

Music in the Temple

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To say that Moravians exercise a strong musical tradition is a virtual truism. It is like calling the sky blue on a clear day. And the bulk of that tradition is sacred music: hymns and anthems. The tradition has also cultivated instrumental music, but instruments have been used, primarily, to support singing by the congregation and the choir. Music is a vital part of our worship and, as such, it reflects, in principle, the part that music played in the worship that developed in the Second Temple that was built in Jerusalem after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian Exile.

Examples of music in the life of ancient Israel

Music was ubiquitous in the common life of the people of ancient Israel. We read of working songs and of love songs. The Song of Solomon is a group of love songs. The Hebrew title is "The Song of Songs." On the face of it, the Book is pure romantic love. There are no references to the deity. The rabbis, however, read it symbolically as songs of the love affair between Yahweh and Israel. Singing broke out spontaneously when something noteworthy occurred, such as a victory or a good harvest. But it was praise to the Lord. After the escape by the Israelites from Egypt, which they interpreted as deliverance by the Lord, Miriam and the women took tambourines, danced and sang: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and the rider he has thrown into the sea" (Ex.15:21). The Song of Deborah, "to the Lord I will sing," came after a military victory (Judg. 5). There was a yearly festival of the Lord at Shiloh when the young women came out and danced (Judg. 21:21). And dancing was usually accompanied by singing.

Music today in the eastern Mediterranean: something like that of the early Hebrews?

I, myself, observed dancing with singing among Arab Bedouin in southern Jordan, whose manner of life seems to be similar to the pastoral life of the early Hebrews, as we read about it in Genesis. I was part of an archaeological expedition in the ancient city of Petra, which is surrounded by desert where Bedouin live in tents and pasture sheep and goats over a wide-ranging area. We employed 55 Bedouin men in our excavation. There was an occasion when we Americans were invited to a marriage ceremony where there was dancing and singing. As part of the festivities, a group of 8 to 10 women formed a straight line, locking arms. Then, while singing, they moved forward 2 or 3 steps, then backward the same rhythmically in repetition. This went on for 10 to 15 minutes. Then a group of men followed the same pattern. Men and women did not dance together. There were no instruments. I assumed that the words of the songs, in Arabic of course, were captured by the native audience from the sense of pleasure I observed on their faces, although I knew very little Arabic and did not understand them.

There was one other incident during that summer's experience that provided some insight into how some of the Psalms may have been composed. The Bedouin learned that the Director of Jordan's Department of Antiquities was coming down from Amman to observe our archaeological excavation. So they decided to have a feast in his honor, a feast to which we archaeologists were invited. They erected a large tent for the occasion. After the meal a young Bedouin got up and read a poem, the subject of which, I was told later, was the hope that the King of Jordan would come to Petra. It made me wonder if some of the Psalms had been composed under similar circumstances. A great many of the Psalms – most of them,

perhaps all of them – were set to music, although this would likely have been done long after they were written (as is the case with many of our hymn texts now).

Use of instruments and the development of music in ancient Israel

The early prophets used musical instruments. One account speaks of their using harps, tambourines, flutes and lyres to whip themselves into a frenzy (1 Sam. 10:5). (Sounds like modern guys.) In that state, on another occasion, these prophets stripped off all their clothes (1 Sam. 19:24). (Pretty powerful stuff.) David is portrayed as soothing Saul's tormented spirit by playing the lyre (1 Sam. 16:23).

The development of music in ancient Israel really began when there were professional musicians. All of the monarchs of the ancient kingdoms had professional musicians in their courts, and there are a great many engravings of musical instruments, some of which are very sophisticated, such as harps, from both Egypt and Mesopotamia. An old Jewish tradition says that Solomon's Egyptian wife brought 1000 musical instruments with her to the court of Israel. Music in the Judean court became known internationally. When the Assyrian King, Sennacherib, invaded Judah in 701 B. C., included in the ransom he demanded, according to his own inscription, were Judean male and female musicians. A little more than 100 years later, after the Babylonians destroyed the Temple of Solomon and took captive the Jerusalem leadership to Babylon, they demanded that their Judean prisoners sing "songs of Zion", as we learn from Psalm 137.

After the Babylonian Exile: the Second Temple period

It was in the Second Temple, built by those who returned from the Babylonian Exile, where sacred music really developed and flourished. After about 50 years in captivity, where new generations of Jews were born and were able to cultivate the faith of their sacred tradition, Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and allowed the captive peoples to return to their homeland. Those who chose to return to the ruins of Jerusalem were under the leadership of priests and Levites, and were strongly committed to the ancient faith. They first rebuilt the altar of burnt offerings and then, after a few years, under difficult circumstances, they rebuilt the Temple.

Since the priests and Levites were the leaders of this restored community they made the Temple the center of the community in every way. Worship was the hallmark of the common life, and sacred music could be heard at all times coming from the Temple court.

It is remarkable that over a period of about a century this new Jewish settlement that started from scratch could sustain a substantial body of professional musicians. They were highly organized. The Temple singers were a division of the Levites numbering 288. That number comes from their having 24 separate choirs, each composed of 12 singers who were said to be trained, and had a conductor who was an instrumentalist. And those 24 choirs drew lots to decide when they should perform (I Chron. 25). What does that suggest? There were 24 hours in a day, then as now. It suggests music being performed in the Temple around the clock. Mention is made of the singers receiving allotments from the community, and there is also reference to their having their own fields.

The Books of Chronicles and its portrayal of King David: a new beginning for Israel

A word should be said about David's role in Chronicles. David's musical accomplishments are legendary. He was a skillful lyre player (1 Sam. 16:18,23). He made or procured instruments for his court

(1 Chron. 23:5; 2 Chron. 7:6; Amos 6:3; Neh. 12: 35-36). He organized the musicians in his court, appointing Asaph, a composer of numerous psalms, as leader. Some passages characterize musical performance "according to the directions of King David of Israel" (e.g. Ezra 3:10), suggesting that David was deeply involved in the production of the music. Most famously, he was a psalm writer. We do not know how many psalms of Books I & II (Psalms 1-72) he composed, but at the end of Psalm 72 is the statement: "The prayers of David, the son of Jesse are ended."

David is the singular, dominating subject of 1 Chronicles, a book along with its complement, II Chronicles, that was intended to be a new history of Israel that would serve the post-exilic community, giving it a new start. History serves the present by giving foundation to interests that are currently most prominent. While Chronicles borrows most of its subject matter about the history of Judah from 2 Samuel and the Books of Kings, it emphasizes priestly interests, with a great deal of additional material about the worship of the community in all its particulars, noting specifically the many participants by name and heritage. The newly formed community that was building a new Jerusalem was organized and administered by priests and Levites.

It may seem strange that the first eight chapters of 1 Chronicles consist of nothing but an ongoing genealogy from Adam down to well-into the post-exilic community. But the historian wanted to demonstrate that the new Israel consisted of pure-bred Jews of legitimate family lines. Old Israel had been corrupt, both genealogically and morally; the new Israel would start genealogically pure with prescribed community standards based on historic legal traditions and a pattern of worship devoted to Yahweh alone. The first recorded wave of returnees mentions some who could not prove their genealogical background and were excluded from full participation in the cultic rites (Ezra 2:59-63).

David is portrayed as the father-figure of the entire Second Temple organization, consisting of large numbers of named priests, Levites, gate-keepers and musicians. He is said to have prepared all the materials for the Temple to be built: the dressed stone, the lumber from Phoenicia - even the nails. Then he organizes the Temple community. The numbers are unrealistically large. He assembles 38,000 Levites. "Twenty-four thousand of these," David said, "shall have charge of the work in the house of the Lord, six thousand shall be officers and judges, four thousand gatekeepers, and four thousand shall offer praises to the Lord with the instruments that I have made for praise" (1 Chron. 23:2-5). (All for a building little larger than Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.)

The portrait of David found in 1 Chronicles is that of an idealistic figure who is the founder of the Temple and its cult in all its particulars, emphasizing the family lines in the celebration of worship that included the entire community. The more historical David of 1 & 2 Samuel only suggested that a Temple be built (2 Sam. 7:1-3). However, the priests who wrote the Books of Chronicles recognized that David was a faithful and devoted worshipper of Yahweh. Solomon was an apostate, as were most of his successors. Only Hezekiah and Josiah were faithful, although Hezekiah had severe troubles both personally and politically in his later years and Josiah was killed in battle. But Nathan's dream in response to David's suggestion about a House to the Lord included the promise that David's "house" would continue forever (1 Sam. 7). 1 Chronicles 3 lists David's descendants through several generations after Zerubbabel, who led the first wave of those who returned from the Babylonian Exile (Ezra 2:1-2). In attributing to David the preparation for the building of the Temple in all its particulars, as well as assembling the qualified priests and Levites who administered its prescribed ceremonies, the Chronicler was giving credence to the true David through his line in carrying out the worship of Yahweh as the historic David had faithfully done. In reality, it was an idealistic vision of the more prosaic practice of Temple worship in the Chronicler's own day, although that worship was probably the most extended in its development and sphere of appreciation that was conceivable for its time. The 24 choirs of 12 members

is challenging, given the resources of that community, but it is not unrealistic, as is the 4000 musicians of the ideal picture.

How was ancient Israel's music performed?

We do not know how the music was performed. It is possible that some of the chants were continued in on-going Jewish and Christian communities. But the Book of Psalms contains a multitude of brief comments, often indicating the names of the hymns, the names of the tunes, the accompanying instruments, or other directions about performance. In our translations these bits of information are found in small print below the Psalm number, just before the psalm begins. Our hymnal provides similar information about the hymns but now, usually, at the bottom of the page. Some of our hymns are identified by the first few words of the text, such as "Silent Night", "Amazing Grace", "Be Present at our Table, Lord". Others are known, primarily, by tune name: Greensleeves ("What child is this?"), Old Hundredth ("Praise God from whom all blessings flow"), St. Anne ("O God, Our Help in Ages Past"). Currently in hymnals, the names and dates of the authors of the texts and tunes are also included, and the back of the book of worship includes several indexes providing other kinds of information.

The references to musical performance in the Psalms are *translated* when they are understood and *transliterated* when they aren't. When they are transliterated we don't know if the Hebrew word refers to a musical mode, an established melody, or something else. There are, however, numerous notes that we do understand. At the heading of more than 70 Psalms is the note: "To the Choirmaster," sometimes translated "Director," indicating musical performance by a choir. There are groups of psalms assigned to leading musicians, such as Asaph, Heman, Korah, and others. These would belong to collections of psalms by those authors. Some Psalms designate accompaniment by particular instruments. Psalm 4 says: "with stringed instruments." Psalm 5 says: "for the flutes." Psalm 46 has as its first line: "To the Director, belonging to the sons of Korah, a song designated for the young women," that is, for the young women's choir. We know that some of the musical leaders were women, although those who are named are men who belonged to the musical Levites. Psalm 45 begins: "To the Director, according to the lilies, belonging to the sons of Korah, a contemplative poem, a song of love." Here "the lilies" seems to mean the name of a tune. In a number of Psalms the word "Selah" comes unexpectedly at the end of a line. It may occur once, twice or three times in a particular Psalm. It means literally, "lift up," suggesting "interlude." This may have been an opportunity for instruments to perform alone.

In the world of ancient Israel there was a great variety of musical instruments, which are documented not only in the biblical text, but also in paintings and engravings. Some, made of metal or ivory, have been found in tombs and excavations. 1 Chron. 15 mentions harps, lyres, cymbals, bronze cymbals, horns and trumpets. There were several types of pipes, similar to what we call woodwinds, several percussion instruments, and several stringed instruments. It is curious that trumpets were played only by priests. There must have been a developed musicology, for the passage says: "Chananiah, leader of the Levites in music, was to direct the music, for he understood it."

Scrolls of Psalms became the hymnal of the Second Temple. No doubt, the collection of psalms was begun by David as tradition has it, for he is said to have been skillful in playing the lyre. But the heading: "A Psalm of David," found at the beginning of most of the Psalms in the first two books (Psalms 1 - 72), simply means belonging to the collection. At the end of Psalm 72 is the comment, "The prayers of David, son of Jesse, are ended."

A final word: Psalms of exultation, to be sung through the ages

There are two clusters of psalms where exultation is so prominent that singing is called for. The first one is in Book 3: Psalms 90 - 106. To illustrate, Psalm 92 speaks of morning and evening worship.

“It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
To sing praises to your name, O Most High;
To declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night,
To the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre.
For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;
At the works of your hands I sing for joy.”

The second cluster is at the end of the Book. The last five psalms begin and end with the word, “Hallelujah”, meaning “Praise the Lord,” and the music of praise is called forth in all of them. The last Psalm, 150, is a litany of praise with all the instruments. Psalm 149, as with a few other Psalms, exults: “Sing to the Lord a new song.” Johann Sebastian Bach took the first three verses of this Psalm and two verses from Psalm 150 as the text for the first of seven glorious motets, *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied* (“Sing to the Lord a new song”). Bach owned a Bible Commentary in which he wrote comments, and underlined commentary and text that he found noteworthy. Bach’s sacred choral music is based, largely, on the biblical text. And he was especially inspired by what is said about music in the Temple. Bach was, in the last 27 years of his life, primarily a church musician. His sacred choral music, along with that of many of his contemporaries and later composers, came to be rooted in our Moravian community and has been a rich resource for our faith and life. How blessed we are as we sing to the Lord.