

# Forging Musical Boundaries: The Contribution of 1 Corinthians 14:6–11 and Exodus 32:17–18 to a Christian Philosophy of Music

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Although references to music and musical instruments in Scripture abound, their appropriation in the ongoing music wars leaves something to be desired. Often texts are carelessly mustered to support the views of both purists and progressives, resulting in unrealistic polarities: the sacred music of the Bible is regarded as either a carbon copy of the hymns of Wesley and Watts or the bouncy forerunner of rock and roll.<sup>2</sup> Neither position is sustainable. Scriptural witnesses to music seldom yield that level of correspondence and most have only limited value in the debate. When they do contribute, they most often do so obliquely.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to call attention to two passages that furnish indirect but important insights for our evaluation of musical styles—bearing especially on the question of anti-music within Christian culture: 1 Corinthians 14:6–11 and Exodus 32:17–18. By means of these texts, this article will argue for the following points: 1) 1 Corinthians 14:6–11 and Exodus 32:17–18 provide normative guidelines relevant to current discussions of music and its parameters; 2) musical parameters can be violated, resulting in a concomitant deterioration of musical quality and integrity; 3) in extreme cases these violations can result in anti-music; 4) anti-music, which has both biblical and modern manifestations, is rebuked by these texts.

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<sup>2</sup> See Ed Christian, “The Christian & Rock Music: A Review Essay,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 149–83. Although Christian’s essay criticizes the reasoning of his conservative opponents, his own liberties with the texts of Scripture should not be overlooked: “Consider, too, the singing of heaven. When the huge army of the redeemed sing, they sound ‘like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting,’ ‘like the roar of rushing waters and like peals of thunder’ (Rev 19:1, 6). If they are playing harps at the same time, the harps may need to be electrified if they are to be heard. Then again, ‘like peals of thunder’ sounds rather like a rock concert!” (163); “If we want to talk about ‘biblical principles,’ *there* is the biblical principle: any instrument today can be used to praise God—even the needle on the record turntable scratched back and forth by rap DJs” (166).

## 1 Corinthians 14:6–11

In 1 Corinthians 14:6–11 the apostle Paul departs momentarily from his specialization of theology and borrows from the discipline of semiotics to illustrate the futility of speaking in tongues without the benefit of interpretation:

But now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either in the form of revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching? <sup>7</sup>Likewise, when lifeless objects emit a sound, whether flute or harp, unless they produce a distinction in the tones, how will what is being played on the flute or harp be comprehended? <sup>8</sup>For again, if a bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle? <sup>9</sup>So also you, unless you speak intelligibly with your tongue, how will what is being spoken be understood? For you will be speaking into the air. <sup>10</sup>There are, perhaps, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none is without meaning. <sup>11</sup>If, then, I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the one who speaks, and the one who speaks will be a foreigner to me.<sup>3</sup>

Although Paul’s interest in this passage is the regulation of spiritual gifts, his analogical use of musical instruments in v. 7 discloses the planks of his musicology, which include music’s ability to communicate meaning as well as the boundaries between music and non-music. He states, “when lifeless objects emit a sound, whether flute or harp, unless they produce a distinction in the tones, how will what is being played on the flute or harp be comprehended?” Paul is arguing that without a variation in the sounds the message of instrumental music is incomprehensible because it is meaningless.<sup>4</sup> This of course presupposes that when played with distinct notes—resulting in a meaningful melody—music is capable of comprehension. The process referred to by the question “how will what is being played . . . be comprehended?” is none other than the act of communication between the musician and the lis-

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of Scripture are the author’s. For background information on ancient musical instruments and their use relevant to this passage, consult Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina, ed. D. J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 495–99; Joachim Braun, *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine: Archaeological, Written, and Comparative Sources*, trans. Douglas W. Stott, *The Bible in its World*, ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 42–45.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1103. The translation “what tune is being played” (NIV) implies that indistinct instrumental sounds merely make it impossible to recognize a familiar melody; so Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 664; Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 680. But in fact “tune” simply reflects the translator’s interpretation of the Greek text, which literally reads: “what is being fluted or what is being harped.” Paul’s analogy with verbal utterances (v. 9), however, suggests that he had in mind comprehending the meaning of any musical piece—both parts and whole, familiar and unfamiliar—as the notes unfold in the listener’s ears, rather than just identifying a particular tune. Additionally, a communication model that involves something predetermined and learned (like a familiar tune) is less likely here, given the fact that this type of signification is taken up by the bugle analogy in the following verse. See my comments below.

tener. Leon Morris comments, “Neither flute nor harp makes sense unless there is a meaningful variation in the sounds produced. A melody finely played speaks to a man’s very soul. An aimless jangle means nothing.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, when music’s analogue, speech (v. 9), enters the conversation, it invites the conclusion that Paul recognized music as a semiotic system, or language, in its own right, capable of conveying meaning in terms of feelings, emotions, and ideas. And finally, the modulation to which Paul makes reference (“distinction in the tones”) identifies the artistic sensitivity of human beings, who can cause static instruments to come alive and “speak” via the mysterious but meaningful language of music.

With these initial observations in place, our attention can turn to the question of how meaning is aborted without a “distinction in the tones.” Here Paul probably has in mind the incessant repetition of a note without alteration (in tones or intervals), which would, of course, extinguish any possibility of meaning as quickly as attempting to write an essay using nothing but capital Ps from beginning to end—P P P P P P P P P P P P P. But an identical meaninglessness would result from randomness, that is, the dispensing of independent and desultory notes without a meaningful pattern.<sup>6</sup> This type of incoherence can be elucidated by the modern analogy of listening to members of an orchestra individually, but simultaneously, warming up before a performance.<sup>7</sup> In either case, what both invariance and randomness lack are intelligence, meaning, and comprehensibility.<sup>8</sup>

The obvious answer, then, to Paul’s question regarding how indistinct notes from an instrument can be comprehended is that they *cannot*, since they are without meaning in the first place; the sounds are monotonous, void of creative intelligence. (Notes indiscriminately played would produce the same effect.) It is not that ordinary sounds or even noise are bad in themselves, but when they are regarded as musical, they capsize (at least) one of the non-negotiable ingredients of music—meaning. Consequently, random sounds can never amount to music, despite the passionate efforts of John Cage to persuade us otherwise.

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<sup>5</sup> Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity, 1987), 192–93.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (Louisville: John Knox, 1997), 236.

<sup>7</sup> Fee, *First Corinthians*, 664 n. 28.

<sup>8</sup> When it comes to 1 Corinthians 14:9 commentators are sharply divided on why meaning is lost in the Corinthian church service. Is it because the language of the utterance (human or angelic) is unknown to the congregation or because the sounds are unintelligible attempts to articulate inner yearnings of prayer and praise to God, hence no language at all? Both perspectives also hold to different understandings of the gift of interpretation. Does it have to do with translating a foreign language into the vernacular or with verbalizing inarticulate, nonsense syllables? Fortunately, choosing one or the other is not essential for our purposes since either scenario results in a miscarriage of the speech-event and can be illuminated by the semiotic breakdown that occurs when musical instruments produce indistinct sounds.

For a defense of the first option, see Ciampa-Rosner, *First Corinthians*, 583–88, 676–77, 682; D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 77–83. For the second, see Thiselton, *First Corinthians*, 1098–1100; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 635–37.

So then, to Paul, meaning is as indispensable a property of music as it is of language, with the inference that music is, at least in part, meaningful sound, ordered in time, and capable of comprehension. But there is another implication: it stands to reason that music that is cacophonous or chaotic also would be treated by Paul as either anti-music or utterly abysmal music. That is, to the degree that the music approximates Paul's concept of non-music, to the same degree it would be criticized. For it is hardly conceivable that Paul would suddenly suspend his judgment of form, communication, and meaning, if his thoughts were to turn from instrumental noise to actual music.<sup>9</sup>

If this much is true, then additional principles can be deduced. For starters, I suggest that meaning has two poles of perversion with respect to music: a suppression of meaning, on the one hand, and an overestimation of music's meaning potential, on the other. The first extreme is rather easy to identify in that random collections and associations abrogate meaning. The second, however, is seldom considered. Music is not suited for intellectual or cognitive discourse; the transfer of meaning is generally limited to the realm of feelings, emotions, moods, and ideas. Although music can signify a variety of ideas and entities (e.g., grace, power, triumph, defeat) and has been used to represent elements of the material world, it is not discursive like language.<sup>10</sup> It is incapable of unambiguous predication, let alone argument.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, expecting music to communicate in such ways would constitute a breach of its semiotic limitations. It is also for this reason that we can expect Paul to have restricted music's communicative potential to things like feelings, emotions, and ideas, as stated above.

Second, sound, like meaning, is also a cardinal constituent of music, as can be extracted from 1 Corinthians 14:7, if from no other source. Without it one could have meaning to be sure—for example, musical notes on a page—but not music. That is, complete silence, though desirable at times, would constitute non-music. Likewise, I would venture that music

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<sup>9</sup> Drawing implications that are permitted, though not specified or foreseen, by the author—as attempted here—is a defensible hermeneutic and highly developed in relevance theory; see Tim Meadowcroft, "Relevance as a Mediating Category in the Reading of Biblical Texts: Venturing Beyond the Hermeneutical Circle," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 4 (December 2002): 611–27. See also E. D. Hirsch's concept of "willed type" and "willed meaning" (*Validity in Interpretation* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967], 48–49, 124–25).

<sup>10</sup> See Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-Nine Issues and Concepts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 205, 207, 209–10; Philip Tagg, "Musicology and the Semiotics of Popular Music," *Semiotica* 66 (1987): 293; Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 123.

<sup>11</sup> I will grant that by extending the parameters of the musical communicative act, the simplest predication may be possible. For example, a happy tune may convey the thought that happiness is good, but not as a result of the music alone. The predication would involve the input of extramusical elements, such as an awareness of the tune's context. If, for instance, the tune accompanied a home video of a child's birthday party, then the predication may be, "the child's birthday party is happy" or "everyone at the party is happy." Left to itself, however, the tune would merely express happiness.

Paul's illustration involving a bugle (v. 8) differs from the one in v. 7, in that the semiotics of a military bugle, like speech, involve the transmission of coded, cognitive information. Each blast, or series thereof, represents a predetermined statement or imperative (e.g., "Battle formation!"). Therefore, when functioning in this capacity sound instruments can be brought into the service of objective communication, as Paul reminds us.

that verges on silence, consisting largely of dead space or extremely faint volume, could be considered impaired or feeble music.<sup>12</sup>

In like manner, sound also can be perverted by sustained periods of excessive volume. Perhaps because the physical menace of sonic overload has been amply documented in earlier studies,<sup>13</sup> many have overlooked the aesthetic disfiguration that takes place when instruments, inundated with sound, produce aural distortion. Indeed, a surplus of persistent volume can extend itself beyond the threshold of physical comfort and safety, but it can also debilitate meaning, comprehension, and beauty—although few would challenge the point that the twentieth century has given birth to distinct subcultures that delight in painfully loud music.

The point to be gained from this is that these fundamental components of music (meaning and sound) can not only be obliterated, but can also suffer from privation or excess. The following section discusses the third irreducible element of music—beauty.

### Exodus 32:17–18

Like the previous passage, Exodus 32:17–18 does not have as its primary objective a description of anti-music. Nevertheless, much can be distilled from this episode about what the ancients regarded as the parameters of music and non-music.<sup>14</sup> The text reads:

And Joshua heard the sound of the people when they shouted and said to Moses, “There is a sound of war in the camp.” But he (Moses) replied, “This is not the sound of the forceful shouts of the victor, nor is it the sound of the cowering response of the defeated. It is instead the sound of singing that I hear!”

Joshua hears the people shouting and mistakes it for the sound of war. Moses, however, hearing the same noise, suggests that it is not the sound of war, but the sound of singing. Moses’ assessment of the situation reveals that Joshua mistook the singing around the calf as both the rampaging shouts of the side that was currently dominating in battle and the shrill of those being overcome.<sup>15</sup> This is probably the best explanation for the enigmatic triad of short clauses: “This is not the sound of the forceful shouts of the victor [lit., ‘answering of

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to discount the fact that periods of silence or low volume may indeed convey meaning as components of a larger composition.

<sup>13</sup> See James Lull, “Listener’s Communicative Uses of Popular Music,” in *Popular Music and Communication*, ed. James Lull (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1987), 147–48.

<sup>14</sup> For earlier applications of this passage to modern music, see Bob Larson, *Rock and the Church* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1971), 50; Frank Garlock and Kurt Woetzel, *Music in the Balance* (Greenville, SC: Majesty Music, 1992), 132–33.

<sup>15</sup> C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, trans. J. Martin, vol. 2 of Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 225.

power’], nor is it the sound of the cowering response of the defeated [lit., ‘answering of weakness’]. It is instead the sound of singing that I hear!” (Exod 32:18).<sup>16</sup> Some argue that here “singing” refers to an antiphonal method of singing, where alternating refrains from one chorus answer another.<sup>17</sup> Whether or not it was antiphonal can be debated, but that it was not singing as it ought to have been is clear from Joshua’s initial impression that it was the rattle of battle rather than the majesty of music.<sup>18</sup>

Moses, having been informed earlier that the people had fashioned a calf for worship (Exod 32:7–8), was in a better position to identify the sound than Joshua. Additionally, Moses was familiar with the character of genuine battle sounds, as heard from an elevation, inasmuch as he had witnessed the battle against Amalek, at Rephidim, from the safety of a hilltop (Exod 17:8–13).<sup>19</sup> Ergo, he was able to rule out two types of battle cries—those of domination and those of defeat—and close with a sardonic punch line, which could be paraphrased, “Believe it or not, this is singing!”

But Joshua’s conclusion was not all that defective in the first place. Apparently, the singing was easily mistaken for battle noise because it involved excessive volume, aggressive vocals, and unsynchronized volleys of grunts and high-pitched screams, all chaotically blended in what must have sounded like a first-rate street riot. Whatever the musical element, it was scarcely detectible. So then, Joshua’s initial reaction was based on sound traits that were alien to music but native to the pandemonium of war. Indeed, one could say that it was war-like singing.

Joshua’s failure to recognize this sound as singing and Moses’ correction indicate that the sound mixture that Joshua heard was largely outside the boundaries of music. It was a violation of Joshua’s definition of music because it was aesthetically impoverished, carrying none of the thoughtfulness and conscious arrangement of music—euphonious sound ordered in time. Rather, it was little better than textured cacophony, to the end that it was only upon closer inspection that any musical scraps could be teased out.

As can be safely gleaned from the singing, the dancing must have been of the same cut: an uninhibited expo of limbs and torso.<sup>20</sup> What is thus far a plausible reconstruction of

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<sup>16</sup> For a defense of this translation, see John Makujina, “Additional Considerations for Determining the Meaning of ‘Ānôt and ‘Annôt in Exod. xxxii 18,” *Vetus Testamentum* 55, no. 1 (2005): 38–46.

<sup>17</sup> Alfred Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1969), 167; Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, vol. 2, 225; Francis I. Anderson, “A Lexicographical Note on Exodus xxxii 18,” *Vetus Testamentum* 16, no. 1 (1966): 111.

<sup>18</sup> Joshua’s misidentification is nicely complemented by a scene from Ezra 3:11–13, where an antithetical combination of joyful shouting and plaintive weeping created dissonance and indistinguishability, especially at a distance.

<sup>19</sup> This observation confirms the verdict of most commentators concerning the identity of the speaker; to wit, the unspecified subject of the verb “said” in v. 18 is Moses not Joshua.

<sup>20</sup> The dancing supports the reasonable assumption that their singing was accompanied by instrumental music (Exod 15:20; Judg 11:34; 1 Sam 18:6; etc.). The sound that Joshua and Moses heard, then, was most likely a blend of instrumental music and singing. Further, it should be recognized that the content of the lyrics was not criticized, but the manner in which they were dispensed. Therefore, even in the unlikely event that the singing was a cappella, it would have been the musical, or formal, elements of the singing that were ridiculed.

the scene is upgraded to probable by v. 25, “When Moses saw the people, that they were out of control—because Aaron had let them get out of control.”<sup>21</sup> This unruliness surely includes the manner of dance, as Alfred Sendrey comments:

The biblical narrator dilates intentionally upon the unrestrained character of this “dance around the calf,” in order to emphasize the sacrilege of idolatry. A later description of a heathen dance by the priests of Ba‘al who “limped about the altar,” on the Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:26), likewise characterizes an un-Jewish, barbarous custom.<sup>22</sup>

Parenthetically, the earlier disclosure that “the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play” (Exod 32:6) is unquestionably pejorative and a prologue to the material in 32:17–25. Although the collocation of “eating and drinking” does not ordinarily generate images of indulgence and intoxication, the contribution of v. 25, “out of control,” should influence us in that direction.<sup>23</sup> The Hebrew verb translated “play” can carry sexual connotations, and some have argued for a sexual orgy on this basis alone. But the verb can also comfortably encompass the activities described in 32:17–19, 25—especially dancing<sup>24</sup>—and none of the subsequent texts that recall the incident mention sexual misconduct.<sup>25</sup> I am partial, therefore, to Douglas Stuart’s precautions:

If any overtone of sexual debauchery is intended here, it is not followed through in the rest of the narrative: Moses later described shouting (v. 17), singing (v. 18), and dancing (v. 19), but not the sort of cultic prostitution the Israelites later indulged in at another location (Num 25), and identified the people’s sin as idolatry per se (vv. 31–32, 34–35). The revelry of the occasion was apparently singing and dancing with

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<sup>21</sup> According to John Sailhamer, the uproarious behavior of the revelers is intended to contrast Israel’s orderly departure from Sinai recorded in Numbers 10:1–10 (*The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 312–13, 370, 381). Evidently, the loss of control continued even after the destruction of the calf and the events that followed (v. 20), connoting thereby the depth of Israel’s depravity; cf. W. H. Gispen, *Exodus*, Bible Student’s Commentary, trans. E. van der Maas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 299. This situation is more plausible if drunkenness was a factor. But it is also possible to read v. 25 as a summarizing description of the earlier calf worship (32:6, 17–19), which motivated the harsh punitive measures of 32:27–28.

<sup>22</sup> Sendrey, *Music in Israel*, 450. On animated dancing in the ancient Near East, see David P. Wright, “Music and Dance in 2 Samuel 6,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 2 (2002): 221–22.

<sup>23</sup> So Judg 9:27; 2 Sam 11:13; Job 1:4–5; Isa 22:13 (par. 1 Cor 15:32); Matt 24:49; Luke 12:45.

<sup>24</sup> See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), 850; Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 3:1019; R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Word Book of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:763.

<sup>25</sup> Deut 9:12–21; Neh 9:18; Ps 106:19–23; Acts 7:39–41; 1 Cor 10:7.

abandon, bad enough as a means of celebration of the people's newfound relationship with an idol.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, the negative evaluation of the conduct, though evident through the association of the singing with warfare and the dancing with unrestraint, is reinforced by the parting shot of v. 25, "resulting in the derision (of Israel) among their enemies."<sup>27</sup>

What one encounters, then, in this passage is music on the brink of becoming non-music. The three essentials of music—sound, meaning, and aesthetic appeal—are not entirely absent to be sure, but they *are* pushed to their limits: volume moves toward extreme volume, meaning toward chaos, and aesthetic toward emetic. Although the discordant sounds of Exodus 32:17–18 would not qualify as Pauline non-music, they illustrate that when music distorts its essential components and borders on non-music, it can be upbraided as anti-music.

My argument, therefore, may be summed up as follows: 1 Corinthians 14:6–11 and Exodus 32:17–18 reveal that meaning, sound, and beauty<sup>28</sup> are genetic components of music so that when any of these elements is absent or contradicted music ceases to be music. More so, when all the nuclear elements *are* present, but are of such quality that they approach self-annihilation, then such music can be considered anti-music and should be subject to criticism.

## Hermeneutical Considerations

Before continuing any further, it is necessary to address possible hermeneutical objections to the foregoing interpretations. Is it proper to develop musicological principles from illustrations in the New Testament or narratives in the Old? In reading these passages, has the critical distinction between description and prescription or accident and intention been bypassed?<sup>29</sup> To cite Kevin Vanhoozer, "To display a world where men rule, as the patriarchal narratives do, is not necessarily to commend it."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, The New American Commentary, ed. Kenneth A. Mathews, no. 2 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 666–67. For a similar position on the New Testament citation of this verse, see Ciampa-Rosner, *First Corinthians*, 455–59.

<sup>27</sup> Although the translation "derision" has been challenged, the major alternatives are negative as well; see the options in Stuart, *Exodus*, 680.

<sup>28</sup> The lack of beauty is more perspicuous in the Exodus passage, to be sure, but it can also be inferred from the one in 1 Corinthians 14. Although one can achieve meaning without beauty (e.g., a telephone directory), it seems axiomatic that meaninglessness and beauty are incompatible.

<sup>29</sup> See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 254–55.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.



## Exodus 32:17–18

In responding to such concerns, it should be recognized that the lessons drawn from Exodus 32, at least, involve only a minimum number of steps in the hermeneutical process. It was doubtless the author's intention to derogate the singing as but one example of the nation's turpitude and collapse into idolatry. Therefore, invoking Moses' criticism of that particular performance against comparable forms would be entirely consistent with the principle taught in 1 Corinthians 10: "Now these things became examples to us that we might not crave evil things as they also did" (10:6); and, "Now, these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have arrived" (10:11). What is more, our appeal is actually licensed by 1 Corinthians 10:7, which admonishes the Corinthians to avoid the behavior of the Israelites recorded in—of all passages—Exodus 32! "And be not idolaters as some of them were. As it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.'" The fact that Paul himself excavates this scene for anti-examples for his own purposes<sup>31</sup> reassures us that appropriating the same event for its artistic failures is on firm hermeneutical footing. And, of course, an incident as rich in object lessons as this one can never be exhausted by just one application in 1 Corinthians.

## 1 Corinthians 14:6–11

The example from 1 Corinthians 14 requires more involved reasoning, in moving from text to application. Here Paul's observation about musical instruments functions as a premise in his analogical inference that, unless intelligible, speaking in tongues communicates nothing. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to assume that as a component 1 Corinthians 14:7 has no independent didactic value. This becomes apparent if the argument is reversed to suppose that Paul was correcting incompetent musical performance, instead of dysfunctional tongues. He then would have said something like, "Just as speaking in tongues without interpretation fails to communicate to the congregation, so the practice of monotonously plucking your harps is meaningless." Now for the application: suppose a Pentecostal believer today witnesses members of his church misusing the gift of tongues, à la 1 Corinthians 14. Setting aside the question of the continuation of such gifts, who would forbid him from using this (hypothetical) premise, "speaking in tongues without interpretation fails to communicate," to halt the confusing practice, simply because it is *not* the conclusion of the argument? In the same vein, the actual statement in 1 Corinthians 14:7 ("when lifeless objects emit a sound, whether flute or harp") is no less serviceable in determining musical boundaries; it is instructive in its own right and applicable to its own domain, despite its subordinate role in Paul's argument.

So then, when properly understood against the rest of Scripture, any principle in the Bible is "useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16;

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<sup>31</sup> Paul singles out Israel's participation in the idolatrous feast ("eat and drink") and the calf worship that followed ("rose up to play") because he is concerned about the Corinthians' involvement in meals where an idol may be honored or condoned in any way (1 Cor 10:14–22).

so Rom 15:4), even when it serves as a component of a larger truth that the author intended to teach.

## Rock as Chaos-Aesthetic

At this point one might wonder what can be gained by documenting biblical examples of non-music and anti-music. The answer is that, to varying degrees and at strategic points in its history, rock music has been a showcase for anti-music. In fact, the anti-musical ethos of rock and roll can be detected in one of its earliest representatives, “Roll Over Beethoven.” Chuck Berry’s 1956 hit intrepidly announced the arrival of a new breed of music that would overthrow classical music, along with its effete worldview of order, discipline, contemplation, control, balance, and beauty. In its place, rock and roll delivered a countercultural sound that was raw, transgressive, impulsive, unbridled, and immediately gratifying to the artistic appetites of its patrons.<sup>32</sup> The lyrics of the song betray a stunning self-awareness of the character of the musical accompaniment:<sup>33</sup>

I’m gonna write a little letter,  
gonna mail it to my local DJ.  
It’s a rockin’ rhythm record  
I want my jockey to play.  
Roll Over Beethoven, I gotta hear it again today.

You know, my temperature’s risin’  
and the jukebox blows a fuse,  
My heart’s beatin’ rhythm  
and my soul keeps on singin’ the blues.  
Roll Over Beethoven and tell Tchaikovsky the news.

I got the rockin’ pneumonia,  
I need a shot of rhythm and blues,  
I think I’m rollin’ arthritis,  
sittin’ down by the rhythm review.  
Roll Over Beethoven rockin’ in two by two.

Well, if you feel you like it,  
go get your lover, then reel and rock it,  
Roll it over and move on up just  
a trifle further and reel and rock it,  
roll it over,

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<sup>32</sup> Peter Wicke, *Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics and Sociology*, trans. Rachel Fogg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 3–4, 8, 11, 27.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Bruce Pegg, *Brown Eyed Handsome Man: The Life and Hard Times of Chuck Berry* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 58.

Roll Over Beethoven rockin' in two by two.

Well, early in the mornin' I'm a givin' you a warnin',  
don't you step on my blue suede shoes.  
Hey diddle diddle, I am playin' my fiddle,  
ain't got nothin' to lose.  
Roll Over Beethoven and tell Tchaikovsky the news.

You know she wiggles like a glow worm,  
dance like a spinnin' top.  
She got a crazy partner,  
oughta see 'em reel and rock.  
Long as she got a dime the music will never stop.

Roll Over Beethoven,  
Roll Over Beethoven,  
Roll Over Beethoven,  
Roll Over Beethoven,  
Roll Over Beethoven and dig these rhythm and blues.<sup>34</sup>

Although unmistakably subversive, the precise nuance and direction of the imperative “roll over” is debatable. It seems to be addressing the postmortem Beethoven, commanding him to animate his misery by rolling over in his grave, and most probably perceive it in this manner. Nevertheless, “roll over” could mean something like “surrender your exalted position,” or “stand aside,” “convert,” or even “rock and roll Beethoven” (see “dig these rhythm and blues”). Berry’s respect for Beethoven, expressed elsewhere, and his flexibility with the term “roll,” suggest that multiple meanings were intended, not all of which are critical of the maestro.<sup>35</sup>

Whereas a few of the lyrics may be ambiguous, the revolutionary sound of the music is crystal clear<sup>36</sup>—at least to the sensibilities of previous generations. Admittedly, by today’s standards “Roll Over Beethoven” would qualify as little more than a lullaby, but to the extent that classical music represented order, balance, and artistic excellence within Eisenhower’s America, early rock and roll could be considered a serious attempt at anti-music.

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<sup>34</sup> The lyrics were obtained from Berry’s official website: <http://www.chuckberry.com/music/lyrics/beethoven.htm>. Berry is evidently the sole author of the lyrics; see Pegg, *Brown Eyed Handsome Man*, 241–50.

<sup>35</sup> Although leaving us guessing as to the meaning(s) of “roll over,” Berry’s autobiography *does* disclose that the song was directed primarily against his classically trained sister Lucy and her monopolization of the piano, which, according to Berry, postponed the emergence of rock and roll by twenty years (Chuck Berry, *The Autobiography* [New York: Harmony Books, 1987], 150). In “Rock and Roll Music,” Berry criticizes modern jazz, which had become too much like a “symphony” for his tastes (Pegg, *Brown Eyed Handsome Man*, 74).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Pegg, *Brown Eyed Handsome Man*, 58.

Later, hard rock and heavy metal were much more extreme experiments in anti-music and were only outdone by punk, thrash metal (Metallica, Anthrax, Megadeth), and their offspring (e.g., death metal). These styles are indisputably tumultuous, intolerably loud, and unrepentantly anti-aesthetical and anti-musical in their delivery. Consider, for instance, Peter Wicke's brief exposé of the Sex Pistols:

This anarchist credo was literally spat out by Sex Pistols' lead singer Johnny Rotten in a barely articulated scream. The whole thing was accompanied by a frenzied noise made up of the monotonous screeching sound of guitars played in parallel and drums being flogged mercilessly. Undisguised anger hammered the short phrases of a minimalist two-chord aesthetic into the heads of their listeners.<sup>37</sup>

Lawrence Grossberg adds, "Rather than seeking to become art or to trash aesthetic pleasures, rock and roll constructs an aesthetics of trash (for example, this is the dominant way in which punk and postpunk were received)."<sup>38</sup> Even the singing of the early punks was considered "anti-singing."<sup>39</sup> In fact, it is difficult to conceive of a new musical form surpassing the sub-musicality of punk rock, without actually becoming non-music.

The anti-aesthetical impulses of punk, thrash, and even heavy metal have been convincingly demonstrated by qualified writers so as not to require reexamination here.<sup>40</sup> I will, however, cite Malcolm McLaren, the doyen of punk philosophy, in order to leave no doubt

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<sup>37</sup> Wicke, *Rock Music*, 141.

<sup>38</sup> "Rock and Roll in Search of an Audience," in *Popular Music and Communication*, ed. James Lull (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1987), 194.

<sup>39</sup> Iain Chambers, "Popular Culture, Popular Knowledge," *OneTwoThreeFour 2* (Summer 1985): 178.

<sup>40</sup> See Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 14, 127, 157, 158, 167; John Podhoretz, "Metallic Rock That's Designed to Shock," *U.S. News & World Report*, 7 September 1987, 50; Nathan Rubin, *Rock and Roll: Art and Anti-Art* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1993), 146; Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 55; Charles M. Young, "Heavy Metal: In Defense of Dirtbags and Worthless Puds," *Musician*, September 1984, 42; Lester Bangs, "Heavy Metal," in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll: The Definitive History of the Most Important Artists and Their Music*, ed. Anthony De Curtis and James Henke (New York: Random House, 1992), 459–63; Jon Pareles, "Metallica Defies Heavy Metal Stereotypes," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 13 July 1988, 12 Ew; George H. Lewis, "Patterns of Meaning and Choice: Taste Cultures in Popular Music," in *Popular Music and Communication*, ed. James Lull (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1987), 206; Joe Stuessy, *Rock and Roll: Its History and Stylistic Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 302; Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Metalheads: Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 47, 48, 55, 66; Santiago-Lucerna, "'Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge on Seattle': Pan-Capitalism and Alternative Rock," in *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World*, ed. Jonathan S. Epstein (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 190; Gina Arnold, *Kiss This: Punk in the Present Tense* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997), xi; John Street, *Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 175; Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985), 60–63, 76–78; Kristine McKenna, "Burned Bridges & Vials of Blood," in *Make the Music Go Bang! The Early L.A. Punk Scene*, ed. Don Snowden (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997), 43; Steve Turner, *Hungry for Heaven: Rock and Roll and the Search for Redemption* (London: Kingsway Publications, 1988), 139; Mikal Gilmore, "Mick Jagger," *Rolling Stone*, 5 November–10 December 1987, 34.

about the anti-musical propensity of rock (in its undiluted forms)<sup>41</sup> and the collision of worldviews that occurs when rock meets gospel: “We live in a Christian society concerned with order: rock ‘n’ roll was always concerned with *disorder*. Punk rock promoted blatantly the word *chaos*. Cash from Chaos.”<sup>42</sup> Regrettably, important self-disclosures such as this have failed to make much of an impression on the CCM community. Consequently, every one of the hardcore genres mentioned above, including punk, finds itself firmly entrenched within the ranks of Christian rock.

## Conclusion

If the biblical record has imparted nothing more to our debate than broadly defining music, non-music, and anti-music, it has performed a yeoman’s service. At the very least one can conclude that music contains nuclear elements and boundaries, which can, in a fallen universe, be mutilated or obliterated. Obliteration of any of these elements results in non-music, whereas mutilation, depending on the degree, results in anti-music or deformed music.

From Russolo to the Rhythm Pigs, the existence of anti-music in its various institutionalized forms has been documented by Christian writers—with the assumption that its incompatibility with a Christian worldview was self-evident.<sup>43</sup> Since, however, the inconsistency has largely gone unrecognized, special revelation must perforce come to the aid of general revelation by verifying what seems to be—to some of us at least—the obvious.

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<sup>41</sup> A caveat: the diversity of rock-based genres, many of which are heavily subdued and domesticated, prohibits a blanket censure of rock as anti-music. Consequently, the criticisms in this article are restricted to the forms that have maintained rock’s original anti-musical propensity.

<sup>42</sup> Jon Savage, *Time Travel: Pop, Media and Sexuality 1976–96* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 151.

<sup>43</sup> See Calvin M. Johansson, *Discipling Music Ministry: Twenty-First Century Directions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 24–26; John Makujina, *Measuring the Music: Another Look at the Contemporary Christian Music Debate*, 2nd ed. (Willow Street, PA: Old Paths Publications, 2002), 174–94.