

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 74

History of Christian Music – Part One

What does music do? What is its role in the Christian life? What is its place in a worship service? Are we concerned most with the words in a song? If we were concerned only with words, then why would we sing rather than read a song? What makes a song “Christian” as opposed to secular? Is there a difference in the biblical view of secular music and Christian music?

A study in the history of Church music offers some interesting information that bears on these and other similar questions. We will take time in our study of the great hymnist Charles Wesley to consider the historical role of music in the church (and the role of the church in music!). In the process of so doing, we will find some meaningful explanations to these questions as well as others!

BIBLICAL MUSIC

Modern psychiatrists tell us that music conveys emotion. It taps into parts of the brain that involve imagination, courage, emotions, and memories, in both conscious and unconscious ways. Janet Towell wrote, “Music can soothe the soul, excite the emotions, and provide a sense of cultural identity.”¹ For years, many thought that the music we listen to or sing was a reflection of our moods. In other words, we listen to a sad song because we are in a sad mood. But, the last several decades of research have shown the opposite is true – the music itself affects our moods. It means our mood saddens if we listen to sad music.²

Many people recognize the truth of these studies internally. Experience has shown this role of music in our own lives. We are not surprised, therefore, to turn to the Bible and see music as an integral part of God’s relationship with humanity, as well as our relationship with each other and ourselves.

A review of the Bible sets a complex and complete scene for understanding music within its Biblical context. For “Literacy” purposes, we shall consider briefly the uses of music and the instruments of music, looking first at the Old Testament and then the New Testament.

¹ Towell, J.H., “Motivating Students Through Music and Literature,” *Reading Teacher*, 53:284-288 (2000).

² Husain, G., Thompson, W.F., & Schellenberg, E.G., “Effects of Musical Tempo and Mode on Arousal, Mood, and Spatial Abilities,” *Music Perception*, 20:151-172 (2002).

OLD TESTAMENT

Music is noted in the oldest part of the Old Testament. Genesis 4:21 records “Jubal” as “the father of all who play the harp and flute.” Within the confines of the Old Testament, we read of music in the worship, military, and daily fun of the people. David answered the requests of King Saul’s counselors and played his harp to soothe King Saul (1 Samuel 16:14-23). That same David would write and sing songs while shepherding the family sheep. Of course, we also know that David would write an incredible number of songs, many of which we have in our Bible as Psalms, that expressed his heart, his relationship with others, and his relationship with God. Many were clearly for his personal use. Others were written for an assembly’s use in worshipping God.

The instruments in the Old Testament were many and varied, with some percussion, string, and wind instruments. We have the various instruments translated as “harp,” “lyre,” “ten-stringed lyre,” “lute,” “shofar,” “trumpet,” “flute,” “reed pipe,” “drum,” “cymbal,” “castanets,” and a number of instruments that we really have no clue how to translate!³ A good synopsis of the Hebrew terms and the scholars’ thoughts about the actual instruments are contained in the entry “Music; Musical Instruments” in Zondervan’s *Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*.

When we read the songs in the Old Testament, several come with no indication of the “music” aspect of the song. For example in Exodus 15:1-18, we read of Moses and the Israelites singing a song to the Lord. Then in verses 20 and 21, Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, “took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. Miriam sang to them: ‘sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.’” So we have the song, we have the accompaniment, but we have no indication of the manner in which the singing took place.

In a number of the Psalms, we do have a little indication of the music involved. A number of the psalms have added instructions at the beginning (which were probably not in the original psalm, but were clearly added long before the New Testament times). For example, if we look at Psalm 4, we will see *before* the first verse (the translators’ way of telling us the words are not likely in the psalm itself) the following: “For the director of music. With stringed instruments. A psalm of David.” Or, if we consider Psalm 5, it begins, “For the director of music. For flutes. A psalm of David.”

³ We need to be cautious thinking of modern instruments when we read these words. Archeologists have given us a decent understanding of the above translated terms, but the instruments themselves often did not look like their modern counterparts.

Likewise, within the psalms themselves, we will frequently find a musical notation. Typically, it is the word “*Selah*” (This is also found three times in the book of Habbakuk). Although there is not uniformity on what *selah* means, most scholars consider it a form of the Hebrew word for “lift up.” These scholars then debate over whether it is referring to the lifting up of the voice, as in a benediction, or the lifting up of musical instrumentation during an interlude or ending of a psalm.

NEW TESTAMENT

As we read the New Testament, we find more examples of music that indicate the usage in the daily life of Jews. We read of flute players mourning the death of a girl (Matt. 9:23-24) and Jesus speaking of marketplace children playing the flute expecting dancing (Matt. 11:16-17; Luke 7:32). Paul wrote of sounding brass and clanging symbols in describing speech without love (1 Cor. 13:1). Later in the same letter, Paul uses the sounds of musical instruments to illustrate the importance of being understood (1 Cor. 14:7-8). Paul also references a trumpet playing as he speaks of the second coming of Christ: “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

Also, we read of singing to God in personal and corporate worship in the New Testament. Jesus and his apostles sang a hymn after the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 26:30, Mk 14:26).⁴ Paul and Silas sang hymns to God while in prison (Acts 16:25). Paul wrote repeatedly about singing to God and His name (1 Cor. 14:15; Eph. 5:18-19; Col. 3:16-17). James writes for those who are cheerful to sing psalms (James 5:13).

The heavenly hosts are recorded singing⁵ a hymn in Luke 2:14, “Glory to God in the highest.” We also read about Mary writing a song of praise (the “Magnificat”) in Luke 1:46-55, a song of Zechariah in Luke 1:67-79, and a song of Simeon in

⁴ Most scholars believe the hymn sung was the “The Egyptian *Hallel*,” [*hallel*] the Hebrew word for “praise.” The Egyptian *Hallel* is what our English Bibles have as Psalms 113-118. Originally, those psalms made up one psalm and they were traditionally sung in the Temple while the Passover lambs were slain. Private families would then chant/sing it again in their homes during the Passover feast.

⁵ Most translations will note this as “saying” rather than singing. Scholars recognize the format as poetic (which in Hebrew would likely mean the lyrics were chanted/sung). The word translated “saying” could also easily mean “singing” in the sense of chanting. Most scholars, therefore, see this as a song.

Luke 2:29-32.⁶ Many scholars believe that Paul is quoting songs of the early church in various places including Ephesians 5:14 (“Awake, sleeper, And arise from the dead, And Christ will shine on you.”); Philippians 2:6-11 (who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father).

The book of Revelation, with its heavenly scenes, closes the New Testament with many references to songs and music. Hymns glorifying God (Rev. 4:11), the Lamb (5:9-10, 12), the Father and Son (5:13; 7:10; 7:12), celebrating God’s triumph over his enemies (11:16, 17-18; 12:10-12; 19:1-3, 6-8) and other songs abound in Revelation, as do the trumpets blown in proclamation of events unfolding. Revelation 5:8-9 recites the portion of John’s vision where the 24 elders are each holding a *cithara* as they fall before the lamb as “as they sang a new song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.’”

What did these biblical songs sound like? We do not know exactly. We know a bit of the *style* of music, but the unfortunate aspect of music as a “time art” is it disappears once it is done.⁷ Tradition has preserved for us, both in pockets of Jewish culture that have kept traditions through the centuries and the known similarities of ancient church music, certain understandings of the sound of the music. The songs would sound to most of today like something more akin to a chant. There was no harmony, beyond certain primitive sounds of an accompanying instrument, but even the instrumental accompaniment would have little harmony. There was likely a degree of improvisation each time a psalm or song was sung. Some of the songs were sung in an antiphonal (responsive singing) manner. We see this in Psalms 24 and 118. One would sing a line and the others would sing the response.

⁶ The passages referenced here as “songs” are written in hymn/poetic form. Most every scholar will term them “songs” even though that noun is not used in the passage itself.

⁷ By “time art,” scholars mean that the art exists only within the time frame of its performance. Our modern electronic age has allowed us to secure recordings of songs that last, but even those recordings are not the original art produced in totality. The performers are missing and the best electronic copy and reproduction lack some measure of fullness of a live performance.

EARLY CHURCH MUSIC

As we move beyond the New Testament and attempt to understand the music of the church, we start to weave in and out of the many lessons we have had in Church history thus far. If we go back to Lesson 1, we looked at early pivot points in the Church noting the impact of the Roman invasion and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 68-70 A.D. As the Jews warred against the Romans, the Christians refused to fight, leaving Jerusalem before the massacres. Afterwards, the Jews rewrote their 18 prayers specifying that Christians were excluded from Jewish assembly and fellowship. From that point on, the Church transformed from a predominantly Jewish institution that drew its thought leaders from the ranks of the Jewish intelligentsia to a Greek institution where Greek thinkers were the leaders.

With this shift in the church, there was also a shift in worship and music. The Greeks brought a different mindset and historical attitude to music. The immediate sound of the songs would not have been that much different. We actually have a copy of a song written on a burial stone found in Turkey dating to the first century. Called the *Epitaph of Seikilos*, the lyrics are:

ὄσον ζῆς φαινοῦ
μη δὲν ὀλῶς συ λυποῦ
πρὸς ὁ λῖγον ἐστὶ τὸ ζῆν
τὸ τέλος ὁ χρόνος ἀπαιτεῖ

In English, the sound of those Greek words roughly would be:

Hoson zis phenou
Mi den holos su lupou
Pros o ligon esti to zin
To telos ho chronos apeti

The song means:

As long as you live, be lighthearted,
Let nothing trouble you.
Life is only too short,
And time takes its toll.

Clearly, this song is not useful as a song of the early church. But the sound of the song, which scholars can roughly put together by the musical notations above the letters of the inscription, give us an idea of what a Greek song would have sounded like in the first several generations of the church.

A scholarly reproduction of this song and several others used in this class are available in the *Norton Recorded Anthology of Western Music*, a CD collection that accompanies the *Norton Anthology of Western Music* book edited by Burkholder and Palisca. The recording of the song includes a plucking of the melody on a lyre, likely as it was played in the first century.

Within the early church, the first post-biblical period is that of the apostolic fathers. We covered these saints in Lessons 2 through 7. Most of their writings about music are illustrations to make a point (much like Paul was doing in his Corinthian correspondence). A good example here is in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch (around 107A.D.) to the seven churches on his way to martyrdom (see Lesson 6). When urging the Ephesians to be in harmony with their Bishop, Ignatius writes that they should be “tuned” to the bishop as the strings on a lyre. Then, as Jesus is “sung” in unity of mind, the Ephesians would “make up a chorus, so that joined together in harmony and having received the godly strain in unison, you might sing in one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father” (Ignatius’s letter to the Ephesians 4:1-2).

One of the most beautiful musical allusions is to God as a musician. Around 175, Athenagoras wrote on the reasons for worshipping God, rather than nature. In *Supplication for the Christians* 16, we read, “Now if the cosmos is an harmonious instrument set in rhythmic motion, I worship him who tuned it, who strikes its notes and sings it concordant melody, not the instrument. Nor do the judges at the contests pass over the lyre players and crown their lyres.”

In the 200’s, we find fascinating reading about instruments and music at the hands of the Alexandrian Christians. We recall from Lesson 15 that the Alexandrian School was preeminent in taking the Old Testament and giving it allegorical meaning. This was done also with the passages that referenced music and musical instruments. Clement of Alexandria would write that the “new song” David wrote of in the Psalms was a reference to Jesus Christ (*Protrepticus* 2:15,3).

Clement would take the instruments in the Old Testament and find allegorical readings that edified the Christian. Clement wrote that the lyre written of in the psalms means either the Lord himself, or those who are saved (“who continuously pluck their souls under the musical direction of the Lord” (*Stromata* 6:11,88).

Also, Clement is where we begin reading the more direct attack on instrumentation as something secular that has negative implications for the church. Clement wrote that musical instruments were associated with war, while humanity is to be an instrument of peace (*Paedagogus* 2:4). Clement further wrote that “plucking strings” was “godless,” and the sound of the *aulos* (similar to a modern flute) was “erotic” leading to “dancing, drunkenness and every sort of trash.”

By the time we get to the third and fourth centuries, we see a great distrust of musical instruments as being pagan rather than Christian, particularly in the West. By this time, the church had gone underground over and over again during periods of persecution. There would have been meetings of house churches, but many scholars recognize that the meetings would not have ordinarily allowed use of loud and full instrumentation. The church had become several generations removed from such usage of instruments and the writings no longer frequently reflect the positive imagery and usage of instruments in the manner of Ignatius and others as referenced above.

If we go back and read the writings and sayings of the desert fathers (see Lesson 21), we find that more and more of the Christian monastics were singing the Psalms, likely as a good way of memorizing them. Athanasius (who wrote the Life of St. Anthony as discussed in Lesson 21) considered it sinful to sing for “the sake of pleasing sound” rather than “as a manifestation of inner harmony” (*Epistula ad Marcellinum* 28). We also know that many of the early monks would use an instrument as a means of communicating the call to daily prayer.

Meanwhile in the East, the Cappadocian fathers (Lesson 23) wrote passages that give us insight into the music of the Eastern Church. In the mid-300’s, Basil the Great would write about God giving people the “sweetness of melody” mixed with doctrine through the songs (psalms) to train Christians as they sang in their homes and in the marketplace. Much like modern psychologists, Basil believed that singing the Psalms would “settle one’s tumultuous and seething thoughts.” It would mollify “the soul’s wrath” as well as “create friendships” and “reconcile those at enmity” (*Homilia in psalmum* 1, 2).

In 375, Basil described the antiphonal singing of his monks as he defended their worship practice that was under some criticism. Though the passage is a bit lengthy, it is a good illustration of the practice that was apparently widespread in the east:

Our customs as now established are in full accord and harmony with all the churches of God. Among us the people arise at night and go to the house of prayer; in pain, distress and anguished tears they make confession to God, and finally getting up from prayer, they commence the singing of Psalms. At first, they divide themselves into two groups and sing songs in alteration with each other, at once intensifying their carefulness over the sacred texts, and focusing their attention and freeing their hearts from distraction. And then they entrust the lead of the chant to one person, while the rest sing in response. After thus spending the night in a variety of Psalmody with interspersed prayer, now that the light of day has appeared, all in common as if from one mouth and one

heart offer the psalm of confession to the Lord, while each fashions his personal words of repentance.”⁸

While holding up the singing of Psalms, Basil also warned the “younger crowd” to avoid the “wicked tunes” of contemporary music in favor of the wholesome sounds of the ancient music! (*Exhortation to Youths as to How They Shall Best Profit by the Writings of Pagan Authors*, 7).

The prolific preacher and writer, St. John Chrysostom (see Lesson 30) wrote a great deal on music. Chrysostom believed that God gave us the psalms so that we would have good music to sing and listen to, both for “pleasure and profit.” This way we avoided the singing of immoral songs (*In Psalmum* 41,1).

Chrysostom would contrast the Alexandrian allegorical understanding of the Old Testament with his more literal rendering. In commenting on the Psalms, Chrysostom rejected the allegorical and instead wrote that God allowed instrumental accompaniment to singing as a way of “sweetening” the melody so those weaker might get the lyric’s edifying message. He would quickly contrast the pagan uses of music with the need for holiness and decorum found in the church and the singing of psalms.

Importantly in Chrysostom, we see that a number of specific psalms were finding their way into liturgy. Certain psalms were sung at certain times and for certain events. This practice expanded over the next coming centuries and the chant/song of the church became the main vehicle for each successive generation to receive, learn, and use the liturgy of worship.

Once we get to Augustine (see Lessons 25 and 26), we have clear writings that show the use of song in the church as a part of the liturgy and practice. Although Augustine would take himself to task a bit for his own “enjoyment” of music, he repeatedly defends the practice of singing in church as right before God and scriptural by example of Jesus and the Apostles.

Singing was most likely still in chant form during this period, and we know little more of its sound until we reach the music schools Pope Gregory founded and his successors. In these schools, we have more extensive writings that allow us to fairly faithfully restore the sounds of these chants, many of which now bear the name “Gregorian Chant.” But, that is where we pick up the story and the sounds next week!

⁸ Basil letter 207, 3. The translation of this writing and the other early church writers has come from the excellent compendium of early church sources, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, James McKinnon (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

POINTS FOR HOME

1. In song, we have a powerful tool for our lives, our hearts, and our souls. We can find joy, sorrow, wisdom, commitment, motivation, and strength as we pour ourselves before God in song. We should take care with our singing and do it to God's glory. Paul would have us read his admonition to the Colossians that "whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col 3:17).
2. Let us use song to encourage each other as well as to worship our God. Paul told this to the Ephesians contrasting it with the world writing, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 5:18-20).
3. Arm yourself with some good Christian music that will minister to you in times of need. David had songs that helped him in times of danger ("I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction." Psalm 40). Songs of prayer for others ("May the Lord answer you in the day of trouble! May the name of the God of Jacob set you securely on high! May he send you help from the sanctuary and support you from Zion!" Psalm 20). He had songs of praise ("The earth is the Lord's and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it." Psalm 24), and we could go on and on. Read those Psalms. Learn them. Plant them deep in your heart and mind. We will find God working through them to sustain us and continue to grow us into the likeness of his son.