

Why No Instruments?
January 29, 2006

Psalm 150

Old Testament Considerations

1. Instruments were used informally by the people of Israel in celebration of God's mighty deeds, with dancing:

Exodus 15:20-21, 1 Samuel 18:6-7

2. Commanded by David for bringing up the Ark of the Covenant and for the Levites' service before the Ark, before the Temple was built:

1 Chronicles 15: 1-3, 16-17, 25-28; 16:1-6

3. Commanded by God for the sacrificial worship of the Temple:

2 Chronicles 29:25-30,

looking back to David's commands for the Temple worship:

1 Chronicles 23:1-5, 25:1-8

New Testament Considerations

Hebrews 8:3-5

Hebrews 13:15

Ephesians 5:18-21

“With respect to the *tabret, harp, and psaltery*, we have formerly observed...that the Levites, under the law, were justified in making use of instrumental music in the worship of God; it having been his will to train his people...by such rudiments until the coming of Christ. But now, when the clear light of the gospel has dissipated the *shadows* of the law and taught us that God is to be served in a simpler form, it would be to act a foolish and mistaken part to imitate that which the prophet enjoined only upon those of his own time.”

[J. Calvin, Commentary on Psalm 81:2-3]

The Book of Revelation

Apocalyptic, symbolic, revealing glories beyond conception

5:6-10

14:1-3

15:1-2

Conclusion

Under the Old Covenant, instrumental music accompanied the worship of the saints in the Temple ritual, as their sacrifices went up to God. In the New Covenant, worship is simpler and less ritualistic. Since the true sacrifice of the Lamb of God has been completed, the singing of praise should be a cappella.

Under both Old and New Covenants, God is pleased when His people bring Him glory through the gift of music, including the use of musical instruments, in settings other than worship assemblies

Psalm 150

Instruments and Worship in Church History

1. Early Patristic Era

Corporate worship was simple:

“And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need. But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.”

[*First Apology of Justin Martyr* (Chapter 67 - Weekly Worship of the Christians) (c. 155 AD)]

2. Later Patristic and Medieval Era:

Music in the Church was **Plainchant** – texts from the Bible (chiefly Psalms) sung simply, **without instruments**.

Plainchant developed through the centuries in the East and West, and was fully developed by the 9th century (Byzantine Chant in the East, Gregorian Chant in the West).

The chanting was originally done by the whole congregation as part of their *koinonia* (oneness):

But,

“After the fourth century... the bond and "oneness" that united the clergy and the faithful in liturgical worship was less potent... [Previously, *koinonia*] referred, not to a separate group within the congregation entrusted with musical responsibilities, but to the congregation as a whole... A marked feature of liturgical ceremony was the active part taken by the people in its performance, particularly in the recitation or chanting of hymns, responses and psalms.”

[Dimitri Conomos, “Orthodox Byzantine Music”, <http://www.goarch.org/en/ourfaith/articles/article7069.asp> (website of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America)]

“For almost a thousand years Gregorian chant, without any instrumental or harmonic addition, was the only music used in connection with the liturgy.”

[*Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Musical Instruments in Church Services”, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10657a.htm>]

Thomas Aquinas (approx. 1250):

“The Church does not make use of musical instruments such as harps and psalteries, in the divine praises, for fear of seeming to imitate the Jews.”

[*Summa Theologica*, 2:2, Q.91, Article 2 “Whether God should be praised with song?” <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/309102.htm>]

3. The Later Middle Ages

Instrumental music began to take hold in the worship of both Eastern and

Western Churches (more in the West).

“It may be said that instrumental music developed simultaneously with the secular music itself. The troubadours, trouveres, and jongleurs (who flourished in France, Italy, and Spain from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries inclusive), and their English contemporaries, the minstrels or wayfarers, as well as the minnesingers in Germany during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, accompanied their chants and lyric improvisations on instruments.”

[*Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Musical Instruments in Church Services”,
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10657a.htm>]

Eventually, large assemblies of instruments accompanied the various parts of the Mass.

4. Reformation Era

There was a conscious return to the rule of the Scriptures. This brought about reconsideration of the use of instruments in the Church’s worship by John Calvin and his contemporaries. Calvin restored congregational singing and disagreed with the use of instruments in worship:

“To sing the praises of God upon the harp and psaltery, unquestionably formed a part of the training of the law and of the service of God under that dispensation of *shadows and figures*, but they are not now to be used in public thanksgiving.”

[J. Calvin, Commentary on Psalm 71:22]

5. Since the Reformation

Protestant churches have gradually re-introduced instruments, generally on the basis of expediency.

Reformed churches in continental Europe began to use instruments in the

17th century. Most Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches, following Calvin and Westminster, maintained a cappella praise until the 19th century. When instruments were re-introduced, it was generally asserted that they were adiaphora (not of the essence of worship).