The Evolution and Antithesis of Western Music

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Musical history (as we know it) dates back to early mankind, however, little is known about it and the culture of its people. What knowledge we have has come out of Biblical texts through its writers. The Bible provides descriptions of several musical cultures including the ancient Israelites, their successors and the Judeans. There are no written or aural records that provide insight as to the style, origin or text of this early music. Nothing was known or handed down until the Bible was first written beginning 3500 years ago. Music manuscript (notation) was not created or written down until the ninth century, long after Christ’s death. The reasons for this include the fact that the early prophets, authors of the Holy Scriptures were not musicians, and not interested in making precise statements about music or musical instruments (Galpin, 51).

The details presented encompass many different cultures in the world. Herein, the Sumerians, Babylonians, Greeks, Jews and other Christian cultures are described. Their differences and similarities parallel each other and juxtapositions abound throughout the ages as music changed in various periods. To better illustrate and understand the musical context of this study, Biblical scripture verses will be used to provide factual material.

The evidence in this study is a general overview of music’s use and evolution through the ages beginning in Biblical times (3500 B. C.) through the Baroque Period (1600 – 1750 A. D.), ending with Johann S. Bach (1685 – 1750). From aural tradition through notational development, man’s vocal and instrumental music has had a long argues and confrontational history. Similar to today’s modern methodologies, cultural tradition, religion and personal opinion and enjoyment have shaped the world’s musical landscape.

The human voice was the first instrument known to man and connected to ceremonies of worship, celebration and pleasure. The oldest records of organized music came from the Sumerian and Egyptian cultures. The Sumerian texts were written in the third millennium B. C. and are considered to be the earliest forms of organized music. For the first time, the Sumerians appointed a director to work with small choirs. Each choir was divided into different musical
classes. The men and women of these choirs were known as temple singers and educated in the great temple of Ningirsu (Sachs, 58-60).

Their early melodies consisted of one to two notes and were sung in a simple rhythmic pattern. Music in Israel was highly prized so everyone in the culture sang. The higher educated people performed on musical instruments that were either handed down or made to match another’s, in similarity. During this period, the harp (Kanzabu), drum (Balag), flute (Tigi), covered pipe (Kanzabu), and two-stringed lute (Senniter) were the first instruments to be played. As mentioned earlier, these people were divided into classes (rank) based upon their musical education.

The first of these three classes were male musicians that included vocalists and instrumentalist. They were believed to have read a type of notation and specialized in spiritual music. The second class was formed by musicians of secular music who were uneducated and on the same level as the social merchant. The third and final class embraced blind singers performing folk music, and women whose vocal music was the lowest of artistic forms (Chailley, 87). This was true for female (young girls) of society who performed music as part of their education. Societal customs were complicated and strict, as evident from the different classes during this period. Being a musician in any class was an achievement and looked upon as being a more desirable educated person in society.

There are several good examples of music being performed in Biblical texts. For example, when the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea and were saved out of the hands of the Egyptians, Moses himself sang a holy tune (song) to glorify the Lord (Exodus 14: 29). All the men and women joined in the praise as well. A second example tells of Saul and David who were welcomed by women singing, playing and dancing as they returned from their battle against the Philistines (I Samuel 18:6). Further, it is written in the Old Testament (I Samuel 16:14-23) that David played his harp for Saul, and in Joshua 6:12-20, there were trumpet blasts and shouting as the walls of the city of Jericho fell. In these examples, music was used to soothe people’s emotions,
generate excitement for victory celebrations, worship, giving thanks and pleasure. Although music is mentioned, the Bible gives no references or delineations showing different classes of musicians (amateur or professional) being used along side of common folk who participated in music.

Musical life did not change much until the days of David and Solomon (c. 1000 B. C.). There appears to be a portion of musical knowledge missing up to this point. During this time period, foreign instruments suddenly appeared just as they did in Egypt after 1500 B. C. Suddenly, harps, zithers, oboes, cymbals and sitars became common instruments. Development of music was becoming organized with no mention of who or why. Kings and queens began to support court musicians of both sexes. Music was used for pleasure and enjoyment as well as pagan worship and dancing. It should be noted that dancing was used for pagan worship as well as celebrating Christian rituals and showing praise unto the Lord. Cultures were changing and music within each culture was changing and becoming more complex. Melody and rhythm had evolved becoming an integral part of the culture flourishing on a larger scale of complexity. Intervals increased to thirds while the range of the melody exceeded a sixth (Sachs, 84). Rhythmic patterns developed creating the first motifs. The first Biblical motif example refers to Moses speaking to the Israelites. “Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel” – sung by a Babylonian cantor. The words are from Exodus 12:21. Each word in this line has its own motif and each word has its own rhythmic pattern. These musical elements (motifs and rhythms) are different from earlier chants where the words were sung on the same pitch and rhythm throughout. (Sachs, 84).

The third century B. C. was a growing period for the Jewish people. Development of the religion brought more music into the ceremony which revolved around the Covenant. The music itself was used in most religious activities and institutions. It did not have a spiritual content to it but helped as a medium to facilitate services.

After the downfall of the Persian Empire in 332 B. C., the Jewish people were subjected to outside influences. They tried to keep their culture free from
Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian, Greek, Canaanite and surrounding tribe influences. However, each tribe influenced the other socially, culturally, and religiously in everyday life.

There is no evidence to show how affected the Jews were by other cultures as they struggled to maintain and remain a nation of their own through religion and culture.

There began a growing distance between music of the Jewish belief and secular music. The temple music sounded obsolete to many people because it was not changing with the times and cultures around the country. Temple keepers insisted it could not change. This gap became even greater as Roman and Greek cultures flourished in the arts.

At a certain point, some influences had to have changed and affected Jewish music without them realizing it. Their culture, like others, melded ideas and daily life experiences together over time. They did fight, even with weapons, against everything they regarded as alien and not to inherent to their traditions (Rothmüller, 63).

The non-religious music of the Greeks had a strong influence over the land. Above all, the Jews would have adopted and incorporated a good deal of Greek secular tunes if they were not secular. The Greeks were one of the most advanced civilizations whose artistic culture was the highest in the land as were the Romans. As Roman influence increased, the Jewish national traditions diminished. This decline was noticed in temple worship and came to an end with the temple being destroyed by the Roman’s in 70 B. C. E. This date is a landmark in Jewish history as most of their musical tradition was lost. The Jews left for Jerusalem to preserve what was left of their heritage.

Christian music was developing, being influenced by the cultures around them. This is noticeable in the book of Psalms which contains the largest contribution of church songs. Others, like Solomon’s Songs, became well known as the church grew. The musical gap between the Jews and Christian faiths was once
again growing as the Jews struggled to survive with their culture. Jewish music at this time involved soloists that sang in the synagogue. Not more than two people could sing at once unless they were accompanied by the cantor and responding to him (Rothmüller, 97).

There were those who did not agree with the music in these services and wanted to change it. These opposing Jewish were influenced by other Christian church music and wanted to introduce it into their services. There were two conflicting parties that would debate and struggle to have their point of view. One side was seeking the introduction of choral singing in the style of contemporary secular madrigals. The opposing, more traditional side resisted. They believed such sinful, alien and worldly music should not be performed in the synagogue (Rothmüller, 97).

It is inevitable that some kind of reform was necessary. This struggle continued for centuries with little change until the nineteenth century. Eventually there were four reforms that took place in the synagogue. I will discuss them later on, but firstly, want to take a look back on the Roman Empire and its music.

The earliest Christian communities, in spite of three hundred years of sporadic persecution, grew steadily in all parts of the Empire. Constantine the Great, also known as Constantine I or Saint Constantine, was Roman Emperor from 306 to 337 A. D. He adopted a Christian policy after his conversion in 312 A. D. and the imperial family embraced Christianity. Constantine tried to merge pagan idealism into the forms of art, statues and worship with Christianity. Music at this time must have flourished because of the many cultures in and around the Empire. Unfortunately, there are no remains of ancient Roman music from which to experience. However, we do have verbal accounts, mosaics, bas-reliefs, sculptures and paintings that show that music occupied an important place in Roman military life, theater, religion and daily rituals (Grout, 2).

The disappearance of Roman music and traditions is an important one that began in the Middle Ages (5th – 15th Century). After the downfall of Rome, most of the music in this time period was connected to social occasions and pagan
religious exercises. Music was believed to be bad for the younger generation because it was worldly and influentially evil (Grout, 9). The Christian church took it upon themselves to banish all evidence of music and art by burning and destroying statues, works of art and music. The rationale for this action was to blot out all memories that would bring abomination to the minds of the faithful. Although most of the Roman traditions were lost and destroyed, some features of ancient musical practice lived on in the Middle Ages.

‘Ancient musical theory’ was the foundation of ‘medieval theory’ despite the churches attempt to destroy it. Rome got its ideas and cultural traditions from early Greece, so it is difficult to erase ideologies and practices that have become a part of one’s culture. The forms and types (styles) of music connected with public spectacles such as festivals, competitions, and dramatic performances were regarded as unsuitable for church services. This attitude even prevailed in distrust for all instrumental music (Grout, 25). These changes were only the beginning for the Western World.

As the church emerged from its underground life, the fourth century encountered a language barrier. Latin replaced Greek as the official language of the liturgy in Rome. As the prestige of the Roman emperor declined, the Roman bishop’s power increased to the point that his authority in Rome was predominant in matters of faith and discipline. With the church growing ever larger, the services could no longer be conducted in the informal manner of its earlier days. From the fifth to the seventh centuries, many popes were concerned with revising the liturgy and music. Under the rule of St. Benedict (480 - 547 A. D.), a set of instructions was developed on how to run a monastery. The cantor was given the duty of preparing each service, but there are no records that provide insight as to what his duties were.

A few centuries later the monastic cantor became the key person to oversee the music program. He maintained the library and scriptorium while directing the performances of the liturgy. By the eighth century there was a school of music known as the Schola Cantorum. It was this early conservatory where men and young boys were trained to become church musicians. A papal choir had
already existed in the sixth century and Pope Gregory I (540 – 604 A. D.) sought to regulate and standardize liturgical chants. Gregory’s achievement was so highly regarded that by the ninth century, he and the Schola Cantorum had become legendary. It was said that “he (Gregory) himself under divine inspiration had composed all of the melodies in use by the church” (H.W. Music, 97). Gregory is credited with recodifying the liturgy to various services by assigning particular items of the liturgy to various services throughout the year in an order that remained unchanged until the sixteenth century. Each service throughout the year had a uniformed repertoire. This was an enormous accomplishment and believed to have been done in only fourteen years (590 to 604).

The Church leaders valued music for its power to uplift the soul and believed it could influence good and ill the people who listened to it. Churchmen of the early Middle Ages did not listen to music for enjoyment, but used it as a part of their ceremony to soothe the heart and emotion as they worshipped. They believed that all pleasures such as music should be judged in accordance with the Platonic principle that beautiful things exist to remind us of divine and perfect beauty and therefore, these things can only inspire self-centered enjoyment and sinfulness which should be rejected by all. Philosophically, they believed that music is the servant of religion (Sacho, 141). Moreover, the only music to be heard in the church should be music that opens the mind to Christian teaching and gives holy thoughts. The Fathers believed that music without words could not do this so they excluded (removed) instrumental music from public worship. Only the lyre (harp) could be played if it was accompanying a choir. At this point the Church Fathers began to experience resistance and difficulty with their beliefs. The Old Testament Psalms are full of references to the psaltery, harp, cymbal, organ and other instruments. How are they going to explain their ideologies and beliefs to the people? The usual recourse was to allegory: “the tongue is the psaltery of the Lord….by the harp we must understand the mouth which is put into vibration by the Holy Spirit as a plectrum….the organ is our body…” (Grout, 34). This explanation was typical
during this period and the allegorizing of scripture was common practice in the church. There were those however who believed differently.

St. Augustine (354 – 430 A. D.) took up the task to resolve the problem and created a treatise on music. He was not the first to take matters into his own hands to create such a document and would not be the last as I will present Johann S. Bach later in this text, who wrote a treatise in the Baroque period to rectify his musical problems.

St. Augustine wrote six books on the subject. The first five were descriptive and included definitions of music that dealt with the principles of meter and rhythm. The sixth taught psychology, ethics and the aesthetics of music and rhythm. For all of his work, the explanation of musical elements and aesthetics, St. Augustine still experienced friction towards music and what it should be used for.

The conflict between sacred and secular in art is not peculiar to the Middle Ages. Society has agreed in general terms, not everything is appropriate for the church. Different churches, communities, and ages have fixed boundaries. Although the line is not perfectly straight, the answer for each comes from the same source. We must look back to the historical encounter when the church was a minority group charged with the task of converting the entire population of Europe. In order to do this, it had to establish a Christian community set off from the surrounding pagan (secular) society. To do this it had to devote much time to teach. Art and music were not necessary to do the task and were put aside. The church leaders believed the church was going into battle, this meant they could not carry excess baggage in the shape or context of music. Since the source developed into what is the Middle Ages, newer ideologies (ideas/principles) were challenged by both young and old. Through adversity, music continued to develop. Christian missionaries traveling the ancient Roman roads in the early Middle Ages carried their music to every part of Western Europe. They were one of the sources from which our Western music developed. However, the growth, complexity and styles of music have continued to evolve.
By the end of the thirteenth century, rapid growth in polyphony was changing sacred and secular music that only years earlier were denounced by the church. It is not the intent of this writer to go into detailed musical theory, but to present established practices of the day during this period. Musical styles (forms) included Motet, Rhythmic Modes, Organum (plain chant), Chants (Gregorian), Polyphonic Conductus, and Notre Dame Organum were some of the musical forms used during this period (H.W. Music, 133). The spirit of the music was subjective while the church refrained from too many new ideas and resided itself to Plainsong and Chants at first, but later accepted and included other forms of music. These changes were not the result of a few short years but took many centuries to evolve. Nevertheless, when looking back over the entire historical development, the eleventh century began the first stages of a progression towards a new and different musical system.

During the first millennium (1000 yrs.) of the Christian era, the Western Church absorbed and converted to its own use all that it could from the music of antiquity and the East. By 600 A.D. the music conversion was almost complete. During the next four hundred years, music was systematized throughout Western Europe. Polyphonic sacred compositions had Plainchant and other borrowed materials until the end of the sixteenth century.

With the exception of a few Biblical names, history provides little recognition of artist’s musicians or composers. There were however a few artists and composers beginning to be mentioned during the Middle Ages, but mainly because of their unusual persona. Hildegard of Bingen (1098 – 1179) was a German writer, composer, philosopher, Christian mystic, Benedictine abbess, visionary, and polymath. She founded the monasteries of Rupertsberg in 1150 and Eibingen in 1165 and wrote theological, botanical, and medicinal texts, as well as letters, liturgical songs, and poems (Bingen. Web. 2014). One of her best known choral works is Ordo Virtutum. It remains an important sacred composition that has survived the Middle Ages. Her contribution, legacy and life is important because she was a women at a time when women did not write music or create all of the things she did. Social norms would have created daily
stress and prejudices against her including being sent to prison or flogged. She was however protected because she lived within the boundaries of the monastery. Hildegard, like other open-minded musicians expanded musical polyphony and texture for future writers to draw upon.

Other composers, poets, and musicians who contributed to the ever expanding repertory and theoretical improvements in music, theatre and art included Adam de la Halle (1245 – 88) of France, who is credited for establishing the tradition of writing liturgical poetry and music as well as an early founder of Frances secular theater. Known as Pèrotin the Great (1200 - ?), this French composer was the most famous member of the Notre Dame School of polyphony whose name can be reliably attached to individual compositions. An anonymous English student at Notre Dame known as anonymous IV called him ‘Pèrotin Magister’, meaning ‘Pèrotin the Master’ or export of polyphony. In addition, Guillaume de Machaut (1300 - 77) was a well known French composer/poet whose work was greatly admired and imitated well into the 15th century. Unlike all who came before, he is the earliest composer for which significant biographical information was written (Bonita, 2).

Throughout each time period, composers adhere to the musical styles and traditions of the period in which they live and write within certain cultural rules that may exist. Before the fourteenth century, only consonant tones of parallel fourths and fifths, limited range of sound, strong linear texture, and rhythmic modes with triple grouping of beats were used in motets and chants (Sachs, 321).

The fourteenth century broadened musically, but took a shift in balance. The transformation moved from sacred compositions to secular works. Composers had more freedom to use rhythm and imperfect consonances (dissonances) such as thirds and sixths. Parallel 3rds and 6ths were becoming acceptable while 5ths, 6ths and octaves became rarer. This is the first noticeable sign of change that affected the ear towards dissonance. The third degree of the harmonic chord sounded dissonant to the ear during this period and not accepted in any musical form. It had the nick-name, Devil’s Third because of its
sound quality. Today, this note is taken for granted and known as the Picardy third. It developed in the 1550’s after a long struggle as society’s ears began to shift and accept more dissonant sounds. Writing such dissonance (3rds) could find the composer in trouble with the church (and society) and possibly be put in prison or worse. Churches up to this point maintained parallelism of 4ths, 5ths and octaves in their music.

Musical forms and their use are important as we look towards the Medieval and Renaissance periods. It is here that the Mass is the form in which the Catholic Church is using. The Mass, usually set in four or more polyphonic parts has five sections, or movements. They are the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei. The Motet, likewise, has four polyphonic parts and is based on sacred Latin texts, which are sung by an unaccompanied choral. The four-part Cantus Firmus Masses are later works that were introduced between 1450 and 1500. The Church at this time had a foundation in which to build music. It made advances in its music by giving church composers (monks and trained musicians) more freedom it music theory. This newly found freedom allowed artists’, theorists’ and composers to look back, research and study ancient music.

Rediscovering ancient Greek and Roman culture brought a rebirth to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries better known as the Renaissance (rebirth). A rethinking of music’s purpose in light of what was read in the writings of ancient philosophers, poets and music theorists occurred.

Artists’ asked themselves why their modern music did not move them the way ancient music was said to have done. Bishop Bernardino Cerillo (1500 – 75) was one of many people who wanted music to return to its past form in order to be pure and expressive (Grout, 200). This type of reaction is called humanism and takes different disciplines. The revival of ancient learning in grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy was the only way to reach high standards. The opposite side of this rebirth idea was to rededicate mankind, humanistic values or morals, as opposed to spiritual values. Fulfillment in life as well as salvation after death was now seen as a desirable goal. To feel and
express human emotions and enjoy pleasure were no longer thought to be sinful or evil. Artists creating art and music turned to secular and religious themes to make their works understandable to men as well as God. This movement began in Italy and spread throughout Europe quickly.

When Martin Luther’s (1483 – 1546) Protestant Reformation began in 1517, musical forms and ideologies again shifted to conform to Protestant practices. The sacred music of the Protestant Church encompassed hymns and chorales of which were sung not by selected soloists’ in combination with cantors, but by the entire congregation. The earliest forms were monophonic but evolved into four-part harmony over time (Bonita, 3). During this period, the Biblical psalms were first translated into French and set to music. This practice would transform future church music from the Baroque Period forward where Biblical texts’ would be set into newer musical forms such as cantatas, madrigals, oratorios, and opera’s and alike.

In 1550, the Catholic Counter-Reformation began. From 1545 to 1663, the Council of Trent discussed complaints against and revisions for the Catholic Church. With wider gaps in musical styles between the Protestant and Catholic Churches, the council debated and consulted with composers of the day including Italian writer, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525 – 94). The council’s attempt to reform music in the Catholic Church in the 16th century was not the first time. The church had spoken out against perceived abuse of music in the mass as early as 1562 and the manipulation of the Credo, (3rd Mvt. of Mass) which included non-liturgical songs, was argued in 1503. Moreover, the use of secular singing and its text in the delivery of the psalmody in 1492 was questioned as early as 1322 by the Council, but churches continued to include secular songs and text as part of the service. Clearly, the lineage of protests’ and reforms had little effectiveness over the centuries. However, dramatic change would occur in 1562 when the Bishop of Modena, Egidio Foscarari (1512 -64) and Gabriele Paleotti (1522 – 97) Italian Cardinal and Archbishop of Bologna made drastic transformations within the church. While these reforms included many changes to the Catholic Church and its practices, for the sake of this text, I will discuss only the musical elements that changed. Firstly, the
organ was omitted (removed) just as we saw in the Jewish faith. The use of professional musicians was banished along with polyphonic singing.

The decision to remove these music elements must have been seen as sinful practices that had no place in the Catholic Church, so they were eliminated. The response from other ecclesial figures wanted to continue the use of compositional techniques that were popular in the 15th and 16th centuries. The practice of using musical material including the accompanying of texts from madrigals, motets, and chansons became common. The idea of writing several voices (Ex. SAT), singing different texts in different languages, made any of the texts’ difficult to distinguish from the mixture and polyphonic texture between words and musical notes. The newly created Parody Mass, contained melodies and words from secular songs that could have been, and often were, sensual subjects for the church (Manzetti, 330).

Influences and new musical trends were finding their way into the musical liturgy of the church in the form of secular tunes and styles. As early as 1528, the Council of Paris and the Council of Trent made attempts to restore what they considered, a sense of sacredness to the churches musical setting and what was appropriate for the Catholic Mass. For all of their challenges, they were simply responding to issues of the day.

Palestrina, like his contemporary Flemish composer Jacobus de Kerle (1531/32 – 1591), was also credited with creating a model of composition for the Council of Trent. Kerle’s composition was in four-parts and marks a turning point of the Counter Reformation’s a cappella ideal. (Smith and Dinneen, 45). As time passed, other revisions were made in shaping liturgical music of the Catholic Church which eventually was left up to the local church leaders and church musicians to find proper application for the Council's decrees. Most notably, the creation of the Missa Brevis, Lauda and Madrigali (Spiritual Madrigal) were new musical forms that came about due to the Council’s search for reform (Leichtentritt, 326).

By the time the Baroque period (1600 – 1750) arrived, secular and religious music was well developed. Composers such as George F. Handel (1685-1759)
and Johann S. Bach (1685-1750) were masters in sacred and secular music. Music and art flourished while many new compositional rules were created that dealt with polyphonic, fugal, cantatas, operas and alike during this period. Many of these styles and rules are still used in the twenty-first century. Church music during this period was growing but remained problematic for church composers as they dealt with common ongoing problems. Responsible for new music each Sunday and writing music throughout the liturgical year, composers such as J. S. Bach never knew who would be sick, late, or not show up for rehearsals much less the Sunday service. His orchestra was a combination of amateur and professional musicians with many stretched to their limits musically. With the size of choirs and orchestras ever increasing due to the expanded score (orchestration) by the composer, Bach had to plan for substitute personnel due to unreliable singers or musically weak musicians who were still learning their craft. To this end, Bach created a treatise just as Constantine the Great did in 312 A. D.

Bach understood the limitations of instruments in his day as well as his performers’ ability to play or sing in various circumstances. This daily uncertainty must have been quite frustrating, leading him to create the first petition for instrumentation in the Baroque period. This document titled, “Short, Yet Most Necessary Draft for a Well-appointed Church Music” was presented to the Leipzig Town Council in Germany on August 23, 1730 (Rager, Chptr, 1). The document details the number of instruments needed to balance his orchestra and which ones should be doubled or tripled. For the first time, orchestras in the Baroque period had standardized rules passed into law.

**Required Church Instrumentation Petition**
Presented to the Leipzig Town Council, August 23, 1730

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The musical changes and elements that occurred during the Baroque period are still used today. Churches still perform music by the masters of the period including their musical forms. The only unchanged medium during this period was that of the Jews. As mentioned earlier, the struggle for change remained resistant in many synagogues.

Until the nineteenth century, there was little change in Jewish music, but when it came, it happened so fast, one would not believe such change could take place. The Jewish reform Movement introduced non-Jewish religious and secular songs into German synagogal vocal music. Four reforms took shape beginning with the introduction of the organ, traditional synagogues began using four-part polyphony, the composition of new songs were permitted to be written in an ecclesiastical style, and lastly, the singing in the language of the country which was German. There was opposition to the fourth reform because not everyone spoke the German language, but the largest opposition was the battle against the organ. Some Jewish leaders refused to have the organ accompany vocal music in their services. This battle is still present in the twenty-first century in some synagogues (Rothmüller, 101).

From Biblical times through the Middle, Renaissance and Baroque eras, people have been reluctant to change the arts. Ideologies, religion, personal opinions and a host of other reasons abound. Change has not come without controversy. Musical change has been slower to develop than any other discipline including medicine, engineering or science. These fields have grown faster because they can be accepted or proven to be better for mankind as time passes. Music has not had that luxury and will continue to struggle for change while society changes around it, leaving people to ask, what will be said about today’s music tomorrow?
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