

The Rhythm of Life

by Ian Hodge, Ph.D.

A POPULAR SONG IN THE 1970'S was entitled "The Rhythm of Life." A line from that song said, "For the rhythm of life is a powerful beat . . . rhythm in your fingers, rhythm in your feet." This fact has been known to mankind since earliest times. This is why it is possible to analyze the music of a particular culture and gain some idea of their view on life.

Music is a language. It allows men and women to express themselves through a non-verbal medium. When words are added to music, it becomes a very, very powerful tool for communication, for it now combines the power of words with the communication abilities of music. (We can also add other non-verbal communication that goes along with music, such as in music theater, or even in concert performance, where performers will endeavor to enhance their audible communication with visible gestures.)

Music consists of four basic elements. These elements are melody, harmony, rhythm, and sound color.¹ This last element refers to the various types of music instruments available to express musical ideas as well as the capacities of the various instruments themselves to change the nature and color of the sound to enhance communication. Thus, tubas are used for some kinds of music, whereas flutes used for another; music representative of elephants will utilize the tuba or double bass but not the flute or the piccolo.

Music has been used since earliest times for various purposes. In the Bible, David played skillfully to soothe Saul. In more recent times, "Music played an important role in the Christianization of heathens and in the subduing of occasional pagan uprisings."²

Our purpose here is to think about these elements of music and ask ourselves what kind of music might be used for various occasions. A march

¹Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music* (revised ed: New York: Mentor Books, [1939] 1957).

² Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1942), p. 58.

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and a waltz both use all the elements of music. But it is the rhythm that sets them apart. Even within music "families," a waltz in France is different to one in Vienna, and again it is the rhythm that distinguishes them. A Polish mazurka has the same number of beats in the bar as a polonaise or a waltz, but what makes it a mazurka is the way the rhythm is structured. An important part of music education and appreciation is to recognize these differences.

Since music is found in all cultures, what is it that distinguishes Western music from that of other cultures? Ultimately, it is the way that the four elements are combined in musical composition. For purposes of this essay, I am concentrating on the use of rhythm in Western music, since it is evident that rhythm has found a newfound importance in music.

As the breakdown of Christian morality has continued unfettered for many decades, it is curious to note the changes in music style that have occurred along with it. Christian culture, with its emphasis on the harmony of creation under God, gave us a certain kind of music. We can trace that music and its development for the past 1,000 years. For us today, however, that music has been based on the "tempered" scales, (major and minor) that music students around the world struggle to master. Before the "tempered" scales, music, mainly in the control of the churches, gave us a different kind of music, a music that is still today recognized as a legacy of the Christian church.

Western music, certainly until the time of Bach, was also governed by rules, just as language today is still governed by rules. There was order and relationship within the music, governed not only by rules of harmony (which notes sound best when played or sung together) but rules of melodic composition. These rules allowed children of young ages to write music, just as a knowledge of English grammar allows children to write compositions in English. They might not be great compositions, but they nevertheless communicate because the rules of language are followed. So, too, with music. Children could write compositions that might not be great musical composition, but certainly were acceptable within the framework of age and experience of the composer.

This music, however, also combined the elements of music in particular ways. A gross use of rhythm was considered vulgar. It's not that rhythm was left out, but it was combined with the other elements in ways that placed a more important role on the other elements, melody in particular. Musicians were also expected to make a judicious choice of instruments for their

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compositions. A wrong selection of instruments for an orchestral composition could make the piece sound bizarre.

Over the past two centuries or more, this has changed. Man, in his revolt against the Christian God, has done whatever is necessary to have music state the obvious: no God, no order; no order, no harmony. This was also reflected in a gradual abandonment of melody and its imposed rules for composition. This is the state of much contemporary music: a series of disjointed sounds with neither melodic nor harmonic relationship.

These abandoned elements placed a priority on the intellect and aesthetic judgement. Just as good prose requires a judicious use of words and phrases, so, too, good music requires a careful choice of the sounds and an ordering of their relationship. Polyphonic (many voices) music requires a mastery of the rules of harmony and melodic writing in order to be successful. It is the priority of order and relationship -- and intellectual challenge at its deepest level -- that sets early Western music apart. For Christianity, of all the religions, emphasizes the intellect and its priority over other aspects of man's nature, such as emotion. It is not so much a matter of intellect versus psychology but rather the emotional and psychological aspects of man's nature were to be controlled by the intellect or "right reason" which, in turn, was to be governed by an understanding of God's Word. Thus, Johann Josef Fux, the great 18th century writer on the art of fugue said, "Since God is the highest perfection, the harmony composed for his praise should follow the strictest rules that perfection can claim, as far as human imperfection can realize them."³

Thus, as man untied himself from a belief in God, so too, he untied himself from the rational and linked himself with the emotional. Now he would be ruled by what he "felt" was right, not what his intellect, after serious study and reflection dictated to him. "If it feels good, do it." became a slogan of the modern era and is the logical result of the establishment of the priority of the psychological aspects of man's nature over the mind.

In music these things were well understood. In the baroque era, for example, the chromatic scale was associated with emotion. But in Western music emotion was subordinated to the intellect: it became, in other words,

³Quoted in Alfred Mann, *The Study of Fugue* (New York: Dover Publications, [1958] 1987), p. 77. Fux's classic work on fugue is titled, *Gradus ad Parnassum*, and first appeared in 1725.

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organized. The Western World, Christendom, was dead by the time of Napoleon. And since that time, music has taken a downward spiral emphasizing the emotions rather than the intellect, emphasizing man and the created order, rather than a higher order that might inspire man to bigger and better things.

To state these things, however, is to make no great statement about music. Many people understand these things. That is why, for example, the music that is to be found in the local club, hotel, or disco, is music that emphasizes rhythm. Imagine, if you can, a disco playing the great cantatas of Bach. Is this the kind of music that accompanies the activities associated with discos? Strip bars would highlight this issue more, which is why strip bars and discos play the kind of music they do: it is the kind of music that lends itself to the other activities that go on in these places. These are not state secrets. These facts are known to anyone who takes a few minutes to ask himself why it is that particular things are always found together.

What is surprising, however, is the propensity of so many churches to introduce the kind of music that is found in strip bars and discos. While it may be maintained that the music has religious words attached to it, and sometimes it is even the words of Scripture themselves, this does not properly address the issue. We still need to ask ourselves the question: Which is the better way for the Christian mind to utilize the elements of music?

Even many churches that decry Christian “rock” music have succumbed to the acceptance of the modern form of church music, reflected in the use of music that has a reliance on rhythm as the strongest ingredient of all the elements. This is why when the band gets rolling and the people start hand-clapping, the bodies begin to sway – just as they do down the road in the discos and the strip joints. Swaying bodies and strong rhythm go hand in hand. So, too, do swaying male and female bodies and an unhealthy sexuality. Which just might help to explain why a number of leaders in churches that utilize rhythmic music have ended up in adulterous relationships. I am not saying that the music is the only explanation here, but I am suggesting that the music can help and encourage certain attitudes, even wrong ones if we select the wrong music. “Disordered music,” argues E. Michael Jones, “leads to disordered lives. . . .”⁴

⁴E. Michael Jones, *Dionysos Rising: The Birth of Cultural Revolution Out of the Spirit of Music* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), p 19.

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Making the local church relevant to our times is the argument used to adopt the kind of music of popular culture. And popular culture surely cannot be called Christian in many aspects. To attempt to baptize pop culture with religious words is either an act of ignorance, or a tacit acceptance of pop culture itself. Which is why some folk don't *want* to change the music. It is not as if the music of pop culture *has* to be used. No one is forcing people to use it. But there is hardly a church in existence that is seeking alternatives in music style.

To return to the hymns of the previous generation is not going to be the answer. While this music had softer rhythm than the music of contemporary culture being used in the church, it also reflected an abandonment of the intellect with its simple melodies and boring harmony. An over use of the tonic, sub-dominant, and dominant harmonies -- again another sign of contemporary music -- is not the mark of an overly intelligent music. These are the harmonies that are learnt in the early grades, and many, perhaps most of the churches' contemporary hymns, harmonically speaking, have not got past junior school.

Music in the church has adopted the familiar. In its efforts to make church music easily sung it has adopted familiar music structures and ideas, just as is happening with the adoption of the contemporary music styles into the church. But it is the familiarity of the style that gives the point away: music does not obtain familiarity once a week in church. Music is familiar because it is heard all the time. Familiarity comes hearing to the radio, watching television, listening to the CD or tape player.

Mankind needs a music that will take him beyond himself and his narrow, self-centered view of life. It is the church's task to provide this music, something it is not doing at the moment. To achieve this, it is not necessary to tell the Sunday night drummer to pick up his drum and beat it. It may be necessary to tell the drummers of this world that rhythm isn't everything – and, if necessary, replace their drumsticks with a feather. But it will be essential for the Christian church to develop its own kind of music. A music that will stir the minds *and* the hearts of the people. To do this, it will be, by definition, unpopular music. This does not mean it should be bad music. Since it will be the church's efforts to change culture, it will not be familiar to those outside the church.

What contemporary church music needs is not to copy the style of the pagan culture surrounding it: rather it needs to be stimulated by the use of imagination that reflects a Christian culture – even though that culture does

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not exist at present. For it will be development of a new wave of Christian music (amongst other things) that will bring about a new culture. If music can be used to assist in the suppression of pagan riots as it has in the past, then it can be used in the subjugation of the pagan to Christ once again.

But – and here's the rub – there's a catch. In order to achieve a change in music we need people who can write music. Modern music education emphasizes performance, not composition. So a radical change in the way we educate our young in music is required amongst Christians before we can expect cultural rebirth of Christendom in music. Composition, however, forces us to teach rules, just as it does in English grammar classes. And it is the rules of music, especially the rules of melodic composition that governed earlier periods, that some are keen to ignore in order to maintain the simplified hymns and Christian “rock” of the contemporary church. Stalemate, or is it checkmate? The bad guys continue to influence our culture with their perverted music and lifestyles which are uncritically passed off as "Christian" music.

May God raise up Christian musicians who can see past the contemporary culture of today and, with real imagination, provide us with music that, first of all, will not be associated in style with the disco and strip joint, but will raise man's vision above and beyond this world so that he may truly capture a vision of the Kingdom of God.

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