

[Article] "But is it any good?" The role of criticism in Christian song composition and performance

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Introduction

Everyone's a critic, but good ones are rare. God judged his own creative output in Genesis as "very good," and Aaron's golden calf in Exodus as "very bad." Throughout history, church leaders have regarded one instrument after another as inappropriate or evil, only grudgingly admitting their use in response to popular practice. John Wesley told his community of churches to sing faster (Young 1995; Reynolds, Price, and Music 1999), while pastors in northwest Democratic Republic of Congo often urge their congregations to slow down. Music conservatories offer courses—though in diminishing numbers—on judging and understanding the canon of Great Works. And the canon itself is a staggering critique, with 95% of all compositions not making the grade. *The New York Times* daily acclaims, applauds, and censures musical performances. Grammy Awards, MTV India Music Awards, Native American Music awards . . . the music industry constantly tells us who the best performers are. Many Islamic leaders reject musical performance of any kind in mosques. Governments around the world hold contests to identify their best artists. Conferences and books explore cultural definitions of bad music, and why so many of us like to listen to it (Washburne and Derno 2004; Experience Music Project 2006). Every day we decide what music to make or let enter our private and corporate experiences through phones, radios, computers, bishops' meetings. Everywhere, all the time, everyone's a critic. But good ones are rare.

The recent ethnodoxology movement owes its existence largely to a reaction against inadequate criticism (Schrag and Harris 2014). Vida Chenoweth stated it negatively—"Spare Them Western Music!" (1984)—in a blanket rejection of sounds and practices she saw as suffocating certain local musics. Ethnodoxologists run song composition workshops believing that "heart music" is better than imported, translated songs. Todd and Mary Saurman and others have written thoughtful guides to the evaluation of Scripture songs (T. Saurman and



Saurman 2004). But we believe that even these approaches are incomplete. And though Harold Best, who has stirred up many of our theologies of creativity, devotes a provocative chapter in *Unceasing Worship* (2003) to discussion of quality, he stops short of offering criteria for judging the worth of a musical event.

We want to situate and extend these efforts in a more comprehensive approach to criticism. We believe that inadequate evaluation of music—often based on a single criterion drawn unreflexively from a farraginous collection of personal preferences—has led to attachment to mediocrity in much of the church, while reticence to judge at all has resulted in a glut of bad music. Our goal is not to make rules that allow us to label every other song we hear as bad. Rather, we contend that the winsome, intelligent, unflinching critique of the musical acts and objects created and enacted for Christian expression can help increase the amount of good music in the church. This is constructive criticism.

Our approach consists first in awakening perception of the myriad signs that make up the experience of a song, and then in measuring these signs against the song’s ultimate purposes. We will also underscore the importance of constructive criticism, and explore means of becoming a good judge.

Situating the model

In some postmodern academic circles, the term “music criticism” is seldom used; it is, in fact, positively distrusted (Kerman 1985, 16). Despite this, certain elder statesmen of musicology assert that all of musicology’s fundamental goals should be oriented toward criticism, “the study of the meaning and value of art works” (Kerman 1985: 16, 19, 123; compare also 113–154). These voices impel us to develop and propose a model of music criticism that we humbly present as applicable in any time and place. In this article, we will focus on the model’s application to the critique of *song* in the context of the Christian church.

We begin with our own working definition of music criticism, one which we have synthesized from related literature and filtered through our own cross-cultural research experiences. We define music criticism as *the process of evaluative judgment of the relative qualities of a musical act*. The element of this definition that we first want to highlight is its identification of criticism as a process, not a unique act. So while it may culminate in an act of judgment, judgments are necessarily preceded by conscious or unconscious acts of perception, interpretation, and evaluation. The nature of our judgment, then, is contingent upon a string of prior intellectual processes. Therefore, the degree to which we perceive and understand the various qualities of a musical act is the degree to which our judgment—our criticism of it—is helpful. We believe that much of the church exhibits a lack of perception and understanding of the nature of music, and that this hinders the critical assessment of music needed to foster musical creation and performance. We want to help everyone, including ourselves, become better critics of music by helping people perceive it more completely.

Our model consists of the six activities shown in Table 1, often—but not always—applied sequentially. The first three steps of the model concern the awakening and understanding of perception. The final three show how to draw on these perceptions to judge the relative value of a song. We condense our evaluation of song in the following statement: a song is good insofar as its features work together to effect the purposes

demanded by the context of its performance and experience. We now move to an exposition of the model.

Understand the song as a complex sign

A musical act's communication is complex, not simple. It signifies and means *many* things in *many* ways, sometimes all at once, and usually spread over time. Yet we typically oversimplify its nature. When, for example, someone says, "I never liked the Beatles' music," do they mean they didn't like their tunes, they didn't like their lyrics, or they didn't like their long hair? Often clarification must be given in order to carry on a reasonable conversation. But our stock criticisms are telling: we do not often recognize the multiplicity of elements at play when we consider a song or other musical act.

I. Understand the song as a complex sign	1. Identify the signs at work in a song
	2. Determine how these signs work
	3. Assess the effects of these signs
II. Criticize the song in relationship to its purposes	4. Identify the purposes of the song
	5. Determine how the song's signs effect its purposes
	6. Determine the virtues of a song's purposes and their relative effect on each other

Table 1. Music criticism portrayed as sequential steps

We view song as sign, an approach grounded in the theory of semiotics, which is widely applied in a number of disciplines: ethnomusicology, musicology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and a host of others. We will exploit only a few elements of the theory during this presentation, mostly drawn from Thomas Turino's application of Peircean semiotics to music (1999). In particular, we will be guided by three of the semiotician's most fundamental questions: what are the signs in a song, how do they work, and what are their effects?

Step one: Identify the signs at work in a song

To begin to identify the myriad signs present in a song (referring to a sung song throughout this article) we distinguish three signifying domains—or, as Chenoweth (2001) puts it, significances—at work: textual, musical, and associative. Textual and musical signs both depend on an experiencer's ability to discern internal conceptual and sonic patterns. That is, features of a sound object hold meaning for the experiencer because of perceived patterns of similarity and dissimilarity and the expectations created by these relationships. The third category of song sign—associative—shows how these features relate to social realities external to the sound object.

Textual signs. Song texts mean something. The most straightforward aspect of this meaning is the denotative, or lexical, sense of their words. Briefly, a word refers to a speaker's or hearer's experience with an object, physical sensation, emotion, or idea. The normal order of words further delineates relationships between the objects denoted. However, the import of song texts extends far beyond mere words; lyrics are especially laden with connotative and poetic significance. Simultaneous layers of poetic devices multiply song's rich signal:

rhythmic, syntactic, phonological, and semantic characteristics. In Western cultures we are taught to recognize some of these under such conventions as meter, line, syntax, enjambment, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, metaphor, and simile. Such individual techniques may then combine to form larger poetic structures like verses, stanzas, and refrains.

Musical signs. The list of meaningful song features increases when we turn our attention from textual to musical signs in categories such as rhythm, melody, harmony, form, and timbre. Features of rhythm include pulse, tempo, meter, accents, figures, motifs, and phrases. Attention to melody yields meaning categories such as tonal center, keys, intervals, modes, scales, range, tessitura, figures, motifs, phrases, themes, and contours. Meaning-rich features related to harmony include cadences, parallel, chordal, and polyphonic relationships between concurrent pitches; cadences, formulas, progressions, and tonality. In the form of music, we can look at strophes, iterations, through-composition, theme and variation, and uniquely defined structures like sonata and rondo. Performances can be solo, duo, trio, choir, unison, parallel, chordal, polyphonic, and they can include vibrato and be accompanied or unaccompanied.

The list of textual and musical signs goes on and on, each communicating its own potentially powerful message, producing a rich array of internal meanings in a song. But the situation of the performed sound object is even more complex than this, because signs in a song seldom occur alone. Signals emanate from a song, cascading over one another, interacting, jockeying for positions of relative prominence or powerful anonymity in the experiencer's mind and body, exponentially multiplying potential meanings.

Remember that though universal cognitive processes may underlie and perhaps fuel these devices—Suzanne Langer has suggested the ebb and flow of tension as one (1953)—their instantiation and significance at a given moment is context specific. The rhythmic and semantic patterns of a limerick, or the expectations in hearing a V^7-I cadence in European societies, work only for someone who knows the expectations of the form.

Associative signs. Associative signs point to realities outside the sound object. Single or bundled features in the performance of a song frequently link to a particular contextual feature: a person, place, or another thing. In other words, there may be a connection between a particular feature of a song and an extramusical feature. The timbre of a voice or instrument, for example, can speak volumes: nasal vocal timbre in some Indian contexts connotes deity, while the same quality is associated with lowbrow cowboy ballads in the southern USA. Susan McLary argues that descending chromatic melodic motifs in opera are usually associated with a seductive, deadly form of feminine sexuality (1988, 53–79). Any sign or combination of signs can point to an external cultural reality.

How do musical and textual signs interact with each other to create patterns and expectations within the song? Does the text flow at one note per syllable, or pneumatically or melismatically, and what does each approach import? How do performers relate melodic and linguistic tones, and what semantic double entendres might their mastery produce? Even from this condensed, truncated litany of signs related to a song, we see how inadequate our one- or two-criteria judgments of music are.

Step two: Determine how these signs work

Having highlighted a few of the common textual, musical, and associative signifying elements at play in any given song, we now turn to the semiotic question of *how* these elements signify something. Briefly, signs are related to objects in an experiential way using three meaning-linking mechanisms, which we draw from Turino's discussion of semiotics (1999). First, lexical (or propositional) symbols relate a sign and an object through language. When God's Property sings "When I think about your goodness . . . it makes me wanna dance and stomp," in Kirk Franklin's "Stomp" (1996), the sung sign *stomp* refers to a kind of bodily movement that bears little resemblance to the sound produced by the movement. Language is the mediator of meaning. Second, icons relate a sign and an object through resemblance: the sign looks or sounds like the object it points to in some way. A musical quote of one piece in another is an example of iconic signing.

Third and finally, indexes describe a sign

related to its object through co-occurrence in actual experience. Smoke can serve as an index of fire, a TV show's theme song can come to serve as an index for the program, a V7-I progression may index musical closure in European societies. . . . The power of indices derives from the fact that the sign-object relations are based in co-occurrences within one's own life experiences, and thus become intimately bound as experience. (Turino 1999, 227)

A song that you were listening to when you had a life-changing experience with Christ, for example, becomes an indelibly forged indexical sign, calling up strong emotions when you hear it subsequently.

Step three: Assess the effects of these signs

Signs in song don't merely exist, but they also cause things to happen in the real world. When a Christian radio station in Chicago started playing music featuring guitars and drums, Brian's grandparents stopped listening and probably stopped sending money to the station. The indexical signs of the musical characteristics of these instruments pointed to personal experiences and understandings that Brian's grandparents judged non-Christian and dangerous. They changed their behavior because of this signing.

Criticize the song in relationship to its purposes

We now move to steps four, five, and six in our model, which make up the actual act of criticism. These steps flow from our definition of what a good song is, which we here repeat: a song is good insofar as its features work together to effect the purposes demanded by the context of its performance and experience. Behind step four is the premise that a good song must have a purpose (see Table 1). Step five is based on the assertion that a good song must effect this purpose. And step six assumes that the virtues of a song—that is, a song with signs that do in fact effect their immediate goals—are relative to the virtues of its purposes. With this background, we proceed directly to applying the steps from our model to concrete musical examples.

Example 1

Domain focus:	Textual
Sign type:	Symbol (propositional, referential)
Conventional device:	Propositional language (words)
Scene:	Nigeria, West Africa
Genre:	Jùjú (Modern West African Dance Song)

Our first example is principally concerned with textual matters, with special emphasis on the lyrics' propositional import and immediate social relevance. It is taken from the West African popular music style called *jùjú*.

Modern Yoruba *jùjú* music in Nigeria is typified by a performing ensemble of singers, amplified guitars, a drumset, a "talking drum" (such as *lya lly*) and various other percussion instruments. It is a popular dance music, and according to ethnomusicologist Christopher Waterman it includes

certain utilitarian ends: the celebration of important events in an individual's life course, the manipulation of public reputation through praise singing and drumming, and the creation of positive effect. (1990, 187)

Waterman documents a barrage of local ways in which *jùjú* music is critically evaluated. One of the most important signs locally evaluated rests in the hands, or rather in the voice, of the band *captain* (the band's leader and solo singer):

A competent *jùjú* band captain [is expected] to control biographical information concerning each important guest at a given celebration. In some cases, the host provides the captain with a written list of key participants. In others . . . the band manager will attempt to collect information from seated guests, whispering it in the captain's ear or writing it on a sheet of paper which is then fastened to his microphone for reference during the performance. The captain uses this information to generate formulaic texts, which form the basis for solo and call-and-response singing. . . . When the band captain and chorus begin to sing [someone's] praises in call-and-response form, the repeated phrases rising from the public address system into the evening sky, undergirded by compelling dance rhythms incorporating Yoruba proverbs, the praisee undergoes an experiential transformation described as a "swelling of the head" (*iwúlórí*). (186)

On the occasion of one particular Muslim funeral celebration in the town of Ogbomoso, Nigeria, Uncle Toye Ajagun, band captain of the popular Ibadan based *jùjú* band Olúmo Soundmakers, at one point in the

celebration suddenly breaks out into a verbal sequence in praise of the celebration's wealthy host, singing in Yoruba these flattering words with Yoruba proverbs:

Aláji betilayi, àlájì humura
Mólèyájó, mo ba rò de àtàtá
Adúdúyemi, gbajúmòṅ mi, ẹni re
Ọkọ àlájà-o, ọkọ àlájà l'yábòdé
Mólèyájó, gbajúmòṅ mi àtàtá
Àràbà sá ni bàbá
Ẹni a bá l'ábà ni bàbá

Alhaji betilayi Alhaji humura [Muslim salutations]
 Moleyajo, I follow you out, important person
 Black and beautiful ["one whose black suits them well"],
 popular person, good person
 Husband of the Alhaja, Husband of Alhaja Iyabode
 Moleyajo, my popular person, important person
 The silk-cotton tree is certainly the father [of trees]
 The person you meet in front of the farm-hut is the father. (Waterman 1990, 201)

In response, the wealthy host

glides majestically up to the band. Standing in front of Toye, turned sideways so that so that all the participants may observe clearly, he pulls a handful of banknotes from the voluminous recesses of his silk gown. Inexorably, bill by bill, he presses the money onto Toye's sweaty forehead." (202)

Just the right words, at just the right time, for just the right people, made the host happy, the band happy, and all the participants happy. The event went just as hoped. Well-chosen lyrics go a long way in effecting their purposes.

Example 2

Domain focus:	Textual
Sign type:	Iconic
Conventional device:	Poetic syntax
Scene:	Peru
Genres:	Traditional Andean song forms and Christian hymns

The next example focuses on a textual sign type in song: specifically, fundamental devices of poetic syntax in song lyrics. This song event took place in Peru and was documented by the late SIL ethnomusicologist Tom Avery (Avery 1994).

In the course of translation workshops designed to produce new hymns with newly translated biblical texts, Avery helped translators analyze the structure of traditional song texts so that they could then produce words for a hymn that would follow a similar pattern. However, it surprised him to find that when literate indigenous Christians composed hymns, they did not automatically include much textual repetition, as is typically found in traditional songs produced totally by oral means. He recounts that

during the Music Workshop . . . with the Lambayeque Quechua [people], [we] observed that the people did not always repeat each line before a new line was sung. Repetition of this type is a strong characteristic of Andean genres, such as the *huayno*, and we felt that there was a real danger that this would make the songs more difficult to learn and sing. (12)

In a North American cultural context, this would be like singing "Three Blind Mice" straight through, without repeating each verse phrase.

The purpose of the workshop was to give primarily oral communicators oral access to Scripture texts through songs performed in oral song styles. But by not incorporating traditional syntactic patterns of repetition, the advantage of oral communication would largely be lost, of little effect.

Avery also writes that

there have been cases in Brazil where indigenous composers, relatively young and literate, have produced hymns [which] have not been accepted by the community. Although there are many factors which affect whether an innovation will be accepted or not, I now strongly believe that . . . even though . . . songs were produced by an insider they were virtually unsingable because they did not conform to the [textual] characteristics of oral style. (13)

Avery confesses, "I hesitate to criticize or make suggestions regarding a song written and/or composed by a cultural insider" (13). But he concludes that constructive criticism is sometimes needed if the song is to effect its purpose: that is, if the community is to accept a song as a song worth singing.

We see then that some cultural artifacts and processes, like lyric composition, may need multiple perspectives—even the perspective of a cultural outsider—in order to effect their purposes.

Example 3

Domain focus:	Musical
Sign type:	Iconic
Conventional device:	Musical syntax (melodic)
Scene:	Cameroon, West Central Africa
Genres:	Traditional Baka song forms and Christian hymns

Example 3 focuses on one small but fundamental structural sign in the specific domain of a song's melodic signs: melodic grammar. Melodic grammar—the traditional constraints on the ordering of melodic intervals—must be respected in order to effect a song's social purposes. This example is taken from Dan's efforts in the Baka Bible translation project in eastern Cameroon to set translated Scripture texts (from the "Song of Moses" in Exodus 14) to traditional Baka song forms.

Dan collaborated with two Baka men—one of whom normally helped with translation; the other, a well-known musician and composer—to select and versify Scripture portions according to prototypical Baka song-text features. The two men set off to compose the Scripture song. A couple of days later, the duo returned with harp and voices, ready to perform the new composition. While they performed, Dan beamed with approval on the outside, but sighed with disappointment on the inside. Many things about the song "worked," but many features did not, so that revisions would need to be made.

Because of Dan's music research and seven years' experience living among the Baka, he could critically examine—even as a cultural outsider—a new Baka song composition. In particular, he noticed that one sequence of the melodic intervals in one phrase intuitively sounded "unnatural." As it turns out, in the Baka music tradition, there are certain sequences of melodic intervals that have never occurred in any of the hundreds of songs that Dan had recorded. Preliminary analysis also suggested certain grammatical restrictions on what interval types may follow others.

To illustrate: it is not, for example, uncommon for a melodic phrase in the modern Western music tradition to descend five to seven steps in succession before reversing melodic direction ("Joy to the World", "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star", "The Star-Spangled Banner"). Most Westerners can comfortably sing a pattern like this. However, most Baka cannot (with ease) sing such a long succession of stepwise intervals; it exceeds the traditionally and subconsciously accepted limit of successive steps (major or minor seconds) allowed in typical Baka melodic grammar. Just as certain grammatical patterns must be respected to facilitate effective speech, so it is with musical tones.

If left unaltered, the original phrase would likely make the melody very awkward to sing, if not altogether unsingable, for anyone other than the person who had just composed it. This was a significant problem given that the song was composed with the specific purpose of being sung by *any* assembly of Baka Christians. The melody, then, needed to be critiqued—with all the cultural strategies of politeness, of course—and then revised to employ only those melodic features truly characteristic of the Baka song tradition: that is, if our purpose was that *any* Baka person should be able to naturally participate in the singing of the song. Dan and the men did this and other alterations.

Example 4

Domain focus:	Musical
Sign type:	Iconic
Conventional device:	Melodic and rhythmic stress
Scene:	Germany
Genre:	German art song

Our next example focuses on the effects of the relationship of two co-occurring song signs: musical stress and textual stress. We here criticize the music of Beethoven. We may confidently and constructively evaluate Beethoven's music because he criticized it himself as he regularly drafted and re-drafted, altered and refined his own original musical ideas. Over 5,000 pages of his autographed composition sketchbooks attest to the self-criticism inherent in his creative process.

In Figure 1, Joseph Kerman aligns transcriptions of the first, second, and third drafts of the second song in Beethoven's love-song cycle "An die ferne Geliebte" (Kerman 1994, 199). We see that a variety of compositional devices—ranging from small melodic motifs (like the descending-third D–C–B figure) to certain larger ostinato patterns (as in stanza 2)—come and go and even return to the song composition process, themselves often altered in some way, as Beethoven searched for the "right" musical setting for Alois Isidor Jeittles's poetic text. Kerman summarizes the critical process that brought about these changes, stating that "the drafts show Beethoven's changing[, even vacillating,] ideas about the declamation appropriate to [the] poem" (1998, 197). Declamation, in this case, means the effective relationship between a song's musical accent patterns and its textual—or poetic—accent patterns.

What was so inappropriate, so ineffective, about the first two musical settings of the poetic text? What was Beethoven's purpose in changing them? In brief, Kerman builds the historical case that Beethoven's intellectual intent in this song was to communicate the text "simply" and "directly" (compare 181–183; 200–203). If this is true, and if musical accent and stress (rhythmic, melodic, or dynamic) is not adequately

FIRST DRAFT

p. 70
1
ms: ♩ 3
Pencil Wo die

[stanza 2] etc. [stanza 3]

5
etc. 6
Ewiglich (c)wiglich sein

SECOND DRAFT

p. 70
1
ink] Wo die

[stanza 2]

6
Vi=

16 = de
ms: Bass zum
gd

THIRD DRAFT (cf. N II, p. 338)

p. 70
1
ink] Wo die

[sic] 3

[stanza 2] Vi=

15 = de [stanza 3] or: e e

ms: ♩ ♩ ♩

Figure 1. Drafts of Second Song in Beethoven's "An die ferne Geliebte" (Kerman 1994, 199)

sympathetic to the text's poetic accent and stress, what is the effect of the musical stress on Beethoven's intended purposes for the song? Clearly, it is at odds with them; at odds because the musical stress patterns not only do not reinforce the text's stress patterns, but are actually in competition with them. Beethoven, of course, saw the conflict and altered various musical structures and devices—melodic, rhythmic, and dynamic accent, all iconic signs—to maximize a simple, direct declamation of the text. Sympathetic declamation, then, effected an aesthetically simple and direct human communication.

Example 5

Domain focus:	Musical
Sign type:	Iconic
Conventional device:	Rhythmic stress
Scene:	United States
Genres:	Rap, hip hop

Our next musical example focuses on song's rhythmic sign patterns and is taken from the 1989 rap song "Fight the Power" by Chuck D and Public Enemy (Public Enemy 1989). The dynamic of *repetition* lies at the very heart of a song's signifying force. Our perception of myriad sonic and semantic patterns informs our sense of a song's cohesion and experiential relevance while simultaneously developing emotional expectation (Jourdain 1997, 309-319).

Depending on any number of variables, each context seems to prescribe certain limits on the quantities and qualities of these patterns. Too much repetition of certain qualities is boring; variation is needed. The right mix of repetition and variation articulates the distinctive emotional ebb and flow of each song, as well as directing our attention to the particular textual and social purposes of that song.

Rhythmic patterns effectively mark our experience of time and progressively shape our expectation of things to come. Certain song contexts privilege rhythmic sign stimuli, such as contemporary rap and hip hop song styles. To the uninitiated, however, the rhythmic patterns of most hip hop songs are critiqued as excessively predictable; these listeners experience no emotional drama in rhythmic expectations that are allegedly always fulfilled.

Robert Walser, in his study of rapper Chuck D and the music of the hip hop group Public Enemy (Walser 1995), makes a case to the contrary. Consider an example from Public Enemy's "Fight the Power." Walser begins his critique by matter-of-factly stating that the entire song is for the most part underpinned by one repeated two-bar rhythm track. Yet we are directed not to expect form and development from the ever-present rhythm track—as funky as it might be—but in "the shifting [rhythmic] tensions" created in the interaction of Chuck D's competing syncopated speech rhythms over against the underlying rhythm track. In this flow, Chuck D's syncopated rap flirts, but never seems to align itself with the ever-present "two and four backbeat" of the rhythm track (see Figure 2).

Walser contends that this tension, this suspension, not only staves off monotony, but also reinforces Chuck D's approaching, climactic rhetorical purposes. Thus,

in verse 3, measures seven and eight, [Chuck D rhythmically] directs each phrase toward landing on beat four, intensifying the eighth measure through shifting to duple rhythms—thus intensifying itself by mirroring with the duple character of the rhythm track. Then, having established [this] sequence and led us to expect [another] arrival on beat four [in measure 9], Chuck D [delays our expectation and] then raps straight through measure nine, not cadencing until the fourth beat of measure ten. This delayed fulfillment in the relentless triplets of measures nine and ten add an intensity to the text of these measures with the purpose of amplifying the anti-racial rhetoric in the line "Sample a look back, you look and find nothing but rednecks for four hundred years, if you check!" (205–206)

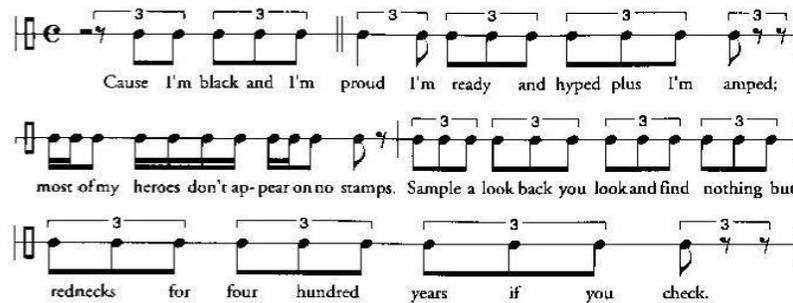


Figure 2. "Fight the Power," verse 3, mm. 6-10 (Walser 1995)

Chuck D's rhythmic patterning is one of hundreds of compositional devices employed to emotionally mark certain climactic texts. Compositionally he succeeded in making his point, at least for this section of the tune. Any number of our favorite song compositions are marked in similar ways.

When we agree with the propositional import of a skillfully enhanced text we are doubly pleased with it, but when we do not share the same point of view, contrary responses arise. Conflict surfaces all the more when a disagreeable statement is skillfully delivered, as it is doubtful that such statements would be noticed at all if the accompanying musical signs weren't so effective. Even so, we may admit aesthetic virtue whenever it exists, without foregoing the decision to critique its related purposes. For finally, we propose that *any particular virtues of a song are relative to the virtues of its purposes*, including moral purposes.

Example 6

Domain focus:	Associative
Sign type:	Indexical
Conventional device:	Genre type
Scene:	United States
Genre:	Hard rock

Our next example focuses on the domain of contextual signs: in particular, indexes of the associative powers of song as meaningful signs. It is taken from an experience in the USA of SIL ethnomusicologist and music therapist, Mary Saurman.

While working as a music therapist, Saurman developed therapeutic techniques for "music assisted childbirth." The development of the techniques was based upon research findings that indicated that

whenever someone heard a familiar song or song style which was from their "generational vantage point," their [clinically measured] blood pressure and heart rate would be within normal range, often decreasing during the listening experience. (The average generational vantage point encompasses the music the individual was exposed to and developed a preference for between the ages of 17 and 25.) . . . When the music presented was unfamiliar, [or] greatly contrasted with their preferred music, [or] was associated with a negative memory, the individual's heart rate and blood pressure would increase considerably, sometimes to a very high degree. (M. Saurman 1995).

Saurman applied these findings to the context of childbirth:

One birth-mother's heart rate began soaring beyond control during delivery. The nurses refused my assistance, even though I had explained how helpful it would be. Finally, in desperation, they consented. I turned on *the heavy metal music* [emphasis ours] (the birth-mother's favorite) and immediately her physical rate *and* the baby's (still in her womb) began dropping and quickly returned to a normal state. (1995, 2)

Clearly, certain musical associations effect particular responses. An informed critique of the contextual elements of music and song can effect intended purposes. Their consequences may be bound by contextual constraints and the will of the individual, but they are not neutral; they will affect the hearer one way or another, to one degree or another.

Example 7

Domain focus:	Associative
Sign type:	Iconic
Conventional device:	Musical syntax
Scene:	Eastern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea
Genres:	Traditional Usarufa <i>singsing</i> dance song

The next example explores both musical and associative song sign types: in particular, the meaning of one song as performed in a sequence of songs. It comes from Papua New Guinea, as told by Vida Chenoweth (personal communication 1989).

Chenoweth tells how, upon analyzing several individual songs from a *singsing* celebration of the Usarufa people of the Papua New Guinean Highlands, she initially found very little evidence of significant points of climax in the overall musical structure of these individual songs. It was not until she noted the *ordering* of these individual songs within the grand scheme of the entire evening-long singsing event that she discovered their function. Taken as only one part of ten or more hours of actual singing, the cumulative effect of each song gradually built upon the others in service of the emotive rise and fall of the entire singsing celebration. It was as if each individual song was but a brief musical phrase within the larger 'event-song' known as a singsing. Some songs functioned as signs of tension, and others of release. Development was not to be found so much in individual songs, but in the ordering of all songs for the sake—that is, the purpose—of the entire ten-hour event. This event, by the way, found its climax—its dramatic purpose—in highlighting the spectacular entry of the singsing's great masked dancers.

We see, then, that songs can syntactically function on multiple levels; to be unaware of their developmental significance in the entire flow of the events in which they are performed puts one at risk of missing the forest for the trees.

The critic

As we said in the beginning, we believe that everyone is a critic. In this final section, we explore what it means to be a *good* critic and how to become one, with the goal of helping more, better music emerge in the church. These ideas—in the form of informal advice—flow directly from the model.

First, a good critic recognizes a wide range of musical, textual, and associative signs of songs, determines how they work, and assesses their effects.

Here are some ideas of activities and exercises for personal development in this area:

- Maintain an active personal musical life: listen to, dance with, perform, and compose music of any kind. Then reflect on how you and others respond to the various musical, textual, and associational signs you produce. The visceral, whole-body encompassing requirements of performing and composing, including the decisions you make to communicate well, will awaken your perceptions to musical signs.
- When entering a musical culture new to you, don't skip the research. Record and transcribe songs; analyze musical form, melody, and rhythm; ask people for examples of the best performances of songs and performers, and the reasons for their assessment; observe participants' verbal, physical, and emotional responses to specific songs and moments in songs (absence from performances also communicates powerfully), and search for correlations. Resources to help you do these things include *Creating Local Arts Together* (Schrag 2013) and courses at the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics and numerous other universities and colleges.

- Read music criticism in *The New York Times*, and note the explicit or implicit criteria they use.
- Listen to a piece of music that moves you, and try to determine the musical, textual, and associational signs that contribute to its effects on you. Do the same with a friend.
- Practice. Apply the model to as many contexts as possible.

Next, a good critic can identify the purposes of a song, figure out how its signs effect these purposes, and assess the relative virtue of the purposes.

Here are some ideas of activities and exercises to develop in this area:

- Learn anthropological approaches and tools that help you discern the multiple purposes of social interactions and institutions. These include participant observation (Spradley 1980), interviews, and a host of other activities common in anthropological fieldwork. A course in the anthropology of music would also be extremely beneficial.
- Study the Bible, and the theology and critical processes of the church communities you are working with. What does your church define as the purpose of song in different contexts? How are new songs vetted and introduced? How is your church's understanding of the purposes of song incomplete?
- Practice performing critical acts alone or with a small group of budding critics.

Third and finally, a good critic enters into a creative process to communicate the relationship between musical signs and purposes in ways that increase the production, acceptance, and enduring performance of good music. He or she also helps others recognize virtues of music that may be veiled to them.

The best way to avoid a situation in which you have to give someone an overwhelmingly negative assessment of their music is to do everything in your power to craft a creative process that increases the likelihood of good results. In the context of song-making workshops, for example, we need to gather the experts in each relevant domain of the sign–purpose relationship during the birth of a song. This could include Bible translators, gifted composers and performers of the instruments in the musical styles being used, and church leaders. If the process exploits all relevant expertise and wisdom, bad songs will be rare. There are increasingly comprehensive and thoughtful examples of incorporating criticism in song producing workshops (see, for example, Hutchisson and Hutchisson 2005; T. Saurman and Saurman 2004). These rightly focus on textual issues such as intelligibility and naturalness, theological correctness, and musical authenticity. But we believe that a broader examination of song signs and purposes can result in even better music.

We also need to be theologians, Bible teachers, and preachers. We can, for example, teach biblical attitudes toward acts of creation. In song composition workshops, Glenn Stallsmith (2008) includes a discussion of the body of Christ and divergent gifts to help people appreciate how everyone brings something to the table. We teach that all we do is for and by God. Because the goal of our work is more and better music for the church, we need to know how to communicate God's priorities to the body of Christ.

Other aspects of the roles of a good critic include using local structures and approaches for correction (see, for example, Gallman and Yost 2004), working to train a core group in aspects of criticism, being persistent in creating and presenting models of good music—even when many people have vested interests in mediocre music—and communicating a vision of what a song could be, in an inspiring and locally appropriate manner. A good critic models, teaches, encourages, corrects, and convinces, all with the goal of building up, rather than tearing down.

Conclusion

We have proposed a daunting task: to perceive an infinite number of signs and their combinations, understand their import, and enter into creative processes in only positive ways. Here's a final suggestion: If you're now a one-, two-, or three-criteria critic, commit to adding three more to your critical toolbox this year. If you think of music as fulfilling only one, two, or three possible purposes, commit to adding three more to your perspective. And finally, look at a context of musical production and ask, "How can we make this better, together?" The only perfect critic is God. Our goal is simply to become better, knowing that we will always be dependent on him for insights, wisdom, grace, and strength.

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