

Calvin R Stapert. *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007. 232 pages. \$18.

The gift of this book is to hear early Christians in their own voices struggling to articulate an understanding of how Christian communities can faithfully sing the “new song” in a contested cultural context. Calvin Stapert serves as the hearing aid in order for us to appreciate their musical thought both as an ethical challenge and as a means of grace for singing and proclaiming the “new song” in our own time.

Stapert writes not specifically for music specialists, but for the wider Christian community. He confesses that writing the book emerged out of a long held conviction “that early Christians might have something to teach us about music” and “since no one better qualified has seemed to be forthcoming with the book I thought needed writing, I have cautiously ventured forward” (10).

Stapert defines the new song as “the song the church sings...a joyful response to the works of God, stimulated by the Word and the Spirit. It is sung by humans to God and to each other, with the saints and angels and all creation” (28). It is not so much literal as a figure for the joyful Christian response sung to God (15, 28, 201). This definition grows out of his listening to early church leaders and is important in his concluding chapter. Christian music and song was for these early Christians part of the warp and woof of their world view, reflecting “the music of the spheres” (the Platonic notion of *musica mundana*; 53, 205; Rev 5:13).

Stapert’s approach is straight forward. From his opening prelude about the importance of the church’s listening to voices that are least heard and yet uniquely relevant to our own time, he surveys the musical thought of the New Testament and of the second and third centuries. From there he digs down into the life and thought of two pairs of contrasting church leaders: Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian from the second and third centuries, and Ambrose of Milan and John Chrysostom, from the fourth and fifth centuries. He contends that despite their differences the four show remarkable consistency in their views “regarding both what music they rejected and denounced [the music of the pagan world] and what they affirmed and promoted [Psalms and hymns]” (11). In chapter 11, Stapert engages with Augustine of Hippo, not because he is in marked contrast to the other four, but because of the great depth and broader dimensions he adds to these themes in Book X of the *Confessions* in which Augustine “wrestles with the problem of sensual pleasures, including the pleasures of the ears” (12).

In the concluding chapter, Stapert offers his digest of the relevance of early Christian musical thought for our own time. He faces squarely the ethical dimensions of music, arguing “we should be no less courageous than were the church fathers in holding and promoting counter-cultural views and practices” regarding the music of the larger society and how we appropriate its assumptions in Christian worship and daily life (196).

Perhaps the primary conviction Stapert draws from the earlier chapters is this: “...there would be a marked and salutary difference in the church’s music and worship [and preaching?] if we would maintain the central focus of our “new song” to be a joyful *response*, offered in humble gratitude, not a *stimulant* [quoting Thomas Merton] ‘to excite every nerve...and to create as many ...synthetic passions as possible’” (202).

Faced with the choice of “dance or chance” (Thomas Howard’s *An Antique Drum*, 1969), Stapert says that our culture since the Enlightenment has opted for *chance* and a cosmology that makes the “new song” seem a fantasy (205). But such a shift has not deepened our understanding of either the cosmos or of music (206). Referencing Augustine’s imagery of two

cities, Stapert observes pensively: “Each city has a song, and those two songs are inextricably mingled for the duration of time” (207). He calls the church to “[s]ing the ‘new song’ to the Lord among the nations; sing the ‘new song’ in this old world, which so desperately needs it” (209).

This volume could have been much shorter if Stapert had simply summarized the writings of his subjects. However, the richness of the book is precisely in the generous inclusion of texts from primary sources allowing voices from the early church to be heard in their own words and contexts.

Daniel T. Benedict, Jr., OSL
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