

MUSIC IN THE TIME OF DAVID

THOSE who read with careful observation realise how important a place music occupies in the Bible, both in history of the past and prophecy of the future. We have met men who have openly expressed a complete lack of interest in the singing of praise to God, apparently without the slightest idea that their indifference called for shame rather than for boasting. There have been earnest worshippers of God who have been so much influenced by puritanical instructions that they have opposed the use of instruments of music as worldly and evil. This attitude was due to the fundamental error of supposing that because the human search for pleasure so often has led men into sin, joy in itself should be regarded as sinful. Macaulay truthfully and wittily said that the Puritans objected to bearbaiting not because it gave pain to the bear but because it gave pleasure to the spectators. Such a method of condemning even evil things for the wrong reason may easily result in the justification of other evil things for no reason at all. The attempt to prevent the servants of God from rejoicing in their worship is definitely such a work of evil.

We who know the Scriptures, remember that joy is one of the fruits of the spirit, and that the Apostle, despite the many trials of faith, could “rejoice in the Lord always.” The Christian religion does not seek to deprive men of joy but to lift them on to a higher plane. We are no longer to rejoice in iniquity but to rejoice in the Lord. It is good to be merry so long as merriment finds proper expression. We are called upon to “sing psalms,” to admonish one another in hymns and spiritual songs, and to make melody in our hearts. We are called to Mount Zion and the company of those redeemed from the earth, and we remember that when John was permitted to see the glorified saints in vision the outstanding impression recorded by him was the sound of musical instruments and the singing of a new song (Rev. 14). . .

If we recognise these truths it is interesting and profitable to study the record of music in the days when Israel was established as a prosperous kingdom, and a temple was prepared for the worship of God. There are scores of references to the elaborate service of song established by David, and it is stated definitely that this musical service was not merely permitted but was required by God. We find this in the narrative of the reformation effected by righteous King Hezekiah recorded in the book of Chronicles: “He set the Levites in the house of the Lord with cymbals, with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the king’s seer, and Nathan the prophet, for so was the commandment of the Lord by his prophets. And the Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets” (2 Chron. 29:25–6).

This is so emphatic that even those who are not particularly attracted by the subject, if they love the Scriptures, will try to be interested. We are informed that the elaborate services of song and the use of many musical instruments in the days of David was in accordance with “the command of the Lord by His servants the prophets.” It is profitable to study the details of

anything which is of sufficient importance to be mentioned in Scripture. It is especially so with a subject which was given prominence by divine commandment. We ought to be interested therefore in seeking to ascertain what kind of music was used in the service of the Sanctuary when "the sweet psalmist of Israel" was king.

It is usually held by students of musical history that the first crude experiments in harmony were made by Hucbald, a Flemish monk, who lived from about A.D. 840 to 930. Previous to his time it is supposed that musicians had no idea of harmony, and that singing was all in unison or the octave. The history of music is of course closely connected with the history of the Church and very little is known of the art previous to the fourth century, when the old scales were first established. (The ecclesiastical modes.) From that time until the days of Hucbald there can be little doubt that singing was all in unison or the octave and harmony was quite unknown.

It is natural, therefore, for students to assume that the music of an earlier age was still more crude and uninteresting. Sometimes at Palestine exhibitions the demonstrator has referred to the words "make a joyful noise unto the Lord," and showing a primitive rattle has suggested that the music of David's day was a mere jingle of sound such as could only appeal to savages. This may be a natural assumption, simply because it is natural for men to be shallow. It is certainly not logical, and there are some plain facts known to all in these days which should rebuke such hasty judgments.

It is known that the human race has many times passed through periods in which civilization has almost been destroyed and all the arts have been neglected. When in a new part of the world men have tried to build anew they have sometimes been proud of the rapid progress made. When they devised levers capable of lifting a few hundredweights they thought that no one in all the history of the world had ever moved such masses before. A few months ago we quoted the confident words of Paine, ridiculing the record of huge stones used in ancient buildings and proving to his own satisfaction that such masses could not possibly be quarried or moved. Exploration in ancient lands has proved that such stones were not only quarried and moved but lifted on to the walls of buildings that are still standing. Such discoveries have made modern men a little more humble in this matter at least. In the same way, in the revival of the sculptors' art men were proud of their work until they were able to compare their efforts with some specimens from ancient Greece. Now there are some artists who, realising that they cannot equal the best work of the ancient world, deliberately go back to the rough and crude style of savages in the spirit that Milton attributed to Satan.

If some buildings and statues had not been preserved we should have known very little of these great works of antiquity. Why then assume that harmony is modern and that all ancient music was primitive and contemptible? Music is the easiest of all the arts to destroy and the hardest of all to describe. The Jews suffered enough hardship under Grecian and Roman masters to put an end to their music. The psalmist tells us that they could not sing their songs while in captivity in Babylon, and after the partial restoration enough happened to produce a generation musically sterile. If they had any system of notation in the days of David all knowledge and all record of it might easily be lost. The service of the sanctuary had been greatly neglected during the reigns of many wicked kings. The seventy years of captivity following might easily allow records to be destroyed and knowledge to die out. The mere fact that modern ideas of harmony

can only be traced back to the tenth century is no evidence of the kind of music in David's day. We can only form our ideas on the basis of the records that have been preserved in the Scriptures.

The first question to raise is, What musical instruments were available? If they only had trumpets and drums, as some exhibition guides have tried to suggest, there could not be real music. Fortunately we have quite explicit information on this point. Radically there has been less development than most people suppose.

The instruments of the modern orchestra can be divided into three classes—instruments of percussion, strings and wind. It is generally recognised that the instruments of percussion were known and used from the earliest times. From Genesis 4:21 we find that strings and wind date back quite as far. It is an interesting fact that although there have been so many inventions and so much development there has been so little fundamental change.

Recent excavations in Ur of the Chaldees have brought to light some remains of harps and by pouring in plaster of Paris before excavating it has been possible to trace the original shape of the instruments, showing that they were not unlike some Irish harps of much later date.

A picture taken from the tomb of Rameses II. gives an excellent idea of an Egyptian harp of that period. It shows a priest playing the instrument, thus enabling us to form an idea of the height. Apparently the instrument was designed for more strings than it bears, as there appear to be several tuning pegs unused. A glance at the form of the instrument suggests a reason for this. The top of the harp is bowed over at the correct angle to take a succession of strings of different length, but there is no support for the end of the bow. We are told that David invented and made instruments of music (1 Chron. 23:5 ; Amos 6:5). We can hardly suppose that David, with his passion for making everything praise God, would be content to have a harp which could not stand the strain of its full complement of strings. What more natural than that he should devise a support from the base of the instrument to the tip of the bow so as to have the full number of strings without danger of them being thrown out of tune?

David would have the best instruments that the world could produce and his own inventive capacity would be used to improve them. There are excellent reasons for this conviction.

Firstly, musical instruments have always been among the first articles of commerce to pass from country to country.

Secondly, the highway between the two greatest civilizations of those early days went through Palestine.

Thirdly, David was in touch with the King of Tyre and drew supplies from "the mart of the nations." Thus the products of all the world were available for him.

Fourthly, there is evidence that during the reigns of David and Solomon the purchasing power of Israel was greater than at any other time. The people were still living very simple lives and in those days of settled peace they produced more of the prime necessities of life than they

could consume. We are told of exports of wine, oil, wheat and barley, in exchange for which the men of Tyre supplied the material needed for the temple. There was no need to stint anything in this national service.

Finally, we have the fact that David was famous as a musician even when he was a youth. When he came to the throne he determined that nothing should be spared to make the service of the sanctuary magnificent and impressive. We may be quite sure that he would obtain the best instruments that the world could supply, and improve them if possible. He brought them to such a standard that “the instruments of David” were referred to some centuries later (2 Chron. 29:27 ; Nehemiah 12:36) in such a manner as to suggest that the days of David reached the high-water mark of musical construction.

From the Egyptian illustrations we learn that some centuries before David’s time harps were made to stand as high as a man and with strings for two or three octaves. We also learn that the system of stopping the strings with the fingers after the manner of violin playing was known. There are some ancient Egyptian pictures of players on instruments of this type. It has been suggested that the “harp” on which David played before Saul was an instrument more resembling a modern guitar than a harp. There is, of course, a good deal of uncertainty regarding the meaning of the various names. The English word harp is made to serve as a translation for more than one word in the Hebrew.

There is clear Scriptural evidence that trumpets of silver were used in the days of Moses (Numbers 10: 1). Trumpets are frequently mentioned in the history, and by the time of David’s exaltation the people of Israel had behind them about five hundred years of experience in the use of this instrument. There is good evidence that other wind instruments were employed and there is some reason for believing that experiments had already been made in contriving pipes in the manner of an organ. The evidence is conclusive that David had at his command an orchestra which might well make an impression on his contemporaries and to be remembered even in the days of Nehemiah.

The Scriptural evidence of Jewish skill and of the kind of music played must be reserved for another chapter.

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¹. *Vol. 66: The Christadelphian : Volume 66.* 2001, c1929. The Christadelphian, volume 66. (electronic ed.). Logos Library System . Christadelphian Magazine & Publishing Association: Birmingham