

Proclaiming God's Kingdom through Music

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Jesus' message was "the kingdom of God", the rule of God in human life and history. God's kingdom is not something that only affects our individual lives or is limited to the confines of the church – it is meant to influence and dominate every sphere of human activity, as Jesus said in Matthew 13:33, "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough". Romans 1:20 makes clear why this is so, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse". It is not by chance that Christians have led the greatest discoveries and advances in human history. I am not talking here about small though significant developments in the progress of science or technology. I am talking about entire theories upon which all others in those disciplines are built – Newton's invention of calculus, Galileo's theories of the cosmos, and Mersenne's invention of the equal temperament scale universally used in all types of music today. Yeast that worked its way all through an enormous amount of dough.

This article looks at how music permeates modern life and what our response to this should be as citizens of the kingdom of Jesus Christ residing in the world of today. We will look at how the entire foundation of Western music was built by committed Christians and how this dominance of music slipped away into the hands of others. We will then look at the role of music within the Church of today, and close with challenges facing Christians to redeem and restore music for the kingdom of God.

Music is everywhere - we can't escape it!



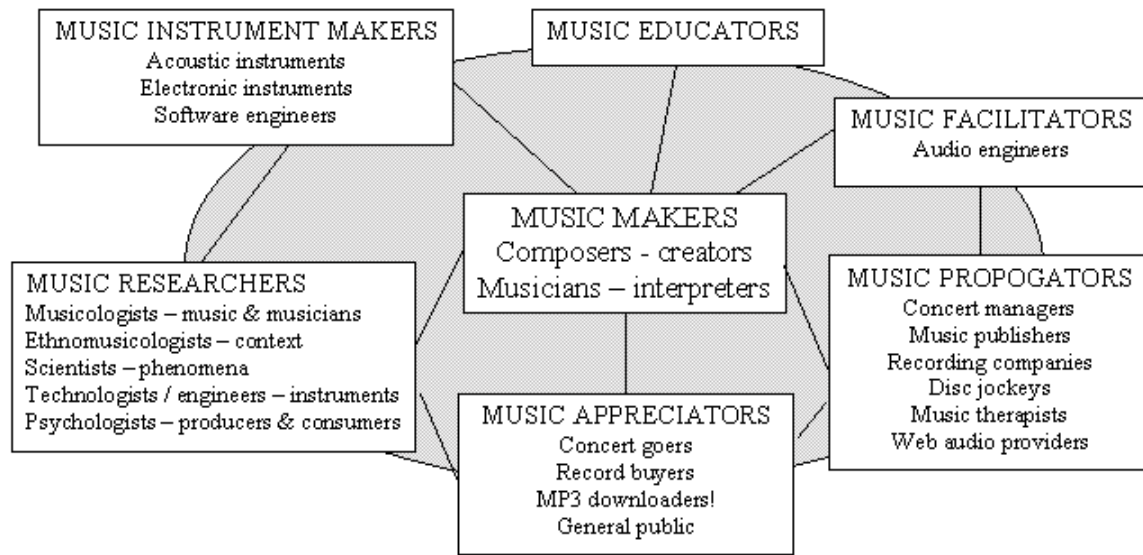
Whether we are aware of it or not, music is present in every sphere of modern life: at home, at work, in church, as we do our shopping, as we dine out, as we occupy ourselves with recreational activities, and even as we commute from one place to another. Unless one is deaf, it is impossible to escape its incessant invasion of our auditory senses. In certain situations we have control over the music we hear, in others it is pre-programmed for us, leaving us with little or no choice in our listening menus. In the latter case, its ever-presence tends to cause us to relegate it to the sub-conscious status of background noise – something that is always with us, but that we don't really take much notice of.

Leviticus 15:31 trains us to watch our lives carefully and to develop the habit of carefulness, even about things that cannot be seen or felt. Much of the music of today, especially the kind you are likely to hear in public

venues, may communicate messages alien or even hostile to Biblical values. I believe every Christian will agree that it is probably unwise to allow these messages to enter our thoughts through the unguarded door of the sub-conscious. We need to be fully aware of what we are listening to, especially since we cannot avoid it in today's world, for us to be able to handle this continual input in the correct manner.

The diagram below depicts music as an ecosystem in which every one of us is a member. The interconnecting lines represent direct interactions between specific groups within this ecosystem, while the grey background on which all groups are placed is used to signify that every single group is dependent to some extent on all the others. At the centre of this ecosystem are the music makers, without whom presumably no music would exist for the other groups to play their respective roles.

THE MUSIC ECOSYSTEM



This music ecosystem is highly significant to us as Christians. It clearly shows that music impacts on everyone, even if we are only a member of the general public. My contention is that, as priests in God's kingdom, it is the responsibility of the Christian to take hold of the centre of this ecosystem to proclaim God's kingdom through music. I do not mean that worship songs should sit at the top of the US Billboard Charts or the UK Top 40. I mean something much more fundamental. Exactly what I do mean will become clear as we progress through this article.

Revelation 1:6 says that Jesus has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve God. Romans 15:16 explains that one of the priestly duties is to proclaim the Good News of God, while 1 Peter 2:9 states that we are chosen to declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light. The sacred-secular dichotomy evident in today's world is a relatively new phenomenon. Certainly, the kingdom of God preached by Jesus made no distinction between sacred and secular – everything came under His rule and all creation gave evidence to His eternal power and divine nature.

This worldview, held steadfastly by most Christian musicians of the past, gave rise to several extremely significant and far-reaching developments, described in the following sections of this article. The proclamation of the Good News and the declaration of God's praises were not limited

to only the literal action of speaking or singing the message of the Scriptures, or even of writing music with this explicit message – it instead seeped into every crack and crevice of the foundation of music itself, resulting in an entire musical system designed to give evidence to His eternal power and divine nature. It should be noted here that the musicians themselves may not always have been explicitly motivated or even fully aware that they were revolutionizing the history of music, rather their far-reaching inventions were a result of lives dedicated to the wholehearted service of the Lord, ones in which no distinction of sacred and secular existed.

The entire foundation of music today was built by committed Christians

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches."

These words of Jesus from Matthew 13:31-32 graphically depict what happened in the history of Western music between the 10th and the 20th centuries. Some of the foundations of music today developed by committed Christians of the past include the staff notation system, the ubiquitously used "do re mi" solfege system, the concept of consonance that forms the basis of tonal harmony, and the major and minor scale systems with their currently universally used equal temperament tunings. Almost all of the great composers whose compositions contributed significantly to the development and advancement of Western music theory were essentially Christian in worldview and wrote their music with the intention of reflecting God's glory through their compositions. Many were also committed followers of Christ.

The Staff Notation System and the Solfege System

Guido of Arezzo (990-1050), choirmaster at the Benedictine abbey in Pomposa, Italy, appears to have been the first person to realize the value of using a staff notation to designate definite pitches (Stolba, 1998), to more quickly train his choirboys to learn new hymns. He invented the first written staff notation system with specific pitches assigned to different lines and spaces. The boys had to memorise the scale steps to be able to sing at sight any note they might come across in any hymn. To make it easier for his pupils to determine the exact sounds of the scale, he devised a method where a known melody was compared with the unknown one to be learned. For this purpose he composed a melody for the well-known hymn "Ut queant laxis". "Ut Queant Laxis" was a hymn in honour of St. John the Baptist (Obstat *et al*, 1912). The Roman Breviary divides it into three parts and assigns the first, "Ut queant laxis", to Vespers, the second to Matins, the third to Lauds, of the feast of the Nativity of St. John. Hymnologists generally ascribe the authorship to Paulus Diaconus. The hymn is written in Sapphic stanzas, of which the first is famous in the history of music for the reason that the notes of the Guido's melody corresponding with the initial syllables of the six hemistichs are the first six notes of the diatonic scale of C (Harman, 1969). It was the innovation of Guido of Arezzo to associate this series of six notes with a set of easily remembered syllables, Ut, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, and La.

C D F D E D
Ut que - ant la - xis

D D C D E E
Re - so - na - re fi - bris

E F G E D E C D
Mi - ra ge - sto - rum

F G A G F D D
Fa - mu - li tu - o - rum

G A G F E F G D
Sol - ve pol - lu - ti

A G A F G A A
La - bi - i re - a - tum

Thus the first six steps of the C major scale are associated with these initial syllables of the first six phrases of the hymn:

Interval Difference:	Tone	Tone	Semitone	Tone	Tone	
Solfège Syllable:	Ut	Re	Mi	Fa	Sol	La

These pitch-syllable linkings used by Guido for sight singing have become standard and have been extended to include the seventh scale step of Ti. In the modern European fixed-Ut system, Ut always means C, Re always means D and so on. In America, Ut has been generally replaced by Do because of the open sound of the latter, and the system can be transposed. (Stolba, 1998).

These inventions of Guido of Arezzo, the staff notation system and the solfège system, originally for the purpose of proclaiming God's message through music, have since been adopted so ubiquitously that everyone takes them for granted and only those pursuing serious study of the history and theory of music remember their origins. They are another testament to the eternal power and divine nature of our Lord being clearly seen and understood from what has been created, so that men are without excuse.

The Concept of Consonance and Tonal Harmony

In today's world where equality is championed and various "world musics" are becoming increasingly accessible to people of other cultures, the concept of harmony has sometimes been criticized by purists as a purely Western phenomenon propagated by colonialists, especially since non-western musics did not evolve to develop harmony independently of Western influence. Notwithstanding this train of thought, most of today's music is nonetheless based on tonal harmony originally developed in Europe.

The earliest form of harmonization, known as organum and consisting mainly of strict parallel movement at the consonant intervals of an octave, fifth or fourth from the main melody, evolved within the medieval European church, as a means of enhancing chant melodies. All subsequent developments in tonal harmony up until its evolutionary peak in the late 19th century after which time the dominance of tonality was challenged by polytonality, atonality and other new developments in the theory of music, took place under the broad umbrella of Christendom, by composers and musicians who definitely considered themselves as Christians. That the mainstream music of today remains based on tonal harmony implies the intrinsic value of those concepts developed by Christian musicians of the past.

The point that I am trying to make here is that concepts and theories developed by the intelligent, educated and innovative mind surrendered to Christ cannot help but discover universal truths reflective of the eternal power and divine nature of our Lord so that these may be clearly seen and understood from what has been created, so that men are without excuse. Why can the concepts of consonance and tonal harmony be considered as universal truths? Consider the following few facts (Fink, 1996).

1. When a note is played, on any instrument, the note is determined by how many vibrations per second it makes.
2. If you play or sing the *octave* to any note (the "same note, only higher"), then it has twice the vibrations. The *ratio* between the notes, then, is 2 to 1 (or 2:1).
3. Historically, the ear has preferred simple ratios as harmonious, and complex ratios have been avoided or considered noisy or dissonant.
4. Whenever a single note is played, we actually hear several notes at once, called *overtones*, caused by simultaneous vibrations or modes of the vibrating system. These overtones are very faint, but the different strengths of the mixture is mainly what tells us we are hearing a trumpet instead of a piano or a voice -- but all sounding what seems like the same *single* note.
5. The overtones of any one note *all add up to its major chord*, when played out loud rather than as overtones.
6. The most audible overtones of a tonic or keynote all have simple ratios, like 2:1 (octave), or 2:3 (fifth note of scale), and the fourth note of the scale, whose first different overtone is the given tonic, has a ratio of 3:4 .
7. If you write out the overtones of these three notes and string out the three most audible ones of each within the span of an octave, you will get the major scale. For example:
 - Tonic C: Overtones are: C, G, E, and Bb (The additional octave overtones are omitted as redundant and too high and weak to be noticed within the framework of average human hearing.)
 - Fifth G: Overtones are G, D, B, and F
 - Fourth F: Overtones are F, C, A, and Eb.
8. If you substitute the three weakest ones (the 3rd, 6th and 7th notes of the scale) with another three notes (which includes the even weaker next overtones), and which are flatter, *you get the minor scale*. (The 6th note is strongest of the three because it forms no complex ratios with adjacent notes in the scale.)
9. When you consider the advent of harmony, in which there has been use of only the three chords of the tonic, dominant (5th) and subdominant (4th) to harmonize *all* the 7 scale-notes in most of the folk melodies known, this further underscores that these three notes and their overtones were fundamental influences in the formation of the scale's notes. Even the names that evolved for them are perfect representations of their acoustic role, even though the names, 'dominant' 'subdominant' and keynote/tonic, were coined by people without acoustical knowledge.

Says Fink: "Now either all this is the greatest coincidence on earth - that is, people who knew nothing of acoustics coming up with scales reflecting *all* these acoustic properties purely by chance - or else, in fact, the ear was already able to discern the sounds as distinct between harmonious or dissonant because the ear could hear these acoustic properties without consciously knowing they existed." But why was it that tonal harmony only evolved in the West? Why could other ears not hear these acoustic properties in the same way? I believe the greater insight given was to those who acknowledged the Lordship of Christ in their lives. Thus yet another clear and easily understood witness to His eternal power and divine nature could emerge to form the basis of music today.

The Major and Minor Scale System and Equal Temperament Tuning

In the Middle Ages eight scale patterns or modes were developed as a theoretical foundation for plainsong, the unharmonized chant of the medieval Christian liturgies in Europe and the Middle East. These church modes, under the impact of the composition of polyphonic vocal music,

became reduced in due course to the two characteristic scales of later Western music, the major and the minor scales. (Encyclopedia.com, 2000). The evolution of the major-minor key tonality universally used today began in the Renaissance period and was not completed until the late Baroque era. A vital step in this process was the recognition of the triad as a harmonic unit, as scale patterns do not become major or minor scales until their pitches are viewed as roots of chordal harmonies with the functions and relationships of key tonality. (Stolba, 1998). As explained in the previous section, the major and minor scale patterns are actually based on the acoustic properties of the tones involved, and are thus rooted in physical reality.

With the establishment of major-minor key tonality and its inseparable companion of tonal harmony, composers became more adventurous and wanted to write music that included modulations, or changes of key. However, due to how musical instruments were tuned up until the Baroque period, to do so would have meant that the music would have sounded out of tune¹. A new method of tuning would have to be universally adopted, one which allowed modulations to occur without making the music sound all wrong! The French theologian and mathematician Marin Mersenne (1588-1648) is generally credited with the invention of equal temperament tuning in 1639 in his *Harmonie Universelle*. In equal temperament, all the notes are the same distance apart, meaning everything is slightly out of tune. However, it is all equally out of tune, so a major, minor, or other scale in any key sounds as out of tune² as if you had played it in any other key, making it easier to tune instruments. This tuning system began to be widely adopted in the mid-18th century. Johann Sebastian Bach wrote *The Well-Tempered Clavier* in the eighteenth century, and there is much debate on what was meant by well tempered. Some scholars believe that Bach was an advocate on equal temperament, and wrote *The Well-Tempered Clavier* to show what equal temperament was capable of. (Denton, 1996). Today, this tuning system is universally used in every type of music around the world (this is not to say no other tuning systems exist, for example classical Indian music still uses various ragas with their unique microtonal intervals, but equal temperament is the norm for all types of mainstream music).

So, the next time you hear any piece of music in a major or minor key (and isn't all music in one or the other...), remember the early church where this tonality was born, and give thanks to the Lord for men like Marin Mersenne who used their outstanding intellect dedicated to His service to invent something so fundamental as our basic tuning system of today so that God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature – may be clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.

The Contribution of the Great Composers

The healing and therapeutic power of music is widely acknowledged today. The so-called “Mozart Effect” of enhancing intelligence featured in parenting, education, and music oriented publications, and in the mainstream general press has renewed interest in classical music education and focused much attention on the general field of childhood development and its relation to music. Much research is still being conducted in all these areas, but there is no doubt that music itself not merely a decorative addition to our environment with no function other than mere entertainment.

¹ The reason for this is rather technical and the interested reader is recommended to run a WWW search on the term “musical tuning and temperament” to read further on this matter.

² It should be understood here that “out-of-tune” in this context falls within the 5% critical bandwidth criterion for consonance, so the scales still sound fine to our ears. (Howard & Angus, 1996).

The church has always acknowledged the importance of music, indeed even today the best musicians often come from a Christian background of some sort. Nevertheless, in today's church the lyrics are often considered much more significant than the music in the sense that they can be directly related to a sung prayer, many examples of which are found in the Bible. However, independent research has shown and is showing that the actual music itself has significant psychological and physiological effects on living beings (not only on human beings!) As Christians I think we can agree that anything that affects our minds and bodies will also somehow affect our spirits.

So, can music be classified as "good" or "bad"? I believe it can be, though perhaps not in a very rigid manner, and I am certainly not suggesting that we should go around attempting to categorize all the music we hear in such a fashion. What I am suggesting is that we should perhaps consider music more seriously and invest more confidence in and offer more encouragement and support to our brothers and sisters in Christ who have been given the talent and go into music on a full-time professional basis. History has shown that when Christians seriously pursue music, the impact of their work lives on for generations to come. Many of the world's greatest composers whose compositions contributed significantly to the development of musical styles, form and everything else encompassed within the history of music were inspired by earnest Christian convictions – Bach, Vivaldi, Handel, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Dvorak, Stravinsky, Messiaen (Kavanaugh, 1992) – although not all may have lived exemplary or saintly lives, each was a sincere believer and sincerely wanted to reflect God's glory in their music.

Secularism and the Decline of Christian Influence on Musical Trends

The rise of secularism, with its fundamental principle that in his whole conduct man should be guided exclusively by considerations derived from the present life itself with anything above or beyond the present life being entirely overlooked, marked the decline of the Christian influence on mainstream music history trends. The first half of the twentieth century in particular saw a great deal of experimenting in musical methods, paralleled in other non-music disciplines, based on humanist principles. That not many of these compositions, extensively expounded upon in books on the theory and history of music, are accepted or known by the majority of people today is a reflection as to their intrinsic endurance. The explosive expansion of commercial music with its ever increasing list of different genres under such tasteless names as trash, death metal, grunge and others is a reflection of the depths to which music today has plunged. Add to that the controversies surrounding the influence of certain modern commercial music with respect to teen suicides, sexual misbehaviour, violent crime and drug abuse, and we can see how far the image of music today has changed compared to previous eras. This is not to say all modern music is bad or has a negative influence, far from it – there is much that is good and excellent, too. The problem is, there is nothing the equivalent of the world-changing Kingdom-proclaiming developments of the past.

The role of music within the Church of today

Singing and worship, or worship through song, forms a major part of most church services today. Sad to say, much division still exists as to exactly how things should be done, what sort of music should or should not be used, even what instruments should or should not be played, which songs should be sung, how they should be sung or played ... the list goes on. A quick glance around the local Christian bookstores reveal a vast selection of new praise and worship songbooks, audio compact discs and cassette tape recordings, and videos and books about music and worship. Some local churches adopt the influx of new material wholeheartedly and do their best to keep up with

all the new songs and latest releases. Others stick faithfully to the old hymnals for their main services, perhaps restricting the singing of “choruses” to youth meetings and home fellowships. Yet others use a mixture of these “new” and “old” songs, in varying amounts.

Seminars, conventions and conferences on music and worship abound. Messages are preached from the pulpit. Yet, divisions still remain. Many churches accompany their singing with the standard “pop band” instruments – guitars, bass, drums and keyboards. Some add winds or brass. Others restrict the accompaniment to only a piano, or perhaps an organ. A few have even tried to set up their own chamber orchestras to play during the service. The only universally acceptable component, apart from the worship leader, appears to be a choir of some sort – either a full fledged choir, or a small team of backup singers.

DID YOU KNOW?

In random tests conducted in a Malaysian church recently, it was found that the volume levels during the service averaged 96 dB, with spikes of up to 110 dB at times. Scientific studies have shown that continual exposure to noises with amplitudes greater than 90 dB can cause permanent hearing damage! Maybe it's time for churches to turn down the volume...

This paper does not attempt to provide recommendations to Christians as to what type of music should be used in worship or listened to in leisure, rather it addresses fundamental issues and presents situations occurring in Malaysian churches today. Living in Malaysia and having been involved in the music ministry for approximately 17 years now, I can speak mainly from local experience, with only one year’s experience in-between serving in a local church in England, and again for a few weeks in Germany.

In past times as we have seen, all the most gifted as well as best-trained musicians came from within the church. Their inventions, innovations and compositions helped shape world music history, with their influence extending far beyond their geographical or temporal localities, proclaiming God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature – so that these qualities may be understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. Today this is no longer the case. Churches struggle to find good musicians to accompany their singing. When they have them, they restrict them in when they are allowed to play, what they are allowed to play, and how they are to play it. Seldom have I heard, in Malaysian churches anyway, congregations singing songs and music written by *local* Christians. Yes, there have been occasions of tokenism, but no *real* attempt to integrate or even encourage the regular use of music written by church members who are dedicated believers as well as properly trained musicians. Instead there are debates over whether the church should use hymns or songs from Australia’s Hill Song or USA’s Hosanna Integrity music ministries. Another problem I have observed, over and over in many different churches, is inhibition fostered by the church leadership’s desire to have only “good” and “anointed” Christians serving as church musicians, with much less importance being placed on real talent or formal, serious musical training. I am not saying that it is wrong for the church to want only true and dedicated believers in Jesus to lead the congregation in worship through music, but don’t the Scriptures also say “man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks within the heart”? (1 Samuel 16:7).

Innovation today is often frowned upon. Church musicians are frequently expected to toe the line in terms of playing styles and interpretations. Very often, a favourite recording is selected as the musical model to follow, with even exact introductions and sections originally supposed to be *ad libitum* imitated as closely as possible. All this is defined as “submitting to spiritual authority”. But is it?

Many churches also have rules on how a new musician is to be initiated into the music team. Many expect the musician to attend several months of rehearsals without playing any instrument

at all, asking the musician to *sing* his praises freely, the premise being if he can sing freely before the Lord, then he will also be able to play his instrument effectively in ministry.

The Bible says that different people are given different gifts, and that these gifts are to be used to serve others so that God may be praised (1 Peter 4:10). The parable of the talents imply that resources, including musical or any other talent given to an individual by the Lord, must be used pro-actively in His service. In this sense, the church as a body also has the responsibility of stewardship with respect to the talented musicians the Lord sends into its midst.

Why are the Christian musicians of today not as effective as their past brethren? Why has music in the world been taken over and dominated by influences alien and even hostile to our Lord? Why is the church of today a follower rather than a leader?

Music in and of itself has been proven to have a profound psychological and physiological impact on us, as mentioned earlier in this article. Connected with this fact is another: a musician who has been deeply involved in music since a young age, or someone who was born musical³, has a unique type of personal temperament known as the musician's temperament, which is different from that of non-musicians (Kemp, 1996). This is not to say that all musicians are similar in character or personality, far from it – musicians are a very diverse lot. But all true musicians share one common characteristic that cannot truly be understood by a non-musician – the deep-seated need to express himself through writing music or playing an instrument. This is not an imagined desire, but a real longing, presumably implanted within the heart of the true musician by the Lord Himself.

DID YOU KNOW?

Advertisers have long known the power of music as a means of psychologically manipulating the masses, and regularly invest millions in producing music to be used to influence consumer behaviour. It is easy to fall into a similar trap in church, and worship leaders and musicians need to consciously avoid using music to drive the emotions instead of to enhance the worship experience for the average member of the congregation.

If the church leadership can understand this and nurture this gift given by the Lord in an informed and correct manner, then perhaps the church can reclaim music as a whole for the kingdom of God. I believe one of the first things to be done would be to identify who in each respective church has been given this gift. This may not necessarily include everyone who can play an instrument, and also may not necessarily include everyone who has passed some music examination or other. The next thing to do should be to encourage these people to use their gift for the Lord's service. This should not be restricted only to playing with the band during Sunday services, but should encompass all aspects of music including the pursuit of a degree level education in music. The combination of gifting and serious training make for a powerful spiritual warrior in the Lord's Army. If there are any musicians within the church who already possess such training, then they should be encouraged and motivated to serve the Lord wholeheartedly with their gift. Praise and worship songs composed by those who have an inclination towards composition should be used regularly within the main church services. Formally trained musicians should be encouraged to train others in the church, but those who have sufficient gifting should always be encouraged to pursue further formal study in this area. It goes without saying that all this musical training must be accompanied by solid Biblical instruction as well. The practise of insisting all musicians must *sing* to the *exclusion* of expressing themselves on their instruments before they are allowed to *play* their instrument in worship should be discontinued – as has been pointed out above, many true musicians are often best able to express themselves through their instrument – this is a gift given by the Lord, why therefore should

³ Musical intelligence has been identified as one of the different inherent intelligence types found in mankind, recognised in standard intelligence ratings and tests.

anyone else be allowed to insist that this form of expression is somehow inferior or less valid than vocal expression? Those appointed to lead the music team should be filled with the Holy Spirit and well instructed in Scriptures (as in Acts 6:3), but they should also be properly trained and skilled in music (1 Chronicles 25:7).

Lessons of past history should never be forgotten. Good quality music written by past, present and future Christian musicians should always be treasured and utilised to its fullest, with thankful hearts to the Lord for His generosity in blessing these brethren with such talent for the edification of His church and for the proclaiming of His Kingdom in the world.

Conclusion

The kingdom of God was both future (Matthew 25:31ff.) and present (Luke 11:20). This last reference connects the kingdom with the activity of Jesus in casting out demons. To the degree that Jesus invades the kingdom of Satan in this fashion, the kingdom of God has already come. There should be no division of sacred and secular, with committed and well trained Christians reclaiming all areas for His kingdom. Music is potentially one of the widest reaching influences available to us, and as past history has shown, when dedicated Christian musicians are allowed to develop to their fullest potentials, the course of history can be influenced for the purpose of God. In closing, it is my sincere prayer that this message will be taken seriously by the church leadership so that we may redeem and restore ALL music for God's kingdom.

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Further Reading

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