

Music Moment 2

Ray Gibbs

Communication

1Co 14:7 And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped?

8 For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?

9 So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air.

The question of communication in Christian Music is a vast subject. I taught a college course on the subject for years, and felt that I just barely scratched the surface. Nevertheless, I am going to try to tackle the high points in this short moment. I pray that the little I am able to explain here will inspire you to explore the subject in more depth.

When we approach this subject, my intended audience must shift from the general church member to the person who is actively involved in the music ministry, i.e. the song leader/choir director, the choir soloist, and the instrumental musician. That is not to say that the layman cannot benefit from understanding these principles. He can apply many of these ideas in his own musical worship.

First of all, we need to reestablish that 1. Music does communicate, 2. Music is not just an entertaining prelude to the preaching, 3. And, music is an opportunity for all in the service to worship and praise God. Rather than taking the time here to reestablish those points, I would like to refer you to my previous column – Music Moment 1.

When we talk about communication, we need to divide the subject into two different subsections, objective (technical) and subjective (spiritual/emotional). The first discusses the various techniques of bringing out the message, and the second discusses the need (and the way) to make the communication meaningful to you, the congregation, and God.

Objective Communication

The Words

When discussing musical communication, we must always start with the word (even if you are an instrumentalist). Although the music does communicate mood, emotional and spiritual depth, it is the word that gives objective clarity to the thoughts and doctrines expressed in the song. If the words are not understood, the song is not understood. We must be sure the pronunciation is clear. If the listener cannot understand the words, he cannot understand the message. The important words must be pronounced clearly and stressed properly in order to make the message understood. Often, the musical stress will work against the word stress in a song. So you must sometimes work against the music in order to make the words meaningful.

Our first general principle is: **“project the words as though it were urgent for your listener to understand what you are saying”**.

Just as important as the stress of the words is the phrasing of the words - where do you breathe in order to make sense of the thoughts? Often, you will find that the thoughts don't phrase in the same place as the music. Let me give an example. In the 3rd verse of *“It is well with my soul”*, the text begins with “My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin, not in part, but the whole, is nailed to the cross...” To make

sense of this poetry, we need to first figure out what we are saying. To put the thought on it's feet, (as one of my old teachers used to say) we would say it like this: "O the bliss of this glorious thought! My sin is nailed to the cross, not part of it, but the whole." Although it makes the thoughts more clear, it loses its poetic power. You realize, though, that the poetic construction alternates between the principle words and the modifying phrases. In order to phrase the original words so that they make sense, we need to say them like this: "My sin" (pause) "oh the bliss of this glorious thought" (pause) "my sin" (pause) "not in part, but the whole" (pause) "is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more."

OK. Now you can see how to make the words make sense. But the music phrases like this (using the words) "My sin oh the bliss the this glorious thought" (pause) "my sin not the part but the whole" (pause) "is nailed to the cross..." Obviously, the music, in this case will tend to obscure the words unless you, as the interpreter, do something about it.

The answer is that you must phrase the music to match the words. You may feel that this feels awkward, and unbalanced musically. Yes it does (at first), but done skillfully, it will bring more interest and musical tension to the phrase that will match the poetic tension of the word construction and beautifully highlight the thoughts contained in the passage. So the second principle is: **"always phrase with the meaning of the words even if it seems to go against the music"**.

This is a good time to talk about the music. Traditional music achieves most of its communication by the melody and harmony. The rhythm keeps things moving forward but generally doesn't call attention to itself by making itself too prominent. Popular contemporary music, on the other hand, achieves most of its expression with the rhythm. The range and variety of expression available to contemporary music is much more limited than traditional music. That is one of the reasons why many pastors and church musicians believe along with me that traditional music expresses the truth of the Scripture more completely than contemporary music. So I'll confine my comments to traditional music in this short article.

The Music

Have you ever sung a hymn and felt that you were going over the same ground over and over again? That is because you were singing a recurring melody and each time you came back to the beginning, you felt you were going around in circles. That is because the music didn't take you to a new place emotionally and spiritually.

One of the most important aspects of the communication of music is that the music should always be taking the listener from one place to another. If you feel you have come right back to the beginning again you have missed an opportunity to carry the thought forward. It is quite possible to take a strophic (technical term for a repeating melody) song and do something different with the quality of the melody each time it recurs to make it feel as though you were exploring new ground. For example, after singing the first verse at the normal tempo, do the second verse much slower (or much faster – depending on the words), then the third verse can be sung in the original tempo only with a majestic feeling (typical system that works). This gives the song a sense of moving forward with a progressive message instead of going around in circles. Our principle is: **"always keep the musical message moving forward, even if you have to change the quality of the music"**.

We can all remember the soloist (or the choir member) who doesn't know where to put his hands, or fidgets with his fingers while he is singing. Maybe you can remember other distracting habits that a special music person exhibits while trying to communicate the message. Perhaps you've seen the soloist who feels he should gesture but is afraid to so he makes a pitiful and ineffective motion with his hands. All these distractions rob the message of its effectiveness. Very simply put, the communicator must free himself from

annoying distractions before he presents his message to God and his congregation. So our next principle is: **“The listener sees everything you do. If, what you do doesn’t enhance the message, it will detract from it.”**

These are a few of the technical “objective” ways to enhance the communication of the musical message you are presenting. I’ll have to reserve the “subjective” techniques for my next article. I’ll see you next time.