

# The Real Problem With Christian Music Isn't That It's Overly Repetitive

There are those of us who cringe and bristle at the modern “praise and worship” music that has invaded churches of every Western denomination in the United States: guitar masses, contemporary services, happy-clappy praise bands, worship teams, big TV screens. One of our regular criticisms is that, in this “contemporary” format, the same words are repeated over and over, at length, and this is somehow proof that we are right to abhor the aforementioned.

This is a misleading criticism.

Listening to J.S. Bach's *St. John Passion* (a Holy Week tradition I stumbled upon years ago) I was struck by this thought: The question is not whether there is repetition in sacred music, but what words are repeated – and how.

There are 36 bars of music played in “*Herr, unser Herrscher*” (the opening chorale of *St. John Passion*) before one word is sung. Thirty-six devastating bars that exquisitely convey the drudgery of the coming long night of humiliation and morning of agony, the sinister machinations of the devil, the purity and innocence and steadfastness of the Sufferer – all of this building toward the massive crescendo that leads to the chorus's cry of “Lord!” (“*Herr!*”). Actually, it's “Lord! Lord! Lord!,” and this prayerful exclamation is repeated – and repeated, and repeated.

But it is repeated in polyphony, with multiple lines ascending and descending and intersecting. This is the height of drama, musically and lyrically, befitting the greatest story ever told, the truest of true myth (because it happened in real space-time), the only hope for fallen man, the redemption of

the world.

*"Herr, unser Herrscher"* is one of several chorales and arias that JSB interspersed among the narrative recitatives, which are straight from the text of the Bible. Most of these chorales and arias are interpretive reflections on the preceding texts of Scripture. But the introductory chorus stands alone, sets the tone, gives us the right mental and emotional framework for what we're about to hear.

And it's a humdinger of a text, which translates (loosely):

Lord, our ruler, Whose fame  
In every land is glorious!  
Show us, through Thy passion,  
That Thou, the true Son of God,  
Through all time,  
Even in the greatest humiliation,  
Have become transfigured!

That last line, *"Verherrlicht worden bist,"* as conveyed musically after a pregnant pause following the words "greatest humiliation," is profoundly magnificent. Somehow the mood is changed from a doleful lament to a flint-faced triumph, without losing the the gravitas required for the arrest, trial, torture, and crucifixion of Jesus – events presently to be explored.

Music can convey such things.

What is said is important. This is not a therapeutic, personalist retelling of Christ's Passion, one that would suggest the Lord of Glory was mutilated and executed so that I might find personal fulfillment on my terms, a purpose-driven life, salvation from modern angst, success, inspiration for virtue-signaling, a cultural focal point for the triumph of my race. This is a bold confession of faith that is in harmony with the Church of all ages, asleep and alive. Doctrinally rich, textual, yet passionate. Not personalist, but intensely

personal, as the beautiful aria "*Ich folge dir gleichfalls*" ("I follow Thee likewise") immediately reflects on the recitative text of John 18:15: "Simon Peter, however, followed after Jesus with another disciple." Yes, I will follow Him to the cross, but only because He is drawing me, bidding me. ("*Selbst an mir zu ziehen, zu schieben, zu bitten.*")

*How it is said* is equally important. Yes, the *St. John Passion* is sacred music composed for performance – a performance financed and advertised by the Leipzig city council, mid-18th century, a fact that ought to fire both humiliation and invention in the imaginations of us modern Americans, who titter over the absolute separation of church and state, as if this anti-Christian Enlightenment principle were somehow handed down from the gods, and any denial of it is the equivalent of *sharia* in the New World. But here we must meditate on the folly of our ridiculous and disingenuous defensive claim that every musical style and taste is equally valid, that there is no objective standard of beauty when it comes to the music I dig. Pythagoras knew that harmony is part of creation, and that the relationships between notes, mathematically measurable, convey different moods and shape our consciousness. Anyone who has heard a police siren already believes this, and knows instinctively something about dissonance and the human psyche. Augustine knew this, too, as did Martin Luther, JSB's theologian *par excellence*.

True, different cultures have different musical traditions; but all of them are evaluated by objective standards present in nature, accessible by all. A shriek conveys something, whether it comes out of the mouth of an orangutan or a dog or a Democratic presidential candidate. So does a sultry moan, whether in the bedroom or interspersed between lines of "God Bless America" before a ballgame.

We call them "mourning doves" for a reason.

Today, Christian music is composed in the aesthetic idiom of

entertainment – specifically, amusement, which is to say deception. It is a kind of self-deception to equate religious piety or affections with the feeling that any other concertgoer feels and expresses with the same gestures – swaying to the beat, eyes closed, hands raised in adoration of the performer. It is an unconscious aesthetic formed by the producers of major record labels who cater to the primitive tastes of consumers, executives answerable ultimately to the shareholders of corporations.

What sells is what gratifies with the minimum amount of effort. Here there is *no muse*, no “muzzling” of the mind and heart to focus on the sacred. Here there is nothing sacred. There are only god-words and sentimental feelings, connected not by nature or mind but by a sheer act of the will.

Add a big glowing screen, the “big bright green pleasure machine,” and the brain is even freer to float away from the mind. You can’t help but stare at it, like the 48 screens on the wall in a sports bar, or the one in your hand at the dinner table. It’s the sort of thing that kills an attention span before the 36 bar introduction is halfway finished, or the sermon even begins. (Bach built a break into the *St. John Passion*, after Peter’s denial, so that a sermon could be preached.)

Repetition, as any classical educator knows, is not only acceptable but necessary. But the repetition of a true word (*logos*, reason) is not merely for effect, a mantra chanted to bring focus somehow by disengaging the mind. Repetition permeates the mind and the imagination with conscious reality, a reality that is ordered by its Creator. (“Language is sermonic,” wrote Richard Weaver.) The Fall, for which Christ paid with His Passion, brought disorder to creation, disharmony to the created order, a chaos to man’s dominion that reflected the disharmony of a human race that was made to reflect the image of God, yet brazenly disobeyed Him.

In singing of the restoration of all things wrought by Christ's Passion – a message worth repeating every year and every day – shouldn't we strive to reflect reality?

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