

# MUSIC & MISSION

TOWARD A THEOLOGY  
AND PRACTICE  
OF GLOBAL SONG

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# 1

## Global Song and the Church

*S T Kimbrough, Jr.*

### RELATIONSHIPS

People relate to one another in multifarious ways, and the area of science known as “relational psychology” reveals a world of complex environments, situations, emotional states, and communicative skills that are the life context of human relationships. How music fits into the world of relationships is both a mystery and a reality. Music as creative art combines energy, sensory stimuli, rhythms, and language(s) (where words are used) that enable people to relate to one another. In all of these arenas of human response, diverse conditioning continues as we grow and live in community. One of my sons, an accomplished musician, wondered why “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” was his favorite popular song, until he learned that a toy bluebird with an internal music box that played the melody of this song had hung over his bed when he was an infant. Most nights as he went to sleep he heard the melody. The way he relates to that song today goes back to his infancy.

There is, of course, more to how music enables relationships than merely what we hear from infancy or childhood. Music comes from the innermost soul of a people—from the toil of their hands, the pain of their suffering, the ecstasy of their love, the lure of the land where they live, farming, hunting, and fishing. In all of these experiences, there is a life rhythm; there is a language of the heart and soul; there is a pulse of daily life. There is a primitiveness, a purity, and an elegance giving shape to the rhythms, words, and tones.

The Christian church is at a crossroads in relationships. It began in a diverse manner, made up of Jesus' followers who were both Gentiles and Jews. In its earliest days the question was raised: Who really is a follower of Jesus? St. Paul confronted this question in his epistles to the Corinthians and the churches of Galatia. At the heart of the controversies about true discipleship lay the deeper question: How do Christians relate to one another, to the God who reclaims their lives through Jesus Christ, and to God's creation?

As the Christian church grew, it realized consciously and unconsciously that music was determinative for the ways in which Christians relate to one another and to God. It drew upon the hymnbook of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Psalms, and set them to music that seemed appropriate in the cultural contexts of East and West, drawing heavily upon musical traditions extant within Judaism. Gradually, styles of "sacred" music emerged that still dominate much of the music of the Christian church in both East and West. As the main branches of Christendom emerged—Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism—leaders made decisions about what is appropriate for the music of divine worship, be it Gregorian chant, Byzantine chant, or hymn singing. This is unquestionably an oversimplification. Nevertheless, a careful look at worship and liturgical formats and practice reveals that these and other musical styles are still in use.

Of course, such an analysis describes a "Christian" world that was less complex in the past than the world of Christianity today. Is there a *right* mode of musical expression through which Christians are to relate to one another, God, and creation? Perhaps we grow up in diverse traditions learning that the musical expression of *our* language and culture is the *right* one.

The pluralization of the Christian community—which emerged using primarily the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages—helps us to realize that there is no *lingua franca* of the Christian faith. It may be expressed in as many languages and cultures as there are people of the earth. God's truth is not limited to a specific linguistic/cultural expression. Hence, the pluralization of the Christian church's constituency has expanded the horizons of musical expressions of faith from the life and soil of the people. With this pluralization comes a multiplicity of musical expression from diverse cultures. If a person's humanness is truly authenticated

through new life in Christ (i.e., if such a life is an affirmation of the fullest expression of one's own identity), then certainly one's own art and aesthetic expression are valid avenues of faith expression.

What does this mean for the musical inheritance of the church in the East and West, North and South? It means that throughout the worldwide church, the musical inheritance is to be regarded as an authentic expression of how followers of Christ have effectively related to one another, God, and creation. Such musical inheritance of *authentic relational expression* cannot be nullified by another cultural expression that claims to be more authentic.

This explains why the field of global music today is so important for the church around the world. It provides the means, the substance, by which Christians of diverse cultural expression may relate to one another. Is then *everything* worth preserving because it tells us something about how Christians have related to one another in the past and present? The answer is "No," because relationships are always at different levels; some are shallow, while others have great depth. Also, the entry level for every person is different in a relationship. We may outgrow a song through which we learned the alphabet of our own language, but at the time we learned it, it was the key to a primary learning experience.

We do not yet know how to determine the depth levels of the relationships created through global song. Sometimes we do not fully comprehend the language, rhythm, harmonic structure, and the style of the music, be they written or oral. One thing, however, is clear. If Christians, who now exist among hundreds of cultures and languages, want to relate to one another, they will have to sing each other's songs—make music together. Music is the God-given language that gives the fullest expression to prayer, joy, suffering, and praise of the Creator. Followers of Christ will find that sharing their songs will strengthen their relationships, for they can sing about what they often find difficult to talk about. They can reach deep into one another's souls with language, rhythm, melody, and perhaps harmony. But this involves tremendous risk and vulnerability. It means that one's own tradition may or may not harbor the music that speaks best to the heart and soul of another person or community seeking to follow the same Christ. The Christians and churches that will not take this risk become insular and immured from the rest of God's world.

Beware, however, for the use of global music and its incorporation into the worship life of the Christian community means opening up all musical expression to critical judgment in light of the highest aesthetic expression we may offer to God. Mediocrity and a cheap aesthetic or sacred art are inadequate offerings to God. If communities of faith have been held together for centuries by musical expressions that have strengthened community and faith, then new forms of musical expression must be measured by the strength of their content and shape to build, edify, and solidify the whole body of Christ and deepen faith in the Triune God. This is the test for global Christian song. A question to ask constantly is: What musical expression is the highest and fullest expression of the unified body of Christ?

We have a long way to go in the quest for global Christian song. It has only begun. Where it will lead we do not know, but if it strengthens the body of Christ and enriches the spirituality of the whole people of God, it will be a worthy quest.

New relationships await us, ones we never before imagined. And music is an important doorway to these relationships. We become in large measure the music we sing, and there is a strong possibility that the Christian church may become global if it opens itself to the musical expression of all peoples.

## THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

The New Testament gospel and the Christian church did not emerge from a vacuum but from the context of the Hebrew people and the nation of Israel in the ancient Near East. Nevertheless, they did not emerge directly from those aspects of Judaism's religious life and practice which were shaped primarily by the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*. However, both have strong roots in the Hebrew Scriptures, referred to by many Christians as the Old Testament. While the traditions of the *Mishnah* and *Talmud* were being shaped hundreds of years before their final form during and after the fourth century of the Christian era, by the time they had become normative for most of Judaism, the Christian church was already well established.

Nevertheless, the faith of God's people did not emerge from a vacuum. It bears the imprint of cultures, languages, and ethnicities. If God is the God of all creation, is it really surprising to discover that the Bible is a

global book? Does it really astound us that the faith it espouses bears the imprimatur of diverse cultures and peoples? Psalm 29 illustrates how God appropriates cultures in the Holy Scriptures. Early in the last century, in what is today the country of Lebanon, a group of French archaeologists discovered Psalm 29 in a Proto-Canaanite cuneiform (wedge-shaped characters) text, which precedes the Hebrew text! Is this really so amazing? It was a remarkable discovery, yes! But should we be shocked that the “inspired” book of God’s people includes a piece of literature that was not originated by one of the “inspired” writers of Holy Scripture? God can use what exists in the lives of people—indeed that which issues from their God-given, creative gifts—to affirm eternal truths.

Should it take our breath away when we confront the reality that the only other person who bears the name “Messiah” in the Bible besides Jesus is Cyrus the Medean king, who stood completely outside the faith community of the Hebrew people and their scriptures? Are we shocked when we discover in the Book of Numbers (chapters 22-24) that someone outside the community of faith, namely, Balaam, a diviner and sorcerer, *blesses* the faith community instead of cursing it? According to the Holy Scriptures, it is God’s way to use the most unlikely people, reality, and the moment to affirm what the Divine Will is ever seeking.

The Bible, like the Christian church, did not emerge from a vacuum but from the life of the people; and, if you examine carefully the Fertile Crescent of the Mediterranean from 2000 BCE to the time of Christ, you will find it a melting pot of humankind. While the songs recorded in the Hebrew Bible, by and large, are couched in the language and form of Hebrew poetry, the concerns of biblical song are unquestionably global in nature. Any cursory examination of the Book of Psalms, the songbook of the synagogue and church, will reveal that.

### WHO OWNS MIDDLE “C”?

Before taking this discussion any further, however, let us reflect briefly on song or music itself. In one sense we can say that the church is global because it sings or makes music, for music making is a universal phenomenon. But one might say that music making in one culture may not be

music making in another culture. Is that really the issue?

Let us ask ourselves a more basic question about the global nature of music. Who owns middle “C”? It might be concluded that this author has already foreclosed and prejudiced the discussion by choosing a designation out of Western musical notation for further elaboration. However, it is used only in reference to the tone itself, not to its place in Western musical scales. Is there only a middle “C” phenomenon for those who have studied Western musical notation? When that tone is sounded in South Sudan or a European concert hall, is it the same tone? Is it a Southern Sudanese “C” or a European “C”? Wherever it is sounded, the tone is still the same. No one owns it by musical or cultural birthright! A Muslim *Imam* may intone it during daily prayers. A Jewish cantor may sing it in a *Kol Nidre*. A Roman priest may produce it in an “Alleluia.” The Vienna Boys’ Choir, a praise band, Wynton Marsalis, or Jessye Norman may sound it. The “C” they all sing is a universal tone; no one owns it, except the Creator who shaped it in the glorious sounds and silence of creation. The distinguished Viennese composer of the last century, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, once stated that the “musical scale is still awaiting its savior.” But how many composers and church traditions of music have claimed to be the “savior”? Only God the Creator is its redeemer.

If this is part of the theological underpinning of who the people of God are, then averring that this way or that way is what Christians do when they make music is risky business. Unquestionably what we do with middle “C” is a decisive matter. It is part of the sacred trust we face as members of the body of Christ, the church. The shaping of the “C” becomes vitally important. We give it context. We determine its relationship to other tones, to other sounds, to text, to faith, to community. Is Hebrew cantorial, Gregorian chant, Anglican chant, Serbian or Byzantine chant, the German chorale, the gospel song, the Wesleyan hymn, Asian unison singing, or praise song *the way*?

What are we seeking? A smorgasbord of sound? An “anything goes” approach to the music of the church? One of the greatest disservices some have done to the phenomenon of worship and the church itself is to create the dichotomy between “contemporary” and “traditional” worship and to make “liturgy” (*litourgeia*, the work of the people) almost a curse word. All worship should be “contemporary” in the sense that whatever the tra-

dition, it should speak to the lives of the people wherever they are. All worship should be “traditional” in the sense that it receives what has sustained the forebears in the faith as having authentic validity. The purpose of liturgy should never be to marginalize anyone but to include all. Does that mean seeking some all-inclusive liturgical style and order that will envelop the entire world? That is not possible, given the diversities of languages and cultures. But it is possible for God’s people to shape their life of worship together in ways that are sensitive to people wherever they are. They can form their worship so as not to marginalize others.

By deciding to worship, a faith community has already made the choice to be global. Christians have decided that they will gather, sing, pray, meditate, reflect, be silent, be noisy, share each other’s burdens, and support one another. This is what happens in almost all Christian worship wherever it takes place. In this sense we may say that simply by coming together to worship, the faith community links itself not just with the community of believers around the world but with all creation. While this would seem to be a generalization with strong elements of truth, it is nevertheless clear from the history of the Christian church that unity cannot be assumed merely because believers perform common and related acts of worship.

Who are the true worshipers “in Spirit and in truth”? The Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Anglicans/Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals? What concern do we have for the whole of creation, for the whole of the incredible range, breadth, and depth of sound and silence, which God gives to the people of the earth? For whom do we have room? The African American spiritual claims, “Plenty good room, plenty good room, . . . there’s room for many a more.” We need to ask, “Is there?” Who owns middle “C”? Who owns the musical scale? Is there room for sacred songs, spirituals, gospel songs, praise songs—for J. S. Bach, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Johann Pachelbel, Martin Luther, Samuel Sebastian Wesley, Dimitri Bortniansky, Charles H. Gabriel, Fanny Crosby, Amy Grant, and Andraé Crouch. Even if one replies, “Yes,” what does this have to do with the church being truly global in nature, or being truly the body of Christ?

"TO BE GLOBAL"

What do we mean by the phrase "to be global"? This author will attempt a working definition: "To be global" means to look beyond ourselves to the larger world that God has made and to acknowledge that God made it and that we are part of the larger whole. We belong to it and it belongs to us and all belongs to God.

This is what the church does wherever it gathers: it looks beyond itself to the larger world God has made. How broad and deep do we wish our sensitivities to be to what God has done and is doing in this marvelous and incredible creation, this astounding world of sound and silence?

The songs of the world church provide a new vision of how the church of God indeed can become the fulfillment of God's will on earth.

## New Book Explores Music and Mission

(Note: *The previous pages are an excerpt from this new book.*)

New York, NY, March 19, 2007—The centrality of song to Christian life and mission is the subject of a collection of essays just published by the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries.

*Music & Mission: Toward a Theology and Practice of Global Song* was edited by the Rev. Dr. ST Kimbrough, Jr., who recently retired as the executive in charge of the Global Praise program of the mission agency.

The 14 essays put special emphasis on the strong role of music found in the Methodist heritage, but they also explores song in Scripture and in the broad Christian experience. The easy-to-read resource is designed in part to help congregations take advantage of the wealth of song available in a global church.

“Music comes from the innermost soul of a people,” Kimbrough writes in an introductory essay. The diversity of people within the church, he continues, makes an awareness of “global song” essential today; music from around the world “provides the means, the substance, by which Christians of diverse cultural expressions may relate to one another.”

Contributors to the new book come from Argentina, the Dominican Republic, England, Scotland, Sweden, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States. They include Dr. Dr. Carlton R. Young, professor of music emeritus at Emory University and editor of *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989), and the Rev. Dr. George Mulrain, president the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas.

The book is divided into three parts. The first deals with global song in a global church, the second with global song and the Wesleyan (Methodist) tradition, and the third with global song and the congregation.

Music and song were at the heart of the spiritual revival out of which Methodism arose in 18th century England. Song came with the movement to the Americas and went with Methodist missionaries into all parts of the world. Today, publication of an indigenous-language hymnal is second only to the Bible in the publishing ministry of emerging Methodist and United Methodist churches around the world.

The diversity of music and song within the United Methodist mission fold led to the formation of Global Praise at the General Board of Global Ministries. The unit issues song books, CDs of global song, and other music resources for mission; it also provides leadership training in the use of global song.

*Music and Mission* sells for \$14.95 and can be ordered through regular United Methodist distribution channels. Place mail orders with Cokesbury, P.O. Box 801, Nashville, TN 27202-0801; telephone, 800 672-1798, FAX, 800 445-8189. The website of Global Praise is <http://www.globalpraise.org>.