

Chapter 4

Musical precedent in the early and medieval church

As has already been demonstrated, the passages in Biblical writing dealing with music contained a set of powerful yet mutually contradictory themes. On the one hand they speak of the power of music to aid worship and to raise the worshipper to new heights of devotion. At the same time music also has the power to deprave and distract, and thus these writings emphasise the centrality of the understanding in worship. The patristic writings available to Stuart divines were also rich in praise of music. This section, through an examination of the most frequently cited authorities, and the Stuart reaction to their ambiguous message, will demonstrate that these sources were equally as ambiguous as the scriptural corpus, and presented similar problems of interpretation to Stuart England.¹

St Ambrose's institution of the practice of communal singing as Bishop of Milan was a frequently used example. For Ambrose

the singing of praise is the very bond of unity, when the whole people join in song a single act of song. The strings of the harp are of varying lengths, but the harmony is a unity. The musician's fingers, too, may often make mistakes on the small strings, but in the congregation that great Musician, the Spirit, cannot err. Psalmody is the rewarding work of the night, the grateful relaxation of the busy day, the good beginning and the fortifying conclusion of all work. It is the ministry of the angels, the strength of the heavenly host, the spiritual sacrifice.²

Psalmody was a means of binding a congregation in the harmony of the community of faith, as well as a sacrifice of praise to God and an aid to devotion. St Basil was also aware of the capability of music to insinuate right religion into the minds of the singers and hearers:

¹ The literature on the status of the Fathers in Reformation England is surprisingly limited. See S.L. Greenslade, *The English Reformers and the Fathers of the Church* (Oxford, OUP, 1960) p.9 on the 'grateful, respectful, but cautious' spirit in which the early reformers approached these writers.

² *In Psalm i Enarratio 9*: Migne (ed.) *Patrologia Latina* (hereafter *PL*) XIV. 925: cited by Erik Routley, *The Church and Music* (London, Duckworth, 1950) p. 229. See also, amongst many: James McKinnon

God mingles the sweetness of harmony with the divine Truth so that while we are enjoying the pleasures of hearing the music we may unconsciously gather up the benefits of the words which are being spoken. This is just what a wise doctor will do when, obliged to give bitter medicine to a sick man, he lines the medicine-cup with honey. The skilful harmonies of the psalms are worked out for our benefit, so that we, who are young in years or at any rate immature in character, may in the act of singing be in fact taming the uncouthness of our spirits.³

St Jerome demonstrated the generally positive witness of the Fathers of the church, but also caution, and concern that the singing should be in connection with the heart of the singer:

Let those whose office it is to sing in the Church beare these things; that we must sing to God with the heart, not with the voyce; neither after the manner of Tragedians are the throate and chops to be anointed with some pleasant oyntment, that theatrical songs and measures may be heard in the Church; but we must sing in feare, in worke, in the knowledge of the Scriptures. So let the Servant of Christ sing, that not the voyce of the Singer, but the words that are read may please.⁴

It is clear that music has a fixed, important institutional place in the worship of the church here, and, if ‘correctly’ ordered, could be a great part of the worship of the church. St John Chrysostom also had much to say on the pernicious effects of ‘bad’ music as he saw it, but nevertheless saw the potential for music if, again, it was in some sense correctly ordered:

In the theatre when the chorus sings its devilish ditties, there is great silence, in order that these pernicious tunes may make their impression. That chorus consists of mimics and dancers, led by some player of the cithara; they sing some devilish and damnable song, and he who sings is the spirit of wickedness and damnation. Here on the other hand where the chorus consists of pious men and the chorusmaster is the Prophet, and the tune is not of satanic agency but of the Grace of the Spirit, and he who is praised is not the devil, but God - surely here it is our duty to keep a great silence, and to listen with great trembling.⁵

It will be noted that Chrysostom gave no guidance on how to distinguish between tunes of Satanic agency and those of the Spirit. In addition to this ambiguity in the

(ed.), *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge, CUP, 1987); Theodore Gerold, *Les Peres de l’eglise et la musique* (Geneva, Minkoff reprint, 1973, first published Strasbourg, 1931).

³ Sermon I. 3: Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Graece* (hereafter *PG*) XXXII. 1135 : Routley, *Church and Music* p. 228.

⁴ *Commentary on Ephesians* Bk 3 c.2: as cited by Prynne, *Histriomastix* p. 276.

⁵ *Commentary on Psalm 8* : *PG* V.106 Routley, *Church and Music* p. 232.

witness of the early church, there were also a number of sources available to thinkers from medieval Europe, keenly aware of perceived abuses in the contemporary use of church music. John of Salisbury likened the music of his day to a ‘chorus of Sirens’, with a facility in singing to which neither the nightingale or parrot could compare.

This facility is displayed in accents and discants, in the dividing or redoubling of the notes, in the repetition of phrases and the clashing of the voices, while in all this the high or even the highest notes of the scale are so mixed with the lower and the lowest, that the ears are almost deprived of their power to distinguish.⁶

Music had decayed to such a state that the technical display and facility of the singers had begun to obscure the sense of the text being sung. The English reformer John Wyclif expressed very similar sentiments, in the ‘Sermon on the feigned contemplative life’. The songs of the Apostles had been ‘songs of mourning’ sung to teach the Gospel, ‘to put away idleness, and to be occupied in a useful way for the time.’

But those songs and ours do not agree, for ours invite jollity and pride, and theirs lead to mourning and to dwelling longer on the words of God’s Law.... When there are forty or fifty in a choir, three or four proud and lecherous rascals perform the most devout service with flourishes so that no one can hear the words, and all the others are dumb and watch them like fools.⁷

Contemporary church music was not serving its correct purpose of aiding and stimulating devotion, but rather had been lost in the technical trickery of the singers. Where church music had once led the believer deeper into contemplation of God, it now served as a distraction. An edict of Pope John XXII of 1325 drew out the same disjuncture between ideal and practice. The church required

of the worshipper an alert mind, of the speaker uninterrupted discourse, and of the singers a modest demeanour which expresses itself in grave and serene music. The Lord's song in their mouths sounded graciously; indeed when musicians so sing and utter their words that God is extolled in the heart and devotion to Him is kindled, the song cannot but be gracious..... To this end, let priests and people sing the services of morning and evening, and the celebrations of the Mass, reverently, clearly, and to suitable music, finding their delight in good enunciation and their full satisfaction in musical propriety.⁸

⁶ *Polycraticus* Bk 1. c.6: Routley, *Church and Music* p. 240.

⁷ Routley, *Church and Music*, p.105.

⁸ Routley, *Church and Music* p.241.

This ideal is contrasted with a detailed criticism of the current practice and its faults, in particular the indiscriminate employment of distracting technical devices. Because of these devices

the music of the liturgies is disordered with semibreves, minims, and even shorter notes. They break up the melodies with hockets, they embellish them with discants; sometimes they so force them out of shape with 'triples' and other music proper to profane occasions that the principles of the antiphony and the gradual are wholly neglected. They forget on what they are building; they so disguise the melody that it becomes indistinguishable,

It was also the case that 'the conduct of the singers is so appropriate to their matter that decent devotion is held in contempt and a reprehensible frivolity is paraded for admiration.'⁹

Charles Butler, in a detailed and systematic tracing of the practice of church music over time (which follows from his examination of Scripture dealt with above) adduces precedents from Saints Jerome and Athanasius, as well as from Isidore. He also refers to the account of the vision that Ignatius of Antioch is reported to have had of two Seraphim at the throne of God, answering each other's calls of 'Holy', after the passage from Isaiah 6, which led to his instituting such a practice in the church at Antioch.¹⁰ He concludes:

This solemn Musik, so pleasing unto God, has ever since (when the times permitted) in one degree or other, been observed in his Church¹¹

John Cosin noted that Ignatius's vision was

derided by our new masters [the Puritan party], and of what authority it is we cannot tell but by Socrates words; howsoever, whether the story be true or no, I am sure that the thing itself is good, and if Ignatius did not hear the angels sing so, that which is better, the prophet Isaiah, 'The seraphims stood upon the throne, and cried to one another &c''¹²

Cosin was in no doubt as to the antiquity of the use of music in worship. As well as the singing of "psalms and hymns with solemn music" under Basil, there were

⁹ Ibid. p. 241-2.

¹⁰ in the section 'Of the Continuance of Church Music': *The Principles of Music*, pp. 105 – 108.

¹¹ Ibid. p.105.

¹² Cosin, *Notes* p. 54.

many other testimonies of the ancients to that purpose... there needs no farther deduction of them, for every man knows how they have always been since those times practised with great and religious solemnity... I cannot but put him [Joseph Scaliger] in mind.. how highly esteemed the solemn music of the Christians was by all pious and learned men, even in primitive times.¹³

George Wither cited a lengthy series of Fathers who ‘did well perceive that [music] was better to be esteemed of, then as an idle or fruitlesse Ceremony’, including the singing of psalms by sides at Antioch, and the hymns used by Ambrose in Milan, as recorded by authorities as Eusebius, Theodoret and Augustine.¹⁴ Justin Martyr had argued that music

stirs up the mind, with a more fervent affection to that which is derived in the Psalme; that it asswageth evill concupiscences arising in the flesh; that it expels wicked thoughts infused by the invisible enemy; and that it more enables to bring forth the sweete fruits of divine goodnesse &c. S. Gregory saith, that singing of Psalmes, if it bee done with intention of the heart, opens in the soule a passage for God, that hee may infuse therinto, gifts of Prophecie, or compunction of spirit.¹⁵

However, part of the ambiguity of the debate on the role of church music was the fact that ‘Puritan’ writers could find apparently equally persuasive censures of the wrong type of church music in the very same sources. Marginal Prynne, in the *Histriomastix*, adduced testimonies from a long list of authorities to assert the fundamental primacy of the understanding. He cited Jerome, Cyprian, Ambrose, Augustine, Gregory, Chrysostom and Justinian

against such curious Prick-song, and melodious singing in churches, in which plaine singing only, which every man may understand, and which is in a manner nothing else but plaine reading, ought to be used¹⁶

His account of the introduction of polyphony and organs was borrowed from Thomas Becon (and similarly borrowed by Peter Smart). Pope Vitalian ‘being a lusty singer, and fresh courageous musician himself’ had introduced

Prick song, Descant and all kinde of pleasant melody into the church in the yeere 653. And because nothing should want to delight the vaine foolish and idle eares of fond fantastick men, he joined the Organs to the curious Musicke. Thus was Paul’s

¹³ Ibid., p. 51, 53, 62.

¹⁴ *A Preparation to the Psalter*, pp. 85, 83 – 84.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp.84-5.

¹⁶ *Histriomastix*; p. 283.

preaching, and Peter's praying turned into vaine singing, and childish playing, unto the great losse of time, and unto the utter undoing of Christian men`s soules, which live not by singing and piping, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.¹⁷

Andrew Willet cited St Bernard of Clairvaux's confession that

Oftentimes in divine service I quivered with my voice with my voice to sing more pleasantly, and so delighted more in tuning my voice than in turning my heart. This then is one great fault in singing, so to regard the note, that we think not of that which is sung: and therefore he saith : Let it so please the ears, that it may play upon the heart:

'Popish mass songs' however, argued Willet, which were 'set forth with tedious notes, and unknown syllables, do want this concert and harmony of the heart, being not understood for the most part of the singers themselves, much less of those that hear them.'¹⁸

We can see therefore, in a similar way to the legacy of the Bible, two mutually contradictory poles of interpretation, both derivable from the same sources, few of which gave any clear guidance on how to steer between this particular Scylla and Charybdis in practical terms of composition or musical practice. This pattern is discernible with particular clarity in the varying responses to the writing of Augustine on music. The most significant sustained Augustinian meditation on the nature of music is the *De Musica*, but this work of philosophical reflection on the metaphysical aspects of music's relation to the universe was not widely dwelt upon by those thinkers under discussion here. Much more commonly used was the account of Augustine's own baptism contained in Book 10 of the *Confessions*.

Calvin, in the *Institution* of 1543, had stressed that in worship the congregation should not be "more attentive to the melody than our minds to the spiritual meaning of the words". He referred to Augustine's caution, as he put it in Book X of the *Confessions*:

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 283. This is a quotation from the *Reliques of Rome* by Thomas Becon, written some 70 years previously. Smart, *A short treatise of altars, altar-furniture, Altar-cringing, and Musick of all the Quire, Singing-men and Choristers* (London, 1642) p.7. Smart attributes the phrase to a 'reverend Father of our Church'.

¹⁸ Andrew Willet, *Synopsis Papismi* pp. 14-15.

Yet when it happens that I am more moved by the singing than by what is sung, I confess myself to have sinned wickedly, and then I would rather not have heard the singing.¹⁹

Prynne also dwelt on the same feelings that Augustine had on finding that he had ‘given more heed, and better eare to the singing than to the weighty matter of the words.’²⁰ Andrew Willet attempted to draw contemporary references to the state of Popish church music from a similar passage:

Two conditions he [Augustine] requireth: first, that we sing holy psalmes taken out of the Scriptures. Secondly, that they be sung treatably and distinctly.... saith he “Even in good songs, if we follow the sound, not the sense, it is to be discommended;” but in Popish songs neither of these conditions is kept, for both the ditty for the most part is idolatrous, stuffed with invocation and adoration of saints, and the note is so divided and drawn out in length, that it cannot be understood.²¹

However, other thinkers stressed Augustine’s personal liking for music, in distinction to his cautious side dwelt upon by Calvin and Prynne. Butler recognised the conflict within Augustine’s mind - when finding himself “too much delighted with the sweet diversity of the music, he fell into a dispute with himself, and at first he seemed to affect the manner of Alexandria, where psalms were tuned with so little altering of the voice, that they seemed to be rather said than sung”²². Eventually, however, Augustine remembered his first experience, as related in the *Confessions*;

O how I wept at thy Hymns and Songs, being vehemently moved with the voices of thy sweet sounding church. Those voices did pierce mine ears, and thy truth distilled into my heart, and thereby was inflamed in me a love of Piety; the tears trickled down, and with them I was in a happy case”

The saint was therefore “more induced to approve the custom of singing in the church.”²³ The *Praise of Musicke* referred to the same change of mind in Augustine:

And yet nevertheless S. Augustine calling to mind, how wonderfully himself has been moved with the singing of the church at his conversion to the faith and what operation it

¹⁹ Garside, *Calvin’s Theology of Music*: p. 20.

²⁰ *Histriomastix*: p. 284.

²¹ Willet, *Synopsis* p. 13.

²² *Principles of Music*: p.110.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 109, 110.

worked in the hearers, although doubting confessth in the same place, that he doth allow singing in the church, that by the delight thereof the weake minde might be brought into a feeling of religion²⁴

In an explicit counter to the use of this passage from the *Confessions*, to disallow music on the grounds of its potential to distract from the true meaning of the worship, he contended

it is not the fault of musicke if thou bee too much therewith allured, but thine own; And St Augustine in that place doth not condemne Musicke for the sweet sound thereof, but his owne fraile and weak nature, which took occasion of offence at that which in itselfe was good.²⁵

The thought of Humphrey Sydenham, as in so many areas, demonstrates the ambiguity of Augustine, as he is to be found simultaneously alluding to both possible interpretations mentioned above. Sydenham first dealt with Ignatius

who tooke a pattern of his Church melody from a Chorus of Angels; which ... he beheld in a Vision extolling the blessed Trinity with Hymnes interchangeably sung. Or if this perchance prove fabulous, that of St Augustine will pass for canonicall, where he stiles his voycing of psalmes aloft ... The Musicke of Angells themselves, the Spirituall Incense of that caelestiall army. And as it is a representation of that Unitie above, so it is of concord and charitie here below, when under a consonance of voyce, we find shadowed a conjunction of notes, meeting in one Song a multiplicitie of Concerts in one devotion, so that the whole Church is not onely one tongue, but one heart.

However, Sydenham is also aware of the dangers of “curiosity” in the church. Augustine

considering what a meanes it had beene formerly to his mortification, when after his conversion by Saint Ambrose, being baptized at Millaine.. hee confess'd, or sigh'd rather Quantum fleui in Hymnis et canticis suavis sonantis Ecclesie vocibus acriter commotus? BUT the devout Father was pleas'd to censure some curiosities in the Church this way, and that from the authoritie of Athanasius, who would have the reader of the Psalme to use such a slender inflection of voyce that it should seeme rather utterance than Song;²⁶

The Patristic evidence available to writers was clearly then sufficiently ambiguous for all sides in the debate over church music to find support therein. The writings on which the thinkers of Tudor and Stuart England could call, as with the Bible, were full of

²⁴ p. 98.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 142.

²⁶ *The Well Tuned Cymbal* p. 26.

the mutually contradictory themes of a resounding condemnation of 'bad' music and an equally enthusiastic exhortation to the use of the 'right' kind of music. In the next chapter it will be argued that the guidance and precedent available to English thinkers from the reformed churches of continental Europe were equally difficult to interpret.