

A Theology of Music for Worship Derived from the Book of Revelation

by Dr. Thomas Seel

Church musicians and worship leaders have been frustrated for 2,000 years because the New Testament has so few specific guidelines regarding the use of music for worship. Consequently, the normative standards for the use of music in the church have been reasoned out through the centuries based on general theological considerations, musical practicality, and convention. The purpose of this study is to show that the New Testament, particularly the largely ignored Book of Revelation, does have practical, “down-to-earth” and specific things to say regarding the use of music for worship in the life of the contemporary church.

How can a Book of the Bible about the future be relevant to today? Just as contemporary Jews today bring the “past” to the “present” as they celebrate their religious festivals, Christians are exhorted by Christ to remember the Last Supper by taking the “present” back to the “past” (anamnesis). Why, then should one not use the music of the “future” as found in the Book of Revelation in the “present” Age, or at the least, seeks to? The Cappadocian theologians of the fourth century did the same thing: they contemporized eschatological thought.

My attempt to formulate a theology of music for worship is by no means complete; it is offered as a beginning. If this work catalytically can prompt a helpful discussion to ensue, it will have served its purpose. It is my hope that more and more church professionals and laypersons will continue to grow in their understanding of what the scriptures have to say concerning worship and music in worship through the remaining days this side of eternity. So many who have come before have considered this glimpse into the future as unattainable today and have dismissed it as enviable. While I agree that perfection this side of eternity is impossible, how dare we not try! All scripture is given for “...teaching, rebuking, correction, and training in righteousness” (II Timothy 3:16), not just those parts that appear to be easier to comprehend and to understand.

This glimpse into eschatological worship has implications for the contemporary church professional and layperson. Based on the work of Bowman, Fiorenza, and more recently Blevins, this study assumes the dramatic approach to the interpretation of the Book of Revelation. This study assumes that it is no accident that the writer of the Apocalypse chose to portray his eschatological glimpse in terms of the best music traditions that he knew in his past and present time. The non-musical portion of this paper assumes much that I learned from my mentor, Dr. James Blevins, who is freely cited.

Writer: the Apostle John, not the Johannine school;

Date: AD 95;

Place: Isle of Patmos;

Historical setting: During the reign of Roman Caesars, Domitian came into rule in AD 81 and declared he was a divine being. Sixteen-foot statues of Domitian were erected throughout the Roman Empire. Similar in construction to the Statue of Liberty, local pagan priests would enter the pedestal and proclaim dictums from Domitian. The people were forced to bow down and

hail Caesar by saying "Caesar have mercy" (Caesar Eleison). The Christian Kyrie Eleison was borrowed directly from Caesar Eleison.

Owing to Christian persecution, Christians could not speak openly of Christ. The writer consequently encrypted the Apocalypse in Jewish Apocalyptic Code and formulated it within the dramatic medium of the day, Greek tragic drama. Apokalupsis (Apocalypse) means "to uncover, to reveal, or to disclose."

During the Jewish diaspora, the people created a coded language called Jewish Apocalyptic Code. The Old Testament books of Daniel and Ezekiel incorporate it. During the time of the early Church, the Roman people did not understand the Code, thus it was a way to transmit John's vision to the Christian churches of Asia Minor, most of whom knew the Code. The Code consists of number codes, color codes, and animal codes. Understanding the Code lends great aid in seeking to unlock the mysteries of the Apocalypse. A simplified expression of the code follows:

Number Code:

Twelve	Wholeness.
Ten	Complete.
Seven	Divinity.
Six	Imperfection or extreme evil.
Five	Penalty.
Four	The world.
Two	Witnessing.
One	Unity.

Color Code:

Pale green	Death.
Dark green	Life.
White	Purity or conquering.
Red	Warfare.
Black	Famine.
Gold	Worth or value.
Bronze	Strength.
Scarlet	Sin.

Animal Code:

Frog	The meanest, vilest animal on Earth (witness Gollum of Middle Earth in the Lord of the Rings)
Eagle	The bearer of bad news.
Monster beasts	Represent monstrous persons or forces.
Beast from the Sea	A symbol for Caesar Domitian or political power.
Sea Serpent	Satan, in the Apocalypse a red serpent with seven heads.
Locusts	Represent the sin and decay of the Roman Empire or any society that opposes God.
Seven-horned Lamb	Jesus, himself.
Lion	Symbolizes all wild creatures.
Ox	Symbolizes all domesticated creatures.

Nature of the writing: Divine visions of end-time events for planet Earth. In order to relate that which he witnessed in the visions, it is no accident that the Apostle John was born and reared in a Jewish family, as a disciple of Christ became a Christian, and lived for over 50 years in the commercial center of Ephesus. John's multi-cultured experiences enabled him to put down on paper what he had witnessed. John could not express all of his vision in prose, so he wrote out the music texts and chose a dramatic medium to express that which he had beheld. In order to unlock the mysteries of the Apocalypse, one must use all one's senses: one must see it, hear it, imagine it, and read it in order to open one's self up to its great majesty.

It is postulated that the writer used his multi-cultured background in order to express the fullness of the vision. What better art form of his day than Greek tragic drama to portray his vision? Christians in Asia Minor were accustomed to visiting the theatres of their day. Of the 3,000 ancient world theatres excavated today, the Ephesian amphitheater is the largest from the ancient world and could seat 25,000 spectators. Tragic drama was always religious drama and had a throne to god on the main stage; a chorus of 12 or 24 stood around the throne and sang the music of the drama; the actors were called priests. At the end of the drama, a god was always brought down from the upper level to the stage to solve the dilemmas posed in the drama. The stage at Ephesus stood at the major junction of the streets of the city and could be seen from a mile out at sea. The Ephesian theatre is mentioned in the Book of Acts (19:29).

Owing to the multi-cultural orientation of the Apostle John, the study assumes a syncretistic blending of pagan, Jewish, and early Church traditions in order to capture the fullness of the vision. Thus, each aspect of the study is analyzed in full historical context by following its possible early pagan associations, Jewish associations including patriarchal, tabernacle, temple and synagogue, Greek and Roman associations, early Church associations, and ultimately culminating in its use as evidenced in the New Testament and finally in the Book of Revelation.

Many of the Christians who had joined the churches of Asia Minor had come out of a background where their religious experiences were expressed in drama. In the mystery religions, drama played a very significant role. The Temple cult of the Old Testament made use of the dramatic; in early Christian worship, evidence suggests drama was also very much a part. The Apostle John held out no hope that the Book of Revelation would ever be presented on the Ephesian stage because of the persecution of Christians. But in Chapter 1, John says to read the Book aloud in the Churches so that the listeners could perceive its dramatic overtones.

The stage at Ephesus: on the lower level was a circular orchestra surrounded by a moat. Directly behind the orchestra lay the skene or scene building. In its earliest days dating to 300 BCE, it had been a wooden structure. By AD 100, it had become a permanent stone edifice. The proskene jutting out from the stage building, to form a raised platform or stage about 8-9 feet above the orchestra level and 10 feet deep. The upper portion of the skene was called the episkene and usually contained 3-5 openings for scenery in Greek drama. The openings were called thuramata and 1-2 foot wide pillars separated them.

The stage at Ephesus is the only such stage building ever excavated in the ancient world with seven thuramata or windows. Thus, the number seven was an important number for producing drama in the theatre in Ephesus. And, seven is likewise a key number in the Book of Revelation. Painted panels were placed in the windows, depicting scenes too difficult to

perform on the stage. A revolving-door structure called an eccyclema could be placed in the windows and be turned to show three additional scenes.

The role of the Chorus: was to represent the objective intentions of the author and could offer comments on the events occurring on stage. The Chorus could represent for instance, wasps, birds, frogs, goats, snakes, bees, fish, or storks by wearing masks. In most of the Greek tragedies, the Chorus was friendly to the main character. The Chorus was the most important aspect of the Greek tragedy, interpreting in musical phrases and songs the action of the play for the audience. They were usually positioned in a semicircle around the throne of Dionysius, directly in front of the permanent altar, located on the orchestra level. In fact, the earliest tragedies had only a Chorus with no actors.

The Chorus could sing and chant accompanied by lyres or harps that they carried. In Revelation, the 24 elders serve as the primary Chorus. They stand around the throne of God in chapters 4 and 5 and sing five beautiful odes. They also could have donned facemasks to represent various beasts or animals presented in the Apocalypse. The great composer Handel was so inspired by the 30 odes of Revelation that he made them a vital part of his work, the Messiah. Careful study of these thirty odes indicates that the chorus partly served the same role in Revelation as it did in Greek tragedy.

Greek tragic drama: A typical Greek tragedy was divided into definite parts. These plays began with a prologue that was rendered in the form of a monologue or dialogue. One character acquainted the audience with the necessary background information for the play. This type of prologue is found in Revelation 1:1-8. After the prologue, the chorus entered the stage by way of the parados, usually singing. After the entrance of the chorus the first episode took place. It was composed of dialogue of no more than three actors or a monologue followed by a stasimon or choral ode. Its basic pattern, episode-stasimon, was repeated 3, 5, or 7 times. Revelation fits the sevenfold pattern and likewise fits the stage of Ephesus as well, equipped with seven thronomata.

Following the last episode, the exodus of the Chorus took place and then the epilogue. A survey of Greek tragedies indicates that some were basic plays of one actor with the Chorus filling in with responses and a variety of other roles. A monologue with choral response might very well have made a Greek tragedy. Revelation falls into this pattern. Instead of acts, the Greeks used the word part, which denoted merely a division of the play as determined by choral division of the written or interpolated action. The Book of Revelation can be divided into seven such parts or acts, with seven scenes per act.

Message of the Book: a positive message of hope for people facing despair and persecution. We need to be freed from the "doom and gloom" of the Book of Revelation preached by so many today; we must sense that every generation of Christians throughout the ages has experienced some level of persecution and despair. Revelation was written from prison to people who were facing prison or execution because of their belief in Christ. The Book's message of hope must be heard over and against that backdrop.

The Greek view of history was of a cycle, endlessly repeating itself. Yet, there is also a straight-line (linear) movement toward a goal taken over from Hebraic thought. By bringing Greek and Hebraic thought patterns together, John has produced a spiral form of action: cycles repeat themselves but at the same time there is movement toward a goal. To

understand the Revelation, one must go back to the past and discover what the message was in the first century world. From there one must hear a timeless message of truth from every age. At the same time, one must keep in mind that John also foresaw an end-time or conclusion to history on Earth.

Worship in the end-times: To propose ten possible normative characteristics of music for worship derived from the Book of Revelation, one must understand worship in the Revelation.

Of eight Greek words indicating corporate worship in the New Testament, only one, *proskuneo*, occurs in the Apocalypse. Its Hebrew root, *shetachavah*, is found in the Old Testament and can best be described as the process of physically prostrating oneself at the foot of one whom one highly respected, a king or a queen, or a deity. In its Old Testament form, it represented a vertical relationship of master to slave. The Greek counterpart is *proskuneo* that means “to kiss” (*kuneo*) “towards” (*pros*). By the time of the Upper Room, Jesus (God) becomes host at the banquet table representing a horizontal relationship of God as servant to guest. Jesus generally rejected those kissing his garments and feet because he knew that too often the Jews were prone to act rightly on the outside while betraying their outward response with a wrongful heart or inner motivation. To counter this, Burkhardt suggests Jesus demanded a “spiritual prostration,” that is, the prostration of one’s heart. Christ’s de-emphasis of physical prostration in the new *proskuneo* allows for agape love to be manifest as the primary motivator of the doxological praise of God. This overriding characteristic of spiritual love predominates the worship of God. It is supported by the full spectrum of humankind attributes: emotive musical expression, the social unity of musical ensembles including the congregation singing corporate hymns, the mental assertion of the musically creative will, and the physical actions of human posturing in musical performance facing the object of their adoration: God. The gamut of eschatological worship is in perfect doxological balance as the worshipers respond to the consummated revelatory action of God in history through the cross-work and resurrection of Jesus Christ via the power of the Holy Spirit. A definition for Christian corporate worship might be a community’s response via the Holy Spirit to God’s revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ.

To study the music for worship in the Revelation, this research foregoes a study of the texts of the thirty odes found in the Book of Revelation. Rather, this study focused on the forms of music used in the Apocalypse, the performing groups, the types of sounds the performers make, and how they make those sounds. This is determined by an analysis of the Greek text.

Musical forms in the text: the ode and the trumpet call. The principal music groups performing in worship crescendo in size beginning with the four creatures, and proceeding to a Levitical choir of 24 elders, a choir of angels, and the choir of all of creation including the Redeemed. The term ode is exclusively used in the Apocalypse. In earlier passages of the New Testament, the ode is differentiated into three separate vocal forms including the psalm, hymn, and spiritual song. But by the writing of the Apocalypse, this vocal-form differentiation merges into the broader term *oda* (ode). The ode is used as a responsive mechanism in worship. The trumpet call is used to announce God’s revelation.

Absent extant music or recordings from the first century, an analysis of the sounds made in performance is difficult at best. Yet, based on Greek usage in Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 5:19, and Revelation 5:9 and 5:13, it can be conjectured, for example, that the Greek word *lego* (to say) and the Greek word *ado* (to sing) can be said to be used interchangeably. Thus,

the odes in Revelation could have been performed across the spectrum of human vocalization techniques and delineated (see Gelineau in “Music and Singing in the Liturgy” in *The Study of Liturgy* by Cheslyn Jones, et al., New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) as declamation (ordinary speech), proclamation (cantillation), meditation (psalmody), chanting (Gregorian chant), songs sung (hymns), acclamation (developed through the human cry), or vocalized via vocalise or jubilus (including the use of musical instruments).

This study analyzes the use of music in worship in a bona fide book of the New Testament. For contemporary church music and worship to aspire to this “perfect” representation is not entirely out of the reach of the contemporary worshiper. Perhaps God allowed this glimpse of eschatological perfection in the music of worship specifically for us to seek. While music can create barriers within the church, music has the ability to break down denominational, racial, and ethnic barriers. Perhaps God provided the church this glimpse of eschatological music to aid the Holy Spirit in assembling an ecumenical community. A key to ecumenicity can be found in the church’s musical doxology in corporate worship. Yet, can this be consummately realized with imperfect worshipers this side of eternity aided by the power of the Holy Spirit?

The ten points of a musical theology for worship derived from the Book of Revelation are summarized in Chapter 6 of my book and then discussed in a contemporary context in the concluding seventh chapter. These ten points are a think piece and are hypothecated to provide a beginning springboard of ideas that hopefully the reader will be able to advance in future thought, dialogue, and studies. Placing eschatological music and worship standards in our “sights” can provide a measuring stick of where we are in the present age and point us to a strategic direction for the future.

A decalogue of normative characteristics of music for Christian worship derived from the Book of Revelation and made relevant to the contemporary Church include:

- 1) A mandate exists for the saints to continue the Imago Dei process by creatively composing new songs of praise.
 - a) The command “to grow in grace” (II Peter 3:18) requires fresh expressions of praise.
 - b) There is a place for spontaneity in music for worship alongside well-planned events as the Holy Spirit can uniquely lead, blending the old with the new.
- 2) A continuum of vocal sound ranges from declamatory speech to sung song as revelation and response mechanisms.
 - a) Response is always logogenic and never pathogenic music. Vocal response embodies the continuum from declamation to chanting to singing to jubilus.
 - b) Revelation is often pathogenic and includes instrument production as well as sounds of nature. Vocalized revelation embodies declamation only.
- 3) Instrumental accompaniments (specifically, timbres which blend with the human voice) are used to aid in the vocal response to the Godhead.
 - a) Accompaniment never dominates the text (logos).

- b) Can we, this side of eternity, divorce instrumental accompaniment from its association with things pagan?
- c) Single ethos represented by single instrument or instrumental family.
- d) Only a single timbre is used.
- e) Can a church-estra, comprised of divergent timbres, create a single blended timbre?
- 4) Instrumental heralding (specifically, the trumpet call) is used to announce the revelation of the Godhead.
- a) Used as announcement of pending revelation.
- b) Appear as ensemble, but play singly.
- 5) The exhibition of emotion in the performance of the music exists owing to the use of a variety of Greek verbs and adjectives.
- a) Favorite response appears to be vocal (phona).
- b) Revelation generally expressed through sounds of instruments or nature.
- 6) The postures for the performance of music in worship involves more than just sitting and standing.
- a) Sitting, standing, kneeling and falling down, and appears to imply gravitational field in heaven.
- b) Postures represent an element of expectation on part of worshipers.
- c) Could include interpretive or liturgical dance.
- d) Literally can face the throne where God is not deus absconditus.
- 7) The music of worship includes the use of the sounds of nature from all Creation, both animate and inanimate.
- a) Entire gamut of vocal and non-vocal sounds known to all of creation including theophanies and anthropomorphisms accompany revelation.
- b) Animate and inanimate sounds of nature from all creation are only accompaniment to revelation.
- c) Instrumental accompaniment primarily is used to announce revelation.
- d) Instrumental solos as response are never found in the Apocalypse.

- e) Part of stewardship of Creation is to use Creation rightly in worship.
- 8) A sense of unity is perceived via the dynamics of antiphonal and responsorial responses by the various performing groups.
- a) Worship is genuinely congregational and inclusively unites variegated levels of creation into a sea of doxological praise to God.
- b) If were forced to eliminate all music groups from worship, which would be the last to stand? For early Church, it was the congregation. In Revelation, it is a gathered choir of all, or the congregation of the faithful.
- 9) Old proskuneo, motivated by reverential fear of a vertical God-to-slave nature, evolves into a new proskuneo, motivated by love of a horizontal host-to-guest nature. Theology becomes doxology as the solemn action of worship.
- a) Master/slave mentality stressing position, while vital, loses primacy.
- b) Host/guest relationship emerges stressing love as primary motivator of the doxological praise of God.
- c) Spiritual prostration of one's heart not one's physical body.
- 10) Music in worship dramatically involves all the senses of humanity and all the collective resources available in all Creation.
- a) Contemporary Christianity is historically tied to its past and is being eschatologically pulled into its future.
- b) Music in worship is the eschatological glue tying us in our present-day worship to our eternal worship in heaven.
- c) See Leonard Sweet's Soul Cafe, chapter 6: at the base of all of God's creation are vibrations that create sound, and sound creates relational communication that drives worship both as revelation and as response. God is intensely social and it is his reasonable expectation that we worship Him in Spirit and in Truth.

Christianity's personhood is as much spiritual as physical. Yet Christianity is often consumed with its seemingly sole attention on its physical state. Contemporary and traditional rightly blended church music has the potential, as it is empowered by the Holy Spirit, to take Christianity's mind off its physical condition and vivify its spiritual souls. Although this appears to be possible only on an eschatological level, finite humanity has been provided a model for music in worship in the end-times. Christianity was perhaps given this glimpse of future worship so that it may imitate it this side of eternity. Granted, this imitation may be only for fleeting moments in periodic worship. Christians may only transcend their physicality for short-lived moments in time as they hope for their final eschatological consummation as true members of the church - the bride of Christ, but how dare they not try! And, that is realized eschatology whereby each worshiper is being transformed little by little into his or her

individual and collective fullest dimensions as the Imago Dei is played out in doxological praise.

Bibliography

Blevins, James. L. Revelation. Knox Preaching Guide, John H. Hayes, editor. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984.

Blevins, James L. Revelation as Drama. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984.

Bowman, John Wick. The First Christian Drama. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1955.

Burkhart, John. Worship: A Searching Examination of the Liturgical Experience. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1982.

Fiorenza, Elisabeth S. Invitation to the Book of Revelation. Garden City, NJ: Image Books, 1981.

Seel, Thomas A. A Theology of Music for Worship Derived from the Book of Revelation. Metuchen, NJ and London, England: Scarecrow Press (University Press of America), 1995.

Seel, Thomas A. Toward a Theology of Music for Worship Derived from the Book of Revelation. D.M.A. dissertation. Louisville, KY: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1990.