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HYMN TUNES

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## HYMNS AND THEIR TUNES

It is of particular importance that hymn-music should be of first rate quality. It is congregational, and therefore affects the whole body of worshippers. The tune is recurrent, and therefore any fault becomes, by sheer repetition, intensified.

Hymns form no prescribed part of the normal services, but are chosen at will. The first question that arises, then, is this: How can we, the average parson, choir, congregation, organist, know the difference between good and bad hymn-tunes?\*

### FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

What principles should govern our choice? First of all, a hymn-tune must be worthy of being offered in worship to Almighty God. This principle, of course, commands universal recognition, but many who are foremost in admitting its force in general are far from foremost in applying it firmly in detail. Nevertheless, it will often clear the mind to ask: Am I choosing this tune because it is worthy of a place in divine worship, or because people like to sing it?

It then becomes plain that what is involved is not merely a question of musical worthiness. More is at stake; and here we may suggest that critics who have been content simply to attack certain composers, schools, and trends of musical thought, have sometimes failed to present their case convincingly. Even if the musical worth of the compositions in question be conceded, the matter is largely one of religious values. Does this or that tune convey a sincere and noble impression? If not, it is giving a false impression, even an actual misrepresentation, of the Christian religion.

The emphasis on sincerity and strength in religion is more than ever apparent in an age that is peculiarly critical of pretence and sentimentality. It is unwise to ask young people today to sing tunes which savour of complacency, or of a too intimate and personal emotion. The

\* The general problem to which this refers is discussed in Chapter III of *Music in Church*.

circumstances of our times are hard, even harsh; they call for a certain austerity in the presentation of religion.

It is because the tunes of songs have the power to conjure an image and an ideal, that it is necessary to be sure that the music of hymns does not insinuate a conception of Christ markedly weaker and more limited than the picture of the Incarnate Son of God revealed in the Bible. And this in fact is what some hymn-tunes, both of the eighteenth and of the nineteenth centuries, have done. There is today a growing tendency to eliminate the weak and the complacent from hymn-tunes used in schools and gatherings of young people, and to concentrate on the stronger type of tune, both new and old. It is significant that *Hymns Ancient and Modern, Revised* 1950, transfers 'Nearer, my God, to thee' to a section for use on more intimate occasions.

There is, of course, a place for the subjective as well as the objective in worship. We must beware of starving emotion, and remember that, alongside with the robust, there is room for the tender.

The ultimate test, then, of a hymn-tune is not its capacity to satisfy a congregation, nor even its effectiveness as music, but rather the impression that it makes, and its faithfulness as an expression of the Christian religion. Moreover, the impression must be both positive and lasting.

Such simple things as a few chords played upon a great cathedral organ, or the singing of a clear-voiced chorister, may be things of beauty, and thrill the hearer; but the emotion produced is vague and meaningless, and the thing is spiritually inadequate. The effect of the satisfactory hymn is quite definite, and it leaves not a passing but a lasting impression.

Even though the truth of this be admitted, there will always remain a debatable land, containing tunes which it would be harsh to sweep away, but which an honest judgment on musical grounds alone would hardly feel justified in retaining. There will always be those with whom the power of association is too strong to allow the critical faculty to operate. Concessions may have to be made, at any rate for a time, and no rigid boundary can be fixed. Meanwhile, the experience of recent years has shown that the growth of musical taste and knowledge may be relied upon to produce satisfactory results, however slowly. Choirs and congregations, hitherto prone to protest when some favourite tune is replaced by one which at first is unfamiliar, will thus learn discrimination, and eventually become critics themselves. Wherever principles of criticism are shown to rest on reasonable and justifiable foundations,



the standard of judgment in hymn-tunes will certainly be raised, though there will always be some whose lack of musical faculty precludes the formation of a sound opinion.

There are tunes, however, about which no one should have any doubt at all. We set out again the characteristics by which to distinguish the better from the worse. A good hymn-tune is one of which the emotional content is appropriate to its plan and occasion; the harmonized parts, especially the bass, should be interesting and distinctive; the melody should be well drawn, not made up of notes which bear no close relation to one another, not insisting with wearisome re-iteration on a recurrence of the same note, so that it sounds clear, decided and convincing when sung without harmonies. Its rhythm must fit closely to the words, but must be neither trivial nor obtrusive nor dull. The general pattern may be very simple, but it must be definite.

Compare 'Maidstone' (A. & M., S. 240, A. & M., R. 240, E.H. Appendix 20) with its hurdy-gurdy rhythm, or 'St. Bees' (A. & M., S. 260, A. & M., R. 344, E.H. Appendix 53) in its tawdriness, with the beautiful simplicity of Gibbons's 'Canterbury', or 'Song 13' (A. & M., S. 151, A. & M., R. 105, E.H. Appendix 413); contrast the insistence of the wrong accent in nearly every line of every verse, as well as the feeble melody and weak inner parts, of Barnby's setting of 'For all the saints' (A. & M., S. 437, A. & M., R. 527) with the two splendid tunes by Stanford (A. & M., S. 437, A. & M., R. 527) and Vaughan Williams (E.H. 641), which really reflect the triumphant ring of the words; take the want of movement in the tune for 'Days and moments quickly flying' (A. & M., S. 289) and contrast 'Croft's 148th' (A. & M., S. 414, A. & M., R. 248, E.H. 565) or 'Darwell's 148th' (A. & M., S. 546, A. & M., R. 371, E.H., 517).

In regard to the part-writing, look at the monotony of the alto part of 'St. Oswald' (A. & M., S. 274, A. & M., R. 292, E.H. Appendix 61) which has D repeated twenty times out of thirty notes, as contrasted with the inner parts of the *Passion Chorale* (A. & M., S. 111, A. & M., R. 111, E.H. 102); or contrast the cheap effect of 'Magdalena' (A. & M., S. 186) or 'St. Catherine' (A. & M., S. 198, A. & M., R. 355) with 'St. Theodulph' (A. & M., S. 98, A. & M., R. 98, E.H. 622) and 'Thornbury' (A. & M., S. 604, A. & M., R. 256, E.H. 545).

In these days of more general musical education, most congregations include a number of people with sufficient musical knowledge to be

really distressed, or even alienated, by some of the music which they hear in church; for it is fair to assume that they know it to be unworthy of the purpose for which it is intended.

## THE CHOICE OF HYMNS\*

Attention may now be given to certain further principles which should guide the selection of hymns. The highest standard of sincerity, coupled with genuine ardour, ought to be applied to hymns and their tunes.

### (a) Liturgical

The choosing of hymns for the various services in the church of even a small parish demands more thought and care than it frequently receives. Careful consideration should first be given to the liturgical standing of the Sunday, the season of the Church's year, and so forth. For instance, the hymns chosen for Evensong on a Seventh Sunday after Trinity should be quite different in character from those previously sung at Mattins, if the Monday following is the festival of St. James the Apostle.

It is probably best to select at one time the hymns for a series of Sundays. If this is done, all suitable hymns available, for instance, for Advent, or for Eastertide, can be distributed over the relevant Sundays, and repetitions either avoided or carefully alternated, so that a congregation at Mattins, at a Sung Eucharist and at Evensong may each have an opportunity, on three different Sundays in the season, to sing some favourite hymn, such as 'Lo, he comes'. Gaps in the hymn list for that group of Sundays will still remain; they can be filled by appropriate hymns from other parts of the book.

During the long Trinity season, particular occasions often demand a special hymn or hymns, perhaps to commemorate a saint, perhaps to mark some popular or national observance. Care should be taken to introduce, when possible, hymns containing a reference to the Collect, Epistle or Gospel of the day, or to one of the Lessons.

### (b) Words

Having had regard to liturgical demands, attention should be given to verbal structure. The hymns chosen for one service should not all be

\* The purpose and position of the Office Hymn, and of other hymns, at Mattins and Evensong are considered in Chapter IV of *Music in Church* and suggestions are given on p. 10 of this Paper for the choice of hymns at a Sung Eucharist. What follows here is of a more general nature.



of the same metre, length or shape; a long hymn should usually be reserved for use during the Offertory at a Sung Eucharist, and for the concluding hymns at Mattins or Evensong. It is important to avoid disproportionate use of the subjective or emotional type of hymn. Variety whenever possible should be the aim.

In many hymn books, certain hymns have verses which are starred to indicate that they may be omitted, in order to shorten the hymn without destroying the logical sequence. Occasionally verses, which have not been starred by the compilers of the hymn book, are omitted without careful thought beforehand; the result is often an illogical sequence of verses, or even faulty grammar.

The use of *Amen* is now much less common than it was; there seem to be good grounds for this. According to Dr. Frere, '*Amens* are seldom found before the sixteenth century, and the evidence as to their use is conflicting.' They were not included with the hymns of the Evangelical revival, but the nineteenth century saw their inclusion for every hymn in most hymn books. The use of *Amen* after every hymn often led to its spiritless rendering, which came as an anti-climax. The custom of singing *Amen* after hymns which end with a doxology has much to commend it, especially when a plainsong tune has been used.

#### (c) Familiar Tunes

In many churches there is a tendency to select for use only those hymns the tunes of which are familiar; many fine hymns are therefore not used. Except in those cases where the metrical scheme is unusual, well-known tunes can generally be sung in place of those printed in the hymn book, but this practice should be sparingly employed. A well-known tune, repeatedly sung to nearly every hymn of the same metre, will lose its appeal and become hackneyed. Moreover, a hymn and its tune may be so wedded by association that both suffer by separation; to sing one hymn to a tune which is strongly reminiscent of another may produce a feeling of restlessness, even of irritation.

#### (d) New Tunes

There is room for a greater spirit of adventure in the introductions of unfamiliar tunes. In some churches, the number of hymns and tunes used is very small, and congregations, consciously or unconsciously, regard the singing of many of them as rather wearisome. In spite of the

conservative outlook of many people in the matter of hymns, there is evidence that congregations welcome the occasional 'new' tune, provided that they are given an opportunity of learning it. In this connection, congregational practices may usefully be held, though they require some skill in direction if they are to be successful. When 'new' tunes have been introduced, it is advisable that they should be used fairly frequently at first, so that they may become really familiar to the congregation.

#### (e) Pitch

The pitch of a tune is an important matter. If it be too high, members of the congregation will be discouraged from singing it; if it be too low, the choir may be put out of action, or reduced to ineffectiveness as leaders of the singing. The respective needs of choir and congregation should therefore be borne in mind, when deciding upon the key in which a tune is to be sung.

#### (f) Mission Hymns

There is a place for evangelistic hymns at non-liturgical services. Their use at a liturgical service is to be strongly deprecated: the quality of the music and of their literary style makes them unsuitable for use beside the measured prose of the Book of Common Prayer. At mission services, in which the subjective finds a place, they have proved not only their popularity but their usefulness.

### PLAINSONG TUNES

It is worthy of note that several hymn books published during the last quarter of a century contain a selection of plainsong tunes. This is greatly to be welcomed, for it shows that the beauty of these melodies, as well as their place in the history of the music of the Church, is being recognized. It must, however, be admitted that they are by no means always well sung, or well accompanied; the difference in style between modal plainsong melody and modern, measured and harmonized tunes, is often misunderstood by singers and organists alike. The chief difficulty appears to be the rhythm; too often a plainsong tune is sung as if it had no rhythm; that is, either very slowly and heavily, or too quickly and jerkily. It is not sufficiently realized that the length of individual notes is approximately the same; and that an important part



in the art of singing plainsong is to understand the manner in which notes are rhythmically grouped, and to sing, with the appropriate stressing or non-stressing, each individual note. The accompaniment must reinforce the rhythm, and must also respect the modal character of the music. Experience shows that when plainsong is well sung, much of the prejudice against it disappears.

## METHOD

Turning now to the method of singing hymns, we wish to emphasize the variety which is possible and desirable. Hymn-singing without such variety or discrimination is liable to become mechanical, especially where hymns are long, metres are limited, and tunes are mainly of one type. The junctions of the lines also require attention. Some metres presuppose at least a little liberty at the end of certain lines — for instance, in Long Measure after the second line; otherwise, the singing becomes either too light and too little sustained, or too breathless. In plainsong hymn-tunes, the lines should generally be sung in pairs, making substantial pauses between the pairs, where the sense of the words will permit it, and pausing only to take breath between the lines forming each pair.

Liberties such as these are a necessary part of hymn-singing, especially when it is congregational. But liberty may degenerate into dragging, unless care is taken to avoid it. This evil is best counteracted, however, not by rigidity of time-beats, but by vitality of rhythm. The congregation that has grasped the rhythm of a good tune will not need to be pulled up to time, or forced back into order, by the accompaniment.

The question of pace is similar, but different. Different types of tune demand different relative standards of pace. A psalm tune such as 'London New' (*A. & M.*, S. 373; *A. & M.*, R. 181; *E.H.* 394) should be sung rather slowly, but with real vitality; lighter tunes such as 'Monk's Gate' (*E.H.* 402) need to move at a faster and more flowing *tempo*.

But pace is relative, not absolute. The pace at which any given hymn is sung must in some degree depend upon the nature of the words, and the character of the tune. It must also depend upon the number of singers and the amount of their skill, the size of the building or its resonance, the mood of the congregation at the moment, and many other modifying considerations. It may, however, be more or less taken

for granted that a congregation will sing hymns more slowly than a choir; that a large church needs a steadier pace than a small one; that a countryman is more deliberate than a townsman. Expression in congregational hymn-singing is inevitably restricted to broad and general effects; frequent changes are inadvisable.

When a choir or small group of singers is available, there are further possibilities of variety. Then monotony may no longer be the danger but, on the contrary, too restless or inappropriate change. With this word of caution, we may summarize the chief available variants:

- (1) Verses allotted to particular groups of voices; for example, to trebles, or to men.
- (2) Verses allotted to choir without congregation, or *vice versa*.
- (3) Full unison with varied accompaniment.
- (4) Unaccompanied passages alternating with verses that are accompanied.
- (5) Descant. This means that, while choir and congregation sing the melody, some treble voices sing a specially-added part.
- (6) *Faux-bourdon* or *Faburden*. This means that the congregation sing the melody, while the choir accompany it in three-part or four-part harmony.
- (7) Special settings of particular verses, for instance, Bach's settings of certain verses of a chorale.

(5) and (6) should be used sparingly — in not more than two verses in a five-verse hymn — but might find their place in a special service such as, for example, a hymn festival.

## ORGAN ACCOMPANIMENT

The accompaniment of hymns is an art in itself, especially when the singing is in unison. Varied harmonies have their use, and may be appropriate to one verse, or perhaps two, in a hymn. The real art of the accompanist, however, lies not in them, but in his rendering of the normal setting, with varieties of tone and colour, of heaviness and



lightness, of phrasing, and the like. Just as the ultimate test of the work of a choir is its effect upon the congregation, so must any final assessment of the organist's work be based upon his ability to weld together the singing of choir and congregation. Indeed, it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that, unless there is this sense of close contact between organist and singers, he has failed in one of the most important branches of his work.

Playing-over is of the utmost importance, and the following principles are recommended:

- (1) The speed should be that at which the hymn is to be sung, with no *rallentando*.
- (2) Playing over should indicate not only the notes and *tempo*, but also the mood, of the hymn.
- (3) The number of lines to be played should be governed by the need for complete word-sense.
- (4) As a general rule, clear-toned stops (8 ft. Diapasons, or 8 ft. and 4 ft. Flutes) are preferable. Undulating stops and tremulants should never be used for this purpose.
- (5) Every effort should be made to encourage the congregation to stand as soon as the playing-over begins.

### HYMNS AT THE EUCHARIST

The choice of hymns for all services has already been discussed from a musical standpoint, but it may be of value to deal briefly here with their choice for use at a Sung Eucharist from a practical, and in a very elementary sense a liturgical, point of view. Due consideration will obviously first be given to the suitability of each hymn for the day or season, or for a particular point in the service; but its length is of hardly less importance, if the orderly progress of the service is not to be impeded.

It is most inadvisable for the organist to bring the singing of an unfinished hymn to an end without previous consideration. To do so will often be disturbing to the congregation; moreover, in many a hymn, such a break will do violence to its message, of which the climax or chief point is not reached until the last verse. The remedy for such

unreality lies in due regard being paid to the length, as well as to the words, of every hymn chosen.

### *The Introit*

In many churches the Introit is replaced by a hymn, which is sung while the priest enters the sanctuary. It should be appropriate to the day, and should express the spirit and seasonal background of the service of which it is the opening act of worship. There is much to be said, following the precedent of the Prayer Book of 1549, for singing a Psalm at this point; this might well be one of the Psalms appointed for the day.

### *The Gradual or Sequence*

A second hymn, which follows the Epistle, may take the place of the Gradual or Sequence. A hymn can sometimes be found which refers directly to the message of the Epistle or of the Gospel.

### *At the Offertory*

The third or Offertory hymn may be of some length, since while it is being sung the alms are collected, and the bread and wine prepared for consecration.

### *At the Communion*

No hard and fast rule can be laid down as to the use of music during the Communion. If communicants are comparatively few, there would seem to be no need for a hymn. A period of silence at this point in the service is of great spiritual value. If communicants are many, and the period of silence rather long, it may be better for a Communion hymn to be sung, or a motet or short anthem where there is a competent choir. The practice of extemporizing by the organist during the Communion is to be deprecated; few are expert in this difficult art. A hymn in which the worshippers can join is usually more helpful to their devotions than listening to the organ.

### *After the Blessing*

The concluding hymn should strike a note of thanksgiving, and should not be so long that it continues after the priest has left the altar. The singing of *Nunc Dimittis* or of a Psalm while the choir is returning to the vestry is not recommended.



### *Other Details*

Where practicable, it is better that the hymns at a Sung Eucharist should not be announced, since this tends to interrupt the worship. Numbers of the hymns should be clearly displayed on hymn boards.

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