

PASTOR'S PAGE

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN MUSIC

The history of church music has always involved a conflict between the old and the new. New developments are usually regarded with suspicion by the traditionalist. For centuries church music was monophonic – all voices singing in unison and a single melody. When polyphony (harmony singing) was introduced, suspicious churches banned all “seductive and impure melodies”.

In his encouragement of church music, Martin Luther stood virtually alone. John Calvin discouraged anything except the singing of psalms, recommending that songs have only one note per syllable. Some Reformers went so far as to raid churches and destroy some of Europe's grand organs, arguing that they hindered true worship.

The first English Baptists had no music whatever. Later, music was limited to psalm-singing by the congregation, though many doubted the practice was according to the mind of Christ, claiming that melody was to be made in the heart, not publicly.

When Handel's Messiah first came out, it took a few years to find acceptance among critics, who judged the music shockingly secular and irreverent. We forget that all the good old songs, now our favourites, were once new songs.

Few 19th century churches permitted the use of pianos in their services. Song-leader Charles Alexander used two grand pianos in large auditoriums to assist his spontaneous choral and congregational singing. His introduction of the instrument in worship services sanctified the piano for church use.

The Gospel songs of Moody's campaigns were criticized as cheap, tawdry, and more suited to the dance hall than the church. They had forgotten that the tune of “O Day of Rest and Gladness”, already in use in their churches, was heard (and still is) in the beer gardens of Germany.

We should not be too quick to reject others' musical choices. The music of old offered in love is as acceptable to God as Haydn's Creation or Handel's Messiah, sung by large choirs with full orchestra. Musical offerings should not be rejected just because they emanate from other cultural sources or don't suit our personal preferences.

The songs about Jesus' birth represent some of the finest music known to man. One of the choicest collections of sacred music for the Christmas is George Fredrick Handel's immortal Messiah. Handel began writing the music from biblical text in 1741, and he completed all 53 numbers in just 24 days. The Messiah, presented on April 13, 1742, is undoubtedly the most frequently performed oratorio ever written, and it is certainly one of the most highly esteemed. At the first London performance, when the chorus began the word “Hallelujah”, King

George II was so inspired that he stood to his feet. Audiences stand today when the inspiring “Hallelujah Chorus” is heard.

As we have opportunity at this season of the year, let us who fear the Lord “make a joyful noise unto God”. Scripture describes Jubal as “the father of harp and organ” (Gen. 4:21). David organized a great choir to serve at the services of the altar (1 Chron. 16: 4,42). In Psalm 150, David calls for an orchestra to play the praises of the Lord upon trumpet, harp, psaltery, timbrel, stringed instruments, organs and cymbals.

Imagine the sound of music when the ark was brought into Solomon's finished temple, for the celebration involved 288 singers, furnished with cymbals, psalteries and harps, and 120 priests sounding with trumpets, all united ‘to make one sound heard in praising and thanking the Lord... saying, “For He is good; for His mercy endureth forever” that then the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the Lord” (2 Chron. 5:13).

John Calvin states in his famous Institutio of 1536: “If the singing comes not from the heart it is worth nothing, and can only awaken God's wrath. Singing in itself is good and useful; our tongues must praise God, and as we honour Him by a common faith, we must also unite in glorifying Him before men that they may hear our confession of His name and be inspired with the desire of following our example.”

Through songs we can express our loftiest thoughts about God and His creation. Not all of us may be able to sing tunefully, but when opportunities are presented, everyone in whom the Spirit of God dwells can and should respond with joyful praise. The psalmist declared, “I will sing of the love of the Lord forever; with my mouth will I make your faithfulness known through all generations” (Psalm. 89:1). God is glorified when our voices are raised in praise of Him. “Whoso offereth praise glorifieth Me” (Psalm 50:23).

The singer should learn to treat his voice with respect and to take proper care of his choice instrument. To sing well requires not only musical and spiritual preparation, but also adequate rest. Above all, a choir member needs to be in tune with God's mind and heart so that the voice will reflect the genuineness of his personal relationship with the Creator.

The Scriptures teach that our worship and praise must always be consistent with righteous living and social justice. Without this consistency, our praise becomes an abomination to the Lord – songs that He refuses to hear. God said to the Israelites of old, “Take away from Me the noise of thy sons, for I will not hear the melody of thine harps (Amos 5:23).

Let us get together with God's people and make a joyful noise on the birth of Jesus. As we sing, we must always have in mind those who are in need of Jesus to be their Saviour. “We've a song to be sung to the nations that shall lift their hearts to the Lord. A song that shall conquer evil and shutter the spear and sword”.