

Out of the Frying Pan

by Ian Hodge

ROCK MUSIC HAS RECEIVED some publicity in recent articles in some of the religious press in Australia. This occurred because the head of the Unregistered Union of Churches in Russia has sent an “Urgent Message to the Churches in America from . . . the Persecuted Church in Russia.” The letter, from Peter Peters and Vasilij Ryzhuk, apparently originally printed in *Christian Info News*, a monthly Christian newspaper from British Columbia, Canada, said in part:

For 30 years we have suffered intense persecution, and now freedom is bringing another great harm to our churches. This damage is coming from Christians in America who are sending rock music and evangelists accompanied by rock bands.

Our young people do not attend these meetings because we have all committed not to participate in secular entertainment.

This is a great burden on our hearts. Many come with the Bible in hand and rock music. We are embarrassed by this image of Christianity. We do not know what words to use in urging that this be stopped. We abhor all Christian rock music coming into our country.

Rock music has nothing in common with ministry or service to God. We are very, very against Christian Americans bringing to our country this false image of “ministry” to God. We need spiritual bread; please give us true bread, not false cakes. It is true that rock music attracts people to the church, but not to Godly living.

We were in prison for 15 years and 11 years for Christ’s sake. We were not allowed to have Christian music, but rock music was used as a weapon against us day and night to destroy our souls. We could only resist with much prayer and fasting.

Now, we have a time for more openness, and we are no longer in prison. However, now it is Christians from America who damage our souls. We do not allow this music in our church, but they rent big stadiums and infect teenagers and adults with their rock music.

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We, the leadership and congregation of the Unregistered Union of Churches, and former Persecuted Church, have made an agreement not to allow rock music into our church. We urge you to join with us and we advise you to remove rock music from America.

Do not desecrate our teenagers with it. Even the unbelievers recognise it is unholy music and they cannot understand how American Christians can be so much like the world. We can give you the conclusion that after Russian unbelievers have attended rock concerts where Christ's Word was preached, the people were very disappointed and disillusioned with Christianity.

We call this music from hell. We urge all Americans stop giving money for the organization of such concerts in Russia. We want only traditional Christian music in our churches. This is the unanimous decision of all our leaders.

When this article was reprinted in Australian press, it was bound to create a reaction. It is an emotive topic. Many people just happen to like to rock music and can't see anything wrong with it. A number of letters to *New Life* contributed to the debate, including one by myself. In nearly all instances, the authors were either against or in favor of rock music on merely subjective grounds. They happened to like it, and that was good enough for them. Naturally, if it is good enough for them, they thought it should be good enough for everyone else as well.

One writer supplied a curious argument. He claimed to have been converted at a Christian rock concert, and surely this was evidence enough that there was a good side to rock music. It is not for us to doubt his conversion, since God moves in mysterious ways. The logic behind this apparent defense of rock music, however certainly should not be accepted.

The argument as it was presented constitutes a poor attempt at constructing a syllogism, but with only one premise. The single premise was this: people are converted at rock concerts. From this single statement of fact, the conclusion is drawn that there can therefore be nothing inherently wrong with rock music. The trouble with this argument is this: there is no logical reason to move from the fact to the conclusion. Or, to put it another way, the conclusion is not warranted from the single premise.

The shallowness of the argument can be seen when we consider other circumstances of life where people are converted. Think back only a few

decades to the early evangelistic work in New Guinea by Christian missionaries. People living in great physical depravity, with little that resembled what we would call civilization, were converted. If the argument above were to be used here, we could justify maintaining these pagan civilizations merely because people are converted in them. Yet no one seriously entertains this idea. Hence, backward (what would be better called non-Christian) civilizations are encouraged to change, to become Christian in their outlook and actions.

On the other side of the argument, those against rock music fared little better. Most of the writers didn't happen to like rock music, and this was good enough reason for them. Some rightly picked up on the lyrics of rock and music and its heavy association with promiscuous and illegitimate sex and other vices. However, while this might be an acceptable criticism of non-Christian rock music, it fails to address the ultimate and underlying question: is rock music inherently bad?

Before answering that question, it is worth noting that most of the arguments for or against rock music are based on only a few assumptions. Some against rock music are prone to use the lyric argument: the words are bad, therefore let's get rid of rock music. However, it is easy to counter this argument by merely cleaning up the words so that they become acceptable. This is the rationale behind a lot of Christian rock music. Another assumption against rock is merely pragmatic: I hate rock so it should be banned.

In the debate over rock music, however, there is very little attempt to come to grips with the music itself – that is, the music divorced from the lyrics. There is probably a good reason for this omission: it becomes very difficult to find a basis to criticize the music itself from a Christian perspective. For example, the Bible does not indicate what styles or forms of music might be considered immoral. This poses a very great dilemma for the person who wishes to criticize rock music: he can't find the biblical evidence necessary to condemn it.

What is Music?

IN ORDER TO ANALYZE SOMETHING, you first need to understand what it is you're discussing. The first question seems to be this: What is music? This question, fortunately, is not difficult to answer. Composer and musician Aaron Copland points us in the direction to answer this question in his book, *What to Listen For in Music*.¹ Music, according to Copland, has four elements,

¹New York: New American Library, [1939] revised ed., 1957.

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or ingredients. These are the tools of the composer and the musician, and these are the four things that are heard by every listener to music. These ingredients are: rhythm, melody, harmony, and tone color.

It is probably impossible to have music, any kind of music, without the first two elements, rhythm and melody, and the last, tone color.² Tone color, or timbre, is “that quality of sound produced by a particular medium of musical tone production.”³ All music has a melodic line of some sort, even if we don’t think it happens to be an attractive melody. Even a single drum beating has a melody, the single monotonous tone of the instrument itself (although a clever drummer can vary the pitch of his instrument by affecting the tightness of the skin on the drum.) And it is “tone color” which tells us that the instrument in this case is a drum.

Of all the elements of music, only harmony is an option, something that is added to music in its most basic form to add depth, color, richness, and complexity. “Harmony,” in the words of Copland, “is the most sophisticated” of the musical elements.⁴ Early harmony was a reproduction of the melody line a particular interval⁵ above or below the music. Known as “organum,” it illustrates how harmony is achieved in music: by having a second melody occurring together with the first. This was achieved, however, by following certain rules: the second melody could occur at a restricted range of intervals above or below the original melodic line. The intervals were two only: the fourth and the fifth. The introduction of the more colorful thirds and sixths came much later, thus forming the basis for music as we know it today.

Organum was merely a duplicate of the original melody moving in parallel, whereas the introduction of “descant” by French composers caused the melodic lines to move in opposite directions. Not only did this add excitement to music, it imposed upon the composer a difficult, but not insurmountable, task of keeping the rules concerning the harmonic intervals. Although the second melody no longer moved in parallel motion, it was still required to use only the permitted intervals, although to this were added the intervals of the octave and unison (same note). Once the introduction of

²It could become an interesting topic for an after-dinner discussion to debate the fine point as to whether a drum, beating by itself, constitutes music. Technically, of course, it does. But I am reminded of the drummer who was told on more than one occasion to pick up his drum and beat it.

³Copland, p. 56.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁵In music, an interval is the distance in pitch between two notes.

descant occurred, it is easy to see why additional intervals were added to the list of harmonic rules.

Music and Grammar

HERE WE SEE SOMETHING that is often left out of the music debate: rules. Just as language has certain rules of grammar and syntax, music too had a developed set of rules. These rules, like the rules of language, cannot be found explicitly in the Bible, but it is certain that without them communication is impossible. In terms of language, it is thus evident that while God may not have given us grammar rules in the Bible, they are certainly an essential ingredient of any language. Since God is the author of language, we may say with some assurance that God is also the author of grammar rules. Without rules, there is no language, only the incoherent mumblings and murmurings of people who can no longer communicate with one another.

We do not fully appreciate that music is a language, a form of communication between people. Music adds a dimension to communication that spoken language is incapable of doing. So do most other art forms, and this is why all peoples have these extra forms of communication. Is it possible to find a society that has no music, dance, painting, or other forms of communication in addition to its language? Man, wherever he has been found, uses various art forms as a means of communication in addition to the spoken language.

In spoken language, however, while the rules exist, there is some flexibility for variances in these rules. The general rules are not done away with; there's change in the way a particular rule is applied.

There is also another purpose for rules: aesthetics. The body of rules that developed were also designed to help the budding composer write music that was aesthetically pleasing. In music, the recognition of harmony and disharmony is important, for it's a combination of these sounds that produce the intended result. Thus, when the rules of music said that "a part may not leap a major seventh," this was done in recognition that this interval is not generally pleasing to the human ear. It sounds peculiar, and as we refine and develop our listening skills in music, the importance of intervals is emphasized.

The development of the rules of music, though, should not be seen outside of a Christian cultural context. Primitive and pagan societies are not known for developing a body of literature on either the rules of music or on

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language grammar. There is something in the ethos of Christian faith and character that motivates people towards a more rigorous scholarship in various areas, as well as the attempt to refine and enhance certain cultural activities. Thus, while we may say that in a specific sense the Bible does not contain rules for music or spoken language, it certainly motivates people towards developing a body of rules in these areas as part of the growth and maturation of a Christian civilization.

The abandonment of rules in the arts has gone hand in hand with the philosophical shift that occurred when the Enlightenment replaced Christian faith. That the non-Christian government schools today are producing illiterates should come as no surprise to us; it is the logical result of several centuries of forsaking Christianity and replacing it with man-centered thinking.

If we can understand this philosophic and cultural shift in attitude towards rules in languages and the arts, then we can begin to comprehend where rock music fits into the scene. However, it would be wrong for us to confine this observation to rock music alone, for almost all forms of contemporary music – from the most outrageous rock styles to the most vulgar in the so-called classical music scene, from the elementary examples of contemporary middle-of-the-road popular music to the current church hymnal – display a remarkable lack of developed grammar rules.

It is not my purpose to focus on rock music alone in this article. Therefore we can consider this point in the light of church or religious music. Picking up from where we left off above in the development of music, we find that by the time of the Protestant Reformation a fairly well-defined set of rules for musical composition. These included not only rules for harmony, but also included regulations for the development of melody.⁶ The melody, what we popularly call the tune, was governed by a set of rules that were primarily negative. They were a list of what should be avoided, rather than what should be included. Like the Ten Commandments, they were a list of what was prohibited. The things not condemned, however, are the things positively encouraged.

The rules of music are eloquently illustrated in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. His music stands out for this very reason: he was a follower of the grammar rules, and within those rules he was able to illustrate the possibility of great artistic achievements when governed by a formidable body of rules. Curiously, they imposed no impediment either upon his output or

⁶A summary of these is provided by C.H. Kitson, *Counterpoint for Beginners* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927).

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his artistry; rather, they enhanced his gifts and abilities. Bach was, however, out of step with many of his contemporaries. Already, the rules were being abandoned. Within a century, revolution – political as well as musical and in the arts – was not just in the air, but too often had become a reality that claimed the lives of many across the face of Europe.

In the music of Bach and his predecessors, we can see the musical versions of the philosophical doctrine of the one and the many (in theology, the doctrine of the Trinity).⁷ This does not mean that there was a necessary self-conscious grappling with this problem in music development. But the issue is one which is basic to man and a part of his nature. He cannot escape it, and its final resolution at the human level is found in the doctrine of the Trinity.⁸

Polyphonic (i.e. many-voiced) music in general, deals with this particular philosophical problem. How is it possible to have several “voices” with their own tune while at the same time combine those individual parts into an integrated coherent composition? This, especially, was the challenge of the fugue, where the voices use the same melody but start at different points in time to the other voices. Thus, the original voice is governed by the rules of harmonic development once the second voice begins, and the complexity increases with additional voices.

It is easy to forget, however, that the music of J.S. Bach was often written for local church, and performed by the local choir and orchestra. Part of Bach’s employment at one time was not only as school teacher; he had the added obligation to provide music each Sunday in the local church. Today, Bach’s music is generally heard in the concert hall, and we too easily forget its origins.

In the later Classical period of music, the complexity of polyphonic music was being abandoned for a more simple approach. Whereas music was once a combination of various voices, each of equal importance, now music began to contain a single melodic line that was to have pre-eminence over all its subordinate harmonic parts. The harmonic parts were there to enrich and support the melody. This does not imply that Bach and his predecessors did not write this kind of music, for clearly they gave us some very fine examples.

⁷See Rousas John Rushdoony, *The One and the Many* (Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1971), for a thorough analysis of this problem at the general philosophical level.

⁸The attempt to resolve the one and the many problem can also be seen in the political realm, where its consequences are also apparent in the development of political philosophy and practice in the Christian West.

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Whereas earlier music included polyphonic and monophonic music, with the emphasis on artistic achievement being able to produce the most aesthetically pleasing polyphonic compositions, now the emphasis began to become centered on monophonic music. This is a generalization to some extent, but the evidence is there to support it.

By the end of the 18th century, the onslaught against Christianity was marked. The French Revolution had endeavored to introduce a new world order based on the basic tenets of atheism and humanism. The results were evident for all to see. It was left to Beethoven to epitomize the Revolution with his onslaught against the older forms and rules of music. This he undertook with great gusto and a remarkable talent. While it is difficult to point out the pinnacle of Beethoven's musical declaration of the new society based on humanism, his ninth symphony, if not deserving of the first prize, is certainly near the top of the list. The revolution ended with the music of Wagner, and it is no coincidence that his music was a favorite of the failed 20th century experiment in humanism, the attempted new world order of Hitler and the Nazi regime.

The denial of God, however, leads to each man being his own god. The end result is not a system held together by rules and regulations that, although not set in absolute concrete, are at least able to provide a solid basis in which civilization can grow and flourish. Rather, the logical result of humanism is existentialism. Each person is his own god, his own island, where the rules are of his own making. For the existentialist, there are no rules except for those which he is willing to accept. The result, musically and in all other areas of life, is anarchism.

While modern-church based music is not anarchistic in the sense that is based on humanism, it very definitely reflects the shift away from polyphonic music. The modern church hymnal contains music that is generally trivial and elementary, since these seem to be essential ingredients for modern congregations. It consists of a single melodic line, usually with four-part harmony. Most of those harmonic lines, if sung by themselves, illustrate the immature character of contemporary religious music. There are few exceptions.

In this sense, both rock music and modern church music can be seen in a similar light. Both are examples of a shift away from the older, more complex, more "sophisticated" (to borrow Copland's terminology), and therefore more intellectually rigorous forms of music. It should not surprise us to find that a number of professional musicians in their mature years increasingly turn to the music of J.S. Bach. It is the rigorous disciplinarian in Bach and polyphonic music that appeals to many mature people. No doubt

part of this is educational; one becomes increasingly aware of the tremendous discipline that is required to compose aesthetically pleasing music when governed by a formidable body of rules. There is also a corresponding understanding that it is increasingly impossible to produce aesthetically pleasant musical compositions when there are no rules whatsoever.

Musical Antinomianism

DISCIPLINE, HOWEVER, IS NOT A POPULAR virtue in the modern world, and for some strange reason is too often reduced to apply only in very narrow areas. It is discipline that is missing from the rock musician's vocabulary. This should not surprise us, since it is also missing from the vocabulary of many disciplines (there's that word again). It is certainly missing from many contemporary Christian musicians who feed us with a constant barrage of music that is, like rock music, hidden behind an array of electronic gadgetry, all designed to mask the performer's inability to produce a high quality product.

For example, it takes many years of discipline to learn how to write the kind of music composed by a Bach or Brahms. The complexity of contrapuntal music is mastered by very few music students today, and it is certainly not even attempted by most rock musicians, whether they are performers or composers. For most, amplification equipment replaces disciplined study to perfect vocal or instrumental technique.

Where is the rock musician who is capable of playing a Brahms' Piano Concerto? It does no good to say that he is not interested in playing it, for this is a truism. We are not here arguing over interests, but over abilities. Even if he wanted to, the rock musician is incapable of playing the music. It is beyond his (or her) abilities; rock musicians are not noted for the technical mastery of their instruments. Neither are most Christian musicians remembered for their artistry and skill. Too many Christians are, in Franky Schaeffer's terminology, "addicted to mediocrity."

Some might also ask where is the classical musician who can play rock. And the two questions together point to the vast difference between the two concepts of music. If we take the piano as an instrument to illustrate the point, the technique for playing rock music is vastly different to that required to play a Brahms Concerto. Whereas rock music requires a hand that approaches the keyboard like a blacksmith's hammer, the Brahms' concerto will require years of perfecting the coordination of ear and fingers in order that the line, color and texture of the music can be brought to the listener's attention. Whereas rock music is based on loudness and electronic effects, a

Chopin recital requires great skill at painting audible shapes and colors in a range of subtle nuances, not the least of which is mastering the art of “*con rubato*.”

It is not so much that rock musicians are poorly disciplined musicians that is the sole problem, however. It is the fact that they also resent having the older standards of music applied to them. They want to decry all objective standards of music in favor of an existentialist and subjective “matter of opinion.” Thus, they put themselves beyond criticism, thereby attempting also to put themselves beyond the application of standards.

Rock musicians are the equivalent of theological antinomians: they have no standards outside their own subjective opinions that they will permit to be used in judgement of what they do. This is why the primitivism that underlies rock music is correctly associated with those cultures that are also recognized by their lack of disciplines and standards in other areas. Unfortunately, most of the arts have gone the same antinomian route, having abandoned any concept of objective standards.

Into the Fire

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US in our criticism of rock music? What I have attempted to do here is provide a general framework for a critical response to rock music in particular, and other forms of music in general. Most of the published criticisms of rock music are way off the mark, and definitely provide no alternative. For example, some people try to criticize rock because of its use of rhythm. But some forms of classical music, including very much the music of J.S. Bach, has just as much rhythm, with very similar patterns. It would be better to say that it is the *manner* in which the rhythm is used that is one of the complaints against rock music. In the music of Bach the rhythm is subordinated to the melody and harmony. In later musical development, the addition of the timpani into the symphony orchestra again provided composers with the means of giving a heightened importance to rhythm, although it has taken modern rock music to make us aware of this fact.

But this brings us back to the burning issue. What standards of musical form and artistic performance will be adopted? Why is it that earlier musicians, especially those associated with the church subordinated rhythm to the other elements of music? Why is it that when music was associated closely with Christian faith and character that the complex rules of melody and harmony provided an intellectual challenge to all three people involved in musical performance: the composer, the performer and the listener? It is this subordination of rhythm, however, which might be the distinguishing

characteristic of Western music. Most societies associated with cultural and social primitivism are noted for their emphasis on rhythm in music.

It is for this reason that the Russian church leaders are right in banning rock music. Its association with primitivism cannot be denied. Their former persecutors who used rock music against them during their incarceration certainly understood that Christian culture does not produce rock music. Our poor educational curriculum does not inform us of the association between music and religion. Thus, it can be surprising to learn that “music played an important role in the Christianization of heathens and in subduing of occasional pagan uprisings. . . .”⁹

The older forms of music are no longer taught. According to Kitson, “This is an age of destructive criticism. But a destructive policy is futile unless accompanied by a superior constructive one.”¹⁰ Pietism had won over the older forms of Christianity which had produced some of men’s greatest artistic achievements.¹¹ Thus, to offer a criticism of rock music without providing an alternative that is itself based on personal tastes, is the equivalent of jumping out of the frying pan into the fire.

Conclusion

IN THIS ESSAY I’VE ATTEMPTED to provide an alternative to rock music that does not lead to that which is a not much better choice. While the general run of modern church music is devoid of the rhythmical emphasis of rock music, its melodic and harmonic structures are not much higher than the earlier grade levels – *if* we apply the older rules of musical composition. “Addicted to mediocrity” is certainly true in the contemporary religious music scene, and if nothing else, it is certain that modern church music is not about to replace rock music in people’s lives. It simply isn’t good enough.

Not only is there an addiction to mediocrity in the modern world, there is a noticeable resentment against the older standards and rules. It is not just the rules of composition that have been abandoned, however. Also thrown out are the cultural standards of what is good artistic performance, as pointed

⁹Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1941), p. 58.

¹⁰Kitson, *Op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹¹Lang, *Op. cit.*, pp. 468ff, 700ff.

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out above.¹² One has only to compare the performance of Chopin's music, for example, by a contemporary pianist with that of David Saperton or Malcuzyński to provide evidence in the very great shift in performance standards. Hardly any contemporary pianist is willing to put in the hours of disciplined practice necessary to reproduce the achievements of Simon Barere's artistic coloring on the keyboard, just as most violinists cannot duplicate the artistic abilities of Yascha Heifetz. Most of all, it is the "who cares about these standards" attitude that illustrates the heart of the problem.¹³

The Scriptures encourage us to grow beyond ourselves and build a better society based on biblical standards. Thus, it is not surprising that the so-called Christian West created the cultural climate for the development of the music of a J.S. Bach or a Johannes Brahms, not to mention the great literary works of a Shakespeare. The religious beliefs and the music go together.

To defend rock music (or any other, for that matter) on the grounds of personal subjectivism is thus to make ourselves the standard of what is good and bad. Would it not be better, though, to defer this to the higher – much higher – standards that men derive when they are obedient to the Bible?

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¹²See Robert Schaeffer, *Resentment Against Achievement: Understanding the Assault Upon Ability* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988).

¹³An interesting example of declining music standards, both performance and composition, is the loss in interest in the Leopold Godowski transcriptions of Chopin's Etudes for the piano. These compositions are challenging enough for even the most professional pianist using two hands. But Godowski took pianism to a higher level when he transcribed the originals for left hand alone. In many instances he provided additional transcriptions adding a right-hand part to his left hand original. These transcriptions have not only dropped out of the concert repertoire because of changing tastes: they also reflect the turning away from that which requires rigorous discipline.