

“A Very Short History of Instrumental and Vocal Music in the Old Testament, Church, and Today”

By Joshua Stucki referencing *The Eternal Struggle* by George L. Faull, Rel. D.

For the first ten years of the church, the church regularly met in the local Jewish temple (one example is Acts 3:1). Musical instruments were always present in the Jewish tabernacle, temple, in war, and in peace (Leviticus 23:24; Numbers 29:1; 1 Chronicles 6:31-48, 23:5, 25:1-31; 2 Chronicles 5:11-14 Ezra 3:10, Nehemiah 12:36, Psalm 33:2, 43:4, 150:1-6, among others). Obviously, instrumental music of various kinds was no obstacle for the early Christians who met at the temple regularly.

Psalms 137:1-4 gives us an interesting contrast: when the Jews were in exile, they hung up their harps; instrumental music ceased when in judgment of sin. However, six different times in the Old Testament, repentance and revival came to the Jewish people, and it was always accompanied by instrumental music (many of the references above are post-exile) of various kinds. God Himself instituted instrumental music for the purpose of worship, celebration, in peace, and even in war (think of the Battle of Jericho!).

In church history, there has been much said about instrumental music of various kinds: after Jerusalem was completely destroyed in 70AD, it was the final “exile”, and thus instrumental music in the temple (along with everything else in the temple) ceased. Some interpreted this (to this day) that instrumental music also therefore ceased for the New Testament church. Naturally, this assumes that the church suffered the same fate as the Jewish religion, which is

certainly not the case. We are promised that the church is the Kingdom of God that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:27), and the gates of hell cannot stand against it (Matthew 16:18). So we can safely assume that the destruction of Jerusalem had nothing to do with instrumental music ceasing in the church.

Instead, instrumental music AND congregational singing ceased in much of the “church” for a time between the destruction of Jerusalem (70AD) and 600AD because the first popes forbid them both. In fact, congregational singing ceased in “church” (term used loosely) for nearly 900 years until Martin Luther reintroduced it during the Reformation. Before that, only chanting by the monks (called the “Gregorian Chant”, still practiced by some groups today) was allowed, and later on in the 7th century the Pope allowed organ music (but still no congregational singing). From the 15th century on, many of the other reformers (and later, restorationists) limited all congregational singing to only the “Psalter”, or hymns developed from the Psalms only. John Calvin, the founder of Presbyterianism, was staunch on this, as was Alexander and Thomas Campbell and Barton W. Stone (at first), as they came out of Presbyterianism.

It was not until the time of Isaac Watts where any song not found in the Psalter was sung in any church with any acceptance (He published his first hymnal in 1707). His hymns, using tunes from local, familiar, secular sources such as bar and drinking songs, immediately caught on in popularity *secularly*. The most popular was the tune to the song we now know and love, “Amazing Grace”.

Naturally, many in the church vehemently opposed using secular tunes from bars for singing in the church. It would be more than a generation of church-goers later before the old prejudice against non-Psalter music was widely dismissed in the churches. However, it was not until much later, near the end of the 19th century, when Isaac's and other artist's songs were largely accepted in virtually all conservative churches and printed in the first mass-produced hymnals.

We can see there has *always* been controversy about music. While we may think some of the controversies in the past were silly, or we now see them as non-issues, the same basic controversy existed then as it exists now: can we use our culture's music style or even present, popular, secular tunes, but with Christian lyrics, for worship?

If you have ever sung, "Alas! And did my Savior bleed?", "Amazing Grace", "Holy, Holy, Holy", or "The Battle Hymn of the Republic", or many others, you have already taken the side of virtually all church history and said, "yes".

The only other logically-sustainable position is to find out what the church sang before 70AD and only sing those songs, only with those original tunes, and only with those instruments. Otherwise, the style, instruments, and lyrics of Christian music has always changed from century to century, always taking some elements from the culture it was present in to claim those things for God and use them for His glory. These elements have changed throughout history to include instruments, technological advancements, tunes, and music genre and style.

My last example is the piano, perfected in its present

form around 1850, where it was heavily chastised for use in churches by many conservatives because they were most commonly found in bars for the purpose of accompaniment for drinking songs! The “automatic piano” in saloons cemented the piano’s secular reputation and for many Christians of that era, such an association was intolerable. Of course, now much later, pianos are largely only associated with churches and the like, so now there is no controversy. Guitars predate the piano of course, and had their most popular origin in the churches as a point of contrast. Naturally, this does not make a guitar better (or worse) than an instrument for worship.

I hope you have enjoyed this brief history of music in worship. What a journey it has been! Yet God has been worshipped in every era, at every turn, with every development, fine-tuned as it went to bring more and more into His Kingdom!

This next generation of music, like all the past ones, has naturally made some uncomfortable. It is unfamiliar, has some secular roots, sometimes utilizing certain secular elements. All of this was true of all past church music too (unless, again, you go back to strictly pre-70AD Jewish temple music!). I would certainly recommend worshipping in a way that makes you comfortable. All the same, let us also evaluate anything “new” in light of Scripture only. Let us be the first generation of church that does *not* divide over music style or instrument. All has been and is used to glorify God! (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16)