

*Muzak of the Buy-o-Spheres:*

*Hearing and Making Music in Consumer Culture*

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Consumer culture shapes how we make and hear music. In this essay I will discuss ways in which the culture entices people to adopt an identity and a role which result in specific practices of making and hearing music. I will suggest alternatives to the culture's identity, role, and practices that I hope will be subversive, creative, and Christian.

Consumer culture (CC) shapes our identity, role, and practices by pressing us to form ideas about who we are, what we do, and how we do it. In shaping our identity it teaches us to ask "Who am I?" and answer "A consumer." In shaping our role it leads us to ask "What do I do?" and respond "I buy things." In shaping our practices it guides us to make and hear music inattentively.

*Identity*

While doing some last-minute Christmas shopping I was in a big box store looking for an iTunes card for my jazz-aficionado son. Above the racks were enormous placards showing people using mp3 players and earphones. These were not instructional signs in the sense that they gave practical advice on how to use the items. They were instructional in the sense that they told us who we will be if we buy them. I will be as content and relaxed, and possibly as good-looking, as that guy on his couch chilling out to some tunes. Or I will be as zippy and charming as that girl traipsing along with her accessorized mp3 player clipped to her belt, in full view of an admiring and envious world. The placards did not encourage the viewer to interpret the vibrant Photoshopped colors and carefully staged scenes as constructs of marketing, but rather to receive them subconsciously as the natural ambience, the inevitable glow of well-being, that comes bundled with the products.

The omnipresence of the consumer identity message becomes clearer when one realizes how rarely we are shown images of people contented to live as ordinary, without idealized bodies or new gadgets. CC points a finger at real life and accuses it of unbearable frumpiness, thereby compelling us to want to be someone else, somewhere else, doing something else. We can be saved from boredom and lameness only if we consume. Being a consumer becomes not an occasional activity undertaken to meet a specific need, but an essential – perhaps *the* essential – element of what it means to be human.

*Role*

A consumer role follows naturally from a consumer identity. If I am a consumer, then what is my role? What habits are normal and right and expected of me? What things can I do that will make me feel like I am hitting the sweet spot of life? The answer, of

course, is that I buy things. It is no surprise that many people now consider shopping as their primary form of recreation. And indeed, the concept of “recreational shopping” is now an area of serious academic study. Researchers have discovered that a cultural transition is underway in which consumers view shopping less as a simple pleasure and more as a central component of their identities.<sup>1</sup>

Credit card companies encourage consumers to buy not what they actually need but as much as possible; they dangle enticements and rewards for increased spending. They may promise a chance to win the ultimate prize, which is a pre-paid shopping spree. A person playing the role of consumer can imagine no greater ecstasy than a limitless bacchanal of shopping. Interestingly, the idea of unlimited shopping is more attractive than any particular product. The point is not so much to acquire and use sweaters or laptops or shoes (and far less to enjoy the contentment of solving problems caused by the lack of sweaters, laptops, or shoes), but to savor the anticipation and consummation of going to get sweaters, laptops, and shoes.

Some products are more closely associated with the consumer role than others. Take, for instance, the cell phone and the toilet plunger. Both items are useful. It could be argued that both are deployed in response to problems: a need to communicate and a clogged toilet. But no one desires to be seen wielding the plunger. There are no advertisements that try to connect sophistication and a flourishing social life with toilet maintenance. CC has connected the consumer identity and role with the phone but not with the plunger.

The person playing a consumer role, then, buys things not simply to have and use them, but to express what he supposes to be his essential humanity. In the process of buying things he encounters nearly endless messages of flattery and accommodation. CC clamors aggressively for his attention through roadside billboards, television and radio ads, unsolicited mail, faxes, and email, and even texts on his phone. These messages are ubiquitous to the point of inescapability, and this results in the consumer supposing that everything he needs to know will find *him*; he need not find *it*. Nothing is elusive; nothing need be sought. Thus he never learns the habit of seeking the elusive. This is the source of the characteristic inattentiveness of the consumer.

#### *What This Has To Do With Music*

Most music is made and heard within consumer culture’s channels, and is created and sent into the world from within a system that is designed to maximize profits. To be sure, there are places where music is made outside these channels, like a church hymn sing or neighbors playing instruments on a back porch. However, today the overwhelming majority of music is conceived, created, edited, marketed, distributed, bought, and heard entirely within channels developed by CC.

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<sup>1</sup> *Defining and Measuring Recreational Shopper Identity*, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, Vol. 34, No. 1, 74-83 (2006), Michael Guiry, Anne W. Mägi, and Richard J. Lutz

For this reason, the same dynamics of identity and role seen in the culture as a whole are also at work in the way music is made and heard. After all, music is made and heard by people. And the culture is pervasively coaching people to be consumers and to buy things.

The consumer identity and role tend to lead to certain practices. I will examine five characteristics of CC music, each of which corresponds to a practice of hearing and a practice of making.

### *Five Characteristics of Consumer Culture Music*

#### *1. CC music engages in hyperreality.*

Hyperreality is the phenomenon in which portrayals and simulations of life are more vivid and attractive than reality, such that real life becomes marginalized. In music, hyperreality manifests itself partly through celebrityism. CC music is designed to be experienced with the audience knowing how the celebrity performer looks, moves, and acts. The music does not exist outside its association with the celebrity. For example, it is difficult to hear *I Can't Get No Satisfaction* without the trademark stage moves and vocal nuances of Mick Jagger coming to mind. *I've Been Working on the Railroad* conjures no such associations (it is hoped).

The celebrity personality is usually larger-than-life, and forms a kind of mythology. Their stories are an important component of the audience's experience, and the more audacious and juicy the stories, the better. In the early days of rock, artists were lionized for childish and dangerous behaviors such as trashing hotel rooms and smashing guitars onstage. Similar excesses of narcotics, sexuality, luxury, and eccentricity added to their stature. While some of these habits persist, today hyperreality is more often manifested through technology such as giant video screens (because the actual puny person on stage is not vivid enough), computer-driven light and laser effects, and immensely loud speaker systems. Because the aesthetics of CC music always invite the audience to fantasize about being the celebrity, the listener is constantly imagining herself into a hyperreal world, posturing victoriously in front of thousands of cheering fans, bathed in flashing lights and billowing smoke – a god-like stance. (Disney's *Hannah Montana* exploits this fantasy expertly.)

#### *2. CC music is made quickly and easily.*

Few non-musicians are aware of the automated nature of much music they hear. Software innovations like *Garage Band* allow complete novices to construct plausible songs in seconds by dragging and dropping audio loops together. Because the loops are designed (indeed, idiot-proofed) to fit together in almost any order and combination, the results can be songs of gratifying catchiness of sound and ease of creation.

The use of automated and repetitious elements is not limited to amateur endeavors like

*Garage Band.* Nearly all mainstream popular music employs some automated elements (most frequently drum loops, but often bass lines and chord progressions). This results in music which tends toward repetition and formula. CC's limited musical vocabulary leads to its limited emotional vocabulary.

3. *CC music is driven by novelty and rapid coolness change.*

As I write, the top song on iTunes is *Boom Boom Pow* by The Black Eyed Peas, in which the lyrics taunt, "I'm so three-thousand-and-eight; you so two-thousand-and-late." The song admirably illustrates the shame inherent in being out-of-date. (Interestingly, the band needed to bump up their own coolness by a millennium in hopes of outflanking the passage of time. Still, by the time you read this, the song will be so two-thousand-and-late.)

In order to sell, CC music needs to be perceived as cool, but coolness is a moving target. What is cool today is lame tomorrow. In order to be cool, music must tap into all the signifiers of cool: clothing, hair, slang, design, and the indefinable quality of being "on the edge". Since all these signifiers are in constant flux, the music must also chase the cool. Bands change their look and sound constantly. Even to appear in the same genre as previous bands is not as honorable as pioneering a new genre. Instead of metal, it would be cool to be death metal. Cooler still would be industrial trance post-metal. Even cooler would be ambient goth post-punk trance industrial Christian screamo polka. These genres are not actual musical distinctions (often they mean nothing more than a new haircut and a different color guitar) but manifestations of coolness-chasing.

As a result of all this novelty, tremendous energy goes toward fashioning an image rather than developing the skills of making music. (I was in a band when I was a fourteen. We spent days arguing over cool band names. We never practiced any scales.)

4. *CC music is promoted by marketing that flatters the consumer.*

With ever-growing numbers of musicians seeking public attention, promoters must now contend with an overcrowded market. Never in history have listeners had so much music clamoring for their ears. In such a cacophonous environment, marketers have become more aggressive as they seek to win an audience's fleeting attention. There is no time for nuance; the message must be hard-hitting, sexy, enticing, voyeuristic, and edgy.

Such marketing flatters the consumer by appealing to his existing tastes rather than telling him to grow better ones. There is no possibility of gaining a hearing by telling the consumer that his tastes are undeveloped, that he is in fact a trousered ape, and that he must work and learn before understanding and enjoying good music. One cannot sell music by saying, "You cannot have this music until you develop patience and discernment." The only way to survive is to allow the consumer's tastes, no matter how primitive or puerile, to act as artistic arbiter.

### 5. *CC music is ubiquitous.*

Just as shopping carts, gas pump handles, and the sides of busses are plastered with ads, so the acoustic spaces of our world are filled with the marketing of CC music. Promoters vie to place even a few seconds of music in a commercial, as a theme for a televised sports event, or as background music for stores, airports, restaurants, and lobbies. Churches play recorded music as the congregation comes in to be seated and as they walk out; there seems to be a widespread cultural anxiety about dead air.

These five qualities of consumer culture music correspond with the following practices of hearing and making music:

#### *Five Consumer Culture Practices of Hearing Music*

##### *1. CC hearing attends more to hyperrealized elements than to music itself.*

Hyperrealized<sup>2</sup> elements in music are presented, through technology, as more colorful, vivid, and exciting than real life could ever be. No one is as loud as the amplification makes him sound; no one is as large as she appears on the screen; and no ones moves are as spectacular as the video editing makes them look.

Hyperreality extends not only to the aural and visual elements of music, but to the identity of the performers themselves, in the form of celebrityism.

Within CC music it is more important to experience the projected stage personality of the celebrity than to hear and understand what is happening musically. I often ask my students to imagine that their favorite band is coming to campus and the students have front row tickets. However, a strange dilemma arises: the members of the band all have the flu, and if they come out on stage tonight, they will sing out of tune and play ineptly. Fortunately, they travel with a group of look-alikes who not only know all the same music, but can sing it more in tune, play the instruments better, and do cooler stage moves. I ask the students which they prefer: the real band looking and sounding bad, or the ersatz band giving a flawless show? Of course they all want the real band, and will gladly endure bad music for the sake of seeing their heroes. In the students' minds encountering the celebrity is more significant than the aural quality of the music.

Likewise, audience members at CC music events will notice and respond to light shows, giant screens, rotating drum platforms, confetti cannons, and other spectacles more than to anything happening musically. The sound itself must simply be overwhelmingly loud so that it functions as an engulfing aural experience. Many CC bands have paragraphs in their contracts specifying a precise loudness range which must be achieved for every seat in the house – often above 120 decibels. To be swallowed by enormous sound, louder

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<sup>2</sup> Though the word *hyperreality* has several nuances within contemporary philosophy, I am here using it in Umberto Eco's sense: that which can give us more reality than nature can.

than could every be achieved by unaided singers and musicians, is another form of hyperreality.

*2. CC hearing exerts little effort or attention.*

Because CC music is made quickly and easily (and is thus formulaic and repetitive), it does not invite deep hearing. Many of its elements are monotonous and do not reward close examination. Other aspects may be so aggressively realized that the listener has no need to incline her ear, no reason to attend carefully. Repeated hearings are not for the purpose of understanding more deeply; they are done in order to get the same mood again. When all the novelty wears off (and if no nostalgia sustains the song's lifespan) the listener will quickly move on to something new.

*3. CC hearing expects to get it the first time.*

Because CC music is driven by novelty and coolness change, each new song must have some catchy and instantly enticing *thing* in it. And often the *thing* is the only thing it really has: there is nothing else to discover. Because so many songs can be instantly understood, the listener comes to expect that everything is, and ought to be, that way. He loses the ability to sustain his attention. It does not occur to him that it would ever be necessary. Just as a formulaic movie (in which the narrative trajectory is obvious after five minutes) prompts the viewer to check her text messages or check out completely, so an abundance of novelty-laden and coolness-driven music causes listeners to suppose that music contains nothing beyond what they perceive at one casual listening.

*4. CC hearing considers its own tastes to be a legitimate artistic arbiter.*

The consumer is persuaded that *I like it* and *I hate it*<sup>3</sup> are unassailable standards of artistic value. The idea that something she likes could be bad and something she hates could be good does not arise. The consumer marketplace never set out to educate, but in a way it has done so: it has taught people to expect music to cater to their tastes. The only indicator of artistic success is sales, and the consumer makes the decision to buy (or not), and thus she wields the final power of assigning value (or not) to music.

*5. CC hearing is driven to inattentiveness by ubiquity.*

It is interesting to imagine living three or four hundred years ago, during which time no music sounded in the world unless someone sang, played an instrument, or yanked on the church bell rope. Music would have been scarce and therefore precious. Today the acoustic spaces of our world are crammed with sonic energy. No one can bear, let alone care about, all the music that is playing. As a matter of sanity, we tune out most of the sounds around us. Who could stand to give thoughtful consideration to all the music in restaurants, bookstores, on television, and in waiting rooms? However, this same survival skill becomes a habit and deprives the listener of the ability to listen to any

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to writer Andy Crouch for this idea.

music with full attention. Certainly, some music deserves to be heard (if at all) with only partial attention: it has not earned a deep listening, and it is perhaps right to talk while it plays, or read a magazine, or fiddle around with a cell phone. Yet CC hearing has acquired this habit toward all music: having been flooded with noise too often, it is permanently inattentive, even when encountering music of rare and compelling artistry.

### *Five Consumer Culture Practices of Making Music*

#### *1. CC music-making adopts hyperreality the new status quo.*

Hyperreality depends on technology. Berlioz and Wagner assembled the largest orchestras they could, and Tchaikovsky pioneered the addition of cannons to the percussion section; but as bombastic as their performances were, they were not hyperreal: they were actual, not a simulation. The advent of recording and video technology allowed the musical event to take place primarily as a simulation. Some milestones in the progression of hyperreality include producer Phil Spector's "wall of sound" technique of recording via overdubbing, MTV's invention of the music video, and the integration of huge video screens in live performances.

However, as each innovation has been widely adopted it has also lost its edginess. All the milestones mentioned above were once daring and are now standard. Even an amateur musician can record audio and video at home on a laptop with sophisticated technology unthinkable two decades ago.

Because CC music accepts hyperreality as normal, it often incorporates celebrityism into the very act of creating music. Celebrityism is, after all, a hyperreal version of being human. If hyperreality has become the status quo in music-making, then such music's vision of humanity must also be hyperreal. It has become the norm for CC music to incorporate some version of exaggerated humanity into its compositional structure, such as a guitar riff designed to accompany pursed lips and a warrior pose; a chorus meant for an auto-tuned, multi-tracked voice; reliance on pumped-up sub-sonic beats (as if human dancing meant not the clattering of shoes but the shaking of tectonic plates); and above all, the image of the celebrities themselves as excessively beautiful, excessively threatening and streetwise, or excessively tormented.

#### *2. CC music-making uses many shortcuts.*

The New York Times recently described the process of creating pop music:

Behind the vast mixing board of a dimly lighted Manhattan recording studio, two producers and the co-writer greeted a record executive who had come to hear their work. With the press of a button, the room filled with sound: somber guitar arpeggios over a slow, sleek hip-hop beat, with layers of falsetto harmonies leading to a big, glittery, instantly memorable chorus. It was pure candy -- sweetly melodic, but just funky enough to have a dance groove.

"I'm thinking Jennifer," the executive said. "It's perfect for Jennifer Hudson."

As three more songs that had been written in the last 24 hours blared from enormous speakers, the producers sat calmly, waiting to hear which superstars their songs would be pitched to.<sup>4</sup>

This article illuminates the speed and automation with which most CC music is made: the guitars, beats, and even vocals are mostly computer samples, not recorded human sounds. It may also surprise some readers to learn that many songs are assembled by producers and then sold to the singers as templates, who then overdub vocals.

The drag-and-drop ease of assembling computerized loops is not the only shortcut; auto-tune has recently come to public notice. Auto-tune is a computer process which analyzes an audio signal in real time and corrects any notes that are not precisely in tune. Most mainstream pop music celebrities use auto-tune on all their songs.

(Television comedian Stephen Colbert facetiously took singer Kanye West to task over the technology. In response to West's claim to be "the voice of this generation", Colbert remarked that because of pervasive use of auto-tune, West was "barely the voice of [his] own albums."<sup>5</sup>)

If musicians rely on auto-tune, loops, and samples, they will tend not to work on singing in tune, writing their own accompaniments, or crafting their own timbres.

### *3. CC music-making employs clichés in order to be instantly comprehensible.*

Clichés allow for instant recognition of a limited vocabulary of pre-packaged meanings. At the same time, the range of clichés is in constant flux due to the pressures of coolness change. Such clichés are deployed in order to grab attention in the cluttered sonic world of popular culture, in which only aggressive and enticing music has a chance to be heard by a CC-conditioned audience. This dependence limits musical meanings to those available as clichés.

### *4. CC music-making caters to its market niche through the use of "genre".*

Like brands of clothing, the "genre" of music does not represent real musical distinctions but a market niche. There are not necessarily any differences in melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, or tonal language between, say, the genres of acid trance, euro trance, tech trance, and hardstyle trance. They are not so much musical styles as brand names. The multiplicity of genres is a manifestation of the willingness of CC music to meet every expectation – indeed, every whim – of a fickle market. CC musicians want to appear to

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<sup>4</sup> *Wizards in the Studio, Anonymous on the Street*, Ben Sisario, The New York Times, May 6, 2007

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/211966/december-01-2008/operation-humble-kanye>

be breaking new ground without doing the work of breaking new ground.

5. *CC music-making uses aggressive strategies in order to get attention.*

Attention-grabbing is not a mere factor in the creation of CC music; it is the dominant dynamic. Derek Stivers, founder of the independent music website CD Baby, advises musicians that their greatest fear should be obscurity. CD Baby produces a popular podcast for musicians in which the conversation regularly turns to strategies for overcoming "the reality of the glut" and gaining a hearing in a flooded musical marketplace. But such strategies are ultimately self-defeating: if musicians all intend to overcome the glut, they simply create an ever-growing crescendo of marketing pandemonium, further exacerbating the inattentiveness of the listener.

*Christian Subversion of Identity and Role*

A Christian response to the state of CC music must begin with a change of identity from consumer to disciple. The consumer locates himself at the center of the universe and seeks to draw products and experiences into his orbit for his amusement or fulfillment. The disciple understands that he is not the center but on a skewed and aimless trajectory. He must be drawn into the orbit of Christ – he must adopt a Christocentric cosmology. The consumer sees his own interest and inclinations as established facts, to which the rest of the universe should be conformed as far as possible. The disciple views his own desires with suspicion: the universe may be part of the problem, but the desires themselves are likely in need of redemption and transformation as well. The admonition of St. Paul to the Romans – to be not conformed but transformed – is right to the point.

If the role of the consumer is to buy things, that role may be Christianly subverted through *doxological aesthetics*:

[T]he arts can be seen as part of our calling to voice creation's praise, to extend and elaborate the praise which creation already sings to God. The doxology of creation has found its summation in Christ: the one through whom all things were created became part of a creation whose praise has been corrupted, and in the crucified and risen Lord, creation is offered back to the Father, redirected towards its originally intended goal. The Spirit now struggles in creation to bring about what has already been achieved in Christ. We are now invited into this movement in order to enable creation to be more fully what it was created to be.<sup>6</sup>

Jeremy Begbie's helpful notion of doxological aesthetics may be summed up as follows: just as Christ entered the physical realities of creation to redeem it and offer it to the Father, so artists must enter fully into the physical realities of creation

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<sup>6</sup> Begbie, Jeremy: *Christ and the Cultures*, printed in *The Cambridge companion to Christian doctrine*, edited by Colin E. Gunton, Cambridge [England] ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1997

(in the case of music, this means mastery of pitch, rhythm, and timbre, and all their derivatives), cultivate them in love and knowledge, and offer them in praise to God. The role of the disciple is to cultivate creation for God's praise – to practice doxological aesthetics.

In order to answer consumer culture's five qualities and practices, I will suggest five *creational* qualities – aspects of music done with a doxological aesthetic rather than a consumeristic drive – and follow them with five creational practices of hearing and making.

### *Five Qualities of Creational Music*

#### *1. Creational music reveals truth about the world.<sup>7</sup>*

Hyperreality lies about the world, and scorns creation by preferring simulation over reality. It must be subverted by *truth-telling*, which takes into account three Christian teachings and holds them in tension: the goodness of creation, its brokenness in this age, and its destiny of redemption and renewal. Truth-telling takes its cue from the Incarnation; just as Christ entered fully into the physical world and encountered its brokenness, so creational music must find language to describe and lament the tragedies of the world.

But it cannot do so *brutalistically* -- in despair and self-indulgent rage, without any hope in view. This is one of the errors of Emo, Death Metal, and Goth: they cry out against the terrors of the world, not because they know a better way, and perhaps not because they have even encountered many of the terrors themselves (why are such bands often from gated communities in southern California?), but because they look so cool and sell so many CDs doing it. It is a posture of lament without the substance of lament. They wouldn't know what to do if things got better.

Brutalism in the arts may indeed depict some aspects of brokenness adeptly, but it lacks the corresponding truths of creation's goodness and redemption, and often degenerates into a mere theatrical pose, or even outright savoring of the morbid and macabre.

Nor should truth-telling fall into *kitsch*, which is the denial of all that is unpleasant and offensive. Kitsch has typically found a warm reception among Christians. Hieronymous Bosch's nightmarish paintings are no competition for Thomas Kinkade's vision of "a world without the fall." And this is precisely the error of kitsch: in depicting a world of charming harmlessness, it mutes the necessity and significance of Jesus' suffering. Just as brutalism lacks the artistic language to describe anything good (imagine Slipknot or Marilyn Manson *celebrating*) so kitsch lacks the language of lament. Though a Precious Moments crucifixion scene exists,

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<sup>7</sup> I owe credit to Bishop N.T. Wright and philosopher Dr. David Mills for some of the ideas in this section.

it is carefully staged with the empty crosses of Golgotha in the blurry distance, the characters in the foreground more pouty than stricken.

Truth-telling struggles to find ways to give full weight to creation's goodness, fall, and redemption. Each reinforces the others: the more we understand the beauty of creation, the more we sense the tragedy of the fall. The worse the fall, the greater the redemption.

## *2. Creational music reveals stewardship of creation.*

CC music is made with little effort or attention. Too many shortcuts allow musicians to avoid direct contact with the physical materials of music-making: wood, leather, reeds, vocal cords, brass, strings and rosin. Without contact with these materials, musicians lose the intuitive sense of their possibilities and rely increasingly on automated processes, not just as time-savers, but substitutes for knowledge and creativity.

Again, creational music finds theological grounding in the Incarnation. For centuries the church has fought against the heresy of Gnosticism, a teaching which denied the physical enfleshment of Jesus. Gnosticism viewed incarnation as beneath the dignity of God, and physical life as inferior to spiritual life. One may draw a parallel between Gnosticism's reluctance to embrace physical creation and CC music's contempt for the physical work of making music.

Creational music finds richness and creativity through its engagement with the physical acts of music-making. It does not disdain the slow and patient work of mastering the acoustic realm but celebrates it. In doing so it demonstrates cultivation and stewardship of creation.

## *3. Creational music is nuanced and layered.*

In response to CC music's priority of instant catchiness, creational music contains layers of meaning which reveal themselves upon study and repeated hearing. Such nuances may be a matter of crafting (rather than cranking out) the various elements of a typical song: instead of using the same old chord progression, one could seek interesting variations; instead of using the same vocal harmonies on every verse, one could tailor them (for example) to reflect something in the text. Extra labor of this kind will not gain immediate attention, but that is not its goal. It seeks instead to reward repeated and thoughtful hearings.

## *4. Creational music is accessible yet elusive.*

Layering of meanings does not necessarily lead to music that is academic, elitist, or inscrutable. Instead, creational music seeks to welcome listeners of diverse educational backgrounds, yet lead them to more mature hearing over time. Just as CC music fails by choosing superficiality over substance, so the music of the 20th-century academy fails when it prefers erudite compositional systems over audience engagement. At its extremes, modern classical music can seem bewildering and

ugly, and even contemptuous of the uninitiated listening public. The listening public has reciprocated with fifty years of apathy.

Creational music seeks to overcome both CC superficiality and academic elitism by finding points of connection with contemporary listeners, yet drawing them to listen more knowledgeably.

*5. Creational music is often local and apparently insignificant.*

One may respond to the glut of music, to the clamoring for attention in the marketplace, by not participating.

I have noticed among some young worship leaders an attraction to large-scale commercial success in popular music. The church work is fine for now, but if a chance to make it big in Nashville opened up, that would be far preferable. It makes me wonder if many young people are drawn to worship leading not because they love its day-to-day labor but because it simulates (on a modest scale) having a career in consumer culture music. It is not glamorous, but at least one gets to be in the front with a microphone. In recent years most Christian pop groups have begun presenting themselves as "worship artists" which further strengthens the apparent similarity between local church work and a career as a celebrity. (Those with years of experience in either the local church or Nashville know that neither is glamorous.)

Creational music is content to work locally, in order to bless locally. Many forms of blessing are best when local: vegetables, fruit, eggs, friends, forests, and jobs. All these are less good when they come from far away. In the same way, creational music is more interested in creating blessing for the dozens who are near than the millions who are far away; it aims not so much to "succeed" as to serve.

*Five Creational Practices of Hearing Music*

*1. Creational hearing seeks truth-telling.*

Creational hearing must begin by acknowledging that truth-telling in music is hard to find. Too often it is supplanted by hyperreality, kitsch, or brutalism. Hyperreality and kitsch can sometimes be found in symbiosis; many worship songs depict a life with God in language of spiritual intimacy that is far more intense and vivid than the ordinary person's experience of the Christian life.

Good hearing seeks music that holds the three truths of creation, fall, and redemption in harmony and tension. As these truths are not among the dynamics that drive CC, the listener will often need to seek music outside the most convenient and heavily-marketed channels.

*2. Creational hearing seeks music that is crafted.*

I would hate to give up all my shortcuts. The ability to copy and paste is just as useful in music notation as in word processing, and my computer is a wonderful help in my teaching and recording work.

At the same time, creational hearing values the slow, patient, and knowledgeable crafting of music. Crafting includes the fashioning of lyrics, melody lines, chord progression, rhythm, counterpoint, and the mastery of vocal and instrumental performance.

Many ideas for composition arise from instrumental mastery. When one knows the instrument inside and out, one is more likely, in the course of noodling around, to come up with great ideas. Ones' musical ideas are always limited by ones' instrumental proficiency. Guys who know three chords on the guitar are likely to write three-chord songs. Again, creational hearing will often find itself wandering from the mainstream in search of something better.

### *3. Creational hearing listens for more over time.*

If creational music contains layers and nuances, one of the joys of listening lies in finding them. Like a reader who discovers themes in a great book gradually after several readings, so the listener may learn to unfold the meanings in music. Such discoveries may include rich lyrics, unexpected timbres, and the creative ordering of musical events within a song.

### *4. Creational hearing learns to expand beyond quick gratification.*

Again, good hearing must begin by recognizing that the culture does not always encourage good hearing. The wise listener will discern when a piece of music is offered as ear-candy, and she will look elsewhere for better nutrition. Like candy, CC music is not an evil in itself; also like candy, it can become unhealthful if it is all one eats. Creational hearing expects that the best music will require many hearings before the full story begins to appear.

### *5. Creational hearing values and encourages local music.*

Consumer culture has inculcated an unhealthy idea of what it means to be a musician. It has entwined our notion of music-making with celebrityism to such an extent that a normal compliment to a young musician is, "You could make it big."

We need instead to encourage musicians to find their significance in blessing their local communities. Listeners have a responsibility to make room in their aural world for sounds that are home-grown. Just as we prefer that a generous portion of our food be grown within a few miles of our homes, we ought also to seek and nourish local music-making.

This is not only healthy for the community, it is also realistic. For every young singer who finds success in Nashville, there are thousands waiting tables and hoping to audition for a ketchup commercial.

### *Five Creational Practices of Making Music*

#### *1. Creational music-making practices truth-telling on multiple levels.*

It is difficult but necessary to write lyrics that are poetically crafted and truth-telling. Too many songs (and in particular Christian worship songs) shirk this responsibility and instead rely for effect on overblown and silly clichés. The only reason such shopworn couplets get by is that their absurdity is dulled by their ubiquity. It is strange that so much Christian worship consists of people declaring, in song, that they are doing things that they are not doing and have no intention of doing. Perhaps no one else feels odd singing that we are falling on our knees and crying out when in fact we are not. If I were to sit on my back porch and sing loudly about the fact that I am skydiving, my friends might well wonder if I even knew what skydiving is.

These lyrics are examples of hyperreality: life would be more exciting if it were like this, if God felt always tangibly close and our Christian gatherings were all-consuming emotional experiences. But life is not this way. Life is ordinary and frustrating and sad and occasionally beautiful. Songs lapse into hyperreality for several reasons: hyperreality is the native language of consumer culture; inflated language of personal experience is very easy to construct because it does not need to say anything specific; and writing texts that take seriously the beauty, brokenness, and redemption of the world requires hard-won mastery of poetry.

Creational lyric-writing should leave behind the hyperreality of abstract greeting-card cliché and instead seek to write about actual things: what God is like and what he does; what we are like and what we do; and what creation is like and what it does.

Truth-telling can also permeate other elements of music. For example, knowledgeable musicians will sense when the unadorned simplicity of a text or melody calls for an equally unpretentious chord progression or instrumentation.

#### *2. Creational music-making relies on long-term learning.*

To exercise real stewardship of creation in music-making means to set out on a journey of gradual mastery of pitch, rhythm, and timbre. Many of the technological shortcuts mentioned above are ways of avoiding coming to terms with these three elements of the musical created order. If, for example, I always depend upon automated drum loops for rhythm tracks, I may never learn the discipline of playing with a steady beat. Musicians who have spent years playing along with a metronome know that mastery of a steady pulse is a deeply *internal* skill: it must be slowly cultivated in the body before one can keep reliable time.

Likewise, full knowledge of how chords work, or how a good melody is constructed, is simply not available to the musician who is unwilling to be a dedicated student.

3. *Creational music-making writes accessibly yet with layers and depth.*

Full knowledge of how music works allow the musician to strike the elusive balance between accessibility and depth. Accessibility comes through the use of familiar elements such as a singable melody or interesting rhythms. At the same time, it is possible to support an accessible "surface" with meaningful crafting. For example, an important moment in the music may be harmonized not by the expected chord but an interesting substitution, and an otherwise simple tune can be made beautifully mysterious by combining it with a counterpointing voice below or above.

By striving for accessibility and layers, creational music avoids both the superficiality of CC and the elitism of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century academy.

4. *Creational music-making does not pander to the lowest expectations.*

Unless writers are willing to challenge their hearers just a little, our musical vocabulary will always be dictated to us by the CC industry. Just as parents must gradually train their children to eat vegetables and not only fast food, so musicians may find that they can only guide their listeners to better hearing by small steps. Improved listening, like improved eating, is not inevitable as one grows up.

5. *Creational music-making is content to be local.*

Effective ministry is usually local. Our lives are made better by friends more than by famous people. *American Idol* both exploits and reinforces the cultural narrative of discovery and fame: an artist is validated only by making it big. Going *home* from the show is an emblem of shame and an indication of artistic illegitimacy. The goal is to win and *not* go home and set off with new interesting powerful strangers. (This away-from-home trajectory contrasts with the Scriptural narrative of Israel's promised land and the New Testament's City of God. The people of God *want* to go home and be with old familiar ordinary friends.)

Creational music-making subverts this idolatrous narrative by writing especially for the local community, giving them music which speaks to their specific tragedies and beauties. It does not look "beyond" them for something bigger or better.

*Conclusion*

Consumer culture's identity, role, and practices affect every aspect of our making and hearing of music. Its influences are sometimes subtle and elusive. By pursuing doxological aesthetics, musicians and listeners may resign from the role of consumer and begin to play the role of disciple, thus opening possibilities for creational practices of making and hearing music.