

# A matter of taste? Religious meanings and musical styles: Religious meanings and musical styles

by [Frank Burch Brown](#) in the [September 13, 2000](#) issue

The cover of the August 1996 *Atlantic Monthly* announced a Christian cultural revolution: “Giant ‘full-service’ churches are winning millions of ‘customers’ with [their] pop-culture packaging. They may also be building an important new form of community.” Author Charles Trueheart described what he calls the “Next Church”: No spires. No crosses. No robes. No clerical collars. No hard pews. No kneelers. No biblical gobbledygook. No prayer rote. No fire, no brimstone. No pipe organs. No dreary 18th-century hymns. No forced solemnity. No Sunday finery. No collection plates.

The list has asterisks and exceptions, but its meaning is clear. Centuries of European tradition and Christian habit are deliberately being abandoned to clear the way for new, contemporary forms of worship and belonging. The Next Church and its many smaller, typically suburban relatives are held up as models of the options available to Christians who want to “catch the next wave.”

Music provides the clearest indication of the revolutionary change. The musical idioms of the Next Church are contemporary (nothing dating from before 1990 in many cases). One 24-year-old pastor characterized the predominantly rock music of his university-related church as “a cross between Pearl Jam and Hootie and the Blowfish”—in other words, somewhere between angst-ridden “grunge” and upbeat pop.

Yet in many of these churches, the spectrum of styles offered is actually quite narrow—as it has been in most churches throughout history. Country music is usually out of the question, as is religious jazz in the style of either Duke Ellington (in

his “Sacred Concerts”) or Wynton Marsalis (*In This House on This Morning*). Nor is there music like that of Sister Marie Keyrouz, a Lebanese nun who has begun singing the chants of her tradition in an appealing, “secular” style that utilizes colorful instrumental accompaniments. The typical Next Music sound is club-style soft rock.

It would be unusual to hear anything in these churches so morally daring as certain songs of the Grammy-Award-winning Indigo Girls, or anything so ironically and astutely probing as a song on ecological spirituality by James Taylor (“Gaia,” from *Hourglass*), or music as alert to alternative spiritualities—African and South-American—as Paul Simon’s *Graceland* and *The Rhythm of the Saints* or as achingly yearning in overall effect as k. d. lang’s “Constant Craving” (*Ingénue*) or U2’s “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” (*Joshua Tree*). These are only a smattering of widely accessible, white and mostly middle-class alternatives.

The more ritualized yet contemporary music from Taizé (composed by Jacques Berthier) and the newly composed yet folk-based songs of the Iona Community in Scotland apparently smack too much of traditional religion to find wide acceptance in the Next Church.

And little of what is currently heard in the megachurch or suburban church with contemporary worship resembles contemporary classical “spiritual minimalism.” Nothing in those settings sounds much like Arvo Pärt, Philip Glass, John Tavener, John Adams, Giya Kancheli or (more Romantic in idiom) Einojuhani Rautavaara. Nor would such churches, which often make use of recordings, be tempted to venture into the recorded repertoire of more avant-garde classical composers such as Igor Stravinsky (by now virtually a classical icon), Olivier Messiaen, Krzysztof Penderecki, Sofia Gubaidulina or James MacMillan—all certifiably contemporary and almost shockingly spiritual, and frequently explicitly theological.

The current selectivity in church music, because it is more the rule than the exception, would be unremarkable except for the claim made by the Next Church and its contemporary Christian relatives: that theirs is the truly contemporary alternative for Christian music today.

In his book *Dancing with Dinosaurs: Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World*, William Easum makes this very claim about worship and music. A former United Methodist pastor, Easum works as a consultant with congregations and religious organizations. He describes major changes in worship as the “second stage” of the Reformation.

“The shift in the style of worship is the most obvious and divisive [of the changes]. This divisiveness is over the style of worship rather than doctrine or theology.”

Easum insists that the generations that are most vital to church growth, the midlife baby boomers and the baby busters (born after 1964), do not want to be reverent or quiet during worship. He singles out music as the “major vehicle for celebration and communication.” Few movies, he observes, make a profit without a solid sound track. So what sort of sound track should a church choose, given the variety of options? Easum claims that the right method for arriving at a suitable style is to determine which radio stations most of the “worship guests” listen to. “Soft rock,” he declares, is usually the answer.

For Easum, classical music—and traditional church music in general—is a relic of a dying past. “Classical music was rooted in the native folk music of the time,” he says. “That world is gone.” He quotes John Bisagno, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Houston:

Long-haired music, funeral-dirge anthems and stiff-collared song leaders will kill the church faster than anything in the world. . . . There are no great, vibrant, soul-winning churches reaching great numbers of people, baptizing hundreds of converts, reaching masses, that have stiff music, seven-fold amens and a steady diet of classical anthems. None. That’s not a few. That’s none, none, none.

If you want life and growth, Easum suggests, make use of music, art and media that are “culturally relevant.” He repeatedly emphasizes the importance of “quality music”—music produced not by choirs and organs, but by praise teams, soloists and a variety of instrumentalists and small ensembles that use synthesizers, drums and electric guitars. Quality music, especially in the context of youth evangelism, needs to be entertaining. What about cultivating some sort of developed and mature taste for quality in worship music? Easum says, “Worship is not the place to teach music appreciation.” The only question that worship communities need to ask about music is: “Does it bring people closer to God?” Music is never the message. “No form is inherently better than another. Music is good if it conveys the gospel; it is bad if it does not.”

Easum is willing to cite historical precedents if he thinks they serve his purpose:

Spiritual giants such as Martin Luther and Charles Wesley showed us the importance of culturally relevant music [by] taking the tunes out of bars, putting words to them and singing the songs in worship. They accommodated the people in order to reach them with the message that would change their lives. They did not conform the message, just the *package*.

Christians should be able to sympathize with most of Easum's pastoral and musical concerns. Importing Vivaldi or Brahms or William Mathias into a church community whose native musical languages are closer to those of Madonna, Jimmy Buffett or John Tesh is like missionaries imposing European or North American religious styles on drastically different cultures. (Not that converts do not sometimes need and welcome a sharp alternative to their native cultural vocabulary. Chinese Christians have treasured the gospel hymns brought to them by 19th-century missionaries, choosing them over songs using Chinese folk tunes or composed later by Chinese Christians and in a Chinese idiom.)

Easum makes a valid point, moreover, in claiming that music that was originally secular has repeatedly found its way into church. The boundary between sacred and secular has repeatedly been blurred or transgressed. No one style is unalterably sacred or unalterably secular. And Easum is probably correct that much of the soft rock or pop music that he advocates for worship has become a kind of generic musical product, with no set of specifically worldly associations that would prevent its use in worship. One could make a similar observation regarding the baroque and early classical musical styles of the 17th and early 18th centuries (roughly from Handel to Haydn), which crossed rather freely from the operatic stage and concert hall to the church and back again.

Again, matching religious words with neutral or nonspecific popular music can bring out a suitable range of meanings that the music might not have on its own. Amy Grant, Petra and countless others adopt and adapt rock as a Christian musical style that their listeners find entirely consonant with their sense of Christian life and proclamation.

Finally, we can agree with Easum's implicit claim that church music has sometimes been unduly limited by traditional suspicions of pulsing or lively rhythms, "irreverent" instruments and entertainment. (Religious music would be in trouble in

much of the world if it could never be rhythmic or animated.)

Despite the merits of some of Easum's claims, he makes several highly questionable assumptions:

- that religious quality and musical quality are both reliably indicated by numerical success
- that liking a certain kind of music for light entertainment is the same as liking that music for all the purposes of worship
- that the key to musical quality, religiously and aesthetically, is immediate accessibility
- that religious music is never, therefore, a medium one might expect to grow into and grow through as a part of Christian formation and development

We also question other Easum claims: that worship music must always be upbeat and animated if it is to be "culturally relevant"; that classical music in general is stodgy and fossilized; that religious words guarantee genuinely religious music as long as the music is likable; and that music can be treated simply as a "package" that contains the gospel message instead of as an art that embodies and interprets the gospel message by its structure and by the very way it sounds. Finally, Easum assumes that he is competent to make judgments about the viability of particular kinds of music without engaging in genuine dialogue with musicians trained in those traditions. Thus, far from exhibiting ecumenical taste, he takes a selective and dogmatic position disguised as an obedience to a gospel imperative to spread the good news.

In fairness, it must be said that the musicians Easum has dealt with might not have been open to much dialogue. Traditional and classical musicians in the employment of churches have all too often dismissed pastoral and worship concerns as irrelevant to their music-making. Faced with the narrowly musical mind-set and unchristian arrogance of certain professional "classical" church musicians, Easum has taken matters into his own hands. He has discerned and reacted to congregational restlessness and dissatisfaction, something that more traditional musicians have been slow to notice and reluctant to treat as relevant to their work. That does not mean, however, that Easum and others taking his approach exhibit the sort of taste and informed judgment that would make them reliable guides to Christian growth (or even church growth) in the sphere of music and the arts.

Consider the current status of classical music—and of certain other “minority” styles—in church and out, and the use of “secular” musical styles in church, and hence the relationship between medium and message in worship. The argument that traditional church music, particularly classical, is either extinct or well on the way toward extinction may seem to be of relatively minor theological consequence. Yet it is highly charged from the perspective of those Christians whose faith is significantly shaped through such music. It has a direct bearing on the question of assessing “cultural relevance.” The way the argument is usually deployed (whether true or not) reflects a highly questionable understanding of the range of art needed for the whole of the Christian life.

Easum predicts, for example, the quick death of all symphony orchestras that do not soon begin to feature a significant amount of pop and rock music. A number of observations counter his suppositions and provide the sort of evidence regarding “cultural relevance” that Easum would have every reason to regard as pertinent.

First, opera has experienced a tremendous revival of late, and not only among the senior generations. Opera houses in many parts of the world (including the United States) are filled to capacity and are adding series. The number of people in North America who say they very much like classical music stands at a substantial 14 to 20 percent across the generations, a more consistently favorable cross-generational response than for most other styles. Although the sale of classical recordings is a relatively small percentage of total audio sales, that can partly be explained by the fact that classical music is much less oriented toward the currently fashionable and the new, which quickly becomes unfashionable and is therefore replaced. As Mark C. Taylor remarks, fashion—being “forever committed to the new”—speaks only in the “present tense.” That hardly argues against incorporating classical styles in many church settings, but instead cautions us that riding each successive wave of fashion may be neither desirable nor even possible.

Other music, known as “early music” (roughly European “classical” music before the 18th-century classical period), has attracted a significant and ardent audience that augments the already considerable following of baroque music such as Pachelbel’s “Canon in D,” Bach’s *Brandenburg Concerti* and Handel’s *Messiah*. A concert by the women’s medieval quartet Anonymous 4, the Monteverdi Consort or the Tallis Scholars is normally packed, whether they sing in Rome, London or Indianapolis.

And recent years have seen a surge in the popularity of chant. The widespread introduction of religious services using music from the religious community at Taizé, France, fits with this trend, since much of it tends to be rather contemplative and in harmony with the moods if not modes of chant. The attraction of such “boring” ritual music challenges Easum’s notion that “culturally relevant” music must be lively and entertaining.

Still another trend—and this one should have caught Easum’s attention, given his interest in “sound tracks”—is the use of music that draws on classical idioms in the composition of musical scores for films of high drama, serious feeling or intense introspection. An array of recent movies use music indebted to classical traditions. The music that John Williams has composed for the *Star Wars* series often sounds like something one might expect from Sergei Prokofiev or Gustav Holst. The film *Shine* features the Rachmaninov *Third Piano Concerto*. One can also cite John Corigliano’s largely classical score for *The Red Violin*, the contemporary classical music for Terrence Malick’s war movie *The Thin Red Line*, the fascinating and contemporary sound tracks for the morally complex films of Krzysztof Kieslowski, Ennio Morricone’s score for *The Mission* and music for “period” films such as *Shakespeare in Love*.

These examples suggest that “classical” music is not only very much alive, though evolving, but also enormously varied—more varied than one would guess on the basis of the “classical music” one typically hears in churches.

Before judging which kinds of music are culturally relevant and relevant to the transformation of values appropriate to Christian culture and growth, it is important to attain a theologically adequate and aesthetically informed picture of the musical options. I would argue that out of many legitimate options, the Euro-American classical tradition remains one of the most varied, profound and adaptable traditions—in ways churches have yet to imagine.

If churches interested in survival and growth follow the advice of those pushing hardest for “cultural relevance”—and many churches are doing just that—Christian churches will be put in the ironic position of refusing to make use of music as serious (or exalted) as what one hears on a regular basis in the movie theater, on television and radio, in the opera house, symphony hall and local restaurant. And that would be because the churches have misunderstood their cultural situation and defined their mission in terms of misplaced marketing values—values that can seriously

undervalue the spiritually transformative potential of challenging artistry (both “classical” and vernacular). The same values would have had Jesus popularize his image and simplify his message before it was too late.

Similar misunderstandings can be found in common assumptions about the viability of simply “packaging” a sacred message in an appealing secular style. Protestants and other Christians have made wide use of secular sources for their hymn tunes and religious music. J. S. Bach borrowed from his secular cantatas and harpsichord concerti when composing his sacred works, including his *B Minor Mass*. Martin Luther has been credited with saying he did not want the devil to have all the good tunes. Yet secular and popular music was not the only sort that Luther wanted to raid. He was openly jealous of “the fine music and songs” and “precious melodies” that the Catholics got to use at masses for the dead, and thought it would “be a pity to let them perish.” He said that the pope’s followers in general possess “a lot of splendid, beautiful songs and music, especially in cathedral and parish churches,” which ought to be divested of “idolatrous, lifeless and foolish texts” and reused for the sake of their beauty. He was hardly the advocate of strictly casual and vernacular styles.

John Calvin was extremely cautious about the music he sanctioned for use in worship, which he thought should exhibit moderation, gravity and majesty. Luther and John Wesley could both be very particular about the tunes they wanted to use with hymn texts. Wesley designated the ones he judged to be suitable; Luther would not sanction the free use of music from bars and brothels.

Why would any Christian theologian, pastor or musician want to make such discriminations? It is doubtful that they would if they thought that music provides nothing more than a “package” for the gospel message, and one that is adequate as long as it is appealing. That is not what any of the major Reformers thought, even though they were sure that some secular music could legitimately be borrowed and adapted for religious purposes.

Christians today need to be thinking more carefully and deeply about sacred and secular in the realm of music. Art, and certainly musical art, may have a special religious calling, because it tends to come from the heart and go to the heart—to paraphrase what Beethoven said of his *Missa Solemnis*. But perhaps not all art is meant to touch the heart, let alone the soul; and perhaps even the music that touches the heart does so in quite different ways. A clever piano sonata that Mozart composed in his head is not likely to be perceived as religious or “spiritual.”

However justified Karl Barth's conviction may have been that Mozart's ostensibly secular music is possibly even more significant, religiously, than his masses, a lover of Mozart's music may "adore" Cherubino's adolescent and flirtatious songs in the *Marriage of Figaro* without needing to regard them as even remotely religious, let alone as generally well suited for worship. As for the masses, clergy and musicians from Mozart's time to the present have expressed reservations about their more operatic traits—the religious admiration of Barth and Hans Küng notwithstanding.

One does not have to believe that certain styles of music are inherently religious in order to be convinced that some kinds of music are generally more suitable for worship than are other kinds. Pianist and musicologist Charles Rosen has articulated a number of cogent reasons for regarding the classical style of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven as peculiarly handicapped in the realm of sacred music. In Rosen's view, those composers wisely departed from the more strictly "classical" conventions to become more "archaic" in style (modal, contrapuntal) when writing their most serious church music—Haydn's oratorio *The Creation*, for instance, or Mozart's *Requiem and Mass in C Minor*, or Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*.

And some musical styles are more flexible than others. Both baroque music and African-American gospel music have roots within the churches as well as within secular settings, permitting composers and performers in these idioms to make relatively minor stylistic adjustments that will readily put into play the appropriate range of associations, thoughts and feelings.

Other music is designed and adapted primarily to do such things as create cerebral conundrums (some avant-garde classical works) or energize sporting events, entertain at parties, reduce stress or enhance bedroom desires. As Martha Bayles argues in *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music*, early rock 'n' roll, for all its undeniable sexual energy, originated out of a milieu deeply influenced by a white Pentecostalism that borrowed African-American rhythm-and-blues styles while remaining defensively segregated. Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard all grew up in Pentecostal churches and sometimes made highly conflicted, guilt-ridden alterations of their churches' music. But, Bayles goes on, a multitude of influences—including the impulses of artistic modernism—conspired to push moral and religious associations and tensions out of much subsequent popular music. Her claim may be overstated, but it finds a certain amount of agreement among popular musicians themselves.

Some musical styles, instead of being flexible or neutral, seem quite specialized in character—something made exceptionally clear by novelist Robertson Davies in *The Cunning Man*, in which the narrator describes his first encounter with plainsong:

At first I did not know what it was. At intervals the eight men in the chancel choir, or sometimes Dwyer alone, would utter what sounded like speech of a special eloquence, every word clearly to be heard, but observing a discipline that was musical, in that there was no hint of anything that was colloquial, but not like any music I had met with in my, by this time, fairly good acquaintance with music. My idea of church music at its highest was Bach, but Bach at his most reverent is still intended for performance. This was music addressed to God, not as performance, but as the most intimate and devout communication. It was a form of speech fit for the ear of the Highest.

Gregorian chant would serve poorly for purposes of inebriated celebration; by the same token, the latest Ricky Martin hit would serve poorly for purposes of meditative prayer.

Thus, in response to any uncritical willingness to adopt for worship whatever music people favor in their radio listening, one might ask: Is it possible that musicians in our notably secular era have become especially adept at shaping music to specifically erotic, recreational and commercial purposes? If so, might not bending those sorts of music to the ends of worship be like choosing to praise or thank God in the tone of voice one would use to order a pizza or to cheer a touchdown—or perhaps even to make the most casual sort of love?

No doubt part of the meaning we hear in a given kind of music is “socially constructed,” which raises the possibility that an alteration in the construct will alter completely how the music sounds. Simon Frith makes such an argument when he proposes that it is “cultural ideology,” rather than anything within the music or its beat, that produces most of the sexual and bodily associations of rock ‘n’ roll. But his elaborate and brilliant defense of that claim is too clever. Nothing one can do will convert Gregorian chant into a style as bodily and erotic in its center as various kinds of rock; nor can rock be made to sound as contemplative or as ethereal as chant, though it can indeed take on an aura of ecstasy.

The whole question of meaning in music is elusive, and in many ways a matter of intuitions that we cannot fully explain. Nonetheless, music, as literary and cultural critic George Steiner insists, “is brimful of meanings which will not translate into logical structures or verbal expression . . . Music is at once cerebral in the highest degree—I repeat that the energies and form-relations in the playing of a quartet, in the interactions of voice and instrument are among the most complex events known to man—and it is at the same time somatic, carnal and a searching out of resonances in our bodies at levels deeper than will or consciousness.” Because of the virtually sacramental “real presence” of its meaning, music has “celebrated the mystery of intuitions of transcendence.”

Particular sorts of music have a range of possible nonverbal meanings that verbal language and cultural context can then shape and construe in more specific ways. One can distinguish between religious music most appropriate for the inner sanctuary (both literally and figuratively), and that which is best for the nave of the church, or for the courtyard, recreational hall or concert stage. One can fittingly choose to use religious music in any of these settings, but its character and purpose will shift accordingly, with convention playing a role in shaping those choices.

None of this means that worship services should never make use of rock, or even heavy metal and “grunge.” Robert Walser argues that this notoriously “diabolical” genre of music can be converted into a credible and creative force with a Christian evangelistic message. According to Walser, the Christian heavy metal band Stryper communicates “experiences of power and transcendent freedom” in which a new sort of meaning emerges from the sounds and gestures, which begin to serve as religious metaphors: “The power is God’s; the transcendent freedom represents the rewards of Christianity; the intensity is that of religious experience. . . . Stryper presents Christianity as an exciting, youth-oriented alternative.”

But because religious meanings cannot simply be imposed on every sort of musical medium, regardless of its style, considerable musical and liturgical experimentation could be required to find out which forms of rock and pop permit or invite stretching for religious purposes. Christians probably need musical “laboratories,” involving both clergy and musicians.

No doubt some of the worship services that now use popular and casual idioms were not awe-filled to begin with but awful: bland, stiff and stifled. Nevertheless, if the medium of religious practice and expression is not only predominantly casual in

style but also artistically “flimsy” (a complaint lodged by Kathleen Norris), or perhaps even kitsch, then one must ask: What sort of God are worshipers envisioning as they sing or look or move? To what sort of life and growth do they suppose they are being called? The possibility that a relatively casual and unchallenging style might be all there is to a community’s worship life is bound to be deflating to those whose call to discipleship causes them to yearn for something more in aesthetic formation and development.

As for the uncritical adoption of “secular” styles, there is no denying that the act of giving ordinary, secular-sounding expression to extraordinary reality can transform the ordinary and secular into something sacred. But marrying gospel insights and liturgical actions to a musical medium that was originally secular in sound and purpose is an art. Carelessly done, it can inadvertently convert the sacred into something quite ordinary.