

## THE USE OF INSTRUMENTS IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP (Part 1)

*This is the first of two articles by The Reverend Peter Moger, which examine some of the history of the use of musical instruments in Christian worship.*

One of the most exciting developments in church music during the past 40 years has been the rediscovery of the use of a wide range of musical instruments in regular Christian worship. It has spread across virtually all denominations and traditions, and finds its expression in church orchestras, praise bands and small informal groupings of instrumentalists.

The roots of instrumental worship music lie in the Bible. In the Old Testament, there are numerous references to the playing of instruments. That great final Psalm (150) encourages us to praise God:

***'...with the blast of the trumpet, ... upon the harp and lyre,  
...with timbrel and dances, ... upon the strings and pipe,  
...with ringing cymbals [and] upon the clashing cymbals.'***

In 1 Chronicles 15 we read of King David's appointment of professional musicians for the Temple: notably ***'Chenaniah, leader of the Levites in music, was to direct the music, for he understood it.'*** And under his direction were players of horns, trumpets, cymbals, harps and lyres, as well as singers.

For the Israelites at this time, instrumental music was simply a part of life and - with no false distinction between 'sacred' and 'secular' - what could be more natural than to use instruments in the worship and praise of God.

But while the Old Testament (and the Psalms in particular) offer us so many examples of instrumental music, in the New Testament there are, rather surprisingly, none. There was certainly music in the early Christian Church. Colossians 3:16 (and the parallel passage in Ephesians 5:19) encourages us to 'sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs' to God. It is likely that this singing was accompanied by instruments but there is no biblical reference to this.

The early Church based its practice on the New Testament texts (or lack of them!). The lack of references to instruments in worship was taken to imply a biblical prohibition of instruments. And so the Church Fathers became strong in their condemnation of instrumental music in church. Perhaps the most typical comment is that of John Chrysostom - that 'where flute [or aulos] players are, there Christ can never be.' (There was another reason for this: aulos players were commonly associated with temple prostitutes and thereby often excluded from Christian worship.) Chrysostom's attitude was reinforced by the Church enforcing legislation against instrumentalists and there are records of instrumentalists having been refused baptism. The Old Testament references to musical instruments were dismissed either by allegorical interpretation, or by conceding that, whilst the Jews were allowed instruments to help their devotion, for Christians, they were hardly compatible with true 'worship of the spirit'. Early Christian music, then, was exclusively vocal - and

this practice continued for many centuries. Many Christian denominations of today owe much of their practice to the work of the Protestant reformers. At the Reformation, Europe saw a variety of attitudes to the place of music in worship, and to instrumental music in particular. For Ulrich Zwingli (Zurich) there was no place for music in worship at all - he saw it as a secular activity and so, for him, no music was allowed in worship, not even hymn singing, which he thought 'unscriptural'. Although Jean Calvin (Geneva) forbade instrumental music (on the grounds that it is not mentioned in the New Testament), he allowed singing in worship, but only the singing of metrical settings of the Psalms (in other words, only the words of Scripture were allowed). In sharp contrast, Martin Luther had a very high view of music. It was, he claimed, able to 'make known' aspects of God's truth - and he put it on a par with preaching as a vehicle for proclaiming the word of God. For him, there was no real difference between instrumental and vocal music since all music was a vehicle of God's truth, not merely a channel for words. As a result, the Lutheran tradition gave birth to a great wealth of instrumental writing for worship, with the cantatas and passions of J S Bach being the supreme example.

So what happened in England? Read the concluding part of this article in the next Ely Music Rag to find out.

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