

Early Church Music and the Songs of Devils

A short paper presented by Kristen Leigh Mitchell
Sophia Institute Center for Orthodox Thought & Culture Annual Conference
Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University
December 2, 2011

Concerns over the suitability of certain kinds of music for liturgical use and everyday appreciation among Christians have existed ever 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 typically invoked as normative representations of the musical philosophies and practices of the early church. Many of these writings contain strong polemics against certain modes, instruments, and contexts for music-making, statements which are commonly interpreted as a theological precedent for the rejection of “secular” music. One image in particular 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 instruments 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 either personal reflections or anecdotal asides, contained within biblical commentaries, letters, and homilies that are focused on other topics.¹

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 about 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 in the early church. 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 from the extant literature.

Nevertheless, some interesting insights can be gleaned by interpreting these statements within the larger context of music practices and philosophies in the ancient Mediterranean world. This paper seeks to situate some of the most well-known historical statements and sentiments about music from the early church fathers within the broader 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 such 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” that everyone seemed to love? In order to properly contextualize such statements, and unpack our assumptions about their social location, it is important to recognize that most of these sentiments were expressed in reference to musical practices and contexts that pre-date what most modern Christians would consider a “liturgical” context. Aside from the oft-quoted observation made by Pliny the Younger in his *Epistle concerning the Christian religion* that “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, on the whole, tend to be more concerned with music at the *symposiums*. The symposium was a Hellenic tradition of gathering in the evening after a communal meal for conversation, conviviality, and camaraderie. These gatherings often lasted into the early morning hours,

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.

and customarily included drinking, singing, dancing, and religious rituals to recognize and honor a chosen deity.⁶ Symposiums not only were the context for the development of early Christian liturgy and ecclesiology, 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 statements made by the early church fathers about the music that occurred at the meals, and for understanding how music functioned in relation to early Christian formation and identity. 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. 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

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.

Christian community.⁸ Music was understood to play a critical role in Christian *formation*, not merely in the context of religious ritual but during symposiums where the lines between liturgical and secular activity were especially blurred.

Indeed, this blurring of the lines between sacred and secular activity 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 also urged his fourth-century listeners not to sing hymns of praise only at the meals, but to teach their children and wives to sing them at the looms and during their other work.¹²

Alikin and others have argued convincingly that one of the primary functions of singing at the symposium gatherings of Christians and non-Christians alike was to help prevent excessive consumption of alcohol.¹³ Plutarch, Athenaeus, and Tertullian all make

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.

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.

comments indicating that singing served to check drunkenness. In fact, according to Tertullian, participants in the Christian symposium were often invited to sing precisely “in order to see whether they have not drunk too much.”¹⁴ The author of Ephesians also urges for 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

While it is impossible to know what the music of the early church *sounded* like,¹⁶ we know from descriptions of music during late antiquity that it would have been primarily vocal, consisting of a single melodic line with no differentiated voice parts or chordal harmonic supports,¹⁷ and we also know from early Christian writings that the music of the early church was learned and transmitted orally, and that there was a strong emphasis on improvisation and charismatic utterance.¹⁸ Tertullian described the practice 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 likewise suggest that Christian music was rooted “in spontaneous, improvised deliveries that were generated fresh on each occasion,”²⁰ and from this, Sadie Stanley deduces that melodic choices were naturally influenced by the local Hellenized-Syrian folk musics of the taverns and

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.

markets.²¹ Runes & Schrickel also contend that while the rhythms of hymns derived primarily from its accentual verse, its melody, most likely, came 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, and as such, the singing of hymns did not belong to any particular segment of society, Christian or pagan, sacred or secular. Thus, he writes that “throughout Christian antiquity, 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 *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.²⁵

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,

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

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.

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. ²⁶

Thus, even in the context of the early church, associations between “secular” music and the devil 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 attitude that the early church fathers had about certain instruments and modes. The question of instruments, in particular, requires some additional contextualization. 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 is particularly strong, and is the one most often cited by scholars as evidence of a ban on instrumentation. And yet Clement himself allows for the use of the cithara and the lyre, saying that these are “not a disgrace.”²⁷ He later describes an idealized Christian worship gathering as consisting of men and women singing together while maidens play the lyre.²⁸ Maxwell Johnson furthermore argues that accompaniment of the cithara or lyre was common in the hymnody heard in the homes of well-to-do Christians.²⁹

The use of instruments, dancing, and rhythmic movements such as hand-clapping in worship were also common among the African Christian communities of Egypt and Ethiopia, as well as other communities on the fringes of the Mediterranean. Theodoret of

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 Alikin, *The Earliest History of the Christian Gathering*, 225.

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.³⁰ 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.³¹ 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.³²

In the past, scholars have sought to establish a connection between the music of the early church and the musical practices of the Jewish synagogue, suggesting that the polemic against instrumentation may have been a holdover from Jewish attitudes and understandings. Mark Kirby cites Wellesz when he writes that, "it was from the synagogue that the Christian communities took over the tradition of reciting, chanting, and singing, as more fitting for their simple service than the elaborate rite of the Temple, with its great choirs and instrumental music."³³ Such scholars have speculated that Christians rejected the use of instruments in an attempt to distinguish their gatherings from Jewish Temple worship, while others suggest that perhaps a similar Jewish ban on instruments existed in the synagogues following the destruction of the Temple.

³⁰ Stanley, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 369.

³¹ 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.

³² Andrew Wilson-Dickson, "The Ethiopian Church," 210-211.

³³ Mark Daniel Kirby, "Toward a Definition of Liturgical Chant," *Sacred Music* 136 2 (2009): 10-11.

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 synagogue gatherings in the first two centuries, or that there was any effort to ban them. The primary sources reveal that the purpose of synagogue gatherings was 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.³⁴

John Chrysostom's insistence that "where the *aulos* is, there Christ is not"³⁵ was particularly influential in establishing the link between the devil and the panflute, an association that has persisted to this day. Taken in its historical context, however, such statements should not be interpreted as a wholesale ban on instrumentation in the early church, but rather a rejection of specific cultural practices like the popular social convention of inviting sexually provocative (and often sexually available) women to play the *aulos* at Greco-Roman symposium gatherings.³⁶ 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 use of drums and cymbals, and was well-known for its trance-inducing qualities.³⁷ This is likely also what Gregory of Nazianzus is thinking of 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

³⁴ J. A. Smith, "The Ancient Synagogue, the Early Church and Singing, *Music & Letters* 65, 1, 1984, 1-4.

³⁵ Bowersock, Brown, & Graber, *Late Antiquity*, 598.

³⁶ Cosgrove, Charles H., "Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music," 263.

³⁷ Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music*, 92.

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

This tendency to think about music as a matter of ethics rather than merely aesthetics is not something that was unique to the early Christians. It reflected a long-standing philosophical tradition among the ancient Greeks, one 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, Aristoxenus, Diogenes, and Ptolemy, writings that later had a profound influence on Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, and Augustine of Hippo. In fact, Charles Cosgrove shows that Clement of Alexandria, at times, is guilty of "reproducing ideas he finds in his sources without having a clear musical idea of what those sources meant."³⁹

Therefore, in order to properly contextualize the statements made about music by the early church fathers, we must first of all have a sense of the classical Greek understanding of musical modes (*harmoniai*) 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. The *harmoniai* were understood to encompass a whole set of factors that clustered together in one's musical and cultural experience, including expectations and associations relating to lyrical content, instrumentation, 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] 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 as having a positive ethical

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

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

influence in relation to its “manly” qualities and associations. Conversely, modes that were considered “effeminate” were thought to be morally degenerating.⁴¹ It is this philosophical tradition from which the Antioch-born Chrysostom draws in his characterizations of “demonic” music, warning that “effeminate songs...weaken the tension of our soul.”⁴² It is interesting to consider the adoption of this gendered understanding of music among the early church fathers in relation to the eventual ban on women’s liturgical singing, which was finalized into doctrine by the late sixth century.

The influence of classical Greek philosophy is especially clear in Augustine of Hippo’s reflections on music, found 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!⁴³

It is important to note that this oft-quoted excerpt concerning music is situated in a much larger discussion that systematically details Augustine’s confessions relating to *all* sensory pleasures—including sight, taste, and smell. Again, this overall suspicion of the bodily senses is not uniquely indicative of Christian theology, but reveals the strong influence of Neoplatonism and Stoicism on the early church fathers’ experience and

⁴¹ Cosgrove, “Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music,” 270-282.

⁴² St. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth & Poverty*, (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981), 59.

⁴³ Strunk, W. Oliver, *Source Readings in Music History, volume 3*, New York: Norton, 1998, 132-133.

interpretation of the faith.⁴⁴ Indeed, Augustine admits that his tendency to be overly strict in this regard has also 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.⁴⁵

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 is unknown to what extent these philosophies influenced the musical practices and cultural values of everyday Christians. If anything, the strength of their arguments and severity of their teachings seems to suggest that, in reality, Christian appreciation of a wide variety of musical styles was far more widespread than the adherence to strict philosophical ideals.

In light of this evidence, it seems likely that demonic associations with dancing, flutes, and “effeminate” modes have more to do with the influence of Greek culture than with any truly theological reasoning on the subject. Nevertheless, Cosgrove suggests that, when read through the lens of Plato’s philosophy of musical ethics, Clement’s negative opinions about certain instruments can be interpreted in light of the Christian principle of nonviolence. The late Roman Empire had seen a great proliferation of music of all kinds, and the theaters and arenas where Christians were mocked and persecuted rang with

⁴⁴ Byers, Sarah, “Augustine’s Debt to Stoicism in the *Confessions*,” *The Routledge Handbook of the Stoic Tradition*, ed. John Sellars, New York: Routledge, 2016.

⁴⁵ Strunk, W. Oliver, *Source Readings in Music History*, 133.

music. Minstrels entertained at the baths and in the streets and highly trained slaves made music in the houses of the wealthy. Acclaimed virtuosi (including the emperor Nero) competed in various musical contests that valued technique and prowess, and created wealthy, insolent, and arrogant celebrities.⁴⁶ Cicero describes 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.”⁴⁷ It was in this noise-polluted context that Clement writes “we must reject superfluous music, which enervates men’s souls.”⁴⁸

It also seems that under the Roman Empire, a more sensual quality did indeed come to pervade both vocal and instrumental music in the songs and dances of private feasts and public shows alike, and the Christians were not the only ones to abhor these musical developments. As early as the first century BCE, there were complaints of decline, as Cicero was among the first to criticize the music associated with Bacchus rites for the ways in which audiences would “leap up and twist their necks and turn their eyes.”⁴⁹ Quintilian and Seneca saw “in the newfangled music signs of moral as well as artistic degeneration,” looking back to a time when music was “more serious and more sacred.”⁵⁰ “Even the Barbarians,” writes Stapert, were “appalled” when they encountered Roman popular entertainment.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 137-139.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁹ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 41

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

Thus, we find that even the complaints of the early church fathers regarding the “sacred” music of other pagan cults corresponded to existing critiques that were already circulating at the time. The specific instruments, songs, modes, and dances that were so objectionable to the early Church fathers were those associated with flagrant eroticism that were usually performed by prostitutes or otherwise sexually-available girls.⁵²

In contrast to this overtly sexualized pop music context, the music of the early church was meant to be a manifestation of the Christian ideal of brotherhood and sisterhood, expressed in a universally practicable form.⁵³ As such, the hymn was characterized and defended as a kind of music that *all* people could participate in without objectification, competition, or judgment. John Chrysostom therefore insists:

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.”⁵⁴

Additionally, the music of early Christians sought to express an attitude of being at once both grave and cheerful, and when it fulfilled its function of being part of a serious yet thankful revelry, it was believed that it could contribute towards the shaping a sober yet joyous character. 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.”⁵⁵

⁵² Cosgrove, Charles H., “Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music,” 263.

⁵³ Runes & Schrickel, *Encyclopedia of the Arts*, 655.

⁵⁴ Wellesz, *A History of Byzantine Music*, 95-96.

⁵⁵ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 57-58.

Ambrose of Milan offers possibly the most beautiful and poetic description in the early writings of the underlying values, function, and stylistic character of 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.⁵⁶

In light of this analysis, we find the presence and character of “sacred” music in the early church is more categorically broad, nuanced, and historically complex than scholars have traditionally suggested. Indeed, this analysis reveals that these categories, which have dominated the musicological landscape since the Reformation, are somewhat anachronistic and misleading when examining the musical practices of antiquity. Music was used not only in ceremonial or liturgical settings, but was intended to permeate one’s everyday life in order to uplift the spirit and build up the community in its values of love and radical equality. The ideal kind of music for the Christian was easy to learn, passed down orally from generation to generation. It could be intuited (improvised) and performed by a single charismatic person, or learned by many and sung communally. It incorporated and accommodated the styles and functions of contemporary musical styles

⁵⁶ Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World*, 103-104.

and forms, including the sacred hymns of other religions cults, and secular music such as everyday work songs. The use of instrumentation, rhythms, modes, and dancing varied from community to community, but the Christians generally sought to create music that could stand in stark contrast to the popular styles that induced orgiastic trances, promoted prostitution, and encouraged the seeking of wealth and prestige through competition based on technical skill and fame. Christian music strove to be a music of the people and for the people, to be at once serious and joyful, to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed, and above all, to reconcile all things and all people in one body through Christ.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alikin, Valeriy 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.
- Bowersock, G.W., Brown, Peter, & Grabar, Oleg, eds. "Music," *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*. Belknap Press: Massachusettes, 1999.
- Chrysostom, John. *On Wealth & Poverty*. New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981.
- Cosgrove, Charles H., "Clement of Alexandria and Early Christian Music," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14, 3 (2006): 255-282.
- Kirby, Mark Daniel. "Toward a Definition of Liturgical Chant," *Sacred Music* 136, 2 (2009): 5-39.
- McGuckin, John. "Poetry and Hymnography (2): The Greek World," Harvey & Hunter, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2008.
- Runes, Dagobert, & Schrickel, Harry, eds. "Musical History, Periods In," *Encyclopedia of the Arts*, Philosophical Library: New York, 1946.
- Sadie, Stanley, ed. "Christian Church, Music of the Early," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* 4. Macmillan Publishers: London, 1980.
- Smith, J. A. "The Ancient Synagogue, the Early Church and Singing," *Music & Letters* 65, 1 (1984): 1-16.
- Stapert, Calvin R. *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 2007.
- Wellesz, Egon. *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*. Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1961.
- Wilson-Dickson, Andrew. "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.