

# A TUNE OF OUR OWN: DEVELOPING INDIGENOUS MELANESIAN CHURCH MUSIC

**Melex Bosip**

*Melex Bosip pastors the Mulmuka Sios Nazarene near Kinding in the Western Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea. He holds a Bachelor of Theology degree from the Melanesian Nazarene Bible College, and often serves as a minister of music for camp meetings and evangelistic services.*

## INTRODUCTION

Wasn't that a great service?", asked the elder in a growing church, after a service that had exuberant praises from the contemporary music. "No", replied another member of the church board. "I don't understand these Western songs, and the style of music is unfamiliar, which makes me feel out-of-place in the service, and I don't worship God as I should."

It is surprising to see changes taking place in the field of music, and, surely, these changes are affecting the work of the church. It is wise for church leaders, and other Christians, to examine and evaluate every phase of church music, to decide if the present trends are helpful or harmful, and to see if we are truly glorifying God in our music. Most Christians in Papua New Guinea today do not find true enjoyment in praising God, and expressing their love to God, because the music structures hinder them.

The purpose of this paper is to encourage the use of indigenous music in the church in Papua New Guinea. It will partially consist of the following: defining indigenous music, historical perspective in music, present trends of music, and some practical suggestions on the use of music in worship today.

## **DEFINING INDIGENOUS CHURCH MUSIC**

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* defines indigenous as “native, belonging naturally to”.<sup>1</sup> In this case, indigenous church music can be defined as that of the original inhabitants of an area.

As an art, music has relevance to different cultures and societies. People either accept or reject music, based on their own values. Of course, church music should find the middle ground, to grow in different cultures of Papua New Guinea. As a Christian and independent nation, with a mostly indigenous church, we should develop indigenous church music. Steve Walsh, a missionary to Papua New Guinea, stated that; “A truly indigenous church should have their own music, which means composing, structuring, and using authentic musical instruments from within the culture.”<sup>2</sup> He also quoted Allan Tippet, a missionary to Pacific Islands, saying, “People should be able to produce their own music within worship services that is relevant, and not imported from somewhere else.”<sup>3</sup> As society is changing, young people are listening to Western music, and ignoring local songs, but they must have confidence in their own music, as an identity, and as a unique gift of God.

## **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CHURCH MUSIC**

Music is an art, created by God, and He gave man the ability to invent music. It originated from God, as basic as language and thought. Heaven is a place of music, where heavenly beings use music as a medium for praising, honouring, and worshipping God. The book of Job mentions, at 38:6-7, “On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together, and all angels shouted for joy?” The sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah records angels actively worshipping God. Not only in the Old Testament do we find records of heavenly music, but we also find exuberant music in the New Testament. God showed this to John in Rev 4:8, “Each of

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, revd edn, s.v. “indigenous”.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Walsh, missionary from Brisbane, Australia, interview by author, February 5, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

the four living creatures . . . day and night, they never stop saying, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, who is, and who is to come’.” In the realm of heaven, music had been there, is there, and will be there.

Music is an avenue, whereby humanity can worship God with expressions of joy, sorrow, and victory. For instance, the lament of Lamech in Gen 4:23-24, Miriam’s song, after crossing the Red Sea, Ps 90 of Moses, and David, the great singer and writer of Psalms – from whom came many songs of praise.

Elizabeth Nelson expresses, “Man’s quest for God has seemed to find expression through the medium of songs, perhaps more than any other way.”<sup>4</sup> Examples are: Mary’s song after God’s favour, and Zechariah’s song, after seeing God’s incredible work for his family, as recorded in Luke 1. Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn after the Lord’s Supper, then they went out to the Mount of Olives (Mark 14:25-26). Paul and Silas were singing hymns at midnight, after being severely flogged and thrown into prison (Acts 16:25). Music was adapted from the Old Testament to the New Testament, as the word of God spread.

In a broad sense of experience: “It is probable that, in the matter of song, the Greek influence was being manifested in the early Christian church, for Greeks were the first to develop a theoretical system of music.”<sup>5</sup> As church music developed, there has evolved some distinct types of music. Elizabeth Nelson describes seven types:

1. Hymns address God. They are poetical and doctrinal.
2. Gospel songs give praise for a personal religious experience that has changed a person’s life.

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth R. Nelson, *Practical Church Music*, Kansas City MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1964, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

3. Cantatas are written for choir use, and are somewhat elaborate in structure.
4. Oratorio differs from the cantata, in that it is not just part of a religious musical production, but is a large-scale musical composition.
5. Anthem is a short musical composition for choral rendition, based upon a biblical text.
6. Carol is a folk song, having a seasonal theme, such as Christmas or Easter.
7. Spiritual are stories from the Bible that have a narrative quality.<sup>6</sup>

Each civilisation produces its own distinctive music, which is a reflection of its people and their society. Every culture in Papua New Guinea has some form of music, in which songs have been sung, and local instruments used: kundu drums, garamuts, and bamboo flutes, for example. The coastal and highlands people have their own music. Former missionaries treated some musical instruments as evil, by associating them with evil cultural and religious practices. Therefore, churches ignored these musical potentials, informing people of their foreign, or Western, musical ideas. Some missionaries valued cultural music, whereas others banned the use of native instruments in worship services.

Martin Luther said, "I am not at all of the opinion that the gospel should do away with the art. . . . I would love to see all the arts, and especially music, in the service of Him, who has given and created them."<sup>7</sup> It is very important to consecrate native instruments to God, and use them in worship services, as part of our identity. For instance, we can bring our native instruments to the church, and have them dedicated to God, before using them.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-31.

<sup>7</sup> William J. Reynolds, and Milburn Price, *A Joyful Sound: Christian Hymnody*, 2nd edn, New York NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1978, p. 12.

No wonder there are changes today, in which music has taken a big step towards Western patterns and structures. Old people, and illiterate adults, find no pleasure in such worship services. A worship service is not a place for entertainment, nor is it a place for audience, but a place for thoughtful participation. All worshippers should understand why they are doing what they are doing.

### **DESCRIPTION OF PRESENT CHURCH MUSIC**

Modern Melanesian church music suffers from a lack of spiritual emphasis. Most Christians do not evaluate music as being either Christian or secular. They do not understand what sacred music is. Most contemporary, so-called, Christian music has all the attributes of worldly music. The beats and arrangements only create pleasure, rather than drawing people to worship God. “Jazz and rock music are finding their way into church, via contemporary music. Our church is being soiled and polluted by these worldly musical techniques and styles.”<sup>8</sup> Some church musicians and singing groups do not know enough about music to detect these dangers, therefore, they accept them without question. They use them, because it is new or popular, but ignore the spiritual emptiness of the music.

There are several recording studios in Papua New Guinea: CHM, Pacific Gold Studio, and Kumul Studio. Having these opportunities, a solo Christian artist or a group can go there to record their songs. Sometimes, the musicians from the studio do the musical arrangement for them, but others have recorded themselves. There are also non-believers, who have been influenced by Western and secular music, who record Christian albums, only for profit. In addition, some former secular band members, who are now Christians, do not change their styles of performing music to make it become real church music.

Listening to worldly cassettes, and watching videotapes of secular music, has brainwashed many youth in PNG. All these are reasons why traditional

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<sup>8</sup> Allan Jones, *Music*, Lebanon OH: The Family Institute, nd, p. 35.

church music is not being used, and it has reduced the spiritual or worshipful value of sacred music. It is good to ride the current of today's modern church music, but it is foolish to leave a congregation silent in the pews. Are we really praising God with the kind of music we perform in church worship today? What can we see in church music today that needs to be changed? What are our objectives, our goals, and our visions for church music tomorrow?

### **PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS ON INDIGENOUS CHURCH MUSIC**

This paper offers the following suggestions, to serve as a guide to halt these trends in church music. All church musicians must have some teaching in the different types of music. Could Bible colleges conduct seminars on campus, or at district meetings, so musicians can be properly educated about church music? In this session, they could be taught what God feels about music, and deserves in worship. Their relationship with God, in the right manner, can allow God's anointing to flow through them, when they make music in church services. They can also be informed of the rhythm styles, and the different time signatures (i.e., 3/4, 4/4, and 6/8) so that they know what beat they are playing in a given rhythm. Too many unnecessary sounds, and offbeat notes, are made in music, because someone is playing by ear, and without basic skills in music. Uninformed church musicians will produce unpleasant sounds, but an informed musician will produce uplifting sounds. "The church needs musicians, who know what church music should express, and who also understand the musical methodology for expressing it."<sup>9</sup>

Making music in a church worship service is a blessed ministry. All classes of people are coming to services with all kinds of spiritual problems and needs. Therefore, music should serve as an activity, through which broken-hearted and troubled souls can be uplifted, released, and find deliverance in God's presence.

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<sup>9</sup> Calvin M. Johansson, *Music and Ministry*, Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1984, p. 42.

There is a greater need for balance in the types of music produced in worship services. Music must be produced to suit the needs and understandings of people within the church, so that they can feel free to worship God. For instance, in a rural church, songs marked for the service should be clear enough for that rural congregation. Likewise, in a more highly-educated urban church, music should be arranged to meet the standard of people worshipping there. The kind of melody, harmony, and rhythm used should fit the needs of the church. The quantity of music is not the issue. Rather, does the music presented suit the congregation? Is it appropriate to the culture and the community?

Most churches sing from hymns that were translated into Pidgin, and special credit should be given to these translators. Songs composed by thoughtful Christians long ago still touch lives today: “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”, by Joseph Scriven (1820-1886);<sup>10</sup> “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus”, by George Duffield (1818-1888);<sup>11</sup> and “Rock of Ages”, by Augustus Montague Toplady (1740-1778).<sup>12</sup>

However, the exciting opportunity is that we can write songs in Pidgin, and in our own dialect. This will help our people to sing to their own tunes, enjoying the meaningful words from their own world. This can be another indigenous form of church music promotion. We can compose songs, and the best songs can be incorporated into our own song books.

“The goal in translating or composing hymns in a tone language is to present hymns to the native church, which will clearly convey the message desired, without any ambiguity.”<sup>13</sup> Today, many songs are being composed, but they are not recorded in hymnals, so that we would know who wrote them, and when they were written. As songs are sung, from place to place, the words

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<sup>10</sup> Carl F. Price, *One Hundred and One Hymn Stories*, New York NY: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1923, p. 42.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>13</sup> Marion M. Cowan, and Majorie E. Davis, *Hymn writing in Aboriginal Languages*, Los Angeles CA: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1959, p. 15.

are quickly changed from the original composition, which is a tragedy. Composing songs is a gift from God, and we can use it to build God's church. It is good to compose songs with meaningful words that will speak to people when they sing them. A song composed of repetitious phrases or words like sha-la-la-la, I love you, I love you, does not make sense. This type of repetitious song can be classed as a self-enjoyment song, not a truly Christian song.

Praise God for the talented Papua New Guineans, who are able to compose songs, and involve themselves completely in music ministry. There are many gospel groups and solo artists in PNG like: Max Manibi, Sikal Kelep, Incense, and Dapsy Yapoc. Some examples of indigenous songs are: "*Mande-Duo Mande-Duo*", meaning "my Lord, my Lord", by Max Manibi. It is sung in the Yangoru dialect, and is beneficial for Sepik people. "*Mana Kangel Nom Kunuma na Kunesi Wonpa*", by Revd Gabriel Kaulo, means, "I was born without money". It is an offering song, sung in the Wahgi dialect by Jiwaka people. "*Lord, Mi Kam Long Presens B'long Yu Nau*", by Peter Maima, means "Lord, now I come into your presence". It is sung throughout the country. We have great local music groups and solo artists in Papua New Guinea.

Internationally, there were great Christian songwriters, too, in the 1700s. Charles Wesley was one of them. "Charles Wesley usually celebrated each anniversary of his birthday by writing a hymn of praise to God."<sup>14</sup>

The book of Psalms encourages the use of various instruments, such as harp, ten-string lyre, trumpets, and ram's horn (Ps 33:2; 98:5-6). This list shows original instruments that were used in that period. They were an integral form of expression for singing praises to God. Now, we see that it is not evil to use native musical instruments in services, if they have been consecrated to God for His service. Coastal churches can use *kundu* drums, *garamut*, bamboo pipe, coconut shells, and seashells. The Highlands churches can use bamboo flutes, *kundu* drums, and *susap*. Any local instrument can be used to make a

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<sup>14</sup> Price, *One Hundred and One*, p. 68.

tune. It is interesting to read about Jews in the Old Testament worshipping God with the simplest native instruments. They composed new songs, and used simple instruments in praising God. If the Israelites can worship God in this manner, why can't the churches of Papua New Guinea use their own native instruments to worship God? Oh Yes! By all means!

### CONCLUSION

The advantage of indigenous church music is that it provides God's people with a fitting medium to worship God with expressions of joy and victory. Surely, we can find no self-identity in the imported tunes. Let us proudly join hands in singing and worshipping our gracious Lord, in the simplest way possible! "Sing lustily, and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half-dead, or half-asleep; but lift your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, no more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sang the songs of Satan."<sup>15</sup>

The music that we use in every local church should be evaluated. It should produce redeeming tunes that are appropriate for the community and the culture. Church music and songs must express deeper theological truths, which will draw people to truly worship God. It is important to make the necessary adjustments in our church music, so that it will attract people to worship and praise God, rather than drive them away.

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<sup>15</sup> Franz Hildebrandt, *Wesley Hymnbook*, Kansas City MO: Lillenas Publishing, 1982, p. ix.

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