

## Sacred Music of the World

*by Shirley M. Rider*

I believe there is a thread woven into the tapestry of our lives which binds our hearts and minds together, fusing in our souls to become a mosaic which, when given expression, becomes part of the specific entity we designate as our culture. I believe this to be so because, to me, the culture of a "people" is the cumulative expression of its beliefs in its art, literature, music, religion, and indeed every facet of its life. I would define this "thread" as the sacred music which expresses the religious beliefs of a culture, and as such, can be traced through the ages in the religious music of the world.

Although it is possible to observe religious music and the role it has played from primitive society on, this paper, will limit itself to brief statements concerning Greek and Roman worship, Hindu songs, the place of religious songs in Buddhism, Chinese worship, music of the Mohammedans, Babylonians and that of the Assyrians, after which it will comment in greater detail upon Hebrew music, as the religious music of this culture leads us to the sacred music of our own time in the Christian tradition.

Elson states that "Hymns are to be found in the literature of nearly every religion, but so far as we are able to judge, save in the Hebrew and Christian, they have rarely been used as a constant and integral part of worship" (281). He goes on to say that the construction of the Greek temples precluded religious assembly or public devotion. He further asserts that worship in Rome gave little space to hymns though prayers and hymns were used to praise the gods.

Max Müller in his "History of Sanskrit Literature" tells us that although the Hindus had much epic and hymnic poetry, the hymns were chiefly used for meditation or recital (281). The Rev. G. O. Newport, a long-time missionary in India expresses a similar view when he says that "there is no periodic gathering of the people into the temples for united religious service" (281). However he does go on to state that even though there may not be congregational singing or musical performance in the western sense, that "On special anniversary festival days and in processions there are always songs sung in honor of the gods" (281).

The stress on the individual in Buddhism likewise precludes a public type of worship experience, and the hymns are used for private recitation and help on an individual basis.

James Legge, an authority on Chinese subjects, tells us that because of the lack of dogmatic teaching of religion in the Confucian system, there are no compositions which we would consider hymns in their own right to be sung in religious services. "Yet the prayers used in the worship of God by the sovereigns of China, and by them and others in the services of the ancestral temple, have the Book of Poetry, containing in all 305 pieces, which Confucius is said to have selected. . . and which he sang over to his lute" (282). Legge further mentions a group of hymnic prayers which were performed for a special occasion in 1538 and consisted of eleven addresses to the Spirit of God.

Sir William Muir says that the Mussulmans recite from the Koran and do not use hymns, but that many parts of the Koran are like Psalms though they are recited rather than sung.

Elson further states that "the ancient Babylono-Assyrian hymns are in many instances translations from older non-Semitic lays. . . , but there are some remarkable songs which are of a more exalted character, and though containing mythological elements, nevertheless express spiritual and devout thought. Most of these belong to a class

called Penitential Psalms" (282).

Elson goes on to state that "So far as the material now enables us to form an opinion, it is that hymns, as an essential of worship, have been mostly characteristic of the Christian, and in less degree of its progenitor, the Hebrew religion. . . It is in this Hebrew race that we find the true rise and onward flow of the river of song" (282).

The comments of Elson, Müller, Newport, Legge and Muir seem to underscore what I have found from other sources, so though sacred music may not be used in the same manner or to the same extent as in the Christian tradition, it does play a definitive role and provides a "thread" of continuity which really begins to flower in the Hebraic tradition. This becomes apparent in the old testament of the Holy Bible, in the unfolding of the history of the Jewish race. In Exodus, chapter fifteen : verses one and two,\* Moses and the people sing a song of praise to God for their safe crossing of the Red Sea upon being pursued by the soldiers of Egypt's Pharaoh :

Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying, I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously ; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation ; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him. (53)

\*Note : Exodus 15 : 1 - 2 This abbreviated form will be used hereafter. It is notable that the same words, as sung in verse two, appear in Psalm 118 : 14. It is this psalm that Jesus Christ is said to have sung with his disciples as he left the "last supper" to go to the garden of Gethsemane.

In Numbers we read that the Israelites sang on their way to the Promised Land, and in Judges 5 : 1 - 3, we can find the song of Deborah and Barak as they sing praise to God for his help to Israel.

As vocal religious music can be traced through the old testament,

even so instrumental music shows the same elements of growth from Genesis 4 : 21 where we find Jubal "was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe" (3). The King James version of the bible translates this passage as harp and organ. Nevertheless, instrumental music becomes more and more interwoven into the life of the people, and by the time of the "schools of the prophets" a definite function of education was the singing of religious songs accompanied by musical instruments, psaltery, tabret, (timbrel) pipe, harp and cymbals. Samuel is the old testament prophet from whom David may have received the inspiration which breaks forth in his many psalms composed in later years. In II Samuel 6 : 5, 14, 16, we can read with what ardor David praised God with instruments and songs. We do know that David later became king of Israel, and with his son, Solomon, organized choirs and instrumental groups for worship in the Jewish temple. We also know that the Psalms, called in Hebrew the "Book of Praises" became both Israel's hymn book and prayer book, and to this day remains the liturgical hymn book of the Jewish Church.

A note-worthy account may be found in II Chronicles 5 : 12-14 at the time of the dedication of the temple envisioned by King David but actually built by his son, King Solomon :

. . .and all the Levitical singers, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, their sons and kinsmen, arrayed in fine linen, with cymbals, harps, and lyres, stood east of the alter with a hundred and twenty priests who were trumpeters ; and it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever," the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the

cloud ; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God.  
(337)

It may be sufficient to say that such was the quality of the music of the old testament that the Psalter continued to be the "praise book" for the new testament Christians and there was no need felt to make a Christian Psalter.

We can still see individual outpourings of religious music as in the "Magnificat", that magnificent song of Mary found in Luke 1 : 46-55, as she accepts the role assigned her by the Holy Spirit. This exquisite expression of Mary's faith, trust and obedience known as Mary's Song can not but remind us of Hannah's Song in the old testament known as the old testament "Magnificat" as found in I Samuel 2 : 1-10.

Mary's Song is followed in a period of about three months by the song of Zechariah made possible by his regained faith (Luke 1 : 68-79).

In Luke 2 : 14, we have the words of the first "Christmas Carol" when the angels sang praise to God in announcing the birth of Jesus Christ.

Later, when Jesus was taken to Jerusalem for the rite of purification and the devout man, Simeon laid eyes on him, he took him in his arms and blessed God ; after which he sang the words which are still sung by Christians to this day, the well known Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2 : 29-32).

We find the crowds singing "Hosanna in the highest" in Mark 11 : 10 when Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

We also find Jesus and his disciples singing a hymn as aforementioned before they went out to the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14 : 26), (Matthew 26 : 30).

After the inception of the Christian church, we find in Acts 4 : 24, the disciples lifting up their voices to God using both spontaneous words and partly quoting words from the old testament book of Psa-

lms.

In Acts 16 : 25, we read that Paul and Silas prayed and sang praises to God from prison at midnight and were heard by the other prisoners.

Although we do not find hymns in the metrical sense before about the fourth century, it is helpful to note that in addition to the psalms of the old and new testament, we find the use of the words "hymns and spiritual songs". Walafrid Strabo and Augustine both define hymns as "any composition of a rhythmic character, whether in verse or not, which was capable of being sung" (Elson 287). In this sense, many of the poetic passages in the new testament such as : "Wherefore he saith, Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall shine upon thee" (Ephesians 5 : 14), King James version, and "Who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords, who only hath immortality, dwelling in light unapproachable ; whom no man hath seen or can see : to whom be honor and power eternal. Amen" ( I Timothy 6 : 15, 16), King James version, are two worthy examples. It seems that the "Gloria in Excelsis" which we still use today may have been "the morning hymn of the Christians of early times, as the Phos ilaron preserved by St. Basil, which belongs to the first or second century, was their hymn for evening use" (Elson 287). Elson further states that this is still the vesper hymn of the Greek Church. Keble has given us the following English translation :

Hail! gladdening Light of His pure glory poured,  
Who is th' Immortal Father, heavenly blest,  
Holiest of Holies-Jesus Christ our Lord!  
Now we are come to the sun's hour of rest,  
The lights of evening round us shine,  
We hymn the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit Divine!  
Worthiest art Thou at all times to be sung,  
With undefiled tongue,  
Son of our God, Giver of life, alone!  
Therefore in all the world, Thy glories, Lord we own. (287)

We may define "spiritual songs" as any songs as long as they were of a spiritual nature or content. In any case, Paul exhorts believers to not be drunk with wine, but rather to be filled with the Spirit ; "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father" ( Ephesians 5 : 19, 20). Indeed, it is not too much to say that thanksgiving to God has been the touch-stone and spring-board resulting in the fountain of praise which has continued to flow through the ages to our present day. We sense this feeling in Revelation, the final book of the new testament as we read, "And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder : and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps : and they sung as it were a new song before the throne. . ." (Revelation 14 : 2, 3) King James version. Again, we read, "And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia : for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to him : for the marriage of the Lamb is come, . . ." (Revelation 19 : 6, 7) King James version. In fact, we can find many examples of exultation and praise in Revelation. It is no mere coincidence that Handel quotes Revelation as well as Isaiah in his oratorio "The Messiah". Nor is it by accident that Bach used the Psalms and many other parts of both the old and new testaments of the Holy Bible as the material for his many well known works including his Mass in B Minor, St. Matthew Passion, and Motet for Double Choir "Sing Ye To The Lord" among others. Haydn in his oratorio "The Creation" uses the well known words of the psalmist "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19 : 1), and Beethoven has given us a sacred composition using the same words. Mendelssohn has used Psalm 121 in his oratorio "Elijah" when he composes the well

known trio "Lift Thine Eyes".

It is an indisputable fact that the masses and oratorios, hymns, and the various expressions of sacred music as we know them today, delve without reservation into the poetic reservoir of the bible. To trace the history of the growth of this sacred music in our present day culture is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper however, and the weaving of the thread in the tapestry of our lives must be continued at another time.

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