

Blessed ignorance: Christian music

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 27, 2002](#) issue

Back when 19th-century Methodists were debating whether to sponsor seminaries and promote a “learned ministry,” one bishop, it was said, opposed the idea. He connected vital faith and piety with ignorance. Challenged by a critic who asked the bishop whether he was thankful for his own ignorance, he proudly answered yes. Whereupon the critic moved that the convention sing a Te Deum, since the good bishop had so much for which to be thankful.

I deserve such a Te Deum, critics may say, after they read my confession of almost total ignorance concerning one of the strongest cultural forces around: “Christian music.” I hope I’m not a snob about everything post-baroque. Folk, soul, gospel, Southern Harmony, Sacred Harp and jazz all have an appeal for me.

“Christian music,” however, draws a blank. Two of the stations on my pre-set auto radio are “Christian.” I listen to them for their commentary, but soon after the first guitar strums or bass throbs or soprano reaches of Christian music begin, my finger goes to the push buttons.

I bring this up because I’ve just read the annual report on Christian music sales, one of the few bulls in a musical bear market. Newspaper headlines have proclaimed that “Christian Music Sales Set a Record in 2001,” and that “Christian [Music Has Been] Born Again.” Almost 50 million units, we learn, were sold last year. This meant a 13.5 percent increase, while sales of other kinds of music dropped an average 3 percent.

How do you measure up? Do the names P.O.D., Donnie McClurkin, Michael W. Smith or Steven Curtis Chapman mean anything to you? Do “WoW 2001” or “WoW 2002” or “Free to Fly”? If not, listen for the Te Deum celebrating your ignorance, since all of these are in the top ten.

I must confess that I am not totally ignorant. Mannheim Steamroller, about which I accidentally knew because a friend’s son used to play with the group, had the top album sales. Thanks to the gift of a DVD player from my grandchildren which

allowed me to watch *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, I heard and liked its theme song. The film's soundtrack is number three on the Christian music chart. Those two discs, one article says, were not *technically* Christian, since secular labels issued them, but . . . Then there is veteran Paul Clark, an old friend; I have a Clark collection. As a scandalmonger who welcomes news of born-again Christians and their careers, I of course know of Amy Grant and Sandi Patti.

All this leads up to some potential sermons on themes such as: "Remember that thou art dust. Life is short. One cannot keep up with everything"; or, "From what I have overheard and read, much Christian music is, let's say it, junk, exploitative, banal, guilty of helping to turn Christianity into mere entertainment for many"; or, "On the other hand, give the recording artists and companies credit for gaining and holding the ear of a generation that other Christians neglect, or fail to reach or don't even try to reach."

Last summer we were in Paris for the premier of Soli Deo Gloria's newest venture, Augusta Read Thomas's musical setting of two Gerard Manley Hopkins poems. I was reminded of the story of Abbot Suger, to whom some monks complained about a monk-architect who was breaking the nice Roman columns to a point that today we call "Gothic." Stop him!" they exclaimed. No, said the abbot, "Some good thing may yet come of it."

If I make the company of angelic choirs, maybe I'll catch up on "Christian music." If, that is, the angels pause in their dutiful singing of Bach and their enjoyment of Mozart to indulge in it.