

TORONTO UNITED CHURCH COUNCIL

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Church Development Discussion Papers

TITLE: In Praise of the Rhythm Method: Music in Worship

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Rock of Ages has splashed across Toronto. It was a brash, bold, and vacuous musical about 80's glam, youth and "believing" that played to a sold-out Princess of Wales theatre. United Church Sunday worship is also splashed, weekly, across Toronto; it too, is occasionally bold, spasmodically brash, and, more often than we'd like to admit, vacuous. It, too, offers the hope that "you keep on believing". It is, however, safe to predict that the odds of a sell-out at Prince of Peace (or any other) United Church are somewhere in the order of about a zillion-to-one.

What's the difference? Well, let's see:

- The Princess of Wales is downtown, where parking is expensive. Prince of Peace is down the street, where parking is free.
- Tickets for *Rock of Ages* were 100 bucks a pop. The number of United Church members "paying" that much every week to their congregation is about, oh, forget it.
- When your mother dies, the cast of *Rock of Ages* is not going to offer a special performance in her honour.
- You get to dress up for the theatre. If you like. You get to dress up for worship. If you like. Nope, no difference there.
- There will be street people with their hands out waiting outside the Princess of Wales. There will be ushers with their hands out inside Prince of Peace. Again, it's a wash.
- Oh yes, and to say it one more time. The Princess of Wales is full. Prince of Peace is empty.

What's going on here? Oh, let's just say it and get it over with – because everyone knows the answer. It's the music!! And, to be even more specific. It's the rhythm!!!

As a young child, I was raised with Eddie Arnold. If you were born this side of the Pleistocene, you likely don't remember Eddie. A countreh-boy from somewhere south of here, his lyrics (I wanna play house with you...) make those in *Rock of Ages* sound like a Wordsworth sonnet. He sang through his nose. His instrumentation was sophomoric. But the man had rhythm – the distinctive twanging bass line of Country and Western, a bass line that nearly 50 years later can still be heard on radio stations in every small town, and every big city, in North America.

Like most people of my generation, I moved quickly, at the first opportunity, from Eddie to John, Paul, George and Ringo. And Mick, Keith, Charlie and the boys. The Animals. Even, God forgive me, Herman's Hermits. It wasn't the lyrics that attracted me. "She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah". Yeah, indeed. What got me was, of course, the rhythm. John and Paul wrote the words, but George and Ringo provided the drive; Mick provided the lips, but Keith and Charlie moved the hips.

And it wasn't long before teens around the world were moving to a new beat. And abandoning their arrhythmic churches by the millions.

I live now live in a great condo in the market district. Many nights, through closed windows, I hear it. THUMP. THUMP. TA-THUMP, THUMP, THUMP. I don't need to look out the window. I know it's some cool young punk driving the car I wished I owned, the windows rolled down, his 57-million-watt stereo beating out the bass line of some rap song whose lyrics involve acts that are either physically impossible or morally reprehensible. Ah, the Sesame Street Generation, brought to you entirely by the letter "F". But there it is again. On the streets below me. Rhythm. Everywhere. Everywhere.

Okay, then. Not quite everywhere. Most United Churches are rhythm free zones. At least the Catholics talk about rhythm, albeit in a way I find unpalatable. And the Pentecostals fill their churches with rhythmic music – but then they fill them with people, too, don't they. But not us. We stick with such toe-tappers at "O Mensch bewein dein' Sünden groß". When we're feeling really risqué, we uncork a hymn to "Stuttgart", and bring out the tambourine. And watch our people flock to *Rock of Ages*. Or *Mamma Mia*. Or *Jersey Boys*. Or *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Or, if they want a really wonderful evening "Cookin' at the Cookery".

Is there a place for classical music in the contemporary worship of the church? Of course there is. A limited place. But it's time for a reality check, folks. There are, by my count, 25 radio stations in the City of Toronto that play mostly music. Two play classical. That leaves; let's see now, yes, 23 that play music with rhythm. Do we see a trend here? What would it be like if Toronto Conference designated two out of every 25 congregations as Classical Music zones, and set the rest free to fill their sanctuaries with rhythm: Latin rhythm, Country and Western, Rock, Jazz, Blues, Gospel? The rhythm of the streets. The rhythm I hear through my closed windows at Front and Jarvis. We could even publish a "directory", something like the TV Guide.

I keep one button on my radio tuned to Classical 96, and I go there when I feel the need for something soothing, noble, virtuous. I'm sure I'd attend the "Classical Congregation" when I felt a similar need. But most of the time I push the rock button, the jazz button, the "adult contemporary" button, or even, God forgive me one more time, the New Country button. I like Shania, and not just her midriff. Although that's okay, too. And when the sun is hot and the moonroof open, I pop back to Vinyl 95.3 for more of George and Ringo, Charlie, Keith and the boys.

Sometimes I sing really loud on those days. "Goodbye, Ruby Tuesday. Who could hang a name on you?". I hear windows slamming shut in apartments 10 stories above me. Who cares? God is in her heaven, and all is right in my world. It's my music. The music of my life. And it makes me happy.

The only time Front and Jarvis is ever quiet, every week, is Sunday morning. What's wrong with this picture?

Isn't the function of music in worship to help our spirits soar. Aren't we, as a denomination, committed to worship in the vernacular? Then why are we so afraid to worship in the musical vernacular that speaks so loudly in every other place in our society? Are we afraid the pews would be full and we'd have to line up for tickets??

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