

The Bible in Music

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By

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Rogier van der Weyden: *The Descent from the Cross*

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LIST OF BIBLICAL ABBREVIATIONS

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Am	Amos
1 Chron	1 Chronicles
2 Chron	2 Chronicles
Dan	Daniel
Deut	Deuteronomy
Eccles	Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth)
Est	Esther
Ex	Exodus
Ezk	Ezekiel
Ezr	Ezra
Gen	Genesis
Hab	Habakkuk
Hag	Haggai
Hos	Hosea
Is	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Job	Job
Joel	Joel
Jon	Jonah
Josh	Joshua
Judg	Judges
1 Kgs	1 Kings
2 Kgs	2 Kings
Lam	Lamentations
Lev	Leviticus
Mal	Malachi
Mic	Micah
Nah	Nahum
Neh	Nehemiah
Num	Numbers
Obad	Obadiah
Prov	Proverbs
Ps (pl. Pss)	Psalms

Ruth	Ruth
1 Sam	1 Samuel
2 Sam	2 Samuel
Song	Song of Songs
Zech	Zechariah
Zeph	Zephaniah

THE DEUTERO-CANONICAL BOOKS

Bar	Baruch
Ecclus	Ecclesiasticus (=Sirach)
Jud	Judith
1 Macc	1 Maccabees
2 Macc	2 Maccabees
Sir	Sirach (=Ecclesiasticus)
Tob	Tobit
Wis	Wisdom (=Wisdom of Solomon)

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Apoc	Apocalypse (=Revelation)
Col	Colossians
1 Cor	1 Corinthians
2 Cor	2 Corinthians
Eph	Ephesians
Gal	Galatians
Heb	Hebrews
Jas	James
Jn	John (Gospel)
1 Jn	1 John (Epistle)
2 Jn	2 John (Epistle)
3 Jn	3 John (Epistle)
Jude	Jude
Lk	Luke
Mk	Mark
Mt	Matthew
1 Pet	1 Peter
2 Pet	2 Peter
Philm	Philemon
Phil	Philippians

Rev	Revelation (=Apocalypse)
Rom	Romans
1 Thess	1 Thessalonians
2 Thess	2 Thessalonians
1 Tim1	Timothy
2 Tim	2 Timothy
Tit	Titus

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INTRODUCTION

The Bible as an enduring deposit of revelation, wisdom and hope, has infiltrated the collective memory of Christian civilization in incalculable ways. Even now its words, situations, poetry, proverbs and idioms inflect the speech and metaphors of all modern languages, and continue to shape the literature and pictorial art of the nations. Its role in the realm of music is particularly incisive and enduring. Through the ages the liturgy, first of the Ancient Israelites and Jewish People, then of the Christian Church (despite the vicissitudes of history), have found their worship enriched by music inspired by the words of the Scriptures—from ancient chants to modern hymns and oratorios, from the songs of pious pilgrims to the choirs of great cathedrals. Both the Divine Office (sanctifying the hours of the day) and the Mass (the great central act of Eucharistic worship) are based on fundamental texts derived from Scripture, especially the Psalms. With the development of more complex harmony and musical forms in the Middle Ages, sacred music inspired by the Bible became more elaborate and sophisticated, as round dances became carols, and the unadorned horizontal lines of Gregorian chant began to flower into the vertical polyphony of the late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance. Increasingly, music inspired by the Bible was valued as a source of edification, contemplation and aspiration in and outside places of worship. The high Renaissance saw the polyphonic style elaborated and gloriously efflorescent. One of the great paradoxes of history is that the tragic division of Christianity at the Reformation (1517-1685) led to a flourishing of church music, with the emergence of new styles and types (like the Lutheran chorale and Passion settings) that are among the glories of sacred music. New techniques and new spiritualities led to new genres—especially the oratorio which would become a supreme expression of Biblical narration and reflection.

Emerging in parallel with the equally new form of opera, and sometime almost indistinguishable from it, the oratorio and cantata, rooted in the 17th-century Renaissance ethos of re-discovery and invention, would, in the 18th and 19th centuries become a major focus of aesthetic and religious expression. And with the gradual de-sacralization of the Biblical text itself in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Scriptures began to play a far greater role

in the scenarios of the glorious achievements of opera in the 19th century.

This book considers the role and place of the Bible in music—from the 17th century, and its exciting new developments in sacred music, to the present times. How have the texts of the inspired Word featured in musical setting? What parts of the Bible have been used? What are some of the greatest or most popular and effective settings in contemplative sacred music, as well as in the more dramatic expression of oratorio and opera? The Bible and its wonderful stories, ineffable poetry, and hopes for transformation of life here and now and beyond death itself, remains one of the great shaping forces of culture and enlightenment. The musical heritage of the West bears crucial testimony to this.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BIBLE IN OPERA AND ORATORIO

Music and Revelation

Music as a means of worship and a way into exploring the unfathomable riches of the Sacred Scriptures was always present from ancient times, as evident from the many references to music in relation to liturgy in the Old Testament. In Ancient Israel music was used in worship (2 Sam 6:5; 1 Chron 15:28; 16:42; 2 Chron 29:25; Pss 33; 81; 92; 108; 150; Dan 3:5); and at festivities (Is 5:12; 14:11; Amos 6:5). We know that the tormented King Saul was soothed by music (1 Sam 16:23). Hebrew music was probably of a loud and piercing nature, and was probably confined to unison harmony. Antiphonal settings were in use (see Psalms 13; 20; 38; 68; 89). Music was indissolubly connected with religion. The Bible makes mention of: stringed instruments (the harp, the ‘psaltery’ or lute/dulcimer, the sackbutt or large harp, the *gittith*, another form of harp); wind instruments (the ‘pipe’ or flute, organ or Pandean pipes, flute, bagpipes, cornet or horn [*shophar*], trumpet); to percussion instruments (the ‘tabret’ or timbrel—a type of drum; cymbals, castanets, triangles [*shalishim*]). This heritage was passed on, and in transmuted form infused the early traditions of the Christian religion. In the New Testament the Elder Son hears the music of celebration when the Prodigal Son returns (Luke 15:25); music is used at worship (1 Cor 14:7); and it will be heard in heaven (Rev 5:8; 14:2). These traditions, where words of the Bible are set to chants deriving from ancient folk sources, are still to be found in the spectrum of ancient Eastern and Western traditions that still exist and flourish side by side in a city like Jerusalem. Here one can hear the Catholic Latin of the Western Church, the Orthodox Greek of the Byzantine Church, the Ghez of the Abyssinian Rite, the Arabic of the Greek Catholics, Ancient Armenian, Arabic Coptic, Ancient Syrian, and the Arabic Maronite of Lebanon.

In the Western Church the rich heritage of the ancient plainchant was encouraged and codified by Pope Gregory I (the Great) (540-604) and became the mainstay and taproot of all developments in music in Europe

(with eight melodies each in a different mode for singing the Psalms). The music of the liturgy in local churches and vast cathedrals permeated the psyche of the ages, the aural correlative to the stories and mysteries of salvation depicted in the stone and glass and great paintings of great houses of worship. The chant was further transposed into popular folk forms as well—like the carol, and other seasonal religious songs used by ordinary people, usually at Christmas. The movements associated with these songs would soon become formalized into dances. With the growth in polyphony in the High Middle Ages, the models of sacred music began to have even greater impact on popular culture.

Mystery and Miracle Plays

Miracle and Mystery Plays, representing respectively Biblical stories and the lives of the saints, were performed widely throughout Europe during the Middle Ages as one of the best means of teaching the Bible and religious lore to a largely illiterate population.

Mystery plays and miracle plays (although they are distinguished as two different forms, the terms are often used interchangeably) are among the earliest formally developed plays in medieval Europe. Medieval mystery plays focused on the representation of Bible stories in churches as tableaux with accompanying antiphonal song. They told of subjects such as the Creation, Adam and Eve, the murder of Abel, and the Last Judgment. Oftentimes they were performed together in cycles which could last for days. The nomenclature derives from ‘mystery’ used in its sense of miracle, but another derivation is from *ministerium*, meaning craft, as the ‘mysteries’ or plays were often performed by the craft guilds. (the Latin *ministerium* meaning ‘occupation’).

As early as the 5th century living tableaux were introduced into sacred services. The plays originated as simple tropes, verbal embellishments of liturgical texts, and slowly became more elaborate. At an early period chants from the service of the day were added to the prose dialogue. As these liturgical dramas increased in popularity, vernacular forms emerged, as travelling companies of actors and theatrical productions organized by local communities became more common in the later Middle Ages. The *Quem Quaeritis?* (Whom do you seek?) is the best known early form of the dramas, a dramatized liturgical dialogue between the angel at the tomb of Christ and the women who are seeking his body. These primitive forms were later elaborated with dialogue and dramatic action. Eventually the dramas moved from the interior of the church to the exterior—the