

Eric Hiller Explains What Sacred Music Is and Why It's Important

Theology and liturgical enthusiast Eric Hiller recently explained what sacred music is and why it is such an important part of religious culture.

CHICAGO, IL, UNITED STATES, September 22, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Music is an art form. It can be used to convey emotions, teach lessons, tell stories, and connect people in countless other ways. The Roman Catholic Church once named music the greatest of all of the sacred arts, because it has an incredible ability to move people, even more so than visual art. Amplifying this sentiment, true son of the Catholic Faith and father of the Reformation, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther (a skilled and avid musician and singer himself) fully agreed saying:

"We can mention only one point (which experience confirms), namely, that next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. No greater commendation than this can be found — at least not by us. After all, the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music, namely, by proclaiming [the Word of God] through music."

Theology and sacred liturgy enthusiast [Eric Hiller](#) recently discussed what sacred music is and why it is such an important part of religion.

"Sacred music is a type of music different from secular music. It shares many aspects of the secular, such as to convey emotions in the music and often lyrics. But, it has the added purposes of glorifying your god(s) and to teach the doctrines of your religion. In addition, it has a listening process that involves far more than simply popping in a CD or choosing a song on iTunes," Eric Hiller said. "You can do that and be edified by sacred music, as the Prophets of the Old Testament were (minus Pandora or smartphones). However, sacred music has a more specific and direct use, which is that it is more often performed and participated in live by religious adherents in an event where the music should serve the worship, rather than the music



Eric Hiller

itself being the main focus of a gathering, such as with a secular concert. Sacred music's ability to teach doctrine, convey worship on a god, and its service to a religious ceremony makes it unique."

[Eric Hiller explained](#) that in the Christian religion sacred music is believed to go back all the way to the Garden of Eden. In fact, the longest book in the Bible is Psalms... a book of, you guessed it, sacred music. Eric Hiller continued that most people would associate sacred Christian music post-incarnation of Christ (A.D.) with the great composers of European baroque or medieval music, or the earlier forms, such as Gregorian Chant. Hiller agrees that these were pivotal periods of growth for Christian sacred music, but wanted to emphasize that New Testament music starts, almost immediately after the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 5 (written circa A.D. 60, less than 30 years after Christ's Ascension): "...but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father..." What were these early Christian Hymns? We don't know all of them, but we know as early as circa A.D. 200 that Church Fathers such as Clement of Alexandria are writing hymns, such as Shepherd of Tender Youth.

[Eric Hiller says](#) that although Christian sacred music was often composed for the Divine Service, it was also composed for other venues, such as theater and chamber music. The goal of sacred music for extra-church venues was likely to re-inforce the morality and culture of Christianity in society to those who already were believers, and to a much lesser extent, to evangelize the rare non-Christian, who might have been watching (or more likely, hypocrites officially already with the church). Eric Hiller explained that this form of outreach joins people together through singing, playing, or simply listening to the music.

"While the importance of sacred music in the West is self-evident for sacred purposes, many people are not aware of how much benefit it generated for the secular realm of culture. Sacred music drove the development of written music and early notation" Eric Hiller said. Eric Hiller continued, "Written sacred music resulted in neume, the shape we see that tells us which note to play or sing. It also created solfege, which is the naming of the pitches and the Guidonian Hand, which helps those singing sacred music learn how to sing a song from sight. Neumes, solfege, and the Guidonian Hand are tools we now find in all types of music, or formed the basis of future improvements."

"But, it was not only tools that were developed that drove musical development. It was also the patronage lavished upon sacred music that also helped accelerate secular European music," Eric Hiller said. "A large number of musicians were employed by the church through the Roman, medieval, and baroque eras, all the way until the Classical Era. These musicians not only wrote music influenced by and for the church. They also wrote secular pieces for both royalty and common use that are still hugely popular today. Even just looking at my own denomination (Lutheranism), the names that are associated with sacred music are renown for sacred and secular pieces they wrote. These men included composing giants, such as Johann Sebastian

Bach, George Frideric Handel, George Philipp Telemann, Felix Mendelssohn, Michael Praetorius, Johann Pachelbel, Johann Hermann Schein, Johann Walter, Heinrich Schütz, Dietrich Buxtehude, Johann Christoph Bach, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, etc. Add to these men all the Roman Catholic composers and you have a formidable musical force. The West would have never come to dominate secular music or reach the zeniths in the Baroque period without the very deep foundation that Christian sacred music laid on which to build."

However, regardless of how many great secular benefits have come from Western Christian sacred music, Eric Hiller explained that the main purpose of it is to glorify the Triune God and to transmit His teachings (doctrines) to the listeners. Music can vividly explain Biblical texts that is one might wrongly skip over. Hiller provided the example of the Third Commandment. It reads from the very literal NASB translation:

"8 Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. 11 For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and made it holy." – Exodus 20:8-11

Hiller says, "In many ways, this is very straightforward, but consider the verse covering the Third Commandment from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther's hymn on the Ten Commandments:

"You shall observe the worship day
That peace may fill your home, and pray,
And put aside the things you do,
So that God may work in you!"

Eric Hiller continued, "Why does God command people to observe a day of Sabbath / rest, i.e. worship? Is it to rest our bodies and minds, yes. Is it to honor and remember God's Creation of the world in six literal 24-hour periods, yes. But, what is the primary, reason? Luther asserts that it is to be silent and listen and be still, because God wants to serve you (He is doesn't need your service, as He says in Psalm 50:12). He wants to teach you His Law and Gospel. Luther does explain all of this in an amazingly concise manner – only 4 lines and 28 words (translated to English)! Then he embeds the impactful lyrics written in the 1500's in your mind by pairing them with a 13th century fun medieval German tune. So, imagine you are an observant Christian. Did you zone out during the pastor's sermon on the Third Commandment? Where you lazy and did not read this Scripture, meditate on it, and read what the Church Fathers said about it? That's not good, but God will communicate this nugget of doctrine to you so you don't miss it – in this concise bit of beautiful sacred music. To use a crass secular business analogy, sacred music is another marketing channel to teach you the Bible and a very effective one."

Hiller admits that there is a dangerous side to sacred music. "It [music] can not only generate appropriate emotions, but it can also manipulate them." Eric Hiller said. "Most people (religious

or secular) recognize music's power in this way. However, what many do not consider is that music can not only manipulate the emotions, but it can warp the mind, when the lyrics teach falsehoods. In fact, one of the most famous heretics in Church history, Arius, was able to spread his heresies with viral speed by composing catchy songs containing his false teachings."

Eric Hiller concluded that although it can be abused (like any weapon or tool) that music is a powerful gift from God, that hymns written from ancient times to the present are an essential part of Christianity, and that sacred music has helped illuminate and pass Biblical texts along for thousands of years.

"Many religions have effectively used music, but none quite like Christianity, which has helped Christianity thrive. Christ grant that music will continue to spread the Gospel, teach right doctrine, and evoke transcendence and nobility until and beyond His return," Eric Hiller finished.

Caroline Hunter
Web Presence, LLC
+1 786-233-8220
[email us here](#)

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