

## Music Philosophy of NCBC

### **Music's Power and Musical Choices**

- 1) Music is a creation of God, and therefore meaningful. It can be used to glorify Him, or mislead, twist and distort His revelation.
- 2) Music is commanded by God to be used in worship (Ps 150, Col 3:16). This elevates its importance to a priority, since nothing is more important than worship, and worship is regulated by God Himself.
- 3) The music of worship is not merely decorative or pleasantly distracting. It is not merely to provide 'atmosphere', or to 'warm people up' for the sermon. Nor is the music of worship merely a vehicle to support orthodox lyrics with catchy, familiar tunes.
- 4) Music in worship is *didactic*, *formative*, and *affective*. It is *didactic* in that it teaches, in concert with the lyrics, truth about God, man and the world. It is *formative* in that it shapes the hearers' sentiments about God. The music becomes a kind of catechism of the affections, teaching worshippers what to feel in the presence of God. It is *affective* in that the music moves the affections in the act of worship, enabling and provoking various heart responses to God.
- 5) Music communicates meaning, through its intrinsic form, and through its use in our culture, and its associations. If the communicated meaning is not consonant with a right view of God, or with ordinate affection, the music becomes a form of distortion, and even deceit.
- 6) Church leaders must be very careful of uncritically borrowing musical forms from popular culture, simply because tunes seem accessible, likeable and easy to learn. Popular music, more often than not, has at least the following characteristics:
  1. Formulaic, and predictable.
  2. A tendency to merely remind us of what we already know and feel.
  3. Sentimentalism – wallowing in our feelings instead of mastering or transcending them.
  4. Escapism - not from the world to God, but from the world to the unreal.

In short, pop music encourages an immature perception of the world, and a narcissism about our feelings and perceptions. This is typically hostile to worship.

- 7) These matters transcend the typical objections to popular music that have to do with its associations with ungodly culture, its typical use to promote ungodliness, or the supposed sensuality of its beat. Far more insidious is the sentimentalised, narcissistic, and formulaic form of popular music that is incapable of carrying the full weight of contemplation and response to the Triune God.
- 8) This also helps us rightly use the word *style* in the music debate. Most often this becomes a vague plea for agnosticism on the form of music, and a call to respect differences in form as we would differences in food preferences. However, each form of music must be evaluated for its meaning, not merely dismissed with a pseudo-tolerance that recognises how 'any style can give glory to God.'
- 9) A respect for individual conscience means that the church cannot bind the conscience of Christians to listen to only a 'prescribed list' of music. Conscience requires that every man be persuaded in his own mind. This persuasion takes place through knowledge and instruction, where each Christian begins to make mature and wise judgements regarding music. This does not mean that the church's hands are tied in teaching the meaning of music: meaning derived from its intrinsic form, its associations, and its conventional use. The church cannot go beyond what is written, but it is required to teach how to 'test all things, and hold fast what is good', how to 'approve the things that are excellent', and to teach wise discernment in general.
- 10) Church leaders carry a particular responsibility to choose fitting music for corporate worship. Corporate worship has a greater teaching effect on the imaginations of God's

people than any other occasion. God's people, in some form, bind their consciences to the musical choices of the leaders. Most of all, what is offered will either be profane or sacred, and the leaders will have to give an account for the worship that was offered on each Lord's Day. Therefore, the choices of music must not be based upon seeking 'balance' in the eyes of man: balancing traditional hymns with contemporary choruses, balancing slow tempo songs with fast tempo ones, or balancing music which appeals to the youth with music that appeals to the elderly. Church leaders cannot make musical choices to appease or attract a particular constituency in the church. Instead, choices must be made by what is fitting to offer to God from sincere, understanding hearts.

## **Musical Selection for Corporate Worship**

The following are the criteria we will seek in evaluating music to be used on the Lord' Day, and in other settings.

**1) Truthfulness.** Truth is what corresponds to reality. Music as a creation of God, can depict reality as God has made it, or falsify it. The lyrics of the songs sung must be doctrinally correct and orthodox, while allowing for poetic license. Hymns are not doctrinal statements put to music, nor should they be. They are poems, using metaphor, rhyme and meter. These poems must nevertheless accord with Scriptural doctrine.

While music does not communicate propositions, it communicates sentiments, emotions and affections. In this way, the music can falsify what is being sung in different ways. It can communicate a mood or a sentiment completely unfitting of what the text purports to speak of, e.g. galloping when speaking of 'sinking deep in sin' or waltzing at the thought of Jesus returning, or skipping at the thought of God's holiness. Not only is the music inappropriate for the text, it misleads believers into associating those emotional states with the truths being sung.

Music can also trivialise a profound truth, exaggerate an emotion, distract from the subject matter, and encourage a narcissism when singing. All these responses are possible due the actual form of the music. The form chosen must communicate affective truth, inasmuch as the lyrics must communicate propositional truth.

This truthfulness extends to the sincerity with which we offer these hymns. The music must correspond with reality, and it must emerge from a heart which senses and feels and believes that truth (Jo 4:24).

**2) Ordinate affection.** God is a unique Being, and there is a kind of love that corresponds to knowing His being, and a kind that does not. The music used, and the poetry used should, through the meaning of their form, evoke *appropriate* joy, fear, contrition, thanksgiving and delight. Church leaders must discern between kinds of joy, or kinds of fear, and know when particular music evokes those affections.

When worship music is merely an exercise in self-gratification or entertainment, the emphasis is no longer one of responding to the Being of God. *Who God is* determines how we feel. We do not aim for a certain feeling and then pin it on God. Ordinate affection arises from the commitment to know God as He is, to submit to Him entirely, to grant Him appropriate responses, be they foreign or uncomfortable to us. This is the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom.

**3) Worthy Offering (Psalm 33:1-3, 1 Chr. 25:6-7)** Worship music is not primarily offered to man for his enjoyment, though he is invited to worship the Lord with gladness. The One who hears all and understands all music, deserves our most skilful and excellent musical offerings. This means utilising the best possible instruments, with the most skilful players to accompany a congregation doing its best to worship God musically. It means selecting the best hymns and instrumental offerings that are beautiful and most expressive of God's manifold glories. Though cost, skill-level, and spiritual maturity may limit or hinder the quality of what is offered, we should always aim to do

the best with what we have, and to keep improving.

**4) Understanding and Participation (1 Cor 14:15)** - Paul desires that believers sing with understanding. Here we face some complexity. On one level, every human being is capable of perceiving beauty, being made in the image of God. People's levels of appreciation may differ, but no one is deaf or blind to transcendence. Nor is an uneducated man better suited to music that is cheap, tawdry or tacky. When music is true, good, and beautiful, it will speak to all men everywhere. At the same time, our current cultural impoverishment means that many find serious and beautiful music impenetrable. Very often, they mistake distaste for non-comprehension, but the problem remains. When the good is no longer familiar, the church faces the hard task of making it familiar without causing people to choke on what they have no capacity to swallow. The solution is not to give people regular 'hits' of pop music so as to placate their cravings (for this will only feed habits that ought to be left to die), but to expose the church to great works, explain them, and allow people to get used to them through repetition and regular use. Where possible, works that are simpler (yet beautiful) should be mixed with those that are more ornate in their beauty, to give beginners and the immature some 'rungs on the ladder' to climb up. As elevation of thought and beauty increases, accessibility must be maintained through regular explanations, regular exposure and regular use.

We would do well to differentiate simplicity from shallowness. Good music and poetry may be simple, stripping away what is unnecessary to bring across its message. Shallowness however, reduces music or poetry to where it no longer carries a true message, only a mere pattern that stimulates no thought or perception. Shallow songs or lyrics give an illusion of meaning, while carrying nothing of substance.

**5) Respect for Tradition and a Right View of Contemporaneity.** *Traditional* and *contemporary* are regrettably misunderstood and misused terms in the music debate. Traditional music ought to mean the music which belongs to the genuine Christian tradition, having equivalent sentiments, regardless of differences in era, doctrinal tradition, or culture. *Contemporary* ought to refer to music written by Christians in our era, that continues these equivalent affections, universal to Christian experience over two millennia, and reports them according to 21st-century experience, in forms that answer to the 21st-century imagination. Instead, *traditional* is used to mean hymns older than fifty years (including trite, useless hymns from the 19<sup>th</sup> century), and *contemporary* is used to refer to pop/rock forms of music.

Used in these uncritical ways, a church should be neither 'traditional' nor 'contemporary' in its musical choices, for there is no virtue in simply using older hymns for the sake of their age, or using pop/rock as a deferring nod to relevance and contemporaneity.

Used correctly, the church should be both. The church should both honour and enjoy its heritage, by knowing, learning and singing the hymns and songs that belong to the genuine Christian tradition. This should ideally represent a wide spread of eras and even doctrinal traditions, to celebrate the true catholicity of the faith. This both honours our elders, and keeps us exposed to the examples of our forbearers' worship. It reveals our own blind-spots, and the excesses and weaknesses of our own era.

At the same time, the contemporary church must use its own voice, and its own words to worship God, for this is commanded of us. Contemporary hymns and songs and music that represent art good enough to carry the weight of worship ought to be used. Songs written in our era should not be used simply because they are familiar; they should be used because they are genuinely good, whether or not they are familiar to us. If they are genuinely good and yet not familiar, they ought to be used until they become familiar.

### **Particular Applications**

#### **Children's music**

The music used in ministries or situations where the primary subjects of discipleship are children or

adolescents should not differ in character from the music used in corporate worship. After all, the goal is to prepare and train young people to worship with the larger body, not encourage them to worship God childishly or with some concession to worldly youth-culture.

While the songs may be lyrically simple, and the melodies memorable, they should never trivialise the faith, make light of eternal things, or try to otherwise entertain the children. Worship is enjoyable, but not 'fun', as some would have it, and we do a disservice to our young people if we attempt to bait the hook with fun, only to force them to worship without the entertainment factor later.

To this end, all children's songs and choruses that are self-consciously amusing, zany, silly or foolish must be avoided. Songs that are clichéd and vague ("Jesus wants me for a sunbeam"), should be avoided. Shorter songs that are simple are ideal (see Isaac Watts' hymnbook for children, as an example). The regular hymns used in corporate worship should be taught.

Care should be exercised before enlisting typical 'praise for children' CDs and songs. These often enlist music that is either sentimental and smarmy, or else the empty and clichéd pop-rock sound. Simply because a CD is styled 'children's music' does not mean we ought to use it. Since music is a powerful discipleship tool, we ask that all who teach in the church's discipleship ministries for children and youth consult with the pastors that the music used is appropriate.

### **Instrumental Music**

We see instrumentation for New Testament worship supported by the fact that Colossians 3:16 calls on believers to be 'singing and strumming (*psallontes*)'.

The use of instruments are for two purposes:

- 1) the support of congregational singing
- 2) Providing beautiful and appropriate musical offerings for corporate worship.

1) In support of congregational singing, the instruments chosen should support and complement the human voice. Instruments which tend to drown out singing, or dominate the musical event become obnoxious and counter-productive. Instruments that cannot be heard when more than five believers sing at the same time become redundant and useless for congregational singing. The goal must never be to gather an orchestra or a band for its own sake, but rather to select instruments most helpful to congregational singing. Those instrumentalists who accompany the congregation need the additional training (if necessary), to play metrical hymns.

2) Instrumental offerings are not to be thought of as mere 'background' or 'mood-music'. They are to be contemplated and experienced for their intrinsic worth and beauty, appropriate for any gathering where we seek to worship the God of all beauty. The most common use of these will be for preludes, offertories, during the Lord's Table, postludes, or in some cases, a special instrumental offering for the worship and contemplation of God's people. Here the instruments may be different from the ones used to accompany the congregation, as the purpose is different.

Instrumentalists should seek to adorn the gospel in their offerings, avoiding the flamboyant, ostentatious, pretentious approaches of performers for performance sake. Instrumental offerings must lead God's people in the contemplation of God, not cause their distraction by the choice of an inappropriate offering. The same criteria with which hymns and songs are chosen apply equally to the choices of plain instrumental music.

Because music has such a public, formative role, instrumentalists are expected to be faithful members of the church. Though musicians do not teach the Word of God in the same way, their public, visible service requires that they seek to walk blamelessly before the congregation.

## **Solos & Choirs**

The tradition of Christians singing to each other in corporate worship is not a new phenomenon. Tertullian, in chapter 39 of his *Apologies*, writes, "After manual ablution, and the bringing in of lights, each is asked to stand forth and sing, as he can, a hymn to God, either one from the holy Scriptures or one of his own composing,"

Just as unaccompanied music enables a congregation to contemplate God's beauty and ennoble the soul, so music sung by one or several singers may accomplish the same thing.

Soloists and choirs can serve the congregation in two ways:

- 1) They can present vocal offerings not usually sung by a congregation or which technically too difficult for congregational usage. These pieces must conform to the same standards mentioned earlier for musical selection. Pieces to be sung by vocalists or choirs must be presented to the pastors before they are practised or presented.
- 2) They can present newer hymns or songs to the church, educating it and helping it to sing its melodies and harmonies.

Because we live in a culture where music sung by vocalists and choirs is understood as a performance for entertainment, extra care must be used to preserve the character of these acts as worship-offerings:

- 1) Vocalists and choirs should be living exemplary lives, blameless and not accused of moral failure.
- 2) Vocalists and choirs should dress so as to communicate both the seriousness of their message, and the modesty of their souls. Clothing that is sexually provocative or ostentatious is inappropriate for corporate worship, all the more so for one who will be involved in serving others in public worship. Further details on an acceptable dress can be obtained from the pastors.
- 3) Vocalists and choirs should be well-practiced and technically proficient, so as to avoid distraction and attention falling on them. Further, laziness and inferior skill must not be covered up with excuses about sincerity. If a choir is not more skilful vocally than the rest of the congregation, they are redundant as a choir.
- 4) Vocalists are expected to be faithful members of the church.
- 5) CDs or recordings of backing tracks are to be avoided.
- 6) If possible, choirs and soloists could be physically positioned so that their offering is less of a performance and more of a service.

## **Children's choirs**

- 1) Children are to be taught to worship, but our use for a children's choir will be primarily educational.
- 2) A children's choir is not a form of entertainment for adults, nor is it to be viewed as a performance by the children.
- 3) Children's choirs are to teach children to sing: to sing in unison, and to sing in parts.
- 4) Since most musical offerings are made for the worship of God's people by the faithful members of the church who are the instrumentalists or vocalists, it is typically not appropriate for a children's choir composed of young people who are not yet converted or not members to lead the congregation in worship. Since corporate worship is supposed to speak to the affections and obligations of all men everywhere, the immature and untrained cannot, by definition, effectively speak to these things. If exceptions are made, they will be discussed with the pastors of the church.

## **Hymnbooks and Projections**

Projections can be a useful tool for corporate worship. Physical hymnbooks should never be entirely replaced by projections for four reasons.

First, a hymnal is a physical collection of Christian piety through the ages, whereas a projection is not. When you page through a hymnal, you are all at once paging through church history, and the Christian tradition.

Second, a hymnal is something you can take home and use for private and family worship.

Third, hymnals contain musical notation, whereas some projections do not. As much as musical illiteracy is rife, printed hymnals still hold out the hope that some music education can take place within a church, which is our goal.

Fourth, a hymnal prevents someone from just chopping and adding songs or hymns at whim, since it is a fixed collection.

While we know of no perfect hymnal, some are superior to others. Using the criteria for musical selection, we should choose hymnals that represent more of the right choices, and fewer of the wrong kind.

### **Song-Leader/ Musical Directors**

- 1) Along with the instrumentalists, a song leader or director is helpful. His role is to:
  1. Announce the hymns to be sung, and make appropriate remarks in between the various elements in a worship service.
  2. Provide the sense of tempo for the instrumentalists and the congregation.
  3. Provide a strong melodic lead voice for the congregation.
  4. Lead the congregation confidently, yet modestly, through the singing of psalms, hymns and songs.
- 2) The song leader is to be male, as one who leads God's people in corporate worship, and stands in a place of authority.
- 3) The song leader is to be a faithful member of the church, whose testimony is without blame.
- 4) He is to be dressed modestly and conservatively, and be a winsome example of godly praise.
- 5) The song-director's musical knowledge should be adequate to the task of understanding hymn arrangements, providing helpful guidance to instrumentalists, and leading the congregation.

### **Technology, Amplification**

Electronically produced music is qualitatively different from naturally produced music, as different as a real choir is different from a backing track. Acoustical instruments are always to be preferred over electronic ones, whenever possible. Recordings of backing tracks are to be used only when necessary (when an instrument cannot physically be in the meeting-place).

Wherever possible, the natural sound of the instruments and the voices should be heard, utilising the natural acoustics of the meeting place. Where necessary, electronic amplification can be used to make sure all can hear the sound of the voice, piano, etc.

Electronic projections during worship should be used intelligently, and probably sparingly.

### **Musical Education & Development**

A church is responsible to teach its members to worship. If music is involved in worship, some musical education becomes part of a church's mandate. This education may take place on several levels.

- 1) On the most basic level, all members are to be taught the hymns and songs used in worship.

Some basic explanations of the content of the lyrics, and of some of the quality of the music is important, and should happen at least once in each service.

- 2) This involves increasing the congregation's hymn repertoire, teaching new hymns along the way.
- 3) Beyond that, members are to be taught to judge music wisely. This is most effectively done through comparison and contrast, helping people to compare different songs and hymns. This kind of discernment can be grown through thoughtful pastoral remarks about a hymn, through Sunday School courses on music or worship, or through other media which push the people to discriminate between good and bad, better and worse, true and false, helpful and useless.
- 4) Some instruction on hymn history and the history of worship can be weaved into worship services, sermons, or taught as a separate course.
- 5) On a more advanced level, specific times should be taken to teach a church to once again sing in four-part harmony, using the hymnal.
- 6) On the most advanced level, children are to be instructed musically: basic tonality, rhythm, sight-reading of music, and part singing.
- 7) As skills are present, instruction in vocal training and instruments is to be taught to those desiring it.
- 8) The writing of hymn-texts and appropriate music is to be encouraged, as well as the process of lovingly criticising such work.
- 9) An elder who gives himself full-time to the implementation and development of musical worship in the church is ideal.

### **Music in Non-Worship Service Settings**

The church will often meet in settings other than corporate worship, Wednesday Bible studies, church dinners or meals, seminars, camps, and other church functions. Music used in these times should be as honouring to God and edifying to the believers as in any other time, and be in keeping with the principles in this document.

Pastors and those they appoint are still responsible for music used in church functions outside corporate worship, for it continues to have a formative, didactic and affective effect on the members.

### **Music and Sanctification**

Music has a formative effect on our loves, which are at the heart of sanctification. We can no more grow in holiness alongside trivial, sensual or worldly music, than we could grow in holiness while digesting pornography or gossip magazines. Once again, the church cannot bind the conscience of the believers regarding their musical choices, but it is responsible to teach its members that music is not amoral, and that musical choices outside of corporate worship continue to shape our imaginations, and form our affections. The music we identify with affects our characters, and moulds us.

### **Pastoral and Deacon Roles**

Pastoral and deacon roles differ in the matter of music. Pastors are responsible for the oversight of music in the church, teaching and correcting when it comes to musical choices, implementation of music in worship and discipleship, and general oversight of music in the church. Deacons are responsible for implementing and delegating the many logistical and administrative matters related to a well-functioning music ministry, including scheduling, recruitment, planning of practices and training, upkeep and purchase of instruments, books, and relevant technology. Deacons may certainly provide mature spiritual judgement in matters musical, but the final accountability for the

direction of the music ministry rests with the pastors.