Book 4

Sunday May 19, 1974

COMMENTARY FOR MUSIC SUNDAY: "MUSIC AND WORSHIP!"

OTIS

Music is such an integral part of our regular worship that we often take it for granted. Today on "Music Sunday," we not only honor our choirs for their contribution to worship throughout the year, but it's also an opportunity to take a look at some of the functions of music in worship.

It is possible of course to worship without music of any kind. Any spoken or unspoken prayer or thought of God done in the love of God is worship. But it is nonetheless a significant fact that the experience of the church in all ages has been that when people worship, music is heard. This was as true of King David in the Old Testament, as it was of the lonely black slave or the Christian wherever he or she worshipped with others. It is natural for the human spirit to resort to music when worshipping because worship enlists the deepest and strongest emotion and so does music. We are talking about those emotions which go beyond words and demand greater expression.

Thus the Old and New Testaments in the Bible are filled with injunctions for the use of music of all kinds in our praise of God, "Sing unto the Lord!" Thus it should not surprise us that until the death of Bach in 1750, the main stream of the development of music was in the church. Popular music was of course always in existence, as was folk music. But serious composers almost unanimously received their inspiration from and dedicated their works to the church.

Today in America, church worship services are one of the few regular places where people of all ages gather to sing. And people who do not sing are the poorer for it. Part of religion is singing and music. This is true of almost all religions.

The Psalms in the Bible are for the most part ancient songs. In Hinduism the tradition teaches that beautiful sound is God. Thus musical sound and musical experience are steps to the realization of the self, and music is viewed as a kind of spiritual discipline that raises one's inner self to divine peacefulness and bliss. The highest aim of music in Hinduism is to reveal the essence of the universe it reflects, thus through music one can reach God.

Music was held in such high esteem in all parts of Hebrew life, including worship that when the prophets had occasion to warn the people of the consequences of the evil ways they were pursuing, they could find no more vivid figure to suggest the desolation that would come upon them than to say there would then be no SINGING IN THE LAND!

And when the prophets wished to enhearten a people in whom the spirit of song had been silenced by their sorrows, the best way to inspirit them they could find was to promise that if they would forsake their evil ways and return to the Lord, there would again be songs in the land, thanksgiving and the voice of melody. Our hope is that more and more singing will return to our land and to the world!

In our Protestant tradition, Martin Luther is notable among the leaders of the church who emphasized the use of art and music in worship. He was keenly aware of the power music could have in the life of the church. As Luther put it, "For whenever you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or appease those full of hate, what more effective means than music could you find."

Luther also believed that the devil was helpless against the power of music. To the devil, the originator of depressing worries and troubled thoughts, music was something altogether hateful and unbearable. As Luther put it, "When Satan sorely presses you, go out and drink wine, tell lively jokes, and play music. Satan is hostile to all music and will not remain near it, for music is always a joyful creation, issuing from the hearts overflowing with gladness. . ."

Luther also realized the importance of trained choirs in leading congregations in worship. He put it this way -- "When natural music is sharpened and polished by art, then one begins to see with amazement the great and perfect wisdom of God in his wonderful work of music, where one voice takes a simple part and around it sing three, four or five other voices, leaping and springing round about, marvelously gracing the simple part, like a square dance in heaven, with friendly bows, embracings and the hearty swinging of partners."

Book 4

He was harsh on those who did not appreciate the worth of music in worship. Luther bluntly stated, "A person who does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being. He should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs."

Otis

Music in all ages has given human beings a sense of mystical and yet immediate kinship with the transcendent and the universal. It binds us together in new harmonies.

Aaron Copland the composer put it this way, "I have been concerned with the creation of music for more than thirty years, with no lessening of my sense of humility before the majesty of music's expressive power, before its capacity to make manifest a deeply spiritual resource of mankind."

And Plato said, "Music is moral law. It gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, a charm to sadness, gaiety and life to everything. It is the essence of order and leads to all that is good, just, and beautiful, of which it is the invisible, but nevertheless, dazzling, passionage, and eternal form."

Tchaikovsky said, "Music is not illusion, but revelation. Its triumphant power resides in the fact that it reveals to us beauties we find nowhere else, and the apprehension of them is not transitory, but a perpetual reconcilement to life."

Music can help with our imaginations. It can give us new visions. It can add cadenzas to our lives and we all need more of those. Music in worship can help our spirits soar. It can take away the dullness we all feel from time to time in our lives.

Recently in the PEANUTS comic strip, there appeared this episode. Lucy, Linus and Charley Brown are looking at cloud formations.

LUCY: If you use your imagination, you can see lots of things in cloud formations. What do you think you see, Linus?

LINUS: Well, those clouds up there look to me like the map of British Honduras on the Caribbean. That cloud up there looks a little like the profile of Thomas Eakins, the famous painter and sculptor. . . .And that group of clouds over there gives me the impression of the stoning of Stephen. I can see the Apostle Paul standing there to one side.

LUCY: Uh, huh. . .That's very good. . . What do you see in the clouds, Charlie Brown?,

CHARLIE BROWN: Well, I was going to say I saw a ducky and a horsie, but I changed my mind.