

# To what will I compare this generation?

Hespeler, July 9, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

[1 Samuel 16:14-23, 18:1-11](#), Psalm 150, [Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30](#)

It's not easy to be a musician these days. If your passion is music, it seems almost impossible to make your living playing. Employment is intermittent at best. Wages are low unless you really make it. And even if you do finally make it and actually get a hit streaming on Spotify, you are paid in pennies while the streaming service and the label takes everything else.

## Tough Audiences

But if you think things are tough today, you should try being a musician in the court of King Saul. Apparently, if the audience (and in that audience only one member really mattered) didn't like what you were playing, you might find yourself pinned to the wall with a spear. Now, I know that there is really no danger at all that the audience this morning will object in any way to the music that they hear but you never know when the people of St. Andrew's might seek to imitate the Bible a little too closely. So let me put Martin's mind at ease. I have taken the precaution of removing all spears from the church this morning.

But let's look at what Saul does in that interesting little story we just read. In it, Saul is starting to get a little nervous about a young man named David who is in his service. David is the best fighter in his army and is his son-in-law. But lately Saul has been worried that David's getting too big for his britches. Absolute rulers always worry when their servants get more popular than they are.

## Music to help a Troubled Spirit

Saul was given, the Bible says, to being tormented by an evil spirit. What that likely means is that he suffered from what today we would call a mental health issue – some have thought (given that he did eventually commit suicide) that he suffered from severe clinical depression. In any case, whatever exactly afflicted him; he often had these episodes where he was quite out of his mind. And when that happened, the only thing that could break him of his evil mood was the music that David played on his harp.

Sometimes, you see, music is the gift that God gives you to help you break out of that dark mood, to see the hope in tomorrow, to leave anger or despair behind. That's what David could do for Saul. But one day, Saul couldn't listen to the music. He let his anger, his fear of David and his bad mood overcome him instead. The spear was cast and for Saul, that was really the beginning of the end. He began from there to lose support, to lose his army and eventually he lost his kingdom. Maybe he should have listened to the music instead.



## W. A. Mozart

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in 1756 and by the time that he died in 1791, he was an incredible musician and a fantastic composer. His personal life, by all accounts, was a mess and his finances were so bad that he was buried as a pauper, but his music was a different story. In his music, all was in incredible and perfect order. The harmony was always just so. And he apparently had the ability to put all the notes together in such order right out of his head and directly onto his manuscripts.

Mozart did things with music that nobody had done before. He pushed the forms of music that were available to him to new heights of excellence and always succeeded with his compositions. So much so, in fact, that you might have said (and perhaps some did say at the time) that no one would ever top what he had accomplished musically. Mozart had pushed the classical styles and forms of music to their extremes and there was no reason to expect that anyone would ever be able to do as much as he had done.

## The World Changes

But the thing is this, in the year 1791, the year that Mozart died, the world changed. That was the year when the King of France tried to flee and was arrested by the Revolutionary Government of France. At that point, France passed a point of no return.

After 1791, France and most of Europe were completely transformed. Gone were the days when society was seen to be in perfect order and harmony – when kings and princes, commoners and peasants all knew their places and kept to the tasks and roles that they had always done.

The world was now a place of chaos, disorder and constant change and suddenly a very fearful place particularly for those who had been on top of everything in the upper classes – that is, those who were the patrons of the music. So, the world for which Mozart had written during his life – a world of order and predictability – no longer existed after his death.

## Beethoven

In 1792 Ludwig van Beethoven arrived in Vienna – the city where Mozart had died the year before – and began to emerge as a musician and composer. His music was composed, therefore, for a very different world than Mozart's and if you listen to what he wrote, you can tell.

The great works of Beethoven are more chaos than order, more discord than harmony. They are very much a reflection of their times. This does not make Beethoven's music any less beautiful or meaningful, of course. In fact, his ability to use such things made his music far more extraordinary than anything that had been written before!

It is quite interesting, therefore, to compare Mozart to Beethoven. They were both masters, both extraordinary composers in their own right. And their music tells us so much about the worlds that they lived in – despite the fact that they lived in the same city one year apart.

## Jesus' Complaint

One day Jesus made this particular complaint against the people of his generation: **“To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out**

**to others: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’”** This is interesting because Jesus seems to be speaking of the popular music of his own day – the kind of music that was played by young people in the streets. The equivalent for us today might be the sight of young people standing at a street corner and dancing as they stream music from Spotify.

Jesus is speaking to the religious-minded people of his own age – the people who criticized John the Baptist and the people who are criticizing Jesus. And what is the problem that he has with them? They won’t listen to the music of their times – the music that the kids on the street corners are playing.

## Jesus and John

Now, in part, of course, Jesus is comparing himself and John the Baptist to these two styles of popular music. John, who lived out in the wilderness and ate a diet of locusts and wild honey and preached fasting and repenting and was generally a downer, is the dirge.

Jesus, who was all about joy and didn’t hesitate to enjoy food and to drink with people is the music of the pipes that invites you to dance. Jesus is complaining that these people were presented with two very different kinds of ministry and managed to find fault with both of them.

## Popular Music

But I am sure that it is no coincidence that Jesus chose to use images and examples of popular music to get his point across. He was always reminding his followers to keep their eyes on the “signs of the times” – to be aware of the currents and flows that were going on in society and in the wider world because these things could give you an indication of what God was doing.

Music can be a very important barometer for what is taking place in the wider society. So, don’t you think that Jesus would want *us* to pay attention to the music of our times?

## The Church and Popular Music

Now, this can be a bit of a problem in the church which seems to be very slow to accommodate to new musical trends. Sometimes, in fact, I think we’re like King Saul and the only kind of music we can listen to is the music that is calming to our troubled souls. Certainly, there are some churches where, if anyone does try and introduce new musical styles, they are bound to have a spear chucked at them. So, we’re not exactly riding the latest musical wave. We are likely going to have to learn a bit more musical flexibility in coming years.

But even if we are slow to adopt new musical styles, that certainly doesn’t mean that we can’t be open to listening to the meaning behind the music in the society around us.

Now, a lot of the popular music today frankly doesn’t have much meaning in it. It is produced in such a way as to attract the biggest possible audience and get the most streams. But some of it really does manage to speak to some of the fears, the passions and the hopes that haunt people’s lives.

## Rap and Hip Hop

Take Rap and Hip Hop music – perhaps the most popular forms of music overall today. Yes, it can be very crude, the language very objectionable and attitudes towards women and some other groups can be downright frightening. But many young people growing up in inner cities find that nothing else is able to express the things that they are feeling better.

There are real grievances, real hopes and dreams being addressed in it. That's why those songs inspire such energy. It is, unfortunately, a kind of energy that is often directed – at best – towards making money and – at worst – towards violence and hatred. But when that kind of energy is directed in more positive and constructive ways there is no limit to what can be accomplished. When you are willing to listen to the music, those kinds of possibilities are there.

## Music and our Generation

The music of Beethoven reflected the kind of chaos that existed in Europe during and following the French revolutionary times. But if you think the French Revolution stirred things up, that is nothing compared to the kind of turmoil we see in our world today! And so, music can be pretty disturbing to listen to today.

Sometimes we are rather tempted to just ignore all forms of modern music and hope it goes away. After all, we are Christians. We can just hold on to our old and familiar sacred forms of music and try and forget about everything else.

Except Jesus told us that we have to pay attention to what is happening in the society around us. **“You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky,”** he complained one day, **“but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.”** (Matthew 16:3) **“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree:”** he said on another occasion **“As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.”** (Matthew 24:32)

Jesus didn't want us to just keep our heads down listening only to the things that are familiar to us or that we find pleasing or calming. He wanted us to be aware of the major movements in our world.

## Encountering God in our Generation

Why was this so important to Jesus? Because he saw that it was in such things that God was at work. Jesus had a much bigger understanding of God's power than we do. We tend to think that God can only work through our plans, our schemes and ways of doing things. Jesus knew better and that was why he was always reminding people to be on guard, to watch and to listen. God can come at you from just about anywhere, even from the music that the kids are listening to on the streets.