

A Few Notes On Music[al Instruments] In Worship

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Recently in Canada (Oct. 2014 in Burlington) there has apparently been a 'Reformed Music in Worship Conference'. This conference has generated a number of articles in the church magazine of our Canadian sisters, *Clarion* about the use of music and musical instruments in worship. Both prof. A. de Visser and prof. C. van Dam have contributed to the discussion. Without going into detail on these articles, I'd like to contribute a couple of considerations to our readers here in Australia, first on John Calvin's opposition to the use of instruments and second on a biblical consideration sometimes overlooked.

Firstly, it is very good to see that both authors desire to confront our own Reformed heritage on the question whether or not musical instruments in worship ought to be permitted. As many of us will realise John Calvin was adamantly opposed to their use. Throughout the 16th century and the first half of the 17th century Reformed churches all over the world used only non-accompanied singing in worship. If we do otherwise, using pipe organs or some other form of musical accompaniment, we ought to give due diligence to our heritage and confront the reasons why Calvin opposed this.

Well let's hear Calvin on the point first. In his commentary on Psalm 33:2 he states:

2. Praise Jehovah upon the harp. It is evident that the Psalmist here expresses the vehement and ardent affection which the faithful ought to have in praising God, when he enjoins musical instruments to be employed for this purpose. He would have nothing omitted by believers which tends to animate the minds and feelings of men in singing God's praises. The name of God, no doubt, can, properly speaking, be celebrated only by the articulate voice; but it is not without reason that David adds to this those aids by which believers were wont to stimulate themselves the more to this exercise; especially considering that he was speaking to God's ancient people. There is a distinction, however, to be observed here, that we may not indiscriminately consider as applicable to ourselves everything which was formerly enjoined upon the Jews. I have no doubt that playing upon cymbals, touching the harp and the viol, and all that kind of music, which is so frequently mentioned in the Psalms, was a part of the education; that is to say, the puerile instruction of the law: I speak of the stated service of the temple. For even now, if believers choose to cheer themselves with musical instruments, they should, I think, make it their object not to dissever their cheerfulness from the praises of God. But when they frequent their sacred assemblies, musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting up of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law. The Papists, therefore, have foolishly borrowed this, as well as many other things, from the Jews. Men who are fond of outward pomp may delight in that noise; but the simplicity which God recommends to us by the apostle is far more pleasing to him. Paul allows us to bless God in the public assembly of the saints only in a known tongue, (1 Corinthians 14:16.) The voice of man, although not understood by the generality, assuredly excels all inanimate instruments of music; and yet we see what St Paul determines concerning speaking in an unknown tongue. What shall we then say of chanting, which fills the ears with nothing but an empty sound? Does any one object, that music is very useful for awakening the minds of men and moving their hearts? I own it; but we should always take care that no corruption creep in, which might both defile the pure worship of God and involve men in superstition. Moreover, since the Holy Spirit expressly warns us of this danger by the mouth of Paul, to proceed beyond what we are there warranted by him is not only, I must say, unadvised zeal, but wicked and perverse obstinacy.¹

Calvin quite obviously considers the use of musical instruments in worship to be part and parcel of the ceremonies of the law of Moses which have been abolished in Christ. He sees so much of this kind of Old Testament ceremony in the Roman Catholic church and includes their use of musical instruments in worship as a part of this. Calvin emphasises that music must praise God in a language which communicates verbally.

¹ Translation taken from CCEL.org.

This is all well and good and up until now I have not said anything which professors A. de Visser or C. van Dam did not bring forward. The problem, however, is how to interpret Calvin's statements. Now neither De Visser or Van Dam can really be blamed for thinking that Calvin is talking, among other things, about using musical instruments to accompany the congregational singing. After all, both of them have done due diligence in referencing articles from respectable theological journals on Calvin's views in this area.² The problem is that nobody, not even those writing in respectable journals, seems to have taken pause to consider the musical context of the mid to late 16th century. When this musical context is taken into account, Calvin's comments can suddenly be read in a whole new light.

To put it bluntly. Singing in church was *not* accompanied by musical instruments. Not in the Roman Catholic church and not in Reformed churches. The matter was to my knowledge not discussed either. This was simply culturally not done. And there was good reason.³ For a start, Roman Catholics did not engage in congregational singing. In fact, the regular worship service of a Roman Catholic church (the mass) sometimes had no music at all. This was the so-called *missa lecta* ('the read mass').

Where possible and particularly in larger churches music was certainly used. This was the so-called *missa solemnis* ('the solemn mass'). The singing in worship was based on plainchant (a chanting of the biblical text, psalm or hymn), which could be either solo or a choir. By the mid 16th century the plainchant line itself was often accompanied by varied voices in polyphony dancing all around it. In fact the use of such polyphony (literally: many voices, that is, all at once singing different lines) came to engender quite some critique within Roman Catholic circles due to the fact that the text being chanted could no longer be understood, even by those who knew their Latin well. The Council of Trent (an important Roman Catholic council designed to answer the criticism of the Reformation) finally ruled that such polyphony was to be forbidden in worship.

That said, musical instruments were certainly used in worship, particularly the pipe organ. However, pipe organs of the time generally did not have a series of stops like they do today. They were 'blockworks', in other words, you either played all the pipes or none of them. And they were generally based on large mixtures, which basically means they were loud and noisy. It was impossible for a pipe organ of this nature to accompany a choir let alone a soloist. It drowned them out. The organ was, however, treated as a choir in its own right. Frequently, the various verses in a hymn or section of plainchant in Roman Catholic services were sung alternately by two choirs, one doing even numbered verses and the other odd numbered verses. In this context, the organ could be treated as one of the choirs. A choir of men and boys would then sing one verse, the organ would 'sing' the next verse, and the choir the following, etc. The worshippers were expected to meditate upon the words which the organ was 'singing' at any given time.⁴ In addition the organ (or sometimes other brass instruments) would accompany things like formal processions of clergy into the church, or play during the blessing of the elements of bread and wine.

It is within this context that Calvin so forcefully speaks against the use of musical instruments in worship. He was never thinking of accompanied singing. That just didn't happen. He was, however, thinking of musical instruments which *replaced* the singing of hymn or psalm texts.

Calvin does also add another comment directed at a specific kind of singing in Roman Catholic worship. He says: "What shall we then say of chanting (lit. *cantilatio*), which fills the ears with nothing but an empty sound?"⁵ Calvin is not talking about the singing of psalms or hymns as chants. *Cantilatio* is the solo plainchant used to recite bible readings in worship. Instead of *reading* the Bible, it was chanted. Calvin is concerned that this form of 'reading' Scripture detracts from properly understanding the words.

2 In particular I am thinking of a recent article by W. D. O. Taylor, 'John Calvin and Musical Instruments: A Critical Investigation' in *Calvin Theological Journal* (2013): 248-269.

3 An important historical reason was also the fact that the early church fathers argued that the use of musical instruments (as also the idea of singing in parts instead of in unison) suggested paganism (see my comments on Hebrews 12 further below).

4 This practice was adopted by the Lutherans and was also to be found here and there in an aberrant Reformed church, for example, the Buurkerk in Utrecht which continued the practice until 1608, when the ministers were finally able to persuade the consistory to abolish it.

5 John Calvin, *In Librum Psalmorum Commentarius*, ed. A. Tholuck (Eichler, Berlin, 1836)

Let me then sum up a crucial point quite plainly. John Calvin never criticised the use of musical *accompaniment* to singing for the simple reason that such accompaniment did not exist in his time.

The Reformed churches introduced *congregational* singing in worship instead of trained soloists and choirs. The idea of using some kind of accompaniment to singing in worship only came up during the 17th century as an answer to the problem of the very unmusical nature of the singing. By then, of course, the long tradition of non-accompanied congregational singing made many people wary of this horrible 'animal' called "change". Eventually, however, after much debate and pamphleteering pipe organs were allowed to accompany the singing in the various churches which had them, although the large city churches found that their organs were often not loud enough to be heard above the thousands of church-goers who were used to literally "shouting" their psalm melodies.⁶ The use of organs for accompanying singing was part of an international trend at the time and also became common in Roman Catholic worship. By this time, of course, pipe organs had developed the mechanism of 'stops' so that select pipes could be played.

But to come to our own time, we must also ask the question what kind of music is appropriate in church. To ask the question is, of course, to realise that any answer is going to have a significant element of subjectivity to it. Nevertheless, I do believe that there is an important biblical consideration which is sometimes overlooked. It comes from the way New Testament worship is described in Hebrews 12:18-24, a passage also mentioned by prof. A. de Visser. We read there:

¹⁸ For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. ²⁰ (For they could not endure what was commanded: "And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow.") ²¹ And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.")

²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, ²³ to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. (NKJV)

In this passage, the worship of the New Testament churches is contrasted with that of Israel in the Old Testament, specifically with worship at Sinai. They approached God at a touchable mountain here on earth. The whole experience was very scary. New Testament worship does not imagine that God comes down to earth to receive our praise, but as churches our worship is considered to be caught up to heaven (cf. Eph. 2:6). Our worship service is, as it were, transported heavenward and joins together with the worship of angels and of departed saints.

What does this mean for church music? I would submit that church music ought to support this biblical imagery. In other words, music in church should give the worshipper the idea that he has stepped out of the world and been transported to heaven. At the very least, church music should be deliberately and distinctively *different* to the kind of popular music in the world. Obviously this effect can be achieved in different ways. It was for this reason that musical instruments and singing in parts (instead of in unison) were banned from church music in the early church. The use of part-singing and musical instruments had, at that time, the distinct flavour of paganism. In fact, the early church fathers argued that because we ought to be singing together with the angels in heaven, this is best represented by singing *in unison*.⁷ Arguably the

6 For a good overview of singing in the Reformed churches at this time see Rudolf Rasch, *Geschiedenis Van De Muziek In De Republiek Der Zeven Verenigde Nederlanden 1572-1795* (2013), published on internet at <http://www.let.uu.nl/~Rudolf.Rasch/personal/>

See also Klaas Bolt, 'De Gemeentezang in een Crisissituatie' (*Het Orgel* 75, 5 mei, 1979, 138-66) who offers a very considered defence of the manner of singing in earlier times, both in terms of tempo and volume.

7 See J. Quasten, *Music & Worship in Pagan & Christian Antiquity*, trans. from the German by B. Ramsey (National Association of Pastoral Musicians, Washington, 1983) 60-62, 66-72.

singing of psalms and hymns in Gregorian plainchant ended up providing the effect of heavenly (other-worldly) worship very well. The tradition of singing Genevan modal psalms (with or without organ accompaniment) can also provide this effect. But this, of course, does not mean that there is no other way of achieving it. The one thing we should, in my opinion, *not* be doing, is trying to make church music sound like the popular music of our day. Visitors to our worship services should also be able to be caught up in the 'other-worldly' experience of true worship. Music which reflects the popular styles of the day detracts from this effect. Suitable non-worldly music supports it.