



A "Recent" Innovation

A Brief History of Instrumental Music in Jewish and Christian Worship

Limitations of Historical Study

- Surveying 3500+ years of biblical and secular history will inevitably result in some surface-level analysis, but we should be able to target the most significant passages and eras.
- We will spend some time on the use of instrumental music in OT worship, move quickly through the song worship of the NT, and then focus on the norm of the postapostolic church and its medieval and modern exceptions.
- As an aside, we will not be discussing the history of the secular use of musical instruments but only that of their use (or non-use) by Jews and Christians in worship to God.

Jewish Worship

- Though people began to use musical instruments early in human history, we have no record of their use in Jewish worship until the time of Moses (Exod 15:20; cf. Gen 4:21).
- The use of musical instruments in Jewish worship was minimal from Moses to David, but from David to Christ, musical instruments were common in tabernacle/temple worship (Num 10:1–10; cf. Ps 81:1–5; 2 Chron 5:11–14; cf. Pss 3–5).
- God specified—always through a prophet (or prophetess)—the musical instruments for tabernacle/temple worship (Exod 15:20; Num 10:1–2, 10; 2 Chron 8:14–15; cf. 1 Chron 28:19).

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The famous assertion by McClintock and Strong that "instruments were never used in ancient synagogue worship" is true but irrelevant because synagogues probably did not include singing before the second century AD. Jews sang at home and in the temple. (Cf. J. A. Smith, "The Ancient Synagogue, the Early Church and Singing.")

Worship in the Early Church

- The NT clearly approves of the practice of singing in the collective worship of God (1 Cor 14:15; Eph 5:19; Col 3:16).
- The use of musical instruments of worship was not practiced by the apostles and the first-century church as they worshiped according to a new pattern (Acts 2:42; cf. John 4:19-24; 1 Cor 14:37-38; Col 2:16-17; *contra* synagogue, temple, paganism).
- God specified the instruments that he desired—the lips and the heart (spirit) of his people (Eph 5:19; Heb 13:15).

For a more in-depth analysis of the NT passages related to song worship, see Part 1 of this series—“Sing and Make Melody.”

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“God has always regulated his public worship even in regard to the specific musical instruments used. There is no record in Scripture of a musical instrument ever being used in public worship without an explicit divine command” (John Price).

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The Norm—*A Capella* Singing

- The postapostolic Christians opposed musical instruments for at least 300 years, but Roman Catholics eventually introduced and accepted them in the 600s and 1200s, respectively.
- The Italian phrase *a cappella* (“in the style of the chapel” = “without instrumental accompaniment”) may highlight the longstanding rejection of musical instruments by Christians.
- Before and between the medieval and modern eras, Catholics and Protestants, respectively, promoted unaccompanied singing and opposed the use of musical instruments in the collective worship of God.

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Julian of Toledo indicates that the organ was commonly used in Spanish churches by the year 450 AD. Pope Vitalian introduced the organ in Rome in AD 660—possibly AD 666. Musical instruments were not widely accepted until much later.

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“They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god...” (Pliny the Younger, AD 111-113).

**“The antagonism which the Fathers of the early Church displayed toward instruments has two outstanding characteristics: vehemence and uniformity”
(James McKinnon).**

Several of the so-called Church Fathers, recognizing the absence of musical instruments in churches, allegorized the OT passages that spoke of instrumental praise (e.g., Clement of Alexandria, Origen).

“Of old, at the time those of the circumcision were worshipping with symbols and types, it was not inappropriate to send up hymns to God with the psalterion and cithara and to do this on Sabbath days. ... We render our hymn with a living psalterion and a living cithara with spiritual songs. The unison voices of Christians would be more acceptable to God than any musical instrument. Accordingly in all the churches of God, united in soul and attitude, with one mind and in agreement of faith and piety, we send up a unison melody in the words of the Psalms. We are accustomed to employ such psalmodies and spiritual citharas because the apostle teaches this saying, ‘in psalms and odes and spiritual hymns’” (Eusebius of Caesarea, AD 263-339).

“Only what is material [from the OT] has been rejected, such as circumcision, the sabbath, sacrifices, discrimination in foods; and also trumpets, kitharas, cymbals, and tympana, which now understood as the limbs of a man resound with a more perfect music. Daily ablutions, new moon observances, the meticulous inspection of leprosy, along with anything else which was temporarily necessary for the immature are past and over with. But whatever is spiritual [from the Old Testament], such as faith, devotion, prayer, fasting, patience, chastity, and psalm-singing has been increased rather than diminished” (Niceta of Remesiana, AD 335-414).

The "Fathers" also recognized a contrast between pagan and Christian practices.

"Let us take up hymns instead of timbrels, psalmody instead of lewd dances and songs, thankful acclamation instead of theatrical clapping"

(Gregory of Nazianzus, AD 329-390).

"It is not singing in itself which is characteristic of immaturity, but singing to lifeless instruments and with dancing and rattles. Therefore, the use of these instruments is excluded from the song of the churches, along with other things which characterize immaturity, and there is simply the singing itself"

(Theodoret of Cyrus, AD 393-457).

The argument of the so-called Church Fathers can be summarized in this way: We sing because the NT says to sing, and we must therefore not revert to OT ceremonies or to pagan rituals.

Before, during, and after the Protestant Reformation, Catholics and Protestants opposed the use of musical instruments in worship.

“Our church does not use musical instruments, as harps and psalteries, to praise God withal, that she may not seem to Judaize [i.e., imitate the Jews]” (Thomas Aquinas, AD 1225-1274)

“Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of other shadows of the Law” (John Calvin, AD 1509-1564).

“Musical organs pertain to the Jewish ceremonies and agree no more to us than circumcision” (Peter Martyr Vermigli [Calvinist], AD 1499-1562).

“Exhorting the people only to rejoice in praising God, he maketh mention of those instruments which by God’s commandment were appointed in the old Law, but under Christ the use thereof is abolished” (Geneva Bible [AD 1560], n. Ps 150:3).

“Let God be praised in the dance with timbrel and harp, according to the usage of the Old Testament church very early (Exod. 15:20), where we find God praised with timbrels and dances. Those who from this urge the use of music in religious worship must by the same rule introduce dancing, for they went together, as in David’s dancing before the ark, and Judges 21:21. But, whereas many scriptures in the New Testament keep up singing as a gospel-ordinance, none provide for the keeping up of music and dancing; the gospel-canon for psalmody is to sing with the spirit and with the understanding” (Matthew Henry [Free Church], AD 1662-1714).

“I have no objection to the instruments of music in our chapels, providing they are neither seen nor heard” (John Wesley, AD 1703-1791).

"Music as a science I esteem and admire, but instrumental music in the house of God I abominate and abhor. This is the abuse of music, and I here register my protest against all such corruption of the worship of the author of Christianity. The late and venerable and most eminent divine, the Rev. John Wesley, who was a lover of music, and an elegant poet, when asked his opinion of instruments of music being introduced into the chapels of the Methodists, said in his terse and powerful manner, 'I have no objections to instruments of music in our chapels, provided they are neither heard nor seen.' I say the same" (Adam Clarke [Methodist], AD 1762-1832).

"What a degradation to supplant the intelligent song of the whole congregation by the theatrical prettiness of a quartette, the refined niceties of a choir, or the blowing off of wind from inanimate bellows and pipes! We might as well pray by machinery as praise by it" (Charles Spurgeon [Baptist], AD 1834-1892).

"The custom of organ accompaniment did not become general among Protestants until the eighteenth century" (Philip Schaff [Anglican]. AD 1819-1893).

Exceptions—Medieval and Modern

- The Roman Catholic Church has never legislated the use of musical instruments in worship but added them in the medieval period to “aid” their singing and to elevate the emotion of the congregants.
- Protestants divided over musical instruments in worship and did so based on their approach to worship—the normative principle (Luther) or the regulative principle (Calvin)—and those who rejected instruments were not always consistent.
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“The consistent and universal opposition of the Church to instruments has continued from the earliest days. Even in the Churches where the innovation of instruments in the Liturgy has occurred, this innovation has been late and the number of instruments minimal. The Coptic, Ethiopian, and Eritrean Churches do not use musical instruments in worship in spite of common misconceptions. The Armenian and Syriac Churches acknowledge that they are recent innovations” (Daniel Michalski, “The Orthodox Tradition and Instruments in Worship”).

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"The pipe organ adds a wonderful splendor to the Church's ceremonies and powerfully lifts up men's mind to God and to higher things" (Second Vatican Council, 1962-1965).

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A Plea for Restoration

- God specified the use of musical instruments in worship for the Jews under Moses and David but only specifies the heart and the lips (i.e., singing) for Christians under Christ.
- The medieval and modern use of musical instruments in the church is a "recent" innovation that abandons the uniform pattern of the NT (and of the postapostolic Christian writings).
- We ought to abandon the unauthorized practice so that we can restore the NT pattern, please God, and unite with all other faithful Christians. God is looking for worshipers who follow the truth and not their own desires (John 4:23).



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