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The task at hand is to answer the question, "*What do you believe is the spiritual significance of music?*" The question itself needs parsing, as it may not actually be asking what it seems to want to know. I am asked to write about what I "*believe.*" "*Believing*" is different than "*knowing.*" This leads to another question: Are there Truth statements that apply to music? Truth with a capital, "*T,*" not truth that is the post-modern equivalent of, "*Your truth is good for you and my truth is good for me and if they meet, it's beautiful.*" No, Truth is Truth. Is there Truth in music, Truth that can be known, or is it all a matter of what I believe, what I hope, what I wish, what I think, what I desire to be so?

Then there is the nagging word, "*spiritual.*" I know what the word means to me, referenced in my Christian worldview informed from the Reformed (Presbyterian) theological perspective. Yet others in these pages use the word "*spiritual*" in different ways. Which brings me to another irritating little thought: "*CAN music have spiritual significance?*" If not, why does it matter what I – or anyone, for that matter – believe about it?

One of the problems we have when considering a sentence (and issue) such as this is that our words mean different things to different people. The sense that all points of view have equal validity (as long as, we hope, they do not "*hurt*" anyone) has led to a breakdown of language as surely as it has fostered the idea that nothing can be really known. Wrestling with a subject as complex as music usually leads to territory staked out early, with emphasis on what one always thinks is self-evident common sense. Issues of taste, preference and style, of modernity versus tradition, old versus new, hip verses stuffy, of generational fault lines and self-proclaimed expertise often close off debate before it starts. Hence my conundrum.

And yet.

Let me begin these musings with this thought:

Music does not have spiritual significance at all. In fact, it can mean nothing but itself.

Confusion over the idea of the spiritual significance of anything results from a mixup between Creator and created. What is music, after all? Is it the jots on the paper, the treble and bass clefs, key signatures and expression markings? How could mere writing have spiritual significance? If a child scribbles a few marks onto a paper with a crayon, how is that different than the printed score



to Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, or the lead sheet to *Here's That Rainy Day*? Or a print out of an e-mail, for that matter? No, we cannot argue that the actual printed notes that we call music can have any spiritual significance. They simply mean themselves. No matter if written by the most committed atheist or the most devoted Christian, the dots on the page are Truth dumb and cannot mean anything except what they are. Printed music is a code, just like printed words, that, to a person with the key, is a link to something else.

What else?

Does a single note coming from the bell of a trombone have spiritual significance? Of course not. How could it? That note – which exists in space and time for only as long as the player holds it – can only be what it is: a vibrating column of air. For if a sounded note on a trombone has spiritual significance, then every sound – the cry of a baby, the passing of gas by a cow, the rumble of an earthquake – has spiritual significance.

And what of the player whose lips have vibrated the air to produce a B flat? Is his physical act – the coordination of the muscles of his lips and the timely flow of air and the movement of his tongue and arm – an act that has spiritual significance? No. It is mechanics, pure and simple.

"But," you protest, *"when you put the notes together and play them in a particular way, in a certain chord progression with a specific melodic line, I feel the music has spiritual significance. It moves me, it makes me feel a certain way. I feel close to God."*

Think again.

We cannot argue that music in and of itself has spiritual significance. Much of the current debate about music both in the church and in society at large is based on the faulty assumption that something that has been created – fashioned, made – by a human being can take on spiritual – that is *"God like"* – qualities. When we posit that a piece of music in and of itself has spiritual significance, we fall into the trap of idolatry, much like the person who takes a coconut, carves an image of an animal into it and then bows down and worships that which he has just made. The created – that which we craft with our own minds and hands – cannot rise to a place above its creator. Or the creator's Creator. We must be careful not to make music – or any art – or any thing – something that becomes more than us, having powers it was not intended to have and, in the words of Harold Best, *"given more value than it could ever intrinsically possess."*

The prophet Isaiah reminds us of this in his pithy oration of judgment:

Ah, you who hide deep from the Lord your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, "who sees us? Who knows us?" You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, "He did not make me"; or the



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thing formed say of him who formed it, "*He has no understanding*"?
[Isaiah 29:16-16, ESV]

Having said this, however, there are two ways in which music can have an effect on us in the spiritual realm. The first is through associative and imputed meaning. Music which may have been written as an "*abstract*" form with no intentional or implied meaning placed on it by the composer can take on meaning through an association that the hearer may have with it. What happy couple does not have a piece of music that they call, "*Our song?*" Such a piece, when heard, brings up deep associations of a moment in time when they first heard it, associations of romance, caring, love. The composer had no intention of writing a special song for John and Mary Doe, but John and Mary feel as if the composer was speaking directly to them because of the symbiotic relationship between the music and emotions of its listeners. Such associations can generate deep spiritual connections but the music itself is not "*spiritual*," rather it is interpreted by the listener through his own spiritual point of reference whereby it can evoke spiritual thoughts and feelings.

Further, words, when put to music, can immediately give music spiritual meaning as they explicitly call the listener to a specific reference point. Again, the words themselves – as words – are not spiritual, but the thoughts communicated by the words can resonate with the hearer in unique, personal ways. But even such a connection is not self-evident to all listeners. I may be powerfully moved – and I am, even to the point of a deep emotional and spiritual response – when I hear the words, "*Bereite dich zu leben!*" ("*Prepare to live!*") sung in Gustav Mahler's *Symphony 2*. Yet to another, those words may pass by with no response at all, sufficient proof that the spiritual content of the music AND the words are not intrinsic but associative, subject to interpretation by the given hearer. Likewise Shakespeare's *Sonnet 29* is, to many, a powerful paean of love and devotion where to others it is merely a jumble of words heaped together, making nothing but nonsense syllables. For one who references everything through a spiritual world-view, as I do with my Christian faith, imputed, associative meanings given to music often result in deep spiritual resonance.

Which leads to a second way that music can take on spiritual significance. My Christian faith causes me to reference everything I experience through the work of the Creator of the universe. God, the only Creator – as opposed to we humans who can simply re-present what the mind of God has always known from the beginning of time – modeled for me creativity and diversity in creation about which I stand and marvel. In our time, when everything from a pizza to a song to an orgasm to a sunset gets called "*awesome*," we would do well to reserve such a word for the One who truly is worthy of our awe – the Creator and sustainer of the Universe. Because my thought life is so tightly knit to thought of God, music can move me into spiritual ecstasies. Whether Gregorian chant, Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem*, Arvo Part's *Fratres*, or Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, my ears transmit signals to my brain, which are then processed in relation to a lifetime lived in communion with God. This is not because the music screams, "*Jesus loves me, this I know*," but because my appreciation for God's creative modeling, for the composer's re-



presenting that modeling (whether he is aware of God's modeling or not), and my gratitude for having the gift of being able to receive it, leads me to view music as a great gift of God, one which gives me pleasure and which points me back to Him with my own spoken and unspoken songs of praise. Without that understanding of God, of first causes, of the redemptive act which gives the child of God the reference point on which to hang his hat of gratitude, the appreciation of music is reduced merely to feelings. And feelings are notoriously poor indicators of Truth.

In Claudio Monteverdi's opera, *L'Orfeo* (1607), the character "La Musica" introduces the audience to the power of music that will unfold before them:

I am Music, and with sweet melodies,
make peaceful every restless heart;
And now, with noble anger, now with love,
I can inflame the coldest minds.

*Io la Musica son ch'ai dolci accenti,
So far tranquillo ogni turbato core,
Et hor di nobilira, et hor d'amore
Posso infiammar le piu gelate menti.*

Indeed. But without the spiritual reference point of the One True God, music's ability to influence us is limited by our own associations and passions. Understanding the difference between the intrinsic and associative qualities of music can free us to put music in its place as one of myriad gifts which we reference on the spiritual level. The Psalmist was surely right when he declared, "*The heavens declare the glory of God.*" [Psalm 19:1, ESV]. So, too, does music, but not because it is intrinsically "*spiritual.*" Rather, music, heard through the ears of faith brings with it a connection with the Creator that moves it away from the temptation of idolatry to a very act of worship and gratitude. This I do not believe. This I know. Why? That, gentle reader, is a subject for another chapter.

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