

# THE SECRET TO A GREAT MUSIC MINISTRY





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# **The Secret to a Great Music Ministry**

Getting On-Stage Music Into Homes

**by Steven Elzinga**

with Steve Lansingh

The Secret to a Great Music Ministry  
*By Steven Elzinga with Steve Lansingh*  
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**“You will sing psalms and hymns and  
spiritual songs among yourselves, making  
music to the Lord in your hearts.”**

*— Ephesians 5:19, NLT*





# PREFACE

EVERY SUNDAY MORNING, MILLIONS OF BELIEVERS gather and sing. The music unites us, lifts us, and delivers our hearts to God. We leave behind our ordinary speech and embrace a unique language of worship.

Or, at least that's how it should be. More and more, the American church is finding its pews filled with those who are just watching, or only mouthing along. Those who have not been raised to sing are left out as mere spectators rather than participants.

The secret to a great church music program lies in reaching these spectators. Success must be judged not by the quality of the musicians or the size of the crowd they draw, but by how many attenders are making music part of their daily life with God. The key is to get your on-stage music into people's homes.

This is a practical book filled with step-by-step ideas that you can implement — whether you are a pastor, a worship leader, part of the worship team, or a lay member of your church. With an audience of such varied musical knowledge, this book begins at square one with the question: Why is music important?



## WHY IS MUSIC IMPORTANT?

ADELE WOKE, AS SHE DID EVERY MORNING, TO THE peals of bells coming from the city's cathedral. For all nine years of her young life, her days had begun with the deep, resonating gongs luring her from her dreams. This morning she smiled at the sound and took notice. Adele walked to her window and watched the Notre Dame belltower as it played out its morning reveille against the backdrop of dawn.

She heard her parents stirring downstairs. Papa was starting the fires for his ovens, getting them ready to bake breads for the citizens of medieval Paris. Mama was beating out the floormats in the shop. She could almost hear them humming along to the tune of the bells, although might have been imagining it.

When the last echo of the morning's song disappeared from Adele's ears, she got dressed and walked downstairs. The smells of yeast and butter already filled the rooms, as Papa had begun his baguettes and pastries. "So there you are," Mama said. "We're nearly out of Brie

**Picture of Adele  
looking out her  
window toward  
Notre Dame**

and Camembert. After breakfast could you pick some up from the market?”

“Sure,” Adele said absentmindedly. She picked up a cluster of grapes her mother had set on the table and began picking at it. “Mama, why do they play the bells at the church?”

“Well,” her mother said, pausing from scrubbing a large mixing bowl. “I suppose they want us to feel uplifted.”

“What does ‘uplift’ mean?”

“Like — it raises our spirits, I guess. It’s comforting.”

Adele chewed on a grape and thought. “How does it do that?”

“I don’t know, Adele. It just does,” her mother said, then shouted into the next room. “Maurice! The baguettes — hurry up!”

Her father appeared at the door with an armful of day-old loaves and smiled at Adele. “Looks like you’ll have the biggest breakfast in the world today!” She giggled.

“Papa, you tell me. Why do they play those songs every morning at the church?”

He sat down next to her at the table. “Ah, the bells. You know, some say the soul of the city is the toll of those bells.” He paused to pluck a grape off her bunch. “We mark our lives by those songs, listening to them year after year. They surround us with beauty; they make us aware that God is always nearby. Without the bells I supposed we’d be lost.”

“Oh,” she smiled. That made a lot of sense ... but there was something she didn’t quite get. “How can

music do all that?”

“Well, you might try asking the bellringer himself,” her father whispered conspiratorially. Adele caught the reprimanding glare directed at him from her mother.

“You should get to the market, Adele,” she interrupted. “You can finish breakfast when you get back.

“All right, Mama,” she sighed. Adele held on to her grapes, and scooped up the money on the counter with her free hand. Within moments, her questions were forgotten as she headed out the door and shouted goodbye.



On Sunday morning, Adele sat with her parents inside Notre Dame and listened as the pipe organ’s dense chords filled the cavernous cathedral with velvety waves of song. She was reminded all at once of her questions, not to mention the mysterious bellringer who was so cautiously mentioned. She thought of him high in the belfry, the unseen heart of the city, listening for once to another’s hymn. Maybe he would know how music works, how a sequence of notes could have such meaning.

Adele made up her mind that she was going to find this bellringer and ask. She told her parents she wanted to sit in the back this morning. When they finally relented, she started toward the rear but then cut over to the left of the building. Her heart pounded as she imagined a thousand eyes bearing down on her, wondering where she was headed. She tried to look purposeful as she made her way to the stairway, as if nine-year-olds always ventured



up to the dangerous walkways high above the city.

The climb up the stairs seemed to take eons, as Adele worried about the echo of her footfalls. Hundreds of stairs she climbed, until at last the bright light of morning greeted her. It was soon joined by a host of gargoyles grimacing menacingly from their stone perches. Adele began to reconsider her impulsiveness as she struggled to tear her gaze from their horrid faces. But she had come this far. She edged along the narrow aisle with her eyes fixed upward on the belltowers, which soared into the vast vaults of the sky.

Adele noticed a quick movement in her peripheral vision. It seemed to have been near the south tower. When she lowered her eyes, she saw a door with a set of wooden stairs where the movement had been. Was this the bellringer she'd seen, or perhaps a refugee claiming sanctuary in the church? She rushed to the door, ignoring danger, and scampered up the stairs. She saw nothing but the gigantic bells — until her eyes adjusted to the darkened room and she could make out a shadowy figure behind a beam of wood.

“Are you the bellringer?”

The man made no movement, so she ventured, “Are you the one who wakes me every morning with those beautiful sounds?”

He turned toward Adele and stared intently her. She could not tell if he looked with interest, skepticism, or anger, for his brow was so knotted with scars that they betrayed no emotion.

“I am.”

“I love your bells,” she quietly confessed. “I love how you play them.”

Again, the man did not answer right away. He let the sound of Adele’s voice echo in the small room. “Thank you,” he answered.

Adele took this as an invitation to move closer to the bellringer. She could see worlds of pain and worlds of wisdom woven into his knotted skin, and her revulsion disappeared beneath awe.

“You know why music works, don’t you?”

“Yes. I do.”

“Will you tell me?”

The man closed his eyes. Adele wondered if that itself was an answer, but then he spoke. His words came out slowly, as if he was considering each one carefully. “In order to understand how music affects people, you must first understand music.” He said the word “music” as if it were life itself.

Adele nodded.

“Amazing grace!” the man shouted. Then, he breathed in a whisper, “how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” Silence filled the room. “Was that music?”

“No,” Adele answered, although something about those words seemed wrong to her. It nagged at the back of her mind, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. “That was just talking.”

“Correct. What would you need to make it into music?”

“You need to say them with the right spacing in

between.”

“Ah. A beat. I have to pronounce each syllable on a certain beat. Da-dum. Da-dum. How-sweet. The-sound. Of course, adding a beat to words does not make the words spring into music. In fact, if you simply say words to a particular rhythm, what you end up with is poetry. So what else do you need?”

“Your voice has to go up and down.”

“Changing pitch, yes. Of course, our voices always go up and down when we talk. In order for our pitch to become music, it has to follow some recognizable form — some relative distance between pitches.”

“Like notes?”

“Exactly. Will just any notes do?” The bellringer screeched: “A-MAAAAA-ZING GRAAAACE!”

“No, no,” Adele laughed. “The right notes!”

“Ah, but how do you know what the right notes are?”

She hesitated. “You just do.”

The man smiled. “It’s a bit more complicated than that, but yes, you know the right notes because you and everyone around you recognize them as being right. Every time you hear ‘Amazing Grace’ it is the same words in the same order, said to the same beat, and always with the same relative pitches. This three-fold pattern becomes recognizable. And that’s music in its most basic form: a recognizable pattern.”

“OK,” Adele murmured, absorbing his words. “But how does that make music so important to everyone in the city?”

“Indeed. If music is just a recognizable pattern, how

can it lift your spirits? How can it sometimes bring you to tears? How can it bring back memories and feelings of long ago?" The bellringer motioned to a stack of wooden crates in the corner. "Perhaps we should sit down."

"Thank you," said Adele, as he set down crates for them.

"Let's try a little game. Do you remember what the priest talked about last Sunday?"

"I think so."

"And can you quote for me any of what he said?"

"Of course not!"

"That's because he said those words to you only once, and in no special order. A song, on the other hand, has a pattern. You hear it over and over. It has words that rhyme, and a certain number of syllables in each line. And so you can remember it."

"That seems obvious."

"But what isn't so obvious is that you remember more than just the notes and the words. You remember the places you learned them. You remember the people you sang them with. And because the pattern of music means that you will repeat it many times throughout your life, over time a song will gather many layers of meaning."

Adele's forehead wrinkled. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Let's make it personal, then. Did your mother ever sing you a lullaby?"

"Yes, there were many."

"Think of one. Try to remember the words."

It had been a long time since Adele thought of those

songs. She struggled to latch onto the words. Hush. She tried to imagine herself in Mama's arms. Hush now. She could feel her face against her mother's shirt. She could smell the clean fabric. Hush now little one. She could remember the feeling of being safe, of being warm, of being content.

"Do you remember?" the bellringer asked.

"Only a phrase so far. And a bit of the tune."

"And do you remember the feelings of having it sung to you?"

"Yes." Adele's eyes opened. "Oh, I see!"

"The easiest way to say it is that music is sticky. It catches memories. You hear someone sing a familiar song and suddenly you smell smells, you feel feelings, you relive a whole era of your life — not just a memory of some past event, but the event itself.

"And not just the event. It can become more powerful than the actual first experience. The years will add layer upon layer of memories and emotions, good times and bad times, emotion upon emotion. When you are old and your mother has died, that lullaby is going to make you remember her, and so it will be both very sad and very sweet."

"All that from just a song?" Adele said.

"Yes," the bellringer answered, and looked away from Adele. She wondered what memories were racing through his mind. "Think of how people say 'that's music to my ears' — what they mean is, it's recreating these pleasant, joyous feelings inside them. Because that's what music does."

**Picture of Adele  
talking to the  
bell ringer**

He turned back to face her. “But we have only looked at half of the equation,” he said. “Remember that the other component of music is being recognizable. Tell me, have you ever heard music from India?”

“I think so. In the marketplace. But it’s not really that good.”

“It doesn’t sound right to you. But do you think it sounds good to them?”

“Probably.”

“Why is that?”

“Because ... ,” Adele said, “it’s familiar to them.”

“Exactly. And it’s not familiar to you. You don’t know the language, you don’t understand the beat. And their pitches use a different musical scale than the one you are accustomed to. You don’t recognize it. Whereas you, and everyone around you, recognize the notes of ‘Amazing Grace.’ Your particular style of music puts you into a certain group of people. So when I say that music requires recognizability, it really means that it connects you to other people.”

“So ... the bells help unite the city because it’s ‘our’ music?”

“Yes — you catch on quickly. Individual songs will be meaningful to individual people, but the genre of songs we surround ourselves with will define us as a group. It gives us identity, and community. When I say that music is sticky, that’s also because it binds us together.”

“Sticky.” Adele grinned.

“Certainly. Let’s say you grow up and then move away to the countryside. You could live there 30 years and

still, you would prefer to hear these old bells more than any other music. That's because it surrounded you during the most emotional time of your life — the time of life you were trying to figure out who you were, what you were going to do, and with whom you were going to do it. And you are stuck together with everyone else who loves the bells. In fact, I'd guess you'll never move out to the country at all, because your love for the bells has already made you a Parisian for life."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose it has." Adele stood up from her crate. "Thank you, sir," she said, extending her hand. "I think I understand now."

"Isn't there another question you want to ask?" the bellringer said, remaining seated.

Adele thought hard. "I don't know."

"I have explained what music is. I have told you how it moves us. I have yet to explain why music is so powerful."

Adele sat down again. "There's a why?"

"Of course. Who do you think created music?"

"God?"

"Yes. Music is like a special language that God created for us to speak to Him. I ring these bells every day because they resonate His glory more eloquently than I ever could with this tongue. And I think it can work the other way around, too. Sometimes when words and thoughts cannot console us, music can lift our hearts. It gives us that taste of the divine."

"Really?"

"Sure. Everything I've told you about music is part of



God's plan for us as His people. When I said that music binds us together, it works with the church, too. The music that we make part of our life gives us identity; it makes us into a community as we learn to make music together. When I said that music catches memories, I think that's something God uses to remind us of all the times He's been with us through the years. Just as your lullaby can make you feel your mother's presence, so also a special song can make you feel wrapped up in God's arms."

Adele smiled. "I never thought of that."

"Songs are also a way for us to have God nearby us at all times. The Bible tells us to hide His words in our hearts, and song is a perfect way to do that because of its recognizable pattern. Some of my favorite songs are just passages from Scripture, and of course the book of Psalms is filled with nothing but songs to God. When you memorize these songs or passages, God can speak to you clearly by just bringing them to mind."

"I see — because the songs are sticky."

"Most people get upset when they get a song stuck in their head," the bellringer said, "but it can be quite useful!"

They both laughed.

"So how come more people don't talk to God and listen to God using music?" Adele asked.

"Let me ask: Do you know how to play an instrument?"

"No. Well, not very well."

The man nodded. "Most people are like you. Music is

part of your life, but you don't know as much about it as you could. Remember how I said music is a language, of sorts, that God and people use to communicate? What would happen if you heard a language being spoken around you all the time, but you never tried to learn it?"

"I don't know. I suppose I'd pick up enough phrases to get by, but ... oh, I get it! I couldn't have a very good conversation with someone!"

"Indeed. The key to tapping into the spiritual power of music is in playing it, not just in listening. Like any language, it must be learned. The more you know, the more it does to you and for you. Suddenly, you are no longer a wallflower struggling to catch a phrase here and there, but a full participant, who can be initiate conversation and listen attentively."

"So how can I learn music?"

"Well, most people learn by being born in a musical family, or by taking private lessons, or maybe from a friend who knows. But I don't believe that this gets the job done very effectively. Maybe there's a better way. What if the church, which spends half its service on music as it is, tried to teach you? What if there was a church out there interested in seeing you make music part of your life with God? What if it used its talented people and its music resources to help you?"

"Is there such a place?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know. I haven't been outside this building much since I was a boy. But I have to imagine that somewhere out there, there's a church that has dared to try it."

“I sure hope so. I’d love to learn to make music myself.”

The bellringer grinned. “Well, in the meantime, I suppose you’ve become enough of a friend that I can teach you a lesson or two.” He got up from his crate and lumbered over to his giant metal instruments. “Come over to the bells and I’ll teach you how to play ‘Amazing Grace.’”

“In the middle of church?” Adele gasped. “But they’ll — “

Suddenly, what had bothered her about the bellringer’s choice of song clicked in Adele’s mind. “Wait — “ she said, thinking hard. “Wasn’t ‘Amazing Grace’ written by a former slavetrader to the Americas? How can that be written yet if this is ... “

Adele woke abruptly to find herself on the top bunk in her dorm room.

