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Sandra Yang

Cedarville University, syang@cedarville.edu

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Vanity of Vanities or Song of Songs?¹

Music Education from a Biblical Perspective

The last chorus of a beloved gospel hymn reads, “Christ without, all is vain! Christ within, all is gain.”²

Without Him, life at best is the vanity of vanities with nothing new under the sun. With Him, though, as our regenerated new life within, our life is a continual song of songs, full of meaning, full of potential, full of the life that is the very Christ Himself. To know Him and the power of His resurrection (Phil. 3:10) has been my principal aim since I met Him. He is the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except through Him (John 14:10).

The Bible commands us, “Train up a child according to the way he should go. Even when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6, RV). Believers throughout the centuries have taken these words to heart, applying biblical truth as the core of their philosophy of parenting. My husband and I built our family life on the rock of this foundation. As we raised our five children we sought the biblical knowledge that would help us carry out our holy stewardship. Much of my personal pursuit of Scriptural knowledge, therefore, has been intricately woven with the issues of training youth. That foundational epistemology followed me into my teaching career, which began in earnest after the children were well on their way to adulthood.

From my pursuit of truth in both my domestic and my professional stewardship, I can delineate three areas that most importantly affect a child’s development: God, education, and character.³ Without an

¹ The idea for this juxtaposition is not my own. “No matter how good, excellent, marvelous, and wonderful a thing may be, as long as it is of the old creation, it is part of the vanity of vanities under the sun. Only the new creation, which is in the heavens and not ‘under the sun,’ is not vanity but is reality. . . . Song of Songs stresses that Christ is the song of songs, the satisfaction of satisfactions to human life, which is versus the vanity of vanities of all things under the sun” (Ecc. 1:2, footnote 2, RV).

² J. Calvin Bushey and Compilers. *Hymns* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1980), 1138.

³ From Witness Lee, *God, Education, and Character* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2001).

accurate knowledge of God as revealed in Scripture, a rigorous education as the foundation for apprehending all the dimensions of Christ (Eph. 3:18), and the development of a proper character, the extent of a person's usefulness in service to the Master is limited. I believe that our role as educators is to cooperate with the skilled Potter and the wise Master Builder in developing the vessels of honor that will glorify God and be useful to Him. Eph. 2:10 states, "For we are His masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (RV). The Greek word for masterpiece here is *poiema*, a word specifically referring to a work of art.⁴ God is producing us, the believers who have been regenerated with His life, and in whom His life is growing unto maturity, as His Body to be the multiplied (Gen. 1:26) and magnified (Phil. 1:20) expression of His son, Jesus Christ. This truly is a masterpiece, a glory to God, and a shame to God's enemy.

I have divided my integration paper into the three sections that correspond to my personal integration of truth and stewardship with the discipline of music, followed by specific applications of truth in music education and of the value of musical training in shaping the character of the man of God.

Epistemology of God

The Bible specifically charges us to know Him. Both Jeremiah (Jer. 31:34) and the writer of Hebrews (Heb. 8:11) emphatically proclaim that all people will know Him, from the least to the great. To know God is to know truth, the absolute truth embodied in the Word of God. We are sanctified in this truth. "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (Jn. 17:17, RV); "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free" (Jn. 8:32, RV). In contrast to a prevailing secular thought that despises Christian thought as being narrow and restrictive, the Bible tells us that the knowing of the truth of God sanctifies

⁴ Eph. 2:10, footnote 1, RV.

us, frees us, and affords us a worldview that comes from a transcendent position in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:6). The foundation of knowing truth is an enlightened revelation of the Bible.

Paul prayed two prayers in Ephesians. In the first, he asked that God would grant him a “spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Him” (Eph. 1:17, RV). In the second he prayed that the believers would be “full of strength to apprehend with all the saints what the breadth and length and height and depth are” that they might be “filled unto all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3: 18-19, RV). He later expressed the desire that the believers would all arrive at “the full knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph. 4:13, RV).

The knowledge of God in the old creation/Old Testament

Solomon prayed for one thing: wisdom. Proverbs tells us, “The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of knowledge” (Pro. 1:7, RV). Man’s wisdom is vanity and darkness at its best. “Your word is a lamp to my feet/ And a light to my path” (Psa. 119:105, RV) instructs Solomon’s father, David. Every king had to write out a personal copy of the law. The king was required to read it all the days of his life, implying he had to integrate his faith into every aspect of his personal and public life and to pass it on to his children.

The knowledge of God in the new creation/New Testament

Drawing from II Timothy, the thought continues that children should be taught an adequate knowledge of God through Scripture. II Tim. 3:15-17 states, “And that from a babe you have known the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise unto salvation through the faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work” (RV). Timothy’s development was directly related to his education in the Scriptures from his youth. I believe that much of this preparation by his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice equipped him to be the useful companion and fellow worker that he was to Paul.

A synthesis

What does “fully equipped for every good work” mean when applied to the discipline of music? “Fully equipped” implies a period of rigorous study and training in a skill. In the Old Testament, musical training was taken very seriously, especially when it came to war and to service in the Temple. The trumpeters at Jericho had to follow specific instructions and be able to carry those directions out precisely at the right moment and in fine coordination with the other musicians. This implies a discipline based upon a period of training. Additionally, only priests were chosen to blow the trumpets, implying that musical training was included in some of the priestly duties. This surely was considered a holy service to God and the music was an offering to Him. Furthermore, the trumpeters went ahead of the Ark of Jehovah. They carried out this duty for seven days without failing in their music service. Surely God used this to defeat Jericho and give entrance to the children of Israel’s conquering of the Good Land.

In Nehemiah 12 at the dedication of the rebuilt wall of Jerusalem, musicians were gathered “in order to hold the dedication with rejoicing and thanksgiving and singing with cymbals, harps, and lyres” (Neh. 12:27, RV). The sons of singers also came (28), indicating a musical training that was passed on in families, just like the law of God was taught. Furthermore, these singers were related in a larger way to those with similar skills, for they had built villages for themselves just outside of Jerusalem (29). This consideration surely must have been with the Levitical service in view. They were trained and ready to serve. For this dedication even the musical instruments of David were brought forward and played (36). Considering how the children of Israel had been carried into Babylonian captivity some seventy years before that and the House of God had been made desolate, the story of those who valued the musical instruments and kept them for all those years must surely be a marvelous one! In these days of dedication, the singers were provided for with portions of food (47) so that they could carry out their service of rejoicing and thanksgiving. It was a time of recovery of music to its original purpose. “For [as]

in the days of David and Asaph, long ago, there were leaders of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God” (Neh. 12:46, RV). These examples and others throughout the Old and New Testaments reveal that well trained excellence in musicianship always occurred in relationship to worship.

On the contrary, several negative examples of music show us that music that is not created and performed for His glory is related to the fall of man. When Cain was cast out from the presence of Jehovah, one of his descendants, Jubal, became the father “of all those who play the lyre and pipe” (Gen. 4:21, RV). This speaks of man’s need to amuse himself once he had left God’s presence and God was no longer His joy and satisfaction. This music was void of God. In the early church, St. Ambrose denounced the development of this line as pagan music and warned the early Christians not to let any trace of it into the church.⁵ In the well known scene (Mark 6:14-29) in which Salome danced, Herod’s lust was stirred up by the moves she made to the accompanying music; so much so, that he gave her whatever she asked. This example of music shows its power in tempting the flesh of man to sin even more. Music as mere amusement or for stirring up the lust of the flesh are misappropriations of God’s purpose in giving man the ability to create music and musical instruments. This is not our goal in the Department of Music and Worship. Our mission statement asserts that “Bach’s famous phrase ‘Soli Deo Gloria’ (for the glory of God alone) is more than a slogan—it is the mission that drives all that we seek to accomplish. We truly believe we honor the Master Creator through our creativity.”⁶

⁵ Calvin R. Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 103.

⁶ Department of Music and Worship, Cedarville University, website <http://www.cedarville.edu/Academics/Music-and-Worship.aspx> (accessed Dec. 17, 2010).

Education: Truth and Music Education

A rigorous training in music offers much for the preparation of the man of God. It trains the mind in its attention to fine detail, to the need for memorization, to the coordination of the hands, the voice, and the ear, and to its ability to articulate aural phenomena with intelligence and discretion. In musicology in particular, this training includes the ability to verbalize abstract aural phenomena and create a precise language that captures its essence as much as mere words possibly can. This training in articulating the abstract helps to train the mind of the man of God as he is called upon to cut “straight the word of the truth” (II Tim. 2:15, RV).

No matter what emphasis the music major at Cedarville has—performance, education, composition, pedagogy, or theory—all require a rigorous discipline of performance practice, ensemble participation, and scholarly study. Students in their college years should consider their studies as their service, or stewardship, to God. Just as Moses and Paul were prepared for a life of service to God partly through their educational foundation, so students must give much attention to their education. After such training in music, students will be able to interpret and execute their music to the extent that they can respond to gospel, worship, and other spiritual situations with great effectiveness. Musical training helps both the performer and the listener “inspire to greatness.”⁷

One of my students recently shared with me the struggle she went through as she prepared her senior recital. The Lord used the high level of achievement required of this recital to gain more ground in her and allow her to grow in Him in a way that a life of ease could not do. The struggles with articulation, with intonation, and with the perfection required of public performance forced this student to go the Lord in prayer many, many times. Each time she came to the Lord, He perfected her a little bit more, until one day she was able to fully trust Him and to perform her recital unto Him.

⁷ Cedarville University motto, 2010-.

Last year I had another experience with a student as I encouraged not only to finish, but to finish well, his research project in music history. Many times he came to me and said that he just couldn't do it, but after encouraging fellowship and prayer, he eventually conquered the project and completed it. At times I was tempted to give him "a break" and lessen the requirement, but inside, I knew that he needed to pass through this struggle and learn to inspire to the greatness that Cedarville University embraces. By keeping the high standards of our discipline, I believe that we serve the Lord well and afford an opportunity for the growth of God's children.

As illustrated by the above two examples, musical training is a vehicle for the pursuit of excellence as encouraged by Paul in Phil. 4:8: "If anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things" (NIV). This excellence is not like the worldly view of excellence, but an excellence obtained through personal pursuit of the worthy attributes and virtues of God. According to Harold Best, "the bedrock of excellence does not consist simply. . .in being number one, being in the top ten percent, winning first place, accolades, prizes, awards, the select few being the excellent. Rather, it lies in the exercise of far different but wonderful and extraordinary things: truth, purity, rightness, loveliness, honor, and admirableness."⁸

In my music history courses, I pursue these things in several ways. In preparing for a lesson, I provide students with "focus questions" that allow them to dig beyond the surface of the text and think about the historical and cultural context of the current musical topic. I believe this affords students the opportunity to make connections with various sources in history, primary as well as secondary, and to be able to analyze them separately and then synthesize them into a more accurate picture of the historical situation. This involves critical thinking and develops the skills that will enable students to discern between truth and falsehood, right and wrong, and admirable and shoddy scholarship.

⁸ Harold M. Best, *Music through the Eyes of Faith* (NY: Harper Collins, 1993), 109.

In musical analyses, I require attention to detail in students' homework. I spend one class period going over these assignments, allowing students to self-correct, to question, and to re-learn any difficult areas. I use musical analyses also to point out problems in faithful transcriptions of a composer's intent, the value and drawbacks of working with primary sources, and the understanding of what we can and cannot learn from a work of music in notation.

In my semester-long historical research project, I require students to submit at least three drafts of various stages of their papers, along with meticulous citations and bibliography. Academic integrity and thorough scholarship are the goals of this process, along with preparing students to accurately and skillfully present knowledge. I believe these tasks and skills are part of the rigor that belongs to the stewardship of being a student in training to serve God. The more I teach in this way, the more I am convicted by the Lord to keep a high standard as my service to these students and to Him.

In at least two other areas musical training serves to prepare a believer. One area is geographical. In Global Music students learn the musical idioms and values of other cultures. They learn how to understand other peoples' beliefs through understanding their music. Western tonal music, for example, is strongly based in a system that has a clear beginning, middle, and end. There are musical means for 'pushing' the music forward in its progress through alternations of dissonance and consonance. This reflects the Christian belief in eternity past, a period of time with its divinely ordained dispensations, the coming Millennium, and eternity future. In contrast to this, music of India tends to be more circular, having no clear beginning or end. This reflects the religious beliefs of reincarnation and the cycle of life. Understanding values and beliefs by understanding a people's music will better prepare students to seek meaningful ways to engage people of other cultures for Christ. Just as Paul used the Athenian polytheistic society to bring the gospel to the Greeks through the proclaiming of Jesus Christ as their "unknown God," we need to use the breadth of our knowledge to gain the world for Him. In the

words of Cedarville University's 2010-2011 chapel theme, we must use our musical understanding for "real world impact."

The other area of musical training that is useful to the believer is the historical line. Understanding a breadth of styles as well as the various thoughts and values about sacred music helps a believer to appreciate music not just as a matter of taste but to understand its place in the context of history. History also teaches us about debates on what kinds of music were acceptable or not acceptable for Christian service. Understanding those debates helps the believer with contemporary worship choices. These tensions show us that nearly every musical element from intervals to performing forces has caused points of contention in the Christian church. In many cases issues about music have deepened the divide among believers. The Calvinists' strict, bare, metrical psalms versus the Lutherans' more elaborate sacred cantatas add emphasis to the difference in opinions about the role of music in the church. Educated believers will understand the debates and be able to move beyond that which divides and maintain a clear view of the oneness of the Body of Christ, where there "cannot be Greek and Jew. . . barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all and in all" (Col. 3:11, RV). Education brings us out of our pettiness and narrowness.

Additionally, beyond the debates, a universe of music appreciation awaits the believers, to aid in devotion, to enrich corporate worship, and to further the truth of the gospel through song. Robert Elmore, in a contribution to Leland Ryken's *The Christian Imagination*, notes that music is one of the lovely and pure things that we are charged to think upon in Phil. 4:8. "Music is the Christian art par excellence."⁹ His prescription for the dearth of musical knowledge among evangelical Christians today is to listen to good music in a focused way until one learns to love the best. This is part of our musical education: learning to love the best music from the past, the present, and across geographical

⁹ Robert Elmore, "The Place of Music in Christian Life," in Leland Ryken, *The Christian Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 429.

boundaries. All the more we need to think on these things. C. S. Lewis shares a similar view, prescribing an approach of “receiving” music rather than just “using” it.¹⁰ As part of a strong musical education that will make keen “receivers” of great music, students must learn to listen to all the musical elements in their complexities: melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre, texture, and form. These are among the excellent things in music that we must receive.

Character: Musical Training to Prepare the Character of the Man of God

What does it mean to prepare the character? Education trains the mind and gives musicians the technical ability to realize their art, but character is related to the person him/herself. Musical training is an excellent means to develop life-long habits of diligence, patience, practice, responsibility, longsuffering, compassion, love, and many other qualities that belong to a person of high character. The hours of training to perfect a musical passage can never be replaced by a casual, lazy, unprepared performance whether or not the notes are all correct. Preparing for a studio lesson prepares us to meet the Lord. Without saying anything, the professor knows how much time of preparation went into the lesson. It is impossible to hide a lack of preparation. This is a huge life matter for all believers. How shall we meet the Lord? If we have given adequate attention to all of the experiences afforded to us by parents, professors, and Providence, we can develop the habits that will characterize the man of God. Musical training affords us an opportunity to develop as persons of integrity. Having weekly private music lessons, students must be accountable for their own practice schedules. Since my office is next to the music majors’ student lounge, I observe students sitting and studying all day long. Why are they seemingly “hanging out” in the lounge? It is because they are taking a break from practicing. Their studio professors are careful to guard the students from physical damage as they practice, so they prescribe breaks in the daily practice schedule. Some students average six hours a day of practice on

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, “How the Few and the Many Use Music,” in Leland Ryken, *The Christian Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 438.

their instrument; they need to break up that time. In the lounge, students are not usually idle; they are working on other assignments. I believe that this kind of rigor, which may be unique to the discipline of music, affords wonderful opportunities to train the character of these musicians. How much more will the development of good habits be useful to their future service to God.

In the Old Testament, the boards and the ark of the tabernacle were built of acacia wood overlaid with gold. In typology acacia wood signifies the humanity of Christ, whereas the gold signifies His divinity. “Christ’s humanity was strong in character and high in standard. No other person in history has had a humanity as strong in character and high in standard as that of the Lord Jesus.”¹¹ Unlike our fallen humanity, Christ’s humanity was sinless and perfect. In order to express Him, we need to have both His humanity and His divinity worked into us. As we receive Him and He grows in us, our humanity has to pass through the cross first, and then be resurrected to express Him. Whatever we are naturally needs to die and then to be made alive in the power of His resurrection. The development of our character, therefore, can be used once it passes through death and resurrection. I believe our job as educators is to steward the character development of those under us, so that they can be used by God in the most effective way and to the best of the abilities that God has given them.

I have had a number of experiences as an educator in dealing with character. I spend several lessons on plagiarism in order to impress students with the importance of respecting the intellectual property of others. I use music history to show that in the medieval and Renaissance eras, copying others’ music was an act of honor and respect, but at some point this attitude changed. Copying others’ music now is regarded as plagiarism and many lawsuits have arisen as a result. The current issues involving Internet downloading of copyrighted music illustrates the pandemic effects of the fallen state of human character. These issues provide many “teachable moments” with students. This past semester I had one

¹¹ Witness Lee, *Life Study of Exodus*, V.3 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1987), 988.

student who questioned whether or not we as Christians could watch video clips online without knowing whether or not they violated copyright law. This led me to check with librarians, colleagues, and the Center for Teaching and Learning in order to find out an exact answer. I felt that I needed to be as proper and exact in my knowledge of fair use on the Internet as this student was in questioning this according to her conscience.

In conclusion, as I continue to teach in the Department of Music and Worship, I am more strongly convinced that the Lord has put me in this position for a purpose, His great commission. I am grateful for the opportunity to teach at Cedarville University, where I can work with students in developing both their human character and their spiritual life as they grow into maturity.

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