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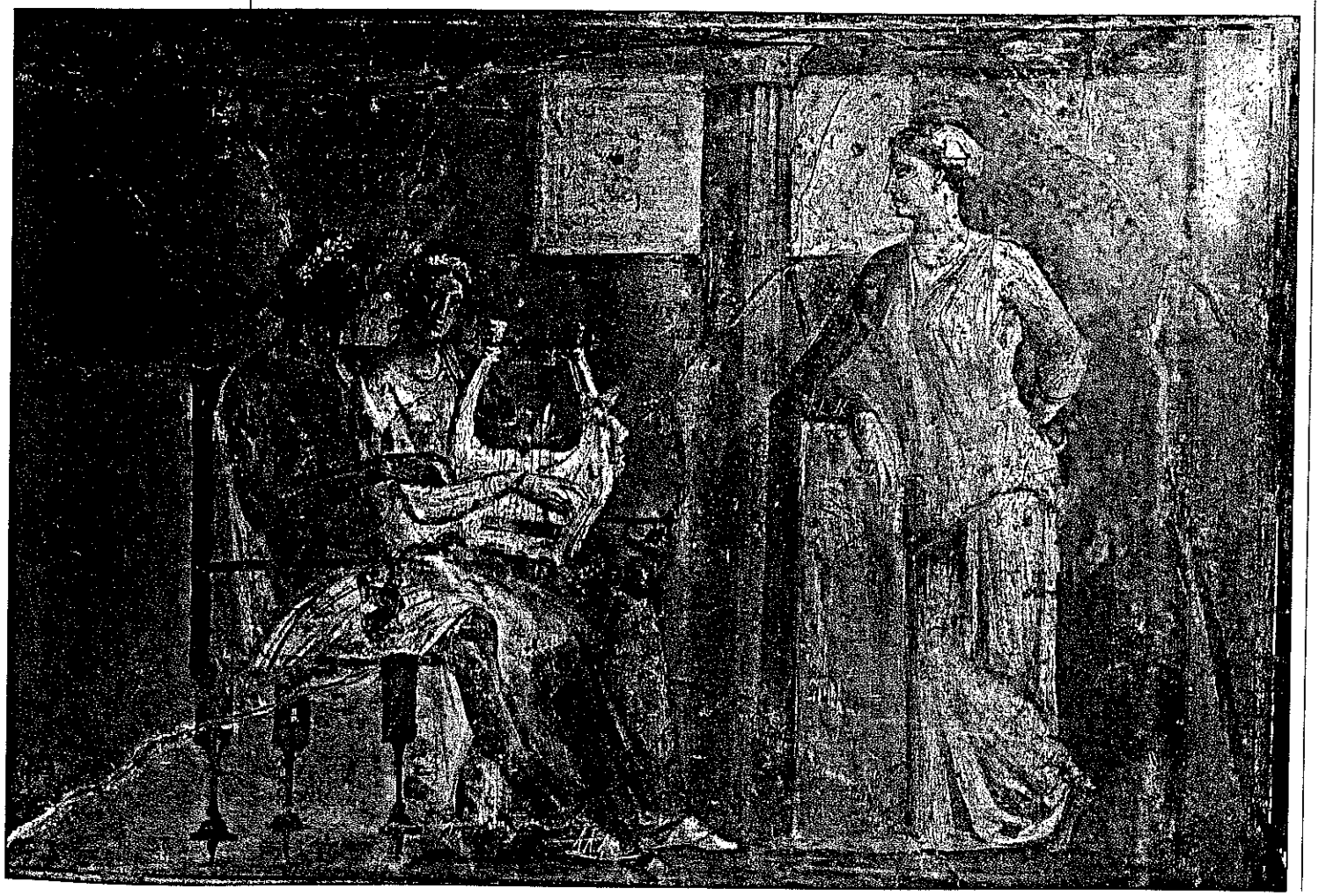
(Return to S. McKamie)

Music in the Early Church

This young woman learning to play the cithara is seen on a Roman wall painting at Herculaneaum. It was destroyed by lava from Vesuvius in AD79, along with Pompeii. This dates her to the New Testament period, when Christian music may just have begun.

Connections between Jewish and early Christian worship are well documented and new links are still being discovered. Even the temple worship is relevant here, not so much as a direct influence—Jesus and his disciples were generally antagonistic to what went on in the temple,[1] but through the synagogue— which had adapted the ceremony of the temple to its own use. Surprising though it may seem, Christianity did not require an entirely new set of principles to guide its worship.

These links may provide one of the reasons for the relative scarcity of musical reference in the New Testament, for there would be no need to record the detail of established worship. Because Christians saw their faith as a completion of



Andrew Wilson-Dickson
The Story of Christian Music (Lion Pub., 1992)
Oxford

Judaism, they were able to continue to use many parts of Jewish liturgy, but to see them in a new light.[2]

The traditions of the synagogue continued to be absorbed into Christian worship for some time, in spite of the persecutions of AD44 and the Council of Jerusalem, which in AD49 ruled that pagan converts to Christianity need not keep the Law of Moses.[3] Cantors, trained to lead the singing in the synagogue and then converted to the Christian faith, continued to put their skills to use in their new church.

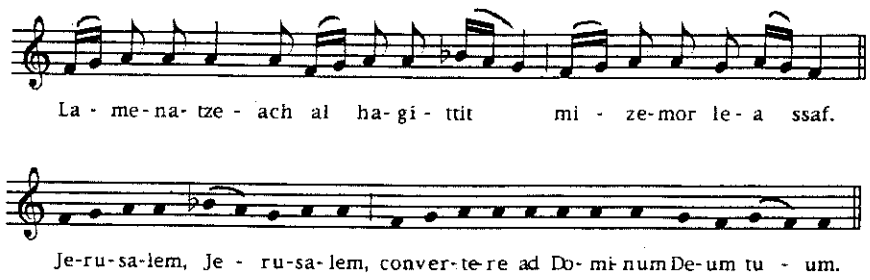
Church and synagogue

Not only did the early Christians speak Aramaic—the language of Jesus himself—as did their fellow Jews in Palestine, but they shared with them a similar 'church year'. The Jewish New Year begins in the autumn, which is when the earliest Christians celebrated the birth of Christ[4]—Christmas has only been celebrated on 25 December since the fourth century. The Christian Easter Eve coincided exactly with the time of Passover, a fact fundamental to an understanding of the significance of the Eucharist.

Both church and synagogue had (and still have) in common: the idea of baptism, the 'Liturgy of the Word' (which for the Christian is the first part of the Eucharist—readings, the singing of psalms and hymns, teaching and prayers), fasting and the encouragement to develop a personal life of prayer. Furthermore, the scriptural content of synagogue and early Christian worship has been shown to correspond in some remarkable ways.[5]

These points of comparison are well documented, but to compare the music of the early church with that of the synagogue is more difficult. Neither Jews nor Christians are known to have noted down any of the music they used for worship until at least the sixth or seventh century AD. The best and perhaps only means of investigation is indirect—by comparing the oldest written musical sources of the Christian church with the present-day singing of those Jewish communities which have preserved their traditions over two millenia. The isolated and highly orthodox Yemenite Jews form one society whose music shows some remarkable correspondences with the earliest known Christian sources.

But Christians were also composing new songs in celebration of the faith:



The similarity of these two chant formulae for the Lamentations of Jeremiah suggest a common origin. The upper one was transcribed in the late nineteenth century from Yemenite singing and represents a pre-Christian Jewish tradition; the lower is medieval Gregorian chant. Such musical links between Judaism and Christianity form what Eric Werner's remarkable book has called 'the Sacred Bridge'.

> **... be filled with the Spirit. Sing the words and tunes of the psalms and hymns when you are together, and go on singing and chanting to the Lord in your hearts...**[6]

Although some translations only stress 'making melody in your hearts', there is every reason to believe that Paul's exhortation to sing was literal. The terminology of some translations is not very helpful, since 'hymn' (and 'spiritual song' in many other versions) has a great diversity of meanings to present-day readers of differing traditions.

At the time of Paul's letters, the hymn, in rhyming verses, did not exist. Later, Augustine (354-430) gave a definition of the word 'hymn':

> **A hymn is a song containing praise of God. If you praise God, but without song, you do not have a hymn. If you praise anything, which does not pertain to the glory of God, even if you sing it, you do not have a hymn. Hence, a hymn contains the three elements: *song* and *praise* of *God*.**[7]

Paul also probably means to include spontaneous praise in song under the influence of the Holy Spirit, which many Christians today call 'singing in tongues'. The literal meaning of 'spiritual songs' is 'odes'—'spiritual' as opposed to secular.

The words of some early hymns are recorded in the New Testament, a number of them in the book of Revelation,[8] such as this fragment:

> **And I seemed to hear the voices of a huge crowd, like the sound of the ocean or the great roar of thunder, answering, 'Alleluia! The reign of the Lord our God**

The Spread of Christianity

First, then, those of the sect were arrested who confessed; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted... And ridicule accompanied their end: they were 'covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed, were burned to serve as torches by night. Nero had offered his gardens for the spectacle.[1]

Thus wrote Tacitus, the Roman imperial historian and vehement Christian-hater, recording events of Nero's reign from AD54–68. The story was to be repeated again and again, with horrific variations, over the next two centuries.

Why were the Christians such a menace? They were reputedly not criminals but pacifists, honest and trustworthy, as some contemporaries, such as Pliny, had recorded. But they bore the marks of conspiracy: followers of a man executed for treason and obstinately refusing to acknowledge or sacrifice to the gods by which Roman civilization swore and which gave the emperor his divinity. In short, they were members of an illegal society which had to be stamped out.

Apart from the physical threat of torture and death, Christians also faced the spiritual threat of heresy. As the faith spread rapidly to nations outside Palestine—to Greece, to Gaul, to Egypt, to Syria and Rome—the resident philosophies and religious beliefs of these nations had their effect.

The great diversity of doctrine that could be called 'Christian' caused deep concern to the leaders of the early church. The Gnostics, for instance, could not have been called Christians by the standards of most of today's denominations, and the urgent need for conformity was already being voiced by the end of the first century.

Clement of Rome recommended in his *Letter to the Corinthians* (written about AD95) that the laity should obey the clergy, even on pain of death, shifting the balance of power very much in favour of the ecclesiastical leadership. Later, Bishop Irenaeus (about AD130–200) insisted that salvation was only possible through the one church, and that outside it 'there can be no salvation'. By about AD200, Christian leaders were working urgently to create and to strengthen a catholic, or universal, church.

Their efforts were assisted by the unstable political circumstances in which Christians had to live:

Pressed by their common danger, members of scattered Christian groups throughout the world increasingly exchanged letters and travelled from one church to another. Accounts of the martyrs, often taken from records of their trials and from eyewitnesses, circulated among the churches in Asia, Africa, Rome, Greece, Gaul and Egypt. By such communication, members of the diversified earlier churches became aware of regional differences as obstacles to their claim to participate in one catholic church.[2]

Far from scattering and confusing the early church, persecution and heresy worked to strengthen it. The early church fathers strove to define the faith in order to excommunicate heretics (later on they were to use more brutal methods) by establishing agreements on forms of worship, selecting and canonizing the writings of the New Testament and by proposing a creed which all Christians could confess.

It was the Emperor Constantine (about AD274–337) who brought about a fundamental change in the political status of Christians. A legend tells that, before joining battle with Maxintius for the leadership of the Roman Empire, Constantine saw a cross blazing in the sky with the words *in hoc signo vinces*—'in this sign you will conquer'.

Constantine took his subsequent resounding victory to be a sure sign of God's favour and his conversion to the Christian faith reversed the fortunes of Christendom at a stroke. Through the Edict of Milan in 313 he not only granted Christians freedom of worship throughout the Empire, but also put many in positions of public authority and allowed the church to own property.

In 328 Constantine created a great new city in the East bearing his name—Constantinople. It was to become a bastion of Christian culture and learning, a formidable rival to the other Christian Patriarchies around the Mediterranean—Antioch, Jerusalem, Alexandria and Rome. Worship in these centres was conducted in splendid new buildings and with great ceremony, in keeping with Christianity's new image as a state religion.

What is more, Christians in different countries began to worship in different languages, rather than in the Greek which had become the common language of earlier times. A number of different liturgical traditions arose, defined by geographical area and sometimes by the language adopted. The Western churches (including such areas as Spain, the Celtic countries and Gaul) adopted Latin for worship, Eastern countries tending to use the vernacular—Arabic in Syria, Greek in Byzantia, Coptic in Egypt. The effects of these ancient languages on Christian worship is still evident, as a number of the traditions laid down at this period are alive to this day. The story of these Eastern traditions is continued in Part 5.

The cithara seen on this Greek vase from the fifth century BC is being played by Apollo. Music was a central part of Greek cultural life. It was Pythagoras who discovered the relationship between numbers and musical scales, and stories about Orpheus were seminal myths for the Greeks. Little is known of how their music sounded, but it seems likely that Christian singing followed Greek as well as Jewish example.

the Almighty has begun; let us be glad and joyful and give praise to God, because this is the time for the marriage of the Lamb...'[9]

The acclamation 'Alleluia' suggests a refrain, following traditional practice in Jewish psalmody. The Gospel of Luke includes some songs which were perhaps already established in the worship of the early church by the time he recorded them. They are the song of Mary (the Latin version begins *Magnificat)*, the song of Zechariah *(Benedictus)* and the song of Simeon *(Nunc Dimittis)*.[10] By translating these songs back from the Greek of the Gospels to the original Aramaic, the characteristic rhythms and structure of Hebrew psalms are revealed, suggesting that they were chanted in the same way. The words of other early Christian hymns are quoted by Peter and Paul in their letters.[11]

Beyond these tantalizing glimpses of the earliest Christian worship in the first century, other evidence in the New Testament is circumstantial. The author of the book of Revelation, for instance, seems to base his visions of worship in the heavenly Jerusalem in chapters 4 and 5 on the words of the *Sanctus,* ('Holy, holy, holy') still used in the Eucharist. A similar text must therefore have been part of Christian worship in his own day.

Christian worship

In about AD111 Pliny the Younger, Roman governer of Bithynia and Pontus, wrote to the Emperor Trajan for guidance on the attitude he

should take to Christians. Writing as an unbeliever, he describes them in this way:

> **They affirmed, however, that this was the extent of their fault or error, that they were wont to assemble on a set day before dawn and to sing a hymn among themselves to the Christ, as to a god, and that they pledged themselves by vow not to some crime, but that they would commit neither fraud, nor theft, nor adultery, nor betray their word, nor deny a trust when summoned; after which it was their custom to separate and to come together again to take food—ordinary and harmless food, however.**[12]

Dancing and instrumental music were almost universally shunned, because of their powerful associations with debauchery and immorality. For example, this commentary on Isaiah dating from the fourth century clearly associates lyre-playing with prostitution:

> **You place a lyre ornamented with gold and ivory upon a high pedestal as if it were a...devilish idol, and some miserable woman, rather than being taught to place her hands upon a spindle, is taught by you... to stretch them out on the lyre. Perhaps you pay her wages or perhaps you turn her over to some female pimp, who, exhausting the licentious potential of her own body, presides over young women as the teacher of similar deeds.**[13]

There are many similar examples in contemporary writing. This vitriolic attack on both instrumental music and dancing dates from the fourth century:

> **... in blowing on the tibia [pipes] they puff out their cheeks... they lead obscene songs... they raise a great din with the clapping of scabella [a type of foot percussion]; under the influence of which a multitude of other lascivious souls abandon themselves to bizarre movements of the body.**[14]

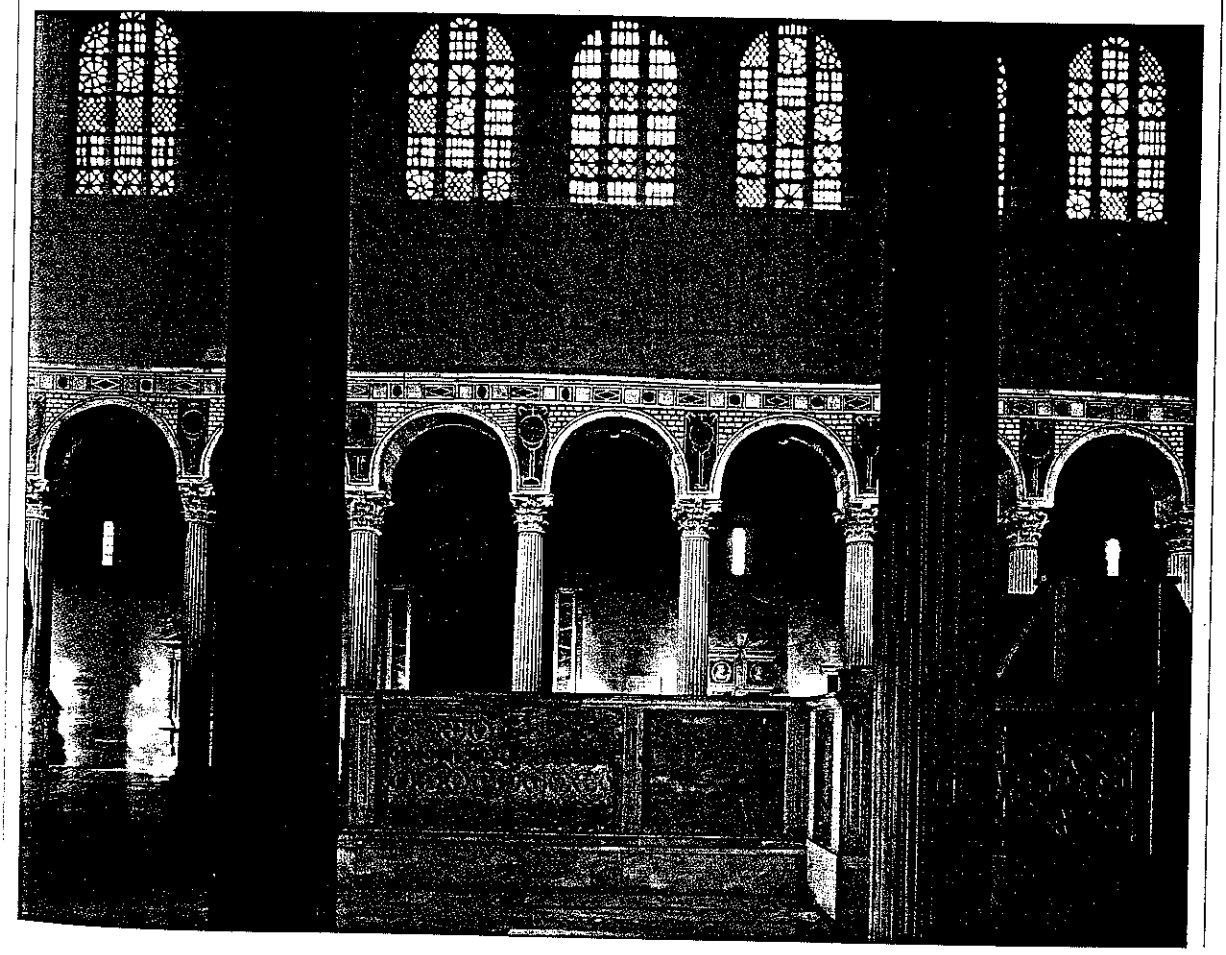
The vehemence of these comments indicates the church's desire to distance itself as far as possible from instrumental music or dancing. Christians were warned not to practise either, even outside the hours of formal worship.

Chapter 3

The Beginning of the Western Middle Ages

The name 'Middle Ages' was coined in the fifteenth century by European thinkers—artists and musicians among them—who turned their attention with renewed intensity to the world of classical antiquity as a model for their own age.

The bridge between their new classical age and the original one was the *medium aevum*, the medieval or Middle Ages, whose beginnings are usually reckoned from the fall of imperial Rome and the time of Pope Leo the Great. Though the Renaissance represented an important turning-point in European thought, the medieval culture it gradually replaced had itself been influenced by certain classical writers



The basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome preserves remarkably clearly the setting in which Christians would once have worshipped. It dates from the times when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Worship in Fifth-Century Jerusalem

Egeria, a Spanish nun, made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the beginning of the fifth century, and subsequently described her experience. This rare account is vivid and fascinating. Here she describes Sunday morning worship, perhaps at Easter.

First of all she observes the large crowd collecting in front of the church doors—they arrived early to be sure of getting in (she calls this a vigil):

> ***Before cockcrow the whole crowd collects, as many as the place will hold. For, as they are afraid that they may not be there at cockcrow, they come beforehand and sit there. And hymns and antiphons are sung; and after each hymn or antiphon a prayer is offered. For the priests and deacons are always there for vigils, on account of the crowd...***

She then describes the service of Matins, the first of the day:

> ***But when the first cock has crowed, the bishop descends and enters... All the doors are opened and the whole crowd streams into the sanctuary. Here innumerable lights are shining; and when the people have entered, one of the priests recites a psalm, and they all respond; then prayer is offered.***
>
> ***[Two more psalms and prayers follow, then] ...censers are brought into the sanctuary, so that the whole basilica is filled with odours. Then where the bishop stands inside the rails, he takes the Gospel and advances to the door and himself reads of the Lord's resurrection.***
>
> ***And when he has begun to read this, there is such a moaning and groaning of all the people, and such weeping...for that the Lord endured such grievous things for us. Then the Gospel having been read, the bishop comes forth and is led to the Cross with hymns, and all the people with him. There again one psalm is recited and prayer offered. Again he blesses the faithful, and the dismissal is given.***
>
> ***As the bishop comes forth they all approach to kiss his hand; and presently the bishop betakes himself to his own house. From that hour all the monks return to the sanctuary and psalms and antiphons are sung till daylight...***
>
> ***If any of the laity, either men or women, wish it, they stay there till it is light; but if they do not wish to do so, they return to their houses and go to sleep again.***

At dawn Egeria moves to the Great Church of Constantine, built on Golgotha, where first of all she hears many sermons from a number of priests during a service lasting till about ten in the morning. After this:

> ***the monks escort the bishop with hymns from the Great Church to the sanctuary. And when the bishop arrives with hymns, all the doors of the sanctuary basilica are opened; and all the people enter (that is, the faithful; for the catechumens [converts under instruction but not yet baptised] enter not).***

Then the baptised Christians all take Communion together. Finally she adds:

> ***Among all these details this is very plain, that psalms or antiphons are always sung; those at night, those in the morning, and those through the day, whether at the sixth hour [mid-day] or ninth hour [mid-afternoon] or vespers [early evening], being always suitable and intelligible as pertaining to the matter at hand.***[1]

These final comments suggest that the traditional daily round of services (the Daily or Divine Office) was already established by the fifth century and a comparison of Egeria's experience with the fuller details of the liturgy in the following chapters will show some interesting common ground.

Egeria stresses the importance of music, particularly the thread of psalm-singing which runs through all she describes. There are plenty of opportunities for the congregation to participate in the music: 'everyone responds' in the psalms. This suggests one of the traditional Jewish practices, that of cantor and congregation singing alternate verses. The reference to hymns here may mean a distinct type of music somewhat different from psalms—such as the hymns of Ambrose of Milan. An antiphon is a short sentence in song (see box).

In Egeria's time the two parts of the Eucharist—the Liturgy of the Word and the Communion—were geographically separated by being held in different buildings (the Christians returned to the basilica for the Communion where they had earlier heard Matins) and only baptised Christians were permitted to attend the latter.

These two sections of the service are still identifiable in many denominations today. The liturgy was clearly ceremonial, but this did not preclude emotional involvement on the people's part, particularly at the reading of the Gospel. The women, too, seem to have been given equal rights amongst the congregation, a state of affairs which was to change in harsher times to come.

Pope Gregory the Great, seen dictating a manuscript in this imagined portrait some two hundred years later than he lived, saw a need to unify the different forms of worship then in use. This harmonization inevitably included the music used in liturgy, hence Gregory's longstanding connection with church music, and particularly chant.

and their philosophy, with important consequences for Christian music.

During the fifth century the church hierarchy increased its power yet further. Pope Leo the Great, (Leo I, 440–461) showed himself to be an impressive diplomat, negotiating the retreat of Attila the Hun across Europe in 452 and later dissuading the conquering Ostrogoths from pillaging Rome. So it was by default that the church authorities found themselves taking up the reins of international politics as Roman imperial power collapsed around them.

Gregory the Great

A number of popes built on this power-base, none more impressively than Gregory the Great, who was born in about 540 and pope from 589 to 604. Gregory was a highly intelligent man, with considerable abilities of leadership.

With immense energy, he set about re-establishing Roman authority, both civil and ecclesiastical. He worked in international and local politics, rebuilding the fabric of the city (the aqueducts, for instance). He developed a welfare system of charities and hospitals and revised and tightened a tax system to pay for the administration of the city and its surroundings—all of which was put into effect by the clergy. Law and the penal code were redrawn in detail under his supervision.

Yet he also preached and wrote voluminously concerning faith and doctrine, aware of the need for a clear and unequivocal voice in Christian matters. Pope Gregory's double success in law and faith was of prime importance for the

In this tenth-century mosaic over the south door of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, Emperor Constantine, who founded Constantinople as the focus of the Eastern Empire, presents a model of the city to the Virgin Mary. Justinian, the Byzantine emperor responsible for building Hagia Sophia, presents a symbolic model of the church. In medieval times, church and state were to form a complex web of authority and influence over people's lives.

missionaries sent to the remoter corners of Europe. They needed to be able both to present an authoritative gospel and to offer an efficient network of administration to the barbarian kings. In 597, for instance, Gregory's mission to England landed in Kent and within twenty years not only was the Kentish king converted to Christianity, but he had also accepted a workable legal system along with it.

As part of the process of increasing the authority of the Church of Rome, Gregory strongly encouraged conformity in styles of worship. The differing Latin liturgies (Mozarabic, Gallican, Ambrosian, Celtic) were gradually absorbed into the Roman, with an inevitable effect on the melodies that characterized them.

Music was still not being written down, so it is difficult to tell what those changes were, but by the time music was widely notated (around the tenth century) there was near universal agreement on the shape of worship—the church year was established in fine detail, along with its liturgical structure and its music. One or two centres held out against change and, as a result of past dispensations, the Mozarabic liturgy can still be heard today in the Spanish cathedral of Toledo,[1] as can the Ambrosian in the northern Italian cathedral of Milan.

But Pope Gregory, a great diplomat, administrator and theologian, would probably be surprised to know that he is most widely remembered for the changes to the music for the Roman liturgy which took place during his papacy. This enduring attribution is the result of the apocryphal musical deeds that medieval scholars later invented for him. It is therefore an inaccurate though long-standing tradition which gives the name *Gregorian* chant to the richest collection of Christian music in the world.

Chapter 5

Music of the Spheres: the Medieval World-View

Almost all Gregorian chant, no matter how involved or decorated, has its origins in one of three types of music: cantillation (prayers, readings, psalms), free composition (antiphons) and new poems set to music (hymns). From these simple beginnings, the liturgies of both West and East gradually became more ornate. By about the eleventh century the complexity of some of them was remarkable, as the musical techniques of adornment created sounds far from the experience of the early Christians.

The cynical explanation for this ever-increasing elaboration of the liturgy and of its music is that it reflected the image that the church intended to present: all-powerful, authoritarian, blessed with spiritual and material riches. But its driving force lies elsewhere, in the medieval Christians' understanding of the world. Their first and fundamental desire was to see God in all things. Paul's letter to the Romans says:

Ever since God created the world his everlasting power and deity... have been there for the mind to see in the things he has made.[1]

The man who drew this elephant was plainly working from second-hand information. Medieval scholars were interested in everything but had close knowledge of only a very restricted world. Yet they saw the whole scheme of things as working together under the scrutiny of God.

The people of the Middle Ages were certain of God's existence and of supernatural powers at work around them: it was truly an 'age of faith'. The church cited the Bible as the final written authority for all points of doctrine, but the nature and diversity of God's creation was also minutely scrutinized, for it was believed that its every detail bore a message for mankind.

Hidden messages

One of the most charming examples of this can be found in bestiaries. A medieval bestiary is a kind of natural history book, a compilation by a monastic scribe of everything there was to be known about the animal kingdom. They are fascinating documents, with the most entertaining illustrations, for a Yorkshire monk was unlikely to have seen, for example, an elephant, and his second- or third-hand sources of information left much to his imagination.

Without the opportunity to travel the author had no sure way of telling what was fable and what was fact. Thus the bestiaries unwittingly mix real animals (many like horse and dog being accurately and lovingly described) with mythical creatures like the phoenix, the manticore or the basilisk. All are treated with equal respect.

But the real purpose of the book is to bring out the meaning that lies behind creation. What, for instance, has God to teach us through the basilisk?

The Basilisk... is the king of serpents. People who see it run for their lives, because it can kill them merely by its smell. Even if it looks at a man, it destroys him. Nevertheless, Basilisks are conquered by weasels... God never makes anything without a remedy.[2]

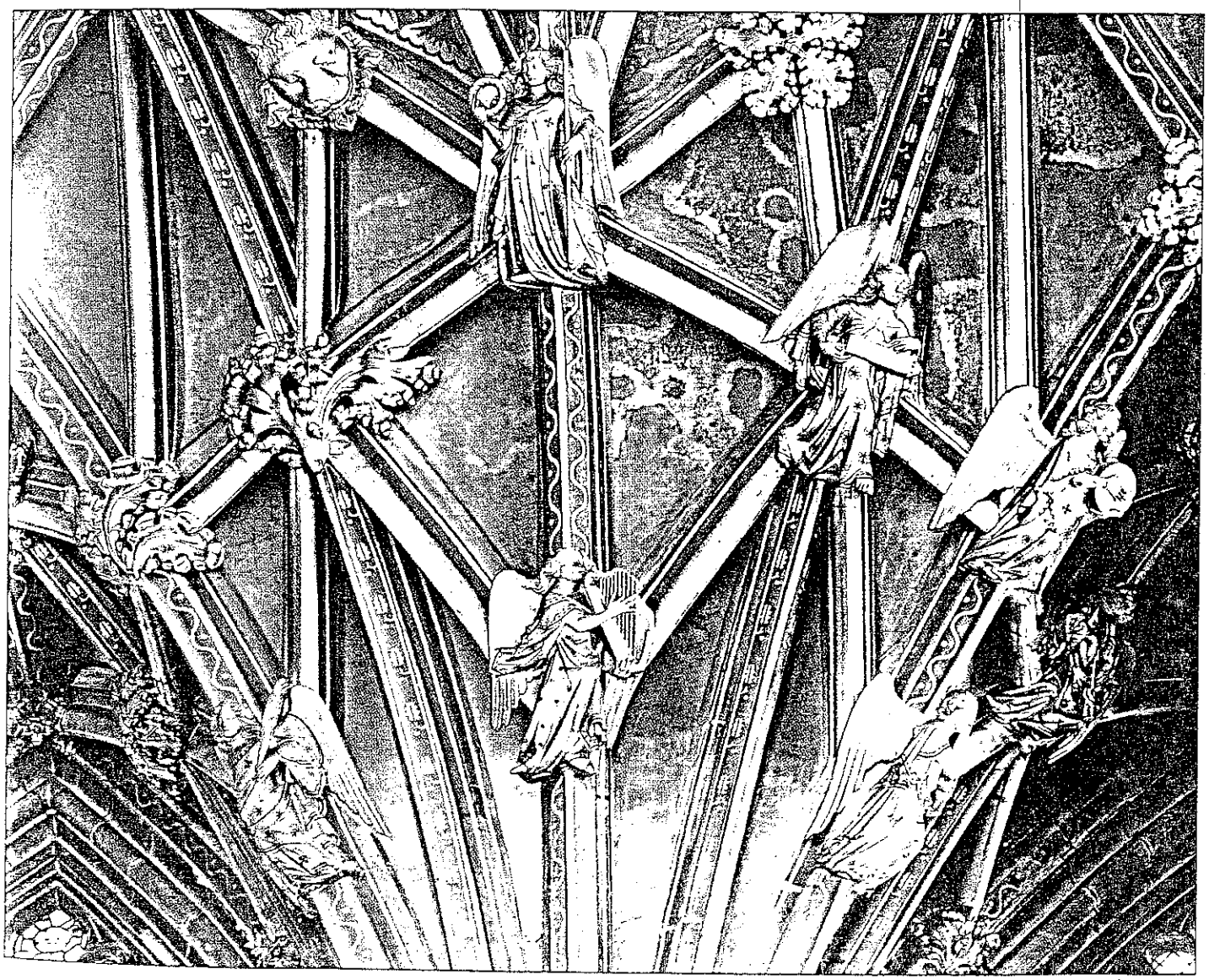
Thus every phenomenon of nature, whether real or imagined, was a sermon on the nature of God, once the church had unlocked the door to its meaning.

Numerology

While the authors of the bestiaries rejoiced in the wonder of living things and their lessons for mankind, the most powerful sermon of all lay in the numbers and proportions that ordered the natural world. The medieval preoccupation with number amounted to an obsession. Biblical commentators were so preoccupied with the hidden meaning of number that they neglected the straightforward message. For example, a verse from Psalm 33 invites everyone to: 'Give thanks to the Lord on the harp; with the ten-stringed psaltery chant his praises.'

The difficulty the church authorities had with the literal use of musical instruments for praise (see Chapter 3: Music in the Early Church) lead a third-century writer to an allegorical interpretation:

The musical instruments of the Old Testament are not unsuitable for us if understood spiritually... The harp is the active soul; the psaltery is pure mind. The ten strings can be taken as ten nerves, for a nerve is a string. Therefore, the psaltery



The angels on the rib-vaulting in Gloucester cathedral's fourteenth-century choir make up a heavenly orchestra. Yet they are using secular instruments. It took a long time for instruments to be accepted as part of medieval worship.

is taken to be a body having five senses and five faculties...[3]

The significance of number led the church to construct great edifices of learning around the significance of the Holy Trinity, the twelve apostles, the 24 elders of the book of Revelation, the proportions of the ark[4] or the number of the beast.[5]

This picture from an eleventh-century Italian choirbook illustrates the theme of the antiphon below it: 'Behold the wood of the cross, on which hangs the well-being of the world. Come, let us adore.' Signs (neumes) above the text give information only as a reminder of what the singers have already learned. These unheightened neumes give invaluable information to scholars about the development of chant.

The idea of a universe synchronized in every detail by numbers and their proportions is classical and pagan, but through the works of Pythagoras and Plato[6] it was readily accepted by Christians. By marrying their study of astronomy with biblical references to heaven, they built up a picture of a universe created and sustained by God, whose planets created a cosmic music through their harmonious movement. Like the Greeks before them, Christians understood astronomy and music to be inextricably bound together by their common basis in number. The Roman philosopher Boethius wrote in the sixth century:

There are three types of music. The first type is the music of the universe *(musica mundana)*, the second, that of the human being *(musica humana)*, and the third type is that which is created by certain instruments *(musica instrumentis constituta)* such as the kithara, or tibia or other instruments which produce melodies.

Now the first type, that is the music of the universe, is best observed in those things which one perceives in heaven itself, or in the structure of the elements, or in the diversity of the seasons. How could it possibly be that such a swift heavenly machine should move silently in its course?... it is impossible that such a fast motion should produce absolutely no sound, especially since the orbits of the stars are joined by such a harmony that nothing so perfectly structured can be imagined... Thus there must be some fixed order of musical modulation in this celestial motion.[7]

Thus even the humble *musica instrumentalis constituta* was linked through the music of the human soul ultimately to the music of the spheres, for all three were part of the same divinely controlled system. Mankind had therefore to strive to make music which synchronized with this harmoniously vibrating universe and which would therefore form a worthy part of God's great symphony of proportions.

This cosmological picture gradually blurred and faded as faith in scientific discovery replaced belief in the unknown and unseen. But this was not to happen for at least another thousand years.[8]

The Eleventh-Century Mass

This plan outlines a Mass as it might have been celebrated in the eleventh century. The Ordinary of the Mass (indicated here with bold text) is the term given to the texts that never change; the *Proper* (in italic) are those texts which vary with the church's calendar and therefore are 'proper' or appropriate for the occasion.

The Liturgy of the Word:

- *Introit*
  Antiphon, psalm-verse and repeat of antiphon
  Sung by the choir as the priest and ministers process to the altar
- Kyrie
  Often a three-fold repetition of 'Lord, have mercy' and 'Christ, have mercy'
  Everyone sings
- Prayers
  The priest offers prayers of confession and forgiveness
- Gloria
  Free composition
  A song of thanks and praise (see Luke chapter 2 verse 14)
- Versicle & response
  'The Lord be with you'—'And also with you'
  Exchanged between priest and congregation
- Collects
  Cantillation
  Prayers for the day
- Epistle
  Cantillation
  New Testament reading
- *Gradual*
  Antiphon, psalm-verse, antiphon
  Highly elaborate music for the choir
- *Alleluia*
  'Alleluia', psalm-verse, 'Alleluia'
  For the choir
- *Sequence*
  Free composition
  For the choir
- Gospel
  Cantillation
  The service book is carried to the rood-loft with great ceremony
- Credo
  Free composition
  A statement of faith for all to say or sing

Eucharistic feast:

- *Offertorium*
  Antiphon only
  For the choir
- Prayers
  Including *Sursum corda*—'Lift up your hearts'—and the Proper Preface for the day
  Preparation for the Communion
- Sanctus and Benedictus
  Free composition. The Sanctus is repeated again after the Benedictus
  Everyone sings
- The Canon of the Mass
  Consecration of the bread and wine
- Pater Noster—The Lord's Prayer
  Free composition
  Recitation by the priest
- Agnus Dei
  Free composition in three parts, each beginning *Agnus Dei*—'Lamb of God'
  Everyone sings
- The Communion
  The bread and wine are received with great ceremony
- *Communion*
  Antiphon only
  For the choir
- Versicle and response
- Postcommunion
  Cantillation
- *Ite, Missa Est*—
  Versicle of dismissal to which everyone responds *Deo gratias*—'thanks be to God'

The two parts of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word and the Eucharistic feast, were in earlier times two separate services. Although they were merged in the later Middle Ages, their distinct characters can still be sensed in Eucharistic celebrations today, one being a preparation for the other.