

Aim of lesson

For the young people to appreciate that music represents a challenge to our judgement. It is provided by God as a gift, to be used for our good and in his worship. But there are no simplistic rules about what is good or bad, and we need to gain an understanding of the scriptural principles involved, and then use our courage in applying them.

Bible background

Exodus 15:1-2, 20-21, and 32:17-19.

1 Chronicles 15:27-29, and Daniel 3:4-6

Preparation required

There is a simplistic view of music, that 'classical' music is good, and anything 'modern' is bad; and since judgement of music is essentially a personal thing it is difficult to disprove. It is a fact, however, that the lives of many classical composers were as immoral and dissolute as their modern counterparts, and that a fair amount of classical music, opera in particular, was originally written as a bawdy 'music hall' entertainment. This is not to ignore the distasteful nature of much modern music; but it does not all deserve to be thrown into the same bin.

So an essential preparation for this lesson, apart from familiarising yourself with the notes and planning how you will lead the discussion, is to try to set aside any prejudices you may have that are based purely on preference. There are some biblical lessons to be learnt, and it is important that it is these points that the young people take away with them, rather than a debate on musical taste.

It is doubtful whether you can deal with this subject fully in one week, and since it is an important practical aspect of the lives of most young people you should be prepared to spend time on it. So if you operate a teaching rota it may be worthwhile rearranging teaching duties so that you are able to spend two weeks on this topic.

Suggested outline of lesson

Introductory discussion

Before you begin the main content of the lesson, have a general, and factual, discussion about music as it impinges on our lives.

Ask the young people about the sources of music that they experience such as radio (which channels?), film scores, CDs, live music at school or home (do they play any instruments?), discos, hymns and spiritual songs, and make a list on a piece of paper or a whiteboard. Include your own.

Then ask them what they like and don't like, and why. Again, include your own views, but try at this stage to avoid a lengthy discussion. This is essentially scene-setting.

Now ask the young people to think of as many examples as they can of music in scripture. It doesn't matter whether it is in any way a complete catalogue, though it is worth jogging their memories to obtain at least some sort of representative list.

Music in the Bible

Look at Job 38:4-7, Revelation 14:1-3 and Luke 15:25 and draw out the lessons that music is part of God's work, and will play an important part in his kingdom. It is not just man's invention, like a piece of machinery or a scientific theory, but a God-given gift.

In everyday life

Music also played an important part in the lives of ordinary people, as in these examples:

- Genesis 4:21; The first reference to musical instruments: so before the flood, people were playing stringed and wind instruments.
- Genesis 31:27; People celebrated important events with singing and instrumental music.
- Job 21:12; Job describes music and dancing as part of everyday life (of the wicked, in this case, but his point is that the wicked seem to be blessed in this life).
- 1 Samuel 16:16-23; The emphasis is on instrumental music rather than singing. The Authorised Version translation that David 'played with his hand' in v23 is correct, and this had a soothing effect on Saul.

So in summary, the main points so far are that music is an important part of God's creation, and will be so in his kingdom, and that both instrumental music and singing have always been a valuable part of people's lives.

Some Comparisons

Now get the young people to think about the two comparisons in the notes

The song of Moses compared with the worship of the golden calf

Exodus 15:1-2, 20-21. It seemed that first Moses and the men sang this song, and then Miriam and the women sang it. They used (NIV) tambourines and dancing.

Exodus 32:17-19. Moses and Joshua are on their way down the mountain having received the law from God, when they hear singing and dancing.

Similarities: on both occasions the people were singing and dancing

Differences: the first occasion was to God, and was acceptable worship; the second was to idols, and they were condemned for it.

Lessons: Music and dancing are not of themselves either good or bad. What matters is their purpose, and the context. The events of Exodus 15 and 32 may have looked superficially similar, but in fact they were very different. So we should not make any blanket judgements about the rights and wrongs of music and dancing, but we do need to note the dangers that they can be abused.

David's arrangements for music in worship compared with Nebuchadnezzar's image

1 Chronicles 15:27-29 the ark was accompanied by 'shouting, and with the sound of the cornet, and with trumpets, and with cymbals, making a noise with psalteries and harps' (AV); 'with shouts, with the sounding of rams' horns and trumpets, and of cymbals, and the playing of lyres and harps' (NIV).

In Daniel 3:4-6 the people were commanded to worship at the sound of 'the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer' (AV) or 'horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes' (NIV). This part of Daniel was written in Aramaic, so there is less common language than we might have otherwise expected, but nonetheless it is clear that largely the same instruments were used as in David's time.

Similarities: the same musical instruments (fundamentally) were used

Differences: the first occasion was to God, and was acceptable worship; the second was to idols, and faithful men refused to have any part in it.

Lessons: there is nothing inherently right or wrong in specific musical instruments. A wide range of instruments can be used either for God's glory, or in the worship of idols. The wisdom lies in knowing the difference, and God's people need to refuse the latter.

What can we learn about music today?

The parallel between the worship of the golden calf and Nebuchadnezzar's image, on the one hand, and some modern pop concerts, is startling. In each case they involve large numbers of people 'worshipping' an idol, whether an inanimate object or a 'pop' idol, and have the same connotations of immorality and obedience of someone other than God.

The key lesson needs reinforcing: the judgement lies not in a superficial assessment of the nature of the music, but is a matter of determining who or what is being worshipped and obeyed.

Music in Worship

Matthew 26:30	Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn before they left the upper room. The passover hymns were Psalms 113 - 118 and 136, which the Jews called the "great Hallel".
Acts 16:25	In the middle of the night Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God: so hymns were not only used in formal worship. And men sang as well!
1 Corinthians 14:7	The implication is that pipes (NIV flutes) and harps were used in worship in the first century.
Ephesians 5:19	Singing was an important part of worship. It is interesting to note the two halves of the verse. Other people hear the 'psalms and hymns and spiritual songs'. God hears the 'melody in our heart'.
Colossians 3:16	Singing can and should be a part of teaching and exhortation; it's not just a musical exercise.

There is a lesson from the first part of this study which needs to be carried over into our thoughts about music in worship today. We cannot make simple judgements about what sort of music is good or bad (Victorian good, modern bad; organs good, guitars bad; rhythm bad, lack of it good; standing still good, dancing bad). Acceptable worship can encompass a wide range of sounds and expressions.

But - there is a but. We live in a corrupt, and corrupting, world which uses rhythm and loud music in a way that can be very enticing. The advantage of simplistic judgements is that they are simple; the trouble is that they are often wrong. The problem with right judgements is that we always have to be on our guard, and questioning our motives.

Finally, the lesson of 1 Corinthians 8 needs to be heeded. We need to think not only about our own actions, but about the effect that they will have on others. That includes thinking about the elderly, and the traditionally minded, as well as those who might be misled into wrong actions.

Relevance to our lives

The young people could think about how the lessons they have learned could be applied in their Sunday School or CYC, or in ecclesial worship.

They should be encouraged to think about whether they should change their listening habits (radio, TV, and recorded music).

Prayer

Dear Lord God, who has given us the gift of music, help us to use this gift to give pleasure to you and benefit to others. Amen.

Other suggestions for activities

Read through 1 Corinthians 8:4-13, substituting 'listening to' for 'eating', and 'music' for 'food'.