

SCRIPTURE AND MUSIC

WHATEVER our mood, we can match it with music; it is not a necessity but without it life would be very dull for most of us. God has implanted in a human the ability to express himself with his voice in a way other than by merely talking. He is able to modulate and smooth the tone of his voice into singing (although it may, sometimes, have a different name!). We can train ourselves to play various instruments which man in his ingenuity has invented; but whether we are able to sing, play or merely listen, most of us have an interest in music.

The words of God to Job bring us to the first music in Scripture:

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (38:4, 6–7, R.S.V.).

The sons of God “shouted”, but the morning stars “sang”. It is thought that the rotation of the planets in space causes sounds at a pitch which cannot be received by the human ear. Since music is only caused by the vibration of air, this idea is quite logical, and whilst the planets’ rotation might not sound very musical to us if we could hear it, could it be the perfect heavenly “symphony”? We have only to think of the varying types of music produced by the different cultures on this earth to realise the diversity of “pleasant” music to the human ear: Chinese, tribal, Western (civilised to us!), Middle Eastern—each to the other may sound like a cat howling, yet one’s own particular culture of music is perfectly acceptable to the ear. But we do not know what musical perfection is to God, and His creations may respond musically to Him in ways unappreciated by men.

“What though in solemn silence all
Move round this dark terrestrial ball;
What though no real voice nor sound
Amidst their radiant orbs be found;
In reason’s ear they all rejoice,
And utter forth a glorious voice;
For ever singing as they shine,
The hand that made us is Divine.”

(Hymn 79)

Perhaps they don’t rejoice only in reason’s ear?

Jubal, the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe ([Gen. 4 : 21](#)), is the first man with musical inclinations to be mentioned, but the voice must surely have been used previously. Music is an emotional outlet so far as humans are concerned and we can break into singing without any prior thought—it’s a natural outlet for a happy mood. To talk to yourself is generally reckoned to be the outward sign of inward trouble, but to sing to yourself is quite acceptable!

A glorious picture of community singing is shown in [Exodus 15](#), after Moses and his people had seen the redeeming hand of God through the Red Sea; the Psalm would follow with a relief and easy spontaneity at least on the part of Moses (perhaps the people “formally” responded, repeating his words), and Miriam and the women joyfully took up the praise:

“Miriam, the prophetess, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dancing. And Miriam sang to them: Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider has he thrown into the sea” (vv. 20–21).

In the wilderness, after the initial signal by God’s angel through the movement of the cloud that the camp of Israel was to move on, confusion was prevented amongst the thousands of campers with an attitude of “every man for himself”, by the sound of a silver trumpet. This was obviously the most effective instrument for bestirring the vast number of people involved and its use is fully explained in [Numbers 10 : 1–10](#), for this and other purposes.

There is something very relaxing for the mind in listening to a stringed instrument such as the (classical) guitar or Elizabethan lute music and presumably Saul appreciated the same qualities from a harp, especially with the control which David exercised over it. Apart from his interludes with Saul which we read of, David was clearly a man of considerable musical talent; a psalm is a holy song and he composed many of those. Some of the psalms have musical directions with them: “To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments”; “. . . for the flutes.” It is unlikely that David committed any of his music to “paper”, and after the first performance the accompaniment would probably be improvised as the instrumentalist went along, as often happens with “basic” music.

There does not seem to be any large scale instrumental or vocal music until the temple was completed. Solomon probably raised this form of worship to its peak:

“. . . all the Levitical singers, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, their sons and kinsmen, arrayed in fine linen, with cymbals, harps, and lyres, stood east of the altar with a hundred and twenty priests who were trumpeters; and it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord” ([2 Chron. 5 : 12–13](#), R.S.V.).

Worship from the Heart

This was one aspect of Divine worship which may not have crumbled when the spiritual side did; but worship must come from the heart, not the lips and hands only, and this aspect was rejected as surely as their other offerings:

“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen” ([Amos 5 : 21, 23](#), R.S.V.).

What of our musical customs today? We have no choirs in our ecclesias; do we have any singers? Of course we do, and some splendid ones at that, who obviously enjoy their singing as much as we do who hear them. But “some of us find it almost impossible to sing. Others sing and their listeners wish they did not”. Some helpful advice follows these remarks in Brother Harry Tennant’s excellent little book, *Ye Servants of the Lord*, in the chapter on music, and I well remember some practical advice from my singing days at school: “If you can’t hear the people standing next to you singing, then quieten down—you are too loud!” Sympathy is all important

in singing—with the music, with the words, with the listeners—and with The Listener Himself. Harmony in voice and in mind should be our aim.

May we sing informally together? We can, of course, but should we? It depends what “informal” is. If we sing with the same devotion and spirit in our own homes around the piano, as we show at our ecclesial services, then of course we may sing informally. But if our hymns are interspersed with comic remarks and hilarity, then our informality is wrong. We need joy in our praises but not frivolity, and we should beware of having “a good sing” just for its own sake, or to satisfy our high spirits. Our informal singing has just the same words, and it should have just the same spirit, as our ecclesial singing. *The Listener is the same.*

Ourselves and Current Music

What should our attitude be to current music? We have different tastes in many things—food, books, cars—so it would be surprising if we were all attracted to the same type of music. The “noise” which Beethoven composed was outrageous to some people in *his* audiences, so if we happen to like Beethoven’s music now, we can’t condemn “pop” music simply because it sounds outrageous to us. But much of the “pop scene” can be condemned, because from start to finish it is erotic and permissive, in its dress, in its words, and in its performance. One of the hymns sung at Sunday School comes to mind when thinking of music and our Father:

The earth doth her Creator praise,
And with the voices she doth raise,
A wondrous harmony displays,
And we would praise Thee too.

And as we in Thy love rejoice,
May each aspire with eager voice,
To render music of Thy choice,
That we may praise Thee too.

Most of God’s creation praises Him naturally—stars, mountains, rivers, trees, animals, birds. Do we in our music?

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