



"The reproduction of Jesus Christ on the canvas of everyday life is the finest of the fine arts."

—R.T. Williams

07-Jul-06

Evaluating Culture

In listening to a series of 48 lectures by University of California at Berkeley Professor Robert Greenberg titled "How to Listen to and Understand Great Music," I have come to a greater realization of the evolving tastes among consumers of Western music. We ignorantly call all orchestral music "classical," when in fact there are a handful of long periods in which such music took quite different forms, for instance, Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, Romantic, etc. It does not take a specially trained ear to distinguish the differences between works from these periods. A Bach fugue sounds nothing like a Chopin mazurka.

As one would expect, between eras were transition periods of varying lengths due to the fact that audiences took time to accept new forms. Younger composers, feeling constrained by the strictures of their elders, experimented with new, then-cutting-edge musical styles, and when their works premiered, the critics and most of their audiences were aghast at their progressive, offensive music. Such was the reaction to what are now much-loved favorites as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, Berlioz's First Symphony (Fantastique), and Brahms' First Symphony. These three masters were criticized roundly for their "grotesque" and "incomprehensible" themes.

Even the universally admired Haydn incurred the wrath of the public and critics when his "Surprise" Symphony was too startling for his audience. To us, the "surprise" is just a loud, sudden chord, but to the audience of his day, it was as shocking as the jarring clatter of a jackhammer.

We would probably have a similar reaction at the cinema if we had bought a ticket to see *Bambi*, were comfortably ensconced in our seats, bag of popcorn and drink in hand, and suddenly were assaulted by the opening blare of a *Star Wars* movie. If our tastes had been trained to enjoy benign, pastoral, gentle films like *Benji* or *Black Beauty*, the dynamics and themes of a dramatic space adventure—not to mention the brassy music—would be jolting and uncomfortable. We might learn to enjoy it over time, but our initial reaction would be negative.

Literature has suffered similar periods of great change, in which venerable authors—from our point of view—broke new ground and faced vilification for it. Even today, Mark Twain is excoriated for his realistic portrayal of relations between whites and blacks in *Huckleberry Finn*. William Wordsworth's poetry was considered by some to be essentially unreadable when first published. Edgar Allan Poe's works, most of them macabre, were—in some cases, literally—on the bleeding-edge of acceptability during his lifetime. Several great works of literature (by esteemed authors like Geoffrey Chaucer, James Joyce, Daniel Defoe, Thomas Hardy, Voltaire—even Hans Christian Andersen!), thought to be tame by modern standards, were condemned as obscene when they first went on sale.

However, things changed drastically in the twentieth century, especially after World War I. Artistic standards began to stretch beyond the suggestive to the explicit, and not just in sexual terms. While there had always been composers, authors, and graphic artists who strayed into pornographic, [occult](#), or other taboo areas, their works had remained essentially private, for society as a whole maintained respectable limits on what it considered to be proper. Yet, after the First World War, these limits began to crumble in one area after another until today, when anything goes. While society still uses ratings of one sort or another to inform the public about artistic content, there are few societal impediments to restrict either their creation or consumption.

Really, how vigilant is the local theater in keeping young teens from seeing R-rated movies? Or the local merchant in keeping them from buying M-rated video games?

In the end, the answer to this problem of down-spiraling artistic and cultural standards is a spiritual one, of course. The prevalent philosophy in the Western world—one that has been dominant since at least the Enlightenment—is humanistic liberalism. This is the intersection of two major ideas: 1) that man is the center and height of all that is, and 2) all men should be free to do as their conscience dictates. From this, it is easy to trace a direct line to today's general consensus that there are no real absolutes, so each person is free to believe and do whatever satisfies him.

This obviously flies in the face of biblical morality. These two philosophies are incompatible, and thus the more pleasing to mankind's nature has become dominant, leaving God's standards behind as "outmoded," "archaic," and "unrealistic." Under humanistic liberalism, cultural standards exist on a sliding scale, depending on the tastes of the individual. In the end, this means that *there are no standards*.

To Christians, however, the exact opposite is true: We have a set of absolute, eternal standards, which are provided to us in the form of principles in God's Word. By them, we can judge artistic achievements on their true merits. In music, we can judge more accurately if a piece is uplifting, hopeful, harmonious, helpful, etc., applying the principles of the fruit of God's Spirit. We can judge literature by these same principles, plus those found in God's commandments. (And by the way, just because a piece of literature contains, say, a murder does not mean that it is immoral. We have to go beyond this to see how the work resolves the sinful act and the circumstances it causes. If we were to do otherwise, we would have to condemn the Bible itself, as it contains murders, adulteries, incest, lying, stealing, coveting—you name it!) These same standards can be applied to the graphic arts too.

Learning godly judgment is no easy thing. It is an acquired skill. But [God](#) has called us to learn how to judge righteously. As our Savior commands, "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" ([John 7:24](#)). How do we do this? [Jesus](#) answers, "My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me" (

[John 5:30](#)). As we strengthen and deepen our relationship with God, our judgment of these cultural phenomena will improve—we will be able to discern what is truly classic.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Worship and Culture \(Part One\)](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Richard Ritenbaugh, reflecting on modern charismatic experiments in worship like "praise dancing," "praise bands," "racing for Jesus," etc., poses the question, "What kind of worship will God accept?" To answer this, it is necessary to know the scriptural principles that apply. Worship denotes reverence to a divine Being'fundamentally a person's response to God'but not all responses are acceptable. Several scriptural principles apply: 1) Carnal man's instinctive response is to hide from God and His clear instructions. 2) Only God can define acceptable worship practices; anything else is sin. 3) God is extremely interested in the details of proper worship and will not tolerate deviation. 4) Our service and worship of God must meet certain very high standards. 5) New Testament worship emphasizes inward reverence to God and righteous observance of His instructions, inculcating obedience to God's commands, prayer, singing, preaching, and performing good works.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The Godly Purpose for Music](#)

by David F. Maas

Believe it or not, music in religion is a contentious subject! David Maas, a talented musician in his own right, considers the Bible's approach to music, concluding that it is a blessing from God and an appropriate vehicle for praise and worship.

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