

# Heart Music For All The Nations

by John Oswald, Ethnomusicologist with WEC

## What is Heart Music?

Heart music has been defined as:

*'The musical system that a person learns as a child or youth and that most fully expresses his or her emotions.'* (from [www.worldofworship.org](http://www.worldofworship.org))

Have you ever tried worshipping God in a language you are not very familiar with and in a musical style that is new to you? Sometimes there is a novelty factor. But that soon wears off. Eventually, it may become part of music we truly cherish. But it is not our heart music.

For instance, on this CD, some tracks you will like instantly, some will grow on you as you listen and some will take time to appreciate. A big part of the reason is that some of these styles are closer to your personal heart music than others!

## What is *Your* Heart Music?

If you fancy trying to work out your own heart music, see a separate document on this CD, called “ [my heart music](#) ”. Let us know what you discover!

## Christian Worship and Heart Music

Have you noticed that music seems to stir up Christian passions – sometimes with a vengeance! This is because worship is an expression of our inner being and we express that partly through music. For example, you may have heard the following kinds of comments...

- 'Their music sounds all the same!' or 'It's just a dirge and has no melody.'

These exclamations have been applied to all sorts of music, from contemporary Christian music in the West to Christian tribal music. The one common link in all these statements is that the musical style is **never** the preferred style of the speaker! It does not communicate to them. It is not their heart music.

One generation and cultural group is nurtured in their spiritual life in a particular style of worship. They find this deeply nourishing. The next generation, or an adjacent cultural group, finds this unsatisfying in some profound way. It doesn't touch them or lift them to the presence of God in the way others experience it. It is not truly their heart music, however much they try.

At this point let us heed a warning. The Christian Church is a family with all ages and types. As in any family, we learn to be flexible. We can worship God in a range of styles. This is enriching as well as occasionally challenging! It is part of growing up in unity into the fullness of Christ (Eph 4.1-16). But let us also encourage one another to express worship in ways compatible with our various cultural and generational backgrounds. In multi-cultural groups, let's give space for variety and diversity, worshipping God with one another. Churches need to recognize that minority ethnic groups in their congregations often need the affirming encouragement to develop worship using their own heart music styles.

## **A Heart Music is like a Language**

Just as we all have a mother tongue language that we call our heart language, we all have styles of music that **move** us. We feel **comfortable** with it. This heart music **enables** us to reach out more easily to the living God and through it we can more clearly hear Him speaking to us.

Heart musics differ in many ways. A key question is: What are the hearers really listening for? For cross-cultural workers it is important to understand why the people they are serving love their own music. What is it they like about the music? Why does it move them in a way that it does not move the foreigner? To understand this is to understand something very deep within the culture.

On a slightly technical level, some cultures emphasise complex rhythms, others place greater value on intricate melody, while still others listen out for rich harmonies or certain timbres (sound qualities). In some cultures, the words are the most important factor in songs, while in others the sense of community and fellowship is paramount. Each musical style is distinguished by its own identity symbols, e.g. particular musical instruments and vocal techniques. Different scale patterns exist around the world. In other words the 'vocabulary' and 'grammar' of the music is different. That's why we don't like or understand some styles.

## **Church Planting and Heart Music**

National church leaders and cross-cultural church planters face the same question in every culture, 'What will the Church of Jesus Christ look and sound like in this culture and in this generation?' The message is the same, but the way it looks and sounds differs from place to place and age to age. Just consider the Celtic monks, the Amish community and William Booth's Salvation Army!

For minority cultures within a majority ethnic group the situation is even more acute. If my only form of music to worship God belongs to another ethnic group, I am inclined to feel that He is really the God of the majority group and that He cannot speak to me using my heart music.

However, time and time again, when a group of believers develop music from within their own culture to worship the true and living God, their expression of praise and adoration rises to a whole new level. The place comes alive! Some spontaneously start to dance. Sometimes, it is difficult to restrain the enthusiasm! Non-believers start to hear the message because they now understand the form of the music. The underlying feeling is that 'this message is for me' and from this groups of new believers come into being.

## **WEC's Pursuit of Heart Music**

Several WEC fields are involved with others in encouraging national churches and new church plants to express their worship using their heart music. This heart music is not necessarily traditional but is increasingly a mixture of the old and the new. These WEC missionaries are involved in learning local instruments and vocal styles, writing locally appropriate music or running song-writing workshops. Others go further than musical forms and encourage the whole worship experience to become more indigenous.

This CD is an expression of the variety of music that is now being used in church worship settings around the world. In this age, with the growing awareness of commercial 'world music', creative 'fusion music' and traditional 'ethnic music', missionaries are becoming aware of the need of each culture to worship in its own style.

In established churches, music is often based on western styles sometimes with local adaptations. For a variety of reasons, it is often difficult for them to embrace indigenous forms or to take up contemporary music within their culture in order to express the praise of God. But this is happening and in an increasing way!

## **The Role of Ethnomusicology and Ethnodoxology**

'Ethnomusicology' is simply the study of music and culture together. It is a wonderful tool for the task of mission and has developed a new life of its own among Christian ethnomusicologists. They seek to encourage the local believers in their own music, and ethnomusicological insights often open up new musical vistas and expand present horizons.

A growing number of musically minded cross-cultural workers are engaging in what is now called 'Ethnodoxology' ('doxology' refers to the praise and glory of God and 'ethno' to the peoples of the earth). So this places emphasis on developing the worship of God among all nations of the earth, using appropriate arts, music, dance, drama, visual art, storytelling, etc.

Clearly, the chief purpose of missions is to increase the worship that God receives, both in quality and in quantity. Hence ethnodoxologists see themselves as facilitators in that process, supporting and adding to the work of national church leaders and church planters, in the spirit of Psalm 67:3:

'May the peoples praise you, O God; May all the peoples praise you.'

## **In Case You're Interested ...**

If you are interested in exploring music in mission or want to know about ethnomusicology and ethnodoxology, you can access this website:

<http://www.worldofworship.org/>

If you would like to find out how you could be part of WEC's growing development of heart music in mission, try the WEC UK website: <http://www.wec-int.org.uk/> and check out the [Ethnic Music page](#).

Or simply write to: [ethnomusicology@wec-international.org](mailto:ethnomusicology@wec-international.org)