

A Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Music

For two years a committee set up by the General Conference administration worked on preparing guidelines on music. The research from this committee has been brought together in a statement, which was given out to delegates to the 2003 Annual Council in Silver Spring, Maryland. The statement, which was not discussed at the Annual Council, is being released for input by the world Seventh-day Adventist Church. Members who wish to make comments and suggestions should send them to Elder Ted N. C. Wilson, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, Maryland 20904.

God has woven music into the very fabric of His creation. We read that when He made all things “the morning stars sang together and the angels shouted for joy”—Job 38:7 The book of Revelation portrays heaven as a place of ceaseless praise, with songs of adoration to God and the Lamb resounding from all (Rev 4:9-11; 5:9-13; 7:10-12; 12:10-12; 14:1-3; 15:2-4; 19:1-8).

Because God made humans in His image, we share a love and appreciation for music with all His created beings. In fact, music can touch and move us with a power that goes beyond words or any other type of communication. At its purest and best, music lifts our beings into the very presence of God where angels and unfallen beings worship Him in song.

But sin has cast a blight over the Creation. The divine image has been marred and well-nigh obliterated; in all aspects this world and God’s gifts come to us with a mingling of good and evil. Music, which may move us to the most exalted human experience, may be used by the prince of evil to debase and degrade us, to stir up lust, passion, despair, anger, and hatred.

The Lord’s messenger, Ellen G White, continually counsels us to raise our sights in music. She tells us, “Music, when not abused, is a great blessing; but when it is put to a wrong use, it is a terrible curse.”—1T 497

Of the power of song, she writes: “It is one of the most effective means of impressing the heart with spiritual truth. How often to the soul hard-pressed and ready to despair, memory recalls some word of God’s,—the long-forgotten burden of a childhood song,—and temptations lose their power, life takes on new meaning and new purpose, and courage and gladness are imparted to other souls! . . . As a part of religious service, singing is as much an act of worship as is prayer. Indeed, many a song is prayer. . . . As our Redeemer leads us to the threshold of the Infinite, flushed with the glory of God, we may catch the themes of praise and thanksgiving from the heavenly choir round about the throne; and as the echo of the angels’ song is awakened in our earthly homes, hearts will be drawn closer to the heavenly singers. Heaven’s communion begins on earth. We learn here the keynote of its praise.”—Ed 168

As Seventh-day Adventists, we believe and preach that Jesus is coming again soon. In our

worldwide proclamation of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14:6-12 we call all peoples to accept the everlasting gospel and prepare to meet our soon-returning Lord. We challenge all to choose the good and not the bad, to "say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ."—Titus 2:12, 13

We believe that the gospel impacts all areas of life. We therefore hold that, given the vast potential of music for good or ill, we cannot be indifferent to it. While realizing that tastes in music vary greatly from individual to individual, and that ultimately choices must be made individually, we believe that the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen G White suggest principles that can inform our choices. We therefore offer the following principles as a guide—not as a manual—to the world Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Principles to Guide the Christian

1. The over-riding principle comes from 1 Corinthians 10:31: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." This means that all music the Christian listens to, whether sacred or secular, will glorify God. Anything that cannot meet this high standard will weaken our experience with Him.

2. The second major principle follows from the first: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is pure, whatever is right, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."—Phil 4:8 As followers of Jesus Christ who hope and expect to join the heavenly choirs, we view life on this earth as a preparation for, and foretaste of, the life to come.

On these two foundations—glorifying God in all things and choosing the noblest and the best—depend the other principles listed below.

3. Christian music fosters our spiritual, psychological, and social sensitivity, and our intellectual growth. It is characterized by quality, balance, appropriateness, and authenticity.

4. Christian music is holistic, appealing to both the intellect and the emotions and affecting the body in a positive way.

5. Christian music reveals creativity rather than monotony and repetitiveness.

6. Christian music is drawn from quality melodies, harmonies used in an interesting and artistic way, and rhythm that complements them.

7. Christian music employs lyrics that positively stimulate intellectual abilities as well as our emotions and our will power. Good lyrics are creative, rich in content, and of good composition. They

focus on the positive and reflect moral values; they educate and uplift; and they correspond with sound Biblical theology.

8. In Christian music musical and lyrical elements work together harmoniously to influence thinking and behavior in harmony with Biblical values.

9. Christian music shuns theatrics and pride in display.

10. Christian music maintains a judicious balance of spiritual, intellectual, and emotional elements, so that the lyrics are not overwhelmed by the volume of the accompanying instruments.

11. Christian music recognizes and acknowledges the contribution of different cultures in worshipping God. Musical forms and instruments vary greatly in the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist family, and music drawn from one culture may sound strange to someone from a different culture. As members of a world family, we respect the music of our brothers and sisters in every land who worship God sincerely through culturally conditioned musical idioms.

12. Christian music does not make a sharp distinction between “sacred” and “secular.” At no moment do we cease to be God’s sons and daughters who seek to glorify Him in all things and to choose only the best. Music that does not directly praise and adore God—so-called “secular” music—has a legitimate place in the life of the Christian. It comes out of our very being, expressing the human spirit’s reaction to life, love, and the world in which the Lord has placed us. Most music today belongs to this arena, and this is where music has been most degraded by the ravages of sin. The Christian will choose judiciously and prayerfully the music from this arena, noting lyrics and the impact for enhancing or diminishing personal spirituality.

Application

The Fundamental Belief #21 (Christian Behavior) sets out the broad lifestyle parameters voted by the Church. This Application section, therefore, supplies suggestions, illustrations, and examples to show how the 12 principles relating to Christian music may come to expression in the lives of members.

1. When we come together to worship the Lord, music should be rendered in the best possible way. All church members should be participants. Careful planning is essential. The pastor should take a keen interest in increasing the quality of church music. Any attempt to organize a vibrant worship service only to give pleasant feelings, be entertained, or entertain others, misses the purpose of true worship. Worship focuses on God, not on us.

2. We should plan a balance of hymns addressed to God and hymns containing petitions, appeals, teaching, testimonies, admonitions, and encouragement (as in the Psalms).

3. We encourage churches to establish a choir, quartet, or some other group of vocalists. Preference should be given to material with scriptural texts. Lyrics must correspond with sound biblical theology. If a language other than the native tongue is used, a translation should be provided.

4. The music score should correspond with the level of training of the musicians.

5. Churches may wish to form a committee that is responsible for planning regular worship services.

6. Churches should consider supporting children in their musical training in order to prepare future leaders in the field of music.

7. Personal taste and experience, habits and culture are not sufficient guides in selecting music, especially within the realm of worship. Likewise, “keeping up with the times” is not a sufficient argument. On the other hand, using only the hymns and the music of our pioneers is not sufficient since God himself calls us repeatedly for creative uses of “new songs.”—Ps 96:1

8. Musicians should personally know the God to whom they sing and make music.

9. Music should be prepared, practiced, and planned.

10. Music is important for Christian homes, with music education and appreciation beginning early in the life of children. Parents are examples and role models for their children. Parents should be encouraged to become familiar with good music and be able to distinguish between music of quality.

11. Parents should talk to their children about great music and listen together to good music. Special care should be taken when listening subconsciously to background music. A home music library of wisely selected materials can be very beneficial.

12. Adventist education in schools, churches, and homes should be open to a broad variety of good music in the classical and folk music styles. Seventh-day Adventist children and young people should be encouraged to learn how to play instruments and read music; they should sing in choirs and groups and participate in meaningful worship experiences.

13. Musical presentations in all Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions should conform to the guidelines of the Church. This applies to local talent as well as to visiting artists, groups, and officially sponsored use of media entertainment.

14. Christians will shun certain music styles and any secular music such as rock and related forms that opens the mind to impure thoughts, leads to unholy behavior, or destroys the appreciation for

that which is pure and holy.

15. As Seventh-day Adventists we are challenged to be educated and to educate ourselves in the area of music and to develop a taste for good music.

Conclusions

We live in controversial and momentous times where increasingly people and societies express religious feelings without clear Christian and biblical guidance. Music has become a major issue, requiring spiritual discernment and decision.

Consequently, we must ask these important questions while seeking to make good musical choices:

1. Does the music to which we listen, or that we perform, have moral substance and depth in it, both lyrically and instrumentally?
2. What is the intention behind the music? Does the music send out a positive or negative message? When we listen to the music, do we find that it conforms to the criteria that Paul spells out in 1 Corinthians 10:31 and Philippians 4:8?
3. Is the intention of the music being communicated effectively? Is the musician fostering an atmosphere of reverence? Do the words say one thing while the music says something else?
4. Are we seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the choice of both secular and religious music?

Seventh-day Adventist music-making means to choose the best and above all to draw close to our Creator and Lord and glorify Him.