

## In Tune with God by Lillianne Doukhan

A REVIEW BY KEN PARSONS

Doukhan, Lillianne. *In Tune with God*. (Hagerstown, MD: Autumn House/Review & Herald Publishing Co., 2010).

As a musically voracious teenager in the 70s—with a strong interest in my faith, I read everything I could find published by the church on music. However, the general tenor of most of it bothered me, condemning as it did entire genres of music as evil—insidiously inflicting spiritual, moral, and even physical harm on all who dared listen. In 1983 as a capstone project for the honors program at Walla Walla College, I wrote a paper titled “A History of Appropriateness in Protestant Church Music.” What I discovered was that controversy over church music has been brewing, and in many cases boiling over, for hundreds of years. The project gave me an even greater sense that music’s reputation had been unjustly besmirched by many church writers, and left me with an abiding interest in books on music, the mind, and spirit.

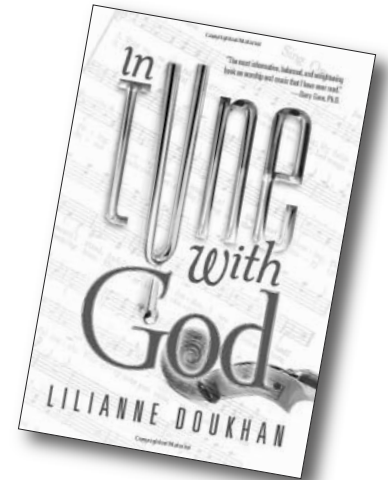
Hence, I was anxious to read Lillianne Doukhan’s new book, *In Tune with God*. I was delighted to find the book impeccably researched, carefully thought out, and clearly and convincingly written. While the entire book has much to recommend it, I’d like to focus on Doukhan’s efforts to restore music’s good name.

A cardinal argument made by earlier writers is that certain rhythms, chords, as well as entire genres of popular music, are at best “damaged goods” and more likely, simply evil. This notion always struck me as somehow Gnostic in its equating a part of the created order with evil. During the Middle Ages, the church adamantly denounced the interval of the tritone (three

whole steps) as *diabolus en musica*—“the Devil in music”—and forbade its use. With time, this prohibition faded, and today every hymn on every page of every Christian hymnal contains tritones.

In spite of many similar prohibitions that have eventually wilted, commentators have continued to rail against the “evils” of various instruments and genres. Doukhan incisively traces this objection to the Greek doctrine of “ethos” and the Platonic view of the spiritual world as the only true reality. Music was held to be a sign of this spiritual reality, and was therefore able to effect spiritual and emotional changes in listeners. Musical scales felt to upset listeners’ emotional equilibrium were banned by the Greeks (47–52). Doukhan contrasts this philosophy with the biblical perspective: the power to transform lives belongs not to created objects or elements, but only to the Holy Spirit (53). Unlike the Greeks who conceived of good and evil as residing in concepts such as harmony and dissonance, biblical writers describe good and evil as obedience or disobedience to the law of God (54). Doukhan quotes Jesus’ statement in Mark 7:15: “Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’” When it comes to music though, as Doukhan details, church leaders—right down to our own day—have tended to side with Plato and Aristotle rather than Jesus and Paul.

So is Doukhan saying that music is neutral, completely powerless? Certainly not. “The real power of music lies in its ability to transform a



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Lillianne Doukhan

given situation, namely, to intensify, to beautify, to stimulate, to create associations, and to build community” (62). In my experience, and Doukhan’s as well, I’m guessing, it is the associative phenomenon that is most powerful in shaping human response to music. We all have specific associations with individual pieces of music; for me, “Day is Dying in the West” will forever conjure up vivid images of Sabbath vespers in the Walla Walla College Church, while

1 Corinthians 8 and 10 in this connection, suggesting that substituting musical terms for food-related terms will help us see the relevant application: “One man’s faith allows him to listen to [eat] everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, listens only to a particular style [eats only vegetables]. The man who listens to [eats] everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not listen to [eat] everything must not condemn the man



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“A Bicycle Built for Two” reminds me of my son as a three-year-old (he learned to sing it at day-care!). Many of us have shared associations: Elgar’s “Pomp and Circumstance” March No. 1 reminds us of countless graduations, while Tchaikovsky’s “1812 Overture” evokes Fourth of July fireworks. Entire genres of music have been linked in this fashion to various activities.

For many in my grandparents’ and parents’ generations, jazz was and always will be the music of bars and brothels and therefore unacceptable for Christian enjoyment. For nearly all of my students, though, it’s just another style to be explored and enjoyed. All of us, however, must recognize that these associations, while personally intense, are probably intensely personal—your mileage may vary. In addition, even widely held communal associations may change over time, as the circumstances previously linked with a piece or a style change. With concerted effort, associations may even be deliberately changed. Because of these factors, all of us must think and act charitably toward those with different associative constructs than our own.

Doukhan aptly cites Romans 14 and 15, and

who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant?” (Romans 14:2–4). “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Corinthians 8:9). “So whether you [sing or play] or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, . . . even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved” (10:31–33) (122, 123).

Having established that music (or any of its constituent elements) has no inherent moral qualities, but can be marshaled to reinforce either good or evil, Doukhan cites the varied efforts of church leaders through the ages to advance the gospel through music. She finds the most positive, energetic example in the ministry of Martin Luther. Luther used music for evangelism, worship, and community-building through his many chorales. Based almost entirely on pre-existing musical materials (only three out of over 170 are original in both tune and text), Luther’s chorales are predominantly upbeat, rhythmic and joyous, with over 25 percent containing syn-

copation (174). According to Doukhan, Luther had no concept of sacred or secular music—all music was potentially useful in spreading the gospel (181, 182). While he retooled contemporary popular music for worship, he also vigorously held on to earlier church music, wanting to maintain connection with the church of the past.

In the final section of the book, Doukhan addresses the current state of church music, and offers helpful suggestions for churches wishing

finding pieces that are “truthful”—lyrics that not only have “theological correctness, but [also] depth, meaningfulness, directness, and poetic quality” and music that is “well articulated, flowing freely, and able to carry a message clearly” (227, 229). The discrimination to make this kind of choice is often in short supply, but is vital if church music of any genre is to be truly meaningful. This sifting must be done whenever one is confronted with new music—there’s far



to maintain (or regain) a vibrant musical ministry. While much of the book lays the groundwork for accepting contemporary popular styles within the worship service, Doukhan is clear that she—like Luther—sees tremendous value in retaining traditional styles as well. Her experience resonates with my own that while students enjoy and are blessed by contemporary worship music (CWM), they do not want traditional music to be excluded. Too often, those in charge of planning services, in a desire to be relevant, focus exclusively on contemporary styles. However, in their quest to break free from the “monotony” of traditional church music, they simply substitute one monotony for another. A blended service will meet the eclectic tastes of most youth, and give many older members opportunities to be gracious.

Doukhan does mention several challenges in utilizing contemporary worship music: frequent lack of musical training, amateurish technological support, the ease of slipping into entertainment mode, the possibility of emotional manipulation, and keeping one’s attitude and ego in check. She also discusses the challenge of

more junk than gems out there. For this reason in part, contemporary worship music often pales dramatically in comparison with established hymns. The hymnal is a collection of gems—pieces that have stood the test of time. There have undoubtedly been hundreds of hymns every bit as hackneyed as that praise chorus you can’t stand, but thankfully they’ve been swept up in history’s dustbin. It will take years for a serious repertory of “contemporary” worship music to be amassed, and by that time, there will a new genre pressing for inclusion.

*In Tune with God* is a must-read for those even remotely involved in planning or presenting worship services, and for anyone wishing to learn more about the sometimes turbulent saga of church music. We all owe Lilianne Doukhan a debt of gratitude. ■

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