

Don't Play Music, We Might Cry

How to educate families about the value of music to a meaningful funeral.

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Sadly, I frequently hear families that are experiencing grief say some variation of the following: “Don’t play music, we might cry.” Of course, when they say this, I remind myself that I have the opportunity to teach them why music is often an important element of a meaningful funeral.

Throughout many important moments and settings in life, we turn to music to help set the tone and establish context. Can you imagine the holidays without music? What would a great film be without its soundtrack? And what about birthdays and weddings?

For funerals, music has long held an equally important role. In pagan times, chants were sung at funerals to placate the spirits. In ancient Rome, the funeral procession included musicians playing wind instruments and professional singers hired to sing praises to the dead.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, a number of classical composers, including Handel and Chopin, wrote funeral marches, which

were slow and solemn pieces often in a minor key. Throughout human history, it has been recognized that music and funerals belong together.

At the funeral, music is one way we let friends and family know that their normal and necessary emotions of grief, which music tends to draw forth, are welcome. Music is also a universal, unifying medium that joins mourners and speaks for them when words are inadequate.

Quiet reflection during musical interludes often stimulates acknowledgment of the *reality* of the death. Music often helps us move from knowing something in our heads to knowing something in our hearts. What’s more, music is often very moving to mourners and can provide effective moments in which to think about their loss and embrace and move them toward *expression* of their pain.

Another purpose of the funeral is *recall*. Music can help us with this. Songs that represent or were meaningful to him or her draw

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forth our memories. Music associated with special times we shared with the person who died, as well as lyrics that seem to capture him or her, elicit memories we may not even have been aware were there.

Have you ever noticed that during musical interludes at a funeral, the mourners gathered will often hold hands, lean on one another or embrace? That is because music is also effective at activating empathy and encouraging people to *support* each other.

Though music is very individual and people often bring their own unique meanings to any given piece, certain pieces of music speak to a body of faith or, more generally, to spirituality and often bring mourners meaning. Hymns are an obvious example,



but classical music, pop songs and other genres can be just as effective at helping mourners search for *meaning*.

I encourage you to be open-minded about music at the funeral ceremony (and also the visitation and gathering after the funeral). To my way of thinking, any form or type of music that helps meet the mourning needs of family and friends should be welcomed.

Instead of suggesting “suitable” music, why not ask families open-ended questions: What kind

of music did he love? What music reminds you of her? What music best captures your feelings about his unique life? Who in your circle of friends and family plays an instrument or sings and could be invited to participate in the ceremony? Your role is to help the family find ways to incorporate the answers to these questions into the unique and meaning-filled funeral they are planning.

Yes, families will sometimes say, “Don’t play music, we might cry.” When they do, you have the opportunity to step into the important role of providing them with information and education, and honoring their choices.

Without doubt, music is an essential and beautiful element of funerals. Don’t let the families in your care miss out on its healing presence. As German poet and

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writer Heinrich Heine reflected, “Where words leave off, music begins.” ☰

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