

Music speaks to each generation

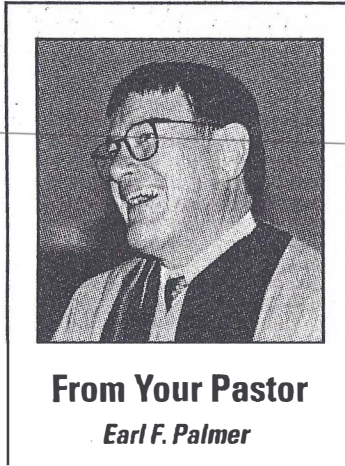
Why has music taken on such importance in our contemporary culture and especially within youth culture? Popular music that is highly focused and consciously directed toward a specific age group, namely the younger person in the society as a whole, has been an increasingly important cultural force in the second half of this century. The power of this almost immediate communication has staggering implications culturally, politically and spiritually.

The music we hear is itself never static or fixed and it continues to evolve, but what stays constant is its importance to the generation that listens to it. We who want to understand youth in America will make a serious mistake if we underestimate the importance that music represents to the teenager today. Every survey of youth values and opinion has revealed that music is for most youth the single most treasured input into their daily lives.

The generational directedness of music began during the years of World War II as song writers and performers “spoke” to the young men and women who were fighting for their country during those crisis years. Those songs of the 1940s were highly focused and their lyrics all related in one way or another to a very definite age with a shared worry and a shared hope. That focusing trend has continued and become even more consciously and tightly directed to very special groups of people, not only age but race and life style advocacy as well.

What does all of this mean? First, our feelings for music are directly tied to our feelings about ourselves. Music is both a *bond* and a *fence*. Music bonds together those persons who know and appreciate the unique rhythms, sounds and lyrics of their music and thereby provides an inner circle of knowing companions; but at the same moment that bond is a fence of protection against a larger unknowing circle. The music box and the personal “walkman” therefore provide both a secret and an enjoyable time of inner place and privacy, and for those other friends who understand the tempo and sounds, music becomes a means of community. Music is a secret to be kept and, at the same time, a language of communication.

My own experience determines what I like, but when



others are able to understand, then my music becomes *our* music. It is then that a single tune becomes a folk song, a patriotic song, or when a lyric of personal conviction about God’s grace becomes a Christian hymn. Communities large and small are created by many building blocks and one of the most durable of these is music.

Wherever songs are sung they tell a story about who we are: songs at a campfire, songs at a school game, songs in a church, songs at an Olympic award ceremony, songs in a car radio, songs when everyone is cheering, songs when our hearts are breaking, songs in the night at home, even songs in prison. Music is ours to fully own and at the same moment, it is a marvelously rich gift that we share with others.

What are the generations to do when they cannot really understand or feel that certain resonance at the sounds of another generation’s music? I have two suggestions that appear to take opposite directions.

First I believe it is important to preserve for each other person that privilege that Paul Tournier calls “the right to keep my secret.” This means that we who desire to know and communicate with people who live in another time and place zone must respect the mystery and secret of that neighbor’s own place. We cannot force our way into the inner solitude of any other human being, even of the people we love very much.

Second, while “very inquisitive people rarely hear secrets” [Tournier], almost every human being wants to share good secrets and music is one of our own best secrets. The role of a trans-generational or trans-cultural friend is to try to know and learn how to listen, and to respect the music of other

cultures and other generations. Since music is the most easily shared secret between people and cultures, we might very wisely begin our efforts of cross-cultural communication with music.

Music is a marker that reveals a part of a whole story about the feelings in our conscious and subconscious personhood; the music in my life will tell the story I am living. Music voices our fears and our anger just as it expresses our love and faith. Music is sometimes saddening and melancholy but it can also be joyous and the language of hope. Some songs are violent but others are tender. Some songs tear at us and do harm to our souls even though we think we need to or want to hear them. But for all the destructive music of despair, there are also the songs that are nourishing to the core and these songs have a profoundly healing effect upon the human soul.

The Christian must try to engage both the signs of hope and the signs of despair that are present in music. This takes time and it takes skill. Music that is destructive needs to be understood and interpreted just as any other literary or art form must be critically engaged when it is used in a harmful way. Pornography must be challenged thoughtfully, just as we must challenge all hate literature. Music deserves that same seriousness of critical challenge and interpretation. The Christian needs to develop prophetic wisdom in fulfilling this critical side of his or her ambassadorship for Christ.

Christian faith has always sung its greatest themes in the music of each generation. I believe we owe every new generation a listening ear and an open heart to learn the songs of each new time so that we are able to share the songs that worship the living God. We should encourage the new songs of faith and honor them for what they really are, the psalms of our life.

When this happens we discover that the timeless hope and love and faithfulness of Jesus Christ is as wonderfully portrayed in the new motifs of the music of youth as in the older themes of previous generations. This is what makes it so exciting to hear and listen for a new song to sing. Who knows, perhaps we are singing a melody that later generations will call classic.