

History of Instrumental Music

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As insightful and interesting as religious history is, it is important to note that Scripture alone – not religious history – gives the proper instruction for understanding and observing God's will. Religious history, however, can yield valuable insights when one observes how a particular biblical topic or issue concerning church practice was handled in succeeding eras of development. With these observations in mind, the present article summarizes the history of instrumental music in worship over the centuries.

New Testament History

It is crucially important to observe that although instrumental music of various types was readily available in contemporary society, no passage shows that the churches mentioned in the New Testament ever used instrumental music in worship. Did they not understand the true meaning of the Old Testament, particularly Psalms? Did they not understand the meaning of various words, such as *psallo*, etc., so often discussed pro and con in contemporary debates? Did they not know the Jewish practices, both in the temple and in the synagogues? Did they not know the mind of God? Most certainly, on all these questions and much more. Yet, there is not even a hint of the use of instrumental music in the worship of these churches.

These facts of New Testament history stand as a stone barricade against any attempted justification of the use of instrumental music in worship today. If present appeals to the Old Testament, i.e., *psalms*, the temple or synagogue practice, etc., legitimately warrant such use, why did the apostles and brethren in the first century not so understand and incorporate instrumental music into the worship of these churches? Such facts are not lightly to be dismissed or forgotten.

Early Church History

The several general periods of religious history, from the close of the New Testament until the present, have been searched many times from many viewpoints. These searches yield one significant fact for the present topic, which is clear and unassailable: Instrumental music in worship within churches professing to serve Christ did not emerge until *hundreds of years* after the close of the New Testament.

These centuries display various departures in doctrine and church organization [such as the practice of infant baptism, the emergence of a bishop versus the plurality of bishops in the oversight of a single church, etc.] over the years. These continuing departures from New Testament teaching issued from the Roman Catholic, the Greek Orthodox, and other nationalistic churches as well as the various heresies and schisms which litter the centuries of Christian history.

In the midst of these spiraling changes from the simplicity of the New Testament to the complexities of the doctrines and practices of medieval religious life and thought, it is important to note that the use of instrumental music in church worship was not evidenced until several centuries after the close of Scripture.

The general dates of the adoption of instrumental music in worship vary with the historian, but all agree it was centuries after the New Testament was completed. A historical summary published elsewhere will provide more details (Woodson, pp. 7-10), but a few observations are in order. M.C. Kurfees cited older historians and encyclopedists who dated the introduction of instrumental music in church worship from the early 600s (pp. 158-178).

The most thorough sifting of the evidence was made by James McKinnon. McKinnon noted a “polemic” of the “church fathers” against musical instruments during and after the third and fourth centuries because they were “a symbol of lasciviousness and debauchery” (p. 2). He also noted that, while this polemic was present in these and succeeding centuries, “early Christian music was vocal” (p. 2). After detailed survey of the evidence, his conclusions are significant.

McKinnon stated that in the patristic period “the issue of instruments in church was never raised” (p. 263). Concerning musical instruments, he observed that “the strongest possible evidence” shows “that they were not used in the early Church” (p. 264). Later he stated “the simple fact [was] that they [musical instruments] were not used in the patristic period” (p. 268). He maintained that the organ was the first instrument to be introduced into the worship service and the next was the trumpet. His conclusion concerning the introduction of the organ, following the work of Edmund Bowles, was: “It appeared with some frequency during the period from 1000 to 1300 while in the later middle ages its use continued to spread until it was nearly universal” (p. 269). He noted accounts of an organ being sent from Byzantium to Pippin [Pippin the Short, ruler of the Franks (741-768)] in 757, and another to Charlemagne [Charles the Great (742-814), first emperor of the “Holy Roman Empire”] in 812. The reactions of curiosity and awe concerning these organs indicated “they did not exist in Gaul during the centuries immediately preceding their arrival from the East” (p. 276). In a few decades organs were being used in monastery schools to give instruction in the *musica*, part of the *quadrivium* in what would now be termed the liberal arts studies. Then, following the tenth century, the use of the organ made its way into the churches as noted above.

Eric Werner gave a different date concerning the introduction of instrumental music in the churches. He concluded that the third century was the “turning point in the Church’s attitude toward instrumental music; it was tolerated, not welcomed” (p. xx:431).

Whenever the specific period of introduction was, and McKinnon’s conclusions seem more reliable, the fact remains that even by the earliest account the introduction of instrumental music in church worship was not evidenced until hundreds of years after the close of the New Testament. This fact cannot be wished away.

In view of this, how can one account for the absence of such use in the churches of the New Testament period, and even the several immediately succeeding centuries? Did they not have access to the same information which is urged by contemporaries in attempting to justify such use? Why did these students of Scripture in the first and immediately succeeding centuries fail to understand the propriety of, and consequently put into practice, the use of instrumental music in worship as is alleged now to be warranted by the same materials which were open to them?

Restoration History Concerning Instrumental Music

A recent study of this historical development has been presented in the book **Sounding Brass and Clanging Cymbals**. The earliest reference presently available indicated a question of the propriety of introducing instrumental music in worship arose in 1849 (p. 19). A few scattered references are found during the 1850s, but the first well documented use of the instrument was in 1859 in Midway, Kentucky, under the leadership of L.L. Pinkerton (pp. 21,22).

Following the Civil War, instrumental music in worship began to be introduced first in a few, then in more and more of the churches in the restoration movement. With the introduction of the instrument also came the resistance and controversy, which its opponents readily provided.

A statement more insightful than the words of J.W. McGarvey in 1868, regarding the coming controversy, would be difficult to find. In response to A.S. Hayden's attempted justification of its use as an expression of expediency and progress, McGarvey stated: "you know that such are the convictions of a very large number of the best and most intelligent class of your brethren, that they will resist to the very last extremity the introduction of instrumental music in the worship, and that they will never, while they live, permit it to rest anywhere in peace" (p. 217).

The following years evidence the accuracy of McGarvey's 1868 evaluation and forecast. Churches in various cities and towns experienced the introduction, resistance, and

resultant controversy; various periodicals mirrored the widening discussions and consequently sharpening debates; church records documented the pattern of introduction, use, resistance, controversy, hardening of support and opposition, and ultimately division when the offending wedge was not withdrawn. And so the history unfolded.

As the 1890s closed and the present century opened, the discussions and divisions over instrumental music, along with other equally disputed matters, reached a crescendo that could not be ignored. In 1907 David Lipscomb explained the results in the following words:

“These disciples [with whom Lipscomb was associated] have separated from the ‘Christian Churches’ that grew out of the effort to restore pure primitive Christianity, by remaining true to the original purpose and the principles of fidelity to the word of God as the only sufficient rule of faith and practice of Christians. This seems to be as accurate an idea of the facts concerning these churches as I can give” (p. 457).

From these early days of our history until now, such convictions as were expressed by Lipscomb have been cherished and preserved.

These convictions rest on the unassailable fact that no authority from God warrants instrumental music in the worship of the church. The best efforts of its defenders have failed to demonstrate this requisite justification. Their failure is made even more overwhelming when it is observed that until hundreds of years after the close of the New Testament there was no recorded use of instrumental music in church worship, and this condition prevailed amidst numerous changes from biblical doctrine and practice otherwise.

When these facts are coupled with the added fact that such use was foreign to the restoration movement for several decades and was only introduced and maintained amidst sustained controversy and division, the case is compelling against its use in

worship. Consequently, advocates of instrumental music find utmost difficulties before them in attempting to justify such use in worship.

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