

## WHAT IS THE BEST MUSIC FOR WORSHIP?

One of the phrases in CMI's mission statement is that CMI tries in all we do to use the "best" of sacred music, remembering that we also aim to be "Informed by the past, Committed to the present, and Preparing for the future." So what is the "best" music?

No one would likely argue that God deserves what we offer in worship to be less than our best. What is the best? It is not an easy answer. All church music must function in a particular environment at a particular time, and with the resources at hand. The "best" can represent the finest craft at any given point. Time helps to sift what is best, that which is lasting.

Dallas composer and church musician, Jane Marshall, was also a deeply theological thinker.\* She gave an example of the difference between a plastic spoon and a sterling spoon in thinking about good church music. Both spoons function equally well, and for her, the plastic spoon was much more practical when she traveled and wanted ice cream on the road. Would she pass a plastic spoon onto her children? Not likely. . .

Jane Marshall then goes on to identify at least four characteristics of quality to apply to good music:

- Universality. Good music speaks across locations and cultures. Chinese folk melodies, tribal Kenyan dances, Mozart in Tokyo, spirituals are examples of music that crosses boundaries. A plastic spoon will break in all but soft foods; sterling will not.
- Timelessness. The same characteristics in chant from medieval times are present in Bach, Duke Ellington, shape-note melodies, and American folks tunes. A sterling spoon will function across generations.
- Involvement of the whole person. Good music will appeal to body, mind, and spirit--not only one of those elements. If it is only intellectual it is hard to become a good friend. If it is only emotional it will not last. A sterling spoon satisfies not only a practical purpose but it has lasting aesthetic qualities.
- Ability to speak uniquely. Good music functions in an almost undefined way that cannot be duplicated. Sometimes we call this inspiration or genius. It is what we aspire to in planning for worship: *transcendence*.

Jane Marshall goes on to say it takes time to learn what is the finest of music. Only prolonged exposure can hone the skills required to identify universality, timelessness, ability to capture a total human response, and the uniqueness of any piece of music. People with these skills are who CMI gathers repeatedly, to reach for the "best."

One more important aspect of church music, and one that is vitally important to how Church Music Institute functions is ACCESSIBILITY. Accessible music and good music are compatible criteria. Good music can be accessible to everyone.

In order for church music to work in any one time or place and for any gathered group of people, it has to be accessible as a vehicle for worship. How is that determined? By the good judgment and knowledge of the clergy and musicians in that congregation who understand what will be possible for the congregation. They will know what music is immediately accessible, and how to prepare for any other music.

What does this mean for Church Music Institute? It means all of our music must be categorized so worship planners can find music for their particular congregation. That is how our libraries are built! With many search criteria, a congregation of any size and resources can be served with the “best” music to worship God for their time and place.

\*Jane Marshall. *Grace Noted*. Carol Stream, IL. Hope Publishing, 1992.