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# HINTS ON HYMN TUNES

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R. E. R.

## HINTS ON HYMN TUNES

EVERY work of art worthy of notice is inspired by some intention, and has therefore a purpose. It may be frivolous, it may be sobering, it may be neither, but there is a function of one sort or another to fulfil. Human nature has many needs, ranging from humour to adoration, and one of the cares that we have to exercise in public worship is to divide attention fairly evenly between a variety of purposes. Balance is a necessity. In Lent when especially we search our hearts and mourn our sins, and at any other season when we feel oppressed, it is entirely right that we should have hymns that assure us of Divine pity. But it is a disastrous misrepresentation of Christianity and a serious handicap to the cultivation of character to allow words and music of this sort to predominate at church services. This is one of the errors and disadvantages from which we are suffering at the present time. I have made a rough calculation and find that more than half the hymns we sing represent us as weary and wayward, and our religion as a soft pillow on which to rest our heads. No one with knowledge of men and life desires to exclude such expressions, but when they assume the proportions usually allotted to them at present and appear in exaggerated forms they undoubtedly tend either to estrange young people from church or to warp their ideas of God and religion and life. In view of the fact that only about thirty per cent. of the population attend places of worship, and the certainty that the character of our services has something to do with this aloofness, it is really worth while considering the music of hymns with special reference to several purposes that ought to have place in public worship.

*Worship.* One of the weakest points in all forms of church services to-day is that there is not enough worship.



There is much petition, but little adoration. We are in need of more words and music that turn the thoughts away from self and concentrate them on the majesty and beauty of God. Dr. Percy Dearmer in his latest book *The Church at Prayer* says—'In all religions, the higher the view of God, the more does prayer lose the element of entreaty and become a disinterested homage of praise and thanksgiving, culminating in mystic communion.' In old days acts of praise played a much more prominent part in worship than they do now, and there can be little doubt that a revival of this traditional custom would be in itself entirely right, and in its effects very wholesome. There is abundant evidence in the Bible that God expects and joyously receives our 'little human praise', and no thoughtful Christian can feel otherwise than that it is the creature's due to his Creator, for in Him 'we live and move and have our being'. There can be no doubt that the note of adoration would make public worship more attractive and inspiring than it is at present.

*Strength.* The Puritans made one contribution of great value to the Church—they intensified men's sense of God's majesty and power. Their poetry and music are predominantly austere, and neither our conception of God nor our public worship will be right and true without that element. God, we know, is our Father; but this precious revelation of Him is made in the New Testament without any suggestion of 'grandmotherliness'. When we sing of our relationship to God we ought to shun exaggerated sentimentality and remember that He is also All-sovereign Lord of the Universe, King and Judge. Many of the old tunes, especially those that welled up in the hearts of austere Scotsmen, combine in fine proportions the elements of sentiment and strength, and we have composers to-day who are able to write music of the same calibre. It would be well if we gave them more encouragement by allowing their works to replace the effusions that have flooded our churches for

the last fifty years. There is a fine hymn, sung to a tune called *Martyrs* (E. H. 449) taken from the seventeenth-century Scottish Psalter, which might be regarded as a pattern of the type we need in this respect. In the words, God is conceived to be the God of Truth, and in the music there is perfect balance of strength and sentiment. But it is in hymns whose subject is the future state, or our relationship to the departed that lachrymose sentiment gets most out of hand. We are frequently confronted with the incongruous spectacle of robust and cheerful young people representing themselves as pining to be quit of this world that they may the more quickly enjoy a somewhat luscious heaven. The beautiful doctrine of the Communion of Saints and a healthy conception of the future life ought to have an honoured place in hymnology; but they should be expressed by poetry and music in such a way as not to give sensible people the impression that there is something feeble and foolish, not to say insincere, in the attitude of Christian worshippers towards immortality.

*Penitence.* In close relationship with the quality of strength, it is appropriate to consider what has been too often regarded as its opposite, the element of penitence. No hymn-book with any claim to adoption at our church services can omit penitential words and music, for penitence is an essential preliminary to the forgiveness we need. But we have to be on guard against what Harold Anson calls 'the sin of wailing' in our services. Those who have had the great privilege of helping men in their intellectual and moral difficulties will probably agree that it is less easy to convince them that God really forgives than to persuade them to confess their sins. We might profitably exchange some of our present hymns for others that would emphasize God's love and power to pardon. A tune that claims to be plaintive must have depth and solemnity, but on the other hand it should never be devoid of hope.

*Inspiration.* Few who have given the subject any



thought deny that many of the hymn tunes now commonly sung are extremely weak, and all must admit that in the average church the singing of them lacks zest and inspiration. Worshippers in Wales must have noticed that there is greater warmth and effectiveness than in hymn-singing in England. The problem—if such it be—is merely a question of introducing better words and tunes. That is why congregational practices play a vital part in the whole process. I have full sympathy with the people in the pews upon whom an unknown tune, however good, is suddenly foisted. The wiser and more successful policy is first to teach the choir a new tune, and when they know it thoroughly, to ask the congregation to hear and sing it before service. This will be more easily accomplished when Sir Walford Davies's hope that no hymn-book will be printed without the melodies is realized. People can only emerge from old prejudices as they are educated into new principles. This education is making rapid progress outside the churches. In every town and in most villages there are now choral societies which have the advantage of being guided in the choice of music by a committee of experts. This secular movement has made the reform of church music really urgent. It is not reasonable to expect musical people to attend and enjoy religious services in which the music is often inferior and sometimes vulgar. The Church of England has shown appreciation of this fact by the issue of an authoritative report on 'Music in Worship' (S.P.C.K., 1s.), and it is not too much to say that every parish priest and choirmaster ought to read and digest it. Along these lines we shall bring better and more robust music into our churches, and the singing will be more general and inspiring than it is at present. Hymns have invariably played a great part in religious revivals, and all great mission preachers like Augustine, Luther, Wesley, Moody, and Boddy have encouraged their use. If, as I believe, we are now approaching another great spiritual revival, it behoves us to have hymns in use that will stir

men's hearts, and reflect those larger ideas of the nature and application of our religion that have re-established themselves of recent years.

*Effect.* The psychological fact that it matters tremendously what music we use in worship, gains in significance by sheer quantity when we consider hymn tunes, for we sing so many of them, and so many of us sing them. In Church, too, people are especially susceptible. This is partly accounted for by their being herded together; another reason is that the act of worship naturally tends to stir their emotions and thus open a way to the underminer and personality. Of all the arts music is the most immediately effective; and it is not surprising that *people's ideas of God and religion and life often bear the impress of the hymn tunes they habitually sing.* Sprightly and frivolous tunes tend to diminish men's sense of reverence; fussy phrases will make life appear as a series of exciting episodes devoid of dignity, coherence, or beauty. The effect of what we sing together in church is much more far-reaching than may at first sight appear, and therefore we ought to scrutinize the music with the utmost care.

*Construction.* There are certain characteristics by which even a humble amateur may be able to recognize a good hymn tune. When I see a new one I ask two questions: Is the construction musically sound? Does it convey the idea and interpret the purpose of the words? We can hardly do better than pursue our study of the subject under the headings suggested by these questions.

Every form of art must have some rules; they represent the net result of learning and experience. In music as in ecclesiastical affairs it is, however, well to know that principles may easily become too numerous; it is better that they should be few and firmly held. Three or four seem to me to be sufficient for the construction of hymn tunes.

*Melody.* The notes must be in such order as to appeal to the ear and to be singable, and all the phrases should



be so related to one another as to secure unity. The tune needs to be simple and such as can be sung effectively in unison. The first phrase is often the key to the whole work. Straightforwardness and consistency are essential, though the melody is apt to be dull if it has not some strategic point upon which the effectiveness of the tune largely depends.

The tune *St. Magnus* (A. & M. 301) has two advantages. The first part leads up very attractively to a top E which is an obvious climax; the second half is saved from comparative tameness by that splendid leap of an octave in the last line. Sometimes the source of interest is in a phrase as in Tallis's tune (A. & M. 208) where the essence of the music is in the first line. A good melody may be obtained by a progression of notes from one to the other next above or below it in the scale, as in *Wareham* (A. & M. 63), or there may be considerable intervals as in the magnificent tune *London New* (A. & M. 373). It is well to observe that much repetition of notes militates against melody. If you hum to yourself Dykes's tune *Melita* (A. & M. 370) you will see how dull it is from this point of view, and its dullness is due to lack of spring and variety. Compare it with that Irish gem *St. Columba* (E. H. 490). Here is progression of notes combined with perfect simplicity. For the most part they pass to the next below or above, with just an occasional and effective disjunct as in the second note of the third line. The nation in whose soul there is this sort of treasure must have rich contributions to make towards the attainment of the beautiful.

*Harmony.* It is not necessary here to enter into a technical study of the art of harmonizing. Let us confine ourselves to a few general observations that are specially relevant to our subject. In hymn tunes the harmony should be unobtrusive. There should never be the impression that the tune is dependent on the harmony, and that it is unintelligible or even very incomplete without the parts. It must always be effective when sung

in unison. Part-writing in hymn tunes should be subordinate, simple, and firm; purity of tone, not dramatic effect, is the first requisite. But there is a second rule which has often been neglected, namely, that the whole texture of a tune should be interesting and marked by some skill. These qualities are lacking in many of the tunes we sing. The structure of a hymn tune should be a work of art throughout, combining knowledge with simplicity, and interest with firmness; and the harmony ought to be so designed as to be a help and support without being aggressive. I conceive it to be the function of harmony in a hymn tune to strengthen and enhance the effect of the melody, the melody being incomparably the more important of the two.

*Rhythm.* We have now to concentrate on the movement of the tune. It may be so slow as to be almost non-existent, or tedious because utterly mechanical or restless. There is a good deal to be said for varying the emphasis by accentuating certain notes which would otherwise have scant notice. Bound up with this question is also that of pace. The singing of hymns ought not to be regulated by strict metronomic time. We suffer much in Anglican churches from Prussian precision. *The Old Hundredth* is often mechanically hurried by organ and choir as if it were a march of the Guards, and the second line of 'O God our help in ages past' is snatched up with breathless haste. This meticulous observance of the exact length of each note surely savours of childishness when the sense suggests that there should be a moment's pause. I would rather risk a little untidiness than cudgel a whole congregation into unintelligent precision. But besides the natural requirements of the words, the size of the building and the number of voices call for consideration. So does the nature of the music. Our main requirement for rendering hymns at the proper pace is not metronomic figures but an ordinary sense of rhythm. There ought to be close correspondence between the rhythm of the words



and the rhythm of the music. Before composing his classical works, William Byrd used to study the words until he felt the music grow out of them, and many modern composers exercise the same care. This characteristic is indispensable in hymn tunes, for its absence, as we know only too well, obscures or even distorts the meaning of the words just where everything legitimate should be done to make the sense unmistakably clear. Dr. Vaughan-Williams has shown appreciation of this fact in his magnificent tune *Sine Nomine* to 'For all the Saints' (E. H. 641) in which the end is not attained without considerable care. This intimate correlation of words and music adds enormously also to the attractiveness of hymns. Young people especially like to have words and music of strong movement, and it is a perfectly legitimate expectation. After many evangelistic enterprises I am deeply convinced that we owe it to them to reduce the number of thin and feeble hymns and to increase those of the manlier sort. 'The true God', says H. G. Wells, 'goes through the world like fifes and drums and flags, calling for recruits along the street.' Let us have more poetry and music that convey this idea of the power of Christ to attract men to his service and suggest vitality and confidence. In our hymns we do not want militarism, but manliness; not combativeness, but courage.

*Faux-Bourdon or Descant.* In a hymn of some length, the tune of which is simple and familiar, there is much to be said for descants in one or two verses, and in moderation they bring a welcome variety and are very effective. There is behind them a long and honourable history. Martin Luther was thrilled by them, and any one who has heard such grand old tunes as *Winchester Old* and the *Old 104th* treated in this manner can hardly fail to be impressed and moved. This is not the occasion to enter upon a detailed account of their history or technical construction. Briefly it is a second melody sung by a few trebles whilst the congregation and tenors

sing the usual melody. The arrangement is straightforward and such as can be sung quite well by the choir and people of a small church. And it is here that its usefulness in bringing a little variety into worship will be especially welcome, for whereas the trouble at times in the more ambitious churches is the sheer ugliness of their music, in the humbler sort it is the less serious fault of monotony. There are several examples of the faux-bourdon arrangement added as alternative versions in the *English Hymnal* and many more are accessible in *The Tenor Tune Book* (Faith Press) in *Descants* by Alan Gray (Cambridge University Press), and in *A Collection of Faux-Bourbons and Descants* by A. Riley (Mowbray).

In concluding I take leave to add that our worship would strike a truer and more inspiring note if we sang words that expressed firmer faith in the presence and power of the living Christ. How few hymns are aflame with the conviction that God is not merely 'up in Heaven' but immanent in this world, in the light and shade of nature, and above all in the minds and hearts of His children! We are apt to think of God as far away, of Christ as one who did wonderful things a very long time ago, of the Holy Spirit hardly at all. And yet we have the promise 'Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world', and we pray in a moment of supreme solemnity 'that we may evermore abide in Him and He in us'. God in Christ through the Holy Spirit is around and within us here and now, in all His love and power, just waiting for the co-operation of our faith to do the very works recorded in the Gospels and to save men, soul and body. I would appeal to the younger poets to give us words that will give this truth its rightful place in public worship; and to those responsible for the choice of hymns in our services, to choose only words and tunes that will strengthen and uplift the souls of the worshippers.