

"Into" the Mystery

On Musical *Mediatrixes*

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us . . . seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus . . . Ephesians 2:4-6

The Matrix: Though defying rational explanation, it is what it is. Foremost, music is spiritual. In whatever venue, whether a rock concert, a national anthem before a sporting event, a funeral, a military parade, or a church worship service, etc.—music delivers powerful experiences to its hearers. Music's subliminal message can prove mind-altering. One newspaper columnist accounts for its popularity for reason that, "Music is a vehicle that propels [the disc jockey]—and me and so many others—toward the place we might call enlightenment, or God, or the higher consciousness, or Grace." [1]

But not only is music spiritual, it is also mystical. Like hand in glove, the spiritual and the mystical work together with an interconnectedness that defies rational explanation because however else it might be understood, music is an experience. "Feel the music," ran an advertisement for the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra a few years ago. It may be deduced that the "language" of music is universal because it is neither conceptual nor verbal, but rather experiential and mystical. It's a language without language. Together, people from different nations and tongues can experience it. Subject to the individual impulses, tastes, and delights of composers and consumers, there is much about music that is ethereal.

The Mysticism: In his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James (1842-1910), a theological philosopher-psychologist who lived a century ago, pointed out that in their attempt to express the inexpressible, mystics often employ self-contradictory phrases—"shoreless lake," "mute language," "whispering silence," and "dazzling obscurity"—to explain their esoteric spiritual experiences. But unlike conceptual speech, James wrote that music is exempt from contradictory descriptions. This, he stated, demonstrates music to be "the element through which we are best spoken to by mystic truth." James then adds, "Many mystical scriptures are indeed little more than musical compositions." [2] As a bumper sticker phrased it, "When words fail, music speaks."

In his book *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy*, Robert Jourdain wrote of the ecstasy music provides. He states:

Ecstasy melts the boundaries of our being . . . engulfs us in feelings that are "oceanic." A defining trait of ecstasy is its immediacy . . . Ecstasy happens to our selves. It is a momentary transformation of the knower . . . Music seems to be the most immediate of all the arts, and so the most ecstatic . . . Nonetheless, once we are engulfed in music, we must exert effort to resist its influence. It really is as if some "other" has entered not just our bodies, but our intentions, taking us over. [3]

Though incapable of rational description, ecstatic experiences provided by music have a way of possessing us. Perhaps this describes why music, even with its various styles and lyrics, has risen to become a common liturgy amongst evangelicals. While the pan-evangelical movement possesses no common confessional standard—which is why some historians question whether evangelicalism is a definite movement—evangelicals do take their music seriously (Ever hear of the “worship wars”?), music that can be designated as traditional, contemporary Christian, or praise and worship. [4] The rise in popularity of certain talented performers and bands within evangelicalism—Christian bookstores are loaded with their CDs—begs this question: Why has music grown to become such a powerful influence over and within the movement?

The Music: Part of the answer lies in the culture. Like a bunch of conformist teenagers kowtowing to “peer pressure,” churches have adapted their musical style to whatever is hip in the culture. Self-centeredly, Christians want what they want (Of course, they refer to wants as “felt needs.”). So as the line between the church and the culture blurs, the church becomes more worldly (See 1 John 2:15-17.). “Pliable church,” to use Bunyan’s description, adapts and incorporates. The culture creates the musical appetite, and as they hop on the musical bandwagon, church leadership attempts to feed it.

There may be however, another, perhaps more subtle reason which helps explain music’s influence over the church. Innately, music possesses the ability to stimulate spiritual experience, to lift people out of themselves and allow their soul to journey to a realm where they encounter life in a transcendent dimension (As an aside, to a dimension where they might feel vibrant and young again.). Allow it to be stated that there’s nothing wrong with this as long as my experience (What I want.) is not equated to be worship. Christians are to allow **“the word of Christ richly dwell within”** them, and **“with all wisdom,”** teach and admonish **“one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness”** in their hearts to God (Colossians 3:16).

In a chapter titled “Worship in Rhythm and Tune,” in his book *Deconstructing Evangelicalism*, and after noting how the rock ‘n’ roll medium grew to be the dominant musical expression amongst the youth culture of the 1960s and 70s, historian D.G. Hart relates that, “Part of its [soft rock’s] new status [in the church] stemmed directly from the music’s ability to generate feelings and emotions that worshippers and their pastors often associated with the movement or work of the Holy Spirit.” [5] Then adds Hart, “Indeed, one of the primary engines driving the charismatic movement of the second half of the twentieth century was music.” [6]

Like a secular rock concert, contemporary churches employ music as a means by which to generate spiritual, and/or “mystical,” experience. In sync with a steady drumming beat supplied by the praise band, worshippers—with eyes closed and faces alternately contorting in grimaces of ecstasy and agony—collectively lift their palms toward heaven, mouth the repetitive lyrics, and sway from side to side. From outward appearances, this phenomenon—looking like any other rock concert—indicates the role of music in causing experiences of cathartic emotional release to happen, moments that can masquerade as spiritual encounters with God. To engender such experiences, facilitators may prove helpful.

The Mediatrices: In this musical wonderland, a new caste of high priests and priestesses has

arisen, an order of musicians claiming to be able usher worshippers into the mystery of the divine presence through their music. In most contemporary churches, singers, worship leaders, and worship teams stake a claim to be able to mediate access to God. Kevin Reeves states that attendees at the church where he once led worship were classified as “inner court, outer court, or holy of holies Christians,” and that it was his and the worship team’s responsibility via the subtlety of the musical medium to move the whole audience into a deeper experience with God, from the outer court into the holy of holies. [7] As Reeves notes: “Leading worship has come to be one of the factors in establishing appropriate congregational mood, with the stated intent that the Holy Spirit may not be hindered in His ministry.” [8] Human agency therefore, assumes responsibility for contriving a worship aura in which the Holy Spirit can minister, and lead worshippers “into dizzying realms of ‘intimacy with God.’” [9] Reeves, himself a former worship leader, notes that, according to their ability to manipulate and control the emotional atmosphere of an audience, some worship leaders have, “attained charismatic stardom by voice and vivacity.” [10] Let’s look at the claim of a couple of those starlets.

A promo of one worship leader’s CD advertises her as, “Fresh, energetic and anointed . . .” The CD jacket goes on to state that she is “an accomplished singer/songwriter, keyboardist and speaker.” The promo concludes by stating that the recording, her second musical project, “takes you through the door of worship, right into the heart and presence of God.” [11] Note those last words: her music project “takes you through the door of worship, right into the heart and presence of God.”

Yet another singer informs that her recording is more than a CD; that “it is an experience of the Lord, saturated with His presence, His glory, and His heart.” The promo goes on to say, “Her passion is the Kingdom coming on the earth, and her heart is to facilitate the corporate bride into the deep mysteries of God, opening atmospheres and Glory encounters, releasing destinies, and healings.” [12] Of her CD the website further promises:

The Door Is Open is a journey through the open door of Revelation 4:1, into the high and the deep; a cross-genre prophetic soaking and worship experience flowing through psalmist and worship leader Kathryn Marquis. With a voice like golden honey, and lyrics that resonate within the soul and spirit-man, the listener is transported to both the depths of the human condition and unseen realms of mystery and grace. [13]

That’s a pretty “high” guarantee isn’t it—that she will escort listeners into the “unseen realms of mystery and grace”? But according to their promos, that’s exactly what these female singers can do for you! So assuming that Scripture is the authority over our experiences, what might we believe about these mediatrixes of music who like Mother Mary of Roman Catholicism, can transport us “through the door of worship, right into the heart and presence of God,” or who can escort us “through the open door of Revelation 4:1, into the high and the deep; a cross-genre prophetic soaking and worship experience”? According to Scripture, can we believe the promos of promise for these songstresses?

Our Mediator: The New Testament knows nothing of musicians who possess either the position and authority to escort Christians into God’s “soaking” presence. No matter how

talented, singers and worship leaders making claim to being mediators between God in heaven and Christians on earth can do so only by usurping the role of Christ for us and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in us.

According to Holy Scripture, Christians already have a Mediator positioned in heaven, the abode of God. Christ Jesus is His name. **"For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus . . ."** (Emphasis Mine, 2 Timothy 2:5). There in heaven, Jesus is our Intercessor. Hebrews states that, **"He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them"** (Emphasis Mine, Hebrews 7:25).

According to Holy Scripture, the Holy Spirit also makes intercession in heaven for us. Paul explained:

And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.
(Emphasis Mine, Romans 8:26-27)

The Mystery: The new musical mediators claim to possess the ability to introduce Christian listeners to "the divine mystery." Interesting . . . very interesting—the Apostle Paul wrote that he and other of the apostles were **"stewards of the mysteries of God"** (1 Corinthians 4:1). Furthermore, in difference to the mystery religions that shrouded their beliefs in secret, the New Testament declares that any so-called mystery is no longer concealed, but revealed (Romans 16:25-26; 1 Corinthians 15:51; Ephesians 3:3-4, 9; 6:19; Colossians 1:25-27; 2:2-3; 1 Timothy 3:16; Revelation 1:20). As W.E. Vine states regarding biblical mysteries:

In the N.T. it denotes, not the mysterious (as with the Eng. word), but that which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by Divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those only who are illumined by His Spirit. [14]

We ask then, in light of all God has revealed to us in Christ and the Scriptures, what further need is there for anyone else to lead on a wild goose chase to explore the mystery of divinity? Will we accept by faith that Jesus Christ is **"God's mystery . . . in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"** (Colossians 2:3-4), and that through His apostles God has already revealed to us all we need to know, or are we craving something more?

The phantastic claim to be able introduce us to the mysteries through music is incredible in light of Paul's statement to Timothy, when he wrote:

**And by common confession great is the mystery of godliness:
He who was revealed in the flesh,**

**Was vindicated in the Spirit,
Beheld by angels,
Proclaimed among the nations,
Believed on in the world,
Taken up in glory.** (1 Timothy 2:16, NASB)

Conclusion: There is a great difference between singing "unto" or "before" the Lord (Psalms 95:1-2; 98:6) and attempting to sing "into" the Lord. The Bible knows much about the former, and nothing of the latter. Performers who make a claim to be able to take listeners into the "soaking" presence of God, seem to be mindless of the truth that in Christ believers are already there, "**seated . . . with Him in the heavenly places** (i.e., *realms*, NIV)" (Ephesians 2:6). Mediatrices who claim to be able to usher listeners into the "soaking" presence of God through their singing do absent any endorsement of such a function in the New Testament, and this they also do without having to meet any of the spiritual or moral qualifications for leading worship (See 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9.).

In reality, these intermediaries attempt to manipulate their audience's mood through their music thereby inducing members to "feel" as if they are in God's presence. In contrast, we can note the "feeling" of one prophet who entered God's presence. When he saw the Lord, his immediate consciousness of sin caused him to declare of himself and the people around him, "**Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips**" (Isaiah 6:5, KJV). I wonder how the musical CDs might sell if they brought their listeners under deep conviction of sin when listeners experienced God's soaking presence, when agony replaced ecstasy . . . (See 1 Timothy 6:5.). It wouldn't be a very good marketing technique, would it?

Amidst all the musical huckstering going on in these the last days, I can only note that by faith believers in Christ already reside in God's presence. Think about it . . . while we're here we're as good as there! Why then do we need mediatrices? We do not need singers to enter into God's presence. Christ Jesus Himself is "**God's mystery . . . in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,**" . Through Jesus Christ, the One who "**was made flesh, and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth**" (John 1:14) believers already have access to the realm of "mystery and grace"!

ENDNOTES

[1] Cathleen Falsani, "The Rev. of rock 'n' roll," *Suntimes.com*. June 25, 2006. Online at www.suntimes.com/output/falsani/cst-nws-falsani_25.html.

[2] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902): 420-421.

[3] Robert Jourdain, *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy* (New York: Avon Books, 1997): 327-328.

[4] See D. G. Hart, *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 2004). In symphony with theologians and historians Wells, Noll, and Sweeney, Hart too questions "whether evangelicalism is a Christian

identity sufficient to sustain serious faith.” (p. 10). I might suggest that “worship” driven by music reflecting the style of the culture has become a rallying point for pan-evangelicalism, the “tie that binds” for an otherwise polymorphous movement. While there may be others, family values as wedded to a Christian dominionist agenda appears to be another.

[5] Ibid. 163. This is a similar conclusion to which I came in 2006-07 while writing chapters 5 (Contemporary Music and Evangelicalism, Suffocating the Word) and 6 (Contemplative Mysticism and Evangelicalism, Subverting the Word) in my book *Church on the Rise, Why I am not a “Purpose-Driven” Pastor* (Indianapolis: Moeller Printing Company, Inc., 2007): 87-150, and in writing my booklet, *Drumming Up Deception, Whether in celebration or in contemplation—“feeling” the beat!* (Indianapolis: Moeller Printing Company, Inc., 2008).

[6] Ibid.

[7] Kevin Reeves, *The Other Side of the River* (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2007): 159.

[8] Ibid. 156.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Mary Alessi. Online at www.maryalessi.com/music.htm.

[12] Emphasis mine. Kathryn Marquis, “The Door Is Open,” Musical CD, *The ElijahList Store*, <http://www.elijahshopper.com/ProductDetails.asp?ProductCode=CD%2DKMA001&Show=TechSpecs>. One pastor even states: “Kathryn reminds me of the kind of minstrel who Elijah was calling for when he wanted the hand of the Lord to come upon him. ‘Bring me a minstrel and I will hear from heaven’ (2 Kings 3:15). As you listen to Kathryn’s soothing and profound worship, you will experience ‘the hand of the Lord coming upon you!’” I note that 2 Kings 3:15 does not say what the pastor says it does. No version translates it as he implies. They read: “‘But now bring me a minstrel.’ And it came about, when the minstrel played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him (i.e., Elisha).” The hand of the Lord was not God’s presence that came upon the prophet, but God’s power. In every instance where it is stated in the Old Testament that “the hand of the Lord” came upon anyone, whether prophet, priest, king or people, it is with a view toward God’s “empowering,” not His “presence-ing.” One has to wonder how any human can, through music, usher us into the presence of the God who is everywhere present anyway (Psalm 139:7-10).

[13] Ibid., Emphasis added.

[14] W.E. Vine, “MYSTERY,” *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Old Testament Edited by F.F. Bruce, Volume 3 (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1981): 97.