

“I will sing unto the LORD”:

Hymnic Autobiography

by

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I will sing unto the LORD as long as I live: I will
sing praise to my God while I have my being.

(Psalm 104:33 KJV)

From Nursery Rhymes to Hip Hop Music

Born in 1980 and raised in the Philippines, my first exposure to music was English nursery rhymes. I remember as a child singing “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” “Jack and Jill,” and other such songs. Although English is not our first language in the Philippines, it has become a common practice among parents to teach their children English nursery rhymes. Such a practice is partially due to our educational system in which every student (from preschool to post-secondary education) is required to study English. By teaching their children English songs, parents help their children learn the language better.

My musical journey, however, did not really begin until the early 90’s. At this time, growing up in a nominal Roman Catholic family with no Christian music appreciation, I became fascinated with slow rock music. Moreover, as a teenager, I fell in love with hip hop music (rap and remix songs). In fact, in our High School Yearbook (1996), when I was asked “What do you want to be someday?,” my reply was to be a great DJ. Around this period I was also ecstatically listening to techno music and “bass hour” music. But, by God’s grace, in 1996 I came to know the Lord Jesus Christ savingly, and my taste for these types of music gradually disappeared. God put a love for

a new type of music in my heart, namely, gospel hymns.

Hymnody

Shortly after my conversion I was baptized and joined a Fundamental Baptist congregation which used *Inspiring Hymns* (1951) compiled by Alfred B. Smith. It was in this church that I learned hymnody. As far as I can recall, one of the first hymns that I heard while worshipping in this church for the first time was “And Can It Be That I Should Gain?” by Charles Wesley (1707-1788). Leaving a lasting impact on my soul, both the tune and the texts of this hymn struck my heart:

Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Desiring to be a pastor, I went to the Center for Biblical Studies Institute and Seminary, Antipolo City, Rizal, Philippines in June 1997. While studying at this seminary, I helped my home church every weekend as part of my practical training, from 1997 to 1999,. The ministries in which I was involved in the church varied from preaching to song leading. Furthermore, both in school and in church I was actively participating in choir. Indeed, during this period my appreciation for gospel music deepened. It was also during these years that I began composing songs. They are listed here:

1. “Ang Tunay Na Kaligayahan” (“True Happiness”), an autobiographical song that explains that true joy comes from Jesus Christ *alone*. I cannot remember exactly when I composed this piece. I think in December of 1997.
2. “Brother, If You Have a Problem,” which, as far as I remember, I devised in the summer of 1998. This short song is based on Matthew 7:7. I usually sing this song

with my guitar to encourage needy Christians to keep praying even when their prayers seemed to be taken for granted by God. As the chorus of the song says:

But if your asking,
 Seeking, and knocking
 Seem to be taken for granted.
 Don't be discouraged,
 Just wait for His will.
 Because He knows what is best for you.

3. "Umawit ng Bagon Awit" ("Sing a New Song"), which my dear mother and I wrote in 1998 or 1999. The song was a result of our reflection on Psalm 98.

Then shortly before I graduated in 2001 from Bible school, I had framed another song "Search Me, O God!" This piece, derived from Psalm 139:23-24, was my prayer to the Lord. I remember that at that time I was serving the Lord, yet my heart was full of sins. Hence, the lyrics:

Lord I want to serve you,
 To worship you, to praise you.
 But how could I do this,
 If my heart is full of wickedness.

Chorus

So search me, O God,
 And know my heart.
 Try me and know my thoughts.
 See if there be any wicked way in me.
 Lead me in the way everlasting, everlasting.
 Lead me, Lord, in the way everlasting.

Lord, I want to have
 A right relationship with you.
 But how could it be true,
 If my relationship with others is not right.

Chorus

Classical Music

Upon my completion of my Bachelor of Theology degree in March 2001, that same year and in the same school I pursued my master's degree, which I finished in April 2004. However, wanting to improve my teaching ability, I enrolled at the Center for Teacher Education, Cainta, Rizal, Philippines in June 2004. Here, with the inspiration of my Humanities professor, I became interested in classical music (baroque and romantic in particular). Since then it has been my lifestyle to listen to such music or otherwise old gospel music (especially a capella) while studying on my computer.

Some of my favorite classical musicians include: George Frideric Handel (baroque, 1685-1759), Johann Sebastian Bach (baroque, 1685-1750), and Ludwig van Beethoven (classical romantic, 1770-1827). When it comes to lyrics, Handel's *Messiah* is my best-loved oratorio! In this piece one can hear the entire story of the gospel.

Psalmody

In 2006, desiring to grow more in the grace and knowledge of God, I came to Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary (PRTS), Grand Rapids, Michigan. Here I learned another class of music—psalmody. Coming from a Baptist denomination, I had never used *The Psalter*, a song book of our seminary, published by Eerdmans. But my stay at PRTS led me to appreciate the singing of psalms. What I liked from singing from *The Psalter* is that I was singing the words of the book of Psalms. Although the texts in *The Psalter* have been slightly paraphrased to fit to the tunes, psalmody is basically singing God's words. Interestingly, some of the tunes in *The Psalter* are taken from traditional hymnody. Thus it was not difficult for me to learn *The Psalter*.

Christian Love Songs

In God’s providence, while pursuing my Master of Theology degree in the U.S., I found Sarah J. Elshout—the love of my life. Sarah and I have been married now since July 20, 2011. In July 23, 2009, shortly after we had met, I wrote “Love in God’s Providence,” a love song that I dedicated for my dearest Sarah. This piece narrates the beginning of our love story:

I went to New Jersey to preach;
Where I also met a girl so sweet.
She possesses the qualities I’ve been looking for in a girl.
That’s why in just three days I began to fall in love with her.

But I kept that love secret from her;
Too early yet to reveal my heart to her.
I thought three days were not long enough.
She might get scared to learn about this love.

So I just waited and prayed to the God of love;
Committing this godly girl that I secretly love;
Trusting that if she is the will of God for me,
The God of love Himself will give her to me.

Now when the time came to say goodbye,
I felt so lonely and I didn’t understand why.
Again I only knew this girl for a short time.
Yet I felt as if I had known her for awhile.

When we departed from each other,
My love toward her grew even stronger.
I’m truly in love with this beautiful girl.
I should really tell her that I love her.

Then on March 7, 2011, four months before our wedding, I wrote another song for my love. In this song, entitled “Answered Prayer,” I recall God’s gracious response to my plea to have a godly life-time partner:

Pleading to the Lord, I remember
that He would give me a lover—
a woman who is a godly believer
who will draw me to Christ closer.

The Lord graciously heard my prayer.
He gave me Sarah. Answered prayer!
O Sarah, I do not deserve you!
How can I thank God for you?

Inwardly and outwardly you are so pretty.
Thanks so much for choosing to love me.
I promise, as long as my life shall endure,
By God's grace I will love you more and more.

Philosophy of Music

As observed, music has been an important part of my life. I cannot imagine life without it. Martin Luther (1483-1546) expressed the significance of music this way: “Music is next to theology.” Of course, whenever I use the word music here I am not referring to worldly, God-dishonoring songs. While not all secular music is evil, we should be wise to discern and to avoid any secular and even “Christian” songs that displease God. Our music, first of all, must glorify the Lord; the musical tunes as well as the texts should be solemnly appropriate and theologically scriptural.

The importance of music in my life is best seen in my Christian growth. Music has been instrumental for my sanctification. Thus, I fully agree with Michael A. G. Haykin when he once said in our class that “hymnody is a vehicle for piety.” While I enjoy psalmody and classical music, I remain a great lover of hymns. Hymns comfort me when I am discouraged: “Be not dismayed whate’er betide, God will take care of you.” When I sin and feel so unworthy to come to God for forgiveness, they remind me of the: “Wonderful grace of Jesus..., Broader than the scope of my transgressions, Greater far

than all my sin and shame.” They challenge me to live a godly life: “Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.” When Satan tries to question God’s faithfulness in my life, they tell me: “‘Great is Thy faithfulness,’ O God my Father, There is no shadow of turning with Thee... All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—‘Great is Thy faithfulness,’ Lord, unto me!” Finally, they teach me to always sing with one of my favorite hymn writers Fanny J. Crosby (1820-1915):

“To God be the glory, great things He has done!”

