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# Foundations of Christian music: the music of pre-Constantinian Christianity

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The LWF is to be highly commended for initiating this study of worship and culture. The results are fascinating, and well worth reading. The theoretical work is well done, and will be useful for a long time. However, given the cultural diversity of our Lutheran churches worldwide, and seeing the narrow scope of reporting on the regional studies as presented here, one despairs of ever gaining a good grasp of the cultural diversity of Lutheran worship!

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### **Foundations of Christian Music: The Music of Pre-Constantinian Christianity**

Edward Foley

Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books, 1994

84 pp.

In this short book, Foley brings a critical, post-modern reading to the sources, which is not found in other recent studies of the topic such as Johannes Quastén's *Music and Worship in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (1973), Alfred Sendry's *Music in Ancient Israel* (1969), and of course Suzanne Haik-Ventoura's highly speculative *The Music of the Bible Revealed* (1991).

Foley begins by admitting that the sources for his study are fragmentary and slim. Then he devotes his excellent first chapter to the cultural differences between the ancient and modern musical situation. Whereas for us *seeing* is believing, for ancient humanity *hearing* was believing. He draws on the work of Walter Ong to support this suggestion that, in ancient times, relationships between people were governed primarily by acoustics—participatory hearing, spoken narrative, and the audible in ritual.

He documents the transition from oral- to craft/written-culture at the time of Josiah, but recognizes that, even then, there remained a “residual orality” which was still significant long after the Deuteronomic transcription of the Torah.

For the Old Testament person, revelation was auditory. Only later is the Word of God written down. God is first and foremost *heard*, and never really *seen*, even on parchment. The turning point away from this comes with Alexander the Great. With his hellenization of the Mediterranean world, we enter the culture of *sight*. Just the same, the New Testament remains an auditory-based written account.

In his next chapter, Foley outlines the music of the OT in the Temple. He begins with the scanty biblical evidence, and then moves to the implications of this for instruments and song. Aside from the few references

to instruments and song and their use in public and private life, the OT also provides some “stage directions” which give us clues as to how music might have been. In addition, the structure of many Psalms, poems, and canticles offers a few clues. But such a reconstruction, he admits, remains problematic and speculative.

What can be ascertained with certainty from the evidence? Musicians at the Temple were numerous and “professional” inasmuch as they were part of the paid staff. Vocal music appears to dominate. Instrumental music was used to accompany the voice, or had a signaling function. And everything musical was adjunct to the sacrifice ritual. He concludes this section by indicating that Temple music had little influence on Christian worship, except to contribute to an early Christian awareness that “worship was, by its very nature, a lyrical event” (36).

His third chapter treats music in the Synagogue. Here the boundary between speech and music begins to blur. The “Ruler of the Synagogue” emerges as the principal figure. Since there is no mention of a separate professional musician in the first century synagogue, this man was probably it: singer and chanter.

Other than the use of the Shofar as a signaling instrument, instrumental music does not seem to have had a place in the first century synagogue. Synagogue music appears to be exclusively vocal, word-borne, amateur, cantillistic, and probably soloistic.

Next Foley looks at the music of the emerging Christian church. Here, too, the music and its sources are shrouded in mystery. The New Testament and other early Christian texts, as with the Old Testament, give us only fragmentary clues: we find short phrases and ejaculations, infancy canticles, Christological hymns, table prayers, God hymns, psalms, and readings, all of which may have been chanted or sung.

It is likely that Jewish-style cantillation continued in the church—but also probably true that Gentile converts brought with them their own style of music. As with the Synagogue, no instruments were used in the church: the music of the emerging church was exclusively vocal. Reasons for this include the Word-orientation of the church; the association of instruments with Temple sacrifice ritual and with pagan drama.

In the last chapter, Foley looks at the transition from first century worship to that of the next generations, and the emergence of the permanent house-church and basilica. Lists of ordained clerics from this period include no cantors or musicians. Psalms began to be sung again in the third century in varying styles: unison, choral, and responsorial. But there were still no instruments, probably again because of the continuing vocal/textual emphasis, and the bad press and connotations which instrumental music had gained in the ancient world.

Foley’s conclusions: there was a lot of music in the religion of ancient Israel, in the early church, and in the pre-Constantinian church. But we know next to nothing about it. There is much speculation, but little evidence. Over and over again we read that there are “texts and rubrics” but “no music”.

Why, then, publish a book which says so little? Especially for musicians, it is important to know how little we have to deal with. And Foley provides a needed corrective to the speculations of those like Suzanne Haik- Ventoura, who claims to have unpacked the entire story of music in the OT, and has even produced compact discs of the Psalms of David, sung and performed as she believes they were some 2500 years ago. For this reason alone, Foley's work is important.

For a short monograph, the writing is quite pedantic and heavy-handed. And the print is very small! The book can be obtained through the Alcuin Club, the Pastoral Press in Washington, or the Anglican Book Centre in Toronto.

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### **The Magnificat: Musicians as Biblical Interpreters**

Samuel Terrien

New York: Paulist Press, 1995

xxii + 89 pp. \$14.95

In recent years some good books have been written which disclose theological insight into musical classics. Among these are J. Pelikan's "Bach Among the Theologians" and Paul Minear's discussion of the Requiem, "Death Set to Music". The present book, by Samuel Terrien, professor emeritus of Hebrew at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and a confessed non-musician, is part of this tradition.

Terrien states his purpose this way: "The book seeks to present, not for musicologists, but for enlightened worshipers, an illumination of the poem in light of recent scholarship, together with the interpretation of the text through selected musical excerpts from the greatest compositions of the Magnificat during the past six centuries" (xv).

At the outset Terrien distances himself from current Liberation Theology and Feminist interpretations of the text. He also rejects Marian authorship of the poem, linking it rather with the Old Testament Psalms, and even suggesting that the original may have been in Hebrew. He spends time identifying Old Testament referents in Mary's song to support this. However, he perhaps gives too much emphasis to these Old Testament connections, especially since all we have ever had is the Greek version of the song!

Terrien claims that his book is for the layperson, even though we suspect that many laypersons would find his etymology of the Magnificat excessively thorough and over-scholarly. He even provides a new translation of the poem, rendered from his own "highly probable reconstruction of the Hebrew