

# Music in Life

Review by Edith Marie Land

*The Christian and His Music*

by Paul Hamel

Review and Herald, 159 pp., \$3.25

In this work, Paul Hamel, chairman of the music department at Andrews University, has "sought to present information that will make the reader more keenly aware of music's power and importance and that will assist him in developing a personal Christian philosophy regarding its use." Within the limits of his purpose, the author succeeds in provoking thought, but he could have made a greater contribution had he asked other questions of his subject.

After noting the omnipresence of music in modern life, Hamel examines music's effect upon the emotions. Drawing upon psychological studies, he argues that "music releases certain kinds of feelings or emotions, and . . . these feelings affect thoughts that prompt behavior. . . ." He believes these effects result both from the music itself and its lyrics and associations. From this standpoint, he discusses church music, opera and rock, and touches folk music and jazz briefly.

Because he believes that the greater the music the more adequately it can communicate truth, the author prefers hymns in church worship and gives a list of technical criteria for judging superior and inferior hymn tunes. He allows traditional gospel music a secondary place as an

expression of personal experience but frowns on the use of contemporary folk and popular styles. As for opera, he finds the plots emphasizing "violence, passion and love." Therefore, "a sincere Christian would not habituate the operatic theatre." Rock music, however, receives his severest condemnation because of its big beat, sexuality, aggression and its association with drugs and social protest, among other factors. "Much of what can be said about rock 'n roll is true also of jazz," he states. "Its music is often extremely sensual, and the lyrics primarily immoral."

Hamel also offers practical suggestions concerning the use of music. In his chapter on music in the home, he discusses the age at which a child is ready to take music lessons and how to find a good music teacher. And he suggests the means of incorporating new hymns into a church service in order to widen a congregation's repertoire. The book concludes with guidelines for attending concerts, building a record library, and establishing music standards for one's own home.

Although the author contends "that to hear music is to respond to it," he documents only the fact that music affects emotions, not that it directly shapes behavior. Of the psychological studies he refers to, only two date from the 1960s, while the others are from the 1930s and 1940s. Furthermore, none of them seem to make a connection between particular styles of music and particular emotions. When it comes to rock music, the author relies heavily on *Time* magazine rather than psychological works. Because of these documentary limitations and because much of what he says is undocumented, his case

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regarding music and behavior remains to be proved.

Hamel's judgments also seem to be shaped by his belief that only serious and sacred music are worthwhile. For example, he says, "Musically educated people tire of popular music more quickly than do those who are not so well educated, and conversely, they tend to have an increasingly pleasurable experience upon repeated performances of serious music." Classically trained individuals such as conductors Arthur Fiedler and Leonard Bernstein and critic Henry Pleasants would strongly disagree with the first part of this statement, for they recognize that popular music plays a different function from serious music. But more importantly, the author's prejudice against popular music prevents him from exploring whether entertainment music can play a legitimate role in the life of a Christian. On the other hand, his assumption of serious music's worth keeps him from discussing, apart from opera, whether one must use discrimination in that realm.

Nor is the author's case strengthened by his tendency to use extreme examples to support his views regarding opera and rock. After summarizing the plots of several popular operas he concludes that "tragedy, passion, illicit love and violent death are very essential ingredients in successful operas." He does not address the social and political contexts of these operas which are necessary to a complete understanding. Neither does he ask whether there is a legitimate place in the arts for these elemental aspects of the drama of human existence. After all, we do not condemn the Bible even though such acts fill its pages. Simply to include such things, even as subjects, is not necessarily to glorify them. A fuller examination of Christian esthetic principles in relation to this problem is much needed.

In examining rock music, Hamel refers to such extreme examples of hard rock as the

Doors, Jefferson Airplane, Rolling Stones and Janis Joplin. He has no difficulty arguing the association of drugs and sex with the life-style and music of these musicians. But he gives little attention to the varieties of rock from soft to acid and bubblegum to soul. Therefore, his analysis bears little apparent applicability to the music of such groups as the Osmonds, Carpenters and Simon and Garfunkel. But apart from lyrics and life-style, he also argues that rock music is sensual and, therefore, bad. He does not explain, however, what makes music sensual and why sensuality in itself is necessarily bad. Such a point needs discussion for it applies to serious as well as popular music. Also, the author does not ask to what extent crowd psychology, rather than the music, might explain some of the audience behavior he criticizes.

Finally, Hamel reveals his biases in his use of highly colored language that does little to advance understanding. For example, rock groups have devoted themselves to Jesus Rock, "asking the God of heaven to indulge in religious baby talk with them." Admired jazzmen of the 1960s played "to the accompaniment of booze and dark lust in big-city nightclubs. The alarms of the concerned were drowned in the moral cesspools of popular jazz." "All that seems to count is the new sound and its murderous mood." Although appearing most frequently in the chapter on rock, such statements occur throughout the book.

As the publishers note on the cover, "One of the most controversial areas in practical Christianity is that of music." Although *The Christian and His Music* does not resolve the controversy, it should provoke further thought and study. Such study should include both laboratory testing of music's psychological and behavioral effects and development of a Christian philosophy of aesthetics. Had such work supported the arguments in this book its contribution would be more substantive and lasting.