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Christianity & Popular Music

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In the first few months of 2013 news headlines included the ‘collapse’ of HMV, the first new album in ten years from David Bowie and Adele picking up a Golden Globe, a Brit and an Oscar for her song for the latest Bond film Skyfall. Popular music is in the cultural lifeblood of society in the UK but is rarely talked about in pulpits, amongst theologians or even in the Church Times (except when Greenbelt is approaching). But is there not more common ground than is popularly perceived between habits of faith and serious listening to popular music? In this article we sketch out how and why we think this is the case, and some of the practical, pastoral and liturgical implications.

We have been researching into people’s listening habits with regard to popular music in this country and the USA for some time. In surveys gathered online, through students and other groups, and one-to-one encounters, respondents have shared their patterns of listening, the emotions that music provokes, their favourite tracks, together with their religious and political affiliations (if any). Our early findings have fed into our book Personal Jesus: How popular music shapes our souls (Baker Academic 2012). As well as examining what kind of work has been undertaken on theology and popular culture generally, we have wanted to look specifically at what music is doing. This article outlines some of our conclusions.

Significantly we are not the only ones interested in this developing area of study. David Brown, Tom Beaudoin, James K. A. Smith, Jeff Keuss and Michael J. Gilmour are amongst a growing body of theologians exploring how Christianity and popular music relate to each other. Our own research suggests that key points of contact and exploration include: (i) embodied practice – how music makes us aware of our bodies, gets us moving (via dance), influences who we spend time with, and who we form groups with; (ii) ritual – habitual and ritualised behaviour is characteristic within individual and communal listening practices; (iii) connectedness – popular music often involves fandom and friendship, and its links with social media highlight and extend these aspects; and (iv) transcendence – many fans of popular music speak of how it is ‘uplifting’ or it ‘takes you to another place’. Or, to put it in more succinct, attention-grabbing terms: popular music is (very often) about sex, friends and emotional highs.

The strands of popular music practice we identify relate directly to Christian theological concepts. Embodied practice links with incarnation. Christianity arguably needs to stress the embodied nature of human life more than it often does, because of the incarnation of God in Christ and the powerful embodied metaphors, and the recognised importance of the material, which spring from this. Attention to the sacraments connects with all forms of human ritual practice. Rituals of Baptism, Holy Communion and other expressions of sacramental life are manifestations of God in creation. ‘Sacramentality’ invites to look more broadly, however, at how God communicates through everyday life, including through ‘devoted’ practices such as music-listening. Church – as both concept and reality - speaks to Christians’ connectedness in space and time, but also encourages us to think about the primary communities which are in practice most significant for us, whether ecclesial or not. Transcendence brings together several theological themes, not least divine revelation and salvation, encapsulating the sense of genuine
encounter with an Other beyond oneself, which is difficult to put into words, yet which opens us up to human possibility, and to divine potentiality within human experience.

Such shared patterns of practice between Christian faith and listening to popular music provide an important and fertile space for critical reflection on encounters between Christianity and contemporary culture. We are not saying popular music is a religion or that it replaces religion, or even that it functions in any simple way like a religion. Nor are we saying that all popular music is equally valuable or functions always in similar ways. But we do not want to define in advance what the ‘classics’ are, or say that only rock or jazz ‘work’ theologically (in a way, say, that hip-hop or ‘pop’ do not). The significant functions of music cannot be predetermined according to style or popularity. We are simply saying that what popular music does to and for people is important, often very important indeed. As far as local churches are concerned this means: (a) preachers and worship leaders taking church members’ popular listening habits very seriously; (b) actively creating spaces for listening to and reflecting upon popular music and upon people’s listening habits; (c) resisting the abuse of music, by which we mean challenging the notion that we can use music simply to ’say’ what we want it to say, and being attentive to other forms of music than we are used to, and not just what our ‘tribe’ finds acceptable.

Our research reminds us too that we have to look (well) beyond lyrics. Searching for ‘Christian-type words’ in pop songs is not enough. Instead, we need to attend to the sounds to which listeners respond, and to the emotions experienced. Music creates an ‘affective space’ for hearers collectively and individually. ‘Affective space’ is a kind of zone which people inhabit as they listen to music within which they both enjoy an emotional encounter, and yet may also move on to make connections with their life narrative, and their value-system. Serious, sustained listening does more than encourage people just to ’enjoy the moment’. Many social and cultural practices can have a similar effect: going to a concert, watching a film or sport, and attending an act of worship. In the affective space which music creates for us, we process those elements of music, culture, religion and more, with which we come into contact both consciously and subliminally. Conrad Ostwalt speaks for many contemporary cultural observers when he observes: ‘We find popular culture functioning in some of the same ways as institutionalized religious ritual, so that popular culture is the entity that provides the context for understanding values, belief systems, and myths’ (Secular Steeples, Trinity Press International 2003, p26). Churches need to take this place of emotional engagement (the affective space) much more seriously than they do at present.

At the start of each episode of his well-received BBC TV series Howard Goodall’s Story of Music, the presenter states: ‘Whatever music you’re into – Monteverdi or Mantovani, Mozart or Motown, Machaut or mash-up … Music can make us weep or make us dance. It’s reflected the times in which it was written. It has delighted, challenged, comforted and excited us.’ And in his discussion of Wagner he notes the ‘disastrous schism between high and low art’. Our research into the ways in which people continue to engage with popular music not only affirms this judgement about the power and emotional range of music but also reminds churches not to accede to that ‘disastrous schism’ which limits the kinds of music which can prove profound for listeners, and narrows the affective spaces music helps to create.
Churches need to affirm the full breadth of the spaces opened up and in doing take seriously the listening habits which people have. This does not mean handing over these spheres to Simon Cowell and the other gods (or idols) of popular culture. It is always necessary to critique and question what is happening within the affective spaces that popular music creates. But it is also important to note and respect the functions and value of what such music and wider expressions of contemporary culture achieve, for those who are religious as well as those who are not. There are canons of popular music to be listened to. An iPod’s contents might be a rich spiritual resource. So-called secular songs have their place in worship. Popular music is more than mere entertainment.

Clive Marsh is Director of Lifelong Learning, University of Leicester and Vaughan S Roberts is Team Rector of Warwick. They are co-authors of *Personal Jesus: How popular music shapes our souls* (Baker Academic Press, 2012). More information about their work in this field can be found under the *Personal Jesus: Articles, Reviews, Blog* section at [http://works.bepress.com/vaughan_roberts/](http://works.bepress.com/vaughan_roberts/)