

MUSIC

FAITHFUL LEARNING



Timothy H. Steele

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Timothy H. Steele



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Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

The quotation on the back cover is from Guillaume de Machaut, “Prologue,” part 5, lines 85–86.

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Music is a science that wants us to laugh, and sing,
and dance.

—GUILLAUME DE MACHAUT¹

MUSIC IS A SCIENCE—a scholarly discipline worthy of study and reflection. And it is also an art that entertains us, helps us to worship, cheers us up when we're feeling low, and nourishes our hearts and minds over a lifetime. We study music because, as human beings, we are made to be music makers and music listeners, dancers and singers and players of instruments. I often point out to my students that the first recorded words of Adam are a song celebrating his union with Eve: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23); and that the prophet Zephaniah pictured even God himself as a singer who rejoices over his bride: "The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing" (Zeph. 3:17).

Christians over the centuries have used music to help them pray, to celebrate weddings, and to add solemnity to funerals. And they have had much to say about music—what it is, what it is useful for, and how we ought to think about it. For many, music is something to celebrate. Martin Luther called it "a fine, delightful gift, that has often roused and moved me, and won me over to the joy of preaching."² But

1. Guillaume de Machaut (ca. 1300–1377) was the foremost musician and poet of fourteenth-century France. A modern edition of his "Prologue" is available in *Oeuvres de Guillaume de Machaut*, ed. Ernest Hoepffner (Paris: Librairie de Firmin-Didot, 1908), 1:9, available online at <http://www.archive.org/stream/uvresdeguillaum00guilgoog#page/n111/mode/2up>. The English translation is my own.

2. Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Tischreden*, vol. 4, 1538–1540

Christians have also insisted that music was caught up in the fall along with everything else. Both Luther and John Calvin were concerned about the potential that music has to become a corrupting influence, and in his preface to the first book of Genevan psalms Calvin warned against an overly optimistic view of music: “As wine is poured into the cask with a funnel, so venom and corruption are distilled to the very depths of the heart by melody.”³

Music is a powerful medium. It helps people to get a feeling across or add significance to what they want to say. But sometimes what people say with music is full of violence and hate, which is a problem because music underscores the potency of words with special vividness through its patterning of sound and time. In Genesis we read how Lamech boasted of murder and flaunted God’s redemptive promises. But although the text refers to him *saying* these horrible things to his wives, the lyrical structure indicates that his words were preserved as a song.

Lamech said to his wives,
 “Adah and Zillah, listen to me;
 wives of Lamech, hear my words.
 I have killed a man for wounding me,
 a young man for injuring me.
 If Cain is avenged seven times,
 then Lamech seventy-seven times.” (Gen. 4:23–24)

In fact, music seems to attach itself to anything that the sinful human heart is able to come up with.

(Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1916), 314, <http://www.archive.org/stream/werketischreden10204luthuoft#page/314/mode/2up>.

3. John Calvin, “Epistle to the Reader,” *The Geneva Psalter* (1543), trans. Oliver Strunk, in Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History*, rev. ed., Leo Treitler, general ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 366.

Despite this, generalizations that associate certain musical sounds with human sinfulness can be misleading and must be thought through carefully. We ought to avoid confusing pleasantness with beauty or thinking that dissonance in music is itself sinful even though discord in human relations may well be. Nevertheless, the true consequences of the fall show up when we consider how apparently normal people have *used* music, even music that most would say is beautiful, to accompany mass murder or to inflict injury.⁴ In all this, Christians stubbornly maintain that the materials of music, and the human abilities associated with music making, are gifts of God—parts of his *good* creation. We insist that people should be responsible, that they ought to make good and wise use of these gifts. Along with this, we want musicians to sing about justice and peace and the gospel message of grace, and we want musicians to use music to serve their neighbors, especially the poor and the oppressed, as stewards of sound in the kingdom of God.⁵ We need performers, composers, and musicologists who understand all facets of music in human life and who apply their minds and their talents to the task of renewing this complex musical world.

This booklet is intended to help those who want to study music and use their gifts for the glory of God, especially those who are or may become music majors in college. At its core are two important questions that students ought to ask: In view of all the challenges involved, will my study of music help me to love and serve God better?

4. Benita Wolters-Fredlund, "Experiencing Beauty in the Music of the Holocaust," *The Cresset* 72, no. 4 (Easter 2009): 21–31, <http://thecresset.org/2009/Easter/wolters-fredlund.html>. See also Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan, *Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 150–60.

5. Karen A. DeMol, *Sound Stewardship: How Shall Christians Think About Music?* (Sioux Center, IA: Dordt College Press, 1999), 22–23.

Can my learning in the discipline of music help me to live more faithfully? I believe the answer to both questions is a resounding yes! But before we jump in, it's important to take some soundings and see how deep and wide this marvelous academic discipline is—this “science,” as Machaut called it. I want to show you what musicians think about and why such things matter. We'll take a look at some pretty big issues (musical meaning, for instance) as well as listen in on a very old conversation about how music reflects and embodies the order of creation. And along the way I'll highlight perspectives that may help us to think about how the study of music is part of God's provision for our spiritual formation.

WHAT IS THE DISCIPLINE OF MUSIC?

In Praise of the Almighty's will, and for my neighbor's greater skill.

—J. S. BACH⁶

In my years of teaching in Christian colleges I've found that students are often confused about musical study. They love music and want it to be part of their lives, but they may not understand how music works as an academic discipline. Many are outstanding performers but have never studied music theory, while others are experienced worship leaders who have had no formal training in music at all. Faced with several years' worth of courses that seem to have little to do with the music they love, some withdraw from the major or choose not to begin it at all. I recall struggling

6. From the title page of the *Little Organ Book* (Orgelbüchlein), BWV 599–644. Translated by Arthur Mendel in Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, eds., *The Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 75.

as a college music major to understand the academic side of music, especially the required music theory and music history courses. It was difficult for me to accept explanations as to why these were necessary or what I might gain from the time and effort invested in them. Of course, not every student struggles with these things, then or now. But as I write these sentences I'm reminded just how often I meet students in my classes who have never really thought about what the discipline of music is or what the real value of musical study in college might be.

Ethnomusicologist Bonnie C. Wade challenges us to begin by thinking about who musicians are and what they do.

Music makers are individuals and groups, adults and children, female and male, amateurs and professionals. They are people who make music only for themselves, such as shower singers or secretly-sing-along-with-the-radio types, and they are performers, people who make music purposefully for others. They are people who make music because they are required to and people who do so simply from desire. Some music makers study seriously, while others are content to make music however they can, without special effort.⁷

Viewed from this angle, all people are musicians, because all people make music meaningful and useful in their lives.⁸ But some choose to apply themselves to the study of music in a way that goes beyond the everyday. People who make music “purposefully” and study music “seriously” may be said to engage in the *discipline* of music. In her short

7. Bonnie C. Wade, *Thinking Musically: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.

8. *Ibid.*, 1–6.

story about a neighbor who tries to teach a stone to talk, Annie Dillard offers a useful picture of this kind of work. “I assume,” she writes, “that like any other meaningful effort, the ritual involves sacrifice, the suppression of self-consciousness, and *a certain precise tilt of the will*, so that the will becomes transparent and hollow, a channel for the work.”⁹ Over time this “precise tilt of the will” becomes second nature, and the tasks of coming up with new and well-made music—working through the problems of understanding how a complex piece of music means what we think it does; performing a masterpiece from the past with commitment and intelligence—begin to shape a musician’s mind and heart according to the contours of the discipline. Musicians who devote themselves to this kind of study become practitioners of the discipline of music, and the content of that discipline, as well as all the practices associated with it, become their responsibility.

Three Musical Practices

As those who pursue this calling out of love for Jesus Christ, then, we ought to think about what the lineaments of the discipline are so that we can better understand how students and scholars alike are being formed by this learning. One simple way to do this is to divide the discipline into three broad fields or practices: performance, composition, and musicology. We’ll take a look at each in turn.

Performance is the musical practice that most people are familiar with. It is what we mostly think of when we form a picture of music making in our minds. All music students know that learning to perform well means many years of private lessons and countless hours of lonely practice. But

9. Annie Dillard, “Teaching a Stone to Talk,” in *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 86 (emphasis added).

the best performers also learn that they need to be open not only to their own individual achievement but also to values shaped in community, through participation in ensembles of diverse kinds. Performers give music a public face—they are the musicians who many students aspire to become.

Music composition is also both an individual and a corporate activity. Composers often work on commission or as part of a team (as with film scoring or creating music for video games). They are songwriters and jazz improvisers, and they compose operas and commercial jingles. Success in the craft of composition requires a love for new music of all kinds, as well as a solid foundation in a particular musical language, whether classical or popular. Often composers are consulted for their views on music, and many of the most important insights into the nature and structure of music have come from them.

The third practice, musicology, requires somewhat more explanation. I use the term *musicology* to refer to the scholarly study of music in general, encompassing music theory, analysis, the writing of music history, and ethnomusicology, together with various hybrids and interdisciplinary subdivisions that comprise the broad field of academic studies in music. As the musical practice most closely aligned with the liberal arts in the modern university, musicology provides the clearest linkage between the study of music and the other disciplines. Most of the discussion that follows will have musicology in view. But I want to affirm before we get into the details that the discipline of music, being in truth a multidisciplinary field, cannot be comprehended by any one of the three practices alone. Deep within the DNA of the discipline of music is the idea that the true musician possesses a well-rounded knowledge of and experience in all three practices, even as she may find her place in God's world as a practitioner of mainly one.

What gives the discipline its coherence in an academic context is that performers, composers, and musicologists have each, in their diverse ways, contended with the same issues and asked many of the same questions. Musicians have thought long and hard about the fact that music has much in common with mathematics, for instance—that it both reflects and embodies a kind of order. And, as we learn from scholars like Bonnie Wade, *people* make music meaningful as well as useful.¹⁰ That is, music is significant, and the way that people use it affects what they understand it to mean. So in order to provide a framework for our discussion, I will focus on three musical themes that I believe have had not only a profound influence on the discipline of music in the past, but also a continuing ability to provoke conversations about music today.

Three Musical Themes

The capstone course for music majors at Calvin College, which I teach, is called simply, “Order, Meaning, and Function.” It serves as both the senior seminar for the music department and an integrative studies course in the core curriculum. As a course designed to help students to integrate their Christian faith with their learning in the discipline of music, it offers a chance for students to find connections among all the things they’ve read and thought about and experienced during their time in college. Together we challenge one another to envision our learning in terms of God’s call to faithful service and stewardship in his kingdom.

Order, meaning, and function are concepts that help us to think about and think through this challenge to live faithfully in God’s world as musicians. When we talk about these themes and the many musical conversations that cluster

10. Wade, *Thinking Musically*, 10–19.

around them, we treat them not as mere abstractions or foundations for research projects, but as biblically grounded insights that compel us to make choices about music and about our lives. A brief look at each theme in its biblical context will help us to be similarly grounded as we try to engage more deeply with the questions of the discipline.

The first of the three themes, *order*, invites us to connect music with the doctrine of creation. The Bible reveals God as the one who *makes* the world and populates it with creatures, who *cares* about the world, and who *sustains* the world through Jesus Christ. Psalm 8 pictures an ordered creation: “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place” (Ps. 8:3); and Hebrews 1 points to the Christological significance of creation, linking the order of heaven to the dynamic movement of time toward its end:

The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. (Heb. 1:3–4)

For thousands of years musicians have noticed that music both reflects and embodies these aspects of creation—that it is ordered, in the sense of exhibiting a harmonious design, and that it embodies an ordered process that unfolds in time. The connection of these things to musical uses of sound and time brings us into the general conversation about music theory.

The second theme, *meaning*, has to do with the interpretation of music—our ways of construing what it means to us. It is easy to understand how the arts in general, and

music in particular, may be said to make life more meaningful, endowing certain occasions with a significance they might not otherwise have. And the Bible reminds us that “the heavens *declare* the glory of God” and that the creation was made by God to have a voice, to “pour forth *speech*” day by day (Ps. 19:1–2). Christians refer to this testimony as general revelation, and human music making has a place in that chorus of praise.¹¹ The real challenge for musicians is to understand how musical meaning happens and to reflect on what music is capable of saying.

The third and final theme is *function*. Scripture is rich in descriptions of music as a social practice: Miriam playing the tambourine as she leads the Israelite women in a celebration dance (Ex. 15:20), or David playing his harp as King Saul “was prophesying in his house” (1 Sam. 18:10). And rather than thinking about historical or cultural context merely as a background against which “music” is set as an object of contemplation, many musicologists today are trying to understand the cultural and social work that music does. This way of thinking has enriched the discipline by bringing a lot of music and music making into the conversation that was marginalized—or even ignored—by scholars of earlier generations.

Before we go on I want to stress that my purpose in arranging the discussion around these themes is not so much to explore the themes themselves but to enable us to focus on the questions that musicians and scholars ask; for it is these questions, as I’ve said, that give coherence to the discipline. This is not a formal treatise on musical scholarship; rather it’s an introduction to the busy world of disciplined thinking about music and disciplined music

11. Jeremy S. Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 202.

“Music is a science that wants us to laugh,
and sing, and dance.”

GUILLAUME DE MACHAUT, “Prologue”

FAITHFUL LEARNING IN MUSIC

EVERYONE LIKES MUSIC, in one form or another. If you’ve picked up this booklet, perhaps you enjoy making music yourself. We all know that music is an art; however, as the poem above points out, it is absolutely a science as well—a scholarly discipline to be studied and explored. But is it a science worth Christians’ time and effort? Or has music been corrupted by the fall, leaving our attentions more suited elsewhere?

Timothy Steele introduces music as the worthy discipline that it is, taking us on a tour of the order, meaning, and function of music. Learn how you can use this gift of God (and the gift of your talents with it) to serve your neighbors, glorify God, and live all the more faithfully!

THE FAITHFUL LEARNING series invites Christian students to dive deeper into a modern academic discipline. The authors, scholars in their fields, believe that academic disciplines are good gifts from God that, when understood rightly, will give students the potential to cultivate a greater love for God and neighbor.

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