

An Important Question for Our Times--Is Music Amoral?
Revised and Expanded
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To be absolutely clear, the question must be stated several ways. Is music neutral? Is sound capable of moral influence? Does music alone, with or without text, carry and communicate moral value? Is music amoral? The answer to this watershed question divides much of the Christian community and greatly influences the character of the music which may be heard in a particular church. When I posed this question to Robert Shaw he responded, without a moment of hesitation, "All the arts are moral." It was very obvious that the most celebrated choral conductor of the twentieth century had seriously pondered this matter prior to our discussion. During a rehearsal with his Collegiate Chorale in February of 1953, he is reported to have said and later clarified in a letter to the group, ". . . music is the most moral of the arts" (*Dear People*, Joseph Mussulman, p. 108).

It is interesting to note that the neutrality controversy is a relatively recent phenomenon and is primarily limited to the Christian community. Although secular sources from the time of the ancient philosophers to present-day writers allude to the topic frequently, one is indeed hard pressed to find anyone from that contingent who sides with the position that music is amoral. My library includes over seventy books on this general topic. I have yet to find a secular author who even hints at making a case for the neutrality of music. Perhaps the only exception is Stravinsky who reportedly commented that his music was an "object," a "thing," with no particular meaning beyond itself (*What to Listen for in Music*, Aaron Copland, p. 12). Virtually all others write eloquently and with great passion for the music-has-great-moral-impact position. It must be understood that their motivation is, unlike ours, primarily sociological rather than spiritual. The artist and the social scientist are concerned about the impact of music on individuals and society as a whole. Our interest and plea, as believers, comes from a sensitivity regarding the influence of music on the Christian and subsequently on the body of Christ. Of equal concern is our testimony before the world.

Those who belong to Christ are called to be separate from the world (1 John 2:15-17). There ought to be a distinguishable, on-the-surface difference between that which is worldly and that which is sacred. The sacred and the profane should coexist and mingle about as comfortably as oil and water. In a society and culture where a clear Christian testimony with an overt witness is becoming more difficult and increasingly restricted (2 Timothy 3:13), music is one of those vehicles which still allows for an uncluttered, distinctive, and telling witness.

Rather than finding believers making a conscientious effort to display biblical values through Christian music, the non-believer discovers a community which strives to mimic the world in its sound, sensibility, sensuality, and degeneracy. This practice does not go unnoticed. Joseph Eger is well known in secular music circles. He has conducted and guest-conducted major orchestras of the world. He is considered to be one of the greatest French horn players alive. In 2005, he authored a fascinating book with the title, *Einstein's Violin: A Conductor's Notes on Music, Physics, and Social Change*. "Songs of Praise," the seventh chapter in the book is a brief (only four pages) commentary on "religious music." This man of renowned and celebrated artistic stature makes an observation which clearly speaks to the discussion of this article and blisteringly lays bare the testimony consequences of music-is-amoral thinking. Even though Mr. Eger gives no indication of knowing the Savior, he uses language which echoes the conditions in Ezekiel 22:26, "Her priests have violated my law, and have profaned mine holy

things: they have put no difference between the holy and the profane” How does Mr. Eger describe what is taking place in the “Songs of Praise” arena? He writes, “Anything goes in contemporary religious gatherings—hymns, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, jazz, rock, symphony, dance. The sacred and the profane have become buddies.” (p. 38)

A Divisive Debate

In order to gain a more complete perspective of the dynamics of this debate, it is entirely appropriate and necessary for us to first consider when, why, and under what circumstances this issue evolved. It is critical to our insight because, as Michael Hamilton (Associate Professor of History at Seattle Pacific University) correctly points out in a *Christianity Today* article, “. . . American churchgoers no longer sort themselves out by denomination so much as by musical preference” (“The Triumph of the Praise Songs,” Michael S. Hamilton, *Christianity Today*, July 12, 1999, pp. 29-35). Sacred music, which holds the marvelous power to unite the body of Christ in vertical praise unto the Lord, has become a divisive horizontal entity subject to individual taste and preference while at the same time creating a raging debate and grievous polarization among believers. Mr. Hamilton makes the observation that, “Our new sectarianism is a sectarianism of worship style. The sectarian creeds are dogmas of music Churches that are too small to sustain separate congregations with separate worship styles are either trying to mix musical styles (‘blended worship’), or they are fighting and dividing over which music to use.” Later in the article Mr. Hamilton reveals his position on this watershed issue when he writes, “The job of the local church is to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ, to draw people into a living relationship with God, and to remold disciples of Jesus into a Sermon-on-the-Mount shape. Any worship music that aids a church in these tasks is almost certainly a conduit of the Holy Spirit.” The contemporary church employs virtually all pop music styles in worship. Thus we could well conclude that this author considers music to be amoral since he gives no caution—“any worship music.” Yet he makes a valuable observation which greatly bolsters the moral position when he writes, “When one chooses a musical style today, one is making a statement about whom one identifies with, what one’s values are, and ultimately, who one is.” How has Mr. Hamilton aided the music-is-moral position with this statement? Music styles selected by individuals are a means by which values are espoused. Individual values are an evidence of morals; therefore, music styles have moral significance.

The inherent contradiction evident in the *Christianity Today* article reflects the dilemma of those in the Christian community who stoutly maintain that music is neutral, yet having to admit to its power and notable influence on character and values. 1 Corinthians 15:33 gives further insight and an unmistakable warning—“Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners.” Music is a powerful instrument of communication. Manners are the fleshing out of values and character. That which is neutral, obviously, cannot impact character. However, when we ascribe or attribute morality to an entity, it must, by its very nature, have the capacity to affect and influence character. If music is moral, then it will, by necessity, prevail upon behavior--the evidence of character. We can't have it both ways! Music is either neutral and has no bearing on values or it is moral and, as do other moral agents, impacts character and values. Therefore, it is inconsistent and illogical to say music is amoral, and yet has influence upon values.

Some may well object with, “But don’t you realize that the word communication in that passage does not literally mean communication, it speaks more of manner of life.” True. But, we must understand that what Gutenberg did for words, Edison accomplished for sound. And as

a result of the audio revolution which Edison began, today's music enjoys more air time with unparalleled influence on dress, buying habits, speech, politics, economics, pace of life, religion, relationships, work, play, and world view than in any time in the history of man. Music has indeed become a manner of life. Basil Cole, in his book *Music & Morals*, makes it rather clear for us with, "If we are what we eat, we are likewise to a certain extent what we hear." (p. 117)

Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy: How Music Captures Our Imagination is an intriguing book written by Robert Jourdain. He is a scientist and a musician and gives us an accurate perspective how pervasive music has become in individual lives and society as a whole. He writes, ". . . music is *everywhere* and embedded in *everything*." (p. 238) Music is, in truth, a manner of life.

Julian Johnson wrote a most interesting book with the title, *Who Needs Classical Music? Cultural Choice and Musical Value*. He was educated at the University of Cambridge, Dartington College of the Arts, and the University of Sussex. This author lectures at the University of Oxford and is well known for his work on music aesthetics and the impact of music on society. He is also a respected composer.

Consider Mr. Johnson's view on music and morality. He writes, "Different musics are not neutral in terms of value systems; they are positioned because they quite literally *do* different things. And our participation in different musical systems necessarily involves us in these different value-positions that different musics construct." (p. 8) He continues, "Investing in the products of the music industry is one way we define our personal identities." (p. 15) Yet Mr. Johnson, like virtually all other secular writers on this topic, disagrees with Mr. Hamilton's position on music morality when he concludes ". . . music has an ethical dimension, and our use of music and the musical choices we make involve us in ethical decisions." (p. 115)

The Music Within You, written by two certified music therapists and music educators, Shelley Katsh and Carol Merle-Fishman, includes similar sentiment in the summary on page 208. They write, "Music is not just a special part of life; it represents life itself. From it we receive inspiration, excitement, and emotional enrichment. With it we create, communicate, and express who we are."

A timely, appropriate, and searching question to ask is, "Who are we?" We are the people who claim the Truth. Is that not the cry from our pulpits? Is this not the earnest personal testimony to friends, relatives, neighbors, and co-workers? If then, we express with our music who we are, the music in our homes, cars, and in our places of worship, becomes an integral Truth statement. Such a statement, the music therapists declare, is often "non-verbal." (p. 206) Indeed, much of music, including music in our worship services, is instrumental. And, after all, not everyone in every service can be familiar with the lyrics of every instrumental prelude, offertory or special. Thus the style of the sound, the mood which the music summons, the manner in which it is created and presented, the sensibility surrounding the presentation, and the pictures which it paints in the minds of listeners, all contribute to an unmistakable value statement. The music clearly expresses who we are--yet often without words.

The world has a rather precise perspective of music's influence on the individual and society as a whole. Dr. Peter Wicke is the Director of the Center of Popular Music Research at Humboldt University in Berlin, Germany. He has been active for many years as an author and music critic. In *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements*, he writes, "Music is a medium which is able to convey meaning and values which--even (or, perhaps, particularly) if hidden within the indecipherable world of sound--can shape patterns of behavior imperceptibly over time until they become visible background of real political activity." (p. 81)

A Brief History of the Question--Is Music Amoral?

Music-is-neutral thinking evolved in Christian circles in the late 1960's and in the early 1970's. It was during this same period that Western culture experienced a traumatic and turbulent upheaval. Judeo-Christian values and mores were ridiculed, attacked, and promptly discarded. The revolution in music played no small role in that process. From evangelicals came the clamor for the Church to relate to contemporary culture. Music, a marvelous expression of faith for the believer and often a propellant of cultural change, was chosen as the vehicle for the Church to connect to a society experiencing tumultuous change.

In 1969, Don Wyrzten, a young, gifted, influential musician and familiar name in Christian music circles, wrote in his Master of Theology Thesis at Dallas Theological Seminary, "Every generation of Christians is responsible to impart the Christian message to the cultural setting in which it finds itself." He continued by claiming that "Christianity will not get a hearing in the contemporary culture until Christians become unshackled from their cultural apathy and begin to enter the arena where the debates of our time are taking place" (*An Introduction to a Christian View of the Arts*, Donald John Wyrzten, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1969, pp. 61-62).

The debate, which continues to this day, encompassed an entirely new approach to sacred music. The pop sound, which had been considered inappropriate for church music, began to gain respectability. Since that time, the new religious music (today known as contemporary Christian music--CCM), virtually indistinguishable from the music of the world in its sound, sensibility, and antics, has been welcomed into an increasing number of churches. Today it is prominent on the platform, firmly planted in the pew, and even more securely anchored in the private listening habits of the average believer. How did CCM get invited and who did the inviting? What conditions hastened a monumental change in practice, in philosophy, and in the purpose of sacred music? How did that which was art-oriented, contemplative, uplifting, wholesome, and orderly get replaced with the pop sound from the lounge, dance floor, honky tonk, and other places where the world congregates to feed the flesh? Why should the believer have concern about the new association? Mr. Johnson has the answer. "Because in art, and music most of all, *what* is said is inseparable from how it is said." (*Who Needs Classical Music?*, p. 104)

It all ensued with a change in purpose. Purpose dictates practice. "We must relate to our culture," was the cry. When the goal, motivation, and mission for sacred music was modified from exalting the Lord and encouraging the saints to identifying with a culture and reaching the lost, the music had to change. If Christian music was to become a major tool to reach the world for Christ, then it was imperative that such music communicate to the world with a sound and a style with which the majority of the world can easily identify. Therefore, not only was a refurbishing of the music in the Church required, but more importantly, the character, guidelines, and philosophy which governed and reflected that music needed a remake.

April of 1971 proved to be a pivotal turning point. "After weeks of coast-to-coast surveying and numerous personal interviews by *Eternity's* staff," executive editor William J. Petersen wrote an article with the momentous title, *O, What a Fantastic New Day for Christian Music*. In the magazine's own words--this article "brings everything into focus." Indeed it did.

What was the tone and how did the attitudes change in the "new-day" Christian community? First, the new culture-directed focus for sacred music was to become external and horizontal rather than remain internal and vertical. The Scriptural model for sacred music is quite clear. Ephesians 5:19 suggests, "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." The sister passage, Colossians

3:16, reminds us that we are to be “teaching one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” Hebrews 2:12 echoes these two passages with “. . . I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee.” The believer’s music is to be an in-house, vertical activity. Speaking to *yourselves*, teaching *one another*, and declaring the Lord’s name *in the midst of the church*, does not even hint at evangelism. Sacred music is for the saints and unto the Lord. Over and over the admonition of music references in God’s Word includes the same sentiment, “unto Him, unto the Lord, unto the Most High, unto Thee, unto Thy Name.” When a society abandons its mores, restraints, and conscience, as it did in the 1960’s, it is not the duty of the Church, nor is it appropriate for individual believers, to cast off the Scriptural model of music and follow a decadent-bent community in locked-step for the opportunity “to get a hearing in the contemporary culture.”

Secondly, the “new day” would bring an entirely new view of music. That powerful and emotionally-packed medium of communication which had been considered to have great moral influence and impact was to be reclassified as *amoral*. This was accomplished with a single sentence from an influential magazine. The article written by William J. Peterson in *Eternity* magazine, *O, What a Fantastic New Day for Christian Music*, included a landmark statement which would provide fresh impetus and new justification for the Church to embrace *any* kind of music in order to reach the lost. This new perspective of music would significantly alter the sounds of worship, and more importantly, provide a vehicle for reaching out to a contemporary culture through music-centered evangelism. The article quoted a well-known musician of the day who commented, “Soul winning is the only aim. The music is--well, it’s enjoyable sure, but our real aim is soul-winning.” Then Mr. Petersen detonated the explosion which unleashed a pop-music avalanche upon the Church when he wrote, “. . . we have to remember that, strictly speaking, music is amoral.”

The great majority of Christianity is now living under the avalanche. A host of Christian music leaders have written numerous articles parroting the new thinking. Several books echoing, re-stating, re-defining, and attempting to justify the music-is-amoral ideology have gained a measure of notoriety and acceptance in the Christian community, all in an effort to keep the debris firmly in place and make digging out difficult, if not virtually impossible.

Thankfully, the Lord has allowed some pastors, music directors, educators, and church leaders to observe from a distance and avoid being engulfed by the movement. Not only have they avoided the rubble, but several serious efforts have been made to counter the music-is-amoral posture with Scriptural principle as well as documented and credible evidence from qualified secular sources. What follows is an effort to present further timely, convincing, and convicting evidence in an attempt to sharpen, reinforce, and expand the music-is-moral discourse.

Finding a Reasoned Answer to the Question--Is Music Amoral?

Music Is a Language

Ever so crucial to this discussion is the need for the realization and understanding that *music is a language*. It is often called the language of languages. It is also referred to as the universal language. Although it is incapable of expressing concepts, it is immeasurably more effective in communicating feeling and emotion than the verbal medium.

There is a striking similarity between language and music. In language, we work with letters which become words. Words grow into sentences. Sentences develop into paragraphs. Paragraphs mature to chapters and chapters make a book. In music, notes become chords. Chords grow into phrases. Phrases are melded into sections. Sections emerge as movements and movements become a composition.

We do language with head, eyes, mouth, hands, and feet. Music is done with head, eyes, mouth, hands, and feet. In language we write, compose, create, think, require inspiration, formulate ideas, and much more. In music the exact same process occurs.

Language is governed by rules of grammar and syntax. Music is created with rules of composition and harmony. Language relies heavily on sounds with different pitches. Obviously music does the same. Language and music both employ sounds with varied durations, dynamics, and timbre. With language we think, ponder, consider. Muse, the root word of music means to think, ponder, and consider. Is it any wonder that music is called a language?

Deryk Cooke was a "distinguished broadcaster, music critic, and musicologist" of the 1950's. In his classic book, *The Language of Music* (p. 272) he writes, "We may say then that, whatever else the mysterious art known as music may eventually be found to express, it is primarily and basically a language of the emotions, through which we directly experience the fundamental urges that move mankind, without the need of falsifying ideas and images--words or pictures." Robert Shaw expressed it in another way when he wrote to his Collegiate Chorale, "Neither weight lifting nor watchmaking is the concern of our singing--but mood and meaning" (*Dear People . . . Robert Shaw*, Joseph A. Mussulman, p. 26). Edward Rothstein, chief music critic for the *New York Times*, is a man with a fair amount of experience, credibility, and knowledge about this subject. In his book *Emblems of Mind* (p. 171) he writes, ". . . music has the power to change the way we see things, to transform our senses and our understanding . . ."

Can we support music's linguistic character and attributes Scripturally? 1 Corinthians 14: 7-11 includes an unmistakable example where music is used as an analogy for language. "For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound . . . how shall it be known what is spoken?" Deuteronomy 31:19-22 was the last face-to-face meeting between the Lord and Moses. This was obviously a momentous occasion during which we could expect the Lord to give Moses some very important instruction. What does the Lord tell Moses? What would replace God's presence and direction which the Israelites had known and enjoyed? How would His comfort and care, experienced for forty years, continue? God instructs Moses to ". . . write ye this song for you, and teach it the children of Israel: put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the children of Israel."

God did not say on this occasion, "Speak these words to them. Make certain that they understand what I'm about to tell you." No. The Lord told him to teach them this *song*. Why is that critically important? Because the words alone did not reflect the power, gravity, and importance of the message. "Write them a song, so they'll remember me that way," God told Moses. Music is a marvelous memory aid. With it we remember lyrics and events which have long been lost from conscious memory. These are often easily brought back for immediate and effortless recall complete with previously experienced emotion--all accomplished through the strains of melody, harmony, and rhythm, like the word-for-word jingle which casually comes out of internal long-term hard-drive storage, though not heard for decades. "The song, in their mouths and hearts, as they observe each other singing it, will keep them close to me and it will prick their conscience when they stray," the Lord assured Moses.

Would God use music for this kind purpose if it were neutral? But, you say, “There were words with this music.” Yes. But the Lord could have instructed Moses to teach them only the words--perhaps in a poetic form. Obviously the *music*, along with the words, had a greater power to influence their lives and their walk with the Lord than did mere words alone.

We see this kind of importance placed on music in other passages as well. Job 35:10 tells us that God “giveth songs in the night.” Psalm 32:7 assures us that the Lord is our “hiding place” who “preserves me from trouble” who “shall compass me about with songs of deliverance.” Psalm 42:8 promises believers that the Lord’s “lovingkindness in the daytime, and in the night his song shall be with me.” We are assured through music that the Lord comforts and protects us. These “songs,” this music, the Word states firmly, is communication from God. Can such a communicant be without moral value? We should also remember that God has pronounced judgement on some music. Isaiah 14:11 reminds us that “the noise of thy viols” will be brought down to hell. Dr. Charles R. Phelps, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church, Concord, New Hampshire, writes, “It would appear then that God’s desire to judge Satan’s music is a direct assertion of God’s willingness to judge Satan’s message, medium, and muse.”

Music Is a Moral Language

Julian Johnson once again enlightens and instructs us with an uncomplicated yet profound and timely observation for our discussion when he writes, “Music does things for us and to us.” (*Who Needs Classical Music?*, p. 33) On pages 114 and 115 of this captivating and instructive book, he continues to expound on this claim with, “At the risk of exaggeration, I want to suggest that different musics have the capacity to exert different effects on us in an analogous way. We underestimate the reach of music.” Two paragraphs later, coming to the end of his treatise, he repeats his contention as if to punctuate the matter in this final argument, and once again makes an end-of-the-book plea with, “Music does things for us and to us; different musics do different things.”

Steve Mason, a member of the CCM group Jars of Clay, made a comment in a *Christianity Today* article (November 15, 1999, p. 39) which is representative of Christians who are on the other side of this debate. In my discussions and correspondence with those who take the music-is-neutral side, this same sentiment has been expressed repeatedly in one form or another. Mr. Mason seeks to justify the group’s crossover (sacred into secular) ambitions and comments, “It’s like ‘either you’re in or you’re out.’ There’s got to be a third rail where music can just be music.” Can music just be music? No. Music does things for us and to us! Music is a language. Music is organized, mood-driven sound which communicates, not with mere words or conspicuous concepts, but through the more forceful, yet subtle power of unencumbered, raw emotion.

In recent months I have had conversation with a gentleman of our church who is employed in advertising. In his agency, he is responsible for nationwide television ad campaigns for a well-known retailer in the fast-food industry. His responsibilities include the oversight of ads from idea and concept to creation, final approval, and airing. His involvement includes not only writing the ads but also “shooting” the images, as well as combining music with pictures and verbiage for maximum impact and “pull.”

The discussion with this person came about as a result of his attending my twelve-week adult Sunday School class which deals primarily and extensively with music philosophy. He stated in no uncertain terms that the music selected to accompany the ad is perhaps the most important ingredient to achieve the desired effect. A team of musicians is engaged to

either write their vision of the best music for the ad or to select a stock piece. Each piece of music is then meticulously evaluated for its ad-synchronization, power to persuade, ability to manipulate, and strength to influence. Selecting the right music to accompany the ad is considered to be the crowning stroke and most crucial decision before presenting the product to the client for final approval and nationwide circulation. Extensive research, along with noticeably increased sales, clearly indicate and validate that the music engages the mind, not through logic and conscious thought resulting in a specific

decision, but rather through emotion as it is specifically placed to influence the viewer and reinforce the message.

Emotions involve choices with ethical considerations and ramifications. We are capable of loving the wrong and rejecting the right. We can love that which is comely, good and wholesome. We also have the capacity to love things which are evil. (1 John 2:15, 16) Pride is an emotion. It is the first-mentioned of the six things God hates. (Pr. 6:16, 17) We are told to put away anger and bitterness in Ephesians 4:31. A brief search of the Word gives conclusive evidence that lust is to be avoided. (James 1:14, 15; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 2:16, 17) Fear is a lack of faith and trust in the Lord. (Luke 12:7; 2 Timothy 1:7) The list could become rather lengthy and the conclusion unmistakable.

The Word clearly tells us that some emotions are inappropriate for the believer. However, not all Christians view emotions in the same way. John Dettoni, president of Chrysalis Ministries of San Clemente, California, writes, "Emotions, of course, are usually not bad or good. They just are." (*YouthWorker*, "Get Some Earplugs, What's Good about Rock Music," Spring 1993, p. 90) Our view of emotions in the believer's life determines, in great part, how we view music. After all, music is primarily emotions put to sound.

Joseph Eger makes the emotion connection and consideration quite clear with, "All is grist for the mill of music, for music is big enough to encompass all emotions." (*Einstein's Violin*, p. 66) He becomes even more direct later in his book on page 127 when he writes, "Music influences human emotions as does no other art or science." *Time* magazine (April 8, 1996, or www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,984377,00.html) gives us an even more graphic and revealing picture of the connection. In an article with the title, "Motown with Angels' Wings," *Time* reporter Christopher J. Farley writes, "Really great gospel sometimes sounds like the devil. There are howls, whoops, shrieks, stomping feet, menacing bass licks and [word intentionally omitted] musical undulations that would be downright sinful if they weren't being done in the name of the Lord. All this is no accident—gospel by its very form has the power to take worldly emotions and transform them into something sacred, something uplifting." Really? Once again, the world, looking in from the outside, sees the picture more clearly than most seated in the pews.

Adequate testimony has been given to affect an application. Can such an all-consuming, emotion-packed mode of communication "just be music" and thereby be neutral? The answer becomes obvious when we view emotions from a biblical

perspective rather than a “They-just-are” viewpoint. Just as this force of emotion, this language, cannot be neutral, neither can music. The sociologist takes strong issue with Mr. Mason’s contention and clearly takes the music-is-moral position when he writes, “There can be no music without ideology” (*The Sounds of Social Change*, R. Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson, p. 107). Whenever music is played or performed, something is being taught. The chief music critic of the *New York Times* would also not agree with the suggestion of a “third rail.” Once again Mr. Rothstein (*Emblems of Mind*, p. 89) signals which side of the morality issue he is on: “So when you play music, you also embrace a style. A style suggests ways to sit, ways to sing, ways to feel rhythm. It also suggests ways to think.”

Mr. Rothstein’s comments should not come as a great surprise. It was mentioned earlier that the term music itself is derived from *muse* or *musa* which means to think, to meditate, or to contemplate. Could something which causes us to think a certain way be amoral? If so, then we would need to conclude that thinking--is just thinking. Fortunately our common sense tells us otherwise. Furthermore, the Word of God provides candid instruction for the believer on this matter. Philippians 4:8, “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.” Why is the Lord concerned about how we think? Why should believers give attention to the thoughts which flow through our minds? David, in Psalm 139:23, 24, helps us understand when he prays, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Proverbs 23:7 provides further insight, “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he:”

If we accept the “third rail” posture, then we as believers have effectively shorn ourselves of any ethical responsibility in music selection. The world calls Christians to task with a much clearer understanding when Mr. Johnson writes, “. . . it should not be hard to hear in music what is self-evident in society: . . .” (*Who Needs Classical Music?*, p. 106)

David Brackett’s book, *Interpreting Popular Music*, is highly regarded in music-education circles. Simon Frith, who is also considered an expert in this discipline and has authored numerous books on the subject of music, writes in his cover endorsement that Mr. Brackett’s book is an “impressive contribution to popular music studies.” In a section which considers the influence of music, Mr. Brackett writes, “. . . we remember a piece of music and return to it again and again because it *means* something, because it has the power to change our lives.” (p. 201) Once again, Pastor Phelps makes the application of this dynamic unmistakably clear for the believer when he writes, “If music impacts thought, and our thoughts are to be righteously regulated, then we must righteously regulate the music to which we listen.”

Lest there be any question about what is meant by music (organized sound itself)

being moral, let us continue in our quest for further understanding and evidence. Composer Béla Bartók commented, "I cannot conceive of music that expresses absolutely nothing." (*Investor's Business Daily*, 6/23/05, A4) Deryck Cook, after much technical music analysis in his book *The Language of Music*, makes a definitive closing statement as he ends his study (p. 271), "Of course, rhythm and form play a large part in moral expression." "Of course," . . . as if to say, "Everyone knows that--it goes without saying!" Perhaps some have forgotten it and need to hear it anew.

William Kilpatrick is a former Professor of Education at Boston College and also the author of the popular book, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong and What We Can Do About It*. What is his opinion regarding the role contemporary music plays in the lives of today's adolescents? Why does Johnny have difficulty distinguishing good from evil? Mr. Kilpatrick makes it clear that one of the reasons Johnny can't tell right from wrong is because of the music in Johnny's life. "Music and Morality" is the title of an entire chapter in his book. His comments leave no doubt as to his opinion on the morality of music. "No matter how many reforms are attempted, rock and rap will always gravitate in the direction of violence and uncommitted sex. The beat says, 'Do what you want to do'" (p. 182).

Martha Bayles, graduate of Harvard University, a six-year television and arts critic for the *Wall Street Journal*, a teacher in the Honors Program at Boston College, and author of articles in *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, the *Brookings Review*, the *Weekly Standard*, and many other publications, has also written *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music*. Early in the book (p. 4) she establishes her concern regarding contemporary music with the observation, ". . . few critics have addressed the subject of *sound*--which is, after all, what the music is made of." Unlike most of the Christian authors who address this subject, her evaluation is sound-based rather than lyric-based. She continues, ". . . just as assaultive as the lyrics and images of contemporary popular music are many of the sounds."

The book is divided into four parts. The final section of the book is captioned, "The Triumph of Perversity." After presenting her argument she makes several pointed value statements. One of them is found on page 388 as she writes, "It is ironic that, in this age of multiculturalism, so many people seem intent upon ignoring the fact that the West is the only civilization to have created a form of art whose sole purpose is to attack morality." It is almost bizarre to think that the great majority of the Christian community is included in the "so many people" who have ignored this "fact." She defines morality as ". . . simply the difference between good and evil as understood by most human beings."

Just a fleeting glance at MTV would cause any discerning believer to agree with Martha Bayles. The pictures accompanying the sound on MTV now graphically display the sensuality which has been pervasive in the music for over two generations. Even some of the entertainment industry's own are expressing concern. Speaking on the "Bloomberg Forum" (WGBH, Channel 2, Boston, 2-2-98) Steve Allen commented, "Much of show

business now involves vulgarians entertaining barbarians." Indeed, there is a brutal attack on morality and music plays a major role in the attack.

It is at this point that the average Christian, adhering to the neutrality view, must ask some searching questions. Can an entity which is *neutral* attack morality? Can an amoral medium have moral impact? The obvious answer to this question exposes the error of music-neutrality thinking and postures statements from men like Harold Best and Steve Miller in sharp contrast. Dr. Best is the former dean of the conservatory of music at Wheaton College and calls music "moral nothingness" and claims that "There is nothing un- or anti-Christian about any kind of music" (*Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, pp. 59, 388). Steve Miller is the author of *The Contemporary Christian Music Debate* and makes his position clear with, "Using what is neutral in a society as a vehicle for the gospel is not only acceptable; it is sound missionary strategy." (p. 49)

These Christian spokesmen use candid and direct words which make their viewpoint unmistakably clear. The world is equally blunt. The words *Jesus Rocks!* were spread across the cover of *Newsweek* in the July 16, 2001, edition. The article entitled, "The Glorious Rise of Christian Pop," written by Lorraine Ali, included an observation which is germane to our discussion. After a thorough review of the CCM scene, the reporter of this secular magazine, looking into the Christian community as an "outsider" makes a valuable observation which should cause Christians to re-evaluate their music-is-amoral thinking. On page 43 of the magazine, she writes, ". . . the values of Christianity and anti-values of rock seem morally incompatible."

In a PBS historical documentary (*Jazz*, Part 3, aired January 10, 2001) produced by Ken Burns, music critic Gary Giddins described the music as, "hot, exotic and sexy." Narrating the scene at a Duke Ellington show, Mr. Giddins comments, "He's playing behind some pretty racy shows. And he is providing a music that supports them and so the music itself becomes erotic. And so the band becomes a kind of participant with the dancers. They're just as erotic. They're just as seamy. . . ."

Martha Bayles uses similar terms in *Hole in Our Soul* (p. 132) in describing a music which appeared almost thirty years later. "It would be absurd to argue that 1950's rock'n'roll is 'religious' in the sense of being ethereal, reflective, and contemplative, as opposed to physical, emotional, and erotic."

A Fresh Biblical Perspective on the Question--Is Music Amoral?

Music is a time art. God created time. Music is a tone art. God created sound. String physics, a naturally occurring phenomenon which results in the overtone series and consequently forms the foundation of harmony and music theory, was not created by man but merely discovered by him. God, the Creator, is the author of sound and ordained how sound would behave. God formed and endowed man with the unique ability, in all of creation, to fuse and fashion time and tone into organized, mood-producing, thought-provoking, and life-impacting sound. We call it music. Those who propose that music is

neutral will argue that since God created music, all music is acceptable to use in worshiping God. But this argument fails. The Lord created the ingredients. He privileged man to shape beauty by combining the elements to mirror His character. And in doing so He gave man the pleasure, obligation, and enduring joy, as with other facets of His creation, to employ those elements in bringing glory to the Creator (Col. 1:16, 17; Rev. 4:11; Heb. 13:15; Is. 43:7).

I recognize that it is relatively easy for believers to dismiss the historian's critique, the sociologist's comments, the music critic's judgments, the educator's opinions, the composer's evaluation, the performer's sense, the choral conductor's insight, the magazine reporter's observations, and anyone else who does not overtly espouse biblical values. Let us remember, though, that in these circles, and particularly in this discipline, there is a level of expertise, awareness, academic stature, and professional accomplishment which is seldom matched in Christian circles. Furthermore, when folks without the witness of the Holy Spirit in their lives forcefully and passionately condemn that which they consider damaging to the arts in particular and to society in general, we as believers would do well to heed their words. It should make Christians sit up and take serious notice when the world categorizes something as having immoral influence and the Christian community responds by saying, "We don't think so. Matter of fact, we think it's fine." What an awkward and atypical position. Isaiah 5:20 warns, "Woe unto them that call evil good and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" When did allegiance to good shift? Who would have imagined Christians to defend evil? Don't we usually find ourselves galvanized in opposition to the world in this kind of discussion? The evidence for the music-is-moral side is overwhelming. Who is being the "salt and the light" here? In Luke 16:8, the Lord alluded to instances in which the world would have better judgement than the believer, ". . . the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light." Perhaps the area of music is now a classic example.

Throughout this discussion I have sought to meld biblical principles with secular findings in an effort to develop an effective, convincing argument. A wealth of additional supportive information is available and could have been included. However, as in other disciplines of study, the evidence of the world is not necessarily revelatory but simply reinforces, clarifies, embellishes, and perhaps contemporizes what the Bible already declares directly or in principle.

In 1 Chronicles 25:1-3 we find a particularly intriguing report. In verse 1 we read, ". . . of the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who should prophesy with harps, with psalteries, and with cymbals: . . ." In verse 3 the same thought is repeated, ". . . under the hands of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied with a harp, to give thanks and to praise the Lord." The words "prophesy" and "prophesied" indicate that verbal communication took place. At the very least, we can conclude from this passage that the sound, that is to say the music, functioned with or contributed to the character of the

prophesying. The music became part of the message. Interestingly, the preposition “with” is prominently included each time an instrument is mentioned. It indicates that prophesying took place “together with” or “accompanied by” the sound from an instrument. Could it be that this account allows us to share a moment with some of the temple musicians who had a part in the dedication of Solomon’s temple (2 Chronicles 5:11-14)? It is the scene where the reader is witness to a wonderful, powerful, and unparalleled vocal and instrumental duet with over 4,000 instruments and 200,000 voices. This monumental group of musicians worked diligently to offer music to the Lord which resulted in His pleasure and ultimately caused the God of the universe to show His presence in the form of a cloud. And please notice that at this momentous occasion the “priest could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud: for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of God.” In this instance the “prophesying” was done, in noteworthy part, *with* instruments—with sound—music! Could this kind of “prophesying” be considered amoral or neutral? Not very well.

Finally, for the Christian to espouse the music-is-neutral position is not only to dismiss the enormous amount of data from secular experts, but more importantly, also to ignore the teaching of the Word of God. Music has a powerful influence in individual lives, families, and churches. My prayer, aim, and purpose for this discussion is that the music in the life of the reader would cause him to experience the reality of yet another passage which suggests that the sound of instruments has moral influence. Consider the words in 2 Kings 3:15. “But bring me now a minstrel. And it came to pass, when the minstrel played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him.”