

In Tune With God
By Lilianne Doukhan

Culture

I have argued in this guild and elsewhere that at the heart of the worship and music wars is the matter of culture. At the outset of her work Lilianne recognizes the cultural nature of music, and stated unequivocally that true artists speak to their culture and have something to say to their society. “Through their works composers celebrate life, comment on life, express their view of life, draw attention to issues in society, protest, criticize, accuse, stir awareness and consciousness, or drive home a reality” (p. 18). Music, worship, yes all of life is cultural. Thus, a person’s appreciation of consonance and dissonance is subjective based on one’s cultural comfort zone. The harmonic language that we westerners find so appealing, took centuries to evolve to the satisfactory familiar perspective from which we argue for our music as superior viz a viz other cultural musics or other contemporary non-classical music.

“A given melodic turn, a particular chord progression, a rhythmic pattern, or a specific instrument may evoke a number of different meanings,” she writes (p.33). The reason for this is because music is an acquired experience. “Music does not happen in a vacuum but is intimately tied with, and carried by, a given culture or society” p. 38). Context and education gives music its meaning. “There is no universal way music is appreciated in different cultural settings” (p. 39; cf. p. 58). She gives good examples of this statement of fact. The illustration I regularly use is that of Bob Marley’s first visit to Russia. After the first number by Bob Marley and the Wailers, the audience politely applauded as they would after hearing a Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto. Bob had to tell them that that was not the way to respond to Reggae. He had to educate them how to move and gyrate to the rhythm and sounds. They had to be educated into the Jamaican culture.

She debunks the concept that elements of music such as beat, rhythm, and syncopation are evil in themselves, or evil because their origins are in the spirit world of Africa. Such postulations are based on “misinformation, ignorance, or simply prejudice” (p. 23). Painstakingly she demonstrates both the neutrality of these elements as well as their universality. For example, quite enlightening was fact that syncopation was a basic rhythmic feature of Western, European music since the Middle Ages. It was imported to Louisiana by early French settlers. Africans incorporated this feature into their music, with jazz being the resultant hybrid.

Lilianne’s arguments and illustrations are an important positive contribution to the worship wars. The issues in the war have nothing to do with biblical orthodoxy or soteriological morality. It is all about culture.

Wholeness

Lilianne rightly recognizes that the Biblical perspective on worship addresses human beings as whole: the body, emotions, and mind. She strongly argues through the book for a balance between the cognitive and the emotive. “Addressing both mind and heart is still essential for today’s worship,” she writes (p.102). Very little, however, is said about the body; and when it is addressed (at least in one place) it is identified as “our senses” (p. 37). I wish to argue that the “body” should not only refer to the senses, but to the physical. The fear of dancing as part of the worship experience has led to the denigration of the use of the body and its movement in worship. This of course arises out of the Greek dichotomy of the body and soul – the latter being evil and needs suppression, the former good and

should be elevated. But wholistic worship must incorporate the physical. Many cultures, like the African culture, use bodily movements as worshipful sacrifices to God. And just as the music prior to the sermon sets the heart in tune to hear a cognitive sermon, so also music can set the pace for a physical expression of worship.

The issue of sacred vs. secular is an issue of wholeness. “There is no such thing as inherently sacred music, neither by the use of a particular instrument of genre nor by a given musical style. Our interpretation of music as sacred is also a learned experience” she writes (p. 44). It is the religious community that “needs to determine which musical language belongs to *its own cultural setting*, and which is appropriate to express the values attached to the sacred and supernatural as they are understood within that given culture or subculture” (p. 46). She is right on here. Again, I draw on the Jamaica context: Bob Marley and reggae music which were anathema to most devote Christians just a few decades (or maybe just a few years) ago, have now found pride of place in the Anglican Hymnal. Yes, “One love; let’s get together and feel alright” is now a Christian hymn – sung with luster and danced with vibrancy on many a Sunday morning in the great Church of England sanctuaries across the nation!

Lilianne is correct when she states on p. 48 that we must “distinguish between the aesthetic (spiritual) experience and a religious experience; they are not equivalent.” She is also correct in rejecting the platonic dichotomy between the spiritual and material world in terms of bad and good. However, I would not limit the spiritual to the realm of the aesthetic. Spiritual is the overarching concept. The opposite of spiritual is not material or secular. The antonym is “profane.” There can be sacred versus secular – that is, something set apart for a special purpose vs. something for general use. But the sacred or the religious can be profane or it can be spiritual. The same is true for the secular. It can be guided by and filled with the Spirit or it can be profane. The focus of spiritual is the triune God. The center of the profane is self. Let’s illustrate: When Bob Marley wrote “One Love” it was out of a deep Rastafarian religious experience. However, the popular (what some would call secular) society took it over and made it profane in the self-centered culture of drugs and sex. The religious world has now re-baptized it and filled it with its original alterocentric spirituality – an othercenteredness with its center in Jesus Christ.

All music can be appropriately performed (and that is not the best word; worship is not a performance as Lilianne rightly argues) in the public worship service if Christ is at the center. That is what makes it “spiritual.” Whether it comes originally from the non-religious or the religious settings it must be christocentric for it to be acceptable for the worship experience.

In this vein, I would suggest that her historical (and theological?) discussion of contrafacta (the technique or borrowing entire tunes and songs from secular or religious traditions) is worth the price of the book. This excellent discussion beginning on p. 166, but highlighted throughout the work, should put to rest once and for all the arguments of those who see worldly influences creeping into the church when so-called secular music is incorporated in the worship liturgy.

Response

On last bit on Lilianne’s timid opposition to clapping in church as discussed on p. 96. This is a classic example of the cultural nature of worship. She notes that “people would never think to clap after a prayer.” In the Black culture all expressions are accepted if it comes from the soul. I have often experienced much clapping, moaning, shouting, rich and soft “amens” during a powerful prayer. As I visit churches today, I find that clapping has replaced the traditional “amens” and/or the no-response of

the more euro-centric congregations. Clapping as response is not only done after the musical selection, but it is the response of choice throughout the entire service, especially during a great and heart-touching sermon.

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