

Music to believe in: What great music does

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [November 13, 2007](#) issue

Reading Jeremy Begbie's article on music in this issue reminded me of one of the biggest mistakes I ever made. I took music theory in college because I knew a little bit about music and thought I could get a good grade with a minimum of effort. How difficult could music theory be? It turned out that I knew a lot less about music than I thought I did.

Begbie explores a topic about which everyone is his or her own authority on taste but mostly ignorant when it comes to the details. He helps explain how music gathers up human hope and passion as no other human activity does. I loved the reminder of the astonishing physics of music: when you play a middle C on a piano and silently depress the key an octave above, the higher string will vibrate. There's something mysterious about that, something ontological—music is built into the structure of the universe.

In his memoir *Once to Every Man*, William Sloane Coffin wrote: "In times of utter desolation, God alone has comforted me more [than music has]; and when the world seems bent on madness, its music as much as its literature reassures me of its sanity." It was Dostoevsky, I think, who said that he never believed more than when he was singing the great hymns of the church. Kurt Vonnegut, who died earlier this year, wrote: "No matter how corrupt, greedy and heartless our government, our corporations, our media, and our religions and charitable institutions may become, the music will still be wonderful." He added: "Let this be my epitaph: the only proof he needed for the existence of god was music." Vonnegut went on to say that music "makes practically everybody fonder of life than he or she would be without it. Even military bands, although I am a pacifist, always cheer me up." (Vonnegut also said that the blues, the priceless gift that African Americans have given the world, is "now almost the only reason foreigners still like us at least a little bit.")

It is not surprising that something so primal and powerful should become a topic of controversy. Churchpeople can get steamed up about the style of music used in church—whether it's pipe organ or praise band, traditional hymns or praise choruses. The conflict for me is not between contemporary and traditional but between high-quality and shoddy, between interesting and boring. I reject the notion that the traditional is boring and uninteresting. In fact I'd make the case that traditional worship has a better chance of being energetic and interesting because there is so much more to work with. At the church I serve, the organist moved from J. S. Bach to Scott Joplin during the postlude one Sunday and people are still talking about it.

In *A Royal 'Waste' of Time*, Marva Dawn writes:

Music, songs, sermons, liturgical form, architecture, are all means by which God invites, reveals and forms us. If we use shallow materials, they will not reveal truth about God. Instead, shallow materials will shape shallow theology and form us superficially; songs with cheap or sentimental lyrics or banal music belie the coherence and integrity of God.

That's what a great hymn does: it conveys and allows us to experience something of the coherence and integrity of God.