

CONTEMPORARY MELANESIAN CHRISTIAN MUSIC

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INTRODUCTION

These days, secular music seems to have a greater influence on many people's lives than Christian music. Unless Melanesian churches embrace a broader worldview of their changing culture, the world will continue to mislead their young people with things that are attractive and relevant to their context. In a changing world, Christian music must be willing to adapt to the times, as Christians use it in their worship of God. It must not be confined to a set of man-made traditions that serve as an encumbrance to church growth in the new era.

Melanesians have varying opinions about Christian music: the style, the type of instruments played, and the context in which it is used. To aid their understanding about the changes in music, this paper answers the question of what is Christian music. Then it identifies the factors that shape a person's perspective of Christian music, and will give realistic reasons for adopting contemporary music.

EVALUATING CHRISTIAN MUSIC IN MELANESIA TODAY

THE VALUE OF INDIGENOUS MUSIC IN WORSHIP

Indigenous music is the native music of a particular group of people, and an important part of their worship life. It is the "language of the heart of an indigenous person, in the best medium of communication between

people and spirits”.¹ Different forms of indigenous music display the cultural identity of a particular group of people. People, who are not exposed to contemporary music, regard native music as more meaningful. In most remote areas, traditional music is more highly valued than contemporised music, because of its influence in their lives.

One factor that makes indigenous music more valuable is the skill of the local musicians in producing it, using their traditional instruments. Contemporary music may be admired by the people, yet, because of its foreign tunes, and difficulty in playing, the unskilled local musicians tend to ignore it. People have a tendency to like what they are more familiar with.

IS MODERN MUSIC ANTI-CHRISTIAN?

Because of church traditions, acculturated in people by some pioneer missionaries and church leaders, the question about using contemporary Western music in worship has created a much-debated issue among many Christians. Some say indigenous music is Christian, while Western music is secular. Many claim that contemporary music, like rock and jazz, cannot be accepted as Christian music, because it can destroy people’s lives.² How do we correct this misunderstanding?

There is a famous proverb that says, “Do not judge a book by its cover”. By observing the negative impact of modern music in the secular world, some people draw the line, and say that it is corrupted by evil, and cannot be used in the worship of God.³ On the contrary, these pessimists do not see its constructive use when Christianised, nor can they identify any convincing disadvantages. They even accuse former secular music artists, who are now converted Christians, for bringing their secular musical styles into the Christian circle, claiming that they are soiling the

¹ Philip Manuao, “Communicating the Gospel in Meaningful Cultural Forms in Melanesia”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 16-1 (2000), p. 72.

² Dan Peters, and Steve Peters, *Why Knock Rock?* (Minneapolis MN: Bethany House, 1984), pp. 195-205.

³ Ibid.

sacredness of Christian music.⁴ This, too, is an invalid argument, because each musician is gifted in a unique way. One size does not fit all. David did not wear Saul's armour, because he was familiar with the slingshot.⁵ These unique talents are from God, and it is fitting when they are consecrated and used for God. Moreover, how do we define Christian music, when both Western and local music have a history of animism and syncretism? It is best to solve this misunderstanding by looking at the origin of music.

Christians should not be fooled, but should know that music started with God in heaven.⁶ God created music, before He made mankind. Since ancient times, people believed that music originated from God,⁷ that it was purposely designed to accompany people's worship of God. Regrettably, that plan was soiled by sin, so music was deprived of its purpose. It is like computers, mobile phones, knives, and other important tools that were invented to make life convenient, but they are sometimes used wrongly.

Seeing human downfall, Satan took advantage of it – using it as an effective tool to lure people into worshipping him. Apart from the triune God, nobody knows music better than Satan. He was “the musical director of the universe . . . God's song leader, before he was cast out of heaven”.⁸ He knows the strong impact music can have on people's lives.⁹ Christians today are afraid to claim and use what is rightfully theirs, because of the fear of its association with Satan. Luther once said, “Why allow the devil to have all the good tunes?”¹⁰

⁴ Melex Bosip, “A Tune Of Our Own: Developing Melanesian Church Music”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 22-2 (2006), p. 19.

⁵ 1 Sam 17:38-40, 48-49.

⁶ Job 38:7.

⁷ Phil Kerr, *Music in Evangelism and Stories of Famous Christian Songs* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1962), p. 10.

⁸ Ibid, p. 9.

⁹ Ezek 28:11-19.

¹⁰ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 189.

Since the time of Jubal, until today,¹¹ music has been changing. Historical information suggests that even though music had its origin in God, it had an earlier association with folk religions, because of the degeneracy of humanity. Melanesian music, like primitive music everywhere, is quite similar in natural history. Even the “most sacred vocal music of the Jews had its origin in folk songs”,¹² and Western church music developed from a Greek influence.¹³ Many early songs were used unofficially for long periods until they were finally accepted by the church. Luther and Calvin opposed new styles and forms of secular music introduced into the church, but later allowed them, because they could not stop the people from using them. They realised the effects of the changing culture on music, and had to make adjustments. Later, Luther borrowed popular secular tunes of his day to compose hymns. He claimed that music is God’s gift to drive out the devil.¹⁴ Charles Wesley also used common secular tunes in composing hymns. This kind of situation has always been, and is still, a factor in the development of Christian music. Although Christian music developed from secular influences, it becomes an effective evangelistic tool when Christianised.

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN MUSIC?

What makes music Christian? Is it the lyrics, the type of music, the record label, or the musician? Music is music, and cannot be branded in any way. It is the “heart, the lifestyle, the spirituality, and the worldview”¹⁵ that affect the music. Christian music is music produced by Christians, and dedicated to God, regardless of its style, tune, or

¹¹ Gen 4:21.

¹² William C. Rice, *A Concise History of Church Music* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1964), p. 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Kerr, *Music in Evangelism*, p. 202.

¹⁵ Jonathan Bellamy, “A Jesus Music Revolution: What Part Does Christian Music Play in Revival?”, January 19, 2006, July 27, 2008. <http://www.crossrhythm.co.uk/articles/lifeA_Jesus_Music_Revolution/18607/p1/.htm>.

origin.¹⁶ Though Christian music differs in forms and definitions, according to the cultural context, it is written from an individual perspective and conviction about Christianity, focusing on Christ.¹⁷

There are two types of Christian music: church and general. Church music is particularly appropriate to be used in a church worship setting. The styles, tunes, and all its attributes assist the congregation in worshipping God. The general type is any Christian music, intended for entertainment purposes only. It may not be relevant to the church, because it could be too noisy, complicated, or similar to secular music in mode. Using the wrong type of music, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, to entertain the wrong people, may cause division among the musicians and the parishioners.

INFLUENTIAL FACTORS THAT SHAPE A PERSON'S PERSPECTIVE CHURCH TRADITIONS AND FORMALITIES

Rice asserts, "Three groups of people have always been concerned with, and affected by, church music – the clergy, the musicians, and the congregation."¹⁸ There are two factors that shape a person's musical taste. The prime factor is his/her church tradition and formalities. It is often assumed that, because missionaries taught a type of music in church,¹⁹ or their forerunners used one particular form of music, it is the appropriate church music. Anything new, and outside of that, is regarded as secular. Evangelicals and mainline churches have a strong music tradition, while the Pentecostals do not. Many Evangelicals emphasise hymn singing as the only suitable style of church music.

The fashion of worship plays an important part in shaping a person's style of worship. Pentecostals tend to be open and passionate in their

¹⁶ Yomi Daramola, "Christian Music as a Discipline: A Religious Appraisal of Christian Music in Nigeria Today", in *Cyber Journals for Pentecostal-Charismatic Research* #17, July 27, 2008. <<http://www.pctii.org/cyberj17/Daramola.html>>.

¹⁷ "What is Christian Music?", July, 2008. http://en.wikipedia.org/Wiki/Christian_music.htm.

¹⁸ Rice, *A Concise History of Church Music*, p. 12.

¹⁹ Bill Matthews. "Sacred or Secular: a Discussion Report", in *Point* 1 (1973), p. 106. Many pioneer missionaries introduced hymn singing.

worship of God, using whatever styles they see fit. A person, who is used to the Pentecostal way will find it quite boring to worship in an Evangelical church. Interestingly, Evangelicals, realising this, are now trying to improve from their traditional forms, and be flexible in adopting new styles that make worship services livelier.

Furthermore, the form and style in music play a key role in worship. With a good mixture of music, the worship becomes livelier and more enjoyable. Some churches consider preaching as more important than music, while others do not. Other churches prefer using simple instruments, like the piano, organ, keyboards, and acoustic guitars, while others experiment with a different range of instruments. Moreover, many churches debate about certain musical styles used to worship God. Some assume that the much-simpler styles, which are less stimulating, are spiritual, and those that excite people have secular features. Different assumptions affect people's thinking about music.

Whether people are aware of it or not, the environment in which the church is located also affects the form of worship. Without proper analysis of the environmental context, Arua comments, "some pastors do not emphasise Melanesian Christian worship . . . in the town churches".²⁰ His thoughts are reasonable, but narrow-minded. He incorrectly uses contextualisation to emphasise his idea of "indigenisation". Contextualisation is relevant in a particular culture.²¹ A town is a modern environment, and is very different from a village. Contextualisation is necessary, but indigenisation may not be relevant because of the mixture of people in the church. Many short-sighted people falsely accuse Western missionaries of discouraging indigenisation in the past, without considering the genuine reasons why it was discouraged.²² Some Melanesian church leaders tell others to indigenise music, while they, themselves, prefer modern music. This

²⁰ Ako Arua. "Christian Worship in Melanesian Churches", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 9-1 (1993), p. 27.

²¹ Ledimo Edonie. "Syncretism in the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 16-1 (2000), p. 40.

²² Arua, "Christian Worship in Melanesian Churches", p. 28.

shows that these people are only retelling what they were told in their classes on contextualisation, and not from their own convictions.

In a town church, people generally want to use the latest forms of music in worship. Where churches have high school and tertiary students involved in the youth programs, the music groups, time and again, want to apply the latest styles they have learned. Professionals in the church also want something that is relevant to their context. In contrast, those in rural churches would consider something that is not too old, but relevant, to be appropriate.

ETHNIC INFLUENCE

The second sphere of influence lies in the socio-cultural upbringing. People, who like music, grow up learning certain popular local tunes. A person may not be aware of his inclination towards certain musical tunes. However, you could ascertain his preference for a type of music when he whistles or hums the tune himself. Probably, in his earlier life, he has been involved with a music group. That group may have favoured a style that eventually won the musician's interest. If the group likes playing rock, their fans, too, will be led to love rock. A person, growing up in a contemporary culture, will probably prefer Western styles more than local music.

Some people instinctively have individual interests on what music they prefer. When they hear a style or tune, they feel good about it, and want to hear more of it. That interest may not be cultivated by other factors, like cultural upbringing, church, or any secular influences, but by their own individual interests. Some may attribute this to one's personality, though not all, necessarily, agree.

WHY ADOPT CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC?

CULTURAL CHANGES AFFECTING INDIGENOUS MUSIC

Culture changes as people adopt new ways of living. Melanesian culture is changing very quickly, with the influence of the Western lifestyle. Development in the modern education system has paved the way for people to be exposed to Western influences. As a result, many educated

people are shifting from old ways of life to new ways. Those, who have access to better services, like electricity, education, roads, entertainment industries, and other daily services, prefer the new way of living. Contemporary music is also becoming popular, and in more demand than the traditional music of the past, owing to these changes.

The music desired in modern Melanesian societies today is heavily influenced by the Western lifestyle. No one can stop the tide. People, who complain about the changes that are happening, are like a person trying to stop the Sepik River flooding.²³ With the effects of modern development, our societies are moving towards a global community.

In the light of these changes, contemporary music has greater advantages than indigenous music. People, who live in towns, would prefer to use power instruments, like the electric guitar, keyboard, and drums, to aid their worship, rather than use *kundu* drums that may not be relevant to their context, even though they are Melanesians. In many village churches, people like to use guitars to produce music in worship services, rather than traditional instruments. This is due to the fact that people are beginning to understand the quality of the sounds these musical instruments produce. A guitar can produce a beautiful tune, and a good rhythm, as contrasted with a *kundu* or *garamut* that can give beats, but no tune. Many traditional instruments produce unnecessary noise.

A restatement of the Lord's commission is to "know Christ, and make Him known" (Matt 28:19-20).²⁴ To fulfil the Great Commission, certain approaches, which are relevant to the context of the present culture, should be used to aid the gospel. In the past, ancestors used traditional tools for work. Their work was hard and slow, and produced less harvest. Today, modern tools are preferred, because they make work easier, faster, and produce better results. Likewise, music is a ministry tool. Traditional music may have been effective in the past, but the modern generation would prefer the latest technology, because of its

²³ The Sepik River is a very big river in East Sepik Province PNG.

²⁴ CLTC Mission Statement.

mass impact. Clergy and musicians have to broaden their views, because, as time changes, it brings with it the force of change. The winds of change are blowing in every direction, and Christianity has to ride with the wind, or lose everything to the secular world. Gregory remarks, “Musical experiences, like religious experience, must grow if it is to live”.²⁵

THE GOSPEL MUST BE PASSED ON TO THE NEXT GENERATION

We should not only think of what is appropriate for us today, but also consider the important factors that can relay the message of Christ, in a meaningful way, to the next generation. Some people are too legalistic, and do not see the opportunities of passing the gospel to the next generation. To make Christian music meaningful and appropriate for them, we have to allow our children and young people to embrace the gospel, through whatever means that seems appropriate to their perspective. As Maeliau points out:

Throughout the history of the church, theologians have always been dating, updating, and outdating their theologies . . . [they] have one thing in common, . . . and that is to make the gospel . . . address itself to the people of today in a meaningful and relevant way. Is this not our aim, too?²⁶

Unless the music presented in our churches fits their standard, we cannot win their love for Christian music. Young people do not like outdated music.

Contemporary music is positively impacting churches today. Even in village churches, many people are not using traditional music, but are blending it with modern-day music, to create something new. On the other hand, Bosip asserts that some theologians have argued that

²⁵ A. S. Gregory, *Praises with Understanding* (London UK: Epworth Press, 1936), p. 163.

²⁶ Michael Maeliau. “Searching for a Melanesian Way of Worship”, in *The Gospel is Not Western: Black Theologies from the South-West Pacific*, G. W. Trompf, ed. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1987), p. 121.

contemporary music is affecting the work of the church.²⁷ Their argument is bigoted and fallacious. With the introduction of contemporary music, churches have seen great changes in their worship services, and an increase in church attendance and membership. Churches that are growing most rapidly are those that have very fine contemporary music. People are not willing to come to church and hear the Word of God unless the church provides something that interests them. “Music that shapes the community will use many styles that invite greater inclusiveness.”²⁸

CONCLUSION

Music in worship is like the flesh that holds the bones and other body parts together. In the past, traditional music was highly valued by indigenous people. However, modern influences have changed people’s tastes for beauty and relevance in life. The old ideas are being replaced by the new. Because contemporary music is foreign, it comes under fire from legalistic, orthodox Christians. This is due to the fact that people have different opinions about what Christian music is. By having a better understanding, changes and adaptations can be made to modern forms of music, in order to make Christian music relevant to contemporary Melanesian society.

Rice affirms:

The present is exciting, and the future is bright. The day should soon come when sacred music will, again, be at least equal to secular music in quality and quantity. Beauty and holiness will exist in proper perspective, and the holiness of beauty will be a reality.²⁹

²⁷ Bosip, *A Tune of Our Own*, p. 19.

²⁸ Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumping Down*, p. 178.

²⁹ Rice, *A Concise History of Church Music*, p. 115.

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