Is Excellence Necessary? by Sheri Gould

I mostly write and teach in areas geared toward the worshipping musician. I am not trying to reach the world of professional musicians or pop musicians or even necessarily the gospel or CCM artist (or hopeful). My purpose is to help equip the *worship* musician most of whom are faithful and hardworking lay musicians in their church. So when it comes to singing as a worship musician, is excellence a requirement?

The answer I typically get from this question is a resounding "YES! We want nothing less than excellence for our Lord and Savior!" However, when it comes down to the reality of pursuing 'excellence' it's quite another story. Would our version of excellence stand up against a worldly standard of excellence? Should it? Is there a biblical mandate for excellence in worship? In singing? Are we called or even required to pursue that call or mandate?

I believe there are clear answers to those questions. Yes! There is a biblical standard of excellence for worship set forth in scripture.

"All of these men were under the supervision of their fathers for the music of the temple of the Lord… —all of them trained and skilled in music for the Lord…" I Ch. 25:6-8
The men that worked in the music ministry of the temple, and the context of this verse references singers, were all highly trained and skilled. They were also full-time paid musicians.

"Those who were musicians… stayed in the rooms of the temple and were exempt from other duties because they were responsible for the work day and night." I Ch. 9:33
This is a luxury most of us do not have. Nonetheless, the precedent has been set here and for good reason.

Musician lead the battle!
"*Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise Him for the splendor of His holiness as they went out at the head of the army…."II Ch. 20:21* There were many instances of God using the musicians to lead the way to where He wanted His people to go. In our context that is into the 'holy of holies' or in other words, true worship of the Most High God. In order to properly 'lead' there is a level of skill *required*. This is different from the call for everyone to *participate* in worship.

Historically the church was the keeper of the arts. The greatest displays of art were in churches. Most music was written for the church. Even most great secular composers of the past wrote at least in part for the church. However with the reformation and Martin Luther's sincere desire for a purified church there was a move to 'cleanse' the church of any and all things that appeared to be ornate or garish in any way. Times of worship were reduced to simpler forms of music accompaniment or none at all. Sadly, the 'baby was thrown out with the bath water' so to speak.

In recent times though there has been a great move in the church to regain our place and take back what was rightfully ours. God gave the gift of music (and all artistic expressions) to His people first and foremost to be able to worship Him. How awesome this

move has been for the church! But we are behind in a sense and it seems like we're still trying to catch up. I have seen that there is a hunger to grow in this area to better serve the Lord.

There are many worship seminars and conferences springing up all over the country where the arts are being taught in workshops and classes that lay leaders can attend without having to miss (much) work. Even the Christian Musician Summit is expanding to include more locations and dates (for more information go to www.christianmusiciansummit.com). These are excellent opportunities for continuing education and getting a spiritual 'shot in the arm'. But it's only a start.

If you are a worship leader or a background vocalist please take your position seriously. What you do on that platform can have eternal consequences and although I realize that your voice is not what does the ultimate work, the Holy Spirit is, your voice can be a huge distraction away from what God is trying to accomplish. I hear concerns on a regular basis from people who are desiring excellence from their worship team but don't feel they can require it. Is there a more appropriate place to require excellence?

I don't have time. We all know that we take time for what we think is valuable.

I don't have money. Learning a craft or a skill *can* require an investment of money as well as time. Consider asking your church to host a seminar or invest in coaching for your worship team. I work with worship teams coaching and providing lessons on a regular basis. This can be very helpful and effective and a worthwhile investment for your church. After all there IS a scriptural precedent for it.

Be careful. Sadly, as in any profession, there are good vocal coaches and not so good ones. Be careful to check into the qualifications of the coach you select. Just because they speak at conferences, have a nice voice, teach, have a web-site and DVD sets or charge a lot of money does not mean they are really qualified to teach. Look for coaches that have an actual background in *vocal training and education* from a qualified university. These are the ones who have been uniquely trained to train and teach- not just perform.

Unfortunately many of the Christian colleges, which so many of our music ministers have attended in the past, have not had the highest of standards when it comes to music education. This trend is changing thankfully. I see common vocal errors being taught among conference teachers that even a very rudimentary study of voice would expose. We are so hungry for knowledge in the church that we can sometimes be easily led astray. We need to be 'wise as serpents' and use our resources carefully.

Your local community college can be a great resource. Many have a great and reasonably priced music program that you can attend part time and can include private music lessons and classes pertaining to music theory, sight-singing and ear-training, all of these are invaluable to the modern worship musician.

I pray that we will begin to set the bar higher on the road to excellence in worship. Let it start with you and with me.