

The Musical Mind of God ... Chapter 3

Music through the Ages

In this installment of the “Musical Mind of God”, I would like to discuss the development of music from the days when David played soothing melodies to calm the tormented mind of Saul, the King of Israel, to the haunting compositions of Andrew Lloyd Weber’s “Phantom of the Opera”. Today, there are virtually no archeological remains of manuscripts depicting ancient musical styles. Although written notes or symbols on a piece of sheepskin, such as the Dead Sea scrolls, may exist in a cave somewhere, unfortunately, it has yet to be found. Therefore, all we can do is guess what kind of musical compositions were developed prior to the first notated examples of music, which were from the Gregorian monks of the Catholic Church.

Nonetheless, there are many examples of musical performances that grace the pages of the bible. David’s love of music is well known even to those who plead ignorance when it comes to knowing anything at all about the scriptures.

The plethora of musical poetry that David produced in the psalms demonstrates how gifted he was in composing songs. In addition, he often instructed other musicians to arrange his compositions for performing with instruments and voices. It is apparent that he either knew or developed some type of musical system to accomplish those things.

David’s son, Solomon, was also well accomplished in the field of music. Like his father, he wrote many psalms, including the “Songs of Solomon,” which read like a modern play or musical. He produced large musical productions, for Temple worship, that would rival any “Hollywood production” of today. Solomon was very much a creative planner and thinker.

*In the dedication of the Temple, he assigned many musicians for the event, **2 Chronicles 5:13** describes:*

Also the Levites [which were] the singers, all of them of Asaph, of Heman, of Jeduthun, with their sons and their brethren, [being] arrayed in white linen, having cymbals and psalteries and harps, stood at the east end of the altar, and with them an hundred and twenty priests sounding with trumpets.

It came even to pass, as the trumpeters and singers [were] as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the LORD; and when they lifted up [their] voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of musick, and praised the LORD, [saying], For [he is] good; for his mercy [endureth] for ever: that [then] the house was filled with a cloud, [even] the house of the LORD;

Notice the phrase “to make one sound” in the text. This phrase reflects an effort to have both vocal and instrumental parts playing in harmony.

A modern day example of this would be listening to the Mormon tabernacle choir singing in unison with an instrumental ensemble.

Musical prowess was not limited to David or Solomon. It appears that Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, liked musical productions as well.

*In **Daniel 3:6**, we read about a decree that was pronounced on the people, including Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, for not worshiping the image of Nebuchadnezzar. The decree said; “and whoso shall not fall down and worship the golden image shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace.” This worship was to take place when the instruments were playing.*

*Look at **Daniel 3:7**:*

Therefore at that time, when all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up.

*It is interesting to note that the instruments listed in **Daniel 3:7** would produce very pleasing sounds by skilled musicians. “Bagpipes” are even listed in some versions of the text. That sound belongs to the isles of Britain and Scotland.*

One would not consider such an instrument in what is now called Iraq.

Another characteristic of the description in this passage of Daniel is the level of musicality that is revealed in the text. It appears to indicate that the Babylonians would have possessed an understanding of rhythm, harmony and instrumental arranging to produce “all kinds of music.” We can deduce from the instrumentation that the sound was relatively sophisticated. It may not have sounded very different from the styles of music we that we hear today from folk instrument ensembles.

The question frequently arises as to how intelligent or sophisticated ancient civilizations were in relationship to our own. Indeed, it is clear that in many ways, they were not extremely different from our society today. Although we have some obvious technological advantages over them, they also displayed deep levels of thought and achievements of their own; the pyramids of ancient Egypt is one example that to this day still defies explanation. Josephus says of Abraham, “he taught the Egyptians in mathematics and astronomy.” Not only was he the father of the faithful but a man interested in the sciences! Unfortunately, the sands of time have all but obliterated the memory of ancient civilizations and their accomplishments.

The origins of our present musical theory, or system, began with Greek theorists and philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle.

Music theory is heavily based in mathematics. Pythagoras is credited with discovering that the basic consonant intervals (pleasing sounding harmonies) were produced by simple ratios: 2:1 for the octave, 3:2 for the fifth, and the 4:3 for the fourth.

The Greek discipline of harmonics (how a note sounds) laid the foundation for modern concepts such as notes, intervals, scales and modes.

Greek scales were constructed from tetrachords, groups of four notes spanning a fourth.

Boethius is the main source through which Greek music theory was transmitted to the Middle Ages. In his book, “De Institutione Musica” (The Fundamentals of Music), Boethius discusses three kinds of music: cosmic music, the orderly numerical relationships that control the natural world; human music, which controls the human body and soul; and audible music, produced by voices or instruments. Boethius saw music primarily as a science.

Although some of these musical concepts were interpreted and transmitted to the Middle Ages through the writings of early Christians, others were not rediscovered until the Renaissance period. I mention these concepts briefly just to make the reader aware of the contribution that ancient Greek thought has on modern music. Most people develop a “brain-freeze” when engaging in any lengthy discussion on this topic and they will normally ask for the discussion to move on to another subject.

The first notes written, to paper, that represented specific sounds, began with what is called “Gregorian chant.” This music was linked to the “Mass” in the Catholic Church. It is where the evolution of our written melodies really began.

The Medieval period, from 1150–1400, was marked by written secular music sung by troubadours and others. The Renaissance followed with a reintroduction of Greek music theory, which set the stage for the Baroque and Classical periods.

In all of music history, I feel that the Classical period, which only lasted for 70 years (1750–1820) is the most significant in the development of God’s musical gifts within the mind of man. During this time, there was a tremendous explosion of complicated musical arrangements for both vocal and instrumental genres. Music theory and practice advanced light years ahead of what had been heard in the previous generations.

From the “Phantom of the Opera” to today’s major motion picture music, all of our modern orchestral arrangements are indebted to the achievements made during the Classical period.

While we may not cherish much of what was written during the Classical era, today’s music, with its numerous styles, is based on the musical advancements of that period.

In this century, we have heard and seen many beautiful “musicals” and performances by numerous accomplished singers and instrumentalists. The current level of sophistication is mind-boggling. People spend their entire lives perfecting their talent and they are indeed able to achieve stardom level. Indeed, it is a far cry from playing a harp or lyre in an ancient king’s palace to singing in a huge stadium today.

Broadway music, such as the score for the “Phantom of the Opera,” contains many beautiful melodies that are played by an orchestra. This music sounds quite different from compositions of the Classical period, which used the same instruments. Each generation, in turn, contributes its own creations to the voluminous musical works of the past. Despite the “digital age” of computers and advanced technologies, this creative spirit continues unabated.

What we have seen in this discussion is that through the ages, humankind’s musical development has been a return to the heavenly sounds emanating from the musically gifted being called “Haylel.” As we developed our inquiry into the “Musical Mind of God,” we discovered that three distinctive sounds were instilled in him and that those sounds closely resemble the sounds of a modern orchestra. It has taken humankind thousands of years to replicate what may have taken only hours or minutes to produce in the spiritual realm.

There is a passage in Job that gives us another insight into the musical nature of God. It is contained in the dialog that God had with Job, when he speaks “out of the whirlwind.”

Job 38:6–7:

Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if you have understanding. who has laid the measures thereof, if you knowest? or who has stretched the line upon it? upon what were the foundation of it fastened or who laid its cornerstone; when the morning stars sang together and the sons of God shouted for joy?

I underlined the last sentence for emphasis because I want to draw attention to what it is saying. It reflects the theme of our discussion: God’s appreciation for music.

This passage is describing the creation of the earth prior to the creation of man. Job is being asked if he was a witness to that event. Can he explain the process by which the earth was created? Did he hear the sounds of the morning stars “sing together” in harmony and the sons of God shouting for joy?

“Hearing the stars sing together” is a revealing statement against the backdrop of the creation; beautiful voices were singing musical masterpieces while the creative power of God was being displayed.

This was a monumental cosmic event. It was not performed privately or in secret but publicly, with tremendous fanfare and musical accompaniment.

It is a beautiful insight into the musical nature of God.

Mark Rusinko