

## CORRESPONDENCE

It was with some concern that I read in *The Bible Translator* (Vol. 16, No. 2) the 'coda' to an article by James Riccitelli on 'Tone Analysis: A Practical Approach'. I refer specifically to his résumé of a previous article in which he undertook to present a methodology in ethnic hymnody.

The subject of ethnomusicology is a worthy consideration, but let us approach it with caution and careful study. Statements generalized from acquaintance with a single ethnic music style can be misleading, for music analysis is comparable to language analysis in that the diversity of both systems forms communication barriers between cultures.

The thesis that 'tone-tune correspondences are obligatory' is what one would expect in a tone language, and it may be the case with the African tribe known to Mr Riccitelli, but it is not a rule to be accepted without testing in the particular culture. The Mazatecos of Oaxaca, Mexico, for example, speak a tonal language and yet their song style does not correspond to the tonal placements of their speech.

When one mentions 'adjusting tones to tunes'—as do many missionaries besides Mr Riccitelli—the nature of song is misunderstood. A composer writes music to words, not the reverse. The purpose of song is to unite a text to a musical setting which will enhance the text. Since every music idiom has its semantics, it is less meaningful (or meaningless) for a people to sing in a foreign musical idiom, even though the text may be in the indigenous tongue.

To illustrate: how meaningful to us would be 'A Mighty Fortress' *sung to a melody in quarter-tones*? One truly conversant in the Western musical idiom could not conceivably 'adjust' music to a text without carefully considering that it might be a violation of what the composer had to say in writing the music. Music too, is a language, a symbolic language which carries emotional impact. To contrast the emotional content of the text with that of the music to which it is sung is fallacy.

Further, just as speech is infinitely more complex than deducing phonemes and their mimicry, so is music infinitely more complex than determining scale pitches and synchronizing accents of syllables with 'beat prominence'. (It is not unusual, by the way, to find that an ethnic music style may not have prominent beats!) For a glimpse into the problems of ethnomusicology Bruno Nettl's *A Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe) would be an interesting experience. In short, adapting tunes to another culture is more often than not a thankless, meaningless effort, and can seldom be done in a manner which would justify it in the source idiom or satisfy in the receptor idiom.

In conclusion, two facts are rarely considered by the missionary in dealing with the musical heritage of another culture: (1) The ethnic culture can

be irreparably harmed by the obliteration of its music; and (2) The missionary should be willing and able to apply his music theses to himself. To elaborate on the first, Mr Riccitelli says it is not impossible to introduce a new scale (and consequently a new music idiom) although he admits that it is very difficult. His illustration of this, however, is inadequate. He cites the 'relatively wide acceptance of Western music in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, India and the Middle East'. The illustration is inadequate because all of the areas mentioned are high cultures, literate not only in speech but also in musical notation. In other words, they have nothing to lose in their experimentation with foreign musics while those others, whose tradition is oral, stand to lose their entire musical heritage within a generation. Who claims the right to change the music of a people who have yet no means of preserving their songs?

Regarding the missionary's application of his theses to himself, the point is this: The Westerner believes sincerely that another culture can learn to produce music in Western idiom, all of which is at once more pleasant and meaningful *to the Westerner*, and—if the truth be known—it is the one and only style the Westerner knows! When a man outside the culture assumes or expects that the people he came to serve can learn what he has to teach them musically, then by every right they can expect of him—with his superior knowledge—the ability to learn *their* music.

Let us see how 'accepted' the musics of high cultures are to the laymen, even with musical notation a tradition of centuries. The reader should ask himself: How many Japanese hymns do I know? Christianity is older in Greece than in England and America: how many Greek hymns do I know? And to emphasize a point, **Why** do I not sing Greek melodies? The answer should help to clarify the fact that music styles have communication boundaries.