muslims of Asia and North Africa were the most educated people in the world (while the majority of Europeans were unable to read or write), and they were preserving machines and ideas from the past. Although it is unlikely they had invented the organ, they had preserved it, and Christians in Europe found it to be the perfect instrument for their every increasingly large sanctuaries. The organ was the most complex machine in the world at that time, and it was very expensive, and it became a competition among churches to see who could afford not only the biggest building but the most beautiful organ. The church with the nicest and most expensive organ was the

winner of the prestige competition. True, they passed off their big buildings and expensive instruments as a sign of dedication to the Lord, but we can be sure that that was not their only or even first motivation.

It is not hard to understand how many today will say that truly reverent music must be sung slowly and accompanied by the organ. But slow organ music is not so much a function of reverence as it is a function of necessity and prestige.

And, thus, we have what have been called the “worship wars.” People who mistakenly believe that reverent church music must be sung slowly to the organ criticize those who long for more upbeat music led by guitar and piano, while those who prefer the faster songs complain about how boring the old music is. So, people get to arguing and bickering and complaining and sometimes churches even are divided over music preference.

Because that is all it is. It’s just preference, our preference. The question we have to ask is this: does it really matter what we prefer? I would prefer not to go to an opera because I prefer other kinds of music, and why waste money on a ticket to listen to music I don’t understand and have never grown to like? I know that many people in this area prefer country music, and they will pay big money to go to Calgary to listen to the latest and greatest country music artist. They want to be in that audience.

But let’s remember that in church, we aren’t the audience. God is. And he is the only person in the audience. So, what kind of music does God prefer? I don’t know, but I suspect that he was a little disappointed when people bragged about how big their buildings were and how expensive their organs were as they talked with the people from the neighbouring village who didn’t have quite as much to brag about. I also suspect that God is not entirely happy when he sees a group of people with all the latest instruments doing a “gig” at the front of the sanctuary while most of those gathered simply look on as they are entertained. I imagine that neither of those are high on God’s “preferred worship music” list.

What does God prefer? I suspect he prefers lyrics that are honest, biblical, true, and meaningful. I suspect that God doesn’t have a strong preference about how the music sounds, but I do suspect that he does like to hear voices raised, no matter what the style of music, as people honour him and praise him for all that he has done for us. In other words, I suspect that God prefers music that is true and that is truly sung from the heart. And he doesn’t much like it when we turn up our noses at a song and refuse to participate because we don’t “prefer” it.

I have a brother who is quite tone deaf. It’s a very unpleasant experience to sit beside him in church and even more to sit in front of him. He knows that he is tone deaf, but years ago he made the decision that he would sing anyway, and he does in full voice. It sounds horrible to us, but I suspect that to God it is some of the sweetest music he hears on a Sunday because my brother sings truthfully from the heart. I suspect God is happier with that than some of the on-key mumbling we might offer. God is happy with what he hears from my brother, I am sure, but I have wished in the past that my brother could at least get one note right. But that is my preference, not God’s. Reverent music is not slow organ-led music but, rather, reverent must be true and sung truthfully, if it is sung slowly in a large cathedral, quickly with electric guitars or off-key by someone who loves the Lord.

Pastor Gary