

[Article] Music Composition as Sung Theology: Exploring Missional Significance



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I learned to play piano from an early age and began writing songs when I was still in elementary school. Writing music came naturally and enjoyably to me, and I could always be found with a pencil and notepad wherever I went in case an idea came to my mind that I could sort out on the piano later.

As a pastor's daughter, I was active in church, and people naturally expected I would attend Bible School following high school and go into "ministry." For reasons I could not explain at the time, I felt a strong urge in my spirit to instead attend a secular university and major in music. In the same way that famed English runner Eric Liddell in the movie *Chariots of Fire* spoke of feeling "God's pleasure" as he ran, using the speed that God gave him to race for his glory (Hudson 1981), throughout my life I have likewise felt the Lord's pleasure as I create music. From a young age I felt compelled to commit my composing of music to the Lord, believing it could be used for mission and ministry. However, contemporary society's reductionist propensity to favor the rational, pragmatic, scientific, logical, lucrative, and productive over beauty and aesthetic (Fujimura 2020; 2017), challenges this idea that the composing of music can be considered worthy and even essential for gospel proclamation.

I grew up in a Canadian church prior to the takeover of the 1990s modern worship movement and have fond memories of singing from our church's thick, red-bound hymnal, *Hymns of the Christian Life*. The 1978 version contains an impressive 612 hymns, as well as numerous responsive scripture readings, where the pastor and congregation would alternate recitation of stanzas. I remember as a young child being drawn into the four-part harmony of hymn singing, and I recall subconsciously absorbing the seemingly magical pairing of music and text, such as in the somber-then-bombastic "Christ Arose" (100), and the optimistic and rhythmic "Blessed Assurance" (299). However, I also remember being captivated by the grouping of hymns according to theme. The table of contents listed themes such as *God—The Holy Trinity*, and *God in Creation, Providence, and Redemption*. The largest section, however, was the section labelled *The Life in Christ*, with subsections including themes such as *Repentance and Faith, Peace and Joy, Divine Healing, Pilgrimage, Protection and Guidance, Christian Conflict and Warfare, Hymns for Christian Workers, Death, Resurrection, and Life Everlasting*, among many others. Each thematic subsection presented a robust compilation of hymns according to that category. Although I might have been too young to fully grasp all of what was being presented at the time, the idea that there could be such a variety in categories of songs for worship left a theological imprint in my mind and heart that has retained a grip on me in the decades since.

At the turn of the 1990s, my church experienced a shift (as many other churches did during this time) in allowing drums and electric pianos to be a part of corporate worship, eventually replacing the organ. Not long

after this, praise songs and the modern worship movement took off in full force, featuring instruments such as bass guitar, electric guitar, and acoustic guitar, sometimes replacing the piano entirely. Many of my friends taught themselves to play guitar so that they could join the praise band on Sunday mornings. This occurred during my teenage years, and I recall being inwardly conflicted: I enjoyed the modern church music which resembled the secular music I heard on the radio. However, I felt confused about what had happened to the “categories of worship” I had been enthralled with in the *Hymns of the Christian Life* just years prior. By comparison, many lyrics now felt generic and repetitive, sung with great feeling, yet seemingly void of deep theology.

A pivotal and formative moment came from my study of music history as an undergraduate, where I became aware of the reciprocal nature of arts, culture, and society. The great sacred choral music of the Renaissance, including works by Palestrina, Byrd, Tallis, and Josquin, flowed from the rich acoustical environment of the cathedrals for which they had been written. The composition technique of word painting (where music is composed to mirror the message depicted in text) ignited my understanding and passion in the power of how music can be purposefully constructed to bring sacred text and theology alive. This felt a jarring contrast to the comparatively simplistic song forms being sung at my church at the time.

In 1 Peter 4:10, Peter wrote that “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms” (NIV). Likewise, Romans 12:1 lists spiritual gifts such as prophesying, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading, and showing mercy. Given the unique propensity of music to embody all these things, in this paper I position music composition as a form of uniquely manifested spiritual gift, bestowed by the Holy Spirit to be embraced, cultivated, honed, and shared for the glory of God.

This paper explores the missional significance of music composition as sung theology. It elevates the dialogue regarding sacred music composition with significance and urgency, positioning it as integral to the life of believers, edification of the church, and a useful tool for discipleship. To begin, I will define key terms such as mission and music composition. I will next highlight key scriptural passages from the Old and New Testament, including the Psalms, which have much to teach about the connection of music and intimate communion with God. I then posit poetic/musical expression as essential to, as well as evidence of, discipleship. I will introduce Fujimura’s (2017; 2020) notion of culture care, along with his charge to artists to participate in the renewal of creation through their art. Referencing biblical accounts of Elizabeth, Mary, Miriam, Moses, and Deborah, I posit that divinely inspired music creation may be available to all believers, whether inherently “musical” or not, and that this creative gift of song may be used for testimony, instruction, encouragement, praise, and ultimately, gospel proclamation for the glory of God. Finally, I present implications for musicians, composers, and church leaders.

Defining Mission

The notion of mission typically invokes a sense of “feeling called,” “being sent,” and working in a culture other than one’s own, leaving home comforts to serve cross-culturally, and proclaiming the gospel in a foreign land. Likewise, it may evoke the idea of serving the homeless, or caring for the marginalized and vulnerable. Mission is not a recruitment project for God’s labor force but is instead a liberation project from the heavy burdens and hard yokes of other gods (Matthew 11:28; Piper 2009). In Acts 1:8, Jesus spoke to his disciples concerning mission, compelling, and commanding them to be witnesses and make disciples locally, regionally, and globally,

according to the power of the Holy Spirit at work. In the early church, God called “specific people to do specific jobs” (Burton 2020, 57). Likewise, we read in 1 Corinthians 12 that the body of Christ has many members, each with their own area of giftedness and uniqueness, to be activated for service in the church and for the glory of God. Mission may take place in cross-cultural environments, yet mission may also occur right on our doorsteps, in our neighborhoods, with those whom we come into daily contact, and with those whom we do not yet know who walk through the doors of our churches.

Mission forms the very foundation of the Bible and must therefore be a “theological priority” (Wright 2006, 22), as opposed to a casual human endeavor. However, despite this clear biblical mandate, the exact way to do this is not overtly laid out. This becomes complicated in settings where gospel proclamation is not explicitly permitted, or worse, is prohibited. Moreover, the fallenness of humanity means that our ability to effectively communicate with others is limited (Moreau et al 2014).

Arts and Mission

The arts have a unique propensity to build bridges in culture. The “building of bridges” is essential for ministry, finding commonality with non-believers so that the message of the gospel can be shared and received (Burton 2019). This may apply to local and cross-cultural missions, as well as community and neighborly relationships. Christians must, therefore, be concerned not only with exegesis of scripture but also with the exegesis of culture in order to be effective. Acts 13–14 illuminates Paul’s cultural adaptation when speaking to gentiles versus Jews. Likewise, the variety of ways in which Jesus spoke to people throughout the gospels demonstrate the significance of cultural variety and discernment in how to respond in cross-cultural environments. Gospel proclamation is, therefore, optimally shared “not in a preplanned sales pitch or canned formula approach but through the discovery of the appropriate spiritual bridges” (Burton 2019, 122). The arts and music creation are therefore integral to living in, and displaying the likeness of God, imagining, and putting forth newness and abundance, participating in the new creation (Fujimura 2017). Moreover, the arts may “enliven” Christian dialogue with rich theology, providing “big theological pictures” in each created song (Russell 2005, 402) and communicating artistically in the vernacular of its community.

Arts and Beauty

Beautiful arts and music are integral to the renewal and edification of the body of Christ and of humanity in general (Bethke 2015; Fujimura 2020, 2017; Kleinig 1997; Troeger 2013). Beauty has been considered “food for the soul” (Fujimura 2020, 49), having propensity to generate new life in bleak places.

While notions of beauty may be culturally nuanced according to time and place, the essence here is that beauty is desired, and that Christ is glorified and honored as the ultimate beauty-beholder, breathing divinely inspired sounds into the hearts and minds of the music-maker. When humans are engaged in the act of creating, they may experience awareness of, and communion with the Holy Spirit, in ways that other endeavors might not so naturally avail themselves (Fujimura 2017). Kurek (2019) contends that this depth of spiritual connection is even important in the modern age of technology and rapid information, where busyness and shifting attention spans can be detrimental to deep experiences. Regardless of culture, the solution must be to transcend the disordered chaos of the world and present an ordered and beautiful alternative that points people to redemption and renewal of Christ through the creation of beauty. The expression of beauty may be uniquely

contextualized and expressed according to culture, just as God uniquely communicates to people of all cultures. Pardue (2023) writes of the way the Holy Spirit coexists and ministers in culture:

God himself learns to speak with a particular accent and cultivates a distinctive set of tastes in beauty, music, and food. The clearest revelation of God turns out not to be an acultural set of principles but, rather, a human life and death that can only be understood in its connection to a particular culture and time. (Pardue 2023, 82)

The scope of this paper is not to restrict beauty to a neatly packaged, single-dimension definition, but rather, to elevate the significance of art and beauty expressed across culture. In this way, “the world needs to see such extravagant beauty in us, or else we are not the Bride of Christ, which is the church” (Fujimura 2020, 92). Beauty expressed through musical arts is a key endeavor for mission that seeks to promote human flourishing.

Music Composition

Music composition may be defined as “the act of conceiving a piece of music . . . [and] the creation of a unique musical event (Ringer and Crossley 2023). This may be with instruments or without instruments and may comprise sacred text, poetic text, or no text at all. Music composition may feature a simple, single melodic line with little tonal variety, or it may include a variety of voice parts, complex harmonies, and modulations. Likewise, composers may notate their music by hand on manuscript paper, input their music using a music notation software program, or even pass on their music aurally, without notation. Importantly, for this paper, the notion of music composition does not merely equate to composition in the formal sense, with an assumed musical background, pre-requisite of a music degree, or extensive musical training in music theory and composition. It also encompasses spontaneous music, music that emerges freely from the inner life of an individual, becoming an entity to be shared to edify the body of believers. Thus, music composition in this article is defined as any kind of created music, created by any person.

Biblical Foundation

From the earliest moments of scripture, we learn of God’s love and passion for creating. Not only did he create the earth and everything in it, but he also intended for humans to create; he invited humanity to partake of the experience of creating, commissioning Adam as a co-laborer, with the missional task to give names for every creature (Genesis 2). Moreover, God may be considered the “Master Musician,” who weaves together major and minor melodies in people’s lives (Philipps 2004, 6).

Psalm 139 reveals that despite God having the propensity to call forth life into being by the sound of his voice, he instead chose a more meticulous process: “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13). The psalmist depicts the unborn as being “woven together” (vs. 15) and declares that God’s thoughts toward humanity are precious (vs. 17), even in people’s unformed state. This passage reveals much about God’s affinity for creating.

The Bible contains many accounts of music, with many implications for music composers. In the book of 1 Chronicles, we learn of the magnitude of musicians who, along with their relatives, were accomplished musicians, and “trained in making music for the Lord” (1 Chronicles 5:17). The Psalms reference numerous instruments by name, and in Colossians, the early church was instructed to “teach and admonish one another

with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude” (Colossians 3:16). While the Bible does not contain explicit instructions about what Christians should sing, Old Testament clues reveal that the response of a hymn or song was often preceded by a Holy Spirit encounter, such as was the case with Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1), the song of Miriam (Exodus 15), and the song of Elizabeth (Luke 1). Scriptural accounts do not specify the extent (or absence) of any formal artistic training in these women, and yet the Holy Spirit inspired poetic expression in them out of the overflow of their hearts, recorded in the scriptures, and passed down through generations.

Skeptical of Beauty vs. Holy Spirit-Inspired

Throughout history, the notion of human senses in relation to worship has been fraught with suspicion (Irwin 2015; Ticker, 2015). Concerned about music’s alleged manipulative and emotional power, these thinkers believed music could overshadow true worship or distract worshipers from God (Ticker, 2015). However, to assume music that appeals to the senses detracts from worship is simplistic; this mentality negates the active, divine, inspirational role the Holy Spirit can have on music creation and composition.

Listening to theology sung can lead to deep spiritual contemplation, connecting hearers directly to God (Greene 2012). In 1741, for example, German-British composer George Frederic Handel wrote his famed *Messiah* in just eighteen days, claiming, “I did think I did see all Heaven before me and the Great God himself” (Dinwiddie 1982). Through music for choir, soloists, and orchestra, Handel’s expansive work brings the biblical accounts of the gospels to life, depicting the mystery of conception, the divineness of the virgin birth, and the sorrow of Christ’s Passion, the wonder of the Resurrection, culminating in a powerful and definitive Amen. In fact, Handel specifically wrote the *Messiah* to be missional, an evangelistic tool to proclaim the gospel on a wide scale; written for the concert hall and theatre instead of the church, *Messiah* transformed “the secular format and style . . . [becoming] the bearer of renewed and refreshed theological reflections” (Greene 2012,14). The inscription “SDG” was written at the end of the music score, an abbreviation for the Latin *Soli Deo Gloria*, “To God, Glory alone.” This music is performed across the world today, more than 300 years later, proclaiming Christ through song. In Communist Vietnam, Handel’s *Messiah* is performed annually at the Hanoi Opera House, despite it being illegal to publicly proclaim Christ in that country, an illustration of how music composition can be missional, penetrate culture, and proclaim Christ in unique and unexpected ways that spoken word may not be able to do.

Biblical Examples of Holy Spirit Outpouring through Song

The Bible explains that out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks (Mathew 12). Throughout scripture, we read of hymns, poems, songs, and exclamations that appear to be direct spiritual outpourings of testimony and glory to God:

- Deborah’s song in Judges 5 features thirty-one verses of song, which the prophetess sang with Barak, son of Abinoam.
- Moses and the Israelites sang a song comprising eighteen verses of Exodus 15, filled with rich imagery, storytelling, and declaration of God’s faithfulness and strength.
- Miriam takes a timbrel and continues in praise of God’s deliverance in the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 15).

- Upon encountering Mary and hearing that she will bear the Christ, Elizabeth becomes suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit, leading to an organic exclamation of praise (Luke 1).
- Mary’s spoken song of praise (Luke) is a response to her learning that she has been chosen by God to carry Jesus.
- Paul and Silas prayed and sang songs while bound in chains in prison (Acts 16:25).

Scripture frequently mentions music, instruments, and singing, yet few specifics indicate what the music was or how it was created. Thus, the creating of music was not necessarily composed as a formal result of academic study, but rather as a natural, organic outpouring inspired by the Holy Spirit. Likewise, these songs above were detailed in their depiction of God, ensuring honor and proclamation of his name now and for future generations.

Hebrews 12:1 depicts the “great cloud of witnesses” in heaven who have gone before us as pioneers and champions in our faith. This includes musicians of the Bible whose written music and testimonies through song are documented in scripture and serve to instruct us today as we grow in our knowledge of God.

Scripture compels Christians to do all that we do to the glory of God (Colossians 3:22). In Hebrews 4:12, Paul tells us that “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (NRSVA). Beyond the utilitarian function of softening hearts and preparing the atmosphere, music is first and foremost gift from God and belongs to him as the Master Creator. It may be used as a powerful means of communicating theology and the gospel message.

Music Composition as Essential for Gospel Proclamation

The sixteenth-century European Reformation saw a great deal of upheaval and turmoil. In this context, music composition was integral to the dissemination of Lutheran theology, leading to a lasting legacy even beyond Luther’s own church (Brubaker 2020). Luther believed that theology and gospel proclamation ought to be in a culture’s vernacular—that is, the language of the people. This led to the creation of new music in languages that people could understand and actively participate in; this was a contrast to the Latin that had traditionally been used in the church (Brubaker 2020). Music as theology was particularly vital, given the illiteracy of the time. Luther’s gospel message through music could be found everywhere: at church, at home, at school, accessible anytime, not only on Sunday morning. In Luther’s time, music became synonymous with the sharing of truth (Brubaker 2020). In fact, Luther’s adversaries were aware of that at the height of the Reformation, for

[t]his was an age when music’s immense affective and persuasive powers were developed as never before, and this in turn generated entirely new and pressing questions about its proper use. Those who tried to curb and control its place in worship did not, as is often thought, have a low view of music. Just the opposite. They were acutely aware of its potency—indeed, its *theological* potency. (Bertoglio 2017, V)

As I mentioned at the start of this article, I have composed music from a young age. However, in the last few years I have experienced a Holy Spirit outpouring of my own, compelling me to write sacred music for individual and corporate worship, as well as sacred and secular music for choirs. One recent publication is a choral piece for youth choir entitled “Perhaps,” that was inspired by the Prayer of St. Francis and the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in Germany in 1989. Although written with a secular text, the piece is laden with biblical themes of forgiveness, redemption, humility, and love for others. When teaching this piece, I have had

deep conversations with my choral students, discussing what it means to live in Christ-like way, putting others above ourselves, living in humility, and seeing others the way Christ intends us to see. In this way, music composition may open doors for discussion about gospel aspects, even in secular settings where Christ's name may not be explicitly preached.

Music Composition in Scripture

The purpose of this article is not to pit music composition against the spoken word to compete for effectiveness in gospel proclamation or missions. However, I want to illustrate and emphasize Scriptural significance of music composition and musical expression as Holy Spirit-inspired and vital for gospel and theological sharing.

The Bible includes many passages that indirectly connect music-making to discipleship and Christian living. Ephesians 5:19 exhorts believers to “Encourage each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord” (ERV). Similarly, Colossians 3:16 says, “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” (NIV). Furthermore, Isaiah 55:11 states that “my word that goes out from my mouth . . . will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (NIV). Isaiah goes on to declare, “you will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands” (NIV). These passages do not say, “Sing music, then switch to spoken word to ensure that the gospel message is heard.” Instead, these passages elevate and ought to reposition music in the minds of believers and the church as sung theology, sung gospel proclamation, sung teaching, sung wisdom, and sung praise. In this way, music composition ought to be considered a natural outpouring, with lasting effect, for the music-maker and music-receiver, all to the glory of God.

Implications for Composers

The potentialities of music composition as sung theology and vital to mission raise many implications for composers, which will now be discussed.

Deliberate Intention

Piper (2010, 56) contended that the gospel message ought to compel believers to rejoice and sing for joy. However, when composers create music only for rejoicing, there is an absence of the full picture of Christ's redemption. Indeed, the Psalms comprise lament, confession, doubt, pain, anguish, as well as redemption, supplication, and thanksgiving. Moreover, composers may use their craft to communicate testimony, such as in Horatio Spafford's “It Is Well with My Soul” and Frances Ridley Havergal's “Take My Life and Let It Be” (Philipps 2003). Christian composers, therefore, ought to hold their music-making craft with great care and faithful stewardship, to intentionally illuminate and express the full spectrum of a faith-filled life, recognizing potential for strong and powerful connection between the Holy Spirit and God's people through the gift of song.

Music That Is Generative

A theology of making is encapsulated in the idea of generating life and newness, much as the Spirit produces

fruit in the life of believers. Close communion with the Spirit enables imagination and connection to heavenly things. Generative creating therefore “bring[s] beauty into a scarcity mindset . . . sowing the seeds of beauty and tilling the hardened soils of culture” (Fujimura 2020, 88). Fujimura believes this will have ramifications not just in the church but also in the wider culture, articulating that “[w]e must recover our call as makers . . . positing the fruit of the Spirit as makers into the next generations” (89). This fruit of the Spirit refers to the qualities mentioned in Galatians 5:22–23, that believers ought to exhibit love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and self-control. However, the urgency of this is that

Christians are seen in culture as promoting hatred instead of love, vindictiveness instead of joy, vilification instead of peace, alarmism instead of patience, discord instead of kindness, racism instead of goodness, prosperity instead of faithfulness, and the imposition of power instead of self-control. (Fujimura 2020, 88)

A mindset that elevates the potential for music creating as sung theology and vital to mission empowers creation of music that generates a tangible encounter with the goodness, love, power, justice, truth, and grace of God.

Creating as Testimony, Vulnerability, and Act of Faith

Humans of all cultural backgrounds have “innate musicality” (Kaschub and Smith 2009, xv). Picasso reportedly said, “Each of us is born an artist, however we need to stay being an artist as we grow up.” In the realm of music education, Kaschub and Smith (2009) contend that all children can and should be encouraged to create and compose music. Applying this to the realm of worship and the Christian life, this would imply that all Christians, regardless of background, perceived ability, or level of training, may be encouraged to create and compose music, out of the overflow of their hearts.

However, just as in Chronicles we read of the training undertaken by musicians for the Lord, and just as we read of the songs of Miriam, Elizabeth, and many others, music composition can take the form of complex music with many stanzas and instruments, yet it can also be simple as a natural and organic outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Regardless, repositioning music composition as Holy Spirit–bestowed, and an essential expression of faith, provides impetus for the idea of music as sung theology and vital for mission to be explored more fully.

Prayerful Submission

James 1:17 states that “[e]very good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights” (NIV). Christian composers, therefore, are compelled to recognize these gifts, and use them for the glory of God (Irwin 2015). Likewise, Proverbs 16 states that when we commit our ways to the Lord, we will succeed. Therefore, Christian composers are called upon to commit their creation of music to the Lord, that the music they make may be used by God, and that creative efforts may be multiplied for his glory, bringing hearts to him. Likewise, Christians and musicians alike may prayerfully seek the Lord for wisdom and sensitivity to discern through the Holy Spirit what kind of music to make, what aspects of faith to illuminate and express, and for what purpose.

Inspired Artistry by Examining the Psalms

The book of Psalms contains the most chapters of any book of the Bible: 150 chapters laden with songs that may

provide a template for music composers, such as the use of eloquent vocabulary, rich imagery, incorporation of poetry, and use of story. Music composition may therefore provide metaphor and allegory for faith and may also provide fresh messages of truth (Troeger 2013). Likewise, the Psalms feature a variety of instruments. Kurek (2019) contended that “God has lovingly given us very beautiful materials and is in them and sustains their existence at every moment, and so we have a responsibility to use them to make the finest art of which we are capable, with right intentions” (26). Thus, music composition for corporate worship, or for mission does not need to be limited to trends of the modern age. Instead, elements of music, including melody, harmony, rhythm, pitch, articulation, and timbre, all have the capacity to contribute (Troeger 2013) and may be culturally nuanced according to contextual details such as instruments, style, language, tone, and tonality.

Enriched by Theology

The present day calls for restored engagement with scripture, theology, and tradition, as well as perspectives and expressions of theology that are generative and procreative (Corbett 2017). This correlates to Psalms 96 and 98, which speak of singing to the Lord a “new” song. The psalmist appeared to understand that human beings appreciate variety and do not benefit from stagnation. Psalms are varied, comprising diverse themes of lament, joy, suffering, supplication, thanksgiving. Composers of music must be cognizant of the potential they have to breathe freshness into the gospel message, being diligent to ensure they have vetted their music to be theologically sound and consistent with what the Bible teaches.

Furthermore, Hebrews 11:1 describes faith as being “sure of what we hope for, being convinced of what we do not see” (NET). In this way, composers must display courage and faith as they step out in faith, believing that God will meet them in their endeavors and guide them as they create (Fujimura 2020). When composers engage with scripture, tradition, and theology in fresh ways, they outwardly display courageous trust and obedience, which can breathe new vitality into the Christian faith.

Mutually Aligned Text and Music

Palestrina’s choral works, such as *Sicut Cervus*, feature soaring melodies, rich harmony, and counterpoint to bring to life the sacred texts on which they’re based. The Latin text of *Sicut Cervus* comes from Psalm 42:1–2, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (NIV). As a choral director, I marvel at how each vocal part contributes a winding, longing aspect in the melodic line of each phrase. In this way, the listener is drawn in to a sense of longing and yearning that is realized only as the piece comes to a gentle and delicate end. Thus, composers, spurred on by rich texts, can contribute to gospel proclamation, sung theology, and spiritual growth of believers and nonbelievers through the music they create.

Sharing of Testimony

A theology of music composition as mission positions the writing and creating of music as natural, biblical, and meritorious for mission, having the propensity to point people to Christ, regardless of perceived cultural barriers. I experienced this while living in Southeast Asia, through a house concert I held at my home for cellists of a local symphony orchestra. When the formal part of the concert concluded, the performers invited informal performances from anyone who wanted to share with the audience. Since I was hosting the concert at my home,

I was asked to go first. I had recently written a piece inspired by Philippians 4:8, and I sang these words in the first verse:

All of my sin; all of my pride
 I give you, Jesus; I want to be holy
 May the words of my mouth be pleasing to you, my God
 May the deeds of my hands, carry out Your commands
 May the thoughts in my life be blameless and pure
 May my faith in You be strong and sure
 May You be glorified in my life.

Following the concert, a number of nationals of that country, many of whom did not speak English and none of whom had heard sacred music or experienced the gospel, told me they were deeply moved by the music. One young man said, “I had never heard the name Jesus until you sang it tonight. Now I would like to learn more.” In this way, composers of music have a tremendous privilege to co-labor with Christ through song, to teach, encourage, and inspire others, and to lift up the name of Christ in unique and often unexpected ways, regardless of cultural context or background.

Seeking to Edify

Scripture says that after God created, he saw that it was good. When he created humanity, he declared it as very good. Worshiping God through song should bring great joy; composers should create music that is enjoyable to sing, play, and hear. Kurek (2020) suggests that music, as well as lyrics, ought to “exhibit some aspect of virtue, edification, beauty, truth, excellence, or goodness” (53). This does not imply that music and lyrics must be in a perpetually sonorous state of joy, but rather that darkness and tension in music exemplify the redemptive gospel by likewise providing tonal resolution. This was observed in medieval times by mystic Hildegard von Bingen, whose visions from God and writings on divine proportions illuminated the complexity, symmetry, and precision of creation that points to a divine Creator. Composers can deliberately craft moments of tension and relief according to the types of sounds they use—not creativity for the sake of thoughtless originality, but rather, for the glory of God, the edification of the body, and ministering to unbelievers. Pope John Paul II argued:

Society needs artists, just as it needs scientists, technicians, workers, professional people, witnesses of the faith, teachers, fathers and mothers, who ensure the growth of the person and the development of the community. . . . Obedient to their inspiration in creating works worthwhile and beautiful, they not only enrich the cultural heritage of each nation and of all humanity, but they also render an exceptional social service in favor of the common good. (Kevar 2019, 66).

Composers can embrace their gifts and calling as cultural contributors, to bring edification to the body of Christ, point others to him, instruct in theology, and bring glory to God.

Conclusion

As I finish writing this, I have just returned to my hotel room following the opening session of a conference for the African Region of the education mission TeachBeyond, in Johannesburg, South Africa. About two hundred delegates from across the African continent were led in worship by South African nationals, with voices, instruments, shouts, claps, and dance. All were united in praise, testimony, and supplication to God, with

humbleness, thanksgiving, and joy. Then our Congolese national director came to the stage with fellow Congolese teachers to sing a song they had composed to commemorate our gathering tonight, to unite our hearts as a community of Christian educators committed to transforming lives for Christ through education. The Congolese choir sang in French with rich harmony, the text of their music pointing to Christ as the ultimate transformer, and to us as mere vessels, privileged to co-labor with Christ in mission. As I marveled at the music I beheld this evening and its impact on all who attended, it dawned on me that this encapsulated what music composition should do: Regardless of language, culture, music style, or even time period, Christian music composition can help unite the body of Christ, facilitate the declaration of his glory, disciple through the teaching of theology and truth proclamation, and point individuals and communities to Christ. I close with a recent hymn I wrote. As Christian composers, may we pray toward this end as we commit our endeavors to him:

God Be in My Head

God be in my head and in my understanding;
God be in mind eyes and in my sight
God be in my mouth and in my speaking
God be in my head and in my thinking.

O Father, hold me close; the world around is raging
Protect and keep me securely
Hold me in Your love that I may know
Your presence overwhelming

O Jesus make me yours in all my imperfections
In all my weakness You make me strong
Oh Lord, deliver and set me free
So I can live with you in Glory

O Spirit lead me on amid my weary body
My heart is heavy; my mind distressed
Fill me with goodness and lift my head
So I can live to show your Glory

O God, be near me 'til my end as I am frail and dying
And soon departing this earthly home
Awake or sleeping be by my side
'Til I arise with You in Glory. Amen

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