

AN ASCETIC AESTHETIC: ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM
ON THE DISCERNMENT OF BEAUTY IN MUSIC

Kristen Leigh Southworth

In the field of classical theological aesthetics, considerations of Beauty as a transcendental quality of existence abound. Meanwhile, the question of how Beauty with a capital “B” might relate to any discernment of beauty in the actual artistic expressions and forms we encounter in our world remains the subject of much neglect. Yet, if we ever hope to return Beauty to its proper place in our transcendent theological discourse, we will ultimately have to face the question of its relationship to our present experience of the beautiful in the daily world. This will require the development of a means for identifying and interpreting the beautiful as it manifests in actual artistic, as well as cosmic, creation.

This paper seeks to contribute to such a cause by outlining and identifying St. John Chrysostom’s discernment of the beautiful in the musical expressions of his own day. Chrysostom is an ideal candidate among the early church fathers for such an analysis precisely because he seems, at least at face value, to be particularly hostile to an aesthetic perspective. Nowhere does he address the subject of Beauty in the transcendental sense, and as a committed ascetic, he is not surprisingly lacking in an affinity for, or interest in, worldly notions of aesthetic beauty.

Furthermore, Chrysostom has often been cited as having one of the most stringent polemics against what is variously labeled “pagan” or “secular” music. In one sermon, he chastises his fourth-century congregation for their familiarity with this kind of music as compared to their lack of familiarity with psalms and Scripture:

Who of you that stand here, if he were required, could repeat one Psalm, or any other portion of the divine Scriptures? There is not one...[but] should any one be minded to ask of you songs of devils and impure effeminate melodies, he will find many that know these perfectly, and repeat them with much pleasure.¹

¹ Stapert, C. R. *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing. Grand Rapids. 2007. 127-128.

Understanding these kinds of warnings in such a way that they might contribute to a discernment of the beautiful in the diverse musical expressions of our own time requires a close examination of Chrysostom's musical context. Many of the available historical accounts presume distinct, oversimplified stylistic and functional boundaries between "secular" music, often characterized as pagan and non-liturgical, and "sacred" music, usually regarded as Christian and liturgical. But these categories of "sacred" and "secular," particularly as they have come to be applied to contemporary music, fail to offer a truly adequate means for identifying the spiritual and sometimes sacramental qualities of music as it manifests in a variety of contexts. This brief look at some of Chrysostom's statements regarding music hopes to provide a more nuanced approach to our understanding of how and where we might identify musical beauty from an orthodox Christian perspective.

In spite of Chrysostom's obvious interest in the liturgy, he is clear in his assertion that the musical practices of Christians were intended not simply for liturgical worship, but to envelop and penetrate the whole of a person's everyday life. Chrysostom therefore urges his hearers not only to sing hymns of praise at their meals, but also to teach their children and wives to sing them at the looms and during their other work.² Let us, then, begin the task of identifying the music that Chrysostom regards as worthy of enveloping the lives of Christians with a consideration of music outside of the liturgy. Chrysostom appears to have a particular interest in the symposium; that is, at the meals and post-supper drinking parties rooted in the common ritual practices of voluntary religious and other associations in the early centuries of Christianity:³

It is mostly at meals that the devil lurks. There he has as allies drunkenness and gluttony, laughter and disorder, and dissipation of soul. Therefore it is particularly necessary at meals and after meals to build a stronghold against him through the security which comes from the psalms, and to sing sacred hymns in praise of the Lord, by standing up with one's wife and children after the *symposia*... Just as

² Wellesz, E. *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*. Clarendon Press. Oxford. 1961. 95.

³ Alikin, V. A. *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering: Origin, Development and Content of the Christian Gathering in the First to Third Centuries*. Brill. The Netherlands. 2010. 211.

these invite mimes, dancers, and indecent women to their meals and call up demons and the devil, and fill their houses with innumerable brawls, so those invite Christ into their houses, and call upon David with the zither. . . . These people make their house a theatre; you shall make your dwelling a church. For nobody would fail to call a gathering a church, where there are psalms, and prayers and dances of the prophets, and God-loving thoughts in the singers.⁴

Given the common assumption of a taboo on dancing and a ban on instruments in the early church, it is perhaps surprising that Chrysostom seems to endorse dancing in the tradition of the prophets, and recognize a Christian use of the zither to call upon David. While we might be tempted to interpret this passage in a metaphorical sense, Chrysostom's *In Psalmum* contains an open concession of the fact that God permits the use of instruments among His people because He wants "to temper them in love and harmony" by "blending the sweetness of melody in with the effort of paying attention."⁵ Though he had a clear preference for the use of the vocal instrument alone, even Chrysostom understood that participation in instrumental music and dancing, in addition to singing psalms and hymns, were appropriately reverent expressions of praise within the Christian community, as long as they inspired "God-loving thoughts" and stood in contrast to other forms of musical and artistic expressions in the cultural milieu.

In what way did the music of the early Christians seek to differentiate itself from the kinds of music that Chrysostom criticizes? Traditional scholarship has typically regarded the music of the early church as generally not rhythmic, in contrast to the secular music of the time.⁶ However, Chrysostom's following statement calls this assumption into question:

Wishing to make the task more agreeable and to relieve the sense of laboriousness, [God] mixed melody with prophecy, so that enticed by the rhythm and melody, all might raise sacred hymns to him with great eagerness. For nothing so arouses the soul, gives it wing, sets it free from

⁴ Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music*, 95.

⁵ McKinnon, J. *Music in Early Christian Literature*, Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. 1987. 83.

⁶ Stanley, S., ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. MacMillan. London. 1980. 365.

the earth, releases it from the prison of the body,
teaches it to love wisdom, and to condemn all the
things of this life, as concordant melody and
sacred song composed in rhythm.⁷

Moreover, much of early Christian music is cited as being highly improvisational, and from its improvisational character, scholars deduce that melodic choices would have been influenced by the Hellenized-Syrian folk music of the taverns and markets.⁸ Furthermore, because hymnic worship was the bedrock of ancient Greek religion and hymns did not belong to any particular section of society – Christian or otherwise – throughout Christian antiquity the influence of pagan and secular songs were adapted by church hymnographers.⁹

Even for all his dire warnings against the demonic nature and dangers of certain kinds of “pagan” music, Chrysostom praises the lullabies and work songs of everyday people:

Not only travelers, but also peasants often sing as they tread the grapes in the wine press, gather the vintage, tend the vine, and perform their other tasks. Sailors do likewise, pulling at the oars. Women, too, weaving and parting the tangled threads with the shuttle, often sing a certain melody, sometimes individually and to themselves, sometimes in concert. This they do, the women, travelers, peasants, and sailors, striving to lighten with a chant the labor endured for working, for the mind suffers hardships and difficulties more easily when it hears songs and chants.¹⁰

Here, Chrysostom is not specifically referencing the work songs and lullabies of Christian peasants, but is showing a much broader respect for the music of common working people. In it he seems to admire those musical qualities that assist the mind in suffering hardships and difficulties more easily. In light of this, perhaps the aesthetic distinctions between “secular” and “sacred” music in the early centuries of Christianity are not as

⁷ McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 80.

⁸ Stanley, S., ed. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. 365.

⁹ McGuckin, J. A. ‘Poetry and Hymnography (2): The Greek World.’ Harvey & Hunter, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*. Oxford University Press. Oxford. 2008. 644-645.

¹⁰ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 127.

neatly delineated as many traditional scholars have tended to assume.

Likewise, perhaps the labels “pagan” or “secular” are not the most accurate means of characterizing the music that Chrysostom was really cautioning against. It is clear that he addresses the question of music as an ethical problem,¹¹ yet as it turns out, this evaluative assessment is one that he shared with many of his non-Christian contemporaries. Already in the fifth century BCE, Plato had developed a theory that applied gender constructions and ethical associations to certain modes of music. Those that were considered “effeminate” were seen as morally degenerating due to their association with various forms of stage life in which pimping and prostitution were a common part of the ‘entertainment experience.’¹² Clement of Alexandria’s arguments in the second century against instrumental complexity, polyphony, and chromatic modes have been shown to be a reapplication (and even somewhat of an ignorant regurgitation) of Plato’s theory.¹³ This is what Chrysostom is reiterating as well in his own characterization of “demonic” music when he warns his congregations that “effeminate songs...weaken the tension of our soul.”¹⁴

An overview of the cultural-musical landscape of the late Roman Empire sheds even further light on the nature of the criticisms Chrysostom makes with regard to certain types of music. Evidence reveals that during this time a highly sensual quality had come to pervade both vocal and instrumental music in private feasts and public shows alike. When Chrysostom claims that “where the *aulos* [panflute] is, there Christ is not,”¹⁵ we have no reason to assume that this is because he identified something inherently wrong with the instrument itself. Rather, this is a reference to the fact that the *aulos* was usually performed by prostitutes or otherwise sexually provocative and available girls while dancing in a flagrantly erotic manner.¹⁶

¹¹ Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music*, 96.

¹² Cosgrove, C. H. ‘Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music.’ *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, 3, 2006, 270-271.

¹³ Cosgrove, “Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music,” 270-282.

¹⁴ Chrysostom, J. *On Wealth and Poverty*. Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press. New York. 1981. 59.

¹⁵ Bowersock, G.W., Brown, P., & Grabar, O., eds. ‘Music.’ *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*. Belknap Press. Massachusetts. 1999. 598.

¹⁶ Cosgrove, “Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music,” 263.

The early Christians were certainly not the only ones to abhor these kinds of musical practices and developments. As early as Cicero in the first century BCE there were complaints of decline, and Quintilian and Seneca saw “in the newfangled music signs of moral as well as artistic degeneration” and looked back to a time when music was “more serious and more sacred.”¹⁷ Thus we find that Chrysostom’s grievances correspond with the critiques regarding popular music that had already been circulating among non-Christians in the Mediterranean world for quite some time.

Moreover, the late Roman Empire saw a great proliferation of music in the theaters and arenas where Christians had been mocked and persecuted. Minstrels entertained at baths and in the streets, highly trained slaves made music in the houses of the wealthy, and acclaimed virtuosi (including the emperor Nero) competed in musical contests that valued technique over artistic quality, creating wealthy, insolent, and arrogant stars in a spectacle that sounds strikingly similar to today’s TV show *American Idol*.¹⁸

It was in contrast to this kind of prevailing musical culture that the songs created and sung by the Christians of the early church attempted to find expression for the ideal of a universal brotherhood in a universally practicable form.¹⁹ As such, the ancient Christian hymn was characterized and defended as a kind of music that all people could participate in without competition or judgment. Chrysostom therefore says with regard to Christian singing that:

No charge will be made against anybody for the way he sings, whether he be old or young, hoarse, or even lacking rhythm. What is required here is an uplifted soul, a watchful mind, a contrite heart, a powerful reasoning, a purified conscience. If you enter the holy choir of God possessing these, you will be able to stand next to David. There is no need of zithers, nor of taut strings, nor of a plectrum, nor skill, nor any instruments.”²⁰

¹⁷ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 137.

¹⁸ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 137-139.

¹⁹ Runes, D., & Schrickel, H., eds. ‘Musical History, Periods In.’ *Encyclopedia of the Arts*. Philosophical Library. New York. 1946. 655.

²⁰ Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music*, 95-96.

Again, there is no reason to interpret Chrysostom's statement regarding the lack of *need* for instruments as signifying support for an all-out ban. The thrust of his argument is against the need for technical skill, a reference to the prestige so often associated with being a skillful instrumentalist. He certainly never condemns anyone for actually having talent either in singing or playing an instrument. But Chrysostom argues that such talent should not be *required* in order for Christians to participate fully in the making of music. Instead, he supports a kind of musical expression that, regardless of style, setting, or technical complexity, uplifts the spirit and builds up the community through the values of love, gratitude, and radical equality. In so doing, he encourages and supports the musical self-expression of all Christians equally and communally.

St. Ambrose of Milan, a contemporary of St. John Chrysostom, both echoes and beautifully elaborates on his understanding of the underlying values, function, and stylistic character of Christian music in the fourth century:

A psalm is the blessing of the people, the praise of God...the joy of liberty, the noise of good cheer, and the echo of gladness. It softens anger, it gives release from anxiety, it alleviates sorrow; it is protection at night, instruction by day, a shield in time of fear, a feast of holiness, the image of tranquility, a pledge of peace and harmony, which produces one song from various and sundry voices in the manner of a cithara...It is a kind of play, productive of more learning than that which is dispensed with stern discipline...A psalm is sung at home and repeated outdoors; it is learned without effort and retained with delight. A psalm joins those with differences, unites those at odds and reconciles those who have been offended, for who will not concede to him with whom one sings to God in one voice? It is after all a great bond of unity for the full number of people to join in one chorus.²¹

Through this brief investigation we can already begin to identify a particular kind of aesthetic that St. John Chrysostom discerns in the music he reveres and encourages among his fellow Christians. But it is an aesthetic that in many ways challenges our typical notions of how we seek to identify beauty in artistic forms. While he criticizes certain musical

²¹ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 103-104.

characteristics, modes, instruments, and technical abilities associated with sexual promiscuity, wealth, and prestige in the music culture of his day, in the final contextual analysis, these surface-level aesthetic qualities do not ultimately concern him. The deeper aesthetic that he discerns and reveres in musical expression is the presence of humble authenticity. This is what makes music beautiful for Chrysostom, regardless of its context. His deepest respect and recognition of the spiritual value in music are in those songs that are sung by and for the common people, both within and outside of Christian ritual contexts, which manifest attentiveness, humility, and sincerity of heart before God.

This kind of aesthetic discernment should give us pause for thought. Applying it to our own context might cause us to radically reconsider some of our deepest-held notions about what constitutes a Christian manifestation of beauty in the musical forms and expressions we encounter both inside and outside of liturgical settings. It might force us, for example, to take a second look at the value of folk music forms, which are rooted in an accessible style, are easily remembered, and are readily participated in by the majority of people. Musical styles that are marked by this kind of simplicity may even offer a higher spiritual value than some of the more prestigious musical pursuits of the classical repertoire that still commonly abound in church music today. It seems that St. John Chrysostom is asking us to reconsider where we identify songs that demonstrate an aesthetic capacity to effectively lead people to consider and experience more deeply the love of God, to perform their work and other tasks with greater joy, to suffer hardships and difficulties more easily, and perhaps most importantly, to bring people together in a spirit of unity, radical equality, and love.

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