

Lecture #25 – Instruments

I. Introduction

While the primary instrument for worshipping God is the human voice, we can enhance our music by using instruments.

II. History

As we saw in our historical lessons, the use of instruments has been a hotly debated topic through the centuries. Opinions have and will continue to differ on which, if any, instruments are acceptable for use in church worship.

The use of instruments in worship during the Old Testament era is undisputed. We see clear uses of:¹

- Cymbals – I Chronicles 15:16, 16:5
- Tabrets, Timbrels, Tambourines – Exodus 15:20, I Samuel 10:5
- Harps, Lyres (various forms and designs) – I Kings 10:12, II Chronicles 9:11
- Pipes, Flutes (various forms and designs) – Isaiah 5:12, 30:29

We find references to new instruments being invented by David (I Chronicles 23:5, Amos 6:5). We have numerous references to the use of instruments in worship (e.g., Exodus 15:20, I Chronicles 16:5, Psalm 92:3).

When we shift into the Christian era, we find few references to instruments in the New Testament. Paul alludes to instruments in I Corinthians 13:1 and 14:7, but these mentions do not seem to be connected to worship. Though silent on the use of instruments, the New Testament is clear that singing was essential in the early church (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16, James 5:13).

It is worth noting that instruments do reappear in Revelation (Revelation 5:8, 14:2, 15:2). This has three possible interpretations: the general acceptability of instruments in worship, the acceptability of their use in Heaven, or their accepted use in the future.

¹ Shofars, trumpets, and bells were not used in making music. Anyone that adds them to the list of instruments has not done their research.

III. Three Arguments Against Instruments

The following are three common arguments against using instruments in church services and responses to them.

A. There is no positive command to use instruments in the New Testament.

This is perhaps the most common argument used by the Church of Christ for prohibiting musical instruments. They argue that the New Testament never explicitly commands us to use instruments. They may also claim that the use of instruments passed with the offering of sacrifices.

To be consistent, should we not ban *everything* from our churches that is not explicitly commanded in the New Testament? I find no command to use pews, hymnbooks, electric lights, indoor plumbing, air conditioning, or the English language. For that matter, there is no reference in the New Testament to any church owning a dedicated building for meeting and ministry.

This argument is built on one of the weakest techniques of debate: the argument from silence. There is simply not a sufficient basis for arguing for or against instruments in the New Testament alone. While one could argue, “I cannot do that because the Bible never tells me to”, another may respond, “I can do that because the Bible never tells me not to.”

The fact is that the bulk of the Bible speaks in favor of using instruments in worship. Instruments were used in public worship in the Tabernacle/Temple and in private worship. During the Babylonian Captivity there is mention of musical instruments (Psalm 137) when no Temple existed to worship at. The prophets, poets, and historians of the Old Testament all present it as an accepted part of worship. Revelation speaks of instruments in Heaven.

The only portion that is not explicit on the subject is from Acts to Jude, which is where we get most of the doctrine of the church. Yet, even there, the singing of Psalms is clearly promoted (Ephesians 5:19, James 5:13). The Psalms, though written in the Old Testament Era, were clearly never meant to be “pass away” like the Ceremonial Law. As the Psalms guide us to true worship, from the heart and not just with the hands, they never disparage the use of musical instruments. In fact, it can be reasonably argued that the promotion of the Psalms in the early churches also shows an acceptance of their content, including the use of instruments.

B. Music is essentially carnal and is a distraction from spiritual worship.

This argument is based on a somewhat Gnostic view that the spiritual is pure, and the physical is corrupt. Music then is connected to the carnal body, and anything the carnal body enjoys must not be spiritual.

If music is then so carnal and corrupt, we can simply counter by asking: “Why then was it ever approved by God?” Are the Psalms carnal? Were David, Asaph, Korah, etc. carnal? Do we suggest that God was wrong in the multitude of commands to sing or play instruments?

Now, can music be a distraction? Yes! But just because something can be used in an evil way does not mean it is evil.

C. The early churches did not use musical instruments.

This is an argument from history and is one of the easiest to defend. As we saw in our previous lessons, the debate on music in the churches has practically always been present. From historical records and sources such as the writings of early church leaders, there is often a clear prohibition of instruments in churches. But to say such a prohibition is universal is not accurate because there is evidence that shows instruments being used. For example, Ephrem the Syrian (306-373) is known to have composed hymns on and performed them with a lyre.² Paul Westermeyer writes:

“One has to assume... that in the liturgy the church adopted the practice of the synagogue without instruments, which is to say the question of their use never arose there, and that whatever minor exceptions may have existed to the ban on instruments took place outside the liturgy.”³

The primary problem with this argument is that it only acknowledges one line – the Catholic one – of church history. For example, the aforementioned Ephrem the Syrian is better associated with Eastern Orthodoxy. We also know that Coptic churches would use dances and handclapping in worship.⁴ There is a clear bias among Catholic and Protestant historians to focus only on their own ecclesiastical family tree.

The secondary problem is that we are likely placing far more emphasis on the subject than the early churches did. It is assumed that the stance against instruments was a primary focus in the churches, when likely it would not have been. This is difficult to determine looking back through multiple centuries, but the fact that music is so rarely mentioned in the writings of the early church fathers seems to show that they were not as preoccupied with it as we are today.

There are many reasons why the early churches did not use instruments:

- Instruments were impractical to small congregations (often in hiding with no regular meeting place)
- They emphasized the words sung over the music it was sung to.
- They associated most music with pagan rituals or Jewish worship, both of which they strove to separate from to strengthen their identity.
- The science of music was not widespread or taught (most early Christians may have even been illiterate).

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ephrem_the_Syrian - accessed 5-17-23. See also *Te Deum*, p. 75.

³ *Te Deum*, p. 75.

⁴ *Te Deum*, p. 75.

IV. Principles for Using Instruments in Worship

They must enhance, instruct, and support vocal music and the message of the words sung. The emphasis must be on what is sung (Ephesians 5:19).

They must be used in a way to bring glory to God and not the musician (I Corinthians 10:31).

They must not be used to artificially stimulate the human spirit. God must be the catalyst for worship, not the ambience.

They must not bring worldly associations with their use (James 4:4).

V. Practical Notes

Pianos

There are three primary types of pianos: **grand**, **upright**, and **electric**. Grand pianos have the richest sound but are the most expensive and take up more space. Upright pianos are more affordable and take up less space. Electric pianos recreate the sound of a piano using either synthesizers or audio samples.

Pianos (except electric) need tuning. Temperature, humidity, general use, or moving the piano can cause the strings to loosen or tighten and affect the tone. It is generally recommended that a piano be tuned at least twice a year.⁵ There are also parts like hammers that may need replacing occasionally.

Organs

Organs are actually better to sing to than pianos because they hold out the tones with no volume loss.

There are three primary types of organs: **pipe**, **pump**, and **electronic**. Pipe organs are very large and create sound by directing air through pipes. Pump organs are smaller and create sound by forcing air past reeds. These were popular in the 1800's. Electronic organs are most common today. The Hammond organ uses a tonewheel to produce electronically produce sound, often through large external speakers.⁶ Newer electronic organs can produce sound through synthesizers or audio samples.

Organs (newer electronic) can be tuned, though it is not as common as a piano. There is some maintenance that can be performed on them also.

⁵ Not that most churches do.

⁶ The church I grew up in had an older Hammond organ that still used vacuum tubes in the speaker (tone cabinet).

Guitars

Acoustic guitars are great for providing rhythm.

Electric guitars should be avoided. Their sound is too overpowering and too closely associated with many types of worldly music.

Bass guitars have become more popular in recent years, but I would caution against them. Many types of worldly music overemphasize the bass because your body reacts strongly to it. Acoustic basses are better than electric ones, but they are almost always too loud in the sound mix.

Orchestra

If you have enough skilled musicians (or people learning that you want to give them experience) you can put together a small orchestra.

Be aware that you will need specialized scores for *transposing instruments*. For example, trumpets are often pitched at Bb. Playing a C on such a trumpet is actually a Bb on a *non-transposing instrument* like a piano. So then, to play in unison on a *concert pitch* requires the transposing instrument to be played in a different key than a non-transposing instrument so that the two are actually playing in the same key. Confusing? Yes.

Many recent hymnals have special orchestration books available for such instruments.

Percussion

Most popular music overemphasizes rhythm. A typical four-piece rock band has a lead electric guitar (melody/harmony), a rhythm electric guitar (harmony/rhythm), an electric bass guitar (harmony/rhythm), and a drum kit (rhythm). Drums in such an ensemble are redundant because of the other instruments already emphasizing rhythm. Drums also provide no melody or harmony since they do not create musical tones. While they have become a staple of popular music over the last century, I would argue that they are unnecessary in most applications and that a rhythm guitar is far superior since it provides both rhythm and harmony.

Most churches have no musical need for drums or percussion for several reasons. First, because drums are too overpowering in small settings.⁷ Second, because there is no need to emphasize rhythm without a very large orchestra. Third, because they provide little musical value since they only provide rhythm. Fourth, because most churches will not have a talented enough drummer to be of any value. Fifth, because drumming patterns completely alter the rhythm and feel of music. Sixth, because the only desire to have drums is to emulate a pop or rock sound.

⁷ This is why they put them in glass cages on stage – they are just too loud.