



What Makes Music Sacred?¹

Ted Ward

What is it that makes a song “sacred?” Something that is set apart especially for God is sacred; but some say that church tradition determines what is and isn’t sacred. But we must reject this on the basis of Scripture. The Bible’s own songbook, the book of Psalms, emphasizes the need for “a new song.” In the face of this need for a new song, it is hard to believe that tradition alone is a proper authority. This is not to say, of course, that the past is wrong or that tradition is worthless. Indeed not. The more aware we become of tradition and history, the broader our appreciation and understanding.

In church music today, there is a need to re-examine the view of what is sacred; not in any attempt to destroy tradition or to take a radical turn into some contemporary fad. What is needed is a broader sense of appreciation—an awareness of the majesty and grandeur of worship that reached its peak in the past, *along with* a recognition that as new generations develop new forms they, too, have something to add.

Even in what we call “traditional” sacred music, a variety of styles and forms exists. Most church-goers already have a broad sense of music appreciation. In a “spiritual” is heard the simple expression of a soul’s happiness in God or an outcry for God’s help. We accept in a marching tune such as “Onward, Christian Soldiers,” something of the testimony of those who are joined in the battle for righteousness. Yet in sharp musical contrast with these simple forms, the majesty of a chorus from Handel, Brahms, or Bach reminds us that even certain highly artistic forms of music are also accepted as sacred.

The use of instruments in worship has long been a matter of controversy in the church. Although the early Christians likely used only hand-held instruments, members of the church in America can sometimes become indignant about the use of any but stationary instruments (piano and organ.) Although the instruments of worship listed in the Old Testament include the equivalents of the flute, clarinet, trumpet, violin, harp, and guitar, a particular church today might accept the flute but reject the clarinet (they are essentially the same, musically) and accept the harp and violin but reject the guitar, again essentially the same instrument, historically.

These distinctions have been explained as necessary because of the “association with sinful activities” of certain instruments. Perhaps we should be grateful that church members today don’t know what music historians know about the pipe organ! It isn’t all hearts and flowers!

The issue has taken on a new form today because of the electronically amplified instruments so popular with young people. “Clearly, an electronic amplifier and speaker box have no place in the church,” we might say. But how inconsistent this would be! An electronic organ, such as the one in our chapel, is exactly that: a set of electronic oscillations to produce whistling and squeaking sounds, a keyboard to control them, electronic filter networks to make them sound pleasant, and a powerful amplifier and speaker box to make them loud.

In order to be honest about what our traditions really are, we should reflect on these facts:

- Not all “sacred” music was written by professing Christians. Among the music we set apart for God in our own church are compositions by Baptists, Lutherans,

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Congregationalists, Catholics, Mormons, Jews, Unitarians, and agnostics. Very few great composers wrote church music exclusively.

- Not all “sacred” music began as sacred music. The tunes of many of our favorite hymns began as folk dances in the Middle Ages. Several of our favorite anthems were originally sections from operas—with very different words—and several well-known Gospel songs take their tunes from twentieth-century “Broadway” shows.
- Not all the songs we sing represent a thoughtful and serious reflection of the majesty of God.

	It isn't loudness or softness.	
	It isn't the simplicity or complexity.	~
	It isn't sentimentality or lack of sentimentality.	~
	It isn't fastness or slowness.	
What Makes Music Sacred?		
	It isn't how old-fashioned are the words.	
	It isn't the kind of instruments.	~
	It isn't how good the performer is.	~
	It isn't even a matter of whether or not we like it!	

Instead, what makes music sacred is a matter of genuine expression—from the musician's heart—of a praise or testimony to God, put forward in such a way that the praise or testimony is made more communicative to one who wants to hear.

Sacred music is a communication to God shared with one another. We don't all use the same words or the same type of prayer. We don't all use the same songs or the same styles of sacred music. But our God is One. In him we can fellowship as one through various sorts of sacred music, even when our own tastes and preferences are less expansive and perhaps less well-tuned than the tastes and preferences of others!