4-12-2024

Making Music in the House of God: How Augustine Influenced Jean Calvin and Martin Luther's Opinions on Musical Worship

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Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.15385/jmo.2024.15.1.2
Available at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/musicalofferings/vol15/iss1/2
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Document Type
Article

Abstract
Music for worship has been a divisive topic throughout church history. Augustine of Hippo influenced Jean Calvin and Martin Luther's theology of music, although in different ways. Their opinions differed, but all three men cared deeply about applying a correct interpretation of the Bible to church music. Augustine's opinion of music was that, when correctly understood, it had the capacity to glorify God. However, music could become a dangerous earthly pleasure if the senses were allowed to have control. Calvin argued that music must be used with care, not due to the problem of music, but rather the weakness and corruption of man. Martin Luther understood music to be a gift from God—a reference from Augustine—placing it of highest importance second only to theology and the scriptures.

This paper was researched by an examination of primary and secondary sources. It argues that Calvin's views were greatly influenced by Augustine, and he aligned more closely in practical aspects. Although Luther was impacted to a lesser extent, his writings about music do contain direct references to Augustinian thought that can be demonstrated in Luther's theology of music. Christians can learn much about the role of music in worship from the example of these God-honoring theologians.

Keywords
Church Music, Reformation, Augustine, Jean Calvin, Martin Luther, Music in Worship, Worship

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Making Music in the House of God:  
How Augustine Influenced Jean Calvin and Martin Luther’s Opinions on Musical Worship

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One of the most debated and divisive topics of church history has been the role of music in worship. Many formative philosophers and early church fathers, such as Augustine, Boethius, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian, expressed strong opinions regarding music. These views range from the prohibition of any music during worship to the encouragement to include instruments to accompany singing. Theologians such as Jean Calvin, Martin Luther, and Ulrich Zwingli also wrote extensively about music during the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. However, these great minds of the Reformation did not arrive at their conclusions without influence. Notably, Jean Calvin and Martin Luther’s opinions on the use of music during worship were influenced by Augustine; however, his influence resulted in different individual conclusions. The influence Augustine exerted is striking due to its longevity—his opinions impacted the reformers over a millennia after he died. Calvin was directly influenced by Augustine and made copious references to him in his writing. Luther was more circuitously influenced by Augustine’s concept of music as a gift from God. This paper aims to trace Augustine’s influence on Calvin and Luther’s theology of music to understand how one theologian’s influence could result in such disparate conclusions. Augustine of Hippo’s opinions about the role and purpose of music were generally stricter than his Christian contemporaries. Christian writers during the post-Nicene period of the fourth century recognized the moral degeneracy of the Roman Empire and resisted the pagan musical practices of the day. They promoted the use of psalms and hymns in worship to counteract the secular musical traditions. Most of the worship from this time was monophonic chant, sung without instrumental accompaniment. Some philosophers, such as Clement of Alexandria, a
philosopher from the second century, discouraged the use of any musical worship. He wrote in his *Paidagogos*,

> When a man occupies his time with flutes, stringed instruments, choirs, dancing, Egyptian krotala and other such improper frivolities, he will find that indecency and rudeness are the consequences. Such a man creates a din with cymbals and tambourines; he rages about with instruments of an insane cult…. Leave the syrinx to shepherds and the flute to superstitious devotees who rush to serve their idols. We completely forbid the use of the instruments at our temperate banquet.¹

The church was concerned that having instrumental music would cause the congregation to associate music with the pagan festivals where it was usually heard. The solution was to dispense with music all together. Instead of mindlessly promoting the traditional thoughts surrounding Christian music in worship, Augustine had a dilemma. He wrestled with his deep regard for the value of music against what he saw as the dangers which music posed—promoting uncontrolled desires. In his *Confessions*, Augustine wrote:

> I remember the tears I shed at the Church’s song in the early days of my newly recovered faith, and how even today I am moved not by the singing as such but by the substance of what is sung, when it is rendered in a clear voice and in the most appropriate melodies, and then I recognize once more the value of this custom. . . .Nonetheless when in my own case it happens that the singing has a more powerful effect on me than the sense of what is sung, I confess my sin and my need of repentance, and then I would rather not hear any singer.²

In *A New Song*, Calvin Stapert presents a summary of Augustine’s philosophy towards music, writing: “It is not wrong to delight in the beauties of sound, whether in eloquent speech or harmonious music. The problem comes when we stop there, when we do not go beyond the beautifully turned phrase or the elegantly shaped melody. Delight in eloquence and music should never be an end in itself.”³ Augustine loved music and beautiful sounds. His concern was that Christians would

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² Augustine, *Confessions*, 270.
³ Stapert, 193.
become consumed by the love of the music and, being unable to control
their sinful natures, start worshiping the song, instead of the God who
made the song. Augustine’s resulting opinion of music was that, when
correctly understood, it had the capacity to glorify God. However, music
could become dangerous and an earthly pleasure if the senses were
allowed to have control.

From this philosophy of music, Augustine decided that the church should
use music to facilitate worship, although he was still wary of its dangers
saying, “Thus I vacillate between the danger of sensuality and the
undeniable benefits. . . . I am more inclined to approve the custom of
singing in church, to the end that through the pleasures of the ear a
weaker mind may rise up to loving devotion.” 4 While Augustine
recognized the risks of luring congregants to sin, he accepted them
because of the benefits offered through using music in the church saying,

But if the objection is so slight that greater benefits are
to be expected for those who are earnest than damage to
be feared from slanderers, then the practice ought
without hesitation to be maintained especially when it
can be defended from the Scriptures, as can the singing
of hymns and psalms, since we have the example and
precepts of the Lord himself and of the Apostles. 5

Augustine not only defended the idea of singing in church but went so
far as to explain that “there are various ways of realizing this practice,” 6
meaning that specific regulations pertaining to the use of instruments and
liturgy could be freely decided.

Augustine’s opinions about the use of church music in the corporate
worship setting were positive, but they came with a caution. He believed
that music could help point Christians towards God, “stirring the soul
with piety and kindling the sentiment of divine love,” 7 but if used
incorrectly, it could lead to worshipping the creation, instead of the
Creator. Regarding the mode of use in music, Augustine promoted
instrumental and conservative worship, with few guidelines apart from
stipulating that it should remain holy. He reasoned that the Bible
instructed believers to worship whenever they came together, writing,
“When, then, is it not the proper time for the brethren gathered in church

4 Augustine, Confessions, 270.
5 Augustine, Epistle LV, in McKinnon, 163.
6 Augustine, Epistle LV, in McKinnon, 163.
7 Augustine, Epistle LV, in McKinnon, 163.
to sing what is holy—unless there is reading of discourse or prayer in the clear voice of bishops or common prayer led by the voice of the deacon?" This promotion of worship whenever the church met, and Augustine’s opinions on music became well known throughout church history. Several other views on church music developed after Augustine, particularly during the Reformation.

Jean Calvin, a leading French reformer, and theologian of the sixteenth century, was heavily influenced by the early church fathers, especially Augustine, in matters concerning the purpose of music. One of Calvin’s theological suppositions was that the spiritual life of a Christian disciple is almost exclusively inward and therefore external expression in worship is relatively insignificant. However, Calvin had to reconcile his theology with his interpretation of the manifold amounts of instructions to sing in the Bible. James Haar writes of Calvin’s dilemma and solution, “The numerous biblical injunctions to sing psalms could not be ignored, and therefore Calvin argued that a simple, dignified congregational psalmody was required for reformed worship. But this psalmody was restricted to the corporate, unaccompanied unison singing of metrical psalms to tunes of appropriate gravity that were untainted by secular associations.” Ultimately, Calvin argued that music must be used with care, not due to the problem of music, but rather the weakness and corruption of man. Overemphasis on the melody or other “musical” devices would neglect the meaning and turn hearts in an ungodly direction. As Steven Guthrie writes, “Calvin’s assessment of music… would seem to be not only: ‘singing engages the emotions’; but also: ‘singing engages the emotions and not the mind.’ While music ‘kindles the heart,’ it is the ‘meaning of the words’ that is perceived by ‘our minds.’” Practically, Jean Calvin rejected the use of instruments in worship due to their potential to distract hearts away from worship. Due to the biblical command to sing praises to God, his solution was the metrical psalm—psalms from Scripture sung in unison for corporate worship.

Jean Calvin’s opinions on music were greatly influenced by Augustine. Many historians have pointed out that Calvin and Augustine shared the same philosophy that music could turn the singer to worshipping the song, and they each turned to the psalms for a solution to Biblical worship. Charles Garside comments that, “Calvin’s theology of music

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8 Augustine, Epistle LV, in McKinnon, 164.
9 Haar, European Music, 394.
10 Guthrie, Resonant Witness, 383.
was expressly, and, in the exactest sense of the word, essentially *Augustinian.* Calvin and Augustine were both intrigued by the solution of singing psalms to combat distraction while still utilizing the tool of music to emphasize the text in worship. In his *Institutes of Christian Religion,* Calvin summarizes Augustine’s famous deliberation about music from *Confessions,* then records and agrees with Augustine’s approval of psalmody:

Augustine confesses (Confess. Lib. x. cap. 33) that the fear of this danger sometimes made him wish for the introduction of a practice observed by Athanasius. . . .If this moderation is used, there cannot be a doubt that the practice is most sacred and salutary. On the other hand, songs composed merely to tickle and delight the ear are unbecoming the majesty of the Church, and cannot but be most displeasing to God. 

At first, Calvin was concerned with the role of instrumental music in worship, but he later shifted his focus to the text of songs, believing that singing Scripture would control the power of the music itself. The reason Calvin was wary of the power of music and turned to psalmody as an answer was shared by Augustine as well. The cautiousness shared by Augustine and Calvin resulted in their mutual uncertainty as to the specifications of church music. Rob Smith writes, “Augustine was reluctant to give singing his unqualified blessing. . . .[and] the same kind of ambivalence appears in John Calvin.” As Calvin recognized the power of music and pondered the problem of church music, he turned to Augustine to examine what solution the early church fathers had promoted. W. Robert Godfrey writes, “Calvin believed that he was restoring the use of music sanctioned by the Bible and followed by the ancient church. From reading the fathers (especially Athanasius, Chrysostom, and Augustine) Calvin learned that the ancient church sang exclusively (or almost exclusively) Psalms in unison without instrumental accompaniment.” The result of Calvin’s research was a theology of liturgical music based on singing Psalms from Scripture. Calvin references Augustine five times in his *Preface to the Genevan Psalter* [a collection of 126 melodies for singing metrical psalms] to explain his theological reasonings regarding psalmody. He also cites

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11 Garside, 28.
12 Calvin, *Institutes,* 182.
13 Smith, “Music, Singing, and Emotions,” 475.
14 Godfrey, 74.
Augustine in warning songs to be sung with reverence. “And in truth we know by experience that singing has great force and vigor to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal. Care must always be taken that the song be neither light nor frivolous; but that it have weight and majesty (as St. Augustine says).” Calvin’s view of music, its powers, and the promotion of singing Psalms in worship were heavily influenced by Augustine.

Another sixteenth century reformer, German theologian Martin Luther, hoped to reform the Catholic Church, not dissociate from it (as did his contemporary, Jean Calvin). Martin Luther’s view on music was shaped in part by his goal of reforming the Roman Catholic Church, however, the idea of reform did not take root within the Catholic Church. Luther was less concerned with separating from the grandiose musical traditions of the Catholic Church. Instead, his primary goal was to rework the text of worship to reflect scriptural truth. This approach meant that the music of Lutheran churches was much grander than the music allowed in Calvinistic services. Robin Leaver writes in “The Reformation and Music,” “In Reformed churches [Calvinistic churches] the music was minimal, comprising simple, unaccompanied singing of vernacular metrical psalms. . . . In contrast, the music associated with the teaching of the catechism in Lutheran churches was more expansive.” In his *Formula missae* of 1523 Luther wrote, “In the first place we assert, it is not now, nor has it ever been, in our mind to abolish entirely the whole formal cultus of God, but to cleanse that which is in use, which has been vitiated by most abominable additions, and to point out a pious use.” As a result of his opinion on music, Luther wrote a vernacular Mass (his *Deutsche messe*) in the German language. Unlike the practice of the Catholic church, Luther prescribed congregational singing to give the teaching of the Reformation practical expression through music. Martin Luther understood music to be a gift from God—a reference from Augustine—placing it of highest importance second only to theology and the scriptures, and desired to follow in the tradition of the early Christian church. In his *Preface to Georg Rhau’s Symphoniad iucundae*, Luther wrote “We can mention only one point (which experience confirms), namely, that next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest

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16 Haar, 379.
17 Luther, *Formula missae*, in *Works of Martin Luther*, 84-85.
praise.”¹⁸ For Luther, the type of music was not as important as the text. He did not prohibit Catholic styles of music as long as the text or practice did not undermine reformed theology, but instead reinforced truth. For Luther, church music could follow the Catholic Mass tradition if the congregation was involved, and the content of the text aligned with scriptural principles.

Martin Luther was certainly aware of the writings of Augustine, especially due to his background as an Augustinian monk.¹⁹ Although the connection is scant, there is evidence that Augustine impacted Luther’s writings. The first similarity is in how Luther and Augustine both reference music. “I would certainly like to praise music with all my heart as the excellent gift of God which it is and to commend it to everyone.”²⁰ This description of music as a gift is full of theological significance. Miikka Anttila expounds on this idea of a gift, and how frequently it is used in his discussion of Luther’s theology.

Luther’s most recurrent statement about music is that it is a gift of God. That claim may not seem surprising on its surface, but is worth a closer examination. In ‘On Music,’ Luther states that music is a gift of God, not of men (donum Dei non hominum est) and in ‘Encomion musices,’ he praises music as the excellent gift of God (donum Dei excellentissimum). Table Talk²¹ includes even bolder statements: that music is a great gift and divine indeed (Musica maximum, immo divinum est donum), or a distinctive gift of God and close to theology (Musica est insigne donum Dei et theologiae proxima), and finally, the greatest gift of God (optimum Dei donum).²²

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¹⁸ Luther, Luther’s Works, 323.
¹⁹ A member of an Augustinian order, specifically the Hermits of St. Augustine, founded in 1244 by Pope Innocent IV. Augustinian monks followed the Rule of St. Augustine which contains instructions on religious life as notated by Augustine.
²⁰ Luther, Luther’s Works, 321.
²¹ Martin Luther’s work containing recorded, informal conversations held with students and colleagues in his home. During these conversations, Luther presented his opinions on a diverse array of topics.
²² Anttila, 70.
Augustine also refers to music as a gift from God in essential writings that Luther would have been familiar with. Another similarity between Luther and Augustine was their recognition of the power of music. Both theologians realized that music could sway feelings. They both believed that it could be a useful tool when worshipping, but unlike Luther, Augustine was also concerned about the dangers of distraction by the instruments: “Luther, along with Augustine sees the power of music. Luther was probably influenced by Augustine’s view of a delight in music and that though he was aware that this had somehow attracted him to God, he also had the feeling of having sinned when he paid more attention to music’s beauty than to its spiritual meaning.”

Unlike Augustine, Luther believed that the positive aspects provided through music were worth any potential danger. He did not share in the “inclination towards the negative effects of music.” Luther could not comprehend how beautiful music could only distract. Instead, he believed that music would help to illuminate the text and that beautiful music would help to keep attention focused on the words of praise.

It is worth saying that, for Luther, music cannot be too beautiful. His appreciation of the beauty of music differs remarkably from that of Augustine. Indeed, the scruples of Augustine in _Confessions_ were utterly inconceivable for Luther. He did not see beautiful music as distracting the mind from hearing words. According to _Table Talk_, Luther assumed that Augustine would have agreed with him if he had lived in Luther’s time.

Because of the way Augustine and Luther both refer to music, and their recognition of the power of music, it is possible to conclude that Augustine exerted some influence on Luther, though not as foundationally as his influence on Jean Calvin.

Augustine, Jean Calvin, and Martin Luther were all church fathers who proposed widely separate views concerning the role of music in worship. Even though their opinions differed, all three men cared deeply about correctly interpreting the Bible regarding church music. While both reformers held distinct views, they each understood the power of music through Augustine. This recognition led to the encouragement of

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23 Kartawidjaja, 88.
24 Kartawidjaja, 26.
25 Anttila, 184-185.
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psalmody in worship for Calvin, and the promotion of music as a tool for worship for Luther. Calvin’s numerous quotations of Augustine appears as clarification of many topics regarding church music, including the trouble of combating the distractive nature of music, while Luther’s distinctive realization of music as a gift from God came from Augustine. It is important to trace the origin of Calvin and Luther’s views on church music, to see how Augustine influenced both reformers. Although Calvin and Luther came to drastically different conclusions, they both agreed with Augustine that worship was commanded in Scripture and should not be taken lightly. The New Testament does not provide practical instructions for musical worship, causing Augustine, Calvin, and Luther to have disparate conclusions. Similar interpretive differences regarding church music persist among Christians today. Christians can learn much from the example of these God-honoring theologians, namely that although there may be differences in how people worship, the heart behind the worship is more important than the form.

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