



CHAPTER 1

THE ORIGINS OF SACRED MUSIC

(A.D. 1–400)

Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.

Paul, Ephesians 5:19

How much do we know about the music of the early church? More than you might think.

Of course, we do not know exactly what the early church's music sounded like. We know little, for example, about particular melodies and rhythms, and still less about specific compositions. There was not much in the way of music notation available, and what little there was is impossible to decipher today with any accuracy.

You simply can't go to the local record store and purchase a CD of first-century Christian music. Unlike the music discussed in later chapters, for which specific music selections can be recommended, there are no CDs entitled *Saint Paul's Greatest Hits* or *David's Top*

40 *Psalms*. People have attempted to produce recordings of biblical music, but much of their efforts remain only guesswork. One point we can know for certain, though. Early church music sounded nothing like the background music Hollywood uses in its movies.

Yet we do know a good deal descriptively that can help us speculate on the music itself. Many of the primary descriptions are not about early Christian music per se, but rather about the two musical sources forming the seedbed from which Christian music began: the Jewish liturgy and the Greek musical traditions.

SEEDS of
CHRISTIAN
- Jewish liturgy
- Greek trad^s

The Jews and the Greeks

Anyone who has read the New Testament has certainly noticed two major elements scattered throughout its pages: ancient Jewish history and the relatively newer influence of the Greek language and customs. Throughout the Gospels and letters, we find accounts and quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures told in the Greek language. The Acts of the Apostles, in particular, tells of the many conflicts that arose with the mingling of these two very different cultures.

Therefore, it should not be surprising to find that the major influences on early Christian music are the Jewish and Greek musical traditions. The first Christians were Hebrews who had grown up in the synagogues of Israel, singing the Psalms of David. Yet there were soon thousands of gentile

believers who had never set foot in a synagogue and whose musical backgrounds were primarily Greek.

Some readers are probably wondering about the Roman musical influence. Didn't Rome conquer Greece long before the time of Christ? Yes, but the Romans were better soldiers than musicians. The Greeks had spent centuries building an impressive musical tradition. So when Greece fell to Rome, the conquerors found that their music couldn't hold a candle to that of the conquered. Therefore, the Greek musical systems were still "state of the art" in the world of the early church.

Let's examine what we know about these two musical traditions.

The Music of Jewish Worship

The Hebrew worshipers had been praising God with music since the time of Jubal, the "father of all who play the harp and flute" (Gen. 4:21). The many passages concerning the great choirs of the Jerusalem temple testify to the extensive use of music in Jewish worship. The words of the Psalms—notably Psalm 150—tell us that Jewish music was not only vocal but also employed a number of available instruments.

After the Babylonian exile of the sixth century B.C., the local synagogue replaced the temple as the usual place of worship for the Jewish believer. The worship lacked the sacrifices of the temple but still included prayer and psalm singing. Much of this singing was responsorial; that is, a cantor would sing a line of music, then the worshipers would

Responsorial

find other
psalms that
are clearly
responsorial

Temple	Synagogue
Vocal w/ INSTRUM Ps. of David	purely Vocal

antiphonal

respond in kind. For example, the first two verses of Psalm 136 could be sung in a responsorial fashion:

Cantor: Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.
People: His love endures forever.
Cantor: Give thanks to the God of gods.
People: His love endures forever.

Many interesting variations of this technique existed, but its use represented a long-standing concept: the musical leadership versus the congregation at large. Obviously, the most difficult parts were given to the leader, who, hopefully, had more talent than the average congregant. The emphasis (or lack thereof) on this "clergy-versus-laity" concept would be a controversial factor in subsequent Christian worship, even to our present day.

Another practice that gave precedence to the leader was the singing of Scripture using accepted melodic formulas that could be varied to fit different lines of text. Still another Jewish practice that would later affect Christian worship was antiphonal singing. Two groups of singers would alternate verses or lines of text, thus enhancing the dramatic impact of the Scriptures on the worshipers.

Early synagogue worship differed sharply from that of the temple in one critical way: it was purely vocal. Some believe that the use of vocals mourned the destruction of Solomon's temple. Others think that it showed the dissimilarity between the worship of the "true" God and the practices of pagan temples,

modes

Trace argument against instruments in worship

The Origins of Sacred Music

of

which used many instruments. Again, this argument against instrumental worship would be used in the early Christian church.

Greek Contributions

"Let me make the songs of a nation and I care not who makes the laws," **Plato** once said. The Greeks had recognized music's mystical powers many years before the Christian era. They had used it in artistic performances as well as in their own worship and had even invented the first systems of music theory. The major Greek philosophers speculated about music's powers, and the leading playwrights used music in the great plays that still move audiences today.

The methodical Greek mind focused on the acoustical and mathematical aspects of music. Struggling to understand the basic elements of sound, **Pythagoras** (fifth century B.C.) and his many followers divided strings into equal parts to create intervals and scale systems. A thousand years later, Christian melodies were categorized into Lydian, Dorian, and Aeolian modes, modes that were originally set down by early Greek musicians.

The Greeks produced a fascinating form of music notation, which looks nothing like the standard five lines we use today. There are no treble or bass clefs or, indeed, any indications of rhythm whatsoever. Instead, they wrote little words or symbols over each of the lyrics that indicated to the performer what pitch to sing for each word. Unfortunately, this imperfect system only works if you happen to know



PLATO

Born:

circa 427 B.C.
Athens, Greece

Died:

circa 347 B.C.
Athens, Greece

Occupation:

philosopher, scientist,
teacher

Hobbies/Interests:

politics, psychology,
art

Quotation:

"Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the secret places of the soul."

modes

harmony
polyphonic

monophonic

improvisation



PYTHAGORAS

Born:

fifth century B.C.
Samos, Greece

Died:

fifth century B.C.
Metapontum, Greece

Occupation:

mathematician,
scientist

Hobbies/Interests:

stargazing,
numerology, travel

Quotation:

"Do nothing you do
not understand."

exactly which pitch matches each symbol—and we do not!

Although the Greek and Hebrew cultures were worlds apart, some important similarities between their music did exist. For instance, in both cultures music was intricately linked with words. Both rhythm and melody were founded upon the poetry of a given text. Even the instruments of Greek music seemed to emphasize the words of the text it accompanied.

Speaking of Greek instruments, do not imagine that a Greek "orchestra" would sound anything like our modern orchestras. The ancient music of Greece was still monophonic. There is nothing to suggest harmony or polyphony as we know it. Instruments either doubled the vocal melody or embellished it in a dramatic style.

We also know that much of the music of the early Greeks was improvised. Therefore, no two performances were exactly alike. The composer and the performer were often the same person. For example, when a Greek bard sang a Homeric poem, he would superimpose his own style on the well-known story. This freedom of improvisation would affect the music of Christian worship until the Middle Ages. And, to some degree, it is still practiced in many churches, certainly in the performances of jazz, gospel, and rock music.

The Earliest Christian Music

In a manner of speaking, when Jesus "sung a hymn" at the end of the Last Supper (Matt. 26:30, Mark

QUICKTAKES

Recommended Recording

Music from Ancient Rome

Synaulia; A Research Group for Music, Dance, and Theater

(Amiata Records ARNR1396)

Although this recording is neither Greek, Hebrew, nor early Christian, it is one of the few recordings of ancient music that offers both competent scholarship and sensitive performances. Most selections are instrumental, encompassing a wide variety of unusual sounds—strange bamboo flutes, horns (literally the horns of animals), bells, buzzers, and drums. Undoubtedly, many of the notes are reconstructed by the players to simulate the forgotten melodies of Roman music, but the presentations are thoughtfully and skillfully crafted. The listener should be aware that this music of early Rome, closely related to that of Greece, is very different from what we are accustomed to hearing. Those willing to make the effort will discover a music that is truly fascinating.

14:26), he inaugurated the beginning of Christian music. Doubtless, the song he sang came from the Hallel group of Psalms (113–118) or some other Hebrew hymn. Since the earliest Christian worship services had much to do with reenacting the Last Supper, Jesus' hymn singing established an important precedent.

Much has been written about Paul's double reference to "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs"



PAUL

Born:

circa A.D. 5
Tarsus, Asia Minor

Died:

circa A.D. 68
Rome (?)

Occupation:

tent maker, preacher,
missionary

Hobbies/Interests:

traveling, poetry,
letter writing

Quotation:

"Sing and make music
in your heart to the
Lord."

(Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16). Rather than make dogmatic statements (which are mostly guesses that cannot be verified), it is probably best to say that Paul was simply describing all the possible music in a given worship service.

Paul's term *psalms* obviously refers to the singing of the various psalms from the Hebrew Scriptures. The Greek word *hymnis* simply means "a song written in praise or honor of God." It could have been composed by King David or by a local songwriter. Most of the millions of Christian songs today could fit into this very broad category.

Paul's spiritual songs have provoked much speculation, often bordering on musical and theological lunacy. There is nothing extramystical or magical about his terms, which are sometimes translated as "odes" or "canticles." Perhaps in contrasting the term *hymns* with the term *odes*, Paul used the second term to cover the improvised songs (possibly combined with ecstatic tongues) that were an integral part of the worship service. It may also refer to the phrase "sing with my spirit" that he used in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 14:15).

In Paul's discussion of worship services, he recognized the somewhat improvisatory nature of music in the early church: "When you come together, every one has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church" (1 Cor. 14:26). Paul's comment seems to indicate a strong

musical involvement of the congregation, who freely chose the songs they would spontaneously sing.

It is probable that in Ephesians 5:14, Paul quotes the words to an early Christian hymn:

Wake up, O sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.

These words may have been the first two lines of a responsorial song, initiated by a music leader and answered by the Ephesian congregation. Or perhaps they were the chorus the congregation intoned between solo verses that told the story of Jesus' resurrection. If only someone had had a good tape recorder in those days!

Again, we see the difficulty of speculating on such early music pieces. Unfortunately, the New Testament manuscripts did not come with sheet music attached, and the first books never had CDs on their inside covers.

Music in the Persecuted Church

The Roman authorities outlawed the Christian faith; thus, the early worship services were held in secrecy and often had to move from place to place. Christians gathered together in homes, in forests, in caves, or underground. Consequently, the facilities for teaching new music were primitive or nonexistent. Perhaps the main rule for singing was "Keep it quiet."

In letters written about A.D. 112 to the Emperor Trajan, Pliny the Younger comments that the

Christians in Asia Minor “were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in separate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god.” The language he uses may refer to antiphonal singing or to a hymn sung by the congregation, a song leader, or both.

About the same time, Ignatius of Antioch, on his way to martyrdom in Rome, wrote seven letters to churches and friends. In one of the letters, he exhorted fellow believers: “Therefore by your concord and harmonious love Jesus Christ is being sung. Now all of you together become a choir so that being harmoniously in concord and receiving the key note from God in unison you may sing with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father.” Again, the emphasis is on unity, reflected in the monophonic melodies of praise.

As the great martyr Origen (185–253) so indicated, it is significant that early church congregations sang praises and recited prayers in their own languages. In fact, the church’s first “songbook”—a collection of forty-two songs (text only, with no musical notation) from the early second century entitled *Odes of Solomon*—is not in Greek but in Syriac.

Many of the early hymns reflect the influence of the Psalms, as seen in this excerpt from the Greek Morning Hymn (from the second or third century):

Each day I will bless you, and I will praise your name forever, and forever.

Yet the teaching through all the early hymns is clearly Christian, underscoring praise to the Trinity, as seen in the beautiful Greek Evening Hymn of the second century:

Having come to the setting of the sun, seeing the evening light, we hymn the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit of God.

An early Christian hymn with music notation as well as text finally surfaced when in 1922 a mangled piece of papyrus was found at the site of Oxyrhynchus, an ancient Egyptian city. This third-century fragment contained the last few lines of a hymn to the Trinity, with Greek notation above the text. But as mentioned earlier, this Greek notation is not much help to us, since we cannot know with any certainty which pitches are indicated by the notation.

What Next?

Fortunately, the Roman emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 with the Edict of Milan. As the persecutions disappeared, the church began to codify its music for worship. Ironically, by suppressing the freedom of the early musicians, this codification did help to preserve some of the church's best hymns. Later, improved notation would record (at least on paper) the music as well as the words.

When the use of notation took place, we can say that the written history of sacred music truly began. Thus, both a song's text and its melody could

From Hebrew Psalms to the Renaissance

be preserved for future generations. A singer could then look at a manuscript and perform it as it had been originally performed. Later it could even be recorded.