Early Church Music and the "Songs of Devils"

A short paper presented by Kristen Leigh Mitchell
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Concerns over the suitability of certain kinds of music for liturgical use and everyday appreciation among Christians – including debates about instrumentation, performance style, community participation, and lyrical content – have existed since the Patristic era. The writings of St. Clement of Alexandria, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Augustine of Hippo in particular, which contain strong polemics against certain instruments, genres, and contexts for music-making, are usually invoked as normative representations of the musical practices of the early church which can be taken at face value. Furthermore, these ancient writings have often been reinterpreted within a modern framework to provide a theological justification for the rejection of "secular" music. One idiom from these writings that has persisted throughout the centuries is that of the "devil's music" — a concept that has been applied to a variety of "secular" musical styles and instrumentation ever since the fourth century. A more careful examination of these writings within their historical context, however, suggests a much greater diversity of musical thought and practice in the early churches than is generally acknowledged.

Of course, any scholarly consideration of music in the early churches must take into consideration that most of the statements made about music by the early church fathers were neither doctrinal nor decrees, but rather anecdotal asides and/or personal reflections contained within biblical commentaries, letters, and homilies focused on other

subjects.[1] Unlike the anxieties surrounding the question of *images*—which were so pervasive that a second ecumenical council at Nicea had to be convened in order to address the subject—music remained a relatively cursory topic of debate for the first four centuries. 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 universally-upheld injunction). Thus, we 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 that are expressed by authors in the extant literature.

Nevertheless, some interesting insights can be gleaned by examining these writings within the broader context of the musical practices and philosophies of the ancient Mediterranean world. This paper 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 complexities of musical thought and practice in the early church, including its relationship to secular musics and the musical practices of other religious communities. In particular, this analysis will challenge the notion that Christians have always maintained such clear boundaries between what we moderns call "sacred" and "secular" music, while also debunking the myth that "the devil's music" has always been identified with the latter.

At a cursory glance, the writings of the early church fathers certainly appear to provide a relatively unified polemic against "pagan" music, which is characterized as morally corrupt, and is frequently associated with the devil. In the second century,

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

Clement of Alexandria criticized those who, after "hymning immortality" at Christian prayer gatherings in the morning, entertained themselves "with the plucking of strings, the erotic twittering of the *aulos*, dancing, wine, and everything filled with trash" at night.[2] This is one of the first indications in the ancient 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 Hellenistic 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 seemed to be so drawn? In order to properly contextualize such statements, we need to first unpack our modern assumptions about their social location. It is important to realize that such statements are being made in reference to social and religious contexts that pre-date what we might think of as "liturgical" or "religious." 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 early morning workday gatherings around the year 112 CE,[5] descriptions

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[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.

of music in the first four centuries of the church tend to be almost universally concerned with music in the evening at the Christian *symposium*.

The symposium was a widespread Hellenistic banquet tradition shared by all voluntary associations of the Greco-Roman world, during which groups would regularly gather for a convivial household meal, followed by libations offered to a chosen deity, and a series of events that usually involved drinking, singing, dancing, and games.[6] Liturgical scholars in the past have tended to take the polemical writings of the patristics at face value, leading to the widespread assumption that "pagan" meals during this period were largely "secular" gatherings that were purely for entertainment, whereas Christian meals were sacred and solemn affairs. However church historian Valeriy Alikin points out that while "Clement of Alexandria states that the purpose of singing at pagan banquets is for the participants' entertainment... the evidence testifies to the contrary: pagans sang at their banquets in honor of their gods, just like the Christians did in honor of God and Christ."[7]

Indeed, recent Biblical and historical scholarship has shown that the meal gatherings which served as the basis for the development of the Christian Eucharist during the first three centuries were not the sole practice of Christian groups, but were part of a much more widespread banquet tradition that was the common cultural practice of all voluntary associations in the ancient Mediterranean world.[8] Documents from the ancient world reveal that philosophical schools, trade guilds, Greek burial societies,

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[6] See Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

[7] 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), 223.

[8] See Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

Jewish and Christian groups, and pagan mystery cults *all* participated in this widely-shared meal practice. Whether the groups were of a "religious" or "secular" nature, they served similar kinds of foods, offered similar forms of entertainment, and maintained similar kinds of seating arrangements and ceremonial roles for guests, which allowed them to question, disrupt, and experiment with established social norms and customs (for example, allowing women to recline with men, or having slaves act as the "presider" for the evening and allowing them to sit in the place of honor). Accordingly, it was also a relatively common practice for groups within this larger context to harshly criticize the meal practices of *others*, while idealizing their own meal practices as being exemplary embodiments of the commonly-shared classical Greek values of *koinonia* (communitas), *philia* (friendship), *isonomia* (equality), and *charis* (grace).

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…[9]

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

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 in the early church was not intended to merely accompany ceremonial rites, but to stand in contrast to the musical styles of other groups as a marker (and shaper) of Christian social identity.[10] In other words, music was meant to play a critical role in the Christian's moral and ethical formation, not simply as an accessory to religious ritual. This was particularly the case during the meals, which served as the primary site of identity early Christian formation and experimentation, and provided a context where the lines between religious and secular activity were especially blurred. Singing at the meals had a mix of social, political, moral, and religious implications.

Indeed, this blurring of lines between the sacred and the secular was itself a marker of early Christian identity. In his letter to the church community in Thessalonica, Paul writes that the goal of a Christian is to "pray without ceasing."[11] Clement of Alexandria later invokes this point in order to stress that Christian worship is not to be restricted to specific times and places, and that the enlightened worshiper honors God in *every* time and place, regardless of "whether he happens to be alone or is with those who share his belief."[12] 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. [13]

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[10] 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.

[11] 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18.

[12] Cosgrove, "Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music," 268.

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

Chrysostom similarly urged his fourth-century listeners not to sing hymns of praise only at meals, but to teach their children and wives to sing them at the looms, and during their other work.[14]

Singing was also used in the context of the early Christian gatherings as a way to discourage the excessive consumption of alcohol.[15] Plutarch, Athenaeus, and Tertullian all make references to singing as a way to check drunkenness in the early church. In fact, according to Tertullian, some participants in the Christian symposium would be invited to sing precisely "in order to see whether they have not drunk too much."[16] This practice was not unique to the Christian groups, however, for references to various musical tests of drunkenness can be found in the descriptions of meals going back to the earliest writings of classical Greece. The author of Ephesians references this tradition when he encourages members of the community not to get too drunk with wine during the singing portion of their gatherings – "for that is debauchery" – but to be filled with the spirit as they sang psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.[17]

While it is impossible to know what the music of the early church sounded like,[18] there is much we can glean from the descriptions of music in late antiquity. We know that the music of the early Christians, for example, would have been primarily vocal, consisting of a single melodic line with no differentiated voice parts or chordal harmonic supports.[19] We also know from early Christian writings that the music was learned and

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[14] Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music*, 95.

[15] Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 223-224.

[16] Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 224.

[17] Ephesians 5:18-19.

[18] Despite the discovery of one Greek hymn notated on a late third century papyrus, this isolated attempt to record a melody for private use must not be interpreted as representing a normative Christian music style.

[19] Bowersock, Brown, & Grabar, *Late Antiquity*, 599.

transmitted orally, and that there was a strong emphasis on improvisation and charismatic utterance.[20] Tertullian described the localized 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."[21] Bowersock, Brown, and Grabar suggest that much of Christian music was likely rooted "in spontaneous, improvised deliveries that were generated fresh on each occasion."[22] From this, Sadie Stanley also deduces that melodic choices would have been influenced by the local Hellenized-Syrian folk musics of the taverns and markets.[23] Runes & Schrickel similarly argues that hymn melodies would have been most likely derived from popular song.[24]

Moreover, Byzantine scholar and Orthodox priest John A. McGuckin points out that 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. "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."[25] 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."[26] Clement explicitly recommended that Christians sing hymns in the manner of the

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[20] Stanley, "Christian Church, Music of the Early," 367-368.

[21] Stanley, "Christian Church, Music of the Early," 364.

[22] Bowersock, Brown, & Grabar, *Late Antiquity,* 599.

[23] Stanley, "Christian Church, Music of the Early," 365.

[24] Dagobert Runes & Harry Schrickel, eds. "Musical History, Periods In," *Encyclopedia of the Arts,* (Philosophical Library: New York, 1946), 655.

[25] McGuckin, *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies,* 644-645.

[26] Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World,* 92.

classical Greek *paean* 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.[27] And 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 with a chant the labor endured for working, for the mind suffers hardships and difficulties more easily when it hears songs and chants. [28]

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 about certain instruments and modes. Many secondary historical sources and traditional scholars of musicology still 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 so-called "ban" on instrumentation. But Clement himself, in the midst of his own argument, admits that the cithara and lyre "not a disgrace,"[29] and later describes an

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[27] Cosgrove, "Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music," 263.

[28] Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World,* 127.

[29] Cosgrove, "Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music," 261.

idealized Christian gathering as consisting of men and women singing together while the maidens play the lyre.[30]

Meanwhile, the African Christian communities of Egypt and Ethiopia, along with other communities on the fringes of the Mediterranean, embodied a much different version of Christianity that incorporated rhythmic movements, hand-clapping, and the use of a variety of instruments. 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.[31] When 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.[32] Through the rigorous training of *dabtaras*, this Ethiopian practice was handed down through the oral tradition across the generations. While Ethiopians themselves claim that their music style dates back to the sixth century, many musicologists believe to be drawing from much older styles, with some scholars suggesting a direct link with the temple music of Jerusalem.[33]

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 perhaps this supposed "ban on instruments" in the early

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[30] Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 226.

[31] Stanley, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians,* 369.

[32] 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.

[33] Andrew Wilson-Dickson, "The Ethiopian Church," 210-211.

Christian churches was holdover from attitudes in the Jewish synagogues.[34] Other scholars have speculated that perhaps Christians rejected the use of instruments in worship as an attempt to *distinguish* their gatherings from ancient Jewish Temple music.

None of these theories, however, stand on very solid historical evidence. While singing and instrumental music were indeed a part of ancient Hebrew 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 rabbinical documents or other sources from the first two centuries describing synagogue gatherings make any mention of singing or music.[35]

John Chrysostom's remark that "where the *aulos* is, there Christ is not"[36] has been particularly influential in establishing a link between the devil and the panflute—an association that persists in popular culture to this day. When taken in its historical context, however, it is easy to see that this statement, and others like it, do not represent a wholesale ban on instrumentation in the early church. Rather, they communicate a vehement rejection of certain *specific* cultural practices. Inviting sexually provocative (and often sexually available) women to play the *aulos* at symposium gatherings was a well-documented and relatively common practice during the Hellenstic era.[37] The *aulos* was also the primary instrument used in the orgiastic rites honoring Dionysus—the god of wine, fertility, and ecstasy. Music associated with these cultic gatherings also made

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

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

[36] Bowersock, Brown, & Graber, *Late Antiquity,* 598.

[37] Cosgrove, Charles H., "Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music," 263.

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."[38]

This tendency to approach music as an *ethical*—rather than merely an aesthetic—matter, was not unique to the early Christians, but was a commonly-held attitude in ancient Greece. These sentiments reflected a long-standing philosophical tradition that began with Damon and Plato's complaints in the fifth century BCE, against what they considered at that time to be the moral decadence of Timotheus' "new" music. Those writings influenced later thinkers about the moral effects of music, including Aristotle, 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 demonstrates how Clement of Alexandria was frequently guilty in his writings of misunderstanding and misapplying classical Greek music theory by "reproducing ideas he finds in his sources without having a clear musical idea of what those sources meant."[39]

Indeed, in order to properly contextualize the statements that the early church fathers made about music in their Hellenistic context, we must first of all understand the classical Greek teachings they learned with regard to musical modes (*harmoniai*) and its relationship to *ethos*. For the ancient Greeks, a "mode" was not merely a scale of notes with an endless variety of possible musical applications, as they are used today. The *harmoniai* were understood to encompass a whole set of cultural factors and associations

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[38] Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music,* 94.

[39] Cosgrove, "Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music," 274.

that clustered together in one's musical experience, including expectations about lyrical content, instrumentation, and style, as well as the location 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."[40]

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 be morally degenerating.[41] 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.[42]

This is the philosophical tradition from which the Antioch-born John Chrysostom draws in his characterization of "effeminate songs" that "weaken the tension of our soul" as "demonic."[43] 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 gatherings. Beginning in the fourth century, female singers were increasingly discouraged, and by the late sixth century an all-out ban on women's liturgical singing was finally published.

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[40] Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World,* 57.

[41] Cosgrove, "Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music," 270-282.

[42] 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.

[43] St. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth & Poverty,* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), 59.

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![44]

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 not unique to the early Christians, but reflected the strong influence of Neoplatonism and Stoicism on the church fathers of the fourth century.[45] 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.

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[44] Strunk, W. Oliver, *Source Readings in Music History, volume 3*, New York: Norton, 1998, 132-133.
[45] Byers, Sarah, "Augustine's Debt to Stoicism in the *Confessions*," *The Routledge Handbook of the Stoic Tradition,* ed. John Sellars, New York: Routledge, 2016.

> Thus, I waver between the peril of pleasure and the benefit of my experience.[46]

While classical Greek philosophy obviously had a major influence on the *learned* men who served as bishops in several of the key Greek cities (and whose thoughts and proclivities have therefore survived in their writings), it remains unclear to what extent these philosophies impacted musical practices and cultural values for everyday Christians. If anything, the strength of the arguments we find in the writings of the patristics suggests a reality in which a wide diversity of songs were being sung at the early Christian meal gatherings. Perhaps it was more common to follow Paul's suggestion in his letter to the Corinthians that "all things are permissible," even if not all things are edifying. After all, Paul asks rhetorically, "if I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that for which I give thanks?"[47]

Despite whatever was happening in local churches, it certainly seems that the demonic associations and ethical concerns surrounding flutes, dancing, and "effeminate" modes, found in the writings of the church fathers were more a reflection of classical Greek thought than they were of any uniquely Christian theological reasoning. Nevertheless, Cosgrove also suggests that when looked at through the lens of Plato's philosophy of music, Clement's opinions about certain instruments and styles can also be understood as an expression of Christian values like equanimity, simplicity, and nonviolence. After all, the late Roman era saw a massive proliferation of music of all kinds. Theatres and arenas where Christians and others were violently persecuted rang with popular music. Trained slaves entertained the wealthy in their homes, at the baths,

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[46] Strunk, W. Oliver, *Source Readings in Music History,* 133.
[47] 1 Corinthians 10:23; 30

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."[48] 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.[49]

It also seems that music under the Roman Empire did have an increasingly sensual quality, which characterized both vocal and instrumental music in the context of public shows and private banquets alike. Christians were not the only ones to abhor these developments. As early as the first century BCE, there were complaints of 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.[50] 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."[51] Stapert goes so far as to write that "even the Barbarians [sic] were appalled" when they encountered Roman popular music.[52]

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

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[48] Ibid., 144.

[49] Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 137-139.

[50] Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 41

[51] Ibid., 137.

[52] Ibid., 146.

panflute, which again, was associated with sexually-available girls and was most often performed by prostitutes in the context of banquets sponsored by the elites who could afford them.[53] This is the conceptualization of the "devil's music" that was captured in the writings of the fourth century church fathers, and ultimately transmitted across the centuries into the popular imagination 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-Roman elites with the songs of the church, which were meant to serve as an expression of Christian values like community and equality.[54] 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." [55]

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

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[53] Cosgrove, Charles H., "Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music," 263.

[54] Runes & Schrickel, *Encyclopedia of the Arts,* 655.

[55] Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music,* 95-96.

Divinity, and cheerful on account of his consideration of the blessings of humanity which God has given us."[56] 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 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.[57]

In sum, we find the style and character of music in the early church to be much more nuanced than suggested by previous scholars. 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 it comes to 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 – that singing was meant to permeate the *whole* of a Christian's daily life, not just to accompany or beautify ritual activity. And that Christian songs often incorporated the musical stylings of local folk songs, work tunes, and even hymns from other religious

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[56] Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 57-58.

[57] Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 103-104.

cults, and the use of instrumentation, rhythms, modes, and dancing varied widely from community to community in the first four centuries.

Furthermore, the contrasts that the early Christians sought to establish between their music and the so-called "demonic" musical practices of other groups had less to do with perceived differences between "sacred" and "secular" music. Rather, these evaluations were 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 uplifting—a music "of the people" which was understood to have the power to reconcile all things in one body, through Christ.

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