

THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSIC IN THE CHRISTIAN CLASSICAL CURRICULUM

By

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The great philosopher and theologian, Augustine, stated that when one encounters truth, one encounters the God whose truth it is. Throughout the ages, God has gifted men by means of Common Grace to be the vehicles through which the art of music has communicated much of His beauty and truth. In scripture (Rom 1:20) we are told that as the creation of God, in the image of God, man innately possesses the ability to recognize God's truth and beauty as revealed in His creation. Through Common Grace, even the philosopher, Plato recognized that the soul already possesses the ideal of an ultimate idea, and instruction merely facilitates the expression of what already exists in the mind. These philosophies can aid us in the understanding of culture, the arts, and specifically music.

Why we need to study music.

God's truth (or reality) is a fallen world that cries out for redemption, and the plan of redemption through Jesus Christ. (Rom 8:18-23) God's standard for truth, beauty, and goodness is the perfection of creation before the fall. This fallen world has changed everything. It is not surprising there are men that have taken music and used it for obscuring beauty and truth (Rom 1:21-25). Because music has become such an integral part of life in our postmodern culture, the Christian has an obligation to his God, as well as to the culture to discern truth from a lie, to redeem the culture, and to be a guardian of God's truth and beauty. To fully understand music is to understand, to some extent, God himself. Knowing God by understanding His creation was the driving force of the Puritans to develop the educational system in this country. The fact that a PhD in Theology was the highest degree offered in a classical university reflected the understanding that the sum of all knowledge was knowledge of God. Additionally, music is God's gift to us to enjoy in this life and to taste, in some small way, the glory of heaven to come.

How we approach the study of music.

If God were able only to communicate his truth to us in a foreign language we did not understand, we would have to choose to either learn the language, or deprive ourselves of God's revelation to us. If we look at the example of the study of literature, we see that before we can examine the works of great authors in our search for truth and beauty, we must first learn to read and then recognize the tools of the writer. Otherwise, we continually will be frustrated and unable to participate in the discovery process. And so it is with music. If we cannot read and recognize the tools of the composer, we will never fully appreciate and come to love the truth and beauty God reveals through the "great works" of the masters of musical art over history.

The development of music has a chronological history that can be examined. It is a reflection of the history, nature and activities of societies all over the globe. Just as the study of the timeline of American history can enrich our appreciation of the privileges we enjoy as citizens of the United States, the study of the history of music, and particularly music of the Christian era, can enhance our cultural identity as Christians. We can glimpse into centuries of trials and triumphs in the lives of saints that have preceded us. When we sing an ancient hymn of Ambrose in worship, for a brief moment we stand before God, spiritually in the very same place as the early believer, confessing and attesting to the very same faith, unchanged, and enduring even to this day. This can be a worship experience that truly transcends time and space.

What the Classical model looks like.

When Solomon was searching for the best craftsman to oversee the building of the temple, he sought someone who possessed three elements, skill in craftsmanship (knowledge), understanding (application of knowledge to context), and the ability to teach (wisdom in persuasion). (2 Chron. 2:3-14)

Grammar At the grammar level we give students a basic *knowledge* of music. We define the vocabulary of music. We teach students to “read” music with flash cards and solfege exercises. In addition to teaching the rudiments of music reading, we apply them to actual singing, or playing a simple instrument. We learn that in God’s design, music has *pitch, rhythm, form, and texture* by listening to examples. These are objective elements that can be used as tools in the craft of music making. Even at this stage we can exercise a student’s God-given creativity by “making” and performing music from a simple rhythmic composition (K) to a simple fugue subject or hymn melody (6th).

Dialectic At the dialectic level, we can add *understanding* to that knowledge by analyzing musical form using scores and recordings. We can deepen understanding of the purpose and function of music in society by comparing different genre such as the symphony, chamber music, opera, jazz, ethnic, or folk song. The performance of actual music is enhanced and facilitated with a deeper appreciation of the nature of its construction and the historical context in which it was created.

Rhetoric Music, as part of the classic quadrivium was studied to teach aesthetics. By the time students reach the rhetoric stage they are truly equipped to develop and apply *wisdom* and discernment to their study as they prepare to “persuade” the culture they will be attempting to influence. They learn to apply Scripture and the writings of the philosophers to issues regarding aesthetics and the arts. They have the knowledge and understanding necessary to recognize God’s truth and beauty or the absence of it, as they listen, analyze, and compare what they are hearing to a Biblical world and life view. They recognize new music that has been well crafted when compared to the great masters of the past. They know whether the text of a song promotes truth or lies when compared to their understanding of God’s truth. When students perform music, they bring a mature recognition of the value of the music they are performing as well as a more fully developed skill. They are equipped to produce a work of worth and beauty that can be shared with their community to God’s glory.

The classical Christian school today, is counter-cultural by definition. It stands in opposition to most of what the world holds dear. The classical approach to teaching music, not surprisingly, is counter-cultural as well. When students complete their education, they will be barraged with every cultural idol a fallen society can produce. Music and many who perform it have become idols in their own right. A classical student will know in addition to what Romans teaches us, that even Plato and Aristotle understood the potential power of music to influence society for good or ill. It is hoped that a student’s total educational experience, including music, has prepared him to be the next generation of Christians truly prepared to redeem the culture and to be guardians of God’s truth and beauty.

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