

Early Church Music and the “Songs of Devils”

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Concerns over the suitability of certain kinds of music for liturgical use and everyday appreciation among Christians have existed since the Patristic era, including debates about instrumentation, performance style, participation, and lyrical content. The writings of a few influential Christian authorities—particularly those of Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, and Augustine of Hippo—are usually invoked as normative representations of the musical practices of the early church. Many of these writings contain strong polemics against certain modes, instrumentation, and contexts for music-making. Furthermore, these statements are commonly interpreted in a modern context as providing a theological precedent for the rejection of “secular” music. One idiom that has persisted throughout the centuries is that of the “devil’s music” — a concept that can be traced back to at least the fourth century, and has been applied to a variety of musical styles and instrumentation ever since. A more careful examination of these statements in their historical context, however, suggests a much greater diversity in musical thought and practice than has been previously acknowledged.

First of all, any scholarly consideration of music in the early church must take into account the fact that most of the statements about music made by the early church fathers are anecdotal asides and/or personal reflections contained within biblical commentaries, letters, and homilies primarily focused on other topics.¹ In other words,

¹ Stanley Sadie, ed. “Christian Church, Music of the Early,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 4, (Macmillan Publishers: London, 1980), 364.

unlike the anxiety around images—which was so pervasive that it necessitated the convening of a second ecumenical council at Nicea—music remained a relatively cursory topic of debate. No official decrees relating to music existed until the fifth century, when the prohibition against women singing in the liturgy was published in the *Didascalia of the Three Hundred Eighteen Fathers* (and even then, it was by no means a universal injunction). Thus, it would be ill-advised to make *any* broad or normative generalizations about the musical practices of the early church based solely on the limited anecdotal opinions of the authors in the extant literature.

Nevertheless, some interesting insights can be gleaned by examining these statements within the broader context of music practices and philosophies within the ancient Mediterranean world. This paper therefore seeks to situate some of the most well-known historical statements about music from the early church fathers within the larger scope of ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish musical practices, in order to reveal the complexity of musical thought and practice in the early church, as well as its relationship to secular music and the musical practices of other religious communities. In particular, this analysis will challenge the notion that Christians have always maintained clear boundaries between what we have come to think of “sacred” and “secular” music (as well as the notion that “the devil’s music” has always been identified with the latter).

At a cursory glance, the writings of the early church fathers express what appears to be a relatively unified polemic against “pagan” music, which is characterized as morally corrupt, and is frequently associated with the devil. In the second century, Clement of Alexandria criticized those who, after “hymning immortality” at Christian gatherings in the morning, entertained themselves “with the plucking of strings, the erotic

twittering of the *aulos*, dancing, wine, and everything filled with trash.”² This is one of the first indications in ancient Christian literature of a conflict over what kind of music is suited to the life of a Christian.³ Later, John Chrysostom is similarly harsh in criticizing his fourth-century congregation of Hellenic Christians for their lack of familiarity with the psalms when compared to their love of what he called the “songs of devils”:

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.⁴

What were these “songs of devils,” to which everyone was so drawn? In order to properly contextualize such statements, and to unpack our assumptions about their social location, it is important to recognize that most of these statements were being made in reference to musical contexts that pre-date what most modern Christians would think of as “liturgical.” Apart from the singular, oft-quoted observation made by Pliny the Younger that Christian devotees “sang a hymn to Christ as if to a god” in the context of their early morning gatherings around the year 112 CE,⁵ descriptions of music in the first four centuries of the church generally tend to be concerned with music at the Christian *symposium*.

The *symposium* was a Hellenistic tradition of gathering in the evening after a communal meal for conversation, conviviality, and camaraderie. These gatherings often

² Charles H. Cosgrove, “Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, 3 (2006), 258.

³ Cosgrove, “Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music,” 261.

⁴ Calvin R. Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 2007), 127-128.

⁵ John McGuckin, “Poetry and Hymnography (2): The Greek World,” *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, Harvey & Hunter, eds., (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2008), 644.

lasted into the early morning hours, and customarily included drinking, singing, dancing, and religious rituals that recognized and honored a chosen deity.⁶ Symposiums served not only as the context for the development of early Christian liturgy, but they were the common practice of religious societies and voluntary associations across the Greco-Roman world (including Hellenic Jews and various pagan cults). This broader social context is critical for interpreting the statements made by the early church fathers about the music that occurred at the meals, particularly in terms of how music functioned in relation to early Christian formation and identity. As John Chrysostom writes,

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 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...⁷

Here we can observe a number of things that disrupt our modern sensibilities about what constitutes “sacred” and “secular” music. First, the use of hymns and psalms was not intended merely to accompany ceremonial rites, but to stand in contrast to other forms of musical expression, as a marker of Christian identity and as way of building up Christian community.⁸ In other words, music was understood to play a critical role in

⁶ Valeriy A. Alikin, *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), 19.

⁷ Egon Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*, (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1961), 95.

⁸ Valeriy A. Alikin, *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), 222.

Christian *formation*, not merely in the context of religious ritual. This was especially the case during the early Christian symposiums, where the lines between liturgical and secular activity were particularly blurred.

Indeed, the blurring of lines between sacred and secular was itself a marker of early Christian identity. In his letter to the church community in Thessalonica, Paul states that the goal of a Christian is to “pray without ceasing.”⁹ Clement of Alexandria likewise stressed that Christian worship was not to be restricted to specific times and places, but that the enlightened worshiper honored God in *every* time and place, “whether he happens to be alone or is with those who share his belief.”¹⁰ He writes:

Holding festival, then, in our whole life, persuaded that God is altogether on every side present, we cultivate our fields, praising; we sail the sea, hymning.¹¹

Chrysostom likewise urged his fourth-century listeners not to sing hymns of praise only at the meals, but to teach their children and wives to sing at the looms, and during their other work.¹²

Alikin and others, however, have also argued convincingly that one of the primary functions of singing at the early Christian gathering was to help prevent excessive consumption of alcohol.¹³ Plutarch, Athenaeus, and Tertullian all make comments indicating that singing served to check drunkenness in the early church. In fact, according to Tertullian, some participants in the Christian symposium were invited to sing precisely

⁹ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

¹⁰ Cosgrove, “Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music,” 268.

¹¹ Calvin R. Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 2007), 57.

¹² Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music*, 95.

¹³ Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 223-224.

“in order to see whether they have not drunk too much.”¹⁴ The author of Ephesians likewise urges singing to be utilized in this manner: “Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves.”¹⁵

Of course, it is impossible to know what the music of the early church sounded like.¹⁶ But there is much we can glean from the descriptions of music in late antiquity. We know that early Christian music, for example, would have been primarily vocal, consisting of a single melodic line with no differentiated voice parts or chordal harmonic supports.¹⁷ We also know from early Christian writings that the music was learned and transmitted orally, and that there was a strong emphasis on improvisation and charismatic utterance.¹⁸ Tertullian described the practice of his own community in this way: “anyone who can, either from holy Scripture or from his own heart, is called into the middle to sing to God.”¹⁹ Bowersock, Brown, and Grabar therefore suggest that Christian music was rooted “in spontaneous, improvised deliveries that were generated fresh on each occasion.”²⁰ From this, Sadie Stanley deduces that melodic choices would have been influenced by the local Hellenized-Syrian folk musics of the taverns and markets.²¹

¹⁴ Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 224.

¹⁵ Ephesians 5:18-19.

¹⁶ In spite of the discovery of one Greek hymn notated on a late third century papyrus, it is unlikely that this isolated attempt to record a melody for private use was representative of a common Christian musical style.

¹⁷ Bowersock, Brown, & Grabar, *Late Antiquity*, 599.

¹⁸ Stanley, “Christian Church, Music of the Early,” 367-368.

¹⁹ Stanley, “Christian Church, Music of the Early,” 364.

²⁰ Bowersock, Brown, & Grabar, *Late Antiquity*, 599.

²¹ Stanley, “Christian Church, Music of the Early,” 365.

Runes & Schrickel likewise argue that hymn melodies were most likely derived from popular song.²²

Moreover, as Byzantine scholar and Orthodox priest John A. McGuckin points out, hymnic worship was already the bedrock of ancient Greek religion. As such, the singing of hymns did not belong to any particular segment of society—Christian or pagan—sacred or secular. “Throughout Christian antiquity,” McGuckin writes, “the influence of the popular (or secular) song, with its well-rehearsed themes of love, or valor, were certainly adapted by church hymnographers.”²³ The fourth-century church father Ambrose of Milan is known to have integrated popular music into his writing, and according to Donald Elsworth, “the Ambrosian syllabic settings were similar to the street dancers of the day.”²⁴ Clement explicitly recommended that Christians sing hymns in the manner of the traditional Greek *paeon* or hymn, as these dignified songs of praise and thanksgiving to a god or gods were reported by Cleonides to have “a calming effect” suitable to peaceful expressions of the soul.²⁵

Furthermore, even for all his dire warnings against the demonic nature and dangers of “pagan” music, John Chrysostom nevertheless praises the lullabies and work songs of everyday people, observing that:

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

²² Dagobert Runes & Harry Schrickel, eds. “Musical History, Periods In,” *Encyclopedia of the Arts*, (Philosophical Library: New York, 1946), 655.

²³ McGuckin, *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, 644-645.

²⁴ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 92.

²⁵ Cosgrove, “Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music,” 263.

with a chant the labor endured for working, for the mind suffers hardships and difficulties more easily when it hears songs and chants.²⁶

Thus, even in the context of the early church, associations between the devil and “secular” music were not axiomatic.

In fact, recognizing the influence that the hymnody of pagan cults in Greece, Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt had on early Christian music may help to explain the cautious attitudes that the early church fathers had inherited about certain instruments and modes. Many secondary historical sources and traditional scholars of musicology maintain that instruments were forbidden in the early churches, along with dancing and hand clapping. Clement’s argument against the use of instruments in Christian gatherings seems particularly strong in this regard, and is the one most often cited by scholars as evidence of a ban on instrumentation. Yet Clement himself, in the midst of his own argument, admits that the cithara and lyre “not a disgrace.”²⁷ He later describes an idealized Christian worship gathering as consisting of men and women singing together while the maidens play the lyre.²⁸

Meanwhile, the African Christian communities of Egypt and Ethiopia, along with other communities on the fringes of the Mediterranean, embodied a much more traditional version of Christianity that incorporated rhythmic movements, hand-clapping, and instruments in worship. Theodoret of Cyrhus recorded that adherents of Bishop Melitius of Lycopolis in Upper Egypt performed their hymns with hand-clapping and other physical movements, and also shook bells attached to a piece of wood.²⁹ When

²⁶ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 127.

²⁷ Cosgrove, “Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music,” 261.

²⁸ Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 226.

²⁹ Stanley, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 369.

Jesuit priest missionaries arrived in Ethiopia in 1627, they observed that the church's liturgy made extensive use of hand drums and sticks with which they struck the ground using full-body motions, foot stomping, hand clapping, leaping, and dancing.³⁰ Through the rigorous training of *dabtaras*, this tradition was handed down through the oral tradition across the generations, and while Ethiopians claim that this style of music dates back to the sixth century, many musicologists believe it is much older, with some scholars suggesting a direct link with the temple music of Jerusalem.³¹

In the past, Christian liturgical scholars have sought to establish a connection between the music of the early churches and the musical practices of the Jewish synagogue, suggesting that the supposed "ban on instruments" in the early Christian churches must have been a holdover from Jewish attitudes.³² Other scholars have speculated that Christians must have rejected the use of instruments in worship as, an attempt to distinguish their gatherings from Jewish Temple worship.

None of these theories, however, stand on solid historical evidence. While singing and instrumental music were indeed a part of Jewish Temple worship, there is no evidence to suggest that music or singing were ever a part of any synagogue gatherings during the first two centuries. The primary sources reveal that the primary purpose of synagogue gatherings was for prayer, the reading of Torah, and religious instruction. No

³⁰ Andrew Wilson-Dickson, "The Ethiopian Church," in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. 4: Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*, Robert Webber, ed., (Star Song Publishing Group: Nashville, 1994), 209-210.

³¹ Andrew Wilson-Dickson, "The Ethiopian Church," 210-211.

³² Mark Daniel Kirby, "Toward a Definition of Liturgical Chant," *Sacred Music* 136 2 (2009): 10-11.

rabbinical documents or other sources from the first two centuries describing synagogue gatherings make any mention of singing or music.³³

John Chrysostom's remark that "where the *aulos* is, there Christ is not"³⁴ was particularly influential in establishing a link between the devil and the panflute—an association that has persisted to this day. Taken in its historical context, however, such statements do not represent a wholesale ban on instrumentation in the early church. Rather, they voice a rejection of *specific* cultural practices—such as the popular social convention of inviting sexually provocative (and often sexually available) women to play the *aulos* at Greco-Roman symposium gatherings.³⁵ The *aulos* was also a primary instrument used in the orgiastic rites honoring Dionysus—the god of wine, fertility, and ecstasy. The music associated with these cultic gatherings also made heavy use of drums and cymbals, which is likely what Gregory of Nazianzus is referencing when he exhorts his audience to "take up hymns instead of drums, chanting of psalms instead of indecent writhings of the body and songs."³⁶

This tendency to approach music as an *ethical*—rather than merely an aesthetic—matter, was a common proclivity in ancient Greece that was certainly not unique to the early Christians. These kinds of sentiments reflected a long-standing philosophical tradition that began with Damon and Plato's complaints against what they considered to be the moral decadence of Timotheus' "new" music in the fifth century BCE. Their writings influenced later thinkers on the moral effects of music, including Aristotle,

³³ J. A. Smith, "The Ancient Synagogue, the Early Church and Singing," *Music & Letters* 65, 1, 1984, 1-4.

³⁴ Bowersock, Brown, & Graber, *Late Antiquity*, 598.

³⁵ Cosgrove, Charles H., "Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music," 263.

³⁶ Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music*, 94.

Aristoxenus, Diogenes, and Ptolemy—writings that had a profound influence on early Christian thought leaders who had been trained in the Greek philosophical tradition, especially Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, and Augustine of Hippo. In fact, Charles Cosgrove shows how Clement of Alexandria is, at times, guilty in his writings of “reproducing ideas he finds in his sources without having a clear musical idea of what those sources meant.”³⁷

Therefore, in order to properly contextualize the statements that the early church fathers made about music, we must first of all understand the classical Greek teachings concerning musical modes (*harmoniai*), particularly in relation to *ethos*. For the ancient Greeks, a “mode” was not merely a scale of notes, with an endless variety of potential musical applications as it is thought of today. The *harmoniai* were understood to encompass a whole set of cultural factors and associations that clustered together in one’s musical experience, including expectations concerning lyrical content, instrumentation, style, and the nature and context of performance. According to Stapert, “this whole package is what we need to have in mind when we hear Plato or Aristotle [or Clement and Chrysostom, for that matter] speak about modes.”³⁸

The Greeks also applied gender constructions to nearly everything in their experience, including musical modes. The Dorian mode was strongly preferred by both the classical Greek philosophers and the early church fathers precisely because it was thought to have a positive ethical influence in relation to its “manly” qualities and associations. Conversely, modes that were considered “effeminate” were understood to

³⁷ Cosgrove, “Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music,” 274.

³⁸ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 57.

be morally degenerating.³⁹ These constructions were further influenced by the medical constructions of gender at the time, which understood females to be imperfect or incomplete males because they had failed to reach their full physiological development in the womb.⁴⁰ This is the philosophical tradition from which the Antioch-born Chrysostom draws in his characterization of “effeminate songs” that “weaken the tension of our soul” as being “demonic.”⁴¹ It is interesting to consider the extent to which the Greek philosophical traditions concerning gender and music may have influenced the early church fathers in relation to women singing, a practice that was widespread in the early church. Female singers were increasingly discouraged, and by the late sixth century an all-out ban on women’s liturgical singing was finalized into church doctrine.

The influence of classical Greek philosophy is especially clear in Augustine of Hippo’s reflections on music in his *Confessions*:

The delights of the ear had enticed me and held me in their grip... I confess, I still surrender to some slight pleasure in those sounds to which your words give life, when they are sung by a sweet and skilled voice... Sometimes it seems to me that I grant them more honor than is proper, when I sense that the words stir my soul to greater religious fervor and to a more ardent piety if they are thus sung than if not thus sung... the gratification of the flesh—to which I ought not surrender my mind to be enervated—frequently leads me astray, for the senses are not content to accompany reason by patiently following it, but after being admitted only for the sake of reason, they seek to rush ahead and lead it... when it happens that I am moved more by the song than what is sung, I confess to sinning grievously, and I would prefer not to hear the singer at such times. See now my condition!⁴²

³⁹ Cosgrove, “Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music,” 270-282.

⁴⁰ Galen, “On the usefulness of the parts of the body 14, 6-7,” *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome*, Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B Fant, eds., London: Duckworth, 1982, 215.

⁴¹ St. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth & Poverty*, (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981), 59.

⁴² Strunk, W. Oliver, *Source Readings in Music History*, volume 3, New York: Norton, 1998, 132-133.

It is important to note that this oft-quoted excerpt highlighting Augustine's concerns about music is situated within a much longer pericope, detailing his concerns relating to *all* sensory pleasures—sight, taste, and smell. These kinds of suspicions surrounding the bodily senses were certainly not unique to the early Christians. Rather, they reflect the strong influence of Neoplatonism and Stoicism on the church fathers of the fourth century, which colored their experience and interpretation of the Christian faith.⁴³ Indeed, Augustine even admits that his tendency to be overly strict in this regard has likewise led him into error:

Sometimes, however, overly anxious to avoid this particular snare, I err by excessive severity, and sometimes so much so that I wish every melody of those sweet chants to which the songs of David are set, to be banished from my ears and from the very church. And it seems safer to me, what I remember was often told me concerning Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, who required the reader of the psalm to perform it with so little inflection of voice that it resembled speaking more than singing. Yet when I recall the tears that I shed at the song of the Church in the first days of my recovered faith, and even now as I am moved not by the song but by the things which are sung...I acknowledge the great benefit of this practice. Thus, I waver between the peril of pleasure and the benefit of my experience.⁴⁴

While classical Greek philosophy obviously had a major influence on the *learned* men who served as bishops in several of the key Greek cities, it remains unclear to what extent these philosophical ideas impacted the musical practices and cultural values of everyday Christians on the ground. If anything, the strength of their arguments and severity of their teachings certainly seems to suggest a reality in which the early Christians appreciated a wide variety of musical styles. Perhaps it was more common to follow Paul's suggestion that "all things are permissible," even if not all things are

⁴³ Byers, Sarah, "Augustine's Debt to Stoicism in the *Confessions*," *The Routledge Handbook of the Stoic Tradition*, ed. John Sellars, New York: Routledge, 2016.

⁴⁴ Strunk, W. Oliver, *Source Readings in Music History*, 133.

edifying. And yet, Paul asks, “if I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that for which I give thanks?”⁴⁵

In light of this evidence, it seems that the demonic associations and ethical concerns surrounding flutes, dancing, and “effeminate” modes, found primarily in the writings of fourth-century church fathers, were more a reflection of Greek thought and culture than they were of any truly unique Christian theological reasoning. However Cosgrove suggests that when looked at through the lens of Plato’s philosophy of music, Clement’s opinions about certain instruments and styles could be understood as an expression of Christian values like equanimity, simplicity, and nonviolence. The late Roman era saw a massive proliferation of music of all kinds. The theatres and arenas where Christians and others were violently persecuted rang with music. Trained slaves entertained the wealthy in their homes, at the baths, and in the streets. Cicero described one locale as having “so many artists that the whole neighborhood [rang] with the sound of vocal music, stringed instruments, and flutes, and with the music of banquets by night.”⁴⁶ The emperor Nero, who was known in particular for his persecution of the Christians, was also an acclaimed virtuoso on the lyre, often competing in musical contests of technique and skill alongside other celebrated elites.⁴⁷

It also seems that music under the Roman Empire did develop an increasingly sensual quality, which came to characterize both vocal and instrumental music in the context of both public shows and private banquets. Christians were not the only ones to abhor these developments. As early as the first century BCE, there were complaints of

⁴⁵ 1 Corinthians 10:23; 30

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁷ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 137-139.

decline, with Cicero being among the first to criticize the music associated with Bacchus rituals based on the trance-like quality it induced in participants.⁴⁸ Quintilian and Seneca also saw in the new music of the first century “signs of moral as well as artistic degeneration,” and looked back to a time when they believed music had been “more serious and more sacred.”⁴⁹ Stapert goes so far as to write that “even the Barbarians [sic] were appalled” when they encountered Roman popular music.⁵⁰

Thus, we find that the complaints of the early church fathers with regard to pop music and the songs of pagan rituals were similar to critiques that were already circulating among non-Christian writers. The particular instruments, songs, modes, and dances that are referenced most often as being objectionable within a Christian context were those that were *specifically* associated with eroticism and wealth—especially the panflute, which was associated with sexually-available girls, and was characteristically performed by prostitutes in the context of elite banquets.⁵¹ This conceptualization of the “devil’s music,” captured in the writings of the fourth century church fathers, is what ultimately gets transmitted and developed in later centuries, particularly within the cultural and political context of the Christian West. It is important to remember, however, that at the time of its conceptualization, these views on music were shared by Christians and pagans alike.

In their writings, the early church fathers clearly exaggerated the sexualization of popular music for rhetorical effect, seeking to contrast the music enjoyed by Greco-

⁴⁸ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 41

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁵¹ Cosgrove, Charles H., “Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music,” 263.

Roman elites with the songs of the church, which were meant to serve as an expression of Christian values like community and equality.⁵² As such, the Christian “hymn” was characterized not only by a particular kind of lyrical content, but by a style and approach to music wherein *all* people could participate in without objectification, competition, or judgment. Towards this end, John Chrysostom insists that at Christian gatherings,

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.”⁵³

The music of the early Christians likewise sought to express paradoxical attitudes held in tension—being at once both solemn and joyful, sober yet thankful, serious and elated. As Clement writes, “the [true] gnostic, then, is very closely allied to God, being at once grave and cheerful in all thing, grave on account of the bent of his soul toward the Divinity, and cheerful on account of his consideration of the blessings of humanity which God has given us.”⁵⁴ Ambrose of Milan offers perhaps the most poetic description of the underlying values, style, and contrasting character that was meant to permeate Christian music:

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

⁵² Runes & Schrickel, *Encyclopedia of the Arts*, 655.

⁵³ Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music*, 95-96.

⁵⁴ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 57-58.

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. The strings of the cithara differ, but create one harmony. The fingers of a musician often go astray among the strings though they are very few in number, but among the people the Spirit musicians know not how to err.⁵⁵

In sum, we find the style and character of music in the early church to be much more nuanced than traditionally suggested. Indeed, this analysis reveals that the categories of “sacred” and “secular” music, which have dominated the musicological landscape since the Reformation, are anachronistic and misleading when examining the musical practices of antiquity. Moreover, we find that the music of the early Christians was understood to be primarily *formational*—rather than liturgical. Singing was meant to permeate the *whole* of a Christian’s daily life, not just to accompany or beautify their ritual activities. Christian songs often incorporated the musical stylings of local folk songs, work tunes, and even hymns from other religious cults, and the use of instrumentation, rhythms, modes, and dancing varied widely from community to community in the first four centuries.

The contrasts that the early Christians sought to establish between their music and the music of the surrounding culture had less to do with style, instrumentation, lyrical content, or any perceived difference between “sacred” and “secular” space. Rather, it was about *values*: in a culture where orgiastic trances, private performances for wealthy elites by sexually available slave girls, and musical competitions promoting the prestige of technical prowess, Christians sought to create a kind of music that was accessible, participatory, and that uplifted the spirit—a music “of the people,” which was understood to have the power to reconcile all things in one body, through Christ.

⁵⁵ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 103-104.

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