

why music matters

What is it that draws you to the music you love most? That it can lighten your mood? That it puts you in touch with your own thoughts and feelings? That it can open up new perspectives when the world seems to close in on you?

A group of researchers from the University of Chemnitz went about exploring the question of musical attraction by asking why is it that some people swear that they couldn't possibly live without music, while other people can take it or leave it? Their hunch was that the answer had something to do with style: that certain types of music attracted more devoted fans than others. That turned out not to be the case. In fact, it revealed a big hurdle: not only are there many different types of music, but also many different reasons why people listen. So the researchers came up with an ingenious way to level the playing field.

What if preference for music were determined by how well it meets the expectations of the listener? In other words, if a person wants music to cheer them up and it does, that builds an appreciation for music. And this is also the case for expectations that music should calm us down, motivate us to exercise, inspire creativity, or nudge us into feeling nostalgic. This not only indicated that the research was on the right track, but the data also showed a clear tendency: "The most common perceived benefits of favorite music had to do with mood arousal and emotion."ⁱ This is hardly earthshattering; we like music that helps us feel feelings we like to feel. In fact, this is one of the main ways we "use" music throughout each day.

However, a closer look at the transcripts showed something else: that many of the subjects in this study recognized differences be-

tween music that served their immediate needs and music that helped them with more significant matters. As the researchers put it, "There are many functions people attribute to their favorite music, but this does not mean that these are the reasons why they like it... The expression of personal identity and values is now the function most closely correlated to music preference."

In other words, we find two basic reasons why music matters: Music is useful, and music is meaningful. And of the two, the reason we feel so deeply connected to music is that it *means* something to us: music says something important about who we are and what we care about.

So if we ask a fan of rap music why he likes it, he'll probably talk about its ability to affect his mood, give him energy, and help him focus. He might even admit that it's the only style of music he feels comfortable dancing to. Rap music helps him function in life, as he uses it in various ways throughout his day. It deeply affects his feelings, and may even help him get to that zone of heightened awareness. But these are not the reasons that rap is ultimately important to him. He values rap music because it helps him clarify his own thoughts and feelings on a deeply intuitive level, so that through the music, he experiences what he believes about the way things are and how they ought to be.

The meaning of meaning

Now when we say that music is meaningful, we don't mean that it conveys factual information. Sometimes it does, but this is not why we find music so valuable. Wheaton literature professor Leeland

Ryken has said that “Art is not about things as they are, but things as they matter.”ⁱⁱ This is the easiest thing in the world to demonstrate with music. Even when a songwriter is being as honest and accurate as she can possibly be, the words as she writes them will never be as meaningful as the words as she sings them. For example, just try speaking the lyrics to the chorus below, then listen to the music.

- ▶ [“I Will Always Love You,”](#) performed by Whitney Houston

I will always love you.
I will always love you.
I will always love you.
I will always love you.

Music offers an intuitive, experiential way to come to know a wide array of thoughts, feelings, and intuitions that are too big, too beautiful, too painful, or too tangled to work through rationally. Now to be accurate, experts rightly point out that there are many possible “meanings” that music might suggest: referential meaning, theoretical meaning, historical meaning, etc. – all which we’ll explore later. But for the time being, I’d like to limit our discussion of musical meaning to the fact that music “says” something about who we are, and what we care about. And music does this in two different ways (or on two different “levels”).

- Music has overt meaning, conveyed rationally, consciously, through lyrics, images, spoken dialogue, or a title.
- Music has *covert meaning*, conveyed experientially, intuitively, through tone, rhythm, gestures, and energy.

Now the interesting thing about covert meaning is that though it is not as specific as overt meaning, it has more swaying power. This is something we already know from verbal communication. Musical elements in our speech show others how we really feel about the

matter is at hand, often more powerfully than our actual words. If you doubt this, think of the last time you were hurt or insulted, not by the words someone spoke, but by his pitch, rhythm, intensity, and tone. Just remember how you felt, and you’ll agree that covert meaning matters a great deal. Or just remember the last time you were totally misunderstood in an email.

Without “music,” we would have great difficulty understanding each other. And as we’ll see throughout this book, without music, we’d have great difficulty understanding ourselves, as well. God made human beings musical. This is true even if you can’t read music or play an instrument. It’s true even if you are a horrible singer. We are intricately “wired” to understand the various implications of rhythm, gesture, harmony, and tone, and in ways that influence how we see ourselves and our place in this world.

Once we recognize this, we begin to understand why music has such great ability to speak to us, to motivate us, to calm us down. Think about your own musical life for a minute. Do you find that certain melodies can instill a sense of hope or freedom? Can certain chord progressions lessen feelings of alienation? Can certain rhythms restore your sense of determination?

Meaning without words

If you answered yes to any of the previous questions, you already know that music can communicate directly to our bodies, our emotions, and our pre-conscious awareness. And none of these types of meaning depend on lyrics.

I like to illustrate this in class by playing the first five seconds of music from various films with the projector turned off. Students are to guess the film’s genre, and maybe even take a stab at the story. After they call out a few ideas, I turn on the projector and continue playing the film. We run through about six or seven examples, and

they nab them all, no problem. Then I follow up with a slightly harder question: “What frame of mind do the filmmakers want us to be in as we sit down to watch?” Their answers here tend to be more intricate, with plenty of apt insights. All from a few seconds of music.

This innate ability to sense musical character and recognize its implications not only applies to the beginning of a movie, but affects how our moment-by-moment understanding of the issues at play within the rest of the film. (And as we’ll see, we use the same abilities to understand songs and instrumental music, as well.) Let’s see how it works in a scene from *The Matrix*.

The Matrix takes place in the future when humankind is held captive by machines who use human body heat to generate electricity, as they keep people’s comatose minds active with an artificial reality known as the Matrix. The story centers around a handful of humans who have broken loose and managed to form a small rebel force. In the scene we’ll explore, a character named Neo visits an Oracle to see whether he is “The One” chosen to free humankind from its bondage. After a little small talk, she begins her examination: tracing the lines in his palms, looking into his mouth. She hesitates; Neo is clearly dismayed. His friend Morpheus had been so sure ...

But then the Oracle tells Neo something else: that either he or Morpheus is going to die. Worse, Neo must choose who it will be. When she finishes her devastating prophecy, she lightens the mood by offering him a cookie.

Music can give us power to know truth from fiction. The Oracle scene uses two very different types of music: the first for its usefulness, the second for its meaning. When we first enter the Oracle’s kitchen, the soft swing music playing very softly on her radio perfectly matches the rest of the 1940’s décor. The wafting motion of the tune is so soothing that we can almost smell the warm cinnamon

and vanilla emanating from the oven. This is what it feels like to be home. But in time, a discrepancy develops between the music and the story: something we sense, but don’t notice. When the Oracle begins examining Neo, the music no longer fits. All the while she’s poking and prodding this poor fellow, the soft swing music just keeps bobbing along without a care in the world, so we sense the disappointing news even before Neo hears it. In other words, the meaning of this “background music” contradicts the gravity of the situation.

When the dialogue transitions to the impending hard choices that Neo must make, we begin to hear (but again, don’t notice) slow, ominous, rolling-and-rising chords played by low brass – music that feels just as serious and true as the Oracle’s prophesy. We believe – deeply – every single word she says.

Then part way through the last bit of dialogue, when the Oracle urges Neo to slough off the bad news, the soft swing music reenters, as if nothing has happened.

Film music doesn’t just tell the film’s story; it tells our story.

Film music not only shapes and guides our emotions as a story develops, it also brings us into the world of the film – even into the minds and hearts of the characters. Music can give us the impression that we are thinking and feeling what the characters think and feel. Or in some cases, like this one, it can delve into the metaphysical, imparting something close to supreme knowledge as it reconfigures our sense of ourselves and our place in this world.

The Oracle’s prophesy addresses character traits that matter to everyone: faithfulness, courage, duty, honor, loyalty, and self-sacrifice. But she doesn’t just talk about them: the horn music stirs them up deep in our guts in ways that deeply resonate with our desire to be true to those we love and persevere for causes greater than ourselves. The music suggests that there’s some great potential in

Neo, and maybe in us too. Once we feel this inside of us, we might even believe we can live into it.

And that belief right there explains our sense of pushback when the Oracle more or less debunks her own prognostication. When she suggests that Neo lacks what it takes to make a hard choice, we can't help feeling a little insulted on his behalf. We don't want a cookie, thank you very much, and we don't want that blasted swing-jazz music! We DO believe, dadgummit! We believe because we long to live as though our lives really matter. But that swing music is so alluring...

And this raises another question. Given that we all fail in our attempts to be faithful to others, to God, to our own deeply-held principles, why are we so surprised and disappointed when we blow it, or when others betray our trust? To me, this indicates that we don't just hold loyalty as an unattainable ideal, we actually believe it's possible, at least to some extent. I'll leave it to philosophers and theologians to determine why we hang on to such an unattainable goal, but I think that at least part of the reason is that so many pieces of music embody something of the substance of loyalty, which we experience (come to know) as we listen. Can't we say the same about love? freedom? and peace?

music and formation

Musical meaning is experiential. Music reaches out to us; into us. It emulates our heartbeat, infiltrates our limbs, and recalibrates our breathing. But music not only affects us, it *shapes* us. There's something inherently *formational* about listening to music.

By and large, most Christians don't think about music and formation because, well, the matter seems so cut and dry. We know that "worship music"ⁱⁱⁱ is specifically designed to affect us "spiritually." By including overt references to spiritual matters, it can enjoin our

hearts to appreciate God's holiness or love, remind us of his promises, and affirm that he is in control; it can stir up gratitude, make us remorseful over our sin, or strengthen our resolve to follow in his ways. But when we listen to "everything else" – music for pleasure, music for aesthetic inspiration, music we exercise to, music we put on to make work (and life) less tedious – we don't expect it to make any impact on our "faith." As long as the lyrics aren't "too nasty," we assume that music "faith-neutral," that it will have little to no effect on us, as believers or human persons.

Over the past decade and a half, however, a good number of scholars have noticed something that calls this assumption into question: that more and more people in our culture now turn to music for help with aspects of life that used to be the sole domain of religion. As theologian Tom Beaudoin writes in the introduction to *Secular Music and Sacred Theology*, "These scholars try to make sense of what happens to religious experience in a world heavily influenced by popular media culture, a world in which songs, movies, musicians, actors, and celebrities influence our individual and collective imaginations about how we might live."^{iv} Such work explores how the various underlying issues in a song or genre can help listeners form conceptions of God, a sense of meaning and purpose, and codes for morality and behavior. Like many, I continue to learn a great deal from this rich and insightful work, though I need to point out what seems, to me at least, an omission: this approach tends to focus heavily on the underlying theological implications of *ideas* (lyrics) while saying very little about the actual music itself.

Music doesn't so much "preach" as it "indicates." Musical notes and rhythms embody our sense of what matters: our deepest convictions, but also our floundering intuitions about all we hold as true, essential. Music invites us – sometimes even seems to compels us – to ponder, grieve, celebrate, and dream. Music trains us how to care,

what for, and why. We pick this up through music's covert meanings, which not only captures attitudes and ideals, but instills them within us as we listen.

Censorship as formation? While it's wise to recognize that music can be a powerful medium for both good or evil, it's not always so clear whether a song is promoting sin or just being honest about brokenness. When we actually hear the heart cry of a "secular" musician, we may find much that sharpens, comforts, and inspires. This is why I dislike the term "secular," especially with regards to music. I find that all the issues that are voiced in songs are "spiritual." Try to name even one song that doesn't capture a sense of "who we are," "what life is supposed to be like," "what we care about." These are all spiritual issues.

It's here that we need to recognize that the candid voices of people looking for light are at least as valuable as those tasked to sing directly about how they have found it. This shouldn't be surprising if we've listened closely to what Jesus has taught us about the kingdom of God. Remember that it was the Pharisees who rebuked the "repugnant harlot" for anointing Jesus' feet with perfume and tears, totally clueless to the nature of heartfelt gratitude; it was the Pharisees who urged Jesus to stay clear of the "filthy tax collector" who had much to teach us all about the true nature of repentance; and it was the highly-educated Pharisees who couldn't wrap their heads around the notion that a "godless Samaritan" might be able to teach them how to love a neighbor.

Gospel stories about broken people seeking help provide clear examples of "be-attitudes." Through their faces, postures, questions, and actions, we sense what we are to be like, and our hearts change as we watch, listen, and feel. Songs of all ages, all cultures capture the same gut-level confrontation with the human condition: our need for light and love, and the celebration of the same when we

find it. The attitudes we sense in music not only affect us, they *shape* us.

The very definition of a disciple is "lifelong learner." Discipleship involves far more than merely thinking about the things of God and drawing conclusions. Jesus calls us to follow, not to conclude. A disciple acquires habits of asking, discovering, leaning into, and holding on. The taproot of such learning must reach into the Scriptures themselves. But what manner of learning will open up God's word to us? God proves his word in us through trials, relationships, our work, spiritual practices, and more. Formation, then, is experiential, immediate, reflective, and brutally honest. And so is music. The facts of the Gospel matter little if our hearts are not moved to obey.

So my position is different from others who connect secular music and faith. While some find valuable insights that echo those in the Gospel, I am more interested in the *questions* than the conclusions: *heart questions* voiced not only in lyrics, but even more in the sounds—deep utterances that voice the experience of the human condition: our need for grace, light, strength, and love from the Father who made us and calls us to himself.

People who are not bound to represent a particular faith tradition can more easily ask genuine questions without the burden of already knowing the right answer. Christian musicians, in my view, ought to work harder to achieve greater honesty, lest our songs merely rehearse the platitudes of our faith.

Time for another example.

"Hound Dog"

The song "Hound Dog" by Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton spent seven weeks at #1 on the Billboard R&B charts in 1953. Once again, read the lyrics (out loud) before listening to the recording.

- ▶ ["Hound Dog"](#) by Big Mama Thornton

*You ain't nothin' but a hound dog
Been snoopin' 'round the door.
You ain't nothin' but a hound dog
Been snoopin' 'round the door.
You can wag your tail,
But I ain't gonna feed you no more.*

*You told me you was high class
But I could see through that.
Yes, you told me you was high class
But I could see through that.
And daddy I know,
You ain't no real cool cat.*

Mama Thornton lays into the word “nothin’” with enough force to hurl that mangy excuse for a boyfriend out with the back alley trash where he belongs. And her powerful growls during the rest of the song make it clear that she’s more than done with all of his smooth-talking and cute tail wagging. It took her too long to realize that his only interest in her is to be “fed” (and housed, and given money, and sex). In acting like a dog, he’s made her feel like a dog as well, and she’s *through!* We experience her disgust – at him, at herself – as we also resonate with her sense of empowerment that helps her rise up and reclaim her dignity. The need to say “enough!” when we’re being robbed in this way is a universal human experience. The unhealthy relationship, a bad habit, an addiction, sin. We need to say “Enough!” to fear: fear of failure; fear of what others think of us. Whatever it is, we all know situations in our lives where we put up with being robbed until we finally find the wherewithal to take out the trash.

And it’s here that we find the “spiritual core” of the song: repentance. To be clear, there’s nothing overt in the lyrics that indicates Mama Thornton is turning to Jesus during this moment, so we

need to qualify, somewhat, what we mean by repentance. The notes and rhythms capture so much of the essence of repentance – its force, energy, and urgency. Despite a growl that seems to rise up from Mama Thornton’s toes, there’s something triumphant, even joyous about this particular embodiment of turning away from darkness, about moving on to freedom – a notion of repentance that stands in stark contrast to our meager repertoires of shame.

Mama Thornton’s voice gives voice to our own heart’s cry, and may even help us find the courage to say, “No more!” “Done with this!” “I’ve seen the light, and that’s where I’m headed!” What might happen if we open our hearts to the Spirit as we sing along?

More than Emotion

Music has often been called “the language of the emotions” and for good reason. One of the most noticeable effects of music is that it stirs up feelings within us as we listen. Music can set a mood for relaxation or a pace for menial work. Music can create an emotional tone for significant events like weddings, graduations, and funerals. A song can capture and give voice to our deepest intuitions about things that are hard to express adequately with words alone: grief when a relationship ends; boldness when we’re feeling unsure of our abilities; a sense of wonder as we worship. And music can even affect our emotions when we aren’t paying attention, for example, when we’re out shopping or watching a movie.

Still, there’s something even deeper than mere emotion at work when we listen to music. Music not only stirs up our feelings, it captures and expresses our deepest intuitions about things we care about and why they matter. So while it’s true that music is “a language of the emotions,” it’s even more true that music is “the language of convictions.” Human beings make music because we find life as difficult as it is beautiful, as fun as it is terrifying, and music

is one of the best ways to grapple with our various (and often conflicting) thoughts, intuitions, and experiences about the way things are, and the way things ought to be.

The Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel explores this same line of thought when he writes,

Listening to great music is a shattering experience, throwing the soul into an encounter with an aspect of reality to which the mind can never relate itself adequately. Such experiences undermine conceit and complacency and may even induce a sense of contrition and a readiness for repentance... [the] unbearable realization of our own vanity and frailty and of the terrible relevance of God.

When Heschel uses the loaded term “great music,” he doesn’t mean “classical” music by the “great composers.” We know this because the excerpt above comes from a chapter entitled, “The Vocation of the Cantor” (the person who sings chants and prayers in a synagogue). Throughout the essay Heschel casts a wide musical net so that musical “greatness” can’t be linked to any particular style or genre. I agree.

Heschel reminds us that great music doesn’t go right for the emotional 1-2 punch, it “says something,” and says it well. He’s not alone here, as many others throughout history have voiced concern over what we might call emotionally-driven music. As literary critic Joseph Bottum wrote in “The Soundtracking of America,” “Just as intelligence turns decadent when reduced to sophistication and complexity for no reason, so something peculiar happens to emotion when it has no coherent purpose except to be felt.”^v

It’s actually quite easy to create powerful emotions with music just by exaggerating certain musical features. (For example, a fast, pounding bass drum beat will create an instant feeling of anxiety or excitement. A slow, airy, violin tune can create a sentimental mood.)

Though listening to emotionally-driven music can be great fun, Bottum and others are concerned that it may be addictive. (Some even compare music with junk food). In contrast, the emotions that arise from having our convictions stirred are more meaningful, longer-lasting, and I would say more deeply felt than the emotions that ramped up by a musician (even a church musician) who knows the right musical tricks. Perhaps more importantly, we’re formed differently by emotionally-driven music than music that draws from deep convictions. The richer the covert meaning in a piece of music, the more likely the listener’s heart will be struck, and the more likely his own convictions will be engaged.

But is it possible to tell the difference?

Each piece of music has a “spiritual core” (but it won’t necessarily be rich).

When Christians use the word “spiritual,” we tend to limit it to things specifically-related to the Christian faith, which typically include things like the work of the Holy Spirit, spiritual practices (e.g. prayer and Bible reading), and putting a priority on the life of faith rather than the concerns of this earthly life. But the general public uses the word “spiritual” far more broadly to describe so many “immaterial,” “non-rational” aspects of our lives: love, hope, happiness, identity, meaning and purpose in life, our understanding of right and wrong, beauty, peace, freedom, joy, and the like. These are concerns that all people share. To follow Jesus means that we engage in an ongoing process of having our hearts and minds changed regarding all such concerns – renewed and redirected according to the ways of the New Kingdom.

It’s no coincidence that music is always about spiritual issues – matters of the heart. This doesn’t mean that every piece of music has something positive to offer. As Heschel points out later in his Cantor

essay, “music is a vessel that may hold anything. It may express vulgarity; it may impart sublimity. It may utter vanity; it may inspire humility...” He makes further distinctions between musical virtues and vices, in the end calling for a type of honesty, or “gravity,” the word that John Calvin uses in an essay that is remarkably similar to Heschel’s.^{vi} Neither man implies that music must be serious and theologically-laden to be worth our time. Even light-hearted music can point us to something bigger than the immediate feelings we get while listening to it, while a somber piece of music might become an occasion for self-absorption.

It’s going to take some time (the rest of the book, actually) to fully show what I mean by finding the spiritual core of a piece of music. But I want to set this out early on, because attempting to listen in this way is one of the best ways I know to open up so many aspects of music. Listening for the spiritual core in a piece of music draws on all our faculties; it challenges us to hear with our whole selves: our mind, our body, our senses, our spirit, our emotions, our intuitions, our desires, and our will. The goal is not so much achieving a perfect “analysis” (wrapping things up once and for all) as *awareness*. In fact, it sometimes happens that our sense of the spiritual core of a piece changes over time as we begin to hear and understand new things in it. This is not only ok, it’s good. Hopefully, we’re not only learning to be sensitive to the music as we listen, but to the Spirit, as well.

Nor is the goal to turn every song into a Sunday school lesson, but rather to find what has moved the musician to make this particular music in this particular way. In other words, we don’t “spiritualize” something that has little to do with spiritual issues; we merely acknowledge what is already a spiritual matter so that we can respond accordingly.

Back to the question of whether we can tell the difference between an emotionally-driven piece of music and a spiritually rich one. Probably yes, but not necessarily. The process of listening for the spiritual core will increase our awareness of the music as it also shines a light inside our own hearts, as we’ll see from working through the next example.

“Hound Dog,” take 2.

In early June of 1956, four years after Big Mama Thornton recorded “Hound Dog,” Elvis Presley appeared on The Milton Berle Show and got quite a bit of attention for his rendition of the song. It was his mainly his hip gyrations that caused all the ruckus, though other harder-to-pinpoint aspects of his stage manner were what marked his “authority” – showed that he was someone to be taken seriously. Elvis’ recording of “Hound Dog” topped three Billboard charts that year: the US pop, country, and R&B hit singles – and resides at #19 on *Rolling Stone*’s “500 greatest songs of all time.” It’s no surprise that this version, and not Mama Thornton’s, is the one that most people know today.

Notice that Elvis changes the words.

► “Hound Dog” by Elvis Presley

You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog

Cryin’ all the time.

You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog

Cryin’ all the time.

Well, you ain’t never caught a rabbit

And you ain’t no friend of mine

Well they said you was high-classed

Well, that was just a lie

Yeah they said you was high-classed

Well, that was just a lie

*Well, you ain't never caught a rabbit
And you ain't no friend of mine*

In the original version, Mama Thornton was singing to a man who had treated her deplorably. Her hound dog metaphor offered rich, direct insights into her situation. Not so here. Isn't Elvis telling his girlfriend that she's like a worthless hound who continually whimpers and can't hunt? That's harsh. If this interpretation is right, then the music makes even less sense. His body language doesn't fit the message, nor does his tone of voice, nor his swagger. And what is a "daw-guh?"

My best guess at an interpretation is that Presley is not thinking about the lyrics at all. In fact, I think that this is what was behind the farce that Steve Allen (another variety show host) set up a couple months after Presley's appearance on the Milton Berle show. Allen brings out an actual basset hound to serenade just before Elvis performs, which catches him off guard. Gone is all the fancy dancing and most of the swagger. And there are quite a few moments when Elvis seems to finally realize what a dumb song he's singing.

So how might we find the spiritual core of Elvis' version of "Hound Dog?" If we think hard about the lyrics, we find themes of superficiality, disappointment, callousness. But none of those themes are close to the surface, and they don't align with the overall tone of the song. In the end, following this route sets us on the sort of analytical course that I discouraged earlier. Analysis can provide a great way to construct a convincing argument for something that has no real merit.

What if we rely on our senses? What does it *feel* like this music is about? Which parts of us does it speak to, and what does it say? What do we notice? What are we left with?

When I hear this music, I can't help but be impressed by the sheer magnetism of "The King of Rock 'n' Roll." I don't think that this is just the power of suggestion. There really is "something" about the way that Elvis commands the stage, commands his voice. We're dealing not just with music here, but with a persona.^{vii} In an article about charismatic "kings" in the late 20th century, Elvis is described as "a captivating performer who transformed not only popular music but also young people's sense of how they could live and what they could be."^{viii} And he not only did this for young people, but for other musicians. For example, Bob Dylan said, "When I first heard Elvis' voice, I just knew that I wasn't going to work for anybody; and nobody was going to be my boss... Hearing him for the first time was like busting out of jail."

My current take on the spiritual core of Elvis' "Hound Dog" is that it has a lot to do with this sense of "busting out of jail." There are quite a few people who will say that this was necessary in our society in 1956, and they may have some valid points. But as a Christian, I also know I need to be wary of the vanity and conceit that Heschel mentions. When and how should we "stand up for ourselves" and "not let society tell us what to do?" Jesus certainly didn't fall in step with what was expected, yet there was nothing of "self-affirmation" in his words or actions.

Now as I said earlier, I come up with different impressions of different pieces at different times, and my ideas about this song may change. So in saying this, I'm not so much interested in judging Elvis as I am in recognizing areas of insecurity, frustration, and pride in myself, which I had to do to contemplate the spiritual core of this song. I am reminded that there are things I do to show off, to feel powerful, to flaunt what I see as my most appealing features. And whether or not Elvis was doing this, I sometimes say mean things just because it gives me a momentary emotional rush.

In the end, whatever we find in a piece of music, we need to remember that every musician is also a person, and that we are all made in the image of God. No person is one-dimensional. Elvis' oeuvre of over 500 songs explores quite a range of spiritual concerns, and I'm not just pointing this out because a few include powerfully moving renditions of traditional Gospel music.

Our task.

I'd like to end this chapter with a reminder that we can listen poorly to great music, just as we can listen insightfully to music that other people don't find particularly valuable. In other words, what we "get" from a piece of music – how deeply we enjoy it, whether we find it meaningful, and how it shapes our faith – will depend on:

- how fully we participate with the music (whether we know what to listen for so we might experience each piece of music more intensely and in the best possible ways)
- what we expect to happen when we listen (whether we anticipate all the different areas of life that music might speak to)
- how well we reflect on the music (whether we take the time and whether we have developed the "art" and "skills" of reflection)

These are all things we can learn and improve on, which is exactly what we'll do in the chapters to come.

points for review

- Music is *useful*, and music is *meaningful*. Of the two, the fact that music says something important about who we are and what we care about best explains our deep connection to it.
- Music has overt and covert meaning. Covert meaning, while not specific, has more swaying power than overt meaning.
- Music not only affects emotions, it shapes character.

- Although Music has often been called "the language of the emotions," we ought to recognize that it is even more "the language of convictions."
- The richer the covert meaning in a piece of music, the more likely the listener's heart will be struck, and the more likely his own convictions will be engaged.
- Listening for a piece's "spiritual core" increases our awareness of the music as it also shines a light inside our own hearts.

ⁱ Thomas Schafer and Peter Sedlmeier, "From the Functions of Music to Music Preference," *Psychology of Music* 37, no. 3 (2009): 279–300.

ⁱⁱ Leland Ryken, *The Liberated Imagination: Thinking Christianly About the Arts* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2005), 26.

ⁱⁱⁱ I've chosen "worship music" (a.k.a. "Christian" or "sacred" music) as an umbrella term for hymns, choruses, and songs about God sung by Christian recording artists.

^{iv} Tom Beaudoin, ed., *Secular Music and Sacred Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Michael Glazier, 2013), x.

^v Joseph Bottum, "The Soundtracking of America," *The Atlantic*, March 2000, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2000/03/the-soundtracking-of-america/378052/>.

^{vi} John Calvin, "Preface to the Genevan Psalter, 1565,"

<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/ccel/eee/files/calvinps.htm>.

^{vii} We explore this distinction more in Chapter 12, "Music & Identity."

^{viii} George R. Goethals and Scott T. Allison, "Kings and Charisma, Lincoln and Leadership: An Evolutionary Perspective," in *Conceptions of Leadership*, ed. George R. Goethals et al., Jepson Studies in Leadership (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 111–24.