

Music Moment 4

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Excellence

Psalm 33: 1-3 Rejoice in the Lord, O ye righteous: for praise is comely for the upright. 2. Praise the Lord with harp: sing unto him with the psaltery and an instrument of ten strings. 3. Sing unto Him a new song: play skillfully with a loud noise.

Matthew 5:48 Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

Again, I am going to try to distill a vast subject into a short article. Someday, perhaps, I'll try to expand these thoughts in a larger format. These articles are intended to stimulate thought in a few short moments.

We all have different backgrounds and experiences that color our concept of excellence. We are not trained or educated in the same ways or to the same level. Because of this, we cannot set a clearly defined level of excellence for Christian music. I was puzzling about how to approach this subject when on April 10, 2011, our Pastor, Dr. Mike Davis, preached a message in the Sunday morning service on the subject of Excellence, "Take one more step". It became clear to me that the question is not that your level of excellence is the same as mine, but that we all are increasing our vision of what excellence means to us, and we are all striving to be better than we are.

In 1980, I was saved in a little church in Memphis Tennessee. I had been singing at the Metropolitan Opera (among other great opera houses) for several years. The people in the opera work hard to be "the best". They're not satisfied to just do well. They strive to be better than anyone else in the music they are doing. They do this so that they can win singing jobs over their competitors. They work 250 to 500 hours on a single work. They spend hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars on coaching to help them get a better insight into the performance they are preparing. They listen for hours to singers that have become famous for the role they are working on. They examine every nuance and musical choice that the famous singer used. They are not satisfied until they have exhausted their vision.

Why do they work so hard? Ultimately, they are doing it for their own success and glory. Many will claim more lofty and altruistic reasons at first, but soon it all becomes about success. They strive in order to be the best. They know that they may not reach their goals but they will end up being better than they would have been had they just "done enough". After all that exploring, they have a deeper insight into the depths contained in the music they are singing. They have expanded their vision.

When I got involved in Christian music, I was shocked at how little care was often taken in the preparation of special music for church. I know we are not in competition with each other, but we are in a sense in competition with ourselves. We are singing a command performance for the King of all Creation! With such an important task, I would hope that I would strive even harder than I would if I had been singing at the Met. When men sing for themselves, the performance counts for nothing. But a song of praise that has a spiritual impact on someone in the congregation can have an eternal impact. It is ironic that men will strive harder to glorify self than they will to glorify their Creator Redeemer.

A short time after I was saved, I read *II Chronicles 5*, when Solomon brought the Ark into the new Temple he had built. I'll reproduce a part of it here.

2Ch 5:11 *And it came to pass, when the priests were come out of the holy place: (for all the priests that were present were sanctified, and did not then wait by course:*

12 *Also the Levites which were the singers, all of them of Asaph, of Heman, of Jeduthun, with their sons and their brethren, being arrayed in white linen, having cymbals and psalteries and harps, stood at the east end of the altar, and with them an hundred and twenty priests sounding with trumpets:)*

13 *It came even to pass, as the trumpeters and singers were as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD; and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of musick, and praised the LORD, saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever: that*

then the house was filled with a cloud, even the house of the LORD;

14 So that the priests could not stand to minister by reason of the cloud: for the glory of the LORD had filled the house of God.

It is obvious from the passage that a great deal of rehearsal had taken place in preparation for this event. Everyone knew his part very well. They were musically together and of one mind. Even more important, each participant, the priests, the levites had prepared themselves to minister to the Lord. They were “sanctified”, made holy. They were right with God and with their fellow man. They were ready to present the “Sacrifice of Praise” (Heb 13:15) to the Lord.

Ever since I read that passage, my desire has been that I would be so filled with the Holy Spirit and so well prepared when I sing in church that the Lord would fill the auditorium with His Glory. I haven't had the privilege to experience the presence of God that way. But maybe as I strive to be more excellent in my spirit, in my musicality and in my communication, the Lord may someday do it again.

It would be thrilling if the church choir had that goal in their minds as they rehearse and sing the choir special. How wonderful the congregational singing would be if every born again believer sang the hymns, with that kind of praise in their hearts. How pleased God would be when he hears such a unified heartfelt song of praise. I believe He would do something special in that congregation.

I believe we need to revise our attitude about the importance of our responsibility when we sing in the choir, as special music or when we sing congregational music. God has a purpose for Christian music in the service (see Music Moment 1). We in the congregation, have only four opportunities to participate in a worship service; when we sing praises to the Lord, when we pray, when we give, and when we respond to the message. If we forfeit one of those opportunities, we have lost something very valuable to us. We need to expand our vision. The music is not just a prelude for the preaching, it is our opportunity to praise God together. We need to pay attention and put our heart into it, and if we can conceive of singing better than we are doing, then for the Lord's sake we need to do better.

Let me state again that I'm not suggesting that we all train to be opera singers. God can use anyone (who is truly willing to be used) to accomplish His will through special music. Indeed, sometimes God calls a certain person to sing, not because of their talent but because God is doing a certain work in their lives and that work coupled with the message of the song will have an impact on others lives - if they are willing to do their part. Sometimes the Lord will choose someone because they are not talented in the accepted sense. They are used because of their life experience and/or their heart.

When we are called upon to sing for the Lord, we are called upon to be transparent and communicate not just the words of the song but the deepest part of our walk with the Lord. God can and will use us regardless of our talent, our education, our experience or our training, but we must be willing to do our best to “take the next step“

How do we do that? The first step is just realizing how important each person's role is in the worship service. Then as we realized the joy of praising God with our whole heart, He will expand our vision, and show us how we can praise Him more effectively. And each time we have an opportunity to minister, take one more step.