

I. Introduction

Religion and culture have always been connected to some degree throughout history. A society's religious views influence the way it expresses itself in culture, and musical forms especially mirror the ties between the two. Examining how culture and church music interact can be a fascinating study.

Culture is the tangible expression of a society's collective worldview. How a particular community looks at life, morality, God, mankind, and justice expresses itself externally in their popular visual art, literature, philosophies, and music. T. S. Elliot argued that "no culture can appear or develop except in relation to a religion."¹ In other words, a society's beliefs about God affect their view of the world, and these beliefs will manifest themselves in cultural expression.

In the Old Testament period, religion and Jewish culture were intertwined so that they were inseparable. Because Israel was a theocracy, no sacred/secular distinction existed. The Israelites used the same musical and textual expressions for worship as they did for a festival, coronation, or funeral. Culture in those days was completely controlled by religion.

The Psalms readily demonstrate the close connection between religious music and culture in Jewish society. Though no music forms are evident, texts for specific religious occasions are identical in form and similar in content to those for other societal occasions. The very fact that war songs, songs for political celebrations, and even songs of personal expression are included in

¹ T. S. Elliot, "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," in *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949) 100.

the religious song book of the Jews illustrates the linked relationship between sacred music and the Israelites' culture.

This kind of connection is not true for any subsequent society to the same extent. Though relationships between religious music and culture have certainly existed, lack of an actual theocracy prohibits the same kind of relationship that Old Testament Jews experienced. The interesting question for the rest of history is, then, what kinds of relationships exist between church music and culture, and to what extent does one influence or control the other? This paper will examine the connections between church music and culture through the ages and will evaluate their influences on each other.

II. Music in the Early Church

The early church was essentially Jewish. "It is only natural . . . that we seek the origins of early Christian worship in Jewish temple and synagogue worship."² Since the church began with Jews and the earliest believers were Jews, new Christians naturally continued worshiping with Jewish traditions, adding to them new truth concerning Jesus the Messiah.

Because of this fact, the intertwining of culture and church music continued for the early church as they had been in the Old Testament theocracy. Even as the gospel spread, Christians carried Jewish synagogue worship practices to pagan cultures. For instance, the early church continued to observe Passover (Acts 20.16, 1 Corinthians 16.8),³ and many biblical scholars

² Andrew E. Hill, *Enter His Courts with Praise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993) 222.

³Even Paul, the great missionary to the pagans, always sought Jewish converts in a given Gentile city first, and continued to observe Jewish feasts such as Passover.

consider “*the prayers*” in Acts 2.42 to be some form of liturgical prayers carried from synagogue practice into the early church.

It was not long, however, before the church developed a sub-culture of its own. As persecution increased from both pagan and Jewish fronts, Christians were forced to move underground. This would have certainly influenced worship practices, including church music, since these believers could worship only with the means at their disposal, and fear of discovery would have especially necessitated discreteness in musical expressions.

Nevertheless, it is almost certain that the earliest church music was influenced heavily by Jewish culture, a culture that had been intertwined with biblical religion for centuries. How soon or to what extent that connection weakened is unclear, but the fact that the church very quickly went underground suggests that they retained the Jewish cultural forms for some time.

III. The Middle Ages

The legalization of Christianity and its subsequent establishment as the official religion of the state in the 4th century significantly influenced the relationship between the church and culture. Essentially, a “top-heavy” church/state controlled cultural expression with an iron fist. How could a once illegal church gain so much power and influence virtually overnight? Several factors combined to create this phenomenon.

First, now that Christianity was legal and even encouraged by the Roman emperor, numerous churches sprang up throughout the empire. In fact, so many churches were formed during those early years that there was not enough time to train new pastors. This prodded

church leaders to publish acceptable forms of worship for newly formed churches to follow, giving great responsibility and power to the leaders of the church.

Second, as congregations began to grow, large buildings were erected to accommodate the masses, and worship had to be organized to prevent confusion. Again, powerful church leaders formulated permissible liturgies for the churches.

Third, as heresy began to spread, proponents of such errors would spread their falsity through the use of hymns. This gave church leadership cause to consolidate their power even further and demand complete control over the church's music. Churches could use only those musical forms that were expressly sanctioned by the leadership.

Fourth, since Christianity became the official religion of the state, virtually everyone was baptized into the church and considered to be a believer. This gave the leadership of the Church greater power and influence since these professing believers would certainly look to them for guidance. These new "nobles" of the empire gained significant power and wealth, taking for themselves vast properties and excessive pomp and circumstance.

Added to this was the fact that these church leaders looked increasingly to Old Testament traditions to formulate their theology and liturgy. This soon developed into an errant theology of priests, sacrifices, and mandatory grandeur in worship forms. Over a relatively short span of time, the simple worship practices of the early church were transformed into spectacular ceremonies full of lavish furnishings and grandiose pageantry.

All of these factors combined to form a powerful body of bishops who not only controlled church teaching and practice but also held strong influence over politics and culture.

“In the millennium between 500 and 1500 the church, however errant, was . . . the strongest force in Western culture.”⁴

The Church’s influence over culture during this period had both positive and negative effects. As the Church controlled culture, it blocked explicit paganism from influencing culture, whether high culture or folk culture. The Church even attempted to spread its influences over pagan cultures, as evidenced by the Crusades.

Regarding music specifically, high art was nurtured in the church itself. Almost all expressions of high art from this time period are sacred in nature. The Church influenced even folk art, which takes its cues from high art but on a more popular level. Christian perspective dominated both high and folk cultures. What the Church thought and said tended to be embodied in both the official cultures (philosophy, art, concert halls, etc.) and the folk cultures (folk songs, local customs, and traditions, etc.). A purely secular culture did not exist during this time.

Because of the glamour and spectacle of the Roman Church, church music took the form of the high art of the day. The most sophisticated musical forms found their home in church music, and performance of church music was reserved for the clergy and musically trained.

IV. Reformation

When Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the church at Wittenburg in 1517, he not only sparked a theological reformation in the Church, but he also led the way for a new interaction between church music and culture. Luther had a strong conviction that every member of the congregation should have the Words of Scripture on his tongue. He wanted,

⁴ Donald Hustad, *Jubilate II: Church Music in Worship and Renewal* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope, 1993) 181.

therefore, the music of the church to be distinctly congregational in nature. Just as he wanted the Bible to be in the German language, he also wanted the texts *and* the tunes of German church music to be in the vernacular.

But I would very much like to have a true German character. For to translate the Latin text and retain the Latin tone or notes has my sanction, though it does not sound polished or well done. Both the text and notes, accent, melody, and manner of rendering ought to grow out of the true mother tongue and its inflection, otherwise all of it becomes an imitation, in the manner of apes.⁵

Luther's knowledge of the Bible combined with his skills as a poet and musician allowed him to make great strides in the congregational music of the day. Luther's genius was combining the best sophisticated art music (that of the Meistersingers and Minnesingers) with accessible folk music forms. The result was the Lutheran chorale, a congregational music form that was both good and appealing.

A recognition of Luther's discernment and conservatism in his mixing church music with secular culture is important, however. It is clear that Luther was very selective in his choices of musical idioms. Despite the plethora of more debased secular forms such as dance songs and drinking songs, Luther was careful to reject those with rhythms too intense for use in the church.

As Robert Harrell explains,

Strongly rhythmic dance music also existed in Luther's day. The rhythms from these songs do not appear in Luther's music; rather, the rhythmic basis of the chorales lies in the word accents instead of dance rhythms.⁶

Ulrich Leupold maintains this observation:

⁵ Martin Luther, "Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments," trans. Bernhard Erling, in *Luther's Works*, ed. Conrad Bergendoff and Helmut Lehmann, vol. 40: *Church and Ministry II*, American (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958) 141.

⁶ Robert Lomas Harrell, "A Comparison of Secular Elements in the Chorales of Martin Luther with Rock Elements in Church Music of the 1960's and 1970's" (M.A. Thesis, Bob Jones University, 1975) 36.

Rollicking drinking songs were available in the 16th century too. Luther steered clear of them. He never considered music a mere tool that could be employed regardless of its original association but was careful to match text and tune, so that each text would have its own proper tune and so that both would complement each other.⁷

Martin Luther began a tradition of church music that took the best of high culture and combined it with best of folk culture to make it accessible for average worshipers in a congregation. While the Church largely influenced both high art and folk art during the Middle Ages, it was high art that comprised the majority of church music during that period. Luther encouraged congregational participation during the Reformation by discarding from church music both the more unaccessible forms of high art and the more debase forms of folk art, thus embracing that which was as excellent as it was popular.

V. Pietism

Often significant events in the stream of history will considerably affect culture, religion, and their interaction with one another. Such was the case with the Thirty Years' War in the mid-17th century. The horrors of that war, begun as a skirmish between Catholics and Protestants and expanding to encompass much more, left society in a state of despair and longing for comfort.

Johannes Riedel describes the period as follows:

Confronted with the horrible killing and pillaging of the Thirty Years' War, the individual sought enlightenment, self-understanding, comfort, and consolation in a personal and subjective approach to God.⁸

⁷ Ulrich S. Leupold, "Learning from Luther? Some Observations on Luther's Hymns," *Journal of Church Music* 8 (July-August 1966) 5.

⁸ Johannes Riedel, *The Lutheran Chorale; Its Basic Traditions* (Minneapolis, 1967).

What resulted from these sentiments was a reaction against orthodox formalism and scholasticism and an emphasis on personal piety and experience that reached its culmination in the Pietistic movement in Germany. Pietism spread with men like Jacob Spener and August Francke who maintained that the purpose of worship and church music was to build up and edify the worshiper. Such thinking had profound effects on the hymnody and other church music of the day.

The influence of Pietism produced church music that was much more personal and subjective than its predecessors. Pietistic hymn writers such as Johann Schütz, Joachim Neander, and Gerhard Tersteegen emphasized individualistic, experiential, even sentimental aspects of Christianity. They rejected customary liturgical forms of worship in favor of more simple, personal expressions of faith. Included in this rejection was any church music that did not edify the worshiper, and church music during this period lapsed into extreme personal subjectivism. Even J. S. Bach found himself in conflict with Pietism, and much of his church music demonstrates its influences.

VI. Enlightenment, Rationalism, and the Industrial Revolution

Up through the late 17th century, culture expressed itself along two planes, high culture and folk culture, over both of which the church had significant influence. How these two forms of culture interacted with each other and with religion changed slightly based on various influences, but nevertheless the overall picture remained consistent. This all changed with the “Age of Reason.”

Beginning in the 18th century, philosophers of Rationalism such as Voltaire and Rousseau slipped into the barren field left by the intellectual weaknesses of Pietism and sparked an emphasis on man's autonomy and trust in reason that permeated culture and religion alike. In terms of cultural expression, progress and pleasure were now most important. The arts were expected to please rather than to instruct. People's personal tastes now shaped music.

The Enlightenment succeeded in dethroning Christian perspectives, sending the culture of the church into exile. This was the origin of a purely secular culture, which up to this time had never before existed in Western society. Now that organized religion no longer shaped culture, high culture broke off on its own and very quickly plummeted into antiquity. While high art retained good and Christianity-influenced qualities through the Classical and Romantic periods, it slowly spiraled downward in quality, interest, and production.

Folk culture, on the other hand, was soon completely replaced. Flowing from the Enlightenment and its emphasis on reason and human autonomy came the Industrial Revolution. Technological progress began to flourish. Emphasis on commercialism and the rise of mass media gave birth to a new form of culture—pop culture. Pop culture did not exist before the invention of mass media, nor did it begin to exist alongside folk culture. Pop culture destroyed folk culture. Pop culture is intrinsically commercialistic and secular. Whatever appeals to the masses and makes money is produced.

These kinds of cultural influences quickly found their way into church music. Beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher, church music with the primary purpose of edification should necessarily be accessible for every person. Therefore church music must be simple and expressly popular. Only church music that appealed to the “common man” would suffice for acceptable

use in worship. Therefore, Schleiermacher pressed for an adoption of secular culture into church music, something that could never before have been attempted.

Such developments produced effects that greatly influenced culture and church music for years to come. The creation of secular culture, the destruction of pure folk culture and its subsequent replacement by new mass pop culture, and a fundamental distrust of religion all led to a profoundly new interaction between culture and church music that was carried well into the modern age.

VII. American Democracy

When America earned her independence and established representative democracy as the governing principle of her new Constitution, free religious expression achieved great liberty. Believers of all religions now found their long sought-after freedom to worship however they pleased. Along with democracy also came the privilege of every individual to have his say in the workings of his government.

While all of these general characteristics of democracy are certainly beneficial for religious liberty and freedom of expression, democracy's emphasis on human freedom and individuality built on the foundations of Rationalism and further helped to "popularize" religion and the music of the church. Several influences of American democracy combined to create such effects.

First, American democracy encouraged individual autonomy and a distrust in organized establishment. Such thinking added to the views of Rationalism and Humanism, further influencing evangelical theology to be more anthropocentric. Church music continued to adopt

the popular styles of the secular culture in order to appeal to people. This practice was strongly encouraged by Charles G. Finney, the “Father of Revivalism.” Finney was a theological Arminian who believed that conversion was not a miracle of God but an act that human means could produce. He thought that in order to convince people to be saved, they had to have some kind of crisis experience. In order to accomplish this in his revivalistic meetings, he saw the necessity to create excitement and appeal that would generate that kind of crisis. Thus Finney pressed strongly for linking the inner culture of the church with the then-new phenomenon of pop culture.

The significance of Finney on culture and the church’s music cannot be overestimated. Because he believed in the autonomous ability of man to change himself, he believed that revival could be produced through the wise use of means. In order to move people in the direction of revival they needed something fresh and new to get their attention. Novelty for its own sake was central to Finney’s method. Finney would encourage people to mimic what advertisers and politicians were doing in order to affect people.

Charles Finney’s theology and methodology of revivalism meshed perfectly with the humanistic philosophies of American democracy and the pop culture it was birthing. So Finney linked the success of the church to pop culture, and men like Moody, Torrey, Sunday, Graham, Sankey, Bliss, and Shea followed suit. None of them foresaw where the church’s link with the then-moderate popular culture would take them.

The second influence of the principles of American democracy upon culture and church music was its insistence that all people should have equal rights. Such a principle may help secure religious freedom and equality of treatment in a depraved society, but stubborn-faced

insistence on an individual's rights increased the shift toward an anthropocentric Christianity that emphasized free choice and human autonomy. These beliefs further influenced church music, both in its texts and musical form.

In terms of text, new hymns and church anthems focused more on themes such as human freedom, personal experience, and decision to change one's self than theocentric worship. The Church experienced a radical shift from a focus on excellence in vertical worship to man-centered, evangelism-focused purposes, and this expressed itself readily in the music of the church. As evangelicals continued to stress experience and appeal to man, they proceeded to embrace the music of pop culture.

The first form of pop culture that was adopted by the church was Victorianism. Victorianism was characterized by sentimentalism and art designed for the pleasure and entertainment of the masses. It gave people a false view of how things really were. It elevated experience and emotion above truth and reality. Christians adopted this culture, which seemed harmless enough, though they should have recognized that this sentimentalism was debasing their affections. More recognizable danger sprang up, however, with the flourishing of secular pop culture. With the invention of cinema and television, pop culture was spiraling downward, taking music style with it.

Finally, American democracy's support of capitalism and commercialism significantly influenced culture and religion. American pop culture's chief objective is to sell. Art is no longer produced for its beauty or benefits to humanity. Pop culture emphasizes the innovative and ignores lessons of the past. It promotes instant gratification and selfishness in the consumer. And

since the Church has married its music with that of pop culture, church music exhibits these characteristics as well.

VIII. Modernism/Postmodernism

The philosophies of Rationalism and humanism reached their culmination in expressions of Modernists of the late 19th century. Modernism as a philosophy is based almost exclusively on rational and empirical foundations. The goal is to completely separate the knower from the thing known so that it can be analyzed dispassionately and objectively. The modernist's pursuit of completely objective truth is exemplified in Descartes' pursuit of doubting everything until he found something that he could not doubt. Ultimately, he believed that he could not escape the reality of his own doubting and thereby claimed to establish his own knowing as certain and, thus, the basis on which to build all other truth claims.

Modernism emphasized the collection and observation of knowledge. It was inherently naturalistic and humanistic, denying the supernatural and championing human reason. Features of modernism such as individualism and an optimistic view of progress affected all of culture including the culture of the Church.

However, scientists and philosophers soon began to question the ability to obtain objective truth and became skeptical concerning the collection of knowledge itself. Added to this, the worldwide scale of suffering and brutality introduced by two World Wars and countless smaller wars, famines, riots, and the everyday violence of men mortally wounded the modernist belief in inevitable progress. The demise of modernism had begun.

Postmodernism is the logical successor to the philosophical throne that had been abdicated by modernism. The postmodern has allowed the skepticism of the rational-empiricists to order his entire worldview. Drawing from such barren conclusions, he is forced to deny the accessibility, if not the reality, of objective truth. Further, postmodernism reacts against the cold mechanical world of modernism by advocating a form of existentialism. Authority is rejected, not because each individual has the ability to discover objective truth on his own, but because there is no objective truth at all. Each person can create his own meaning. Knowledge is uncertain, progress is rejected, and truth is known only through channels other than reason, such as intuition.

This kind of thinking adversely affected culture and especially the arts because no longer was there such a thing as objective standards of beauty. Beauty is now “in the eye of the beholder.” Such lack of objectivity in musical evaluation has led for a call of tolerance for any music style conceived as long as an individual finds meaning for himself in that style.

Church music has adapted this sentiment to some degree by insisting that morality in music is non-existent and only an individual can determine meaning for himself with any given genre or piece of music. Proponents of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) styles insist that any form of music is acceptable for Christian worship:

With certain exceptions, arts and especially music are morally relative and inherently incapable of articulating, for want of a better term, truth speech. They are essentially neutral in their ability to express belief, creed, moral and ethic exactitudes, or even world view.⁹

“The Christian Rocker’s Creed”—We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all music was created equal, that no instrument or style of music is in itself evil—that the diversity

⁹ Harold Best, *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993) 42.

of musical expression which flows forth from man is but one evidence of the boundless creativity of our Heavenly Father .¹⁰

In current church music trends, all music is permissible, and anyone who insists that one musical form is more excellent or fitting for purposes of worship than another is castigated. Any amateur can write a ditty on a napkin and rise to stardom in the Contemporary Christian Music community. Postmodern denial of objective beauty mixed with rampant commercialism has led to a pop marketplace of sub-standard church music.

IX. Conclusion

In western history, interaction between culture and religion has been tenuous. It is very difficult to determine which influences had greater hold on the other. What is clear, however, is that there was a fundamental shift in the 18th century with the Enlightenment. The Church was dethroned as an important influence over culture, secular culture was born, and with the growing Industrial Revolution, pop culture destroyed and replaced folk culture.

With this shift, culture was no more directed and controlled by talented musicians and Church leaders. Culture was and is now controlled by mass media and commercialism. Before the shift, godly church leaders could choose from high art and folk art music that would aid their congregations best in the worship of God. Men like Martin Luther mixed good, accessible forms of high art with the best of folk art to produce a quality, yet pleasing congregational song. After Pietism, Rationalism, and the influence of men like Schleiermacher and Finney, pop culture governed church music.

¹⁰ *Contemporary Christian Music*, November 1988, 12.

As the Church moves forward into the 21st century, church leaders must be aware of the relationship between church music and the inner culture of the church with that of the culture around them. They should recognize the strengths and weaknesses of various cultural forms and strive to choose quality yet accessible forms for use in their congregational worship.