

Lifting Our Voices by Everett Ferguson

During my graduate study days at Harvard, I lived in the same dormitory with a Greek Orthodox student who was a graduate of the University of Athens and a candidate for the master's of theology degree at Harvard. I asked him if it was correct that the Greek Orthodox churches did not use instrumental music in their public worship. He said, "Yes." Then, I inquired as to the reasons why. His reply was most interesting to me: "We do not use instrumental music because it is not in the New Testament, and it is contrary to the nature of Christian worship." He stated my case for unaccompanied church music better than I could.

In elaborating my reasons for defending *a cappella* music in the public worship of the church, I would like to apply a method of approach that I have found helpful in considering disputed matters of Christian practice. This methodology involves three steps: 1. an analysis of the New Testament evidence, 2. a testing of one's interpretation of the New Testament by the testimony of church history, and 3. a consideration whether there is a doctrinal or theological reason that explains or gives meaning to the biblical and historical evidence.

New Testament Evidence

According to the New Testament evidence, instrumental music was not present in the worship of the early church. Singing incontestably was present in the corporate life of the early Christians (1 Corinthians 14:15; Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19), and this was rooted in the practice of Jesus with His disciples (Mark 14:26). But there is no clear reference to instrumental music in Christian worship in any New Testament text.

We may note in passing that the New Testament passes no negative judgment on instrumental music *per se*. It makes neutral references to playing on instruments (Matthew 11:17), uses instruments for illustrations - with unfavorable connotations it may be noted (1 Corinthians 13:1; 14:7) and compares the heavenly worship to the sound of instruments - probably under the influence of Old Testament and temple practice (Revelation 14:2). The situation is simply that instruments are not referred to in the church's worship.

Testimony of History

In J. W. McKinnon's doctoral dissertation, *The Church Fathers and Musical Instruments* [Columbia University, 1965], later summarized in his article "The Meaning of the Patristic Polemic against Musical Instruments" [*Current Musicology*, Spring, 1965, pp. 69-82], McKinnon presents information about the history of instrumental music in the church. His studies put the introduction of instrumental music - first the organ - even later than the dates found in reference books. It was perhaps as late as the 10th

century that the organ was played as part of the worship service. This makes instrumental music one of the late innovations of the medieval Catholic church. And that was only in the Western branch of Christendom, not in the Eastern Orthodox branch, which we have seen still today does not use an instrument in worship - except for congregations under the influence of Western churches. Even in the West, the acceptance of instrumental music has not been uniform. The Reformed and Anabaptist branches of Protestantism eliminated the instrument as a Catholic corruption and only came to reaccept it - and then not uniformly - about the time instruments were being introduced into churches of the Restoration Movement. Thus, to abstain from the use of the instrument is not a peculiar aberration of a frontier American sect; this is easily the majority tradition of Christian history. Virtually no one has said it is wrong to worship *a cappella*, whereas many have thought instrumental music in worship is wrong. *A cappella* music is truly the ecumenical ground to occupy.

The church's nonuse of instrumental music is in contrast to the surrounding religious world. Any nonuse of instrumental music was not in the same category with nonuse of loud speakers. Instrumental music was available and was part of the surrounding religious practices. Pagan religions used instruments to accompany their sacrifices and to arouse the emotions of their worshipers. The instruments accompanied song. If the church were going to reject instrumental music because of its association with pagan worship, song should have been rejected too.

The temple cult of the Old Testament also employed instrumental music as an accompaniment to its sacrifices. Here, indeed, we may have a clue to the nonuse of instrumental music in Christian worship. When the Levitical priesthood and the sacrificial cult were abolished, naturally its accompaniments were too. Thus, the incense that accompanied the offering of animal sacrifices became a symbol of the prayers of the saints (Revelation 5:8), but there is no reference to literal incense used in early Christian worship and several references in early Christian literature explicitly disowning it. Similarly something external and mechanical like instrumental music was superseded by the songs of praise.

Historical evidence makes it most unlikely that use of an instrument is implied in the term *psallo*, the Greek term for "music," in the New Testament and shows that the absence of clear reference to instrumental music in the church's worship in early days was not accidental. It was not mentioned because it was not there, not because there was no occasion to refer to it. There is no time when we can point to an original use of instruments in the church being abandoned.

The Nature of Worship

Thus far, we have seen that the testimony of church history and the circumstances of New Testament times point to a negative conclusion on the use of instrumental music in early Christian worship. Was there some reason, other than cultural or sociological,

for the absence of instrumental music in early Christian worship? We turn now to the doctrinal or theological aspect of our study. It seems to me that this is the really conclusive consideration on which a decision about our practice today must be made. I would argue that *a cappella* music is more consistent with the nature of Christian worship. It is really the nature of Christian worship that determined early Christian practice and should determine our practice.

Worship is what we offer to God. The important thing in Christian worship is not our uplift, what pleases our senses, or what we find aesthetically satisfying. Instrumental music may put me in a certain mood, may stir my heart, and may stimulate high sentiments (as well as lower or lesser sentiments), but my feelings are not my worship. Instrumental music performed by someone else cannot be something I offer to God. Our worship is to be determined by what is rational, spiritual and verbal, not by what is emotional, aesthetic or sensual.

Worship is grounded in our relation to God, as creature to the Creator. That means we must come before God on His terms. The gifts we offer are those He appoints. Instrumental music was an act of worship and not an aid in the Old Testament. It was a separate act. Playing an instrument is doing something different from singing. To offer mechanical music would require explicit authorization from God.

When Paul was confronted with disorders in the worship assembly of the church at Corinth, he invoked the standard of what "edifies the church" to govern the conduct of the worshipers (1 Corinthians 14:4, 6, 9, 12, 19, 26). What goes on in the assembly must be intelligible, understandable. Rational, spiritual, vocal music corresponds to this criterion. "[E]ach one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification" (1 Corinthians 14:26 RSV). It is difficult to conceive of instrumental music contributing to the biblical meaning of edification, building one up in the faith. It is more likely to interfere with the purposes of edification than to contribute to them.

The type of vocal praise that evolved in the synagogue and the early church made instrumental music irrelevant. It is only the instrumentally conceived music of modern times that makes us think differently. It is no wonder, therefore, that historians and interpreters of church music agree that *a cappella* singing is the purest and highest type of church music. Many quotations could be assembled on this theme. Historians may not agree on an exclusive stand, but they do agree that this is the classic form of church music. I should not be understood as saying that just because the singing is unaccompanied it measures up to these standards of Christian worship - as edifying, spiritual, and an appropriate offering of man to God. I am simply saying that vocal music is best fitted to express the nature of Christian worship.

Conclusion

We are on good historical and theological grounds to engage in *a cappella* music in our public worship. This is safe, ecumenical ground that all can agree is acceptable. Instrumental music cannot be confirmed as authorized in the text of the New Testament. It did not exist in worship until centuries after the New Testament was written. Vocal music is more consistent with the nature of Christian worship.

Neither side of the instrumental music controversy has had a monopoly on Christian love and humility, and neither side has reason for pride. My hope is that we can go beyond our recent history of bitterness and unite on the original undivided ground of the Restoration Plea. This should not be done out of the spirit "one side is right and the other wrong." But let us be New Testament churches - in practice and in attitude, in loyalty to the Bible, and in the exercise of Christian freedom.

This article is adapted from Everett Ferguson's book, A Cappella Music in Public Worship, which is being reissued in its third edition by Star Bible Publishing. Used by permission.

February 2000, *Gospel Advocate*, pgs. 12-13