

Guidelines Toward An SDA Philosophy of Music [1972]

Autumn Council of the General Conference Committee

October 14-29, 1972, Mexico City

Voted, That the following guidelines for a Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Music be adopted:

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has come into existence in fulfillment of prophecy to be God's instrument in a worldwide proclamation of the Good News of salvation through faith in the atoning sacrifice of God's Son and of obedience to His commands in preparation for our Lord's return. The lives of those who accept this responsibility must be as distinctive as their message. This calls for total commitment by each church member to the ideals and objectives of the Church. Such commitment will affect every department of church life and will certainly influence the music used by the Church in fulfillment of its God-given commission.

Music is one of God's great gifts to man and is one of the most important elements in a spiritual program. It is an avenue of communication with God, and "is one of the most effective means of impressing the heart with spiritual truth" (*Education*, p. 168). Dealing as it does with matters of eternal consequence, it is essential that music's tremendous power be kept clearly in mind. It has the power to uplift or degrade; it can be used in the service of good or evil. "It has power to subdue rude and uncultivated natures; power to quicken thought and to awaken sympathy, to promote harmony of action, and to banish the gloom and foreboding that destroy courage and weaken effort" (*ibid.*, pp. 167-168).

Those, therefore, who select music for the distinctive purposes of this Church must exercise a high degree of discrimination in its choice and in its use. In their endeavors to meet these ideals, more than human wisdom is needed. Turning then to revelation for guidance, the following general principles are revealed:

The music should

1. Bring glory to God and assist us in acceptably worshiping Him (1 Cor 10:31).
2. Ennoble, uplift, and purify the Christian's thoughts (Phil 4:8; *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 594).
3. Effectively influence the Christian in the development of Christ's character in his life and in that of others (*MS 57*, 1906).
4. Have a text [words, lyric, message] which is in harmony with the scriptural teachings of the Church (*Review and Herald*, June 6, 1912).
5. Reveal a compatibility between the message conveyed by the words and the music, avoiding a mixture of the sacred and the profane.
6. Shun theatricality and prideful display (*Evangelism*, p. 137; *Review and Herald*, November 30, 1900).
7. Give precedence to the message of the text, which should not be overpowered by accompanying musical elements (*Gospel Workers*, pp. 357-358).

8. Maintain a judicious balance of the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual elements (*Review and Herald*, November 14, 1899).
9. Never compromise high principles of dignity and excellence in efforts to reach people just where they are (*Testimonies for the Church*, 9:143; *Evangelism*, p. 137).
10. Be appropriate for the occasion, the setting, and the audience for which it is intended (*Evangelism*, pp. 507-508).

There is much that is spiritually uplifting and religiously valid in the music of the various cultural and ethnic groups; however, the musical tastes and practices of all should conform to the universal value of Christ-like character, and all should strive for oneness in the spirit and purpose of the gospel, which calls for unity rather than uniformity. Care must be exercised that worldly values in music which fail to express the high ideals of the Christian faith be avoided.

The above principles will serve as effective guidelines in the choice and use of music for the varied needs of the Church. Certain musical forms, such as jazz, rock, and their related hybrid forms, are considered by the Church as incompatible with these principles. Responsible persons involved in the Church's broad-ranging music activities, either as leaders or performers, will find little trouble in applying these principles in some areas. Certain other areas are much more complex, and a more detailed discussion of the factors involved follows.

I. CHURCH MUSIC

Music in the Worship Service. Worship should be the primary and eternal activity of mankind. Man's highest end is to glorify God. As the worshiper comes to the house of God to offer a sacrifice of praise, let it be with the best possible music. Careful planning of every musical element of the service is essential so that the congregation is led to be a participant and not a spectator.

The hymns used for this service should be directed to God, emphasizing praise and utilizing the great hymns of our heritage. They should have strong, singable melodies and worthy poetry. The pastor should take a keen interest in increasing the quality and fervor of congregational singing. "Singing is seldom to be done by a few" (*Counsels on Health*, pp. 481-482). Christian experience will be immeasurably enriched by the learning and use of new hymns.

Where there is a choir, meaningful anthems chosen from master composers of the past and present, sung by dedicated and well-prepared musicians, will add much to the service and assist in elevating the quality of worship.

Instrumental music, including organ or piano, should harmonize with the lofty ideals of worship and be chosen carefully from the best materials consistent with the ability and training of the player. The instrumentalist responsible for accompanying congregational singing has an especially great responsibility to set the right standard in all his

contributions, be they preludes or postludes, offertories or other voluntaries, or accompaniment of hymns. He is in a unique position to raise the level of worship music in his church. If in the service there should be vocal solos or other special music, preference should be given to material with scriptural texts and music that is within the singer's range of ability, and be presented to the Lord without display of vocal prowess. The communication of the message should be paramount.

Music in Evangelism. Music used in evangelism may also include gospel music, witness music, or testimony music; but there should be no compromise with the high principles of dignity and excellence characteristic of our message to ready the people for the second coming of Christ. The music chosen should

1. Direct the hearer to Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.
2. Prepare the way for the presentation of the message from God's Word, or continue its appeal, evoking a response from the hearers.
3. Be played and sung by those whose lives are consistent with the message they bear.
4. Be a vehicle for the deep impression of Bible truth, which will inspire a positive change in the life.
5. Be presented in a carefully planned, orderly manner.
6. Be simple and melodic and presented without emphasis on personal display.
7. Give precedence to the preaching of the Word, both in emphasis and in allotment of time.
8. Maintain a balanced appeal to the emotion and intellect and not just charm the senses.
9. Be understandable and meaningful in content and style for the largest possible cross section of the audience.

Music in Youth Evangelism.

In the field of youth witnessing, most of the above suggestions apply. Consideration also needs to be given to certain aspects that are unique to this area. Young people tend to identify closely with the music of the contemporary youth culture. The desire to reach these youth where they are with the gospel of Christ sometimes leads to the use of certain questionable musical idioms. In all these idioms, the element which brings the most problems is rhythm, or "the beat."

Of all the musical elements, rhythm evokes the strongest physical response. Satan's greatest successes have often come through his appeal to the physical nature. Showing keen awareness of the dangers involved in this approach to youth, Ellen G. White said, "They have a keen ear for music, and Satan knows what organs to excite, to animate, engross, and charm the mind so that Christ is not desired. The spiritual longings of the soul for divine knowledge, for a growth in grace, are wanting [i.e., lacking]" (*Testimonies for the Church*, 1:497). This is a strong indictment of the way in which music may be put to a use that is in direct opposition to God's plan. The previously mentioned jazz, rock,

and related hybrid forms are well-known for creating this sensuous response in masses of people.

On the other hand, we have many traditional folk-music idioms which have been respected as legitimate branches of the musical stream. Some of these are acceptable as vehicles for expressing the Christian witness. Others, which might find acceptance in a Christian secular atmosphere, may be inappropriate for bearing the Saviour's name. Still others may fall completely outside the Christian's experience. It must be clear, then, that any form of "folk" musical expression must be judged by the same general principles as all other types discussed in this document.

"Higher than the highest human thought can reach is God's ideal for His children" (*Education*, p. 18). Those who strive for this high ideal and who lead in youth witnessing will find guidance through prayerful study of music by the aid of the Holy Spirit.

In addition to the problem of rhythm, other factors affect the spiritual qualities of the music:

Vocal Treatment. The raucous style common to rock, the suggestive, sentimental, breathy, crooning style of the night-club performer, and other distortions of the human voice should be avoided.

Harmonic Treatment. Music should be avoided that is saturated with the 7th, 9th, 11th, and 13th chords as well as other lush sonorities. These chords, when used with restraint, produce beauty, but when used to excess distract from the true spiritual quality of the text.

Visual Presentation. Anything which calls undue attention to the performer(s), such as excessive, affected bodily movement or inappropriate dress, should find no place in witnessing.

Amplification. Great care should be exercised to avoid excessive instrumental and vocal amplification. When amplifying music there should be a sensitivity to the spiritual needs of those giving the witness and of those who are to receive it. Careful consideration should be given to the selection of instruments for amplification.

Performances. The primary objective in the performance of all sacred music should be to exalt Christ rather than to exalt the musician or to provide entertainment.

Music in the Home.

1. Music education and appreciation should begin early in the life of the child through (a) The introduction to great hymns and gospel songs in the informal happy experience of family worship; (b) The establishment of right listening habits through home audio equipment, which includes carefully selected music;

- (c) Attendance with the family at music concerts with standards conforming to those outlined in this document; (d) The proper example and influence of parents.
2. Family singing and participation in family music instrumental ensembles should be encouraged.
 3. Experiments in writing poetry and song compositions might be encouraged.
 4. A home music library of wisely selected materials should be established.
 5. It must be recognized that Satan is engaged in a battle for the mind and that changes may be effected imperceptibly upon the mind to alter perceptions and values for good and evil. Extreme care must therefore be exercised in the type of programming and music listened to on radio and TV, especially avoiding that which is vulgar, enticing, cheap, immoral, theatrical and identifiable with trends in the counter culture.

Music in the School.

1. In preparing and presenting music for religious functions, school administrators and teachers should work with the students in a way that will uphold the musical standards of the Church.
2. Witnessing and folk-music groups going out from campuses should receive sponsorship and guidance from those appointed by the administration, be they music-faculty members or others.
3. Directors of radio stations on Seventh-day Adventist campuses and those who are responsible for the selection of music played over institutional public-address systems should choose music that is in conformity with the philosophy of music as expressed in this document.
4. Music teachers in school ensembles and in private teaching activities should make positive efforts to teach music literature that may be used in church and in soul-winning activities.
5. Because one of the primary objectives of school music-appreciation courses is to teach discrimination in the light of divine revelation, instructors in these classes on all educational levels are urged to include information in the art of making qualitative value judgment in the area of religious music.
6. Efforts should be made by the local church and conference to close the culture gap. To this end the trained music personnel of the schools should be used in musical training and activities so that the lofty ideals of worship be effectively promoted.
7. Musical presentations in Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions should conform to the standards of the Church. This applies to local talent as well as to visiting artists, ensembles, and music on entertainment films.

II. SECULAR MUSIC

Music "rightly employed, . . . is a precious gift of God, designed to uplift the thoughts to high and noble themes, to inspire and elevate the soul" (*Education*, p. 167).

The Seventh-day Adventist lifestyle demands that the individual Christian exercise a high degree of discrimination and individual responsibility in the selection of secular music for personal use, solo, or group performance. All such music should be evaluated in the light of the instruction given in Philippians 4:8: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." He will also keep in mind the warning given by Ellen G. White in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 497:

"I was shown that the youth must take a higher stand, and make the Word of God the man of their counsel and their guide. Solemn responsibilities rest upon the young, which they lightly regard. The introduction of music into their homes, instead of inciting to holiness and spirituality, has been the means of diverting their minds from the truth. Frivolous songs and the popular sheet music of the day seem congenial to their taste. The instruments of music have taken time which should have been devoted to prayer. Music, when not abused, is a great blessing; but when put to a wrong use, it is a terrible curse."

The Christian will not sing songs that are incompatible with the ideals of truth, honesty, and purity. He will avoid elements that give the appearance of making evil desirable or goodness appear trivial. He will try to avoid compositions containing trite phrasing, poor poetry, nonsense, sentimentality, or frivolity, which lead away from the counsel and teachings found in scripture and in the Spirit of Prophecy.

He will consider music such as blues, jazz, the rock idiom, and similar forms as inimical to the development of Christian character, because it opens the mind to impure thoughts and leads to unholy behavior. Such music has a distinct relationship to the permissiveness of contemporary society. The distortion of rhythm, melody, and harmony as employed by these styles and their excessive amplification dulls the sensibilities and eventually destroys the appreciation for that which is good and holy.

Care should be exercised when using a secular tune wedded to sacred lyrics, so that the profane connotation of the music will not outweigh the message of the text. Moreover, the discerning Christian, when selecting any secular music for listening or performing which is not included in the above categories [blues, jazz, rock, etc.] will subject such music to the test of the principles given in the general principles outlined in this Philosophy of Music.

The true Christian is able to witness to others by his choice of secular music for social occasions. He will, through diligent search and careful selection, seek out that type of music which will be compatible with his social needs and his Christian principles.

"There must be a living connection with God in prayer, a living connection with God in songs of praise and thanksgiving" (*Evangelism*, p. 498).

Official Action of the Autumn Council of the General Conference Committee, October 14-19, 1972, Mexico City, Mexico.

NOTE: Punctuation slightly altered. Bracketed text supplied.

Note: [General Conference Committee Meeting Minutes transcript](#) of above action can be viewed at the [General Conference Archives](#) (see page 72-1200). In order to view DJVU documents you will need the [DJVU Browser Plugin](#) (currently requires Internet Explorer).