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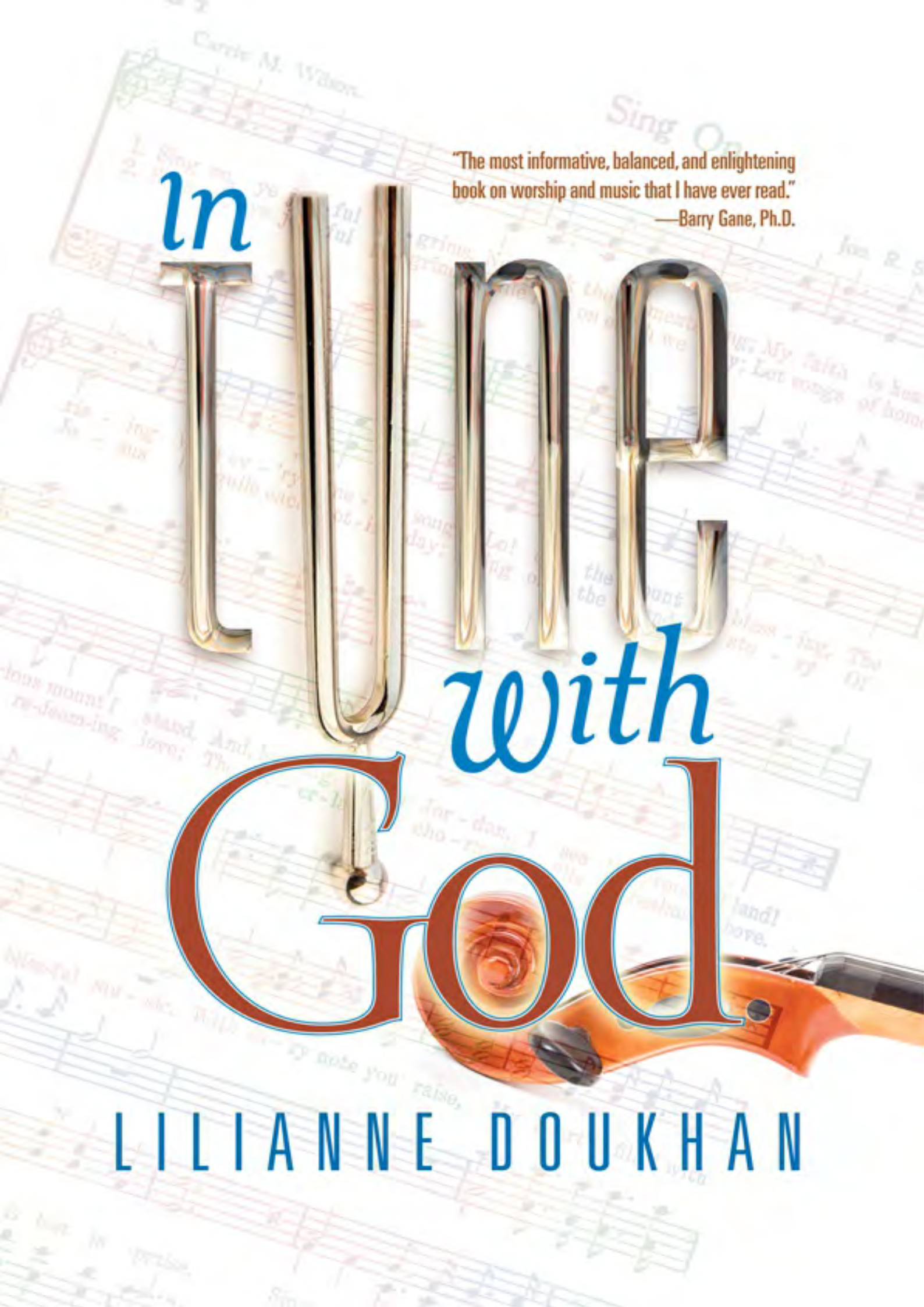
with

God

LILIANNE DOUKHAN

"The most informative, balanced, and enlightening book on worship and music that I have ever read."

—Barry Gane, Ph.D.



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Published by Autumn House® Publishing, a division of Review and Herald® Publishing, Hagerstown, MD 21741-1119

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14 13 12 11 10 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Doukhan, Lilianne.

In tune with God : the challenge of music in worship / Lilianne Doukhan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Church music. 2. Music in churches. 3. Music—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

ML3001.D68 2009 264'.2—dc22

2009037334

ISBN 978-0-8127-0500-3

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Prologue: In Defense of Music

I am writing this book in defense of music. I am a music lover. My life has been filled with—and fulfilled by—music, starting with piano lessons at the age of 4 and continuing through my conservatory degree in piano performance, my studies in organ, and my Ph.D. in musicology. Awakened and nourished in my childhood by the sounds of eastern European folk music, my love for music took off to farther shores, embracing the strains of the simple church hymn and the wonders of the great classical works. Later, after having the privilege to live a number of years immersed in Hebrew, Arabic, African, Indian, and even Chinese cultures, I also developed a love for the sometimes strange but always intriguing resonances of various musics of the world. My activities as a church musician, beginning at an early age, have added practical insight to my work in church music, and, together with my academic background, today inform my contribution as chair of the Worship and Music Commission at Pioneer Memorial Church, on the campus of Andrews University in Michigan.

Much has been said about music during my journey through life so far, and much is still being said. Too much of what I have heard is vilifying, accusing, destroying. Fifteen years ago the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary of Andrews University asked me to develop a course in the philosophy of church music and to consult with pastors, churches, and musicians all around the world who had a burden for worship music. These past 15 years of my teaching career have given me the opportunity to reflect about this subject, to research what really happened in history, to observe, analyze, share, and discuss experiences and thoughts about music with people from a great spectrum of cultures. Often, other people's reactions to music left me surprised or perplexed, and obliged me to learn to listen to others even more carefully and to open my mind to different and new understandings of music. I wrestled with questions and sought answers, but music always remained for me a wonderful companion and source of inspiration.

The time has come to speak up in defense of music. What was meant to be a most beautiful gift to humanity has often become a source of discord, disgust, hatred, and separation. It is time to come to the rescue of music and to give it back its innocence and dignity.

This book does not want to add to the interminable debate about music. While it does dissipate or correct some misconceptions along the way, its

purpose is not to criticize, destroy, or prove wrong existing theories and opinions. Rather, it proposes to look outside personal opinions and preferences to find objective criteria that can transcend subjective approaches and help formulate a balanced and informed opinion about these important matters. I am a strong believer in the principle that one of the best ways to counteract error is to implant the truth.¹

When dealing with religious matters such as music in worship, it seems only natural to turn to the Sacred Scriptures to find wisdom, counsel, and guidance. This is one of the major aims of this book. In addition, I will frequently refer to the writings of Ellen G. White, which are abundant on the topic, and filled with great insight and common sense. Further, I will look at history to draw lessons from the experiences of the church in the past and to see how problems similar to today's were dealt with in other times and places. Finally, practical lessons will be drawn to apply what has been learned to the reality of musical practice and discussion in the church.

Before any study about music can be undertaken, it is important to understand the process of music: what it is made of, how it functions, and what determines our reaction to it. Here, too, many misunderstandings and preconceptions need to be weeded out so that discussions and dialogue may rest on facts and reality rather than on imagination and perpetuated myths. In order to be convincing in one's argument, it is important to look for *truth* in matters of music.

I invite you to follow me on this journey through the intricacies of music and the musical experience, especially—but not exclusively—as they relate to practices in the church.²

At this point I would like to express my gratitude to a number of individuals who have accompanied me on my journey in music and in one way or another, though always significantly, have contributed to the present work. My first thought goes to my parents, who instilled in me at a very early age the love for music, together with the discipline needed to develop talent through assiduous and hard work. Then my gratitude goes to my husband, Jacques Doukhan, and my daughter, Abigail, faithful but also challenging partners in dialogue and discussion, who encouraged me all along the way on this difficult task. A number of my teaching colleagues, musicians, theologians, and scientists contributed to a better and more correct understanding of the topic. Finally, I want to thank my many students who, by sharing their own experiences, have always been a source of inspiration and renewal, leading me constantly to reconsider and adjust my position on the vast and diverse reality of the musical experience.

CHAPTER 1

The Nature of Music

One of the major reasons disagreement occurs in discussions or dialogues about music is the lack of information on the topic. The partners in dialogue may be ill-informed or not informed at all about the subject matter and may rely entirely on their personal feelings,¹ taste, opinion, or presuppositions. Instead of speaking to each other in an informed way, they might be speaking about two different things or about the same thing from a different perspective.

Music is first of all an objective phenomenon, related to multiple aspects of life. It is connected to physics through the laws of acoustics; to mathematics by way of the numerical proportions that define the intervals; to psychology because of its impact on human behavior; to history in the way it reflects the values and thought patterns of the various epochs; to culture, of which it functions as a mirror; to economics, which drive the business of music; to politics, which appropriate music as a means of propaganda; etc. This is not to say that anyone who wants to carry on a sensible conversation about music needs to be informed and proficient in all these subjects. It shows, however, that music is an objective subject matter that needs also to be approached in an objective way.

Before we can undertake a fruitful study or discussion of the topic of music or, more specifically, church music,² we must take care to devote some time to understanding how music functions and how it affects us: What is music, and what is the nature of the musical experience,³ from the side of both the artist/performer and the listener? Obviously, we will be able to scan only the surface of this topic. It is much too broad for the scope of this book, and must therefore run the risk of appearing schematic, especially in the eyes of the professional musician. The following observations and elaborations should be taken for what they are intended, namely, a quick introduction, on behalf of the novice in musical matters, to the mechanisms of music, music writing, and music perception, with the purpose of creating a starting point and common ground for reflection and discussion.

THE NATURE OF MUSIC

“Music is a universal language.” This statement can be heard again and

again when dealing with music, particularly church music. It is certainly a true statement. Indeed, all human beings respond to music; they do so, however, in different ways. In order to better understand the extent to which this statement is true, we need first to explore what music is and how it functions and affects us. At first we will take a look at the three main elements that make up music: melody, harmony, and rhythm. Then we will consider general principles that make a piece of music work.

Contrary to popular myth, musical composition does not happen by chance. It is a conscious and willful act, during which the artist uses musical language—very much in the same way a writer uses letters, syllables, grammar, and syntax—to convey not only beautiful sound but meaning, thoughts, ideas, and ideals as well. The language of composers is always determined by cultural language, i.e., the language of their time and place. Through their works composers celebrate life, comment on life, express their view of life, draw attention to issues in society, protest, criticize, accuse, stir awareness and consciousness, or drive home a reality. They entertain and please, excite and move, challenge and liberate, or they simply create a musical background. Some of their works are meant to elevate thoughts and inspire hope, courage, and vision. True artists have something to say to society, and they say it in a language—art—that speaks to their culture.

Moreover, while music speaks to many people at the same time—in a *universal* manner—it also addresses each individual in a very personal way, according to his/her own experience, needs, and sensitivity—in a *particular* manner.

The interest in and longevity of a piece of music will depend on the way the essential components of music—melody, harmony, and rhythm—are put together and interact with one another. The more complex and subtle the relationships, echoes, variances, and allusions, the more satisfying, deep, and long lasting the listening experience will be. *Balance* is the key behind any durable musical work. There must be balance between the elements of music—melody, harmony, and rhythm—and balance between the principles of variety and repetition.

THE PRINCIPLE OF BALANCE

Balance Between Melody, Harmony, and Rhythm

It is the mutual interaction of the three basic elements of music that makes up a musical composition. Each composer uses these elements in

his/her own creative ways and thus gives expression to the creative genius. This is the essence of style: through an infinite variety of possibilities in combining the elements of music, each composer develops his/her own style, distinct from that of other composers. The way melody, harmony, and rhythm and other elements of music interact, how they alternate, and the lesser or greater emphasis that is given to one or the other, in turn, makes a composition unique and at the same time creates what we call style. On a broader level style also applies to a type of music distinctive of a particular time in history (baroque, Romantic, jazz), society (folk), or group (country, hip-hop, etc.). This is how we distinguish between jazz (which itself created a number of substyles), bluegrass, country, rhythm and blues (R&B), gospel, Christian contemporary, and, in classical music, between baroque, Romantic, and a multiplicity of twentieth-century styles.

The concept of style, however, goes beyond an artist's particular approach to composition. Style is also determined by a society or culture and its values. Music is at its very core a cultural phenomenon, a mirror of society. As the composer is part of his/her culture, his/her music and style will always happen within the context of a society, dependent on its understanding of art and the beautiful, the purpose of art and the artist, the source of inspiration, etc. The composer will make use of a particular musical language that is produced, understood, and assumed by people living in that culture.⁴

Balance Between Variety and Repetition

The richness of the musical experience is governed by yet another basic principle verified in life and nature, namely, that of variety and repetition, the equivalent of tension and relaxation. Tension is essential to create direction and forward movement. But tension must be relieved by moments of repose in order to retain its dramatic character. Too much tension sustained for too long a time creates confusion and chaos, even illness. Judicious use of variety creates interest, as it adds an element of surprise and unexpectedness. Lack of variety, on the other hand, or too much repetition, brings about dullness, shallowness, boredom, and lack of interest. The appropriate use of repetition, however, is a vital element in the musical experience. It creates satisfaction through familiarity and pleasure through recognition.

A purposeful alternation between repetition and variety is also an important factor in creating form and direction. Direction imparts and sustains meaning. As in good storytelling, it keeps the attention span going

and engages the listener to the very end of the experience. A musical piece lacking form and direction is like an engine idling: while it produces some sound, it will not be able to fulfill its purpose to convey meaning and to touch the listener's heart and mind. In order to produce a satisfying and meaningful musical experience, it is essential to observe a healthy balance between variety and repetition, which is guaranteed by a judicious and proportioned use of all the elements of music.

It is essential to keep in mind these basic components of the craft of musical composition in order to arrive at a healthy evaluation of the musical process. To do so, one does not need to be a trained or professional musician—one needs only to develop good observation skills and an informed understanding of what makes up music and how music functions. The following section, as it looks into the three main elements that constitute music, aims at helping the reader reach that goal.

THE ELEMENTS OF MUSIC

Music is basically made of melody, harmony (in Western culture), and rhythm. There are additional elements that shape music, such as timbre (the particular quality of sound of an instrument), tempo (how fast or slowly a piece of music is performed), volume (the loudness), texture (how many various parts and how they interact with one another), and more. For the purpose of our study we will consider here only the three basic constituents of music: melody, harmony, and rhythm.

Melody

Melody is the way sound is organized in space in a horizontal manner. It is a succession of tones of different heights (pitches)—we speak of high notes and low notes. In order to qualify as a melody, this succession of pitches must be organized and perceived as happening in an orderly relationship with one another. Melodic organization happens on the level of form and rhythm. A single-standing melody is a very versatile entity; indeed, it can easily be accommodated to any style, from opera to church—and even to rock. Because of the flexible character of a melody, the same tune has often been used for different settings, from secular to sacred or vice versa.⁵ Melodies have a strong cultural flavor and are shaped according to the scale patterns used in a given setting. While Western melodies use the diatonic scale built on 12 equidistant semitones, Arabic and Asian tunes use scales made of five or six tones within the octave (pentatonic and whole tone) and may accommodate intervals smaller than the semitone.⁶ This gives them

their characteristic flavor that is sometimes difficult for ears not attuned to those sounds to appreciate.

The way notes are organized into a meaningful and beautiful continuous line—a melody—is one of the most difficult challenges for the composer. Great composers often distinguished themselves by their gift of melody. Josquin, Palestrina, Bach, Mozart, Puccini, Brahms, Gershwin, Hammerstein, the Beatles, etc., are among the greatest writers of melodies. Andrew Lloyd Webber, the English composer who wrote a number of immortal melodies for his musicals (*Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*), mentioned how he would struggle for weeks with small details that would make the melody sound *just right*. All these composers mastered the difficult art of writing effective melodies, melodies that touch the heart and remain forever in the memory of the listener, melodies perpetuated throughout the ages.

It is a general assumption that the emotional impact of music resides in the particular qualities of the melody. In reality, harmony and rhythm, the other two components of music, play a much more important role when it comes to touching our emotions.

Harmony

Harmony is another way music is organized in space—this time in a vertical manner. As two or more voices blend together, they form a musical fabric very much like the texture of a woven cloth. When several voices sound simultaneously, we speak of polyphonic texture. We distinguish between horizontal and vertical structures of polyphony. In horizontal arrangements, called linear counterpoint, several melodies run simultaneously, but the distinct voices move quite independently of one another, in separate rhythms. These structures were predominant in early medieval polyphony, throughout the Renaissance, and predominantly up to the seventeenth century.⁷ Vertical structures of polyphonic music are made up of several pitches sounding simultaneously, called chords. Such structures, in which all voices move at a similar rhythm, create homophony. Chords are the foundation of harmony.

Chords are classified into consonances and dissonances. Consonances are often described as forming pleasant, agreeable sounds, whereas dissonances are said to produce unpleasant, distressing sounds. Consonances are generally associated with relaxation and closure; dissonances are associated with forward movement and tension. These descriptions are not absolute, universal values but rather subjective

appreciations, matters of style. The appreciation of consonance/dissonance changes according to an individual's concept of pleasantness/unpleasantness or tension/relaxation. It also depends on the culture in which the music functions and the extent to which an individual is familiar with the prevailing musical style. The concept of consonance and dissonance has constantly changed through time. It is actually a process called the emancipation of the dissonance⁸ that primarily contributed to changes in musical style. A style can indeed be defined by its harmony. Specific chords and harmonic patterns define jazz, blues, or country in the field of popular music, but also baroque, classical, late Romantic, and twentieth-century styles in classical music.

Several functions can be attributed to harmony. Within the field of sensations it creates interest and expectation (tension) and brings about feelings of pleasantness (relaxation) or unpleasantness. On the level of cognitive appreciation, harmony brings structure and organization to the music. The particular way of arranging chords in succession is called harmonic progression. These progressions are classified from strong to weak. Movement in music is achieved through appropriate use of harmonic progression. Harmony has the ability to impart a forward movement to the music, to have it stall, or to bring it to a close by a slowing down of its harmonic rhythm. Harmony also lends "color" to a piece, according to the types of intervals that make it up. In the history of music, the more we advance in time toward the nineteenth century, the more composers play around with the concept of color. Composers of the Impressionistic school of music used chords predominantly to create colors rather than to produce structure and progression.

It took the Western musical world five centuries to develop its polyphonic language, which became the basis for its harmonic system.⁹ An extra two centuries of exploration of the harmonic language made music a powerful vehicle to convey emotions. As the harmonic language evolved throughout the centuries, composers were able to create impressions such as strength, tenderness, fright, awe, tragedy, seduction, contentment, etc.

Rhythm

Because of the complexity of the topic and the important place rhythm takes in discussions about music today, this section is given considerably more in-depth treatment than our discussion of melody and harmony. Rhythm is the element of music that inspires most heated debates. Out of misinformation, ignorance, or simply prejudice, most of rhythm's

antagonists are quick to condemn it as the “evil” element in music. However, rhythm is not only a basic ingredient of music; it is essential to every aspect of our lives. We cannot live without rhythm. Therefore, to look down on rhythm as an invention of evil would be to deny a basic principle of Creation. Indeed, rhythm is the governing principle of life. Consider any gesture or activity that articulates human life. It will be rhythmically based: walking, talking, breathing, eating, working, our heartbeat, the cycles of day and night, etc. Nature also is ordered by rhythm: light and darkness, the lunar cycle of weeks, the four seasons, the movement of wind and waves, etc. In much the same way, rhythm is the basic element that governs music. It is the way music is organized in time, and it refers to the way sounds are ordered in time and to their relative durations. The following exercise will illustrate this principle. Take a simple scale (a succession of eight adjacent pitches) and sing it in a descending pattern. It will still be only a scale. Now animate it with a particular well-known rhythm, and it becomes music, a familiar song: “Joy to the World.” There is no melody without a rhythmic component.

In music, as in nature and our daily lives, rhythm carries the function of organizing movement and sound into distinct groupings. This happens on several levels of the musical discourse. We distinguish between the concepts of beat or pulse, meter, accentuation, and melodic rhythm. Beat or pulse refers to the subdivision of the musical flow into regular basic pulsations or units of time. Meter concerns the organization of these pulses or beats into distinct groupings of 2, 3, or 4, but also into asymmetric or additive units. Accentuation is particular emphasis given to a specific tone within a rhythmic group that makes it sound more prominent than others (louder or longer, etc.), lending the tone higher hierarchical status, a quality that helps the listener recognize the articulation of the various rhythmic units. Finally, melodic rhythm involves patterns created by the flow and turns of the melody or the speech patterns inherent in the lyrics. These patterns are actually superimposed onto beat, meter, and accentuation.

Rhythmic perception is not solely an external physical phenomenon dictated by the properties of music. Rhythmic interpretation involves a factor of perception on the part of the listener, who mentally manipulates the various rhythmic components of a piece of music.¹⁰ We seldom perceive the rhythmic structure of music as a series of single or separate beats or accents, but hear them rather as *resultant* structures, that is, in combination with each other. The more complex these structures—such as in genres using cross-rhythms in which several distinct layers of rhythmic patterns are sounded simultaneously—the more resultant is the listening experience. An

example of this can be found in the perception of beat and counterbeat as a resultant phenomenon rather than a dichotomy.¹¹ There is, then, much more to rhythm than a rigid metric pattern; rhythm is quite a complex phenomenon whose interpretation is based on both external and internal criteria.¹²

There are two particular aspects of rhythm that create animated debate in churches and deserve to be given more attention, namely, beat and syncopation.

Beat

The concept of beat is generally associated with popular music, but it is actually a part of all musical performance. We have already seen that it belongs to the concept of pulse rather than meter. For the past century the word “beat” has generally come to be understood as a sustained or exaggerated accentuation of the basic pulse, generally produced by a prominent sound source, such as a foundational instrument (e.g., a double bass or bass guitar), percussion, or even hand clapping. Beat may be enhanced by a prominent counterbeat obtained through variably strong marking of the unaccented part of a pulse or measure. Musics that consistently emphasize a basic pulse featured together with predominantly repetitive rhythmic patterns distinguish themselves from the rhythmic practice found in Western music, mostly (but not exclusively) from before the twentieth century. This music basically featured an alternation of accented and unaccented beats or pulses animated by varying rhythmic patterns. Rhythmic practices based on the principle of repetitive pulse or beat are not exclusive to popular styles; they are also found in certain genres of twentieth-century classical music, e.g., primitivism and minimalism, represented by composers such as Igor Stravinsky, Aram Khachaturian, Béla Bartók, Carlos Chávez, Arvo Pärt, Philip Glass, etc.

Syncopation

According to the *Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*,¹³ syncopation involves “rhythmic displacement created by articulating weaker beats or metrical positions that do not fall on any of the main beats of the measure.” If you hum or sing to yourself the song “Give Me Jesus,”¹⁴ you will find an easy illustration of the concept of syncopation. In the first, second, and third phrases of the hymn, on the words “when I,” the strong accent falls on the offbeat of the meter, as emphasis is given to the normally unaccented second half of the beat (traditionally considered the weak portion of the beat), on the word “I.” This emphasis is achieved through a

lengthening of the note on the word “I” and a corresponding shortening of the previous note (on the word “when”). In the last line of the hymn the technique is repeated on the words “have all this world,” where the accent is put on the word “all” through a lengthening of the second beat in the measure, traditionally considered to be a weak or secondary beat in a 4/4 time.

Syncopation is generally explained as a musical feature that was first brought from Africa by slaves and later became a major ingredient of jazz and rock music. Because of this perspective syncopation has been understood as intricately tied to heathen/animistic practices and interpreted as an instrument of evil. For this reason it has often been shunned from church. An objective and historical study of the practice of syncopation, on one hand, and the traditional rhythmic practices characteristic of African music, on the other hand, reveal that the situation is not this simplistic and that such an explanation of syncopation is outright erroneous.

The most characteristic element in African music is not syncopation, but its use of cross-rhythms. Ethnomusicologist Arthur Morris Jones comments appropriately on this fact. He says, “The very essence of African music is to *cross the rhythms*. This does not mean syncopation. On the whole African music is *not* based on syncopation.”¹⁵ The practice of cross rhythms can be likened to a kind of rhythmic counterpoint, similar to traditional Western melodic counterpoint, though done in a much more sophisticated manner. In cross rhythms several voices compete with one another through different, sometimes conflicting, meters and rhythmic patterns (2 against 3, 2 against 3 against 5, etc.). Similar techniques are used in classical music of India and the Middle East; both use a system of complex rhythmic modes, respectively called *t~la* and *ṣq~>*. Here again, it is the *resultant* effect of these compound rhythms that is perceived and analyzed by the listener rather than the separate rhythmic elements. The overall effect is one of great interest and complexity, challenging not only the various performers but also the minds and bodies of the listeners and dancers.

Syncopation, on the other hand, has been a basic rhythmic feature of Western (European) music since the dawn of polyphonic music in the Middle Ages. To come closer to our times, the rhythmic principle of sacred or secular Renaissance music from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—by composers such as Josquin des Prez, Heinrich Isaac, Orlande de Lassus, and Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina—is strongly governed by the practice of syncopation. Any sacred music written in those times, whether a motet (a

polyphonic setting of a Latin text, for religious use) or mass, features abundant use of syncopation. Music was then composed according to a linear principle, and one way of setting the various voices off from one another, in order to create variety and diversity, was to animate them with different rhythmic patterns. This was mainly achieved by offsetting the accentuated parts in the different voices. This Renaissance principle of composition was carried into the baroque, where it became a staple of church style and has since then remained a basic technique in contrapuntal writing. We find a wealth of syncopation in the sacred works by composers such as Claudio Monteverdi, J. S. Bach, and G. F. Handel. Often, the final sections of choral works of these great composers end with choral fugues, rhythmically animated polyphonic sections brimming with syncopation that create an effect of exhilaration and a triumphant climax to the whole work. In an eyewitness account of a rehearsal of Bach's "Cum sancto spiritu" section from the *St. John Passion*, the rector of St. Thomas Church at Leipzig, where the composer himself was conducting the choir, commented about how "the rhythm takes possession of all his [Bach's] limbs."¹⁶

The Western style of music making, including the technique of syncopation, was imported into the colony of Louisiana by early French settlers. By virtue of its particularly tolerant attitude toward local cultures and its fluid cultural boundaries, the colonial city of New Orleans, around the year 1800, was brimming with music bringing together European and African traditions.¹⁷ It was then that the practice of syncopation mixed with African musical practices. The resultant combination later came to characterize the world of jazz.

In today's popular music styles, beat and syncopation are closely associated and thus given a much more prominent character. We saw earlier that the rhythmic component in music cannot be considered a freestanding entity. Instead, it must be placed within the larger context of the other musical elements. Syncopation and beat must therefore be looked at in this broader perspective rather than as isolated elements of the musical discourse. Are they the sole governing elements in the music? Do they alternate with rhythmically less pronounced but melodically more interesting moments? Are they heightened through intense harmonies, or do they stand out against uninteresting melodies and poor harmonies?

As we already noticed, the richer and greater the interplay between the elements of music, the deeper the musical meaning and the more satisfying and longer lasting the musical experience. This principle of balance has something to do with the way we perceive and receive music. It touches our

hearts, minds, and bodies through emotional, physical, and intellectual stimulation. In other words, it affects us on a wholistic level. The same is true for the principle of alternation between tension and relaxation, i.e., between rhythmically or harmonically pronounced or heightened sections and rhythmically and harmonically more inactive or less colored sections. In a musical style in which one of the elements becomes domineering at the expense of the others through a monolithic, sustained, and pronounced presence, the principle of balance is destroyed, and the wholistic effect of music that should characterize our worship music, in particular, is lost.

The Effects of Rhythm

In order to appropriately use and evaluate the rhythmic element in music, we must be aware of how rhythm works and adapt it to a given cultural setting. This has been achieved by studies in the field of the psychology of music. To illustrate my point, I turn to an authority on the psychology of music, Carl E. Seashore,¹⁸ recognized by his peers as a pioneer in matters of scientific study of the psychology of music.¹⁹ I directed the choice of my source purposely to an objective and clinical study outside the field of religion and written before the advent of rock music to eliminate any religious agenda or stylistic prejudice on the part of the author. In reading these paragraphs, one can easily verify their validity in one's own musical experience, whatever style is under consideration. Seashore presents the effect of rhythm on three levels.

1. Rhythm creates emotions.

“Rhythm affects the circulation, respiration, and all the secretions of the body in such a way as to arouse agreeable feeling. Herein we find the *groundwork of emotion*; for rhythm, whether in perception or in action, is emotional when highly developed, and results in response of the whole organism to its pulsations. Such organic pulsations and secretions are the physical counterpart of emotion.”²⁰

A first observation that comes to mind in reading these lines is the relationship the author establishes between rhythm and the emotions. We generally connect rhythm with physical response, such as toe tapping, marching, swaying of the body, etc. But here we learn that rhythm affects our psychological response. It is rhythm, not necessarily melody or harmony as is generally assumed, that governs our emotions. And it does so through the stimulation of various physiological functions of the body.

Seashore also writes that in order to have such an impact, rhythm needs to be highly developed. This means that to achieve these effects, the

rhythmic element needs to have a dominant or predominant character in the music.

It is important to be aware, then, that rhythm is a powerful agent of influence in our emotional lives. The impact is all the greater since it affects an aspect of our personalities, the emotions, that can easily get out of hand and beyond the control of our reasoning.

2. *Rhythm empowers.*

“Rhythm gives us a *feeling of power*; it carries. It is like a dream of flying; it is so easy to soar. . . . There is an assurance of ability to cope with the future. *This results in the disregard of the ear element and results in a motor attitude, or a projection of the self in action.*”²¹

One of my former students illustrated this process in a very graphic way. He told us the story of a time in his life when he was experiencing personal difficulties, because his parents were in the process of divorce. He had trouble coping with the situation and had taken to the habit, each day after he came home from school, of lying down on the floor, putting a pair of headphones in his ears, and listening for half an hour to rock music. The driving beat, enhanced by the high volume of sound, restored his psychological abilities and gave him the strength to cope with the future. He did this for a few weeks until he noticed that the effect of the experiment lasted little more than a few hours, after which he fell back into his depressive and desperate mood. He understood then that listening to music as a remedy for his troubles was, in fact, a deception, nothing more than a quick fix that would never bring him the lasting and enduring strength he was looking for. The feeling of power imparted by the music provided a way to avoid confronting a painful reality. Shortly after that time, he was encouraged to turn to prayer and was able to start the long and difficult process of healing—and ultimately to achieve it.

We all have experienced the energizing power of rhythm when, worn out from a day of work and still more to come, we get into our cars, turn on the engines, and hear lively rhythmic music streaming from the radio. We start tapping our feet (motor attitude)—or our fingers on the steering wheel for more security—and feel energized and ready to go on with our tasks (projection of self into action).

3. *Rhythm stimulates and excites.*

“Pronounced rhythm brings on a feeling of elation which not infrequently results in a mild form of ecstasy or absentmindedness, a *loss of consciousness of the environment*. It excites, and it makes us insensible to the excitation, giving the feeling of being lulled. . . . *One becomes oblivious*

to intellectual pursuits . . . feels freedom of movement—action without any object other than the pleasure in the action itself. There comes a sort of auto-intoxication from the stimulating effect of the music and the successful self-expression in balanced movements sustained by that music and its associations.”²²

The words used in this paragraph remind us of another reality of today, namely, the use of stimulants in general and recreational drugs in particular. Expressions such as stimulation, elation, ecstasy, and loss of consciousness of the environment point to similar experiences. With any stimulant, the consumer progressively gets accustomed to and dependent on it, needing ever-increasing quantities or degrees of the stimulus to achieve satisfaction of his/her need. Anything with a lesser stimulating effect seems dull and uninteresting. A similar effect can easily be observed in our consumption of rhythm: the more we listen to rhythmically animated music, the more the need increases for stronger and more accented rhythms.

Notice that Seashore places these phenomena in a context of “pronounced rhythm,” i.e., music that features rhythm prominently and on a continual basis. The effect of pronounced and sustained rhythm can lead the individual to become so absorbed in the actual engagement and enjoyment of the rhythmic activity that there is a progressive loss of interest in the rational or cognitive control of the situation. The capacity for control can diminish progressively and even be shut out and eliminated. This can easily be verified in some worship experiences of a charismatic type, where the musical element is very animated, prominent, and sustained, helping the believer to reach the desired stage of being touched by the spirit. The stimulating and auto-intoxicating effects of music with a highly pronounced and sustained rhythmic element may result in making us oblivious to the voice of reason or of the conscience. The situation is made even more complex by the fact that these responses happen without our even noticing them. We are so taken by the pleasurable experience that everything else is ruled out.

A number of examples from the secular, military, and religious worlds illustrate this mechanism. The first is found in dance. There was a good reason for the great swing dance bands in America to take off and become so popular precisely during the Great Depression years (1930s). It was the distinct need, in the midst of all the hardship, worrying, and despair, to find a way to “lose consciousness of the environment,” to forget the harsh and often unbearable reality and get completely absorbed, at least for a few moments, in a pleasurable activity—“action without any object other than

the pleasure in the action itself.”

My second example is drawn from the military world. From the earliest times of humankind, war making has been accompanied by music and song. Even the Bible has its own examples of such practice: the trumpet blasts (from the ram’s horn, or shofar) played a decisive role at the conquest of Jericho (Joshua 6) and contributed to the scattering of the enemy by Gideon’s forces (Judges 7), etc. Soldiers are trained to march to war while singing. Why is this method so effective? According to Seashore,²³ as soldiers sing their marching songs or march to the sound of a military band, they reach a stage at which they are completely absorbed by the marching movement, which creates a sort of absentmindedness through its monotonous repetitiveness. The singing of songs of patriotism and victory in combination with the marching creates some feeling of elation or even ecstasy. The subjects become “oblivious” to the reality that they are actually marching off to kill or be killed.

One may similarly observe the ambiance in clubs to verify the impact of a sonic experience. Psychologist and author John Booth Davies has adequately described such a setting. The emotionally heightened ambiance in an environment of loud repetitive sound intensified with stroboscopic lighting affects the attitude of the dancers. They are apparently oblivious to anything that goes on around them, but they never completely lose consciousness—they are still able to discriminate between various sounds and to continue making automatic rhythmic responses.²⁴

Illustrations taken from the popular religious scene, such as Pentecostal celebrations or scenes of possession, testify to the mechanism just described. In a first stage the dancing excites. Then the dancer becomes “insensible to the excitation” (getting entirely absorbed in and concentrating totally on the pursuit of the physical activity per se), “oblivious to intellectual pursuits” (giving up rational control), and ends up in a sort of ecstasy (receiving the Spirit/possession). Anybody watching a trance or possession dance can observe these different stages.

It is essential, however, to point out that this process does not happen in a mechanical or automatic way. Seashore himself took care to make this very clear. As he speaks about the gratifying experience of “auto-intoxication” and “successful self-expression,” he explains how the two happen through the combined effects of both the music *and* its context and associations.²⁵ In other words, at the base of such experiences (be it dance, war, or religion), there lies a deliberate investment, an intent and readiness, in participation. Getting into a trance does not happen automatically, as a

result of the effects of music, etc., but requires a voluntary letting go and surrender to the experience. This explains why musicians providing the music for events related to possession do not automatically enter the state of trance themselves.²⁶

We now understand better why rhythm is such a basic ingredient in music: it is rhythm that makes music so interesting and powerful. But, as with anything else, this powerful tool can be misused or abused to the point that it carries us beyond the limits of our full control. When dealing with church music—but equally in our personal listening habits—it is especially important to realize how rhythm functions and how it affects us as individuals or as groups, so as to use it appropriately. We need to clarify in our own minds what we are looking for during our personal musical experiences and, particularly, during worship, and measure and adapt the level of the rhythmic activity of our music accordingly.

Here is a last reflection on rhythm. The foregoing explanations might suggest a possible answer to the question What makes the rhythmic element so prominent in today's society? In a world of stress, deadlines, insecurity, self-doubt, and disillusionment—in a time when the exploration of hitherto unknown regions of the personality and the pursuit of new sensations through a variety of stimulants is occupying so much time and money—one reason for the incessant pursuit of rhythm might be to fulfill a need for freedom, power, and expanse.²⁷ In that sense it becomes even more important for the church to present to its worshippers through its music something more than the world does, a music that is not content with merely covering up our needs, and that takes the searching mind and soul to the real and lasting solution for these human quests and needs.²⁸

It is a fact that the single elements that make up music, such as a note, a chord, an instrument, etc., do not carry in themselves a meaning or message, just as a letter of the alphabet, a number, or a rhythmic pattern of the spoken language does not carry a meaning in itself. Both manifestations, the spoken language and the musical language, acquire their meaning only from the moment that their elements start being combined—and according to the interpretation that is made of them in a given cultural context. If I do not know the Spanish language, the word “*madre*” does not carry any meaning for me. It remains neutral, a mere juxtaposition of letters of the alphabet. If, on the contrary, I have learned this word from my earliest childhood, it not only carries the meaning of the person who gave birth to me; it is also ripe with a wealth of associations that come with the word “mother”: provider, security, consolation, unlimited love, sacrifice, etc. It works the same way

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