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## CHAPTER THIRTY

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### THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS WORSHIP

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#### Abstract

*The locus and historical structures of Christianity, her world views, communal setup, riddle more on her relationship with music in connection with her liturgical mode of worship. From scriptural connectivity, music plays a prominent role in the act of worship. It inspires worshipers to generate and uplift the rhythm of religious worship. This paper is geared towards exposing the role of music and its importance in various religious worship. Using ethnographical references, the paper x-rays the technical features of music, its origins, myths and symbolism in Christian worship. The paper argued that music being the bedrock and inspirational act of worship draws the peoples' culture, language and symbols to meaningful religious worship and translates culture and values to the worshipper in an act of adoration and worship. It concludes by recommending that music composers should be careful with the texts of their music and that more religious texts should be set to music to allow for a more involved worship experience while incorporating song performance skills that give the performer and the listener a heightened sense of praise.*

**Keywords:** Music, culture, communication and religious worship

#### Introduction

Music plays a prominent role in Christian worship. According to Allan (2014), any Christian worship without music is like dry bones without flesh. Music gives a character to religious worship and liturgy. We have different kind of music which in the contemporary age is described as Christian music. In the church, we have chants, classical music, modern music and traditional music. They are fixed according to their usage. Vincent Mundel (1972) stated that music helps to create awareness in liturgical step and changes. For John Fredrick (1978) the use of music in liturgical functions help participants in liturgy to understand the next liturgical actions; He narrated the stages appropriately like entrance songs, penitential songs like Kyrie, Gloria, offering songs, communion and dismissal song. Each song accordingly sends a unique message to every worshipper.

Each song is composed to convey a spiritual message to the worshippers and help them to understand the period of worshipping. John Bosco Akam (1976) started that music transmits cultural flavour to all who listen to it during liturgical services. Christian music carries along with it the gospel message according to the seasons of the liturgical calendar.

Religious musical systems may also extend across cultural boundaries. Islam, for example, has forged musical links across vast regions of Asia and Africa; and North American traditions such as the [Ghost Dance](#) and the peyote cult have created musical bridges between very diverse ethnic groups (Leonard, Neil. 1987). Other well-known intercultural religious

musical traditions include Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, and West African/Latin American possession music. Additional cases may include (1) the drumming and singing of Asian shamans, perhaps constituting a related tradition stretching from Scandinavia to the Himalayas, and possibly even extending into the Americans; (2) the epic songs, based on improvisatory recombination of traditional song segments, of [Central Asia](#) and Eastern Europe; (3) the bronze gong ensembles, associated with cosmological and cylindrical symbolism and functions, of [Southeast Asia](#); (4) perhaps the ancient sacrificial chants, linked to modal systems built on tetrachords, of Indo-European peoples extending from India to Greece; and (5) conceivably an even wider connection between Chinese, Indian, and Greek conceptions of music as an embodiment of universal cosmological and mathematical laws.

Yet, second only to its universal occurrence, diversity is the most characteristic feature of religious music, even in the great intercultural religious traditions. Christian music, for example, includes not only Gregorian plainsong, Palestrina masses, Protestant hymns, and Bach oratorios but also the resonant basses of the Russian Orthodox choir, the ornate melodies of Greek Orthodox chant, and the percussion-accompanied dances of Ethiopian Coptic worship; in the postcolonial era, it encompasses West African rhythms, and metallic sonorities of the Javanese *gamelan* orchestra, and the driving beat and electronic tones of the rock band as well (Marini, Stephen 2003). Hindu music aimed at helping to achieve the meditative state of *Samādhi* can employ the very non-Indian sounds of Indonesian bronze instruments. Musical diversity in its religious and cultural contexts will be treated in other articles; here, I shall discuss some pan-religious and pan-cultural issues.

### **Definition of Music**

Music is defined as the most intelligible combination of notes, characters to form a good atmosphere when playing on the instrument or singing. Music as a character embraces all language and culture. Music is discovered in all languages since all languages speak and sing music. Music embraces all cultures and exposes the beauty, symbols and background of every language. It helps to deepen the philosophy of every language and culture. Music brings down to the worshipper the flavour of religious worship into a living essence and being. Music can bring a lifeless situation into an existing and lively one. Religious music triggers worshippers into a higher level of worship and brings them closer to the divine.

Jim Hokins (1962) described music as one of the languages of religion. For him, music as the language of religion inspires both man and gods. For him, it inspires men to encounter their gods more, while it inspires the gods to rain favours and blessings upon the objects of creation.

### **Definitions and Concept of Music**

Given the close link between music and religious concepts, a nonsectarian definition of music may be impossible. For example, one common definition of music as "humanly patterned sound" conflicts with widely held religious beliefs that music is not humanly patterned, but rather, divinely patterned. To members of traditions holding that music or, at

least, religious music originates with the gods or with devils, the assertion of the human origin of music must seem the ultimate in Western materialistic dogmatism, however scientifically neutral it may seem to the outsider (Moody, Ivan. 1995).

Even definitions as simple as the dictionary staple "art of sounds" carry ethnocentric and sectarian implications. In many religious contexts, music is less an expressive "art" than a technologically applied to produce practical results, from the storage and retrieval of information contained in religious narratives and teachings memorized in songs to the attraction of animals in hunting, increasing of harvests, curing of diseases, communication with the divine, supplication, and control of the various levels of psychogenic experience. While aesthetic beauty may or may not be integral to such technologies, individual self-expression plays little part in them and may be detrimental to their intended results.

The concept of music as an "art" carries overtones of a late European ideology based on the sanctity of self-expression and individualism, ultimately rooted in Greek and Judeo-Christian notions of ego, self, and soul. For some traditions, music is antithetical to the very notion of an individual self or soul. One group of Buddhist texts takes music as the archetypal embodiment of impermanence and conditioned causality, dependent on external sources and conditions, to show that there can be no such thing as an individual self. By contrast, modern Western scholars tend to view music, at least in its ideally purest forms, as fundamentally independent of external causes and conditions; they draw a sharp line between "extramusical" elements such as symbolism, function, purpose, and so forth, and "the music itself," which is supposed to consist of pure arrangements of tones. This concept of music seems to reflect European post-Renaissance religious concepts of an autonomous and inviolable soul wholly contained in the body of the individual (Reed, Teresa. 2003). Perhaps it also reflects post-feudal economic concepts of individual entrepreneurial freedom, just as the Buddhist concept of impermanent music resulting from temporary combinations of causes and conditions reflects basic Buddhist religious beliefs.

Even sound may not play a decisive role in religious concepts of music, at least not in any technical sense. When fundamentalist Muslims ban recordings of Western popular music and fundamentalist Christians burn them, they are not necessarily reacting to the melodic or chordal structures that constitute the essence of music for the technically oriented outsider. The "music of the spheres" extolled by early Christian writers was not sound in the sense of physical waves propagated in a gaseous medium; and, in Tibetan Buddhist thought; music consists of both the "actually present music" produced by sound-making voices and instruments and the "mentally produced music" perceived and imagined by each listener, with different results according to individual differences in experience, skill, and imagination. Religious traditions have by and large no more conceived music to consist of sounds and the "extramusical" than they have considered persons to be made up of the physical body and the "extra personal." Hence, even the most basic technical definition of music will ignore or deny essential aspects of music as conceived by many religions, while labels such as "symbolism" applied to non-acoustic aspects may appear misguided or even

hostile from a believer's perspective.

The very attempt to define music neutrally and open-mindedly might be objectionable from some religious viewpoints. For certain Christians, some kinds of secular music and the music of other religions are the works of the devil and should not be mentioned without condemnation.

### **Music and Christian Religion**

Music and religion are closely linked in relationships as complex, diverse, and difficult to define as either term in itself. Religious believers have heard music as the voices of gods and the cacophony of devils, praised it as the purest form of spirituality, and condemned it as the ultimate in sensual depravity; with equal enthusiasm, they have promoted its use in worship and sought to eradicate it seldom has a neutral phenomenon, music had a high positive or negative value that reflects its near-universal importance in the religious sphere. This importance - perhaps difficult to appreciate for post-industrial-revolution Westerners accustomed to reducing music to the secondary realms of "art," "entertainment," and occasional "religious" music isolated behind sanctuary walls—has nonetheless been pervasive.

Religious "texts" have been sung, not written, throughout most of human history; and religious behaviour has found musical articulation in almost every religious tradition. Navajo priests are "singers"; the primary carriers of Sinhala traditional religion are drummers and dancers, and the shamans of northern Eurasia and Inner Asia use music as their principal medium of contact with the spirit world. Through the centuries, priests, monks, and other specialists have sung the Christian masses.

The values use, and forms of religious music are as diverse and culture-specific as the religious traditions in which they are found. Christian liturgical music is generally as characteristically "European" as Hindu devotional music is "Indian"; both use sounds, forms, and instruments from their respective cultures and have contributed greatly to the overall musical life of their regions (Danielson, Virginia, Scott Lloyd Marcus, and Dwight Fletcher Reynolds. 2002). Yet music, like religion, can transcend cultural limits; the religious musical systems of Ethiopia and Tibet, for example, differ almost as greatly from the secular music of their own respective cultures as the music of foreign countries.

### **Technical Features**

Music has its technical basis in human voices and/or [musical instruments](#) that produce sounds with patterned acoustical characteristics. Religious traditions often stress a distinction between vocal and instrumental music and frequently assign a higher value to vocal music. This is usually because of its capacity to communicate meanings through the words of song texts because the human body seems more a part of divine creation than instruments created by human artifice, or because of negative associations of instruments and their music.

Singing without words produces a melody, a patterned sequence of tones; with words sung to the melody, one has a song. A song may be sung on a single, steady pitch level (monotone); or its melody may rise and fall to any number of higher and lower pitches, the total of which, arranged in ascending or descending order, is its scale; or it may consist of continuous, gradually shifting tone contours without distinctly separate high or low levels. Sets of musical scales may be conceived as modes that incorporate standard melodic patterns, ethical and cosmological implications, and other non-acoustic features.

Religious traditions may place greater value and emphasis on either words or melody; and vocal styles may range from formally simple, with few up-and-down melodic movements to avoid distortion of the words of the texts, to more elaborate, with complex melismatic movements to enhance musical beauty. It was once widely believed that such differences represented an evolutionary sequence from "primitive" chant to musical art; but, as Edith Gerson-Kiwi (1961) has convincingly argued, melodic simplicity may be a deliberately developed stylistic alternative to elaborate secular styles in complex cultures. Varying textual/musical emphasis may reflect varying mythic/ritual applications, stressing either the informational content of religious narratives or the aesthetic beauty or power of a religious offering. Contrasting textual/musical emphases may also reflect differences in communicating with human believers in an intelligible language, or with spirits or gods, who may prefer the special mode of musical communication.

Melodies may be performed as a solo by a single singer or instrument player, in unison by a chorus of singers, or accompanied by other singers or instruments playing independent, distinct musical parts. They may be arranged to occur simultaneously with other melodies (polyphony), with a steady-pitch monotone (drone), or with conventionally arranged sequences (harmony) of other pitches or simultaneous-pitch clusters (chords). The most musically complex of these features may occur in the smallest local religions of the socio-politically and technologically simplest cultures. Generally, such traditions tend toward maximum religious and musical participation by the whole group, while the "great" religions of urban civilizations tend toward complex patterns of religious and musical specialization.

### **Origins, Myths, and Symbolism in Christian Music**

The close relationship of music and religion may imply, as some myths and legends claim, a common or related origin. From the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, evolution-oriented scholars debated theories of musical origins in the sounds of birds and animals, emotional cries of grief at funerals, language intonations, stylized recitations of religious texts, and animistic awe of "voices" heard in natural objects such as shells and bamboo tubes, and so forth. All such theories proving no less speculative and resistant to the objective investigation than the traditional myths they were meant to replace, the issue gradually lost scientific interest, and it is now all but ignored in musical research. But, as if in discouragement at having failed to construct their myth of musical origins, scholars also made little effort to explore the original question in its traditional context of religious mythology; and today we still find ourselves in the "surprising" position of finding, as did

Alan P. Merriam (1964, p. 74), "that there seem to be almost no available accounts of beliefs concerning the ultimate origin of music"

Accessible information, while insufficient to allow for generalization or systematic analysis, is abundant enough to show that music is as diverse in myths of origin as in any other of its aspects. The creation of individual pieces of music and **musical instruments** may involve contact with the divine.

### **Time, Space, and Ritual**

Music is widely used for demarcation of ritual time and space. In traditional settings all over the world, one may enter a community just before or during a ritual performance and be drawn toward the centre of religious activity by musical sounds that grow progressively stronger as one move toward the centre. At the ceremonial site, music may emanate from the exact centre of the action; or musicians may be placed at the borders of the ritual site, creating a boundary zone of maximum sensual stimulation through which one passes to enter the ritual area itself. In either case, the ceremonial space is pervaded by musical sounds that, more than any other element fill the entire sacred area with tangible energy and evidence that a special situation has been created.

Sometimes architectural or geographic isolation is used to confine the sound to the ritual space, and the music becomes an intimate or secret experience restricted to ritual participants and unheard by the general public. In other contexts, musical contrasts may mark the boundaries of sacred spaces by reserving different styles or sounds for sacred centres and profane peripheries: for example, Christian churches with bells that ring on the outside and organ music on the inside.

Unlike works of visual art, which exist in their entirety and all their details at any given moment, the music unfolds through time. Thus, it creates a temporal framework that may be synchronized with ritual time in various ways. At the simplest level, the beginning and end of musical performance may coincide with the beginning and end of ritual performance. Music may begin before a ritual and end after it, enclosing the performance in a temporal bracket or frame; or music may be performed selectively at temporal high points in ritual activity, highlighting significant periods of religious action.

But music also structures the experience of time in more complex ways. The tempo of the sounds that constitute the "events" of musical performance may be considerably faster or slower than the pace of everyday experience, and they may combine in unusual temporal patterns. Music uses formal devices such as cyclicity, repetition, contrast, variation, and development of one pattern of an organization into another. Any or all of these devices may be used to create perceptual impressions of the extension or compression of a moment of experience to a longer or shorter time than normal, the return of a precious moment, or the building of intensity toward a climax and emergence of a new structural and experiential framework.

For both time and space, the structuring effect of music and other performance media may thus function in quite distinct ways. The most obvious way is by the contrastive marking of boundaries between music-filled sacred space/time and profane space/time without music. The musical preludes and postludes performed before and after Christian services, or the conch-shell trumpet notes sounded before and after many South Asian rituals, often from a temple door or gateway, exemplify the boundary-marking aspect of music used to highlight ritual activity by creating a sonic frame around it in time and space.

A different mode of organization is used when the spatial and temporal centres, rather than the boundaries, of ritual activity, are brought into concentrated focus by music. This phenomenon occurs at a conceptual or "symbolic" level when music is perceived as a Spatio-temporal *axis Mundi*, a channel of communication with spiritual realms and primordial eras. For example, singing the "drum lineage" songs of the Tibetan Bon religion evokes a link with the beginning of time and the centre of the world.

More concretely, the central spatiotemporal foci of ritual actions in the physical world may be highlighted by musical intensification, while movement toward or away from the centre is marked by gradually changing intensity rather than a sharp boundary.

### **The Desire for Music and its Importance in Christian Religion**

Music can deepen the meaning of words that accompany it, both in a religious context or even on your local pop radio station you listen to on the way to work. As described by St. Augustine in Weiss and Taruskin's *Music of the Western World*, St. Augustine reflects on his baptism, "The tears flowed from me when I heard your hymns and canticles, for the sweet singing of your Church, moved me deeply... The music surged in my ears, truth seeped into my heart, and my feelings of devotion overflowed..." (24). St. Augustine's account makes it clear that the hymns and canticles sung at his baptism amplified his personal religious experience back in the 4th century. At the same time, music wasn't always considered an appropriate mode of worship, so why has music become such a universal part of worship today?

### **Conclusion**

In the early Christian tradition, as with many other religions, one had to be careful with their use of music. According to Weiss and Taruskin's *Music of the Western World*, using music for unholy purposes such as pleasure was sinful because pleasure gets in the way of the Lord. If early Christians considered music a pleasure capable of distracting them from their relationship with God, then the impact music had on people of this time must have been significant. Luckily, many religions agreed the sin of music is taken away when it is used for worship. Putting religious text to music allows for a more involved worship experience, incorporating song performance skills that give the performer and the listener a heightened sense of praise. In this way, music can be used as a tool for praise that is appealing to the worshiper.

Music has a way of filling in the gaps in thought, feeling, and emotion that words cannot do

justice, which can be incredibly powerful when accompanied by a spiritual belief. Using music for religious reasons also gave early humans the ability to experience and explore the tantalizing effects of music without sinning. In the present day, music is used much more widely and for purposes other than worship, which has allowed religious music to grow and expand into many types of praise that have a wider impact many people. Music is a nearly universal part of the religion because it appeals to and heightens human senses in a pleasurable way which, in turn, allows humans to praise through a medium that makes worship more enjoyable.

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