

## Excerpt on Aesthetic Guidelines for Church Music from *It's All About HYMN: Essays on Reclaiming Sacred and Traditional Music for Worship*

### **What are the characteristic properties of church music? Is there a “standard” somewhere to reference?**

Church music directors, organists, pianists, and other church musicians often cite one standard – Maurice Hinson’s “Criteria for Selecting Piano Music for Church Use.” Dr. Hinson is professor of piano in the School of Church Music at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He states that church music should have the following qualities:

- **Melody:** flowing, diatonic in nature
- **Harmony:** avoid musical harmonies and progressions associated with blues, jazz, and rock
- **Rhythm and tempo:** avoid highly syncopated music (rhythms that accentuate the weak beat in a measure of music)
- **Dynamics:** balance *piano* and *forte*; virtuosity emphasizes the performer and detracts from the worship atmosphere
- **Form:** formal structure is essential
- **Articulation and touch:** *legato* (smooth) and *cantabile* (flowing) pieces are more suitable for worship than *staccato* (disjointed) and radical articulation changes
- **Title:** titles often convey the composer’s idea of the mood or character of the piece
- **Association:** avoid pieces with secular connotations; works associated with opera, movies, or TV should be avoided
- **Appropriateness:** consider the type of service (morning worship, communion, benediction) and cultural, ethnic, and social background of the congregation.

Dr. Hinson’s list serves as one excellent example of the type of objective aesthetic criteria by which all music must be measured before it is introduced into the sanctuary. Another great source is *A Handbook of Church Music*, edited by Carl Halter and Carl Schalk. While aimed primarily for Lutheran worship, much of the information can apply across other denominations and provide non-denominational churches with great ideas for their own purposes. Other lists exist, but the essential criteria among them are very similar. Having objective aesthetic criteria is a non-negotiable element for the reclamation of sacred and traditional music for worship. Without it, spiritual and scriptural discernment can degrade easily into a “*your* spiritual discernment is not *my* spiritual discernment” argument, much like that heard for defending one’s personal preference, thereby implying a disputable matters claim.

The field of philosophy has many competing and complementary aesthetic theories. But for those proclaiming a biblically Christian (theistic) worldview, an objective aesthetic theory is the *only one* that can be defended. Such a position is diametrically opposed to that of our post-modern culture, but then, isn’t that what the church’s position should be? Because of this stance, if worship music choice is considered a disputable matter, some choices do a better job of pointing to the Cross than others.

Much of what is being sung and performed in many contemporary churches lacks these criteria for church music for several reasons, one of them being the original intent of the music. While it is difficult to truly know what motivates the heart of the composer, it is safe to infer the general commercial approach Christian pop music takes as its primary motivation. However, the main issue is the formula commercial pop music uses (simple, repetitive lyrical and musical themes) that conflicts with church music standards. Many Christian pop artists write music for CDs and go on tour to promote their sale. The contemporary church movement has co-opted selections from those CDs and introduced them into worship spaces. The co-opted music then gets categorized as “contemporary worship music” even though its original purpose and intent might have been something altogether different from worship.