

Chapter 11

Are You Listening? **Musical Dialogue - Not Monologue** John J. DiModica

Consider this—playing music is dialogue not monologue. It is not several single musical voices speaking simultaneously but rather a lively exchange between instruments having a musical conversation. One musical Idea inspires another. Performing then should be a mutually enjoyable interactive experience.

For a variety of reasons, however, when music is played it is often not this kind of engaging dialogue but rather the opposite. The good news is that by developing good listening skills one can greatly enhance performing skills. This approach both benefits those we are playing with as well as those listening.

At Your Service

Let me start with a question that may seem unrelated to the topic. What is your motivation for being in the worship team? It should be, of course, to serve. Our desire therefore with our instrument (which includes voice) includes serving the music ENSEMBLE. I am not a solo act nor am I auditioning to get noticed in the band or congregation. We are to serve within the worship music group. So, if we are serving, then we are listening so that our playing is appropriate and complimentary. We should be concerned about blending not standing out. We allow other instruments to lead and we don't overplay to draw attention to ourselves. We are supportive of the vocalists and the lyrics. We cannot accomplish these objectives if we are self-serving and not listening. Therefore, in order to fully serve in a worship group, one MUST develop good listening skills. Now that you have the motivation, let's address the implementation.

One thing is for certain: you cannot listen to other instruments if you are unsure about what you are playing on yours! For that reason, to be good listeners one must be proficient and confident with their own performance. If one is groping and floundering in their own parts, they will not be able to concentrate on the big musical picture. This leads into a discussion about practice and lessons.

Refining Your Gift

I am a BIG proponent of the need for all of us to improve. It is a matter of stewardship. In other words, if God gave us a musical skill, then it is incumbent upon us to develop that skill. It doesn't matter if you are young or old or busy or not, everyone one of us has a responsibility to improve the raw materials we have been gifted with.

Stay Current

I listen to players that are still stuck in a particular musical decade and shake my head. I like the music of the seventies, eighties and nineties but not in every worship song this year! Also, here's an idea-why not learn music from different cultures, i.e., Latin or Caribbean. Take some lessons, learn some music theory, read some music books and magazines, research the Internet, buy some CD's. GROW! The better you are as a musician, the more confident you will be when playing with others. This means you will not be stuck listening to yourself to survive. You will be able to play your parts while listening to others to compliment what they are playing/singing, too. By doing this you will allow for spontaneity to occur. That's where the life and joy in performing comes from!

Band Set-Up

Lastly, I would like to address another important factor that can help or hinder good listening within the ensemble, which is band set up. Are you able to hear everyone clearly in your worship group? You cannot respond musically to what you cannot hear, right? So, in terms of this discussion, ask this question-can I hear everyone? Are the monitors helping or hurting the situation? Is the way our band set up ideal for listening to one another? It may be time to reevaluate your monitor system and band setup. You are probably way overdue for a good, comprehensive sound check, too.

With regard to setup each situation has its own unique set of variables. In general you should group similar instruments together, i.e. voices together, rhythm instruments together (bass player directly next to the high hat on the drums), horns together, too. By placing instruments of similar function close to one another, they are better able to listen to one another. That is our topic-LISTENING! One important thing I do when brought in to help a worship ministry is to address the band set up. Often correcting this can solve a number of common problems.

Practice Listening!

Hopefully this article will get you thinking about this important topic and ways to be a better listener. Be sure to share this chapter with your worship leader so that he/she can begin to emphasize the need for good listening habits to be developed within your worship group. Make it a topic to discuss and practice and worship rehearsals. I guarantee by doing so your worship experience will be more rewarding for you, the other players and singers in the group and the congregation.