

Teaching Music: A Counter-Cultural Distinctive in the Christian School

This is part of a series by CSM interrogating what it means to be a Christian teacher in each of the disciplines. CSM does not believe that we are at ‘war’ with our culture; on the other hand, it is clear that our stance is to be ‘strangers’ on earth (Hebrews 13: 11-16) as we work to bring God’s kingdom ‘on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matthew 6:10). This notion that we see now only a ‘reflection’ (1 Corinthians 13: 12) implies the need to strive to see ‘face to face’. Christians thus stand as a different “weltanschauung”, a way of looking at the world that is counter to how the non-Christian sees it. What does that mean for Music? Why is Music not a proud distinctive on every Christian school website and a difference maker in the marketplace? It is not just a fundamental way of being Christian but an important, maybe crucial, element in the education of all kinds of children. When only c. 20% of high school students have a connection to formal music education, it is clearly counter-cultural to suggest that music is as fundamental for children in Christian schools as mathematics and English. Schools have never valued the arts (both visual and performing) as much as more ‘useful’ subjects. According to a study published in 2017 by the Ontario-based lobby group People for Education, only 41 per cent of Ontario schools now have trained music teachers. Today, music education is being cut across the USA and Canada and ubiquitously. Christian education should be a cultural outlier in valuing music as a central piece of a child’s education.

Our claim is that all Christian schools should teach music in a systematic way to all children. It should be a fundamental part of the curriculum. There are four reasons for this.

First, the song is a primary way in which children learn and experience the Bible. To learn words is hard; to memorize words to a tune is much easier. Listening to words, the Word, is good. When there is music, it supports a different dimension of experience. God Himself knew this when he had Moses write the law as a song. Indeed, he commanded that Moses write it in order to use it as a teaching tool: “So Moses wrote down this song that day and taught it to the Israelites” (Deuteronomy 31: 19). The Torah itself is a song and intended to be sung by the people of God. St. Paul recognizes this (was he not taught at the feet of Gamaliel?) and echoes this command of God: “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” (Colossians 3:16). Notice that the admonition is to teach through ‘psalms, hymns, and songs’. It is not to sing for the sake of it – although there is no reason not to sing because you just like doing it. Scripturally, however, there is a point to it. We learn to sing so that we can learn the living Word so that we can be closer to Jesus, the Word in the beginning (John 1) and who, with his disciples, sang “a hymn” before going out to the Mount of Olives (Mark 14:26). Indeed, there seems little doubt that he and the disciples continuously sang hymns since the entire book of Psalms is a book of songs, intended not to be read but to be sung in a variety of different modes. It was a custom of the churches, following Jewish practice: “When you come together, each of you has a hymn/psalm, or a word of

instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation" (1 Corinthians 14:26). Even at the Omega of our lives, we will continue to sing as Revelation illustrates: "And I saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and its image and over the number of its name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of God's servant Moses and of the Lamb: "Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed" (Revelation 15: 2-4). It is interesting that in the first couple of centuries of the Christian church, singing with a multitude of instruments appears to have been frowned upon, despite Scripture's clear identification of a variety of instruments (just think Psalm 150: praise him with the strings and pipe, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals). But singing was common. Tertullian writes in the 2nd century A.D. that "When supper is ended, and we have washed our hands, and the candles are lighted up, every one is invited forth to sing praises to God, either such as he collects from the Holy Scriptures, or such as are of his own composing" (Apologia 39:18 trans. William Reeve). Not only did they sing what was old i.e., from the Hebrew Scriptures but also composed new hymns and psalms. Music is thus not only performance / worship. As we think about its application and its justification in our schools, music must also include composition. To emphasize, our Christian life must be also experienced and music is a door to that. Saul used musicians to get into that experience. "As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, timbrels, pipes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying. ⁶The Spirit of the LORD will come powerfully upon you, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person" (1 Samuel 10: 5-6). Note that the instruments reflect the three fundamental elements of music – harmony (harps and lyres), rhythm (timbrels/drums), melody (pipes/flutes). We learn deeply through the experience of music. We have no evidence that Saul was himself a musician. Yet, music allowed him to become a different person, one more attuned to God's will in his life. "And when the musician played, the hand of God was upon Elisha" (2 Kings 3:15).

Second, music invites us into the unity and community of God's people. If ever there was a time for unity, it is in the current era. Isaiah writes: "So will it be on the earth and among the nations, as when an olive tree is beaten, or as when gleanings are left after the grape harvest. They raise their voices, they shout for joy; from the west they acclaim the LORD's majesty. Therefore, in the east give glory to the LORD; exalt the name of the LORD, the God of Israel, in the islands of the sea. From the ends of the earth we hear singing: "Glory to the Righteous One" (Isaiah 24: 13-16). The work of music is the work of coming together, of being at one in a common enterprise. This has been understood from the earliest times of Christian community. "The sound in Norman and Gothic cathedrals, surrounding the audience, strengthens the link between the individual and the community. The loss of high frequencies and the resulting impossibility of localising (sic) the sound makes the believer part of a world of sound. He does not face the sound in "enjoyment" – he is wrapped up by it" (Kurt Blaukopf, Viennese musicologist). Singing or playing together is about obedience to the music / conductor, intentional listening to each other, deep concentration, being with in a meaningful way. This invitation into unity is not without danger however. Psalm 149 invites us to "sing to the Lord a new song" but also

recognizes that the person who has a song in his throat also has “a double-edged sword in their hands”. Music can certainly be conventional as with dance music but it is as likely to be counter-cultural (think Roll over Beethoven by Chuck Berry or The Bigger Picture by Lil Baby). It is not comfortable. Yet, in our Christian practice of music, it invites us into unity. In worship, whether we are swaying to Hillsong United or being bathed by Orthodox/Anglican chant, we are being drawn together in an experience of knowing God. In the Jewish practice of gematria, the numerical value of the words for prayer (tefillah) and song (shirah) are the same i.e. prayer and song are forms of each other. We sing; we pray. Here in our pews or standing in the aisles, lifting up our hands or perched on chairs, we find a place that brings us together even as we can also acknowledge and accept our incredible diversity. The same we are not. United we can be. “Anyone who has heard monks chanting plainsong in one of these old buildings will never forget the effect: the voices seem to issue from no point but suffuse the building like perfume” (R. Murray Schafer: *The Soundscape* 1977). Music is a key agent to that.

Third, music draws out emotions. Music uncovers and exposes feelings and thoughts that would otherwise not come to the surface. Engaged in music, we inexplicably laugh or weep, are filled with exaltation or despair, are drained or energized, feel love or anger. Jeremie Begbie writes in *A Peculiar Orthodoxy: Reflections on Theology and the Arts* (2018), that emotions, while they can be ‘appropriate or inappropriate’, are also critical for decision-making and spurs to action. Bono of U2 said in interview: “I said, I’m not an idealist. I’m an actualist. I want to get stuff done.” When it comes to moral action, in particular, the emotions make moral decision-making more reliable. The positivist attitude of the 20th century supported supposedly objective movements such as eugenics in the USA, Nazism in Germany, fascism in Spain and Italy, and communism in Russia and China. Music can, of course, be used in the service of evil. Left to its own devices, however, music is more typically a means to give voice to the voiceless, to lift up the spirit, and to resist the status quo. The emotions that music evokes are, in this context, clarion calls to justice whether that be Verdi’s operas opposing Austrian oppression, Spirituals calling for freedom, or raves in the desert of Iran. Holocaust music scholar Francesco Lotoro said “During the most tragic event in history, humanity set into motion the most civilized mechanisms of self-preservation, and managed to spark an explosion of creativity. The composers created music regardless of their surroundings. Deprivation, loss of freedom and physical discomfort were not obstacles to their creativity. They were, in fact, a powerful incentive. Although it was not possible to save the lives of many musicians who were deported to the camps, we were able to save their music with every performance, and so we restore life and dignity to thousands of musicians.” What can be more emotional than the spontaneous music of Moses and his sister responding to the overthrow of the Egyptians in the Red Sea: Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: “I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea” (Exodus 15: 1-2). Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. Miriam sang to them: “Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea” (Exodus 15: 20-21).

Fourth, music is at the center of who we are. Chapter 5 of Nina Kraus’s book *Of Sound Mind* (2021) is titled *Music is the Jackpot, Sensing, Thinking, Moving, Feeling*. “Playing music positions us to build a brain especially tuned to our sonic world” (p. 96). Whether it’s training the brain to hear (auditory), to see (auditory-visual), to move (the motor cortex), to feel (the limbic system),

to remember and pay attention (verbal/working memory – focusing), to be creative (reducing frontal cortex activity), music is “arguably one of the best ways to foster cognitive strengths”. Our schools have a great diversity of children in them from all kinds of backgrounds. Most of our parents are well-educated (meaning that they have one or more degrees/qualifications), but not all of them are. Music is a potential leveler when it comes to language recognizing the overlap in brain function. The reason seems to be that both music and language require forming sound-to-meaning connections. “Children evaluated before and after music lessons, or rhythm based training, show improvements in phonological awareness, reading, and neural processing of speech sounds” (p. 157). Brainvolts, Kraus’ research group, carried out two longitudinal studies, one with teenagers over four years, that found “enhancement in processing” in the music-making children only – the sound ingredients needed for reading and language development. These outcomes happened even for those who had begun to learn music when the study began. And these outcomes began after only one year. What the study described as ‘fundamental changes’ occurred after only two years. Music is an essential part of developing our potential and equalizes opportunity across socio-economic and educational groups.

CSM therefore recommends that:

1. music be an integral part of the curriculum from kindergarten onwards (and preschool for those schools with one).
2. it be taught at least 3 times a week.
3. the length of period can be variable but should include at least 30 minutes of actual learning/teaching.
4. music intentionally include imitation, reading, and improvisation.
5. music be developmental as well as performance.
6. high school credits be made far more flexible to allow of and maybe even mandate an arts option each year.
7. music teachers are hired / professional developed who see every child as musically capable, use music to bring the community together, teach music as key to spiritual health, recognize music as a way to strengthen the brain.
8. music be a soundscape that embraces a diverse reflection of the school’s families, the region, the country.

Note: Dr. Isabelle Peretz at the University of Montreal is the creator of the discipline, the neuroscience of music. She suggests that 97.5% of the population is musical i.e. pretty much everyone is musical. Experience would suggest the same. And Scripture includes everyone whenever it talks about music, singing and dancing, the Psalms.

National Association for Music Education (NAfME)

Beliefs

- Music is unique to the human experience and is essential to our humanity.
- Music communicates and connects people across all time and cultures.
- Music unlocks human creative expression and is a lens to the experiences and interpretations of the world.

- Music is basic to human wholeness through our emotions, intellect, and physical and spiritual well-being.

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Email: christianschoolmanagement@gmail.com

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