

De Utilitate Cantorum: Unitive Aspects of Singing in Early Christian Thought

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In this article, I draw from a number of church fathers who almost unanimously affirm the socially and cosmically unifying power of singing the Psalms. Often tacitly but unmistakably, they draw upon singing as a type of the person of Christ, a participative union of the divine with the human. However, investigation of singing's "illegitimate" pagan and Jewish heritage illustrates the reason for singing's ambivalence in the Christian mind. I conclude, however, that singing, employing the human body and its sensory faculties sanctified by Christ, constituted a far more valuable heuristic, pedagogic, and doxological tool in the early Christian centuries than we commonly appreciate today.

While the power of singing to bind together and unify a community is today widely acknowledged, the extensive recognition of the same among the earliest generations of Christians has gone largely unnoticed. Hidden within the writings of the church fathers we find a wealth of profound theological reflection upon singing, especially that of the Psalms, as a legitimate and beneficial means not only of worship but also of social bonding, or *koinonia*. They considered singing able to center one's mind, to unify soul and body, and to regain what might today be termed a "spiritual equilibrium," as the fourth century Athanasius writes: in singing the Psalms, one's "usual disharmony of mind and corresponding bodily confusion is resolved, just as the notes of several flutes are brought by harmony to one effect."¹ Its inherent

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¹ Athanasius, *Letter to Marcellinus*, 27, in Robert C. Gregg, ed., *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus* (London: SPCK, 1980), 124.

communality brings into relief the integral role psalm singing (Greek: *psalmodia*) played in the early church's self-understanding as at once plural and diverse, yet one and unified in the body of Christ. Just as the eucharistic meal transcended and nullified distinctions between communicants, so Christian hymnody joined the choristers together in such unity of spirit that former divisions of class, gender, or age held no sway.

Moreover, Hellenized Christians adopted and baptized the pagan idea that a cosmic "music" perpetually vitalizes the universe, evident in the harmonious rhythms of the stars, seasons, and natural world. The human body, being a part of God's creation and even in his very image, operated as a microcosm of the universe's harmony. Communal singing, bringing into symphony an assortment of differing members and parts, was understood to embody a (re)alignment of humanity with the cosmos and with God himself. Christ, in whom "all things in heaven and on earth were created," in whom "all things hold together," and through whom "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things" (Col. 1:16–20, NRSV), was for many synonymous with this cosmic harmony. Christian singing, therefore, constituted a "christomorphic" exercise, a molding of a community into Christ-likeness. For Athanasius, singing allows one to see "in accordance with the mind of Christ, conceiving the most excellent thoughts."² Singing, I suggest, is an archetypal frustration of fallen humanity's tendency toward illusions of self-sufficiency, pride, and godlessness.

This study joins the growing awareness in recent scholarship of the need to redress the privileging of sight and the written word as the primary means of Christian understanding and revelation.³ The acknowledgement that the "lesser" senses facilitated a new spectrum of experience outside the remit of the rational intellect is commonplace among the first Christians.⁴ Yet, largely due to disproportionate concentration upon the written word during the Scholastic movement, the patristic primacy of aural learning and teaching is only lately coming to be recognized.⁵

² Athanasius, *Marcellinus*, 29, in Gregg, *Life*, 126.

³ Examples include Carol Harrison, *The Art of Listening in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2006).

⁴ For example, John of Damascus, *Divine Images*, 1.11.

⁵ See Stanley P. Rosenberg, "Beside Books: Approaching Augustine's Sermons in the Oral and Textual Cultures of Late Antiquity," in Gert Partoens and Anthony

Greek and Pagan Singing

Since many distinctive elements of Christian singing are constructed at least implicitly in opposition to pagan practice, it is essential briefly to investigate the latter. Singing doubtless pervaded many avenues of life, mundane and extraordinary, in which it escapes documentation; however, there are two primary foci for which pagan singing was notorious in the Christian mind.

The first is the polytheistic cult, where its attestation is so abundant and unequivocal that Andrew Barker writes that throughout ancient Greece, “worship of the gods . . . always used music and dance.”⁶ Singing as *epiklesis*, or a “calling forth” of the gods in a ritual context, is extremely ancient, and thought by many even to predate language.⁷ Music was rarely absent from the rite of animal sacrifice practiced in all the religions of the Mediterranean, Semitic as well as Greek and Roman.⁸ Singing and music was both a means of *epiklesis*, and thought to prevent the attendance of malevolent spirits—the practice of wearing little bells to ward off demons found currency even among Christians.⁹ In general terms, music exercised particular potency among pagan deities, enabling divine communion, inhibiting demonic influence, and accompanying sacrifice. The fourth century Christian Arnobius denounced the pagan folly that believed that the sound of cymbals, drums, and choirs might influence the transcendent gods.¹⁰ As Brian Dunkle notes in his work on fourth century Christian hymnody, “Unlike pagans, Christian authors generally avoid the notion that music gives pleasure to the divine,”¹¹ preferring to address the human benefit of singing, if theologically conceptualized. This revision of singing’s ultimate object and telos is one of the major

Dupont, eds., *Ministerium Sermonis*, vol. 2 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2009), 405–442.

⁶ Andrew Barker, “Public Music as ‘Fine Art’ in Archaic Greece,” in James McKinnon, ed., *Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1990), 47.

⁷ See, for example, Robin Dunbar, “On the Evolutionary Function of Song and Dance,” in Nicholas Bannan, ed., *Music, Language, and Human Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 208–210.

⁸ James McKinnon, “Early Western Civilization,” in McKinnon, *Antiquity*, 9.

⁹ John Chrysostom strongly denounces the practice (*Homily on 1 Corinthians*, 12.13).

¹⁰ Arnobius, *Adversus Nationes*, 7.32, 36.

¹¹ Brian P. Dunkle, *Enchantment and Creed in the Hymns of Ambrose of Milan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 18n23.

theological innovations early Christians brought to bear upon their cultural milieu.

The second focus is the association of singing and music with libertinism and moral dissolution. Aristotle cites the popular opinion toward musicians, whom “we speak of as vulgar people; and indeed we think it not manly to perform music, except when drunk or for fun.”¹² Written in the early third century, Athenaeus’s *Deipnosophistae* frequently records the vocal and musical accompaniment to the debauched banquets he describes, although he often bemoans the neglect of music’s more salutary forms.¹³ There is a common acknowledgement that music, especially in the Phrygian mode, could be orgasmic, and heightened sensuous consciousness (*pathetikos*) to such an extent that one might be inhabited by or united with a god, thus becoming *entheos*.¹⁴ The close association of the music-fueled Bacchanalian and Dionysian mysteries with abnormal sexual practice and the transcending of gender boundaries is well documented;¹⁵ indeed, Plato bans several modes from his republic, including the Lydian, fearing it will make men *malakos* (“soft” or “effeminate”).¹⁶ Clement of Alexandria’s disgust at some of his congregation’s participation in pagan music—amusing themselves “with impious playing, and amatory quavering, occupied with flute-playing, and dancing, and intoxication, and all kinds of trash”—is readily understandable, and reflects Christianity’s general malaise toward pagan singing.¹⁷

Aristides Quintilianus, the Greek pagan author of one of the most comprehensive and technical treatises on music in the ancient world, might add some temperance to the preceding assessment. He embodies and articulates the culmination of the Platonic and Pythagorean learning that so informs early Christian reflection on song, learning upon which Augustine drew copiously in his *De Musica*, for example. The complexity and gravity of *musica* leads Aristides Quintilianus to esteem it as both a science (*episteme*), and an art or skill

¹² Aristotle, *Politeia*, 1339b.

¹³ See 14.627–628b.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Politeia*, 1342b.

¹⁵ See Michael Jameson, *Cults and Rites in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 77n35.

¹⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 398e.

¹⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Pedagogue*, 3.11, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 290.

(*techne*)—hardly the domain solely of the degenerate.¹⁸ He initially defines music as “knowledge of the seemingly in bodies and motions,”¹⁹ which Mathiesen glosses as a “palpable paradigm of the body and soul of the universe.”²⁰ Music is not only an essential element in *paideia* (education),²¹ but a means to elevate the soul to contemplation of, and eventual return to, the Real, transcending the merely temporal and contingent. Aristides Quintilianus paraphrases the “divine Plato”: “the object of music is the love of the beautiful.”²² As I shall explore, Christian theologians both embody and critique this assessment in the light of Christian *doctrina*.²³

Christian Ambivalence toward Singing

The story of singing’s flourishing in early Christianity is in many ways an unlikely one. Reasons for Christians to distrust singing abounded. Undesirable pagan connotations underlay many of those reasons, but the obvious continuity of singing with Jewish worship also presented a problem; the use of music to accompany animal sacrifices before the destruction of the temple perhaps troubled Christians, for whom Christ was the ultimate sacrifice (compare with Heb. 7:27; 9:26). Clement of Alexandria is one of many early fathers who betrays distinct unease at Christians’ uncritical appropriation of Jewish musical practices. His allegorical exegesis of Psalm 150 reinterprets the instruments mentioned therein as elements of the human physiognomy, thus removing doubt whether these instruments are still to be used physically: “Praise him on the psaltery; for the tongue is the psaltery of the Lord. . . . ‘Praise Him on the clashing cymbals.’ He calls the tongue the cymbal of the mouth, which resounds with the pulsation of the lips.” Humanity’s praise, typified in psalm singing, is

¹⁸ Thomas Mathiesen, “Greek Views of Music” in William Strunk and Leo Treitler, eds., *Source Readings in Music History*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998), 48n4.

¹⁹ Quintilian *On Music*, 1.4, in Thomas Mathiesen, ed., *Aristides Quintilianus: On Music, in Three Books* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), 75.

²⁰ Mathiesen, “Greek Views of Music,” 48n3.

²¹ Aristides Quintilianus, *On Music*, 2.6, in Mathiesen, *Quintilianus*, 126.

²² Aristides Quintilianus, *On Music*, 3.18 in Mathiesen, *Quintilianus*, 186. Paraphrasing Plato, *Republic*, 403C.

²³ Quintilianus and other similar writers were drawn upon with particular enthusiasm by Byzantine Christians. See Thomas Mathiesen, *Apollo’s Lyre: Greek Music and Music Theory in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 411.

to replace the “revelry” implicit in the Jewish instruments.²⁴ Nicetas of Remesiana addresses the same fear: while the physical institutions of the Old Law like circumcision and food restrictions, along with the instruments of psalmody, have been rejected as temporary provisions made for little children, their spiritual essence, which includes faith, patience, and the singing of psalms, has been retained and even increased under the New Law. This explains the unavoidable presence of song in the New Testament.²⁵

Within the early church, singing appears always to have been colored by the tincture of heresy. Arius is said to have utilized the contagious nature of musical tunes to disseminate his teachings exponentially further than possible by mere speech. According to an early fifth century historian, Arius “composed several songs to be sung by sailors, and by millers, and by travelers along the high road,” to ensnare the simple.²⁶ That it is the severe and arguably misogynistic Jerome who denounces Pelagius for his libertine attitude toward women singing in public does not detract from the implicit association of singing with heterodoxy, disorder, and division.²⁷ Ephraem the Syrian, so beloved for his hymns, evokes musical dissonance in describing heretics:

The evil one made them
in the image of pipes
And played songs on them—
agitated songs of contention.²⁸

Heretics’ inability to “sound together in one / Note of unity” betrays their disparity from the communion of the true church. Dunkle’s

²⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Pedagogue*, 2.4, in Roberts and Donaldson, *ANF* 2:248.

²⁵ Nicetas, *On the Benefit of Psalmody*, 9, trans. Gerard Walsh, in Bernard Peebles et al., eds, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 7 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1949), 71–72.

²⁶ Philostorgius in Photius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.2, in Edward Walford, ed., *History of the Church by Sozomen and Philostorgius* (London, 1855), 434.

²⁷ Jerome, *Against the Pelagians*, 1.25, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1951), 461–462.

²⁸ Ephraem the Syrian, *Hymns against Heresies*, 2.7, in James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 94.

judgment, that “early Christian hymnody very often emerged in polemical contexts,” seems readily justifiable.²⁹

There were also theological reservations about the practice of singing. Gregory of Nyssa, in his early *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, differentiates sharply between *aisthesis* (sense perception) and *dianoia* (intellectual perception): “On the one hand there is the joy of evil which delights our sense-perception, and on the other, that of virtue which brings joy to our soul.”³⁰ He initially calls the gratification of *aisthesis* and *dianoia* “opposing pursuits,”³¹ and allows singing only as honey with a bitter medicine. Yet as the treatise progresses, it becomes apparent that this clean-cut distinction cannot hold, and Gregory eventually admits the benefit of many corporeal things. Blessedness and the virtuous life (which is understood by Gregory to be the perpetual and universal praise of God) is not attained simply by withdrawal from the world of sense experience, but rather by a rightly oriented entering into it.³²

Augustine expresses similar indecision about the good of singing rather than speaking the Psalms, evidently uneasy about the *delectatio carnis* and *voluptas* such expression causes in him. He too is suspicious of his spirit’s being “deeply moved to devotion by those holy words when they are sung, and more ardently inflamed to piety, than would be the case without singing,” due to some “secret affinity” between the human spirit and song. Despite bitterly lamenting his tendency to indulge his “sensuous gratification” in the melody’s aesthetic, rather than contemplating its content rationally, he condones the practice of singing the Psalms for the good it does in kindling the devotion of weaker believers.³³ The days following his baptism are remembered positively for their infusion with song: “How copiously I wept at your hymns and canticles, how intensely was I moved by the lovely harmonies of your singing Church! Those voices flooded my ears, and the truth was distilled into my heart until it overflowed in

²⁹ Dunkle, *Enchantment*, 38.

³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, 1.11, in Ronald Heine, ed., *Gregory of Nyssa’s Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 85.

³¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions*, 1.16, in Heine, *Treatise*, 87.

³² Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions*, 1.122, in Heine, *Treatise*, 122–123.

³³ Augustine, *Confessions*, X.33, in Maria Boulding, OSB, trans., *The Confessions* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1997), 269–270.

loving devotion.”³⁴ Singing, while subject to abuse and misinterpretation, possesses a profound and inexplicable ability to nurture neophytes on their journey to Christian maturity.

Put simply, then, the pleasurableness of singing counted both for and against it as a holy and Christian pursuit. Athanasius is quick to reject the supposition that the Psalms are rendered musically and sung for the benefit of the ear, or for the sake of euphony. As we have seen, they are rather sung “for the sake of the soul,” and ultimately allow one to master the passions and “serve the will of God.”³⁵ Accordingly, most fathers stress that the musicality of a group’s singing matters little in preference to the choristers’ intention. Chrysostom demonstrates this inclination: “Nor will any complaint concerning this singing arise, even if one has grown old, is still a child, has a rough voice, or is altogether ignorant of rhythm. This is because what is sought here is a sober soul, an alert mind, a contrite heart, sound reason and a clear conscience.”³⁶

The importance of intention rather than aural perfection corresponds with the common direction that Christian singing must be performed “with attention and a mind wide awake . . . not only with the spirit,”³⁷ most likely in opposition to pagan music, in which one partakes out of one’s mind. Clement of Alexandria is quick to distinguish the Christian choir’s “rational enjoyment,” hymning “temperate melodies,” from the pagan singing characterized by “lust, intoxication and irrational passions.”³⁸ While we must consider this depiction to a certain extent the product of rhetorical caricature, it is clear how Clement wished the faithful to understand the manner and purpose of their singing.

We do discover widespread patristic agreement with pagan opinion that singing exercises an inexplicable and mysterious influence on one’s spiritual disposition, both pernicious and salutary. Jerome counsels the young girl Pacatula to guard her heart against potential suitors, who “with sweet voice wound the soul through the ear.”³⁹

³⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, IX.6, in Boulding, *The Confessions*, 220.

³⁵ Athanasius, *Marcellinus*, 27–28, in Gregg, *Life*, 123–124; compare with *Marcellinus*, 29, where he calls harmonious singing a *tekmerion* (“sure sign”) of a peaceful and well-ordered heart.

³⁶ John Chrysostom, *In psalmum xli*, 2, in McKinnon, *Music*, 81.

³⁷ Nicetas of Remesiana, *Psalmody*, 13, in Peebles, *Fathers*, 74.

³⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Pedagogue*, 2.4, in McKinnon, *Music*, 32.

³⁹ Jerome *Ep.* 128 (PL 22:1098), my translation.

However, in a delightful take on 1 Corinthians 2:16, Athanasius argues that singing can draw one's whole being into Christ-likeness: "For thus beautifully singing praises, [a believer] brings rhythm to his [*sic*] soul and leads it, so to speak, from disproportion to proportion. . . . And gaining its composure by the singing of the phrases, it becomes forgetful of the passions and, while rejoicing, sees in accordance with the mind of Christ, conceiving the most excellent thoughts."⁴⁰ Drawing from a common patristic trope, he argues that God gifted psalm singing to humankind not out of a desire of praise, but because of our disinclination toward instruction:

[God] joined melody to the Word of God so that [men and women], being spiritually influenced by the rhythm of the melody, would send up holy hymns to him with great willingness. For nothing at all so edifies and gives wings to the soul, looses it from the earth and the body's fetters and makes it so contemplative and contemptuous of earthly things as the melody of music and a godly and rhythmic song.⁴¹

It is through the *bodily* action of singing that one's *immaterial* soul is liberated from physical things. This recognition of its human benefit—God's blessing toward mortals—is the principal difference between singing's conceptualization in Christian and pagan thought. Indeed, the near absence in the early church of the notion that singing might affect God's attitude toward humankind is remarkable. Nowhere is this "anthropological turn" demonstrated more clearly than in the fathers' recognition of singing's indispensability as a metaphor for union.

Several recent social anthropological and psychological studies have demonstrated the unitive effect of music, and go on to highlight the evolutionary benefit for its practitioners. One argues that music "evolved as a form of social communication," and thence that "human musicality evolved in service of group living."⁴² Another sees

⁴⁰ Athanasius, *Marcellinus*, 29, in Gregg, *Life*, 126.

⁴¹ Athanasius, *Homily on the Psalms*, 49, in Johannes Quasten, *Music and Worship in Pagan and Christian Identity*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Washington D.C.: National Association of Pastoral Musicians, 1983), 92–93.

⁴² Chris Loersch and Nathan Arbuckle, "Unraveling the Mystery of Music: Music as an Evolved Group Process," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 105 (2013): 778.

“chorusing” (or wordless singing) as taking over the socially cohesive role of grooming, once the dilation of groups made the latter unfeasible.⁴³ At least one study utilizing fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) to monitor brain activity draws a tentative link between listening to music, “profound and . . . transformative psychological experiences,” and experiences of ego dissolution.⁴⁴ It would appear that an awareness of singing’s close association with social bonding, only recently demonstrated by scientific method, was commonplace among early Christians, who consistently drew upon it to expound and explore theological and anthropological themes.

“Harmonious in Unanimity”: Singing as Mediating Social Unity

One of the most widely attested commendations of singing the Psalms is its absolute inclusivity, its accessibility to all members of the assembled community. So enthusiastic about the practice is Ambrose that he challenges Paul’s proscription in 1 Corinthians 14:34:

The Apostle commands women to be silent in church, but they may sing the psalms; this is fitting for every age and for both sexes. In this singing, old men lay aside the rigour of age; downcast middle-aged men respond in the cheerfulness of their heart . . . youths sing without danger to their still impressionable age . . . tender maidens suffer not damage to the adornment of their chastity, and young widows let their rich voices ring out without endangering their modesty.⁴⁵

What might be termed the “democratizing” effect of singing—between sexes, ages, and walks of life—closely resembles Pauline reflection on existing “in Christ.” Just as there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, “for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28), neither are any conventional markers of distinction consequential when singing. A curious, almost mystical union occurs when one joins one’s voice with another, as Gregory of Nyssa’s brother Basil describes: “Who can consider as an enemy one with whom he has sung God’s praises with one voice? Hence singing the psalms imparts

⁴³ Dunbar, “Song,” 209.

⁴⁴ Alexander V. Lebedev et al., “LSD-Induced Entropic Brain Activity Predicts Subsequent Personality Change,” *Human Brain Mapping* 37 (2016): 3211.

⁴⁵ Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Psalms*, 1, in Quasten, *Music*, 78.

the highest good, love, for it uses communal singing, so to speak, as a bond of unity, and it harmoniously draws people to the symphony of one choir."⁴⁶

This correlation between the unity found in communal singing and that found in Christ is noted as early as the early second century by Ignatius of Antioch. In a passage exhorting the Ephesian church to union, he chooses a choral metaphor to express the oneness found in Christ:

Therefore in your unanimity and concordant love Jesus Christ is sung. And each of you must make up a chorus, so that being harmonious in unanimity, and having received the tonality of God, you may sing in unity with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father, that he might both hear you and recognize you as members of his son, through what you do well.⁴⁷

By the congregants each singing in unison the song of Jesus Christ, *through* Jesus Christ, they will be granted ultimate membership in Christ, so that "you might also always partake in God." This analogy would lose much of its force were the unitive power of singing not widely assumed.

Nor was the resemblance between *psalmodia* and the eucharist ignored by the fathers. Both acts of sacrificial worship made all difference among the faithful of no account, transcending distinctions essential and inviolable in secular life. Singing's presence at communal meals is attested even as early as Clement of Alexandria.⁴⁸ The fifth *Mystagogical Catechesis*, attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem, surely refers to the eucharist in calling us to "listen to the *psallontos* [cantor], who invites us with a sacred melody to communion in the holy mysteries, and says: 'Taste and see that the Lord is good.'"⁴⁹ Quasten speaks of the "full notion of the mystical body of Christ, which lies at the basis of the Christian liturgy and receives its expression in such singing. . . . The entire Christian people becomes a single body,

⁴⁶ Basil of Caesarea, *Hom. in Ps.*, 1.2, in Quasten, *Music*, 70.

⁴⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, *Ephesians* 4.2 (PG 5:648), my translation.

⁴⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Pedagogue*, 2.4, in Roberts and Donaldson, *ANF* 2:248.

⁴⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis*, 5.20, in McKinnon, *Music*, 77.

magnifying the Lord in song.”⁵⁰ That in the Psalms one meets not only Christ foretold, but indeed Christ himself speaking was a common patristic exegetical observation. Indeed, the notion of the *totus Christus*—that, since the whole Christ includes a mystical union of body (the church) and head (Jesus Christ himself), the entire Psalter may be interpreted christologically—while fully enunciated by Augustine, is clearly drawn upon in the earlier fathers.⁵¹ By routinely singing the Christ-inspired and -imbued words of the Psalter, the faithful are effecting and confirming their transformation from discrete individuals to members of the body of Christ. In the same way, through Christ’s absolute identification with the sinful members of his body, his voice too may be heard in the Psalms interceding to his Father on their behalf.

While singing “with one voice” clearly held important symbolic resonances with the communal and theological unity found in Christ, it has been debated whether we can therefore conclude that early Christian singing was universally and exclusively in unison. Most scholars take the rise of Gregorian chant in the second half of the millennium to indicate a similarly homophonous origin,⁵² despite the observation of some that the polyphonic liturgical singing that exists in Georgia today may have claim to an ancient pedigree.⁵³ However, language of “harmony,” “symphony,” and *una voce*, commonplace in the patristic writings, I believe reflects more the outworking of their cultural, experiential, and theological convictions, than technical details of their praxis. Indeed, as we shall see, many of the Christian theological arguments evinced in favor of singing in fact countenance and even embrace aspects of polyphony, both drawing from and tacitly critiquing pagan philosophy.

Music of the Kosmos and Anthropos

The Pythagorean and Platonic teaching that the operation of the universe accorded to harmonic principles, “eternally resonating with

⁵⁰ Quasten, *Music*, 70.

⁵¹ For example Augustine, *En. in Ps.*, 38; see also Gerald Boersma, “Participation in Christ: Psalm 118 in Ambrose and Augustine,” *Augustinianum* 54 (2014): 173–197.

⁵² See Richard Crocker, *An Introduction to Gregorian Chant*, vol. 1 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 25.

⁵³ See Peter Jeffery, “The Earliest Christian Chant Repertory Recovered: The Georgian Witnesses to Jerusalem Chant,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 47 (1994): 26–27.

a measured music,” was widely imbued into the philosophical inheritance of the early Christians.⁵⁴ Writing around the close of the second century, Clement of Alexandria is perhaps the first to treat the teaching explicitly. In his work *Protrepticus*, which reevaluates Hellenistic learning in the light of Christian revelation, he meditates and draws upon Colossians 1:15–20 in his cosmogony. Christ, whom he calls the “New Song,” was at work not only during his brief incarnation, in which he ordered humans according to God’s will, and brought the dead who heard his song back to life; he sees the New Song as that which formed order out of primeval chaos: “[The New Song] also composed the universe into melodious order [*emmeles*], and tuned the discord [*diaphonia*] of the elements to harmonious arrangement [*symphonia*], so that the whole world might become harmony. It let loose the fluid ocean, and yet has prevented it from encroaching on the land.”⁵⁵

Indeed, “so that the whole world might become harmony” may be understood as the very telos of creation, which having been partially completed by Christ, will soon be brought to its consummation. The only proper response to one’s harmonious formation is to join in the celestial hymn of creation to God, thus being fully united with it. Origen is challenged by Celsus’s insistence that honor be done to the sun and Minerva; yet he maintains that while pagan worship takes these splendid objects as worthy of worship, Christians recognize the heavens’ own harmonious paean, and through singing join them: “We sing praise to God and His only-begotten Son, as also do the sun, moon, and stars, and all the heavenly host.”⁵⁶

Drawing ultimately from Democritus, Gregory of Nyssa explores anthropological arguments entailed in the idea that “man is a miniature cosmos,” who thus shares its arrangement according to harmonic principles. We, like the cosmos, embody the harmonious reconciliation of unity and multiplicity, seen in the “diverse and variegated musical harmony” of the whole, despite the “great distinction of essences

⁵⁴ Carol Harrison, “Enchanting the Soul: The Music of the Psalms,” in Andreas Andreopoulos et al., eds, *Meditations of the Heart: The Psalms in Early Christian Thought and Practice* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011), 205. See Aristides Quintilianus, *On Music*, 3.10, in Mathiesen, *Quintilianus*, 175.

⁵⁵ Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus*, 1.5, in Roberts and Donaldson, *ANF* 2:172.

⁵⁶ *Contra Celsum*, 8.67, in Henry Chadwick, ed., *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 503.

. . . observed in the individual parts.” Amid its complexity, the universe, by “some structured and unchanging rhythm,” creates the “harmony of the parts in relation to the whole, and sings this polyphonic tune in everything.”⁵⁷ Variegation and even opposition—typified by rest and motion—is a *sine qua non* of melody, and should not be conceived pejoratively. Therefore, “the music perceived in the universe is seen in the miniature cosmos,”⁵⁸ corroborated by the instrumental resemblance of our windpipe, palate, tongue, cheeks, and mouth. This philosophical groundwork provides the basis of what appears to be his primary purpose, to defend the practice of singing:

Since, then, everything which is in accord with nature is pleasing to nature, and since the music which is in us has been shown to be in accord with nature, for this reason the great David combined singing with the philosophy concerning the virtues, thereby pouring the sweetness of honey . . . over these sublime teachings. In this singing nature reflects on itself in a certain manner, and heals itself.⁵⁹

It is somewhat ironic that a commendation of the physical and aural practice of singing emerges from theological reasoning based on criticism of the physical connotations of aural enjoyment. Singing is a means whereby one’s nature can realign itself with its and the universe’s harmonious creation, and “heal itself.” He reinforces this judgement with scripture, citing how by a song David soothed and healed Saul, “frenzied and out of his right mind,” so that his “understanding returned to him again in accordance with nature.”⁶⁰ While Stoic influence is apparent in Gregory’s concern that singing be natural and order one *kata physin*,⁶¹ the Christian appropriation of this principle is unmistakable. In the Christian mind, whereas pagan singing and music was generally associated with an agitation of one’s passions, and a threat to social order and propriety, Christian music

⁵⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions*, 1.19, in Heine, *Treatise*, 88–89. For Democritus, see Heine, *Treatise*, 88n12; the idea is at least nascent in Plato, *Timaeus*, 90d.

⁵⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions*, 1.22, in Heine, *Treatise*, 91.

⁵⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions*, 1.23, in Heine, *Treatise*, 91.

⁶⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions*, 1.24 in Heine, *Treatise*, 92; 1 Sam. 16:23.

⁶¹ See Marrou, H.-I, “Une théologie de la musique chez Grégoire de Nysse?” in Jacques Fontaine and Charles Kannengiesser, eds. *Epektasis: Mélanges patristiques offerts au Cardinal Jean Daniélou* (Paris:Beauchesne, 1972), 505–506.

caused the “subjugation of [the] passions,” and was eminently rational, returning things maligned by the devil and sinful man to the divine harmony.⁶²

We have already discussed Gregory’s description of the coordination of various opposites in music as “a musical harmony which produces a blended and marvelous hymn of the power which controls the universe”—praise flowing from diversity.⁶³ Gregory later takes up singing’s peculiar ability to reconcile opposites, to bring harmony out of diversity, this time dwelling on its soteriological significance. He interprets Psalm 150 as describing the joyous occasion when humanity finally and consummately joins with the celestial chorus of praise, presumably at the eschatological banquet—“when humanity has laid aside everything that is of the earth and noiseless and silent.”⁶⁴ Humankind’s estrangement from this heavenly choir of praise was maintained because of the presence of sin, which Gregory conceptualizes as the separation of angelic nature from human nature. Yet when the “mercy of God” should reunite these two, Gregory anticipates an impressive vocal experience:

For such a combination, I mean of the angelic with the human, when human nature is again exalted to its original condition, will produce that sweet sound of thanksgiving through their meeting with one another. And through one another and with one another they will sing a hymn of thanksgiving to God for his love of humanity which will be heard throughout the universe. . . . Whenever the whole creation, consisting of all things superior and all things inferior, has been united in one choir, both the spiritual creation and that which has been separated and has been at a distance on account of sin will produce the good sound . . . from our concord.⁶⁵

Several things are to be noted from this magnificent passage:

(1) The envisaged hymn of praise flows from such unity that Gregory employs language redolent of ego dissolution, as the choristers sing

⁶² Although Gregory later clarifies that the passions, if controlled, may be useful for leading us to blessedness (*Inscriptions*, 1.103, in Heine, *Treatise*, 116-117).

⁶³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions*, 1.20, in Heine, *Treatise*, 90.

⁶⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions*, 1.116, in Heine, *Treatise*, 120.

⁶⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions*, 1.117, 1.122, in Heine, *Treatise*, 121-122.

“through one another, and with one another.” One doubts whether such an insight is the product simply of poetical floridity, and has instead not arisen from Gregory’s own experience of the mingling of selves in communal singing.

(2) Commenting on this extract, Ludlow notes how “one is struck by the passage’s emphasis on the *unity* between humanity and the angels and—implicitly—between individual humans too: the harmony of the music is obviously intended to reflect the harmony of the community of heaven.”⁶⁶ The *eschatological* unity (both angelic and mortal) evoked in this passage finds its symmetrical counterpart in Gregory’s *protology*, since Gregory appears to have understood the creation of humankind to have been as a united whole—“when human nature is again exalted to its original condition.” The image of God, then, from which we have fallen, but to which we will once again ascend according to Gregory’s notion of *apokatastasis*, may be equated (or at least associated) with the perfect interpersonal unity so lacking in this world, of which praiseful singing affords us a foretaste.⁶⁷

(3) Lastly, as with the cosmos, the result of the skillful union of distinct entities produces harmony beautiful “to be heard.” Indeed, to join the angelic chorus humanity must first put aside all that is “noiseless and silent.” Harmonious union breeds singing and euphony, despite Gregory’s initial reservations surrounding sense perception. So thoroughgoing is Gregory’s conviction of the “creative tension” latent within opposition that it appears he has to some extent relented of his strict separation of *aisthesis* and *dianoia* as eternally opposing pursuits. While it remains largely true that enjoyment via the physical senses is ephemeral, and the intellect is eternal,⁶⁸ singing’s unitive and harmonizing properties appear to make it an exception to this rule. There is a very real recognition that the bodily act of singing and listening—at once unitive and emanating from unity—can contribute toward the soul’s ascent to blessedness.⁶⁹

Finally, Gregory’s choral vision of humanity’s union with the divine, “when human nature is again exalted to its original condition,” also revealingly describes the person of Christ, at once human and

⁶⁶ Morwenna Ludlow, *Universal Salvation: Eschatology in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa and Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 75.

⁶⁷ Ludlow, *Salvation*, 89–90.

⁶⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions*, 1.32, in Heine, *Treatise*, 93–94.

⁶⁹ See Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 235.

divine, whose incarnation took place to deify humanity.⁷⁰ Bonhoeffer is in fact one of the few modern theologians to note the parallel between Christ's two natures—"undivided and yet distinct"—and aural polyphony, which he calls "the musical image of this Christological fact and thus also our *vita christiana*."⁷¹ Near the end of his *Inscriptions*, in an extended analogy between Saul's attempting to kill David with a spear of wood and iron, and the people's nailing Jesus to a tree, Gregory writes that "the song which comes from [David's lyre] is the Word which has been made manifest to us through the one who was made flesh, whose work is to destroy the derangement that comes from demons."⁷² Here we see a parallel with the earlier instance, and a delicious reversal of the "maddening" influence of pagan song. The Song that is the Word (made flesh), through his powers of union, effects a calming of disorder into harmony in accordance with nature, which bespeaks and precipitates the perpetual praise of God. Nicetas expresses a similar sentiment, speculating that David's ability to calm the demonic Saul came not merely through the harmonic effects of the harp, but "because a figure of the cross of Christ was mystically projected by the wood and the stretching of the strings, so that it was the Passion itself that was sung and that subdued the spirit of the demon."⁷³ The unitive and reconciliatory nature of song is employed by the fathers as a metaphor for the person of Christ himself, and the salvation wrought through him.

Christian singing envisaged as a joining of the faithful with the celestial chorus is not peculiar to Gregory, but is assumed by many early Christians. Cyril of Jerusalem imagines the eucharistic hymns as partaking in those of the angels:

We call to mind the Seraphim also, whom Isaiah saw in the Holy Spirit, present in a circle about the throne of God . . . saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." Therefore we recite this doxology transmitted to us by the Seraphim, in order to become participants in the hymnody of the super terrestrial hosts.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ See, for example, Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism*, 37.

⁷¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John De Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2010), 394.

⁷² Gregory of Nyssa, *Inscriptions*, 2.269, in Heine, *Treatise*, 208.

⁷³ Nicetas of Remesiana, *Psalmody*, 4, in Peebles, *Fathers*, 68.

⁷⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis*, 5.6, in McKinnon, *Music*, 76.

Once again, the inseparability of the unions involved with the eucharistic mysteries and singing is clear. The liturgical singing of the Antiochene church is described by Cyril of Antioch as a mingling of individual selves:

Thereupon we went into the church, and [one could there] see the choir, which was like a choir of heavenly men [*sic*] of God or a choir of angels taking up a song of praise to God . . . so that one might believe that they were not [a number of people] but rather one rational being comprehending a unity, which gave off a wonderful sound.⁷⁵

In many ways this can be seen as the earthly actualization of Gregory's vision of the human and angelic natures uniting, both of which vignettes use singing as the cause and perhaps the fruit of such a coherent unity.

Concluding Remarks

Perhaps the most decisive conclusion to have emerged from this article is singing's undeniable potency in the dynamics of the early Christian centuries. The universality of song, while proving a creative social and theological tool for those early Christians received as orthodox, also facilitated the unchecked proliferation of less doctrinally sound teachings. The distinctive understandings of singing held by various Christian groups thus effectively became a means of identity formation.⁷⁶

It is my contention that an essential aspect in the fathers' writings on singing, and one not readily found in pagan literature, is its unique ability to form many into one, paralleling the central tenets and metaphors of the faith. On an individual level, psalm singing is understood as a means of union between one's soul and body; yet singing is rarely treated except as a communal institution. Even when the practice of a single lector chanting a hymn emerges, the collectivity of this act is stressed: "And indeed there must always be but one voice in the church, as there is but one body. . . . The singer sings psalms alone, and, while all respond, the sound issues as if from one mouth."⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Cyril of Antioch, *Confessio Cypriani*, 17, in Quasten, *Music*, 70.

⁷⁶ Dunkle, *Enchantment*, 23.

⁷⁷ John Chrysostom, *Hom. in I Cor.*, 36.5–6, in McKimmon, *Music*, 86.

Delving deeper, the social unity divinely wrought among the singers emulates the harmony of the spheres, divinely wrought throughout the cosmos. The patristic observation that difference and distinction are essential for any creative harmony and euphony might prove instructive in our own Anglican context.

The neglect among modern theologians of the profound resonances between Christian theology (most centrally the incarnation) and music has only recently begun to be redressed.⁷⁸ Music's unique ability to convey ineffable and mystical sentiments and truths despite (or by virtue of) its inherent temporality and materiality, affirms the created order and humanity itself as divinely forged, and capable of being inspired by, or working in harmony with, the Holy Spirit; yet the Christian interpretation of singing also tacitly requires an acceptance of humankind's createdness, one's nakedness apart from community, and one's continual reliance upon grace. This bipartite insight is imbued in the fathers' very being, who perhaps most fully recognized the consequences of the resurrection of Christ upon the "ordinary" world; namely the sanctification of the body and therefore our ability to sing by the incarnation of God, and the knowledge that we simply have no other means of coming to know God except through our embodied sensory faculties. It is by prayerful analysis of this revealed knowledge, through devoted meditation upon the scriptures, bodily participation in the ceremonies, celebrations, and liturgies of the church—and above all in singing—that we come to be united "in Christ," and through recognition of their temporality be led beyond the physical to the immaterial God.

⁷⁸ For example, Begbie, *Theology*.

