Recent Discoveries in Contemporary Christian Music **[1]**

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Growing up as a Christian teenager, I was very much into the "Jesus Culture": the music [2], the clothes, the paraphernalia, the books, the whole lot. I have since "settled down", even developing an aversion for commercial/popular Christian stores and the "fads" that they sell. I do, however, sometimes miss good Christian music (especially as the church which I attend is quite conservative regarding music).

Good vs Bad Music

In the Say Hello to my Little Friend podcast [3], Glenn Peoples makes the point that just because something has explicit Christian overtones does not make it good [4]. This is a controversial statement which will upset many Christians, but I think that he is right. Music can be beautiful without having overt Christian themes in the same way that story or film can; or a spread of food without it being communion or a car without an Ichthus symbol attached to the rear. This is something which I have been thinking about quite a bit recently: appreciating the beauty of something simply for what it is in itself (and that, ultimately, *all good things* are gifted (or at least permitted) by God. There are innumerable examples, but one that comes to mind (which is nearly universally recognised as being beautiful music) is Beethoven's *Für Elise* [5]. This song is not Christian-themed, but is rather about unrequited love1. Indeed, sometimes Christian music borrows from, or even assimilates, secular music. An example is the hymn *Be Thou My Vision* [6]. This hymn was written in the 6th century, but was only set to music in 1919. The tune to which it was set belonged to the melody *Slane*, which was a traditional (non-Christian) Irish folk tune (about a hill). I believe that the accusation that *all* music which was not written with a "Christian intent" is evil and unrighteous, is baseless.

> "For the invisible things of Him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even His everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse." — Romans 1:20

Intent

One thing which is important to always take into consideration, is the *intent* with which something was composed. It can sing God's praises. Or, it can be explicitly anti-God. Or, it can simply speak of the human condition: being in love, being lonely or scared being angry. It can even be ungodly, but remind us that there are people who live very different lives from ours, perceive the world different and have different experiences of it; through their music they reveal their worldview and their struggles, and it gives us a glimpse into it—for both the composers and performers, and those who identify with it. This is something that I feel strongly about.

If someone does write a song and wholeheartedly means to praise God by it, then I believe that God will be pleased by it, even if it is incredibly "cheesy". Indeed, songwriting usually is a process rather than an event, and lyrics or tunes could be adapted and improved upon over time so that it is less cheesy. (This may very well be part of God's good grace!)

> "From the lips of babes and infants you have established strength, because of your adversaries, that you might silence the enemy and the avenger." — Psalm 8:2

But as I said, music can be beautiful in and of itself. Someone can play a well loved song badly, and it will be recognised as such. Have not all of us cringed when a worship band in church miss a note or sing a false note? Or a person or band can play freestyle and it will sound amazing (arguably, without any purpose or intent attached to it other than the enjoyment of it in that moment). As I implied in my previous paragraph, Christian music can be written and still be considered to be below the standard of being considered "good". Is this a problem? I believe that it can be, for two reasons. The first is that a person can think themselves better than they are and not approach the creative process in humility. Or they can simply think that sub-standard quality work is good enough simply because they produced it. The problem here is pride, and it is a sin that such a person would have to deal with. The second problem is of greed. If one sees what happens in the Christian music industry sometimes, one sees that it often does not really look different from the secular music industry. And just like the secular music industry, it (and the "Jesus culture" as a whole) is a big industry in terms of money. Having money as a motivator to write that one more song that is necessary to complete the album, or bowing under the pressure which a record label may exert, it is not difficult to imagine that Christian musicians, who remain sinful human beings[2], can succumb to pressures to produce work with which they have had to compromise against their conscience and better judgement[3]. Indeed, the "Jesus culture" which exists in the USA can lead to all sorts of weird, wonderful and disturbing [7] things.

And so, as with any other area of life, pride and greed can destroy what should be beautiful gifts that God has given, and even Christians are susceptible to it.

A Pleasant Surprise

In my teens I was really into the bands dc Talk and Delirious? Both those bands have broken up now. These days, as I hinted to in the opening paragraph, I do not listen to much "Christian music", although I do still enjoy Jason Upton. Another Christian band which was popular when I was ending high school was Jars of Clay, although I did not have any of their albums. That band is still going strong. And it turned out to be this band that introduced me to a whole new world of Christian music. A friend posted on social media a free offering of their "Gather and Build: A Collection" album on NoiseTrade [8]. I discovered that NoiseTrade was a website where artists could offer their music for free (the audience can optionally give them donations) to the public in order to get exposure. This has been one of the most important discoveries on the Internet for me in recent years. Although I have only used it occasionally, I have discovered some artists which I have come to adore. The website is a platform for all sorts of artists (secular), but appears to have a penchant for Christian artists. I say this because I regularly receive newsletters which advertise Christian musicians specifically[4].

What has struck me about the (few) artists which I have explored is the complexity and nuance of their lyrics. These are not happy-clappy Hillsong songs. Often I downloaded artists without realising that they were a "Christian band" in the first place. These bands may not overtly brand themselves as "Christian" as dc Talk or Jars of Clay may have, and many—if not most—of their songs deal with "everyday" matters which they do not coat with a Christian message. But that does not stop them about singing about their beliefs and convictions. Mike Mains & the Branches [9] is one such band. Their song *Stereo* [10] (which I have already referenced [11]) contains a surprising but powerful message about the salvific power of Christ (which is only revealed in the final verse). Another example is Future of Forestry [12]. When I listened to the four song sample that I got from NoiseTrade, I did not find a particular "Christian" message. But I enjoyed the music, so I searched for more. Then, to my surprise, I came across their song *The Earth Stood Still* [13], which is an incredibly poignant song about Jesus's birth [14] (and certainly a welcome and meaningful reprieve from all the Christmas carols which ones hears almost constantly during December). Other artists are more overtly "Christian", for example the The Oh Hellos [15]. Most recently I have been blown away by the four song sample from Jon Guerra [16]; the songs in the sample deal largely with the hope in the resurrection. These are just a few examples: I am sure that there are many more out there waiting to be discovered.

Conclusion

God has blessed us with many things, not the least of which are beauty and creativity. It is our responsibility to thank Him for the beautiful and creative in the world, and (responsibility) exercise those gifts. As with anything we can exercise them in a depraved way, but in anything we need to seek God's purpose. As for us as Christians, we know God's plan, borne before time itself, of infinitely wonderful and selfless salvation. That message encourages and saves thousands, if not millions, each day, yet there are more to be reached. We need to apply that message to a world where cultures are in flux and there are infinite distractions. Let our creativity not be the same as the world's, but stand apart in excellence, to the glory of our Lord!

- 1. Even without lyrics, which I shall discuss shortly, music has motivation, intent and purpose.
- 2. Such musicians may also not be strongly anchored theologically or receive sufficient teaching at their "home" church, which can lead them eventually sending shock [17] waves [18] through the conservative Christian community.
- 3. The band Delirious? was criticised when they tried to make themselves more "accessible" to the non-Christian audience by toning down or cutting out references to God and Jesus, or "religious themes" in their songs, even though they meant to retain the intent with which their previous songs were written. An example can be seen in their song *Inside, Outside* [19]. While I do love this song, note the absence of any direct references to God or Jesus: the object of their worship remains nameless throughout the song. With context one would know that they are singing about the all consuming majesty of God. But without knowing that they are a Christian band, one could interpret it freely. I have seen, for example, people project this song onto their crush or lover. It can be argued both ways whether what Delirious? tried to do was right (attempting to reach a wider audience to ultimately have them come into contact with their gospel message) or wrong (to "shy away" from openly and unambiguously proclaiming their beliefs), but perhaps they should not have used this tactic to reach an audience which, arguably, is already confused about the world.
- 4. This could also merely be targeted marketing because I have downloaded Christian music before, but I have not seen any evidence yet of them targeting other market segments in such a way.

Categories:

- Encouragements [20]
- In the Media [21]

Tags:

- music [22]
- beauty [23]
- creativity [24]
- jesus culture [25]
- culture [26]

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