

Criteria of Identification for Christian Music: An Ethicist's Perspective

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The man that has no music in himself,
Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treason, stratagems and spoils
- William Shakespeare, *The merchant of Venice*

The noble art of music is, as God declares, the highest of earthly treasures. It rules all thoughts and senses the heart and the temperament. Do you want to comfort the troubled, to tame the impudent and wild into mildness; to soften the arrogant and so on? What could be better for such purposes than this high, dear, worthy noble art?
- Martin Luther

Abstract

Music has a universal appeal, and has long been associated with religion, including Christianity. However, there has been an on-going debate whether or not there is anything like “authentic Christian music”. Some investigators like Laurie Mellor believe that there is nothing like “Christian music”. Others say Christian music exists and that what is popularly called “worldly music” should not be played by Christians in private; it should also not be part of the music tradition of the church. For those who say there is Christian music, opinions vary on how it can be identified. Being a matter

fraught with diverse emotional dispositional judgments, a multi-criteria approach was found to be more reasonable in bringing us closer to a realistic consideration of what should constitute the parameters of judging whether a piece of music is Christian or not. They are: (i) Inspiration/Source (ii) Lyrical Content (iii) Composer's Association (iv) After-Effect. These four-dimensional criteria if applied together give a reasonable basis of conclusion. No one applied in isolation of all others will lead to a justifiable conclusion; however when applied together there is a credible chance.

Introduction

Most normal humans both know and experience music. Music, at one time, was the explanation of universal order that supported the popular concept of the harmony of the spheres, and it has always been part of man. “From Pythagoras to Kepler, music and mathematics were inseparable and offered a means to understand the mysterious relation between humans, nature, and the supernatural” (Benitez-Bribiesca *et. al.* 2432). Scholars have described it in various ways, all

pointing to its universally recognized existence as a phenomenon. To Philipport and Smith, true music is that work of the brain illuminated by the heart which, through the medium of the ear, unites other hearts and brains (45). It is a universal language; indeed there is nothing the world has treasured as much as music (Onwochei, *Social and Medical* 133). In fact it is so universal that it is alleged that “No culture so far discovered lacks music” (Storr 1).

In terms of its association with religion, music has always been a language of religion from time immemorial. Peter Van Lierop opines that:

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It is a known fact that people often find it difficult to express in words their deep innermost feelings in religion. It has been shown on the other hand however, that

where spiritual experience is too deep for verbal expression, music will speak with meaning and power. Music, in its elevated state, is a truly important medium of religious expression (160).

That music, therefore, has played a major role in the lives of Christians is incontrovertible. It has indeed been part of life and cultures of those who claim Christianity as their religion, and this is consequently hardly debatable.

For long, Christian scholars as well as the general Christian body have been concerned about the genres of music that have found their way into the worship of the church. Some insist that what is popularly called “worldly music” must not be played by Christians in private, and must not be used in the church as part of her music tradition. Their bias stems from the fact that they believe that there are certain kinds of music that are authentically Christian, and that there are others that are “worldly”, unfit for use in the church and among genuine Christians. Yet, there are some investigators who believe that there is nothing like “Christian music”; there is no music that is Christian. They argue that you can only have a piece of music made by a Christian and those made by non-Christians. One of such is Mellor. “I believe there is no such thing as Christian music: there is music made by Christians and music made by non-Christians” (17-19). His position stems from the example he gave of Jewish thought in which there is no distinction between secular and sacred. He feels that in the same way, a distinct Christian music does not really exist.

It is important to point out that many who argue one way or the other use the “tempo” – how fast or slow the rhythm is – as their basis of judgment. Is there really something like “Christian Music”? Is there something like sacred music? Can we also regard some musical pieces as secular? What really is the difference between sacred and secular music? If there is something like Christian music, what are the parameters of identification? In other words, what are the things to consider before we can conclude that a particular piece of music is Christian or not? These and other related questions are the focus of this paper.

Role(s) and Effects of Music

Music is very powerful and plays critical roles in human experience. “That music does have an effect on its hearers is something that most scholars may not be willing to contest” (Onwochei, *Music, Morality, Church Growth* 7). It is shown in another work why music greatly affects us, even our morality (Onwochei, *Morality, Music, Pluralistic*). One of such reasons is that music bypasses *Cognition*. “One of the essential characteristics of music is just this, that it makes its appeal to the emotions without the medium of any definite train of cognitive thought” (Britan 52).

For Juliet Alvin, music has therapeutic value. According to her, this therapeutic value has been recognized from time immemorial; it has been used throughout the world in magic, religion, and medicine. In their rites, magicians use music to cast out the “spirits of disease”. Music seems to carry the prayers of the sick to the deity. To her, even ancient philosophers believed in the action of music on the behaviour of man. Music therapy today is a discipline of its own, and is quite related to the recent trends of physiological and psychological medicine. She identified two main techniques in music therapy - the receptive and active methods - and concluded that music does generally provoke a strong activation towards movements of any kind, and that this can be of special assistance in physical rehabilitation. (Her entire work makes good read).

Martin Luther is best known for reformation. Few, however, get to remember him as an accomplished musician. He pointed out that music makes people happy, and drives away the devil. He saw music as the highest of earthly treasures, having the capacity of ruling all thoughts, even the senses, heart and temperament. It is powerful enough to be effective in taming the wild into mildness, and can soften the arrogant. No wonder he called it a high, dear, worthy noble art.

Wilson-Dickson also commented on the power of music. He opined that its power is diverse. It may merely entertain, but it can also excite. It can persuade, move and cure. It acts upon its hearers in a number of ways. “Some react to it simply on an instinctive level, some search it for clues about their very existence, others listen for its messages about human behaviour” (11). He categorized the ways in which music can act on its hearers under three headings: ecstasy, symbol and rhetoric.

There should be something called Christian Music

Music was an integral part of Judaism, and has always been part of Christianity. Some even argue that music originated from heaven, so, Christianity as revealed to adherents, could never have been practised without the use of this great gift that originated from its founder. There is a reference to Jesus singing: "and when they had sung an hymn..." (Matt.26.30, KJV). Jack Westrup argues that "music is not in itself either sacred or secular: It becomes so by force of association, which may very well create the illusion that particular styles are appropriate to the Church and Chamber respectively" (77).

However, Nigosian pointed out that "whether man is a monotheist...or a polytheist...he reaches out to express his deep admiration, love and devotion, to the one who is mighty and worthy of his praises" (110). If man reaches out in worship to the one he feels deserves his praises, and all are not unanimous as to who deserves it (hence there are many religions), then, there can be genres of music identifiable with different groups in relation to their gods or God. If there is identifiable music with different worshipers in relation to their religions, then there can be certain type of music identifiable with Christianity and indeed Christians.

Alec Harman et. al. contend that the Church fathers decided that singing was a good thing to allow, and that deciding otherwise would have amounted to flouting all natural instincts. Just like the old Greek philosophers "they realized that music can either ennoble or debase man's moral fibre" (2). They therefore insisted that all Church music must be associated with devout words.

Criteria of Identification

Music, has always been part of Christian worship. We, therefore, believe that there is something called "Christian Music"; we believe that there are certain genres of music fit for church worship and some unfit. It is pertinent to note that even among the scholars that believe that there is Christian music, different reasons have been adduced. Their opinions are far from uniform. It is also important to note that any mono-criterion proffered will at best be faulty. A multi-criteria approach, to all intents and purposes, seems more reasonable and

brings us closer to a realistic consideration of a matter so fraught with diverse emotional dispositional judgments. We suggest four-dimensional criteria that should be applied to reach a reasonable basis of conclusion. No one, applied in isolation of all others is likely going to lead to a justifiable conclusion; applied together however, there is a credible chance.

i. Inspiration / Source

Inspiration has a lot to do with influence or influences that awaken creative activities. This can be in music, art, literature, etc. Such influence(s) can be a person(s) or thing. That said, it should be noted that the person being influenced or inspired cannot be said to act solely on external influences, having absolutely no say of his own. Be that as it may, inspiration plays a very critical role in song/music composition. It is the main source or origin of any musical piece. Richard Buknor once opined that music is 30% knowledge, 30% skill and 40% inspiration (Onwochei, *Informal Evangelism* 21).

In other words, inspiration plays a noticeable significant role in terms of percentage. In reality, every musician is inspired. The source of inspiration thus becomes its source, which has significant ramifications, both for the composer as well as the consumer (listener). Most genuine Christians agree that there are only two sources – the Holy Spirit or Satan. It is "either or", not "both". Put succinctly, a particular musical piece cannot originate from the Holy Spirit and Satan at the same time. In the words of Ori Okoro, "Every music is inspired by one spirit or another. Satan and his demons also inspire" (Onwochei, *Informal Evangelism* 21).

Brahms, who is a music composer, made a confession that is quite powerful. "For four months before his death, Brahms, for one, made the confession that when composing, he felt himself to be inspired by a Power external to himself" (Scott 28). He believed in One Supreme Spirit, and maintained that it was only when an artist was receptive to that Spirit that he could write immortal works, and not otherwise. "This is tantamount to saying that all truly great artists, in whatever field, are mediums, whether conscious of the fact or not" (Scott 28). This powerfully lends credence to the

fact that inspiration plays a momentous role in music composition to a point it can be said that without it there cannot be music of any kind.

And significantly, investigations have revealed that there is “something” in music that “moves” listeners; there is a power inherent in music, the secret of which lies in the fact that each time any piece of music is played, the power behind its inspiration will be available to back it up. If, as Powell aptly affirmed, “All we can safely say is that music is sound that has been organized to stimulate someone” (5), then there is “something” in music that has the ability to stimulate. That capacity to stimulate stems from the power behind its inspiration.

It must not be lost on us that every musical piece has an intended motive; every musician has an intention for each piece performed. There is something in his/her heart to achieve. That is normally enhanced by the power behind it, which would have been the origin of the intention in the first place. There is a “thought”; there is an intended “feeling” behind every piece of music that the “originator” is intending to convey. According to James Glennon, Music is “expression in sound” or “the expression of thought and feeling in an aesthetic form”(1).

From ancient times, the power and resultant effects of music has been attested to. Among the ancient claims of the effect of music is this one from Robert Burton as late as 1621.

In a word, (music) is so powerful a thing that it ravisheth the soul, the queen of the senses, by sweet pleasure... and corporeal tunes pacify our incorporeal soul... And 'tis not only men that are affected... fish... as common experience evinceth, are much affected with music. All singing birds are much pleased with it, especially nightingales... and bees among the rest, though they be flying away, when they hear any tingling sound, will tarry behind. Harts, hinds, horses, dogs, bears are exceedingly delighted with it... and in Lydia in the midst of a lake there be certain floating islands (if ye will believe it) that after music will dance (117).

To my mind, the power observable in musical pieces can be attributed to its source or sources of inspiration. So, before we can safely conclude that a particular song is Christian or not, we should appeal to its source as much as possible.

ii. Lyrical Content

Words are an important medium of communication. So, the words used in any song convey the message intended. And this is an important criterion of judging whether or not a particular song is Christian. The words of a song can be direct word-for-word quotation of a Bible passage or passages. However, it need not always be. But the question to ask is: are the words in conformity with the “spirit” of the revealed word of God? In other words, are the words such as are in line with biblical theology, are they theologically correct? Even if they are not word-for-word quotations from the Bible, they should be words that are in agreement with the totality of the revealed word.

Someone cannot claim, for instance, that his song is Christian when it denies the sonship of the Son. It cannot be Christian if it negates all or some of what the Bible teaches; it cannot be Christian if it contradicts basic doctrines of the Bible; it cannot be Christian when it promotes lewdness or vulgarity; it cannot be Christian if it is vile and unwholesome; it cannot be Christian if it is obscene or rude. A profane song for example cannot be said to have come from the Holy Spirit; this is incongruous and completely inconsistent with His person as revealed in Scriptures. It follows naturally therefore that we cannot afford to overlook the words that are used in a supposed Christian music composition.

The direct “conversion” of Prince Nikko Mbaga's *Sweet Mother* to *Sweet Jesus* has at least one debatable doctrinal ramification for example. In its original composition the following is part of the lyrics: *If I no chop my mother no go chop, if I no sleep my mother no go sleep*. Those who “imported” it into Christendom sang: *If I no chop my Jesus no go chop, if I no sleep, my Jesus no go sleep*. The implication is that if I sleep, then my Jesus can now sleep. However, Scriptures plainly teach that Jesus is one of the persons of the Divine Trinity, as such He is God. As God, He does not sleep. This, taken as it is, subtly pushes the consumers of the song into error. There

is, therefore, the need to properly scrutinize the lyrics of a song to ensure it conforms to revealed truth before we can safely conclude it is Christian.

iii. Composer's Association

The third criterion to apply is the testimony of the composer/performer. Somehow, someone is known by his/her force of association. The company one keeps, the lifestyle of a person, has a lot to say about the kind of person he/she is. It helps others place him. A general saying "show me your friends and I will tell you the kind of person you are" seems to lend credence to this.

As much as possible we should ask: Is the composer's life consistent with the expected life of a Christian witness? Those who know him/her, those who interact with him/her, do they know him/her as a Christian? Do they consider him/her a child of God? Are his/her actions and way of life reflective of the profession of faith in Christ? Are those who know and interact with him/her comfortable to refer to him/her as a Christian? Does he/she bear true allegiance to the crucified Christ? Does his/her entire life bear testimony of the risen Lord? If the answers to these are not in the affirmative, then that artiste is not likely a Christian, at least not in the true sense of the word.

At one time in Nigeria, a popular social entertainer/musician Sonny Okosuns released an album. One track on side A talked about Jesus. It was an outright declaration that Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. But on side B was another track that made certain declarations about the revered Prophet Muhammad. The question on the minds of many people then was whether Sonny Okosuns was a Christian or a Muslim; was he promoting Christianity or was he promoting Islam? I know at that time, most genuine Christians did not regard him as one of them. I doubt if genuine Muslims regarded him as one either. So for us to come to conclusion about any music, questions relating to the "person" of the artiste are desirable. These are questions that border on his/her testimony by life and conduct. The same fountain cannot yield fresh and salty water at the same time. You cannot sing for Jesus and sing for the world system at the same time.

iv. After-Effect

It is possible for someone to argue that his/her song

is from above – and we may have no objective way of refuting that. However, there is a fourth criterion to apply that has the propensity of addressing that: what effect did the music leave on the final consumer? After listening, did the song bring the listener closer to God and His principles or did it take him/her farther away? What feelings did it elicit?

It is a known fact that music does facilitate religious experiences. There is a sense in which it can be said that music has become such an integral part of religious ceremonies because of the role it plays in facilitating religious experiences. Indeed, one of the most articulated records of how music acts as a facilitator of religious experience is the account put forward by Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis. According to them, there are four stages of religious transformation: existential crisis (preparation), self-surrender (incubation), new vision (illumination), and new life (verification). Music can facilitate each of these four stages and its facilitative power rests on its rather unique but authentic power to elicit emotion (116-154).

The above, therefore, suggests that there are *after-effects* that each musical piece leaves in us. The effect of Marvin Gaye's *Sexual Healing* for example was real. His perceived intention to stimulate sexual desire was unmasked, could not be doubted and can be said to have been largely achieved. As usual, we hesitate to reproduce the full text here for what we consider his overt and unmasked sexual expressions. A few lines however will suffice to make the point.

*Baby am hot just like an oven I need some loving
And when I get this feeling, I need sexual healing
Wake up (4x) Let's make love tonight
Open up and let me in, etc.*

In reality, I should say, it did achieve this to a very reasonable extent. Its role in eliciting unbridled sex was noticeable.

Conclusion

Music is more than just an art of life; it is human centred, aimed deliberately at the human person, usually with certain envisaged outcome or an expected impact. Thus, every musician has a purpose, some category of persons in mind, and

some vision-impact. He plays with definite expectations. So, there is the dimension of humanness in music, a dimension quite noticeable in Africa where traditional music is a human centred art (Onyeji and Onyeji 21). An art as affective as this should, therefore, not be left without proper guidelines for a professing Christian whose aim is to please the Man of Calvary. Indeed, music is part and parcel of human living meant to bring out certain identifiable traits of the human species (Onwochei, *Morality, Music Pluralistic* 27). Certainly one of the things it brings out is our values. So it is a veritable influence in our moral and ethical consciousness. It brings to the fore, those internalized guides in the production of human behavior.

Music is not played only for its artistic values; it is indeed rationalized as a veritable part of human life; it is aimed at providing support services to human, social and cultural life and events. Usually, it possesses dynamic qualities making it a means to an end (Wells 10). We therefore cannot be passive about an art so tremendously influential, particularly in Africa that is still lagging behind in terms of a reading culture and where values – and, sometimes, a whole history are told in songs. This has not changed significantly in Christendom in Africa. Up till now, much doctrine and indeed Christian moral teachings are carried out using the instrumentality of songs. There must, therefore, be standards that should be employed to guide the production of materials that are so effective in its capacity to influence the Christian population. The criteria proposed in this paper will, we hope, aid in the search for a credible basis of judgment.

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