

The History of Instrumental Music

INTRODUCTION

- A. Something which sets us apart from the majority of the religious world is the absence of instrumental music in the worship.
 - 1. I know a preacher who says that one night as he was sleeping, he got a phone call from the church's security system saying there had been a break in at the building.
 - a. The preacher got up, threw some clothes on, and headed for the building.
 - b. But, the security company had also alerted the local sheriff, and the sheriff arrived at the building before the preacher.
 - c. When the preacher arrived at the building, the sheriff informed the preacher, "It doesn't look like they took anything but your piano."
 - 2. Dan Chambers, in his excellent little book, "Where's the Piano?", tells of taking his children to a large denominational church in Nashville to hear a renowned speaker on the subject of Creation vs. evolution.
 - a. His six-year-old son Chris sat down near the front of the building and began looking at the enormous multi-level stage in front of them.
 - b. Finally, the little boy couldn't take it any longer and blurted out, "Dad, what are those drums doing up there?"
- B. That is a solid, right question to ask: "What are those drums or that piano or that organ doing up there?"
 - 1. The New Testament never mentions the use of instrumental music in relation to the singing of praises to God.
 - a. "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples" (Rom 15:11).
 - b. "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord" (Eph 5:19).
 - c. "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" (Col 3:16).
 - 2. Some have said through the years that the silence of the Scriptures should not and does not prohibit the use of incremental music in worship. We must understand, however, that the Scripture's silence is prohibitive.
 - a. In speaking of the change of the priesthood, the author of Hebrews writes, "It is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests" (Heb 7:14).
 - 1) The Old Testament simply said that the Levites were to be priests and it never once said that those from the tribe of Judah could not serve as priests.
 - 2) Yet because God had specified the Levites were to serve as priests, that excluded all other tribes.
 - b. "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which described in this book" (Rev 22:18-19).
 - 3. Some have also said that the instrument is, like a song book or a microphone, an aid to assist in the worship of God.
 - a. That overlooks that they are two types of music-vocal and instrumental and that God has

- specified vocal music.
- b. That also overlooks that instrumental music cannot add one thing to what God desires singing to accomplish in worship.
 - 1) From both Eph 5:19 and Col 3:16, it is clear that music in the assembly is to speak, to teach, and to admonish.
 - 2) How can a lifeless instrument one must play speak to me, teach me anything, or admonish me in my Christian life?
 - c. That also overlooks the fact that in the Old Testament, instrumental music did not just aid the worship, but it was worship in and of itself.
 - 1) Ps 150.
 - 2) While some have also wanted to use such texts to justify instrumental music in the New Testament era. Jesus took the Old Law out of the way at his cross (Eph 2:14-15). Using instrumental music simply because it was mentioned in the Old Testament would be no more appropriate than burning incense, offering sacrifices, erecting a temple, and other Old Testament avenues of worship.
- C. Tonight, I want us to go back in time and examine what some well-known scholars of the past have said on the subject of instrumental music and see that we are not at all unusual in the history of Christendom.
1. Although we are in the minority in the modern world, as we examine history, we find that we are in the majority, for instrumental music has been rejected by learned people since the beginning of the church.
 2. I also want us to notice the problems incremental music has caused among brethren since the beginning of the church.

THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

- A. The early church fathers were unanimous in their denunciation of instrumental music.
1. Clement of Alexandria who lived from 150-215 wrote:
 - a. "He who is from David, yet before him, the Word of God, scorning the lyre and cithara as lifeless instruments, and having rendered harmonious by the Holy Spirit both his cosmos and even man the microcosm, made up of body and soul-he sings to God on his many voiced instrument and he sings to man, himself an instrument: 'You are my cithara, my aulos and my temple,' a cithara because of harmony, and aulos because of spirit and a temple because of the word, so that the first might strung the second might breathe and the third might encompass the Lord."
 - b. Again Clement wrote: "We, however, make use of but one instrument, the word of peace alone by which we honor God, and no longer the ancient psaltery, nor the trumpet, the tympanum and the aulos, as was the custom among those expert in war and those scornful of the fear of God who employed string investments in heir festive gatherings, as if to arouse the remissness of spirit through such rhythms."
 2. Tertullian, who lived from 170-225, like many of the ancient Christian writers saw instrumental music associated with the theaters of the ancient world, which they saw as immoral. Tertullian wrote: "Clearly Liber and Venus are the patrons of the theatrical arts. That immodesty of gesture and bodily movement so peculiar and proper to the stage is dedicated to them, the one god dissolute in her sex, the other in his dress. While whatever transpires in voices melody instruments and writing is in the domain of Apollo, the Muses, Minerva and Mercury. O Christian, you will detest those things whose authors you cannot but detest!"
 3. Isidore of Pelusium who died about 435 wrote: "A carousal, my dear friend, is the intoxicating aulos, together with prolonged drinking, which arouses one to sensuality, and makes of the

symposium a shameful theater, as it bewitches the guests with cymbals and other instruments of deception. It is written that they who frequent it stand outside the kingdom, as they well know.”

4. Gregory of Nazianzus, who lived from 329 to 389, wrote: “First, brethren let us celebrate the feast, not with carnal rejoicing, nor with extravagance and frequent changes of clothing, nor with carousing and drunkenness, nor surrounded by the sound of ion and percussion; for this is the manner of the monthly Grecian rites Let his take up hymns rather than tympana, psalmody rather the shameful dances and songs, a well-rendered applause of thanksgiving rather than theatrical applause, meditation rather than debauchery.”
 5. Epiphanius of Salamis, who lived from 315 to 403, wrote: “In fact the aulos itself is an imitation of the serpent through which the Evil One spoke and tricked Eve. For it was in imitation of that type that the aulos was made, for the pulse of deceiving mankind. And observe the type, which he who plays the aulos represents upon the instrument. For the player throws his head back, then bows forward; he inclines to the right then similarly to the left. Now the devil has used the same gestures in order to flaunt blasphemously at the inhabitants of heaven, and to bring utter destruction to things on earth, at once encompassing the entire world, causing ruin right and left to those persuaded and charmed by his treachery, as if by the deceptive tones of a musical instrument.”
 6. John Chrysostom, who lived from 347 to 407 and was probably the best orator the church ever saw wrote: “He allowed those instruments, then, for this reason: because of their weakness, and because he wanted to temper the in love and harmony, to raise their understanding through enjoyment to do what accrues to their benefit and to lead them to great zeal through enticement of this sort. For knowing their thoughtlessness, laziness and carelessness, go wished to arouse them by this stratagem, blending the sweetness of melody in with the effort of paying attention.”
- B. The first instrument used in Christian worship seems to have been introduced by Pope Vitalian I about AD 666.
1. The Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia, an authoritative source on church history records: “In the Greek Church the organ never came into use. But after the eighth century it become more and more common in the Latin Church; not, however, without opposition from the side of the monks. Its misuse, however, raised so great an opposition to it, that but for the Emperor Ferdinand, it would probably have been abolished by the Council of Trent. The Reformed Church discarded it; and though the Church of Basel very early reintroduced it, it was in other places admitted only sparingly, and after long hesitation.”
 2. Interestingly, Pope Pius IV published a document on church music on November 22, 1903. In paragraph IV, the document says, “Although the music proper to the Church is purely vocal music, music with the accompaniment of the organ is also permitted.”

WHAT DO CHURCH HISTORIANS SAY ABOUT INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC?

- A. Church historians are unanimous that instrumental music was not used in the primitive church.
1. J. E. Riddle wrote: “These instruments of music were introduced into the Christian church about the ninth century. They were unknown alike to the early church, and to all the ancients The large wind organ was known, however, long before it was introduced into the churches of the west. It appears, from the testimony of Augustine and others, that it was known in Africa and Spain, as early as the fifth and sixth centuries. The first organ used in a church was one which was received by Charlemagne as a present from the emperor Constantine Michael In the east, organs were never approved as instruments of sacred music, nor did the use of them continue without opposition in the west.”
 2. Lyman Coleman wrote: “The organ constituted no part of the furniture of the ancient churches. The first instance on record of its use in the church, occurred in the time of Charlemagne, who received one as a present from Constantine Michael, which was set up in the church at Aix-la-Chapelle. The

musicians of this city, and of Mentz, learned to play on the organ in Italy, from which it appears that they were already known in that country.”

3. John Kurtz wrote: “At first church music was simple, artless, recitative. But the rivalry of heretics forced the orthodox church to pay greater attention to the requirements of art. Chrysostom had to declaim against the secularization of church music. More lasting was the opposition of the church to the introduction of instrumental accompaniment.”
 4. Philip Schaff, one of the greatest church historians ever, wrote: “The use of organs in churches is ascribed to Pope Vitalian. Constantine Copronymos sent an organ with other presents to King Pepin of France in 767. Charlemagne received one as a present from the Caliph Haroun al Rashid, and had it put up in the cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle The attitude of the churches toward the organ varies. It shared to some extent the fate of images except that it never was an object of worship The Greek Church disapproves the use of organs. The Latin Church introduced it pretty generally, but not without the protest of eminent men, so that even in the Council of Trent a motion was made, though not carried, to prohibit the organ at least in the mass.”
 5. Joseph Bingham wrote, “Music in churches is as ancient of the apostles, but instrumental music not so.”
- B. Can there be any doubt that instrumental music was not present in the earliest days of the church?

WHAT HAVE VARIOUS COMMENTATORS SAID ABOUT INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC?

- A. William Beveridge wrote: “All the while that you are singing and praising God, keep your minds as intent as you can upon it, without taking any notice at all of the organs, for they will have their effect upon you better if you do not mind them than if you do; for your minding of them will divert your thoughts from the work you are about.”
- B. Charles Buck wrote: “Much has been said as to the use of instrumental music in the house of God. On the one side it is observed that we ought not to object to it, because it assists devotion; that it was used in the worship of God under the Old Testament; and that the worship of heaven is represented by a delightful union of vocal and instrumental music. But on the other side, it is remarked, that nothing should be done in or about God’s worship without example or precept from the New Testament; that, instead of aiding devotion, it often tends to draw off the mind from the right object; that it does not accord with the simplicity of Christian worship; that the practice of those who lived under the ceremonial dispensation can be no rule for us; that not one text in the New Testament requires or authorizes it by precept or example, by express words or fair inference; and that the representation of the musical harmony in heaven is merely figurative language, denoting the happiness of the saints.”
- C. Adam Clarke wrote: “But were it even evident, which it is not, either from this or any other place in the sacred writings, that instruments of music were prescribed by Divine authority under the law, could this be adduced with any semblance of reason, that they ought to be used in Christian worship? No; the whole spirit, soul, and genius of the Christian religion are against this: and those who know the Church of God best, and what constitutes its genuine spiritual state, know that these things have been introduced as a substitute for the life and power of religion; and that where they prevail most, there is least of the power of Christianity. Away with such portentous baubles from the worship of that infinite Spirit who requires his followers to worship him in spirit and in truth, for to no such worship are those instruments friendly.”
- D. Erasmus, a contemporary of Martin Luther, wrote: “We have brought into our churches a certain operose and theatrical music; such a confused, disorderly chattering of some words, as I hardly think was ever heard in any of the Grecian or Roman theatres. The church rings with the noise of trumpets, pipes and dulcimers; and human voices strive to bear their part with them Men run to church as to a theatre, to have their ears tickled. And for this end organ-makers are hired with great salaries, and a

company of boys, who waste all their time in learning these whining tones.”

- E. John Calvin, the well-known Reformation leader, asserted: “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, The papists, therefore, have foolishly borrowed this, as well as many other things, from the Jews. Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostle is far more pleasing to Him.”

CONCLUSION

- A. There can be little doubt that instrumental music was not used in the earliest days of the church, nor that the New Testament does not in any way authorize its use.
- B. Those who desire to be faithful to God will sing and make music on their hearts, not on a mechanical instrument. Are you faithful to God?