

by Bruce McLarty

Why Worship Without Instruments?

The New Testament instruction and example are to sing praise to God, making music with our voices and our hearts.



The term “a cappella” came into the English language from Latin by way of Italian. It means “in the style of the chapel (church).” Today, it is commonly used to express “without instrumental accompaniment.”

From the beginning of Christianity, Christians sang in their worship without the use of musical instruments. Today, those who worship without musical instruments are a minority of believers in America. However, our practice is not as rare or peculiar as it might first appear. For the first 1,000 years of church

history, instrumental music in worship was not only unknown; it was also vigorously opposed by Christian writers. Although it was later accepted in the West, the Eastern (Greek Orthodox) Church has continued to regard instrumental music in worship as a non-biblical practice that is contrary to the spiritual nature of worship.

What are the reasons for insisting on a cappella music in Christian worship? Is this matter significant, or is it merely a stubborn tradition that has no relevance in the present age? These are the questions to which we now turn our attention.

New Testament Evidence

The early Jerusalem church was born into a world of music. Existing as it did for the first few years of its history in the shadow of the Jewish temple, the first-century church was exposed to a large variety of musical instruments. There were numerous types of cymbals, harps and lyres (1 Chronicles 25:6-7). However, the early church used none of them. Instead, its worship assemblies included psalms, hymns and spiritual songs performed only with human voices and hearts (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

It is a shock to most people today to find that, historically speaking, instrumental music in worship was actually the minority practice.

In light of the extensive use of instruments in the Old Testament and in the first-century world, it is amazing that no mention is in the New Testament of such instruments in connection with the worship of the church. Apparently, when the early Christians were instructed to sing, the clear meaning of those instructions to them was to sing without instruments of music.¹

Other Concerns

In addition to the direct instructions that early Christians had to sing, they had at least three other reasons to reject instrumental music:

(1) Its association with the Old Covenant. Instruments of music were, indeed, used in the worship conducted in the temple of God in Jerusalem. Many people today believe that instrumental music in worship is still appropriate based on this ancient practice. However, there are many Old Testament practices, including animal sacrifice, that the New Testament declares to be inappropriate for Christian worship: “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly

year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship” (Hebrews 10:1 NIV84).

Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (A.D. 263–339) wrote the following in his commentary on Psalm 91:2-3: “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 kithara and to do this on Sabbath days. . . . We render our hymn with a living psalterion and a living kithara 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.”

(2) Its association with externals. Jesus told the Samaritan woman that New Testament worship was to be in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). Instructions about Christian singing include these spiritually focused words: “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music *in your heart to the Lord*” (Ephesians 5:19, emphasis added). “Let the word of Christ dwell in you

richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude *in your hearts to God*” (Colossians 3:16, emphasis added).

In another context, while not condemning the use of musical instruments, the apostle Paul drew a contrast between the meaningless noise of a gong or a cymbal and the meaningful response of a human heart filled with the love of God (1 Corinthians 13:1). Everett Ferguson, in a work entirely devoted to the question of a cappella music in worship, writes:

“The whole self (including the emotions) is involved in Christian worship, but the mind (reason) is to be in control. Instrumental music can express feelings and emotions. Vocal music can express the will and intellect. The latter is better suited for the communion of spirit with Spirit. In vocal music there is an immediate contact. In instrumental music there is an intermediary. The voice is much more a matter of one’s self than any other gift of praise can be. Vocal music thus best corresponds to the nature of man’s relationship to God.”²

(3) Its association with pagan festivals. As the church moved out of Judea and into the Greek world, instrumental music posed new problems for Christians. Many of their converts had formerly been involved in pagan mystery cults where a wide variety of musical instruments had been part of the wild immorality that characterized their worship. Out of concern for these young, vulnerable believers, the early church avoided instrumental music in its worship, helping the new converts to make a clear break with their sinful past. *The Oxford History of Music* observes:

“The religious use of instruments, so long an important feature of the Temple worship, was not prohibited after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 in token of mourning, as was long believed, but discouraged before then in order to safeguard the purity of religious music ‘against the musical and orgiastic mystery cults in which Syrian and Mesopotamian

Jews not infrequently participated.' It was equally disapproved of by the Hellenistic–Judaic philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who wrote in the early years of the Christian era and was opposed to any kind of music in worship, and in the early Christian communities – whose interdiction of instrumental participation in service-music has been maintained to this day by the Eastern Church.”³

The Testimony of Church History

Although church history does not serve as our authority, it is often helpful in understanding the thinking of the earliest Christians. As mentioned before, we have no clear references of instrumental music in Christian worship for almost 1,000 years. Even then, it was not the normal or generally accepted practice. It is a shock to most people today to find that, historically speaking, instrumental music in worship was actually the minority practice.

It is also surprising to most people to find that many writers in the first several centuries had a lot to say about instruments of music. Typical of their objections to instruments are the following:

- **Theodoret (A.D. 390–458)** – A leader of the church in Syria, Theodoret was probably the writer of *Questions and Answers for the Orthodox*: “107. Question: If songs were invented by unbelievers to seduce men, but were allowed to those under the law on account of their childish state, why do those who have received the perfect teaching of grace in their churches still use songs, just like the children under the law?”

“Answer: It is not simple singing that belongs to the childish state, but singing with lifeless instruments, with dancing, and with clappers. Hence the use of such instruments and the others that belong to the childish state is excluded from the singing in the churches, and simple singing is left.”

- **Niceta (A.D. 335–414)** – A church leader in Eastern Europe, Niceta addressed the concept of “silent singing” in *On the Utility of Hymn Singing*: “It is time to turn

to the New Testament to confirm what is said in the Old, and particularly, to point out that the office of psalmody is not to be considered abolished merely because many other observances of the Old Law have fallen into desuetude [disuse]. Only the corporal institutions have been rejected, like circumcision, the sabbath, sacrifices, discrimination in foods. So, too, the trumpets, harps, cymbals and timbrels. For the sound of these we now have a better substitute in the music from the mouths of men.”

Conclusion

The New Testament instruction and example are to sing praise to God, making music with our voices and our hearts. The early church was both consistent and adamant in its rejection of musical instruments in worship. Whatever the reasons – whether because of its association with the Old Covenant, with inferior external rituals, or with pagan feasts – instrumental music was viewed for centuries as inappropriate for Christian worship and inferior to the human voice as a vehicle for the expression of the soul’s worship of God.

Non-instrumental believers today continue to follow the simple, positive teaching of the New Testament on this subject and to imitate the example of the early Christians in our rejection of instrumental music in the worship of the church. □

Bruce McLarty currently serves as the vice president for spiritual life at Harding University in Searcy, Ark., but was recently named to become president of the school in June 2013. He may be contacted at bmclarty@harding.edu.

Endnotes

1 Milo Richard Hadwin, “What Kind of Music Does God Want?”, *Directions for the Road Ahead: Stability in Change Among Churches of Christ*, eds. Jim Sheerer and Charles L. Williams (Chickasha: Yoemen Press, 1998) 67.

2 Everett Ferguson, *A Cappella Music in the Public Worship of the Church* (Abilene: Biblical Research Press, 1972) 88.

3 *The Oxford History of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 39.

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