

An Analysis of the Ancient Church Fathers on Instrumental Music

By David VanBrugge

As the early church grew out of and confronted the cultures surrounding it, there was a need for discernment and teaching. Many of its members had come from Greek and Roman paganism. Others had come from Judaism and there was variation with what was culturally acceptable.

The early church fathers tried to distinguish between what was acceptable musically and what was not. There are two early writings dealing completely with music, but neither focus on musical instruments. Niceta of Remesiana has one sermon on hymnody and the act of singing. Augustine's volume, *De Musica*, is a theoretical and philosophical understanding of music. Apart from these two sources, references to music are couched in writings about other topics, possibly indicating that "music was not something early Christians thought about in isolation. It was involved in their thinking on everything."¹

During the first five centuries, the line of acceptability fell between vocal and instrumental music. To contemporary authors this means different things. Werner argues all of the church fathers found vocal music more pleasing to God than instrumental.² Price argues that there were no musical instruments in the churches.³ Squire indicates that instruments were allowed.⁴ It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate, through a survey of sources from the first five centuries, that the early church

¹ Calvin R. Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 3.

² Eric Werner, *The Sacred Bridge: The Interdependence of Liturgy and Music in Synagogue and Church During the First Millennium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 336.

³ John Price, *Old Light on New Worship: Musical Instruments and the Worship of God, a Theological, Historical and Psychological Study* (Avinger, TX: Simpson Publishing, 2005), 82.

⁴ Russel N. Squire, *Church Music: Musical and Hymnological Developments in Western Christianity* (St. Louis, MO: Bethany Press, 1962), 41-42.

fathers generally regarded musical instruments as inappropriate. Further, an analysis of the influences on the church fathers' position will reveal that the cultures they were in did affect their position on instruments.

First Century

Little was written about musical instruments in the first century. It is certain that the church leaders were addressing issues, but musical instruments were not one of them. The references that remain are from the New Testament and the apocryphal writings.

There is some evidence in the New Testament that the early church saw vocal music as superior to instrumental music.⁵ The instructions to sing, the quotes of psalms and hymns, and the description of eternal praise in the Book of Revelation all indicate an approval of singing.⁶ While he did use instruments positively in other passages, according to some, Paul's citation of the clanging cymbal and noisy gong in 1 Cor. 13 reflects the contemporary attitude of the Pharisees.⁷ On the other hand, John in Revelation 5:8-9 speaks of the 24 elders holding a cithara as they sing the new song.

Outside of the New Testament canon, one apocryphal writing references music. The Odes of Solomon is a collection of forty-two hymn compositions written in Syriac likely during the first century. Although there is debate about its orthodoxy, it does contain multiple references to the cithara and musical composition as an acceptable means to praise God.⁸

Second Century

⁵ Paul Westermeyer, *Te Deum: The Church and Music* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 67.

⁶ See 1 Cor. 14:15, Col. 3:16, Eph. 5:19, Jas. 5:13, and Rev. 15:3.

⁷ Westermeyer, *Te Deum*, 67.

⁸ James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 23-24.

The second century provided no drastic changes in the church father's opinions. Musical distinctives grew, but they were connected to the theological issues of the day. The praise of psalmody continued, probably in part to battle the Marcionites. There were no explicit condemnations of musical instruments as church fathers emphasized the unity and harmony of life.⁹

During the second century, there were still positive references to musical instruments. Ignatius of Antioch (c. AD 50–117) was likely the first post-apostolic author to mention music. He used the harmony of the harp allegorically to encourage the unity between a church and its bishop, for “he [the bishop] is attuned to the commandments as a harp to its strings.”¹⁰ Another author compares inspiration and music, seeing the Spirit “coming down from heaven like a plectrum and using those just men as an instrument like the cithara or lyre.”¹¹

In an early description of worship in his *Apology*, Justin Martyr (c. AD 100–65) did not refer to music.¹² He did recognize music as a part of culture, but rejected instruments in worship since “musical organs pertain to the Jewish ceremonies and agree no more to us than circumcision.”¹³ It is debated whether this applies to instruments or the means and methods of the music of the time.

While the early church fathers wanted music to be Scripture-based, there was also an emphasis that music be in harmony with the universe, and grow proper spiritual discipline.¹⁴ Athenagoras (fl. c. AD

⁹ James McKinnon, *The Temple, the Church Fathers, and Early Western Chant* (Brookfield: Ashgate Variorum, 1998), 74.

¹⁰ Ignatius of Antioch, “Letter to the Philadelphians,” in Michael W. Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers in English*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 117.

¹¹ Pseudo-Justin, “Hortatory Address to the Greeks,” in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 21.

¹² Stapert, *New Song*, 157.

¹³ Quoted in Price, *Old Light*, 75.

¹⁴ Erik Routley, *The Church and Music: An Enquiry into the History, the Nature, and the Scope of Christian Judgment on Music* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1950), 50.

175) displays consistency with Greek thought, but with a new focus when he writes, “Now if the cosmos is a harmonious instrument set in rhythmic motion, I worship him who tuned it, who strikes it notes and sings it concordant melody, not the instrument.”¹⁵

There was also a link between the Church’s reaction to music and Roman Gnosticism.¹⁶ Irenaeus (c. AD 130–c. 200), bishop of Lyons, directed the Gnostics to the arts so that they could see and hear God rather than seek possession of knowledge among images of the Greek philosophers.¹⁷ The lyre and the practical music arts he deemed good, and able to demonstrate the goodness of God.

Third Century

It was in the third century that opposition to instruments grew into a significant movement. This coincided with the rise in asceticism, especially in relation to sexual matters.¹⁸ It seems this attitude was to create distinguishing features for the church, and increase the holiness of individual members.

Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 165–215) set out to make clear distinctions against the remnants of Hellenism. According to Greek musical cosmology, the god made *musica mundana* (the universe) and then, a little lower, *musica humana* (humans). To Clement, the *musica humana* was created in the image of God, and is the crown of all the *musica mundana*.¹⁹ “Music (*musica instrumentalis*) is then to be handled for the sake of the embellishment and composure of manners (*musica humana*)... But we must reject superfluous music, which enervates men’s souls, and leads to variety – now mournful, and

¹⁵ Athenagoras, “Supplications for the Christians,” in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 22.

¹⁶ Routley, *Church and Music*, 45.

¹⁷ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies II,” in Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed. *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 16-17.

¹⁸ McKinnon, *The Temple*, 74.

¹⁹ Stapert, *New Song*, 58.

the licentious and voluptuous, and then frenzied and frantic.”²⁰ It was with such arguments that the third century church fathers rejected musical instruments.

It is important to note that this new polemic was not just against outside culture. It was also an attempt to purify the church. Clement of Alexandria complained that Christians “having paid reverence to the discourse about God, they leave within [the church] what they have heard. And outside they foolishly amuse themselves with impious playing, and amatory quavering, occupied with flute-playing, and dancing, and intoxication, and all kinds of trash.”²¹ Others made it clear that musical instruments were inappropriate for believers. Although it may be indicative of his other demanding positions, Novatian (d. c. AD 258) stated that the tibia player:

Labors to speak with his fingers, ungrateful to the Artificer who gave him a tongue...
Even if these things were not consecrated to idols, faithful Christians ought not to frequent and observe them, for even if there were nothing criminal about them, they have in themselves an utter worthlessness hardly suitable from believers.”²²

Such behavior and therefore such instruments were not for the Christian. Clement would state, “Let the pipe be resigned to the shepherds, and the flute to the superstitious who are engrossed in idolatry. For, in truth, such instruments are to be banished from the temperate banquet, being more suitable to beasts than men.”²³ Even when he says, “If you wish to sing and play to the harp or lyre,

²⁰ Clement of Alexandria, “Miscellanies VI,” in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 500-501.

²¹ Clement of Alexandria, “The Instructor III,” in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene*, vol. 2: 290.

²² Novatian, “De Spectaculis,” in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 48.

²³ Clement of Alexandria, “The Instructor II,” in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene*, vol. 2: 248.

there is no blame. Thou shalt imitate the righteous Hebrew king,"²⁴ and is seemingly allowing instruments, he is referring to the lyre as figure of Jesus.²⁵

In order to deal with the inclusion of instruments in the Holy Bible, Clement allegorizes them to be aspects of the human body:

'Praise him on the psaltery' for the tongue is the psaltery of the Lord. 'And praise him on the cithara', let the cithara be taken to mean the mouth, played by the Spirit as if by a plectrum. 'Praise him on the tympanum and chorus' refers to the Church meditating on the resurrection of the flesh in the resounding membrane. 'Praise him on strings and the instrument' refers to our body as an instrument and its sinews as strings from which it derives its harmonious tension, and when strummed by the Spirit, it gives off human notes. 'Praise him on the clangorous cymbals' speaks of the tongue as the cymbal of the mouth which sounds as the lips are moved.²⁶

Tertullian (AD 160–220) and Origen (c. AD 185–251) would interpret ideas similarly. Tertullian quarreled with the use of the trumpet in pagan military funerals, yet in his description of the soul, allegorized the hydraulos as an example of a unified entity with diverse parts.²⁷ Origen advised his pupil to take the good from Hellenism,²⁸ but did not apply this generosity to musical instruments. In Pseudo-Origen sources we find, "The musical instruments of the Old Testament are not unsuitable for us if understood spiritually,"²⁹ and, "The strings are the harmony of the balanced sound of virtues and

²⁴ Clement of Alexandria, "Instructor II," in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene*, vol. 2: 249.

²⁵ David W. Music, *Instruments in Church: A Collection of Source Documents* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 30.

²⁶ Clement of Alexandria, "Instructor II," in Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene*, vol. 2: 248.

²⁷ McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 45.

²⁸ Origen, "Letter to Gregory," in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 37.

²⁹ Pseudo-Origen, "Selecta in psalmos XXXII," in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 38.

instruments.”³⁰ One incongruity is Origen’s letter against Celsus, where he did not disagree with the charge that Celsus brought against Christians who used instruments prior to the worship services.³¹

Fourth Century

After the Edict of Milan in AD 313, much of the policy and music of the church’s worship fell in the hands of the leadership. As the church became more visible, and adapted features of the surrounding Hellenistic culture,³² there emerged a strong condemnation of the practice of instrumental music. Werner believes the victory of the Gentile-Hellenistic over the Judaeo-Christian divisions at Nicaea in 325 demonstrates a transition to greater appreciation of Hellenistic culture, which was also indicative of a shift in the perspective on music.³³ While the fourth century represents the apex of the anti-instrument literature, there was little consistency in the reasoning or explanation.

Eusebius of Caesarea (AD 269–339) acknowledged the literal use of instruments by David and his musicians. However, the church was not to follow:

When formerly the people of the circumcision worshipped through symbols and types, it was not unreasonable that they raised hymns to God on psalteries and cithara, and that they did this on the days of the Sabbath, thus clearly violating the required rest and transgressing the law of the Sabbath. We, however, maintain the Jewish law inwardly, according to the saying of the Apostle: ‘For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly,’ ... And so more sweetly pleasing to God than any musical instrument would be ... with one mind and unanimity of faith and piety, we raise melody in unison in our psalmody.”³⁴

³⁰ Pseudo-Origen, “Selecta in psalmos CL,” in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 39.

³¹ Christopher Page, *The Christian West and its Singers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 80.

³² Edward Dickinson, *Music in the History of the Western Church* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1923), 52.

³³ Werner, *Sacred Bridge*, 331.

³⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, “In psalmum xci,” in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 97-98.

Again, the early church fathers commented on the music outside of the church, including the performance of instruments – which they saw as immoral.³⁵ McKinnon believes “the vehemence of the polemic against instruments is primarily accounted for by the association of musical instruments with sexual immorality, an issue on which third- and fourth-century Church Fathers were extremely sensitive.”³⁶ A document formerly attributed to Basil of Caesarea, suggests a direct connection between musical instruments and prostitution, and the author laments the “sorry sight for sober eyes [when] a woman weaves not but rather plays the lyre.”³⁷

Others argued that the musical elements of culture not be allowed in the Christian life. Gregory of Nazianzus (c. AD 329–89) declared: “That which cannot be mixed is not combined or identified; neither bishops with jesters, nor prayers with dancing, nor psalmody with aulos-playing.”³⁸ It was near the end of the fourth century that the *Canons of Hippolytus* declared: “Whoever performs in a theatre or is a wrestler or a runner or a music teacher... or is a hunter or an animal trainer... none of these may be permitted to attend a sermon until they have been purified from these unclean works. After forty days they may hear a sermon.”³⁹ Ambrose (c. AD 337–97) took a stronger position yet and equated salvation with what instruments one had played: “Psalms are being sung, and you take up the psaltery or the tympanum? Woe unto you indeed, because you relinquish salvation and choose death.”⁴⁰

³⁵ McKinnon, *The Temple*, 72.

³⁶ McKinnon, *The Temple*, 69.

³⁷ Pseudo-Basil, “Commentary on Isaiah,” in *Music, Instruments in Church*, 39.

³⁸ Gregory of Nazianzus, “Epistle CCXXXII,” in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 72.

³⁹ Anon., “Canons of Hippolytus,” in Johannes Quasten, *Music and Worship in Pagan and Christian Antiquity*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Washington: National Association of Pastoral Musicians, 1983), 127.

⁴⁰ Ambrose, “De Helia et ieiunio XV,” in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 128-29.

For many, stringed instruments were to be avoided. According to the *Canons of Basil*: “If a lector learns to play the guitar [cithara] he shall be taught to confess it... If he keeps at it he shall be excommunicated and put out of the church.”⁴¹ Yet, Evagrius of Pontus (AD 346–99) would connect string instruments to spiritual harmony: “The many strings brought together in harmony, each ordered musically in its proper place, are the many commandments and the doctrines concerning many things, which exhibit no discord among themselves. The instrument embracing all this is the soul of the man wise in Christ.”⁴²

Basil of Caesarea (AD 330–79) discussed the Greek cosmological function of good music, while displaying some existential tendencies. According to him, only the arts that left behind tangible objects were valuable.⁴³ Therefore, “of useless arts there is harp playing, dancing, flute playing, of which, when the operation ceases, the result disappears with it. And indeed, according to the word of the apostle, the result of these is destruction.”⁴⁴

There are also several interesting anomalies. Hilary of Poitiers (c. AD 300–68) in his *Commentary on the Psalms* distinguished between four techniques of music in worship, one of which included instrumental playing and antiphony.⁴⁵ This seems to indicate use of instruments in the worship of some groups. Diodore of Tarsus (d. c. 390) also recognized the actual use of

⁴¹ Pseudo-Basil, “Canons of Basil,” in Quasten, *Music and Worship*, 75.

⁴² Evagrius of Pontus, “Selecta in psalmos CL,” in Music, *Instruments in Church*, 30.

⁴³ Basil of Caesarea, “Homily I from ‘The Hexaemeron’,” in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd ser.*, vol. 8 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 55-56.

⁴⁴ Basil of Caesarea, quoted in Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, eds., *Music in Western World: A History in Documents* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), 27.

⁴⁵ Routley, *Church and Music*, 46.

instruments.⁴⁶ Ephraem of Cyrus (c. AD 306–73), sometimes positively referred to as the “Kithara of the Holy Spirit,”⁴⁷ may have actually encouraged instrumental use.⁴⁸

Fifth Century

In the fifth century, the cultural reasons for rejecting musical instruments would continue. One new theme was the strong condemnation of instrumental music in worship as a Jewish rite. Yet, while the attitude was generally consistent, there was variation in the rationales.

The early church fathers continued to reject musical instruments. The bishop of Salamis, Epiphanius of Salamis (c. AD 315–403) tried to rid his church of the poisons of the day. He described the “flute itself [as] a copy of the serpent through which the evil one spoke and deceived Eve... And see what the flute-player himself represents; he throws his head back as he plays and bends it forward, he leans right and left like the serpent.”⁴⁹ Purportedly Jerome (AD 347–402) said a Christian maiden ought not to know what a lyre or flute even was, nor its purpose.⁵⁰ Theodoret of Cyrus added his voice to those who condemned lifeless instruments and finger clappers as “instruments and other such things appropriate to those who are childish... dispensed with in the churches and singing alone has been left over.”⁵¹

⁴⁶ McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 77.

⁴⁷ Werner, *Sacred Bridge*, 212.

⁴⁸ McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 92-93.

⁴⁹ Epiphanius of Salamis, “Panarion XXV,” in Music, *Instruments in Church*, 40.

⁵⁰ Dickinson, *Music in the History*, 55.

⁵¹ Theodoret of Cyrus, “Quaestiones et responsiones ad orthodoxos CVII,” in Music, *Instruments in Church*,

The challenge that faced John of Chrysostom (AD 347-407) was that he knew his congregation knew the songs of Satan, yet they could not recite one Psalm.⁵² Many people were living unholy lives, and their entertainment included “dancing, and cymbals, and flutes, and shameful words, and songs, and drunkenness, and revellings, and all the Devil’s heap of great garbage... Do you still inquire, ‘Whence come adulteries? Whence come fornications?’”⁵³

John of Chrysostom and Theodoret of Cyrus (c. AD 393–457) attacked instrumental music as an unwarranted remnant of Egyptian idolatry. Chrysostom said God “allowed those instruments, then, for this reason: because of their weakness, and because he wanted to temper them in love and harmony... For knowing their thoughtlessness, laziness, and carelessness, God wished to arouse them by the stratagem, blending the sweetness of melody in with the effort of paying attention.”⁵⁴ Theodoret would agree:

We know that God takes no pleasure in songs and music because he says to the Jews: ‘Away from me with the noise of your songs; the sound of your instruments I do not wish to hear (Amos 5:23).’ But when this continued to happen he permitted it since he wished to remove them from the deception of idolatry. For since there were many devotees of sport and laughter, which took place in the temples of the idols, he permitted this in order to draw them to himself and so through a lesser evil to prevent a greater one.⁵⁵

The scriptural rationales that church fathers used still varied. Augustine (AD 354–430) recognized the power of all music, and the discipline that it took as a Christian to discern well.⁵⁶ Yet, he

⁵² Stapert, *New Song*, 128.

⁵³ John of Chrysostom, “Twelfth Homily on 1 Corinthians,” in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 69-70.

⁵⁴ John of Chrysostom, “In psalmum cl,” in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 83.

⁵⁵ Theodoret of Cyrus, “Psalm 150,” in Quasten, *Music and Worship*, 64.

⁵⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 208.

allegorized musical instruments in a way that eliminated their practical function: “Nor do I think that what the musicians say should be ignored... there are three kinds of sound, by voice, by breath, and by striking... just like mind, spirit, and body, but through similarity, not actual properties.”⁵⁷ In another of his sermons, he said, “The flesh working the divine is the psaltery; the unyielding flesh of humanity is the cithara.”⁵⁸ Niceta of Remesiana (c. AD 337–414) took a different approach, which displayed his literal hermeneutic: “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.”⁵⁹ Instead of allegorizing the instruments, Niceta attached them to the Old Covenant. Positively, he did not dismiss all of them, but used the harp as a type to Christ: “Not that there was any kind of power in the harp, but, with its wooden frame and the strings stretched across, it was a symbol of the Cross of Christ. It was the Passion that was being sung, and it was this which subdued the Devil.”⁶⁰

There was one seeming anomaly in the fifth century. Cyril of Alexandria (c. AD 376–444) said that, “*Psalmos* means a musical utterance for which the instrument is played rhythmically according to the harmonic notes.”⁶¹ This appears to be consistent with the statement of Hilary of Poitiers mentioned earlier.

⁵⁷ Augustine, “In Psalmum CL,” in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 160-61.

⁵⁸ Augustine, “Enarrationes in Psalmum LVI,” in Music, *Instruments in Church*, 32.

⁵⁹ Niceta of Remesiana, “De utilitate hymnorum,” in Roy Joseph Deferrari, ed., *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Gerald Walsh (New York: Fathers of the Church Inc, 1949), 71.

⁶⁰ Niceta of Remesiana, “De utilitate hymnorum,” in Deferrari, *Fathers of the Church*, 68.

⁶¹ Cyril of Alexandria, “Lexicon,” in Werner, *Sacred Bridge*, 318.

Analysis

As the church fathers sorted through the cultural issues, they did not feel compelled to “live apart... nor practice any eccentric way of life... [but did] conform to ordinary local usage in their clothing, diet, and other habits.”⁶² However, as they sorted through the full legacy and influence of pre-Christian civilizations to music,⁶³ they regarded musical instruments as inappropriate. Regardless of the varying hermeneutical stances of the early church fathers, their theology, their geographic location, or their language, apart from a few anomalies, the uniformity against musical instruments is striking.⁶⁴

While the anti-musical instrument attitude was negative,⁶⁵ it was not a blanket position against music. Rather the attitude had two foci: first, instruments do not belong in the worship; and second, their inclusion in the lives of Christians ought to be limited⁶⁶ because they promoted cultural decay, and were closely connected to false religions.⁶⁷ Three areas influenced the church fathers’ discernment towards instruments: (1) the Jewish traditions, (2) the pagan culture and religions of the Roman Empire, and (3) the remnants of Hellenization and Neo-Platonic thought.⁶⁸

First, the early church fathers recognized the Jewish traditions of banning instruments and using psalmody in the synagogues. They did recognize that the Psalms and other portions of Scripture listed musical instruments. Yet, “in order to give those who listened to their homilies on the psalms no

⁶² Anon., “Epistle to Diognetus,” in Holmes, *Apostolic Fathers*, 295.

⁶³ K. Marie Stolba, *The Development of Western Music*, 2nd ed. (Madison: Brown & Benchmark, 1994), 18-19.

⁶⁴ Stapert, *New Song*, 131.

⁶⁵ Werner, *Sacred Bridge*, 318.

⁶⁶ Stapert, *New Song*, 145-46.

⁶⁷ Quasten, *Music and Worship*, 126.

⁶⁸ Stapert, *New Song*, 132.

grounds for protest against the ecclesiastical prohibition of instrumental music, most of the Fathers resorted to the use of allegory.”⁶⁹ Gregory of Nyssa (d. AD 385) spent a chapter claiming that man was created by God to serve as various instruments.⁷⁰ Isodore of Pelusium (d. AD 449) went so far as to disdain sacrifices and music equally, saying they were the foolishness of men.⁷¹

Judaism had banned instrumental music since the destruction of the temple, as a demonstration of mourning.⁷² This undoubtedly influenced many Jewish Christians, and some took it to an extreme. Quasten quotes *Oracula Sibyllina*, a second-century work, saying the new sacrifice is where “no kettle drums is heard, no cymbal, no many-holed flute, instruments full of senseless sounds.”⁷³ Yet, much earlier, Philo of Alexandria (20 BC–AD 50), a Jew with a Greek education, believed that music was not to be used in worship, because if the worshipper is filled with God, then “all other burdensome and hateful noises cease.”⁷⁴ Further, according to Philo, the only reason the Jews knew music was because Moses had learned and borrowed it from the Egyptians.⁷⁵ That may help explain the anti-Jewish comments of John of Chrysostom and Theodoret mentioned above.

The Jewish use of Greek musical terminology and concepts does demonstrate a certain level of impact by Greek thought. Yet the Jews saw Hellenic music as a temptation, to the point that they

⁶⁹ Quasten, *Music and Worship*, 64.

⁷⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, “Philosophical Works – On the Making of Man” in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 53.

⁷¹ Quasten, *Music and Worship*, 65.

⁷² Eric Werner, “The Conflict between Hellenism and Judaism in the Music of the Early Christian Church,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 20 (1947): 415.

⁷³ Quasten, *Music and Worship*, 60.

⁷⁴ Philo of Alexandria, “Legun allegoriarum II,” in Quasten, *Music and Worship*, 54.

⁷⁵ Quasten, *Music and Worship*, 65.

claimed one rabbi apostatized through the influence of Greek melodies and instruments.⁷⁶ Therefore the Greek influence on the early church receives significant attention below.

Secondly, as part of the Roman culture, instrumental music would have flourished in marches and at baths, in arenas and theatres, as well as in private homes. The theatre pantomimes and farces were lewd and full of sexual script and behavior.⁷⁷ Not surprisingly, Christians took offense. Even some Romans were disgusted to what levels they had sunk, for “in place of the philosopher the singer is called in,... libraries are shut up forever like tombs, water-organs are manufactured and lyres as large as carriages and flutes and instruments heavy for gesticulating actors.”⁷⁸

Music was also an important part of the practice of Rome’s religious cults, and outside of cult and religious practices instrumental music was not appreciated.⁷⁹ Pagan religions used music for one of three functions: (1) *euphemia*—a magical use of flutes and drums to produce good omens; (2) *apotropaic*—where the banging of gongs and drums were used to ward off the evil spirits; and (3) *epiclesis*—the summoning of the gods.⁸⁰ As one pagan writer put it, “Music is pleasing to the gods, for if it were not pleasing to the gods... the triumph in honor of Mars would not be celebrated to the accompaniment of flute music or the trumpet’s blast.”⁸¹ Arnobius of Sicca (d. c. AD 330) would mock the pagan use of instruments: “In the same way that the foolish crying of infants will be stopped when they

⁷⁶ Werner, “The Conflict Between Hellenism and Judaism,” 415.

⁷⁷ Stapert, *New Song*, 137-41.

⁷⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus, “Books of History XIV,” quoted in Stapert, *New Song*, 140.

⁷⁹ Stolba, *Development of Western Music*, 18.

⁸⁰ Stapert, *New Song*, 133-34.

⁸¹ Censorinus, “De die natali XII,” quoted in Quasten, *Music and Worship*, 1.

hear rattles, are the almighty deities soothed by the shrill sound of pipes, and do they relax at the rhythm of cymbals, their indignation mollified?”⁸²

Although not daily, drunkenness, dancing, and mutilation accompanied cult music so regularly that many Christians would have witnessed these things.⁸³ One Pseudo-Clement source summarized the influence as “perverse and erratic religions... to which the greater part of men gave themselves up... following pipes, and flutes, and harps, and diverse kinds of musical instruments... Hence every kind of error took rise.”⁸⁴

Culturally, weddings seem to have been choice targets. Seen as events of immorality, Christians could attend weddings as long they refrained from dancing. However the clergy “must not look upon the spectacles at weddings, or at banquets, but they must arise and depart from there before the entry of the musicians.”⁸⁵ Remarkably, even Julius the Apostate (AD 331–363) expected all pagan clergy to leave such celebrations, and said the barbarians who would come in and invade Rome would be appalled at what they found as entertainment.⁸⁶

Thirdly, the classical Greeks influenced the early church fathers. There were leaders who thought that Christians could accept some of the philosophical benefits of pagan art, including the ideas of Plato (c. 428 BC–348), who had said music was to be consistent with cosmic harmony⁸⁷ since, “All audible music was given us... as a heaven-sent ally in reducing to order and harmony any disharmony in

⁸² Arnobius of Sicca, “Disputationum adversus gentes,” in Music, *Instruments in Church*, 38.

⁸³ Stapert, *New Song*, 135-36.

⁸⁴ Pseudo-Clement, “Origin of Idolatry,” in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 137.

⁸⁵ Anon., “Canons of Laodicea,” in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 118.

⁸⁶ Stapert, *New Song*, 145-46.

⁸⁷ Stapert, *New Song*, 52.

the revolutions within us.”⁸⁸ Already in the second century Justin Martyr understood music to be one of the liberal arts: “Are you not acquainted with music, astronomy, and geometry?”⁸⁹ This is clearly a reference to music as a part of the quadrivium first worked out by Plato, and the Pythagoreans, and taught in the schools of Greece.⁹⁰

Augustine’s *De Musica* indicates his acceptance of the Greek connection between music and math. His primary argument is that music is an exact form of expression, derived from precise knowledge, and demonstrates itself to be in contact with the ultimate reality of the universe and ultimately in devotion to God.⁹¹ Ambrose (AD 339–397) accepted the Greek cosmology of music, yet worked to redefine it because he saw *musica humana* in the structure of the body itself, and not in the body-soul dualism of the Platonists.⁹²

The quotes from the early church fathers also indicate concern that instrumental music caused social decay. This traces back to the Greek concept of *ethos*, where the musical elements of mode and rhythm were able to influence emotion and behavior.⁹³ This important concept “had a dual meaning: a) the morals and the character of the people, and thus it was related to ethics, and b) the specific character of a musical mode or tuning that affected the morals and character of the people.”⁹⁴ As Plato said, music was not meant for mere pleasure because where there were “men of worth and culture, you

⁸⁸ Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. H. Lee (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), 64-65.

⁸⁹ Justin Martyr, “Dialogue with Trypho,” in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 20-21.

⁹⁰ McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 4.

⁹¹ Routley, *Church and Music*, 58.

⁹² Stapert, *New Song*, 106.

⁹³ Weiss and Taruskin, *Music in the Western World*, 1.

⁹⁴ Stolba, *Development of Western Music*, 12.

will find no girls piping or dancing or harping.”⁹⁵ This idea is evident in the quotes from Clement of Alexandria.

The rejection of instruments also is connected to the Greek concept of modes. As each mode had a certain category of lyrics, narratives, attitudes, occasions, instrumentation, and rhythms attached to it,⁹⁶ certain modes were allowed by the philosophers, while others were not.⁹⁷ Even Basil of Caesarea saw musical passions as generated by the modes: “It is said that Pythagoras, upon encountering some drunken revelers, commanded the aulete who was leading their song to change the mode and to play the Dorian for them. They were so sobered by this music that tearing off their garlands they returned home ashamed... Such is the difference in filling one’s ears with wholesome or wicked tunes.”⁹⁸

Nor was church fathers’ anger against the flute new. Much earlier Aristotle (384 BC–322 BC) had said the flute, which was prominent in the synchronistic religions, was “not an instrument that has a good moral effect; it is too exciting... [and] the acquirement of flute-playing contributes nothing to the mind... The ancients therefore were right in forbidding the flute to youths and freemen.”⁹⁹ Interestingly, the Greeks themselves preferred vocal music to instrumental.¹⁰⁰

Early church leaders were also against instrumental music in order to preserve the concept of unity. Therefore, polyphonic music (such as instrumental music) was not to be used. Quasten argues,

⁹⁵ Plato, “Protagoras,” in Weiss and Taruskin, *Music in Western World*, 6.

⁹⁶ Stapert, *New Song*, 56-57.

⁹⁷ Giovanni Comotti, *Music in Greek and Roman Culture*, trans. Rosaria Munson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 38.

⁹⁸ Basil the Great, “Exhortations to Youths as to How They Shall Best Profit by the Writings of Pagan Authors,” in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 69.

⁹⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, in Comotti, *Music in Greek and Roman Culture*, 140.

¹⁰⁰ Stolba, *Development of Western Music*, 9.

“Instrumental music stood in sharp contrast to the primitive Christian idea of the divine unity.”¹⁰¹ He quotes Clement of Alexandria: “We want to strive so that we, the many, may be brought together into one love... a medley of sounds and division, becomes one symphony, following the one leader of the choir and teacher, the Word.”¹⁰² As such, the belief in the *una voce dicentes* made exclusion of instruments from worship obvious.¹⁰³

The Greek influence was so great, and the anti-instrument sentiment so strong, that some church fathers only wanted inaudible *musica mundana*.¹⁰⁴ Jerome would take the simple singing concept and advocate sound-less music: “We ought therefore to sing, to make melody and to praise the Lord more with spirit than the voice... God is to be sung to, not with the voice but with the heart.”¹⁰⁵ Quasten makes a connection between the Greek idea of “spiritual sacrifice” and the dismissal of instruments.¹⁰⁶

Even though there were similarities between Hellenistic criticisms and the early church fathers’, their reasons remained distinct. Plato was offended because polyphonic music lacked harmony with the universe, and he would complain about the loss of the classic purity of the past, and the public who preferred the vulgarity of modern music rather than the traditional practices.¹⁰⁷ The Christians were against the same because the music did not reflect the fruits of the Spirit.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ Quasten, *Music and Worship*, 67.

¹⁰² Clement of Alexandria, “Protrepticos 9,” in Quasten, *Music and Worship*, 67.

¹⁰³ Quasten, *Music and Worship*, 72.

¹⁰⁴ Werner, *Sacred Bridge*, 318.

¹⁰⁵ Jerome, “Commentarium in epistulam ad Ephesios III,” in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 144-45.

¹⁰⁶ Quasten, *Music and Worship*, 54-55.

¹⁰⁷ Stolba, *Development of Western Music*, 11.

¹⁰⁸ Stapert, *New Song*, 90.

The use of the Greek influence was also inconsistent. The church would use the Greek modes for some of the hymns, but would write their own melodies and use their own methods. They would listen to Plato and Aristotle, yet reject the bulk of Greek practice. John of Chrysostom understood that “nothing so arouses the soul, gives it wing, sets it free from the earth... as concordant melody and sacred song composed in rhythm... Here there is no need of the cithara, nor taut strings, nor the plectrum and technique, nor any sort of instrument.”¹⁰⁹

Yet, there were those who tried to keep the church tainted from any pagan influence.¹¹⁰ For example, Tertullian said the refreshments of eye and ear do “not square with true religion or with duty to God... All that is done with voice and song is the affair of the Apollos and the Muses, the Minervas and Mercuries. You, O Christian, will hate the things, when you cannot but hate the authors of them.”¹¹¹

Conclusion

As responsible leaders of their people, early church leaders did address the issues of the day. In an unorganized manner they sorted through musical concepts, addressing them in contexts that they were noticing inside and outside the church. While they were affected by the cultures around them, they were still discerning.

The early church fathers generally regarded musical instruments as inappropriate for worship and life, with the peak of the polemic in the fourth century. The anomalies mentioned do not outweigh the bulk of early writings, which were against instruments. This was due in part to their concerns about social and moral decay, Jewish traditions, and the Roman and Greek cultures and religions.

¹⁰⁹ John of Chrysostom, “In psalmum xli,” in McKinnon, *Early Christian Literature*, 80-81.

¹¹⁰ Stapert, *New Song*, 36.

¹¹¹ Tertullian, “On Spectacles,” in Stapert, *New Song*, 66-67.

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