

The Basic Elements of Music

This discussion concerns the elements of music. What are the basic building blocks of music? What elements are needed to make good music, and how should they be balanced?

Three Elements

Music is comprised of three parts: Melody, Harmony, and Rhythm which correspond to the three natures of man: Spiritual, Mental, and Physical.

1. **Melody** – Melody is the message of the music, and should occupy the same place and quality as the spiritual nature of man.

Ephesians 5

¹⁹ Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and *making melody in your heart to the Lord.*

2. **Harmony** – Harmony is a mathematical relationship of different notes to the melody note. These added notes enhance and emphasize the meaning of the melody, just as the talents and gifts of man's mental nature are used to enhance the message written in the inner man, that is, in the spiritual nature.
3. **Rhythm** – Rhythm is the foundation of music, which gives it its regularity and order, just as the law is the foundation of the government of God. Ellen White often refers to the physical nature as the "lower nature" (like the foundation of a building), and it is this nature which contains the natural heart that pulses and regulates the body with the orderly flow of blood.

Note: Some people have mentioned that music contains other elements, such as Tone, Tempo, Dynamics, and Presentation, but these more properly belong to the *performance* of music, rather than its basic elements. Also, this discussion is not dealing with the Text or Lyrics of a Song. These are all important as well, but out of the scope of this article.

Proper Order

In order for music to glorify God, these three parts—Melody, Harmony, and Rhythm—should be kept in perfect balance and working order, just as the different parts of man’s nature were to be balanced in order for him to accurately represent the image of God in which he was created. This order is:

1. Spiritual first
2. Mental next
3. Physical after

So it is to be with godly music:

1. Melody should be first and foremost;
2. Harmony is next important, and is subservient to the melody;
3. Rhythm is the last. Like the old saying that “children should be seen and not heard,” so, as a general rule, rhythm should be “implied and not stated.” There is no need in godly music to assert, pound out, or otherwise make of greater importance, the rhythm. It is like the foundation of a house: definitely needed, but best kept out of sight.

Modern music, just like modern man, reverses this order so that Rhythm is given the prominent part, melody is often used to convey an evil message, and harmony is distorted or not balanced.

The effect of putting the physical nature over the mental or spiritual, can best be described by one term: selfishness.

Jesus Christ established His religion on self-denial, and self-sacrifice. The lower nature is subservient to the higher, which is in turn subservient to the will of God. How important then, that any music purporting to honor or represent Him, be ordered and regulated with proper balance.

Music since the Advent Awakening

In the mid-1800's, a worldwide warning was given in the Advent message, based on the prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation, especially *Daniel* 8:14, and *Revelation* 14:6-12.

In America, the message was first announced by William Miller. But there were similar warning messages raised in England and Scotland (Edward Irving), Chile (Manuel de La-cunza), Switzerland (Louis Gaussen), Germany (Brugel, Leonard Kelber, John Albert Bengel), Holland (Hentzepeter), Sweden and Norway (child preachers), and Asia and Africa (Joseph Wolff).

The aim of that message was to prepare a people ready to meet Christ at His coming. Just as John the Baptist “prepared the way” for the Messiah, by bringing a message of repentance and reform, so before Christ's second coming, there was also to be a similar message, bringing a similar result.

The purpose of the Advent message was to produce the following kind of people:

Revelation 14

¹² Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.

The description of “keeping the commandments” refers to a law-abiding people, whose hearts are in harmony with the principles of God's law, as applied to the inner man, and who walk in an orderly way.

But to a large extent, that message was rejected.

The rejection of that message of holiness, then, would produce the opposite kind of effect. Men would become more evil and devious in their inner man, and would cast off law, order, and restraint. In short, it means the breakdown of society.

It is not to be expected that people who cast off law and order are going to admit that they are doing this. Law-breaking does not produce honest people. Instead, these people would “feel” like they had discovered new kind of freedom...the free-

dom to “do what I want,” and “follow my dreams.”

Man’s music is simply a reflection of who he is, and where he is at. The breakdown of law and order in society would be expressed in the music that such a society produced.

And so it is that since the warning of the Advent near, in the mid-1800’s, man’s music has taken a distinct and definite downturn.

In the late 1800’s, Classical music began to deteriorate with the increasing use of fierce and often unpredictable climaxes, unlovely (or non-existent!) melodies, and dissonance. This use of dissonance laid the foundation for Jazz music, a music best described as “the art of dissonance.” Modern Classical music seeks to cast off restraint, to ignore well-formed rules, to make a mockery of order and regularity.

It was also around this period that Ragtime music was invented. This was the first educated attempt to apply syncopation (off-beat rhythms) in a scientific manner, in order to propel the music. Syncopated music is actually “out-of-step” with the regular Rhythm. Again, it is a casting off of the restraint imposed by natural rhythm.

The effect of syncopated Rhythm on humans tends to also make them cast off restraint, and give reign to the lower nature. When Ragtime was first introduced, one observer noted that “people began to twitch uncontrollably.” Whereas before, rhythm was held in submission and restrained, now it was to move into a more and more dominating role. While enslaving men, it would appear as a great liberator. This is well expressed in the words of a recent pop song:

Oh, give me the beat, boys, and free my soul
I wanna get lost in your rock and roll and drift away.

This innovation of syncopated rhythm bore fruit in other styles: Swing, Blues, Rhythm and Blues, Pop, and finally Rock. The experiment with modifying the laws of rhythm, which at first seemed rather harmless, and was even exciting in a way,

led to wilder and wilder innovations, until rhythm was pounded out at great volume, and music became a trance-inducing, hypnotic force. The unhealthy effects of this imbalance can be seen in many modern concerts.

Quite apart from the lyrics, the music itself contains a message. The message is: “do what you want,” “follow your feelings,” “let your impulses lead.” The lyrics often chosen to accompany this kind of music convey the same message, so that music and words suit each other well in one unholy union.

Modern musical forms that distort the natural order and balance of music thereby teach and promote one thing: Lawlessness.

Glorifying God

Revelation 14

⁷ ...Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment is come.

Music should glorify God in its structure as well as its lyrics. That does not mean that all music must have words, it simply means that the principles of God’s order and kingdom should be revealed in the order and beauty of the music, just as nature reveals God without having visible scriptures written all over the leaves!

Those people preparing for the return of Christ will show their return to law, order, balance, and restraint, in the music they produce. They will leave behind the unholy ways of the world, and build upon a firm foundation again.