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Ancient Worship Wars: An Investigation of Conflict in Church Music History

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to prove that conflict in church music is nothing new. Even in the time of the early church fathers, dissenting views on what were acceptable and unacceptable practices in church music were present. The music of the 2nd century through the 14th century is examined.

The method used to find specific conflicts in church music history involved reading early Christian literature on music. When possible, both sides of the conflicts included in the project are presented. However, oftentimes only one side of an argument can be found since there is not an abundant supply of early Christian writings on music. When this is the case, a brief attempt at reconstructing the opposing side is made.

The most important resources for this research were James McKinnon's *Music in Early Christian Literature* and Oliver Strunk's *Source Readings in Music History: Revised Edition*. These were integral to this project as they provided primary sources translated into English.

Keywords

Worship

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Ancient Worship Wars: An Investigation of Conflict in Church Music History

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In the modern church, disagreements on worship practice are prevalent. There are countless stories of churches dividing over the matter of worship music. Yet this commonly occurring disagreement is no new phenomenon. This paper will focus on several specific conflicts in early church music history that took place from the first century to the fourteenth century. The points of contention vary greatly; there are conflicts over the use of instruments, the function of church music, and even meters. Disagreements on church music are nothing new; even in the early days of Christianity, dissenting views on what were acceptable and unacceptable practices in church music were present.

When investigating conflict in the early church, it is often difficult to find complete arguments from both sides of an issue. This lack of documentation is understandable since everything was handwritten at this time. Unfortunately this means that many of the ideas of the time are now lost. Dr. Quentin Faulkner writes of this lamentable fact, “It is not always easy or even possible to detect a source’s context...that is, what are the writer’s musical background and standards? What is he reacting to: pagan practice or heretical Christian practice?”¹ So historians are left with the task of attempting to reconstruct arguments based on a less than ideal amount of information. This paper will present several conflicts in church music history by quoting sources from both sides—when possible—of each conflict. When only one side of an argument can be found, a brief attempt at reconstructing the opposing argument will be made based on the evidence that is present.

¹ Quentin Faulkner, *Wiser than Despair: The Evolution of Ideas in the Relationship of Music and the Christian Church* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 54.

For the most part, the earliest church fathers were in agreement on various issues in their writings. But the music that was agreed upon was born of conflict. Early Christian worship borrowed heavily from that of the Jewish synagogue. “The fundamental musical practice of the early apostolic church was thus Middle Eastern, semitic, Jewish, not Greek or Roman. Christianity, however, grew and flourished in a pagan Graeco-Roman environment whose popular ideas about music were at odds with Christianity’s.”² To say that the early church fathers disliked pagan practice in music would be a large understatement. In a third-century Christian treatise entitled *Didascalia apostolorum*, the author writes, “a faithful Christian... must not sing the songs of the heathen.”³ The author’s uncompromising condemnation of pagan music is characteristic of the opinions of the early church fathers.

One aspect of pagan music that is frequently condemned in the writings of the church fathers is the use of instruments. In a musical treatise by Cyprian, a third-century bishop (although the authorship is disputed—it may be Novatian, a third-century theologian, instead), entitled *De spectaculis*, he writes:

He [the musician] endeavours to speak with his fingers, ungrateful to the Artificer who gave him a tongue.... These things [instruments], even if they were not dedicated to idols, ought not to be approached and gazed upon by faithful Christians; because, even if they were not criminal, they are characterized by a worthlessness which is extreme, and which is little suited to believers.⁴

Cyprian’s hatred toward instruments is not unique; St. John Chrysostom had similar feelings. He writes, “Here there is no need for the cithara, or for stretched strings, or for the plectrum and technique, or for any musical instrument; but, if you like, you may yourself become a cithara by mortifying the members of the flesh and making a

² Ibid., 53.

³ *Didascalia Apostolorum* (third century), Chapter XXI in Richard Hugh Connolly, *Didascalia apostolorum: Syriac Version, with the Verona Latin Fragments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 86.

⁴ Cyprian’s (or Novatian) *De spectaculis* (third century), Accessed at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PATRISTC/ANF5-22.TXT>.

full harmony of mind and body.”⁵ These quotes demonstrate that instruments were, at the very least, seen as unnecessary. At the worst, instruments were seen as disrespectful to the Creator who gave all people voices.

This strong distaste for instruments left the church fathers with an interpretive problem. They had to come up with a way to explain all of the references to instruments in the Old Testament. They resorted to two different solutions to the problem. The first solution was to explain all mentions of instruments to be allegorical. Clement of Alexandria, a late second- and early third-century theologian, explained what he believed these instruments represented in Book II of *Paidagogus*:

‘And praise Him on the lyre.’ By the lyre is meant the mouth struck by the Spirit, as it were by a plectrum. ‘Praise with the timbrel and the dance,’ refers to the Church meditating on the resurrection of the dead in the resounding skin...For man is truly a pacific instrument; while other instruments, if you investigate, you will find to be warlike, inflaming to lusts, or kindling up amours, or rousing wrath.⁶

His eisegetical interpretation continues and explains other instruments in the Psalms as well. The next solution to the interpretive problem, proposed two centuries later, is written by St. John Chrysostom. “Instruments were permitted to them [i.e., the ancient Israelites] out of regard for the weakness of their spirit, and because they had hardly emerged as yet from the cult of idols. Just as God allowed their sacrifices, so also He allowed their instruments, condescending to their weakness.”⁷ St. John Chrysostom did not accept the allegorical interpretation (if he was aware of it) presented by Clement of Alexandria. He did, however, still condemn the use of instruments

⁵ St. John Chrysostom’s *Exposition of Psalm 141* (late fourth/early fifth century) in Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History: Revised Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1998), 125-126.

⁶ Clement of Alexandria’s *Paidagogus*, Book II (late second/early third century). Accessed at <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-instructor-book2.html>.

⁷ St. John Chrysostom’s *In Psalmis* (late fourth century) in Joseph Gélineau, *Voices and Instruments in Christian Worship: Principles, Laws, Applications* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1964), 151.

among Christians, explaining that instruments were only for Jews under the old covenant.

At first glance, these writings may make it seem like Christian thought on the use of instruments was undisputed. Nearly all Christian writings from the first few centuries condemn their use. However, there is evidence within these writings that there certainly were disagreements on the topic. Quentin Faulkner writes, “The distaste for instruments became stronger and stronger as the church matured, probably in part as a reaction to the inevitable penetration of pagan practices into Christian life and worship.”⁸ The fact that these arguments developed and continued to be written over time indicates that Christians were disagreeing on the issue. Although there is an appearance of greater unity in the early church regarding music, it may be that there were just as many disagreements on the topic as there are today.

As common as the debate on instruments in church music is, the next conflict is even more prevalent. Early Christians debated whether church music should be enjoyable or not. The first clear position on this topic appears in the fourth century in a writing by the well-known bishop of Alexandria—Athanasius. Athanasius takes the position that psalm singing is not meant to be enjoyable. “Some of the simple ones among us...still think that the psalms are sung melodiously for the sake of good sound and the pleasure of the ear. This is not so. Scripture has not sought what is sweet and persuasive; rather this was ordained to benefit the soul for every reason, but principally these two.”⁹ The first principal reason for psalm-singing is to ensure that people are reciting Scripture and praising God often and in full voice. The second principal reason is for the singer to create harmony within himself.¹⁰ Athanasius certainly views music as essential to the church, yet he does not believe its purpose is to bring joy to those who are singing.

This debate continues and is clearly seen in a portion of Augustine’s *Confessions*. Augustine writes how he struggles between two extremes. The first extreme occurs when he allows the emotional power of music to overtake him, leaving his mind disengaged. When this happens, he only realizes it in retrospect and considers it to be sinful. The other

⁸ Faulkner, *Wiser than Despair*, 55.

⁹ Athanasius, *Epistula ad marcellinum de interpretatione psalmodiarum* (early fourth century), in James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 52-53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

extreme occurs when he is so mindful of music's emotional power that he wishes church services would forbid music. He then wrote that at these times, "it seems safer to me what I remember was often told me concerning Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, who required the reader of the psalm to perform it with so little inflection of voice that it resembled speaking more than singing."¹¹ Although he seems to prefer an emotionless singing of the psalms, he concludes, but not indefinitely, that the music may be enjoyable so that weaker Christians might be called to greater devotion.¹²

While Athanasius and Augustine essentially agreed on this topic, St. Ambrose, the fourth-century archbishop of Milan, falls on the opposing side of the debate. In *Explanatio psalmi I*, St. Ambrose unashamedly celebrates how pleasant it is to sing psalms.

A psalm is the blessing of the people, the praise of God, the commendation of the multitude, the applause of all, the speech of every man, the voice of the Church, the sonorous profession of faith, devotion full of authority, the joy of liberty, the noise of good cheer, and the echo of gladness. It softens anger, it gives release from anxiety, it alleviates sorrow.¹³

He also goes on to list several additional benefits of psalm-singing, showing St. Ambrose to have yet another view that conflicts with Athanasius's. Whereas Athanasius lists merely two reasons for psalm-singing, St. Ambrose lists over ten.

Although these opposing viewpoints were present at the same time, it is not clear whether their arguments were directed at each other. It is possible that Athanasius and Augustine arrived at their views, at least in part, as a reaction against pagan musical practices. As mentioned earlier, Christians did not want their music to have anything in common with the music of the pagans; this seems to be one thing on which Christians were unified. Many early Christian writings show their

¹¹ Augustine's *Confessions* (early fifth century), in Strunk, *Source Readings*, 133.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ St. Ambrose's *Explanatio psalmi I* (fourth century), in McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 126.

distaste for pagan dancing.¹⁴ This dancing indicates that pagan music was highly emotional. Perhaps this was another aspect of pagan music against which Christians reacted. It is also possible that the view in opposition to pleasurable music arose as a result of observation and personal experience. It is evident that Augustine came to this view, at least partially, based on his own experience. But it is not clear what led Athanasius to this view. He too may have come to this conclusion based on personal experience. Or he may have observed other Christians succumb to the emotional power of music with only poor outcomes. St. Ambrose, on the other hand, may have come to his view based his observations of the benefits of pleasurable psalm-singing. It cannot be determined whether these leaders ever came into direct conflict with one another. But since their teachings were respected and preserved, their conflicting ideas were likely circulating among Christians.

St. Ambrose, in the same writing referenced above, appears on one side of another conflict present in church music history at this time. He writes, “The Apostle admonishes women to be silent in church, yet they do well to join in a psalm; this is gratifying for all ages and fitting for both sexes...even young women sing psalms with no loss of wifely decency, and girls sing a hymn to God with sweet and supple voice while maintaining decorum and suffering no lapse of modesty.”¹⁵ This view is in direct contrast to that found in the anonymously written third-century Christian treatise, *Didascalia apostolorum*. It says, “Women are ordered not to speak in church, not even softly, nor may they sing along or take part in the responses, but they should only be silent and pray to God.”¹⁶ Both of these quotes include a reference to 1 Corinthians 14:34 in which the Apostle Paul instructs women not to speak in church, yet they arrive at strikingly different conclusions. It is evident from these quotes that Christians did not agree on whether women were permitted to sing in church or not. However, the view that gained the most support was the one requiring women to refrain from singing; this view did not weaken until the Renaissance.¹⁷

¹⁴ Tatian’s *Discourse to the Greeks I* (Late second century), in McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 22.

¹⁵ St. Ambrose’s *Explanatio psalmi I* (fourth century), in McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 126.

¹⁶ *Didascalia apostolorum* in Faulkner, *Wiser than Despair*, 58.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

In the ninth century, there arose a conflict involving Gregorian chant. The ninth century marked the time when Pope Gregory was given credit for what is now called Gregorian chant, though it is doubtful he wrote much, if any, of it. The Roman Catholic Church created a propagandistic legend about Pope Gregory in order to promote their music as the best.

As the story goes, the pope, while dictating to a scribe his commentary on parts of the Bible, often paused for a long time. Gregory's silences puzzled the scribe, who was separated from him by a screen. Peeping through, he beheld the dove of the Holy Spirit hovering around the head of St. Gregory, who resumed his dictation only when the dove moved away.¹⁸

Through this story, the Roman Catholic Church convinced many that their versions of the chants were divinely inspired and therefore authoritative.

Around the year AD 820 the archbishop Nidibrius of Narbonne commissioned Helisachar, a man who served as the abbot of two monasteries, to observe the liturgical practices of the court of the palace in Aachen and correct them when necessary.¹⁹ Helisachar writes to the Archbishop of his experience. He describes how he carefully inspected the antiphoners—liturgical books—of the court to see if they matched the chants of the Roman Catholic Church. He found that the chants of the Mass were accurate, but the chants of the Office were greatly distorted due to carelessness and ignorance. Helisachar goes on to describe how he created a new antiphoner that corrected all of the errors. It is not certain what these errors were precisely, but the problem could not have been with rhythm or exact pitches since heightened neumes and rhythmic notation were not invented yet. Their notational system did, however, indicate the general contour. The errors may have involved the contour or the text. It is already clear that there were conflicts between courts of different regions, but Helisachar includes a request to the Archbishop that makes the presence of conflict even more evident. “Make available the work to those who will be content with it so that they may carefully copy it, but do not offer it to

¹⁸ Richard Taruskin and Christopher H. Gibbs, *The Oxford History of Western Music: College Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8.

¹⁹ Strunk, *Source Readings*, 175-176.

the fastidious and the ungrateful who are *more inclined to criticize* than to learn [emphasis added].”²⁰ The quote reveals that Helisachar did not expect everyone to accept the new antiphoner. He fully expected the work to be criticized.

Johannes Hymonides, better known as John the Deacon, was a deacon in the Roman Catholic Church in the ninth century. He wrote a large work entitled, *Life of Gregory the Great*, which provides great additional support for the presence of conflict at this time. In this work, John the Deacon continually criticizes the chanting of the Germans and the Gauls. He explains how they tended to corrupt the original chants. He does not stop there, however, and also insults the sound of their singing:

For Alpine bodies, which make an incredible din with the thundering of their voices, do not properly echo the elegance of the received melody, because the barbaric savagery of a drunken gullet, when it attempts to sing the gentle cantilena with its inflections and repercussions, emits, by a kind of innate cracking, rough tones with a confused sound like a cart upon steps.²¹

Also in this work, John the Deacon makes a passing statement on how the Roman chants were superior to those of the Gauls. “The impudence of the Gauls argued that the chant was corrupted by certain tunes of ours, while on the contrary our melodies demonstrably represented the authentic antiphoner.”²² The people of this time shared a passion for Gregorian chant, but there was much conflict since everyone was equally passionate about only their own culture’s chant.

Perhaps one of the most famous and well-documented conflicts in church music history occurred in the fourteenth century. Until the introduction of *Ars nova* notation, polyphonic church music rhythm consisted of beats divided into three. A great example of this feel is found in Perotin’s *Viderunt omnes*.²³ Although the music does not

²⁰ Helisachar’s *Letter to the Archbishop Nidibrius of Narbonne* in Strunk, *Source Readings*, 177.

²¹ John the Deacon’s *Life of Gregory the Great* in Strunk, *Source Readings*, 179.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Taruskin and Gibbs, *The Oxford History*, 77.

indicate a time signature, the phrasing of the piece sounds like a modern 12/8 time signature. Dividing the beat into three was favored because it had associations with the Trinity. Since God is three-in-one, the music most appropriate for worship would involve as many groups of three as possible.²⁴

In 1321, Jehan des Murs, a French music theorist, finished a work entitled *Notitia artis musicae* (more commonly known as *Ars nova musicae*) in which he presented a case for *Ars nova* notation. Much of this work focused on justifying the use of binary meters in church music. He invented a mensural notation system in which each meter had one of two tempi (perfect or imperfect) and one of two prolations (major or minor). If a piece was written in perfect time, it had three beats per measure. Imperfect time had two beats per measure. The prolation of a meter referred to how far each beat was divided. In major prolation, the beat was divided into three. And in minor prolation, the beat was divided into two. This resulted in four possible meters. The modern day equivalents of these meters are 9/8 (perfect and major), 3/4 (perfect, and minor), 6/8 (imperfect and major), and 2/4 (imperfect and minor).²⁵

The *Ars nova* was the first notational system that enabled pieces in duple meter to be written.²⁶ This system was not favored by everyone. Shortly after the release of *Notitia artis musicae*, Jacques de Liège wrote *Speculum musicae* in response. It is “the longest surviving medieval treatise on music, comprising seven books in 521 chapters.”²⁷ Four chapters of the seventh book are dedicated to defending the *Ars antiqua* against the *Ars nova*.

A good summary of Jacques de Liège’s argument against the new practice is found when he asks why people enjoy this music so much when “the words are lost, the harmony of consonances is diminished, the value of the notes is changed, perfection is brought low, imperfection is exalted, and measure is confused?”²⁸ His complaint that perfection and imperfection are brought closer together is likely a rebuttal to this quote from *Notitia artis musicae*: “Perfection and

²⁴ Ibid., 95.

²⁵ Ibid., 92-94.

²⁶ Ibid., 95.

²⁷ Jacques de Liège’s *Speculum musicae* (1330) in Strunk, *Source Readings*, 269.

²⁸ Ibid., 278.

imperfection are represented...by the same figure.”²⁹ This referred to how perfect and imperfect meters used the same symbols for the notes. The fact that duple meters were now acceptable in church music was enough to upset Jacques. Surely, even more upsetting to him was the use of the same symbols in both perfect and imperfect meters; perfection and imperfection were placed on level ground.

In *Speculum musicae*, several Bible verses are used to defend the old practice. Jacques de Liège quotes Deuteronomy 19:14 which reads, “You shall not remove your neighbor’s landmark, which the men of old have set.”³⁰ Jacques believes that the advocates of *Ars nova* notation violated this verse since they contradicted traditional teachings:

Now in our day new and more recent authors have appeared, who write on mensurable music with little reverence for their ancestors, the ancient doctors; to the contrary, they change their sound doctrine in many respects, corrupting, criticizing, annulling and protesting against it in word and deed, whereas the civil and ethical thing to do would be to imitate the ancients in what they have said well, and in doubtful matters, to explain and defend them.³¹

He also quotes Luke 11:17 and Hosea 10:2 which read, respectively, “Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste” and “Their heart is divided; now shall they perish.”³² Jacques relates these verses to the many disagreements that were occurring among supporters of the *Ars nova* notation.

More interesting than these references to Scripture is his comparison of the old and new practices to the Old and New Testaments. Jacques compares the *Ars nova* to the Old Testament and the *Ars antiqua* to the New Testament. He writes that the *Ars nova* and the Old Testament contain, “many and diverse moral, judicial, and ceremonial precepts which were difficult to fulfill.”³³ And the New Testament is like the

²⁹ Jehan des Murs’s *Notitia artis musicae* (1321) in Strunk, *Source Readings*, 266.

³⁰ Jacques de Liège’s *Speculum musicae* (1330) in Strunk, *Source Readings*, 270.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 277.

³³ *Ibid.*, 275.

Ars antiqua because it is, “freer, plainer, more perfect, and easier to fulfill; it contains fewer precepts and is less burdensome to observe.”³⁴ What is fascinating here is that Jacques sees his conservative approach as the one that is more liberating.

It is apparent that Jacques de Liège had put much effort into his argument. He brings up many interesting points and argues against *Ars nova* from several different angles. But it is obvious, based on the abundance of music that was written in *Ars nova* notation, that this was a losing battle for him. In the prologue to his seventh book, Jacques admits that he is old and laments that those who shared his ideas are now dead. It appears that when Jacques and the rest of his generation passed away, the distaste for *Ars nova* did as well.

Conflict in church music history is not only present, but prevalent. There are disagreements over instruments, over who is permitted to participate, and even over meters. Some of these disagreements are unthinkable in a modern context. Others, like the debate on how pleasurable church music should be, are alive and well today. Unfortunately for church music leaders, history indicates that disagreements in worship practice, at least on this side of heaven, are unavoidable.

³⁴ Ibid.

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