



Holiness of Hymns and Purity of Praises

Contemporary Music and Spirituality

Ἰσοελλα νευ ἰχινῆνευατι ἄπιχοῦ

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With great wisdom, God created man with a spiritual element unlike any of His creations. He desired man to communicate with Him through a means unattainable by other living creatures. Man was given a spirit by which he can commune and have fellowship with his Maker. However, man's ability to communicate with God does not stop there. Prayer, both spoken and silent, is an effective and common means by which we enter into God's presence. Also, our bodies participate in worship as we kneel, bow, raise our hands, fast, etc. In fact, our dialogue with God may be nothing more than a tear, a heartfelt yearning, or a feeling of regret. Thus, God intended for us to reach Him with every aspect of our being, both seen and unseen.

Among the many means which exist to satisfy man's yearning for God, is the capacity to offer praise through man's musical ability. It has often been said that music has the ability to touch the depths of man's soul, to inspire and stir him to either great heights or degrade and demean him to an unpleasant low. Through this gift of music, man is able to offer the highest form of prayer through praises, by which man attains and perfects the language of the angels.

In the same way that we are keen to avoid the defilement of body and spirit, we should, in like manner, preserve every aspect of our being and offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, as St. Paul advises, *il beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service* (Rom 12:1). Our musical ability should be similarly preserved. How easy it is for us to allow ourselves to be exposed to types of music which might be of questionable style. Can it be said that every type of music touches man's spirit in the same way? Could anyone claim that the harsh, high-pitched sounds of hard rock effect the spirit in the same way that the soothing, inspiring tunes of certain pieces of classical music, for example?

Here, then, exists a need for those aspiring to grow in spirit to agree that musical style has as much of an effect, and in some cases more of an effect, than a song's lyrics. In other words, not every song or hymn containing Christian

lyrics is an automatically acceptable piece of music to the vigilant Christian. Christian music is rapidly becoming a popular alternative to secular, popular music amongst Coptic youth. While it should be said that this is an admirable departure from the worldly and indeed sometimes sinful lyrics found in secular songs, one should still apply some selectivity in his choices.

A common example is rap music which is often associated with violence and misogyny. This type of music, in general, is considered by musicians and spiritual persons alike to be the most base and uninspiring of the popular music varieties of our time. Its style and beat are a very far cry from the unique styles of any of the ancient, traditional types of music utilized by any of the apostolic churches. Can a simple switch in lyrical content magically erase the unspiritual effect of this type of music? An honest and thoughtful response would certainly be a *inoi*.

Furthermore, the type of music pursued should be one which appeals to the spirit rather than to the body and emotions. What is meant here is that so many musical arrangements of our day are intended to excite and energize the body to match the rhythm and sway of a song's beat. Also, many songs generate an emotional response which is temporary, unreliable, and different from person to person. However, in order to consider music as a part of our fitting worship and praise to God, one should consider whether or not a particular song appeals more to the body and emotions, or to the spirit.

Similarly, one should be leery of the accuracy and content of a song's lyrics. Can one say that because a song is produced by a Christian group that its message and lyrical content is entirely in line with the faith and spirituality of the apostles? Who has determined its accuracy and correctness? Should these lyrics be analyzed under the microscope of Holy Scripture or are they to be innocently and perhaps ignorantly accepted? Again, a sober and careful Christian would be sensitive to the blind acceptance of anything in general, but especially music produced by a society thoroughly confused by the melting pot of hundreds of Christian denominations. The infamous heretic, Arius,



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utilized music as means to distribute his heretical teachings. Christian words, phrases, and verses were put to music and these songs were taught to the people who blindly accepted the incorrect teachings contained therein. Again, not every Christian group professing the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is to be accepted at face value, but rather we are called to carefully and thoughtfully *itest the spiritsi* (1 John 4:1).

This graying of clearly defined boundaries and limitations is ultimately the work and purpose of the devil himself. What is wrong with music? How can a simple song be harmful? Why would a Christian group have improper intentions? Why must the Church involve herself even in her members' choices of music? All these questions are meant to make the intended crystal-clear picture of boundaries and limitations an unrecognizable and chaotic scene of fuzziness where no rights and wrongs exist. Instead, everything is relative or an individual choice. This well-known, but often unnoticed method of the devil can be a disastrous beginning to a spiritual decline in many areas of one's walk with God.

Having said the above, it should be noted that some of the popular Christian music available today is entirely acceptable both lyrically and musically. One need only search carefully for a musical style which appeals to the spirit. Without question, the content and style of the many

Church praises, chants, and hymns are a suitable measuring stick for my choices of music. Is the message here that one need find a Christian group producing music similar in length, tempo, and style to say the well-known Coptic chants of the Pascha Week? Certainly not! A search such as this would no doubt be quite unfruitful. However, one can certainly find groups producing music which inspires and appeals to the spirit.

The very common problem with the above is that many youth have trained their ears exclusively to the popular, secular styles of music. If any piece of music does not contain guitars, drums, synthesizers, etc., then its appeal is greatly diminished. Here, again, one needs to be acutely aware of the focus and purpose of music: to appeal to the body and emotions or feed the spirit. For this reason, many parents prefer to play various types of Church music, chants, and praise when their children are quite young in order to accustom their ears to develop an appreciation for the finer music which appeals to the spirit.

May our Lord Jesus Christ who blessed our nature by taking what is ours and giving us what is His, bless every aspect of our being. May we strive to train our senses, so that we may be conscious of those things which even have the appearance of sin. To Him be the glory with His good Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen. ✠