

The Music and the Mystical

On music's native ability to engender "religious" experiences.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. Colossians 3:16, KJV

Music engenders mystical experiences. This can be discerned from Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* containing the song *The Music of the Night*. The lyrics read:

Night time sharpens heightens each sensation / Darkness wakes and stirs imagination / Silently the senses abandon their defenses / Helpless to resist the notes I write / For I compose the music of the night / Softly, deftly music shall caress you / Hear it, feel it secretly possess you / Open up your mind let your fantasies unwind in this darkness which you know you cannot fight / the darkness of the music of the night. [1]

Subject to the individual impulses, tastes and delights of consumers and composers, there is much about music that is creative, experiential and ethereal. But as every genre from military marches to love songs indicate, music possesses a mysterious, if not occult, power to sway the soul. The only question for Christian believers becomes, do their musical preferences, acquisitions and experiences hinder or facilitate the Holy Spirit's work in their souls? (See Ephesians 5:18-19; Colossians 3:16.)

In an internet article, former rock musician Tom Beaudoin makes statements and employs quotations which connect rock music with "spirituality." Consider his description of rock music: the "digital environment of the CD is the plastic, virtual 'enclosure' today in which younger generations taste and hear . . . the grandeur and intimacy of God"; he refers to "rock's inherent religiousness"; he says, "both rock itself and religious experience may yet be open to further transformation"; "the 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal. 5:22), are often experienced through rock music"; and rock music is a "form of religious experience" [and] "capable of mediating religious experience and knowledge." [2] But what is the religion inherent to the medium? To me, it sounds like the beat of mysticism.

From *easy listening*, to *light rock*, to *hard rock* and to some *classical pieces*, there exists a murky and undefined interconnectedness between sensuality and spirituality, the sexual innuendo of Ravel's *Bolero* serving as a case in point. Perhaps this accounts for some music's appeal—the sheer undefined mysterious working of it upon the human soul. When engaging rock music while attending rock concerts or through headsets connected to an iPod or CD player, individuals testify as to the medium's ability to create mystical experiences within their vulnerable souls. Rob Bell describes one:

I remember the first time I was truly in awe of God. I was caught up for the first time in my life in something so massive and loving and transcendent and . . . true. Something I was sure could be trusted. I specifically remember thinking the universe was safe, in spite of all the horrible, tragic things in the world. I remember being overwhelmed by the word *true*. Underneath it all life is somehow . . . good . . . and I was sixteen and at a U2 concert. The Joshua Tree tour. When they started with the song "Where the Streets Have No Other Name," I thought I was going to spontaneously combust with joy. This was real. This mattered. Whatever it was, I wanted more. I had never felt that way before. [3]

Another contemplative devotee vividly describes his experience:

The effect of the music coursing through my nervous system is to produce a lift, a somatic levity that sends me at once deeply within and outside my body, spacing me in three simultaneous modes: as embodied spirit, as disembodied spirit, and as a spirit ecstatically holding them bound. [4]

Who was and where was this individual when he experienced that mystical ecstasy? The author is bass guitar player who played rock n' roll for 15 years, and he experienced what he described while on a spiritual retreat in a monastery listening to the Christian rock band *Creed*!

In another example of music's power to induce mystical experience, occultist Wilburn Burchette reported a "breakthrough" which happened to him while listening to rock music as a young boy. He described:

I was getting to the point where my mind was blank. I remember shifting consciousness and having a sensation of my mind being above time. I felt I could move forward, backward in time. The physical sensation is an orgasm of the soul, because you are in complete, absolute union. You extend your mind and being out of this dimension, and wham! You receive a knowing beyond words. When you transcend over into the other dimension, you split in two, and yet you are one. This is what all the alchemists brought out: you split in two, and yet you are one. This is pretty weird for most people, but you have split in two, you have another being which can realize the Absolute, the Godhead. These two you's are in perfect union. [5]

But music in and of itself does not generate genuine or lasting experiences with God, David's harping for Saul demonstrating the point (1 Samuel 16:14-23). David's music temporarily relieved Saul of his angst, but did not cure it. Opposite from undefined feelings, "**spiritual songs**" that magnify the Gospel and the Word facilitate authentic spiritual experiences and godly living. Genuine spiritual experiences in and among Christians result from the "filling of the Spirit" as born witness by their "**speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs**" (Ephesians 5:19). Such spiritual songs focus upon the objective Person and Work of Jesus Christ (John 1:1; See Colossians 3:16, "**Let the word of [about] Christ dwell in you**

richly . . . teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs". As recorded in Holy Scripture (2 Peter 1:19) and as witnessed to by the Holy Spirit (John 15:26), lasting spiritual experiences are induced by music and lyrics that bear witness to and are wedded to the biblical Word. They are not subjective and mystical ends in themselves. True spirituality does not lie in the subjectivity of sound, but within the objectivity of the Scriptures as they bear witness to Jesus who is the Word of God.

Though music can and does engender mystical experiences, true spiritual feelings do not reside in any music per se. When artificially induced, human feelings can be a distraction from worshipping Almighty God. The attention of worshippers can be turned upon themselves and how they feel in a particular moment of ecstasy. Godly music on the other hand, draws people's attention off of themselves and turns their hearts toward God and the wondrous redemption wrought in, by and through the Lord Jesus Christ. In and through spiritual music, believers can find relief and deliverance from sinful emotions and fleshly appetites that can vex their souls. Godly songs help to rescue our emotions from whatever we might be feeling at any given moment in time, as those songs turn our minds and hearts toward Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit all the while bearing witness to Him as the words of the music help authenticate the Gospel to our souls.

ENDNOTES

[1] Andrew Lloyd Webber, "The Music of the Night," *The Phantom of the Opera*. Lyrics online at: <http://www.metrolyrics.com/music-of-the-night-lyrics-phantom-of-the-opera.html>

[2] Tom Beaudoin, "Ambiguous Liturgy," *Christianity Today Library.com* (<http://www.ctlibrary.com/345>)

[3] Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005): 072. Rob is an influential emergent church pastor

[4] Beaudoin, "Liturgy."

[5] Reported in Brad Steiger, *Revelation: The Divine Fire* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1973): 92.