

Psalms and Music

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An illumination from a 9th-century psalter showing King David playing a stringed instrument in the company of a pair of drummers and dancers. Source: Bailie, John. "The Hebrew Legacy". The Capo History of Western Classical Music. New York: Da Capo Press, 1999.

Psalms

- **Definition**

“Psalm” - the word *psalm* stems from the Septuagint’s translation of the **Greek**, *psalmoi*, referring to “**songs** sung to [the accompaniment of] plucked string instruments.” **Hebrew** name – *Tehillim*, “praises”.

Book of Psalms (Psalter): 150 songs, 9th-5th centuries BC, associated with the Temple in Jerusalem; Dead Sea Scrolls evidence of the original music.

- **Types:** hymns/songs of praise of God, thanksgiving, lament, wisdom, royal, pilgrimage, and others. Prescribed method for each psalm: time, place, singers, instruments, manner of execution.

Jewish Musical Practices in Worship

- **King David** – a musician, composer and performer at the court of King Saul; as a king he encouraged vocal and instrumental performance in divine worship – singing of psalms and the use of instruments (kinnor/lyre, nevel/harp, cymbals)
- **Antiphonal or responsorial singing** (a solo voice followed by a response by the congregation) – a characteristic feature in worship; a **link** between Jewish music and Early Christian Church liturgy
- **Jewish service**: hourly prayers; the psalms & biblical songs; formulas -“Alleluia”(“Praise to Yah, Jehovah”), “Amen”, triple Sanctus); simple archetypal melodies – persisted in Christian service

Psalms in Christian Worship & Culture

- During the 1st cen. AD – in liturgical readings; 2nd and 3rd cen.– singing of psalms in various Christian gatherings; 4th cen. – embraced as core expression of Christian faith, psalm-singing was universal as per Eusebius;
- St. Jerome, St. Augustine, **St. Ambrose, St. John Chrysostom** (4th cen.) – recognized the power of music; the two latter ones introduced antiphonal psalm-singing at Milan and Byzantium;
- St John Chrysostom’s testimony to a pervasive presence of the psalms throughout Christian **culture** and **everyday life**;
- **Vigils and the monastic regimen** – psalms were recited, chanted to keep monks awake and away from physical distractions.

Orthodox Church & Byzantine worship

- **Justinian I (527-565)** – established the supremacy of the Orthodox church, its liturgy & music; the Church of Rome, using Latin, developed different liturgical practices -> the Roman Mass
- **Prominence of the psalms in Orthodox worship:**
 - > Psalmic singing as movement by **procession** – in the Byzantine church and today (smaller churches and inside services)
 - > **Interactive & dialogic character** of early Christian worship – internalizing the gospel message through **audible response** (enthusiastic Amen, Alleluia, Hosanna) – psalms' structure fits the liturgical dialogue of early Christians; **living faith** through antiphonal singing; cantors & choir; standing position; no instruments.

Orthodox Church & Byzantine worship

- **Polyeleos** (from Greek, “of much mercy”) – is the “festive portion of the Matins or All-Night Vigil service as observed on higher-ranking feast days in the Eastern Orthodox, Eastern Lutheran, and Byzantine Rite Catholic Churches. The Polyeleos is considered to be the high point of the service. It consists of **Psalms 134 & 135** (135 & 136 in King James) – refrain “alleluia”, repeated chanting of “mercy”, “His mercy endureth forever.”

Psalms in the Orthodox Music

- “Psalm 135 (136) Greek”, published by Orthodox Christian Chants - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lf22wzskal0>
- “Psalm 50 (51) Orthodox Chant”, published by Blajen3 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z26VCmKgzWw>
- “Orthodox Christian Chant at the Coronation (Psalm 71)”, published by Ascetic Aesthetic - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6UiKjyb4XQ>
- “Psalms 104 sung in ancient Hebrew”, published by Yamma Ensemble - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--UABwqW9Sg>
- “Psalm 104” by **Cyrillus Kreek** (1889-1962, Estonia), performed and published by Vancouver Cantata Singers - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfLUVdAXoXI>
- *All-Night Vigil (Vespers)* by **S. Rachmaninov** (1873-1943) – Psalms 1, 103, 134 & 135 (Polyeleos) are used - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nX-pkUTO2q4&list=PLPt7zqMDQ-wmqHIT5PDUrh1HsyccdYCa-&index=2> – part 1, 2, 8, performed by Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir

Psalms in Western Music

- **Composers:**

-> Heinrich Schutz (1585 – 1672) – Psalm 137

-> G. F. Handel (1685-1759) - *Dixit Dominus (Latin title)* - Psalm 110, “The Lord Said”

-> J.S. Bach (1685-1750) – Psalm 51, BWV 1083 (Versus 1-3), solo organ

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WvE8I8s6NwU>

-> Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) - Psalms 42, 95, 98, 114, 115, 116, 118, 141

-> Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901) - *Nabucco* (1841), Psalm 137

-> Antonin Dvorak (1841-1904) - “*Ten Biblical Songs*”

-> Herbert Howells (1892-1983) - an English composer, organist, and teacher, most famous for his large output of Anglican church music – Psalms 42, 84, 118

Psalms in Western Music

- **Composers and Psalm 130:**

-> Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) – Psalm 130 “De Profundis”

-> **Lili Boulanger** (1893-1918) - Psalm 130 'Du fond de l'abîme' -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kS87JdcQSfA>

-> **John Rutter** (1945) on the 'Requiem'. 6: 2nd movement, Psalm 130, 'Out of the Deep' -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awe4OEEbPgQ>

-> John Rutter: Requiem – Psalm 130, “Out Of The Deep” and The Cambridge Singers -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-YYSY7v6A>

Psalms in Western Music

- **Composers and Psalm 84:**

-> **Johannes Brahms** (1833-1897) - "How lovely are thy dwellings": St John's Cambridge 1997 (Christopher Robinson), Psalm 84 -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCN44NzEN5M>

-> **Victoria Bond** (1945), "How Lovely is Your Dwelling Place," Psalm 84 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWrFWRfFkWM&t=4s>

-> Victoria Bond's website, How Lovely is Your Dwelling Place (Psalm 84), Comments:

<https://www.victoriabond.com/artist.php?view=reper&rid=2776>

-> **Himig Heswita**, a Jesuit group, "How Lovely Is Your Dwelling Place" (Psalm 84) with lyrics -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RsxOE9TuLZM>

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