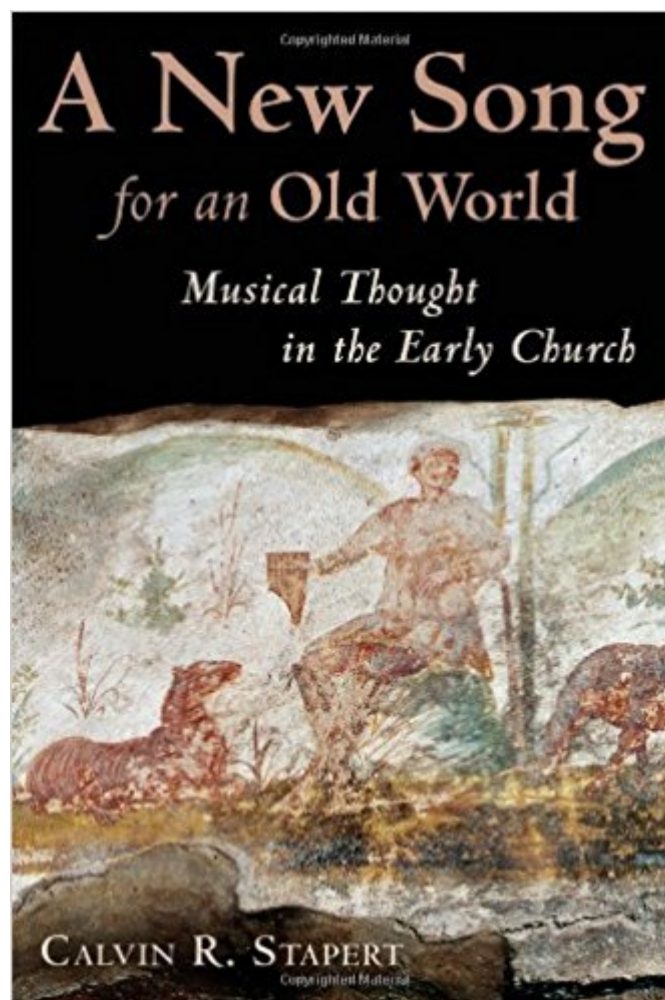




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# A New Song For An Old World: Musical Thought In The Early Church (Calvin Institute Of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies)



## Synopsis

Even as worship wars in the church and music controversies in society at large continue to rage, many people do not realize that conflict over music goes back to the earliest Christians as they sought to live out the "new song" of their faith. In *A New Song for an Old World* Calvin Stapert challenges contemporary Christians to learn from the wisdom of the early church in the area of music. Stapert draws parallels between the pagan cultures of the early Christian era and our own multicultural realities, enabling readers to comprehend the musical ideas of early Christian thinkers, from Clement and Tertullian to John Chrysostom and Augustine. Stapert's expert treatment of the attitudes of the early church toward psalms and hymns on the one hand, and pagan music on the other, is ideal for scholars of early Christianity, church musicians, and all Christians seeking an ancient yet relevant perspective on music in their worship and lives today.

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## Customer Reviews

Even as worship wars in the church and music controversies in society at large continue to rage, many people do not realize that conflict over music goes back to the earliest Christians as they sought to live out the new song of their faith. In "A New Song for an Old World" Calvin Stapert challenges contemporary Christians to learn from the wisdom of the early church in the area of music. Stapert draws parallels between the pagan cultures of the early Christian era and our own multicultural realities, enabling readers to comprehend the musical ideas of early Christian thinkers,

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Calvin R. Stapert is professor emeritus of music at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan. His previous books include *My Only Comfort: Death, Deliverance, and Discipleship in the Music of Bach*; *Handel's Messiah: Comfort for God's People*; and *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church*.

Author Calvin Stapert is an American professor emeritus of music at Calvin College, located in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he taught for thirty-eight years. According to academia.edu, Stapert holds degrees in Musicology, Music Theory, and Music History; however, the institutions where he obtained these degrees are not listed. To date he has written five books, all of which are on topics concerning church music in historical context: *My Only Comfort: Death, Deliverance, and Discipline in the Music of Bach*; *J.S. Bach*; *Handel's Messiah: Comfort for God's People*; *Playing Before the Lord: The Life and Work of Joseph Hayden*; and that which is the subject of this review. In *A New Song for an Old World*, Stapert provides insight into the formative thoughts and actions concerning music in the early church through expositions of several historical church founders, with the end goal of applying these ideals in the modern realm. The author states the reasons for writing this book early on, stating his reasons for reaching back to the voices of the early church as being "the least heard today," and that "their thought on music has particular relevance for us today" (Stapert 7). Based on these two assertions, Stapert begins a compelling dialogue about the pagan culture in which the early church began, using the writings of several church founders as his primary sources. The first early church character discussed at length is Clement of Alexandria. The author is quick to note that "[Clement's] writings reveal the breadth of his reading of both the Bible and Greek literature" (Stapert 45). Because of his extensive knowledge of both realms, Clement is able to take cultural ideas and apply them to Christian life. The best example is when Stapert uses Clement's writings to offer new insight into Plato's concepts of music mundane (harmony of the universe), *musica humana* (harmony in and among humans), and *musica instrumentalis* (organized music with voice and instruments), finishing the chapter by stating that the "close union between the Christian and Christ is a Christian *musica humana*, of which

even the music of the spheres is but an echo, and of which the best of our musica instrumentalis is also an echo” (Stapert 59). This idea of cosmic, musical harmony becomes the theme on which Stapert builds his conclusion at the end of the book. To contrast Clement, Stapert includes chapters on Tertullian and St. John Chrysostom. He explains that while Clement was willing to embrace cultural forms of criticism, Tertullian was vehement about abstaining from all forms of pagan practice, particularly in the marriage ceremonies and theatrical productions of Athens (where he lived and worked). The author explains that most of Tertullian’s comments on music have to do with these types of events, and the main point Stapert makes is that Tertullian primarily called for Christian music to look and sound drastically different than pagan alternatives. It’s important to note here that while Stapert places Clement and Tertullian in juxtaposition, he readily notes, “[T]here is little that separates them when it comes to the music they renounced and the music they warmly embraced” (Stapert 75). Stapert is clear that these men both wanted the same thing: Christian music that was as drastically different from culture as the faith which they adhered to. Later in the book, Stapert cites St. John Chrysostom as recognizing the same need for opposition in the Christian way of life. However, Stapert also credits him with offering a functional method of combatting the pervasive music of pagan culture: memorizing psalms and hymns. St. John Chrysostom, whom the author makes clear probably asserted the most vehement polemic towards pagan practices, ushered in a combative mindset towards rejecting these practices that “resulted in as thorough a transformation of culture as this sinful world is likely to see” (Stapert 148). A chapter that acts as a summary of this first section in the book’s exposition of early church music is a collection of psalms and hymns that have survived from the era, combined with explanations of their use in the time they were penned, and the styles in which they were composed. The last two chapters of the book deal with modern relevancy; however, the case for relevancy begins with another church father “St. Augustine. To make this connection, Stapert draws from Augustine’s writings concerning elegance and love, explaining that in the current age, the appeal of elegance is higher than ever. Stapert directly applies Augustine’s ideas on the entrapment of elegance and a misunderstanding of the definition of love to the appeals of modern culture. After this discussion, Stapert neatly concludes by adding the two cities referenced in the book of Revelation, Jerusalem and Babylon, to the musica mundana idea, challenging his readers to incorporate the ideals of musical harmony as a whole into their individual devotions and daily lives, and thereby sing a “new song” from Jerusalem in the “old world” they are in. Critique As mentioned at the start of my summary, Stapert’s goal in writing *A New Song for an Old World* was two-fold: to provide insight about

the formation of early church thought concerning music, and then to use this insight as a template for similar thought formation in today's church. In short, I believe the author achieved this goal. The insights provided were eclectic, and the references were all highly relevant. I did not get the feeling at any point that I could skim the information, as it all worked to culminate in the final paragraph of each chapter, and finally into the last chapter of the book. The book's strengths are a result of its diverse bibliography. The author has done a fine job of gathering pertinent information to create brief biographies of each founding father's life, and to explain the cultural practices of the time. Although I had studied at least two of the figures depicted, the writing style and sources referenced amounted to an almost personal experience with each founding father. This personal caricature leads to another of the book's strengths – "the in-the-moment feel given to descriptions of second, third, and fourth century practices. By illuminating the characters quoted before inserting their monologue, the author sets up a connection with these ancestors of the faith. Often, this leads to a humorous comprehension of the texts, such as when Tertullian is cited pronouncing judgment on those who dye their hair, claiming "the constant application of any undiluted lotion ensures softening of the brain in your old age" (Stapert 63). These less-quoted moments in history are what instill readers with connection, and I believe it's quite possible Stapert included these sections to give further clout to his goal of making their arguments have modern application. Another strength of this book is its careful attention to presenting first-hand accounts of important moments in church history. Rather than providing a chronological narrative of certain events, the author's formula is to depict the general circumstances and then quote at length a primary source. This of course has its dangers, but as previously mentioned, not one of the citations in the book feels unnecessary or out of place. Perhaps the best example of this strength is when Stapert exposes the assumption that the Biblical psalms and hymns have always been sung by the common people in the church. His response to this is simply to quote St. Ambrose's account of being held up in the church during Justinian's military attack: "That was the time when the decision was taken to introduce hymns and psalms sung after the custom of the [Latin] Churches, to prevent the people from succumbing to depression and exhaustion." He goes on quoting Ambrose claiming that "From that time to this day the practice has been retained and many, indeed almost all [churches], in other parts of the world, have imitated it" (Stapert 172). The book's direct citation of first-person accounts is more than just a strength – it gives the conclusions drawn from them highest authority. While the book contained strengths that make it worthy of high commendation, it did possess a few qualities that give it characteristics of weakness. The primary

characteristic was its organization. A brief look at the chapter titles is enough to suggest that the expositions of the church ancestors are not all together, and reading the book ratifies this notion. For the sake of organization, it might have been better to convert this book from two main sections into three: one for narrative development of the characters addressed, a second for the explanation of cultural practices combined with responses from the church figures, and then the final section centered on modern relevancy. The current organization suffices, but the suggested adaptation would provide the reader with a better chronology than the one presented. A second weakness lies within the potential for bias based on the author's age and training. While the scholarship of the author is unquestionable, his high level of musical training suggest a predisposition towards certain musical styles. However, I consider this a minor weakness because counteracted with my own potential for bias as a reader on the lesser end of the age spectrum, I arrived at a common ground with his conclusions, and even with similar musical training myself (though certainly not to the degree the author has achieved). In fact, the entire argument of the last chapter lends itself to the idea that older styles of Christian music are more reverent and lyrically free from heresy, a sentiment that I readily second. Yet, the idea still lingers for me that while the danger of heresy and irreverence exist in the creation of new *musica instrumentalis*, the creation of it is still pertinent for the modern church. While the finale of this book does not directly forbid this practice, it leaves its readers who are composers with the gravity of their craft heavy upon their brows. Perhaps that is one of the very points the author seeks to make when he writes, "Shouldn't a composer be cognizant of the God-given order permeating all things rather than being in touch with no reality beyond [his or her] own inventive mind or, worse, his or her sentimental feelings" (Stapert 207)? Along with a new sense of gravity for my craft as a musician, the book also stimulated me in other ways. Admittedly, I'm not as well-read a person as I want to be, although when I do read a book, it's usually in the academic genre. I finished this book and wrote in the margin, "I need to read more." Through this book, I was challenged to take a stance on what music I select for my congregation and listen to personally; but more than this, I was challenged to take up the reigns of those who established the church and join in the symphony of life around me. This doesn't mean that I'm realigning to Mysticism (though the book does make St. Ambrose's approach to life sound pretty interesting, to say the least) but it has already made me consider that my following after Christ is really a joining in with the cosmos as we hurriedly work to be fully restored to oneness. The implications of this kind of life are both yet to be determined and partially discovered by those who have done it. This book has taught me, a musician by skill and trade, that following Christ involves

learning His new song “one different than that which I natively sing (see Augustine) and proclaiming it in an old world, which so desperately needs to hear it” (Stapert 209).

An excellent book for those interested in original sources of western music.

Personally I like this book.

I’m supposed to write a review for this book, but without real page numbers, it’s worthless.

"Returned" it for a refund and am now having to track down a hard copy.

On a youth group outing recently, several of our teenagers and I began discussing one of our favorite topics—music. I told them that my musical preferences had changed over the past year in favor of hymns, folk songs, and classical music. When one young man asked why I was making such changes? I explained that it was due to some of my recent reading. *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* has been particularly influential. With a background in music history, author Calvin Stapert reviews the early church fathers’ writings for insight concerning the worship wars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. His extensive research, spanning the first five centuries of the church, produces two surprising results: The early church fathers (1) did not distinguish between songs sung in the home and songs sung in the church; and (2) they disagreed little concerning music. Stapert’s two findings are particularly interesting when viewed through the context of two important influences upon the fathers: (1) Jewish tradition and (2) Greek philosophy.

**Holistic Hymnody**

The worship services of the Jewish Temple and first-century synagogue were foundational to the early church fathers’ understanding of music. First, in Jewish temple worship the Levite temple singers sang the Psalms rather than the people. By emphasizing the natural rhythms and accents of the spoken language the songs’ rhythms were dictated by the words of the Psalms. The result resembled chant or recitative. Instrumentally, melody-supporting strings accompanied the songs, unlike the overpowering double reeds used in pagan rites. Additionally, the trumpets and cymbals were used to signal the beginning and ending of the singing, and to direct worshipers when to fall prostrate [1]. Jewish temple music differed from the surrounding pagan temple music particularly by being word-oriented rather than instrument-oriented. The orgiastic music of the pagan temple was meant to elicit ecstatic trances, euphoric rituals, and manipulate gods. But, the Psalms were ever the

heartfelt communication between two members of a close relationship. Synagogue worship, though related to the temple, differed in several ways. In synagogue worship, the Hebrews read and discussed Scripture, offered prayer, and chanted psalms [2]. Here, the people sang rather than the Levites, as in the Temple—though the style was similar. The music was rhythmically word-driven and melodically simple, but unaccompanied by instruments. The early church appropriated this form of musical worship from the synagogues in which it met. In addition, the early Christians drew from their Jewish heritage a life-style of music. The apostle Paul exhorts the churches of Ephesus and Colossi to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to one-another at all times (cf. Eph. 5:18-19; Col. 3:16). As a result they perceived singing and music as holistic, pertaining to all of life.

—The Music of the Spheres— [3] In addition to being influenced by the Jewish tradition, early Christians were also influenced by Greek tradition. Whereas the Jewish influence was practical, the Greek influence was philosophical. To understand this influence, we must consider the Greek philosophers Pythagoras (6th century BC) and Plato (424/23-348/47 BC). Pythagoras first theorized about a connection between music and mathematics. Then Plato expanded this thought in *Timaeus*, suggesting that music is connected with the harmony and order of nature and man [3]. The Roman philosopher Boethius (AD 480-524/25) later coalesced Plato's theories into three categories: (1) *musica mundana*, (2) *musica humana*, and (3) *musica instrumentalis*. First, *musica mundana* refers to the creation's order and harmony, particularly as it relates to the heavenly bodies. Next, *musica humana* concerns the order and harmony of the human body with the spirit. Finally, *musica instrumentalis* refers to audible music's order and harmony. This is what we sing in our homes, cars, and churches. Plato theorized that these three forms of music are highly interconnected and should be reflective of one another. Since the universe is ordered, Plato and the early Greeks concluded that music and humans should also be ordered [4]. The early church fathers followed this belief, teaching that Christian's lives and their music should be ordered and harmonious. Note however, that while the church fathers drew on the culture around them, they always viewed it through the prism of Scripture. They never "Christianized" the culture; they only accepted those concepts which were congruent with the whole of Scripture. For example, both Clement of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 150-215) and Saint Ambrose (A.D. 339-397) embraced the Greek concept of music, though each modified it in small ways. For example, Clement held that *musica mundana* refers to the ordered mind of the Creator who set the universe into ordered rhythm. He also believed *musica humana* derived its true order and harmony only from the word of God. He additionally taught the story of David's playing his harp for Saul as a great example of the importance of

ordered *musica instrumentalis* [5]. Ambrose differs from Clement only slightly. Whereas Clement understood *musica humana* as the order and harmony of the human body with the spirit, Ambrose saw it as being related merely to the physical human body. Both men, however, saw music as a pervasive aspect to all of creation that should be orderly and harmonious at all times. They also realized that music should be used to calm or control the affections rather than to inflame them. We see this thought-process fleshed out in both church and classical music for nearly the entire following two millennia. Not until the Romantic period (approx. 1770-1900) were order and harmony questioned. The church would wait until the second half of the twentieth century before it began to question the importance of order, harmony, and controlled affections.

Fathers Know Best Evident from these examples, the early church fathers were heavily influenced by the Jewish and Greek traditions that were congruent with Scripture. The early church fathers were very concerned with guiding the music and entertainment of the early church. They understood music's power and effect. Accordingly, they were unanimous and vociferous in their denunciations of pagan theater music (the popular music of the day), while consistently promoting the singing of hymns, psalms, and folk songs [7]. Since music was inevitably part of life, they taught that it should be productive and edifying. John Chrysostom (AD ca. 347-407), for example, often preached against the music of Antioch's theaters and scurrilous wedding processions. When confronted with the argument that immoral music does no harm to a listener, John responded by speaking of the Spectacles of Antioch, "If even now you are chaste, you would have become more chaste by avoiding such sights" [8]. Even assuming there are no direct deleterious effects on a person, John pointed out that they were spending their time fruitlessly and their support of such entertainment may cause another to stumble [9]. Tertullian (AD ca. 160-225) spoke to the same issue. If we have been baptized, he stated, we mustn't re-entangle ourselves with those activities so closely associated with Satan [10]. His response to those who attempted to defend the pagan spectacles was two-fold: "We must always remember that the love of pleasure clouds the judgment of men. Though the primary elements of each show are not sinful in themselves, they are being used and manipulated by fallen man in a fallen manner. Tertullian was also clear to point out that the music of the theater carried with it the bawdy and immoral outside the actual theater [11]. They each concluded that the music of the Christian should reflect the principles of Scripture. Clement was also clear about what music he found reflective of Scripture in *The Instructor* and in *Miscellanies*. He believed that music should be decorous, ordered, sincere, modest, joyful, celebratory, temperate, grave, and soothing, while he denounced music that was boisterous, intractable, energizing, scurrilous, licentious, mournful, frantic, and frenzied [12]. Though

we've explored just a few, these early church fathers are representative of the whole population of the early church. Despite the near unanimous agreement among the early church fathers concerning music, present day Christians never consider them. Yet, they are instructive. Our twenty-first century discussions concerning music both inside and outside the church might strike a new timbre if we seasoned our thoughts with history rather than fancy.

### Conclusion

What does all of this mean for me, or for a modern teenager? Music is pervasive. As a result we mustn't segment it up for different portions of our lives. Music is holistic. The music we choose to listen to will inform every part of our lives. So the question remains, do we take the voluptuous and boisterous that we find in the world and use it in worship, or do we take the modest and temperate, psalms and hymns to the world? Considering the early church fathers' input, as we do in most areas of doctrine, we should be taking the modest and temperate, psalms and hymns to the world.

[1] Calvin R. Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007) 153.

[2] Musical worship within the first century synagogue has been reasonably assumed by many scholars. It would seem to have been part of the purpose of the synagogue; however, there is no direct evidence of singing or chanting in synagogue worship until the eighth century. Stapert, 153-155.

[3] In the hymn "This Is My Father's World" by Maltbie D. Babcock (1901) we can hear an echo of the Greek concept of the music of the universe "This is my Father's World/ And to my listening ears/ All nature sings and round me rings/ The music of the spheres."

[4] While Plato had a broad understanding of music, it was not labeled and categorized as *musica mundana*, *musica humana*, and *musica instrumentalis* until the early sixth century AD by the Roman philosopher Boethius (AD 480-524/25). Though the early church fathers did not have these labels they obviously drew from Plato's concept of music. I have used these labels because they greatly streamline and clarify any discussion of Plato's theories concerning music.

[5] Plato states in *Timaeus*: [A]ll audible music was given us for the sake of harmony, which has motions akin to the orbits in our soul, and which, as anyone who makes intelligent use of the arts knows, is not to be used, as is commonly thought, to give irrational pleasure, but as a heaven sent ally in reducing to order and harmony any disharmony in the revolutions within us. *Timaeus*, Trans. H.D.P. Lee (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1965), 64-65 via Stapert, 52.

[6] Stapert, 53.

[7] The folk music referred to by the early church fathers consisted of songs sung by people as they worked in the field, on the docks, and at the loom. The content consisted of the joys and sorrows of everyday life in that line of work. Also, they were handed down by family and members of the community not from a paid performer.

[8] Chrysostom, John, Homily XXXVII on Mat 9 from *Homilies on the Gospel of St.*

Matthew Trans. M.B. Riddle A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. 9 Ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 250 via Stapert, 124. As English author William Gurnall (1617-79) put it centuries later, "If we do not wish to yield to sin, we must take care not to walk by or sit at the door of the occasion. Do not look on temptation with a wandering eye, nor allow your mind to dwell on that which you do not want lodged in your heart" (William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armor*, 1655).[9] Stapert, 124.[10] *ibid.* 70.[11] *ibid.* 70-71.[12] *ibid.* 54-55. Note that often in modern Christian worship the joyful and celebratory are emphasized to the exclusion of the decorous, modest, temperate, and grave. This has been derived from the rise and dominance of charismatic thought (or anti-thought) on the evangelical mainstream of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Ideally, each characteristic should inform and temper a Christian doctrine of music. The result should resemble hymns and songs that are decorously joyful and temperate, or gravely and modestly celebratory.

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