

“Ugly” Church Music – Is all beauty merely in the eye/ear of the beholder/listener?

From dirges to “screamo” it seems that in our “tolerant” evangelical subculture nobody dares to call some “music” what it really is – Ugly. We have bought the lie that all beauty is in the eye of the beholder. On that basis, speaking of music, we accept any style of music as an equally legitimate expression of the worship of our God. I don’t think so!

After a lengthy illustration of a WWII concert by Olivier Messiaen in a Nazi prison camp compared with a 1950’s Woodstock “concert” by John Cage, Chuck Colson and Harold Fickett in their book, The Good Life, make the following comments:

“Very few people today understand beauty as an extension of the creation. **Many people say that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” or “beauty is a matter of taste.”** To declare something is beautiful means only that it pleases them. Such value judgments are always merely one person’s opinion. **To the Christian and the classical mind, however, beauty is not a subjective value judgment, and art is not merely the expression of an artist’s inner world. Beauty, like goodness and truth, is part of reality; beauty is essential to the created order, part and parcel of the world in which we live.**

“The reason one person judges one thing to be beautiful while another disagrees is that different people are more or less able to perceive beauty. Some people’s judgments about beauty are more accurate. This may be an idea that many people in our culture find intolerable; nevertheless, it’s true.

The Christian view of beauty has its basis in its theory of origins - how the world came to be. God made a world that reflects His identity, not only His unimaginable genius but also His majesty - His beauty. The ancient Greeks understood from the order and beauty of creation alone that truth, beauty, and goodness were interconnected absolutely. This understanding was captured powerfully by theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar: “Beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and

goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated... . from her two sisters.”

“The beauty of the world communicates God’s love for us. He designed a universe in which the sun’s rising and setting, the pale moon hanging in the sky, and the power of rushing clouds would inspire us each day. He made a world in which we can delight in a field of daffodils, be haunted by a loon’s call, and find amazement in the chameleon’s powers of camouflage. In his poem “The Tiger,” poet William Blake recognized God’s hand behind the beauty of His creation.

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright,
In the forest of the night
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

“God’s ways are far beyond ours, yet the beauty of His creation shows us His love.²⁰ Because Olivier Messiaen believed that beauty is a sign of God’s care, he paid tribute in his music to a loving Creator. Messiaen’s audience was far less tutored than Cage’s in musical theory, and yet Messiaen’s music communicated to his fellow prisoners that the world was ultimately God’s, not the Nazis’, and that every human hope “has a legitimate basis in God’s rule. He wasn’t selling cheap comfort or expressing himself.” Who among his fellow prisoners could possibly have cared about that? He was translating truth that they needed to hear— truth essential to the good life—into music.

“All of us intuitively understand the connection between beauty and truth. Ask teenagers and even younger children whether they can tell the difference between good art and bad art. Most groups, as I noted before, are not sure whether they believe in absolute truths. Often I’ll ask them to imagine a painting that catches their eye, that they can’t stop looking at— perhaps J. M. W. Turner’s famous marine painting showing a sailboat, keeling under the wind, plowing through the seas. It’s so lifelike that you can almost feel the boat’s driving motion. The colors are at once watery yet startling. I ask my young audience, “If you saw a painting like that, wouldn’t

you say it's cool?" They all nod approvingly. I then ask them, "If you went to Germany today and saw an exhibit of body parts, a huge mural on a wall with pieces of flesh hanging from it, would you say that's cool?" Most of them instantly look revolted. I confirm what they are thinking: "No, you would say it's yuck, right?" They all nod. They get it. There is a difference between cool and yuck. And there are absolutes. Something in us resonates with beauty. It inspires us. It lifts us, exactly as Messiaen's music lifted the prisoners of war in Stalag VIII A during World War II.

"The arts are so powerful because they communicate directly to our emotions as well as our intellect—to the heart and its superior reasons. The students I've talked with would immediately understand the difference between Cage and Messiaen—Cage, the emperor without clothes, and Messiaen, the maestro of creation, whose work captures a history of time from the perspective of eternity. While the arts capture our thoughts and penetrate our imaginations, they awaken us to the world's wonder and touch our emotions. At their best, the arts reflect the truth of the human experience in its heartfelt wholeness. **The arts point to what lies beyond the merely human because the source of beauty, I believe, is beyond the merely human.**"