

"SINGING WITH UNDERSTANDING ALSO"

by Vida Chenoweth

Music is a generic term; so is language, and there are many varieties of both. If one studies the language of another culture with the intention of understanding, describing and speaking that language, he is a descriptive linguist. One who studies the music of another culture with the purpose of understanding, describing and participating in that musical "language," is an ethnomusicologist. Like spoken language, music varies from one people to another, but each music system has its own worth with a unique contribution to make to the whole of creation.

In order to grasp a medium of expression, one must investigate cultural traditions surrounding it and have interchange in the vernacular language, either through an interpreter or, better yet, after having learned to speak in the vernacular. Ethnomusicology then is more than the anthropology of music. Its most particular task is to understand how composers of music in cultures other than those of our Western civilization build music. What are their building blocks and how are they organized into an artistic whole? This task requires rigorously trained analysts. The well furnished ethnomusicologist is a music theorist and practitioner very like a descriptive linguist.

Whereas such a pursuit may seem at first to be unrelated to Bible translation, it is in fact crucial to the developing indigenous church, for unless the church is indigenous in its methods of communication, it will not propagate itself. Just as scripture must be in the vernacular language to strike home, prayer and song too must be in the vernacular

to be vital. Song is considered to be vernacular when it utilizes the music system of the people as well as their language. A Western hymn whose words have been translated into the local language is not a vernacular hymn. It is still foreign to a people who has a different music system. Stop to think of your favorite hymn and how much loss of meaning would result if the words were put to music from, say, South India or Irian Jaya. You would not be able to relate to its musical "language" at all. It would suffer considerable loss of meaning, and this dissatisfaction is now being voiced around the world.

Harold Best, Dean of Wheaton's Conservatory of Music, often remarks that worship through music is not an option to Christians. It is a mandate. We are commanded to sing to the Lord, and to sing a NEW song. That phrase "new song" is sprinkled through the Bible from the Psalms to Revelation. To a Christian ethnomusicologist the phrase has special significance. After exposure to 50 or more music systems in which there are worshipping Christians, one begins to appreciate that the NEW songs to the Lord, free from any previous context, are the ones that are the outgrowth of a vital faith and carry no threat of syncretism. They are new in spirit but utilize the linguistic and musical elements of the culture.

What is wrong with Western music in non-Western churches? Let me quote an African pastor from Cameroon:

" . . . it is not enough to attack African traditional religions and to treat their rites as pagan practices, idolatries, savage superstitions, and obstacles to conversion; but it is good to study and find out how to integrate some aspects of the African traditional culture to Christian worship for African Christians to become real believers."

Monseigneur Tchidimbo wrote in *L'Homme Noir face au Christianisme*:

"One will never know how much, in Africa, Christianity has suffered -- confounded with occidentalism and its power."

Paul says in I Corinthians 9:20-23 (TEV):

"While working with the Jews, I live like a Jew in order to win them; and even though I myself am not subject to the law of Moses, I live as though I were when working with those who are, in order to win them. In the same way, when working with the Gentile, I live like a Gentile, outside the Jewish law, in order to win the Gentiles. This does not mean that I don't obey God's law; I am really under Christ's law. Among the weak in faith I become weak like one of them, in order to win them. So I become all things to all men, that I may save some of them by whatever means are possible."

To quote the Cameroon pastor again:

"There is no doubt of the fact that the use of foreign Western religious songs in Africa has made the African Christian feel strange in his own land, just like a fish out of water."

The introduction of a foreign music system implies that the existing one is unworthy. In many cultures whose music tradition has had little or no foreign influence, the Western modes and harmonies are difficult to imitate. This is not to say that the *prime* reason for not introducing Western music is because it cannot be readily imitated. It is relatively easy to teach music to young children (e.g. the Koreans), but in so doing one has supplanted their music culture with a foreign one. And while imitation is easily accomplished, composition in a foreign system is not. The church needs indigenous composers for the perpetuation of praise in song. Third-world countries are no longer content to merely imitate the West. It is for the evangelizing parties to foster creativity within the church. In order to assure that musical creativity will be

ongoing, the local system wherein one creates spontaneously is the medium deserving first place.

Those of us who belong to cultures with written traditions can afford to taste and experiment with musics from all over the world. However, those from oral traditions stand to lose their culture when they embrace another because theirs is undocumented. For this reason they, more often than not do not realize the ultimate consequence of an immediate choice. They haven't the historical background to know the alternatives or their results. They thus run the risk of obliterating their own heritage.

For one to compose or to make musical decisions in a music system not his own is a serious undertaking. If it were up to the missionary to create the local hymnody he would be hard pressed indeed. These decisions are best made by the local church, and Christian songs are best composed by indigenous Christian composers.

The introduction of Western music has, in some cases, stifled creativity of local composers, especially when Western instruments have been introduced. Just the tuning of these instruments suppresses at once the local character of an indigenous music. Guitar lessons can, for example, lock a culture into a 3-chord harmony which thereafter predetermines the shape of every melody. Manufactured instruments are smooth and shiny and L-O-U-D. What adolescent wouldn't be attracted to them? Even so, the effect upon the elder musicians is often devastating, to the extent that the very ones who could be the church leaders are culturally ostracized. They ascribe low status to themselves, deeming their own hand-crafted instruments worthless in comparison to

the sophisticated ones from overseas. Missionaries must guard against overwhelming the efforts of local artists.

The introduction of Western music displaces musical leadership. A foreign choir leader is not needed. Foreign instruments are not necessary. Part-singing is not required of worship. God speaks Navajo. Yes, and He sings Navajo too! The Navajos needed to know this. The local church needs to assume the responsibility of its own worship forms.

Western music in a non-Western church fosters a theological error, that one culture is divinely favored over another. It used to be a common notion that Greek was a divinely favored language and therefore was the language of the New Testament. We know that every language has the capacity to express the truth of the New Testament adequately and dynamically to the people who speak that language. By the same token, any music system is capable of generating songs for Christian worship adequately and dynamically to those born into that music system.

Just as a vital Christian church addresses God in its prayers, so too, it addresses God in music of its own making. Occasionally one discovers ways of making music to be so different from those of Western ways that one is tempted to try to adjust their ways to ours. For example, the Tai Dam people of Vietnam do not by custom sing together. They sing individually. Is there any Scriptural injunction that would force them into congregational singing as we know it? We are told to make music to the Lord, to sing a new song, to praise Him in song and with every kind of instrument, to make melody in our hearts, to sing to one another, but fortunately, the ensemble is not prescribed. If it is natural to sing individually, why should this custom be adjusted to that of someone

else? Neither the kind of ensemble nor the number of voices sounding simultaneously creates unity. Oneness of mind and spirit creates unity.

Each individual culture deserves respect. Changes will come from within, initiated by the same Spirit that reforms older church bodies.

Those indigenous churches whose membership includes a local composer are fortunate indeed, for not everyone creates music. The ethnomusicologist can assist the vernacular by putting it down on paper for the purpose of preserving and analyzing the music; he can assist in determining what categories within a given music system are most consistent with Christian expression, though the people themselves will ultimately determine the body of songs to be sung in the church; the ethnomusicologist can play an important part in helping those outside a musical culture to understand it, and he is most necessary at the time a people is ready to put music to paper, for just as in all other forms of literacy, one learns quickest and soundest in his own vernacular speech or music system.

Indigenous music has made a remarkable difference in the attitude and sincerity of worship. Among believers where Wycliffe Bible Translators work in Papua New Guinea, some who were given the idea of composing hymns in their own music system have amassed a staggering number of hymns and scripture songs. The Komba and Kunimaipa peoples, for example, in Morobe Province, have created hundreds of hymns. In Africa the women of Nigeria compose and sing their own anthems continually, and in Cameroun the churches of Yaoundé have indigenous ministers of music who compose and train choirs and instrumentalists on local instruments to perform for special services such as Palm Sunday, Easter and Christmas. In Irian Jaya the Danis

can sit for hours and sing scripture in their own unique harmonic style. Depending upon the musicianship of the church body, the creation of a hymnody may be accomplished in a short while or slowly over an extended period. It doesn't matter how long it takes. Our best role would seem to be that of an informed catalyst. God will determine the tempo.