

Lecture #9 – History of Sacred Music – Part II

I. Review and Introduction

Last time, we looked at the sacred music in ancient Israel. We traced it from its first appearance to its systemization in the Temple, then into the synagogues. We observed the principles and mindset concerning music that was passed into the early church.

Today, we will start with the music of the early church and end on the eve of the Reformation in Europe. We will see that we know much more about the music of churches as we progress in time.

One word of warning is that much of the information regarding the churches of this period can be heavily influenced by the Catholicism that rose to dominance during these times. The independent churches that are the forefathers of the Baptists are often overshadowed by Catholicism and primary sources from them are rare. For this time period, we will have to focus on a larger view of the vaguely defined “orthodox Christianity”.

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” – philosopher George Santayana

II. Music in the Churches of the New Testament Era

Early Evidence of Music

There is ample evidence that music was an integral part of New Testament Christianity. Christ and the disciples sang a song after the Last Supper (Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:25), which many believe to have been part of the “Hallel” from Psalms 113-118. Acts 2:46 shows us the early believers continuing to be active in and meeting at the Temple in Jerusalem. Paul and Silas famously sang in the jail at Philippi (Acts 16:25). Paul wrote instructions on the use of music to the early church in Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19.

We can also look outside the Bible for historical evidence. In 112 A.D., Pliny the Younger, governor of the province of Bithynia, wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan concerning the practice and spread of Christianity. He reports that their worship was to “sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god”.¹ Justin Martyr wrote of offering God “solemn prayers and hymns”.²

¹ <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html> - accessed 9-14-22

² https://biblehub.com/library/richardson/early_christian_fathers/the_first_apology_of_justin.htm - accessed 9-14-22

Description of Early Church Music

The earliest source of Christian music was the Scripture itself. This of course included the **Psalms**³, but other passages of Scripture began to be used. These non-Psalm Scripture songs are sometimes referred to as **Canticles**. Popular passages included Luke 1:68-79 (“Benedictus”), Luke 1:46-55 (“Magnificat”), Luke 2:14 (“Gloria in Excelsis”), and Luke 2:29-32 (“Nunc Dimittis”). We may assume that **Hymns** were also written and sung, though sadly none appear to have survived for us from 1st century.

We can make some conclusions about what this early music may have sounded like. The singing of Psalms likely was influenced by Jewish converts and how they had sung in synagogues. The early churches did not have dedicated meeting places, but rather met in private homes or public spaces. Since secrecy may have also been in mind the songs must not have been overly loud or raucous. Thus, it appears that the music was that of small group participation or of private devotion. It is likely that songs were sung in unison (or rather in octaves to allow for varied vocal ranges) with an emphasis on the church being of “one voice”⁴. Church music was not a performance but a communal activity.

There is little or no evidence for the use of instruments in worship in the early church, but that could be more practical than doctrinal. Those early Jewish Christians likely continued singing as they did in the synagogue, which was without instruments. The New Testament itself is largely silent on the use of instruments though singing is clearly done.⁵ Paul alludes to musical instruments in I Corinthians 13:1 and 14:7 but it is unclear if this refers to secular, Jewish, Christian, or music generically. Instruments are found in the book of Revelation but not in a church setting.⁶ It is from the later 2nd century that we find the earliest Christian writings on the use of instruments.

Whatever the music of the first century churches sounded like, we can be sure that it was born of simplicity, high regard for doctrinal content, and above all a concern that Christ be honored and praised through its use.

III. Music in the Churches of the 2nd-4th Centuries

Conflict Regarding Instruments

There were many conflicts regarding music during this time. First was regarding the use of instruments in worship. There appears to have been debate on if they should be allowed or if certain ones were acceptable. There does not appear to be much debate over singing.

³ “The Psalms, the most quoted Hebrew Scripture in the New Testament, are the base upon which all subsequent church song has been built.” *Sing With Understanding*, p. 78

⁴ See *Te Deum*, p. 62.

⁵ Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16, James 5:13

⁶ Revelation 5:8, 14:2, 15:2. Critics of using instruments in church will usually say on these verses that instruments will be fine to use in Heaven but not in the church now.

On the use of instruments in the early church, Paul Westermeyer writes:

*“Music was part of the same real world as persecution, organization, internal and external definition. As the church was to discover, being in but not of the world was difficult. Music posed problems like everything else. The church in its worship simply adopted the vocal change of the synagogue, without instruments. By the third and fourth centuries, however, it came to realize that in confronting the pagan culture outside the church’s worship, music and music’s associations were part of the package it had to confront. The musical part of this confrontation became most obvious in the polemic against musical instruments.”*⁷

Clement of Alexandria (150?-215?) wrote against the use of instruments. His logic associated the use of instruments with immorality. Here are a couple of examples from his work *Paedagogus* (“The Instructor”):

“Let the pipe be resigned to the shepherds, and the flute to the superstitious who are engrossed in idolatry...”

*“In their wars, therefore, the Etruscans use the trumpet, the Arcadians the pipe, the Sicilians the pectides, the Cretans the lyre, the Lacedaemonians the flute, the Thracians the horn, the Egyptians the drum, and the Arabians the cymbal. The one instrument of peace, the Word alone by which we honour God, is what we employ. We no longer employ the ancient psaltery, and trumpet, and timbrel, and flute, which those expert in war and contemners of the fear of God were wont to make use of also in the choruses at their festive assemblies; that by such strains they might raise their dejected minds.”*⁸

John Chrysostom (347?-407) also wrote against the use of instruments because of wicked associations:

“Where are they who give themselves to devilish choirs, and harlot’s songs, and sit in theatres? For I am ashamed to make mention of them...”

*“But here the grace of the Spirit pours forth a sound, using instead of flute or pipes, the lips of the saints.”*⁹

*“...demons congregate where there are licentious chants, but where there are spiritual ones there the grace of the Spirit descends, sanctifying mouth and soul.”*¹⁰

Note that the primary logic behind these stands was not necessarily Scriptural. There is no command to *not* use instruments in the New Testament and the Old Testament is full of references to them. The primary reason given was **association**. They did not want their music to sound like the pagan world around them. However, next to issues with association must be considered the **practical** nature of denying the use of instruments. There simply was not a practical means of introducing or implementing music into the simplest forms of church worship.

However, there is at least some evidence that instruments may have had some acceptance. Ephraem the Syrian (c. 306-373) is said to have played a harp/kinnor/cithara in accompaniment to the singing

⁷ *Te Deum*, p. 67

⁸ <https://st-takla.org/books/en/ecf/002/0020268.html> - accessed 9-14-22

⁹ <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/200168.htm> - accessed 9-14-22

¹⁰

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Source_Readings_in_Music_History/ZtCYwFm2mTwC?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=demons%20congregate – accessed 9-14-22

at his church.¹¹ It appears that these uses of instruments are such exceptions that they are not well known or documented.

Conflict Regarding Heresy

A second area of conflict was the development of songs with heretical messages. This was not necessarily new, as Gnosticism was promoted in the 1st century through music. Latourette writes:

“In Gnostic circles religious poetry arose to compete with the Old Testament Psalms. Some Catholics therefore distrusted the composition of hymns after this pattern on the ground that they might smack of heresy. Yet from at least the second century hymns were written by the orthodox which, like their Gnostic counterparts, employed the forms of Greek poetry.”¹²

One of the defining doctrinal battles of this time was the Arian heresy: “the view that Jesus is a finite created being with some divine attributes, but He is not eternal and not divine in and of Himself.” Chief spokesman and namesake for this heresy was Arius (256-336). He helped spread his false ideas through the use of music, such as this song that was set to a popular melody:

*“The Father is alien to the Son in essence,
for the Father is without beginning.
The Unbegun made the Son the beginning
of things originated.
When the Son was not the Father was God.”¹³*

Conflict Regarding Ritualism

A third area of conflict was the growing ritualism of some branches of Christianity. One area this is seen is the growing use of **liturgy**, which we will define as standardized and formalized systems of worship services. The first **choirs** appear in the 3rd-4th centuries as worship for the common person began to shift from being something to participate into something that was to be experienced.

Some of the growth of ritualism must be attributed to the battles against heresy that raged at the times. As orthodox Christianity began to define its positions it also began to standardize its practices. The liberty of the Gospel became secondary to the conformity to orthodoxy to maintain purity of doctrine and practice.

Conflict Regarding Leadership and Specialization

A fourth area of conflict was the rise of dedicated leadership in church music. This is in part due to spread of liturgical traditions which needed someone to implement and lead them. Practically this led

¹¹ *Te Deum*, p. 75.

¹² *A History of Christianity: Volume I* by Kenneth Scott Latourette. p. 207.

¹³ *Te Deum*, p. 66.

to divisions of power and emphases in the churches as some focused on the Word and some on song. Jerome (341-420) warned against those that “If you take a reader with you or an acolyte or a psalm-singer, let their character not their garb be their adornment; let them use no tongs to curl their hair; rather let their mien¹⁴ be an index of their chastity”¹⁵.

We also begin to find during this time references to people having such roles as “singer” or “cantor”. These specialized roles show that music in practice and leadership was becoming more organized and “professional” in its implementation. We here begin to discern the trend of the congregation having a passive and not active role in worship.

Debates Concerning Music

There was still some conflict about the very presence of music in churches.¹⁶ Ambrose (340?-397) did not approve of the use of instruments in worship but delighted in the very sound of singing, in essence that the beauty of the sound of singing brought praise to God. Others, possibly including Pambo (305?-375) seem to renounce all use of music in worship. Anathasius (296?-373) allowed for the singing of psalms only if it were as close to regular speech as possible. Augustine (354-430) wrote an entire work on music titled *De Musica* and took a more balanced stance that music was profitable if under control. He wrote:

“Sometimes, again, avoiding very earnestly this same deception, I err out of too great preciseness; and sometimes so much as to desire that every air of the pleasant songs to which David’s Psalter is often used, be banished both from my ears and those of the Church itself; and that way seemed unto me safer which I remembered to have been often related to me of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, who obliged the reader of the psalm to give utterance to it with so slight an inflection of voice, that it was more like speaking than singing. Notwithstanding, when I call to mind the tears I shed at the songs of Thy Church, at the outset of my recovered faith, and how even now I am moved not by the singing but by what is sung, when they are sung with a clear and skillfully modulated voice, I then acknowledge the great utility of this custom. Thus vacillate I between dangerous pleasure and tried soundness; being inclined rather (though I pronounce no irrevocable opinion upon the subject) to approve of the use of singing in the church, that so by the delights of the ear the weaker minds may be stimulated to a devotional frame. Yet when it happens to me to be more moved by the singing than by what is sung, I confess myself to have sinned criminally, and then I would rather not have heard the singing.”¹⁷

Chant/Plainsong

One type of singing that rose to prominence during these centuries is that of **chant** or **plainsong**. Today it is mostly associated with the Gregorian Chant of Catholic monks. However, this is a very old form of music that would have been used in other churches and settings. The 1917 Catholic

¹⁴ Webster’s 1828 – “Look; air; manner; external appearance; carriage”

¹⁵ https://biblehub.com/library/jerome/the_principal_works_of_st_jerome/letter_lii_to_nepotian.htm - accessed 9-15-22

¹⁶ This section heavily relies on *Te Deum*, p. 82-89.

¹⁷ <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf101/npnf101.vi.XXXIII.html> - accessed 9-15-22

Encyclopedia¹⁸ says that this was the “exclusive music of the Church until the ninth century”.¹⁹ It is not very different from the Jewish synagogue singing. In its earliest forms it did not rely on consistent meters in the text being sung nor did it have any harmony or instrumental accompaniment.

These songs, and especially their tunes, were passed down orally at first. By the 9th century a system of notation developed called **neumes**. The following example is this modern rendering of the Lord’s Prayer into plainsong neumes:²⁰

THE LORD'S PRAYER

The image shows the Lord's Prayer written in plainsong neumes. The text is: "Our Father, who art in heaven; hallowed be Thy Name; Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, And forgive us our trespasses as we for- give those who trespass against us, And lead us not into tempta - tion, but de- liv-er us from e -vil. For the kingdom, and the pow- er, and the glo- ry are yours now and for- ev - er." The neumes are represented by small black squares on a four-line staff. The text is aligned with the neumes, with some syllables having multiple neumes above them. The notation is a modern rendering of the traditional plainsong style.

A simpler system used in congregational singing developed over time called **Common Chant**. This system uses four primary musical sections for each line of text. A tutorial from the Orthodox Church in America explains these:

*“The **introduction** or **intonation** of a phrase is a note or several notes that precede the reciting tone. At times the intonation will simply be a held note (half note), either on the same pitch as the reciting tone, or one tone above or below the reciting tone. A phrase may begin immediately on the reciting tone, in which case there is no introduction.*

*“The **reciting tone** is a single pitch on which many syllables of text can be sung. In the unison examples showing chant melody only, the reciting tone is indicated with a filled- in (blackened) whole note. In the harmonized printed examples, groups of words that are sung on the reciting tone begin with a notehead over the first syllable and a notehead over the last syllable. All the syllables between this first and last notehead are sung on the same pitch (chord). Frequently the reciting tone will conclude with a **preparation** for the*

¹⁸ Is this better than Wikipedia?

¹⁹ <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12144a.htm> - accessed 9-15-22

²⁰ <https://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/2006/09/english-our-father.html> - accessed 9-15-22

*cadence. This preparation (indicated as **prep** in the tutorial) can consist of a single note sung on a different pitch or a series of notes sung on different pitches.*

*“The **cadence** forms the conclusion of the phrase. It usually begins with an accented syllable sung on a “held” or half note, introducing a brief melodic pattern. In each cadence, one or more accented notes determine the “curve” of the cadence.”²¹*

These sections are illustrated in the following two examples²²:

The image shows two musical staves in G-clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The first staff is divided into four sections: 'intonation' (two whole notes), 'reciting tone' (two whole notes on 're'), 'prep' (one quarter note on 'ti'), and 'cadence' (one half note on 'do'). The second staff is divided into four sections: 'intonation' (two quarter notes), 'reciting tone' (two whole notes on 're'), 'prep' (one quarter note on 'ti'), and 'cadence' (one half note on 'do').

The image shows a musical staff in G-clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It is divided into four sections: 'intonation' (two quarter notes), 'reciting tone' (two whole notes), 'prep' (one quarter note), and 'cadence' (one half note). Below the staff is the text: "Come, let us also go to meet Christ with di-vine songs!".

Chants can be a varying length. Some are a few lines long and others can have dozens of lines. Sometimes lines or sections will have different melodies they are chanted to.

The next example of chant we will see is a more recent attempt at displaying it with modern music notation. It is found in *The Baptist Hymn and Tune Book for Public Worship*, published in 1873 in Philadelphia.²³ This arrangement has harmony, which would not have been present at least the first millennia of the church. Note that there are three different melodies to be used in different sections of the song. Verses 1-9 use the first line, verses 3-4 the second, verses 5-8 the third, then verses 9-10 the first followed by the final “amen”.

²¹ <http://media.oca.org/chanting-tutorial/Tutorial-Intro-Obikhod-Tone1-Explanation.pdf> - accessed 9-15-22

²² <http://media.oca.org/chanting-tutorial/Tutorial-Intro-Obikhod-Tone1-Explanation.pdf> - accessed 9-15-22

²³ <https://hymnary.org/hymn/BHTB1873/A1> - accessed 9-15-22

CHANT No. 1.—Gloria in Excelsis.

Verses 1, 2, -9, 10.

Verses 3, 4.

Verses 5, 6, 7, 8.

CODA.
A - men.

1. GLORY be to | God on | high, || and on earth | peace, good- | will toward | men.
2. { We praise thee, we bless thee, we | worship | thee, || we glorify thee, we give thanks to | thee for | thy great | glory.
3. O Lord God, | heavenly | King, || God the | Father | Al- | mighty;
4. { O Lord, the only begotten Son | Jesus | Christ; || O Lord God, Lamb of God, | Son— | of the | Father:
5. That takest away the | sins .. of the | world, || have mercy up- | on— | us.
6. Thou that takest away the | sins .. of the | world, || have mercy up- | on— | us.
7. Thou that takest away the | sins .. of the | world, || re- | ceive our | prayer.
8. Thou that sittest at the right hand of | God the | Father, || have mercy up- | on— | us.
9. For thou | only .. art | holy; || thou | only | art the | Lord.
10. { Thou only, O Christ, with the | Holy | Ghost, || art most high in the | glory .. of | God and | Father. || A- | men.

Growing East-West Rift

During this time there was a growing division in the Roman Empire that would eventually lead to it splitting into Eastern and Western halves. Some of those causes also led to a split in Christianity along the same lines – East and West. The music of these two reflected that division. The Eastern or Byzantine division used more hymns than psalms, usually written in Greek in classical styles. The Western division used more psalms than hymns originally and wrote in Latin.

IV. Music in the Churches of the Middle Ages

Musical Developments

In the centuries between Constantine and the Reformation, church music developed slowly. The foundation of chanting psalms, canticles, and hymns was aggrandized but not enlarged to include many new forms.

Music in the Catholic traditions began to become more grandiose. Liturgy and ceremony governed church services. Choirs and instruments became commonplace. The first church organs appeared somewhere between 1000 and 1300.²⁴ Other instruments like the trumpet began to see some adoption as well.

In Catholic and other churches, the worshipper was given a more passive role in the service. The music became too complex for untrained and illiterate singers. Instead of finding ways to incorporate all into the service, choirs began to do all the singing during the service. Services became performances with little or no participation from those in the pews. This alienation of worshippers was a primary catalyst for the Reformation.

The largest advancement musically was made in polyphony: adding harmony to sacred music. This was done at first by adding harmonic voices to the songs that had once been unison or by adding countermelodies that were sung alongside the chant.

Around the 13th century **carols** began to appear. These were festive folk songs that took on religious lyrics. Today they are known only in association with Christmas but were much more widely used in the past by the masses. Perhaps this was in part a reaction to the Catholic church not giving the people voice to sing in its services. The Catholics and other Christian groups widely frowned on the use of carols in church services until some in the Reformation started to adopt them.

There were then, practically speaking, three divisions of music in the Western world: **sacred**, **folk**, and **secular**. Sacred music was the music of the churches taught down to the people. Folk music was the music that sprang naturally from the masses and could take many forms.

Secular music was higher, more developed group of music that was generally made to be art. It was too advanced to be folk music and not religious enough to be sacred. The Renaissance (c. 1400-1600) with its advances in art and science rapidly pushed the art of music to new levels.

State of Sacred Music Before the Reformation

Westermeyer sums up the music leading into the Reformation by writing:

“By the sixteenth century of our era, however, the compositions for choirs took the place of the people’s participation. Church music became the music of choirs. The people could listen to this treasury and probably

²⁴ *Te Deum*, p. 120

*in many cases were deeply appreciative of it, but no comparable concern was exerted for their active musical participation. They listened and watches as choirs sang for them.*²⁵

He also observes:

*“An elite group had the secret of music’s composition and performance. The complex choral polyphony that developed could be, and certainly was, appreciated by those who did not understand it. But it was not meant for listening as much as for singing by the inside group.”*²⁶

Music Still In Use Today

There is little music of this period in active use in Baptist churches today. Denominations with deeper ties to high church traditions through the Catholic church (Anglican, Lutheran, etc.) do still use some songs from the period. But largely it is the Catholic church that continues to use the music of this period.

There are exceptions, however, including:

- “All Creatures of Our God and King” – the text translated from a Latin hymn by Francis of Assisi (1182-1226)
- “Good Christian Me, Rejoice” – the tune and translated text are from 14th carols.
- “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” – text first published in 1710 but believed to be much older.

²⁵ *Te Deum*, p. 115

²⁶ *Te Deum*, p. 118