

The Origin of Jazz Vespers

An Overview by The Rev. Norm Freeman

The evening Office of Vespers has roots extending into the worship life of the Jewish people. Our tradition has molded and shaped these forms of worship and prayer through an evolutionary process that is both faithful to our heritage and open to creating new traditions of praise.

The Jazz Vespers Service is itself a synthesis of several traditions, each finding a unifying voice through the unique musical heritage that we call jazz. The makers of jazz develop consummate technical achievement as both a composer and a performer. The virtuosity of the performer is not an end unto itself. The musical tradition is about the task of giving voice to the hopes, dreams, frustrations and pain that expresses human experience. Jazz is the musical incense that collects and carries the prayers of a people. Numerous jazz composers have secured a place for this art form within the living tradition of the church. In his Second Sacred Concert at New York's Church of St. John the Divine Duke Ellington set Psalm 150 for jazz orchestra. Dave Brubeck, Wynton Marsalis, and Pat Metheny are among this decade's proponents of religious music within a jazz context. The United Methodist Hymnal (1989) offers a setting of Duke Ellington's "Come Sunday." St. John's African Orthodox Church in San Francisco regards John Coltrane as its "patron saint." Founded by jazz musicians, this Church includes Coltrane's music in their Sunday liturgies. A look at the history that forms the foundation of the Vespers service, along with a brief study of the origins of jazz will offer a basis for understanding the juxtaposition of these two traditions.

Origins

Vespers, originally begun at the rising of the evening star, are the Church's Evening Prayer, one of the two main hours of the daily Office. Lucernarium (literally: lamp, lamp lighting time) was another early name for Vespers. The fading of the light of day inaugurated the time when lamps were lighted. The Jewish tradition accompanied this transition in time with a blessing prayer, and Christians continued the custom. Thus the lucernarium, a preliminary rite, gave its name to the prayer service that followed.

Vespers was also called the evening sacrifice, a counterpart of the sacrifice of incense offered every evening in the Temple at Jerusalem. Psalm 140 alludes to this practice. "Let my prayer come like incense before you; the lifting up of my hands, like the evening sacrifice." (Ps. 140:2) This psalm prompted the use of incense during its recitation within the Office and again during the Magnificat. The Church Fathers regarded burning and sweet-smelling incense as a symbol of the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. The Church made Vespers her evening sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, commemorating Calvary and the Last Supper and offering thanks for all the benefits of Creation and Redemption.

Content

Vespers has the same form as the Morning Office, Lauds. After the introductory versicles and response, there are five Psalms with antiphons. The choice of Psalms reflected the influence of Jewish tradition by at first restricting use to the Alleluia Psalms 110-17. Beginning in the 8th century Psalms 109-47 (excluding those said at other hours) were divided over the days of the week. The monastic order has only four Psalms. Today, as in Benedict's time the Psalm is followed by a single shortened reading or capitulum. The most common capitulum, found on Sundays and the weekly ferias, is 2 Cor. 1:3-4, summing up the spirit of the Vespers, thanking God for His merciful redemption. In the 4th and 5th centuries (Gaul and Egypt) there were two lessons, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. In the monastic rite the capitulum was followed by a responsory, probably the former transitional chant after the Old Testament lesson. The hymn ("Ambrosianus") and the canticle from the gospel (Magnificat) were common in Benedict's time, though an antiphon was not yet assigned. Hymns were introduced as early as the 4th century but not adopted by the Roman Office until the 12th century. The Gregorian antiphons that accompany the Magnificat are exceptional musical structures that remind us that the Magnificat is the climax of the hour for the Roman Church.

This was followed by the litany of intercession with the Kyrie or the prayers of the people (Aetheria, c. 400). A vestige of this remains in the monastic vespers; the Preces, which were the Frankish form of these prayers. The president originally concluded the prayers of the people with the Lord's Prayer which is still sung aloud in monastic vespers. Vespers conclude with the Collect of the day; originally in Gaul it referred to the evening hour and not to the day being celebrated. The dismissal now reduced to the Benedicamus Domino (Benedict: missae) may well originally have been a blessing.

History

The liturgical Office, Vespers, was the outcome of a long development going back to Apostolic times. The Jewish people had a daily evening sacrifice in the last centuries before Christ and they had a corresponding prayer service in their synagogues. The pious Jewish community of Qumran prayed regularly at evening. It is practically certain, therefore, that the Jews had a long-standing tradition of prayer at this hour, whether public or private. Most scholars believe that the testimony to customary prayer three times a day in the late text, Dn 6:10 is to morning, noon, and evening prayer as specified in Ps 54:18, Enoch 26:1-3, and the Qumran Manual of Discipline (1QS 10:1-3, 9-11). The 1st century Didache in its exhortation to pray the Our Father three times a day could well have been a Christianizing of this usage (8; AncChrWr 6:19).

The 3rd century provides the first clear and extensive evidence of a Christian evening prayer. Tertullian asserted that morning and evening prayer were prescribed, obligatory prayers (De oratione 25; CSEL 20:198). Fifteen or so years later, the Apostolic Tradition described a common evening service that consisted of a lucinarium, Psalmody, and an agape (25, 26; Botte LQF 64-66). The Alleluia Psalms it mentions are still among the group of Psalms reserved for the Vespers.

Hippolytus (Rome, c. 215) gives evidence that the common liturgical evening meal (agape) was introduced by the blessing of light and responsorial psalmody; the people sang Alleluia in response. Scholars agree that by the end of the 4th century there did exist a public prayer of the Church along the lines in which we understand Vespers today. Fourth century Antioch observed an evening service which the people were expected to attend.

The work of converting these primitive evening prayers into the set form of the modern Vespers was done mainly in the 4th, 5th, and 6th centuries. Cathedral churches and monastic communities were chiefly responsible for this evolution. The Office described in the Rule of St. Benedict was basically the Roman Office of the 6th century, showing that Vespers had then reached its present shape in all its essentials. The influence of St. Benedict, (c. 525) who had vespers sung in his monasteries in the late afternoon may have contributed to the disappearance of the lucinarium from the Roman rite (a contrast to the practice in the Mozarabic rite). In Gaul vespers continued to be said after sundown as late as the 8th century. Subsequent reforms of the Roman Office have affected Vespers but slightly.

The present form of this evening office of the Western Church consists of a hymn followed by two psalms a NT canticle, a short lesson, a short responsory, the Magnificat with antiphons, and prayers. This divine Office, rooted in antiquity, is along with Lauds the most important of the Daily Offices. The service of Evensong in the Book of Common Prayer was partly formed on the model of Vespers with additions from Compline.

The place of Vespers in the Roman Church

"Because it is the public prayer of the Church, the divine Office is a source of piety and nourishment for personal prayer. Therefore, priests and all others who take part in the divine Office are earnestly exhorted in the Lord to attune their minds to their voice when praying it. In the revision of the Roman Office, its ancient and venerable treasures are to be so adapted that all those to whom they are bequeathed may more extensively and easily draw riches from them." [Chapter IV, "The Divine Office," Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, (First Constitution, Vatican Council II, Dec. 4, 1963), 90.]

"Pastors of souls should see to it that the chief hours, especially Vespers, are celebrated in common in the church on Sundays and the more solemn feasts. And laity, too, are encouraged to recite the divine Office, either with the priests, or among themselves, or even individually." (Ibid., 100.)

Jazz - A musical heritage emerging out of the traditions of the church.

African slaves sold in America brought with them a musically sophisticated culture, expressing it in poly-rhythmic and poly-tonal forms. In a matter of time the African forms would superimpose themselves upon European harmonic language to produce the building blocks of jazz.

A simple outline of the development might look like this:

- African slaves utilize "work songs" to help them in passing the arduous forced labor. The structure of these songs were "call and response" or "shout and response."
- A leader would express the collective thoughts of the workers, leaving the workers to respond a repeated refrain in unison.
- The leader continues to improvise calls while the chorus repeats its response or refrain.
- Banned from worshipping in "white" churches, slaves gather outside these churches adopting church harmony to African melodies.
- The I, IV, V chord progressions of the church's tradition adapt to the call and response form to produce the basis of "the blues."
- The European rhythmic emphasis on the 1st and 3rd beat in common time experiences a "democratization" in the context of African poly-rhythmic expression, resulting in an emphasis on the 2nd and 4th beats.
- This rhythmic "democratization" leads to an integration of rhythmic traditions, producing syncopation, and ...
- Jazz is born - a synthesis of two distinct heritages

This outline is clearly an over-simplification, yet it indicates the cross-cultural roots of jazz, a music that captures the hopes, dreams and aspirations of a people.

The birthplace of this once marginalized art form was the church. But, the connection between jazz and the church extends beyond the paternal.

Social justice provides a context for understanding the unique relationship between jazz and the church, for jazz gave voice to a marginalized people even before the church's conscience was awakened to its own hypocrisy.

Jazz music emerges as a balm that has the power to heal and inspire, capturing the hope of reconciliation without disguising a sometimes-bitter disgust and impatience with the American scene. Jazz reminds us who we are and where we have come from, while inspiring us into the reality of who we can become in the Risen Christ. Jazz is the music of the social gospel of Jesus Christ.

While many churches provide a home for Jazz Vespers, others debate its place in the life of the church. One thing is certain. The key to Jazz Vespers' future lies in the creative collaboration between liturgist and jazz artist. There is hope this dialogue will produce a synthesis that expands the church's liturgical tradition through the continuing exploration of a truly American Church music - jazz.