Sing With Understanding
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Sacred music can play a vital role in helping to reach men with the Gospel. Not only the melody but its harmonization too plays a part in communicating the character and mood of the Gospel. In this capacity music owes full allegiance to the Word. If the biblical text is more readily understood in its musical setting, the music has fulfilled its mission and the worshiper has been enriched in spiritual experience.

Winfred Douglas, eminent Episcopal church musician, stated one of the concerns set forth by the Archbishop’s Committee in 1951: “The music should be a fitting expression of the Word.”

What kind of music is best suited to elevate the text and convey its meaning? What in a hymn-tune will express the aspiration of the soul?

Great literary expression cannot have the fullest meaning when coupled with music that is mediocre. In setting the character of the text, the tune must be appropriate. There should be a critical examination of quality of melody, harmony, and rhythm. The melody should not be trivial. To enhance the worthy text, the tune must balance it in dignity and reverence.

In looking at musical settings of hymns in denominational hymnals, one occasionally finds some inequities. A “jiggy,” trivial melody has been set to a text that teaches a message of prayer or consecration. Hymns in themselves worthy in thought and sentiment fall short of their usefulness because of their association with mediocre musical settings. For example, Nusbaum’s “His Way With Thee” has a text that could be used following a sermon encouraging Christians to respond to a call of consecration. The tune, however, disrupts the occasion. Even if the tempo of the hymn is slowed to a more serene pace, it tends to become draggy and dull. In this instance the wedding of text and tune is a poor one.

Music which attracts attention to itself detracts from the message of the hymn. The tune is so busy displaying itself that it “upstages” the text. Extreme dissonances can be used to heighten the

meaning of the composition in anthems or other forms of music which are “through-composed.” However, in the strophis forms (hymns, carols), where the same tune is used for all the stanzas, extended dissonances are rather out of place. One stanza may serve well when the meaning of the text is appropriate, but the next stanza may be altogether different in meaning and the music ill-suited to it. Whatever is said must be stated in a concise, straightforward manner of text and tune.

Chromaticism or “sliding chords” may have their place in barbershop music, but in attracting attention to themselves they are unworthy of the greater task of presenting the Gospel. George Duffield’s “Stand Up, Stand Up For Jesus” is a hymn that has wide usage. The stately tune Webb and its harmonization portrays the text effectively. However, the other musical setting to the tune Geibel, with its droll chromatic imitation, is less effective. The singer is distracted from the text by this dominating factor. A proper tune will provide a vehicle for the words without getting in the way. But the text must continually have the predominant position. One begins to see the difficult task of composing an interesting, vital hymn-tune, one which plays a supporting role without becoming the “star” of the setting.

Rhythm is an attribute in music which can lend verve, interest, and a surging quality in any composition. It too, however, can be used to excess, and as such becomes improper in hymn settings. Repetitious syncopations can set a motion in the music which soon becomes toe-tapping or “beat” music. As an example of this, one has only to listen to the Stamps-Baxter type of continuous beat in many of their gospel music selections. The participant, be he singer or listener, is more aware of the beat than he is of presenting a sincere, inspirational message of God. Though the singer of this type of music is sincere in the presentation of the message of the song, the beat of “back-time” continually gets in the way. Because of the intrusion of this repetitious, interrupting rhythm, the message of the hymn is clouded or even lost.

One of the musical innovations in present sacred music is the use of musical styles or idioms which are recognized as secular. When these styles suggest the music of the world and bring to mind the feverish syncopation of jazz and the sensual harmonics of the popular love song—then something is wrong with the standards of our church music. Hymn arrangements which contain these sentimental, crooning harmonies have no place in the sanctuary of the Lord. The feeling seems to exist among some gospel musicians that their type of “pop” entertainment music set to sacred words attracts youth to the church. It may attract the few but not the many. One needs to remember that the church is a sanctuary devoted to the worship of God. There can be no justification for drawing the music of the
theater into the church. Such music is geared to entertainment. Its melodies are cloy with sweetness, its harmonies lush, and its rhythms jaunty. The music of the church seeks to elevate the text and direct the worshiper to a vision of God. "Church music is good not because it is of a certain time or nationality or by a certain composer or school of musicians; nor because it is contemporary and popular; nor because it measures up to secular standards; nor just because it happens to be soft, or loud, or slow and steady or fast or rhythmic." 2 Worthy church music is that which fulfills its mission—reinforcing and portraying the message of the words.

Since the Christian church was founded, her leaders have sought to keep its religious song reverent, dignified, and free from secular or "worldly" association. As a result of the Edict of Milan (313 A.D.) granting toleration to the church, a spiritualized concept of music became known to wider circles. The early church had the foresight to clear away the remnants of ancient pagan musical life. The Christian leaders adopted from the past what was good, revised it, and gave it new spiritual import. "Primitive Italian Christianity had the task of preserving both the purity of the doctrines of faith, and the musical expression of that faith." 3

The liberation of Christianity in the fourth century brought about a rapid growth of the church. "However, it created two problems that at first appeared contradictory; the one was the internal consolidation of the Church’s musical life, with its growing exclusion of secular (pagan) music, the other was the necessary adjustment to the intellectual forces of ancient music and the task of injecting them with the Christian spirit." 4 As the masses began streaming into the church there was grave danger of their falling back into the heathen ways of thinking and doing. The inner spiritual preparation for the faith and its outward musical expression was a dire need of the new Christians. They had to rid themselves of heathen practices and accustom themselves to Christian ways of thinking. Melodies current in pagan use had to be kept from entering into divine service. 5 The early guardians of worship music are to be commended for their wisdom and foresight.

"About the time when Christianity shouldered the task of furthering intellectual progress, writers like Mertinus Capella (5th c.), Boethius (475-524) and Cassiodorus (490-580) produced a summary of ancient musical teaching on the basis of the writings of ancient

4. Ibid., p. 13.
musical theoreticians." The early Greeks held the view that music affected character. Plato stated that if he were allowed to make the songs of a nation, he cared not who made its laws. The Greeks, realizing the power of music, attempted to control the musical activity of the people.

The process of determining what the psychological impact of the music should be was related to the "ethos" concept. "In the interpretation of verse they employed the musical possibilities of singing, using the tetrachord combination with 'mese' so placed as to suggest accurately the mood of the text." Since the theory of ethos taught that different kinds of music produced different effects on the passions and emotions of men, enlightened Greek educators were concerned with the kind of music to which their young people were exposed. As a result, the churches established norms for music in the worship of the church. In the process, "ancient musical practice that could be made to serve the Christian tradition was effectively used. From the fourth century on church leaders handed on to future generations the adaptations of ancient musical theories, but only after sifting it and refurbishing it in Christian fashion." 8

The development of church music culminated first in the collecting, standardizing, and arranging of church melodies by Gregory the Great (590-605). This is a task that modern church leaders too must assume in our age of musical extravagances. Historical perspective discloses the fact that scholars who are trained in the best traditions of musical culture and influences should guide the forms used in the sanctuary of God. Secular or "worldly" influences must be sifted out, and the lofty, inspirational music forms retained.

The musical setting of a congregational hymn should be such as will encourage the participation of the people. The hymn provides an opportunity for the participant to affirm his faith. A hymn setting that is stilted and of a lethargic, plodding character will be reflected in congregational singing. A dull tune never inspires energetic singing. As a member of the Hymnal Committee for the recently published Hymns for Worship, the author can say that every tune was carefully examined for its worthiness and character. The tunes of those hymns that spoke of courage had to "strike fire" in the hearts of the committee members. Appropriate examples of this kind of hymn would include "Soldiers Of Christ, Arise," set to the tune Diademata; "Lead On, O King Eternal," to the tune Lancashire and Marlatt; "'Are Ye Able' Said the Master?" to the tune Beacon Hill.

For hymns that conveyed a spirit of prayer and aspiration, the tune had to stimulate earnestness and a common bond of commitment, as in "Breathe on Me, Breath of God," set to the tune Trentham; "O Master Let Me Walk With Thee," to the tune Maryton; and "Open My Eyes, That I May See," to the tune Scott. No tune was used which seemed to be listless or uncommunicative. No musical setting was accepted which did not complement the text.

There is commonly a close relationship between Christian thought and feeling and the hymnody inspired thereby. As Benson remarks, "Nothing is more futile than a congregational song that does not express the living faith of the congregation and its warmth of feeling." 9

There are churches in America that have founded and nurtured a great singing tradition in their services. One has to attend only one of these services to feel the response of brethren of "like precious faith," when they lift their voices in singing the great hymn literature. This expression of the soul in congregational singing promotes devotion to the cause of Christ and assists in the spreading of the Word.

Each congregational body has its own distinctive worship characteristics. These derive from differences in form of worship, in hymnological heritage, and in cultural and economic backgrounds. Although these factors are to be reckoned with in hymnal compilation, standard denominational hymnals have a substantial number of hymns in common. A majority of hymnals now include the hymn forms of each period of hymnody. The strong German chorale is present. English, Scottish and Genevan psalm-tunes are included. The best of the English hymn-tunes—from those of the Tudor period to the contemporary era—are represented. The Gregorian melody is present, as well as the plaintive folk songs of various countries. As to American gospel hymns, in general only those which show quality of tune and text find a place. The Mennonite Hymnary, for instance, includes six sections representing various hymnic forms. It has standard hymns from ancient and modern sources, Lutheran chorales, metrical psalms, gospel hymns, and choral aids to worship.

In the respected, scholarly hymnal—Hymns Ancient and Modern—the editors express concern for the average congregation's ability to sing hymns belonging to historic periods. "Perhaps it may be well to state that in deciding on the exact form of the melody and the harmony, the Musical Editors have been concerned to provide a setting which should not be too elaborate to be rendered by a congregation supported by a choir of average ability rather than to include a setting which, although perhaps even more beautiful, would

not fulfill this condition."\textsuperscript{10} Extreme ornateness in some of the products of the eighteenth century called for simplification to meet today's need.

In addition to a hymn tune being singable, its range should accommodate the average congregation. For instance, men often find that the tessiture of a hymn is too high for them to sing for any duration of time. The \textit{Hymnal}, a recent publication of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, has lowered the keys of several hymns in order to provide a more comfortable singing range.

Waldo Selden Pratt states that hymn-singing is fitted to serve three general purposes:

First, it is one of the best methods by which a company of people can offer both prayer and praise to God. It is therefore a means of social worship. Second, it is a reactive force on those who engage in it, helping them to define and crystallize their religious ambition. It is therefore a means of spiritual self-culture. Third, it not only draws many persons into a form of united action, so as to declare their actual sympathy, and strengthen their sense of real brotherhood, but at the same time there is exerted through it a decided spiritual influence back and forth among those who act in concert. It is therefore a means of evangelistic pressure upon others.\textsuperscript{11}

Discerning judgment should be exercised in the selection of hymns for service use. A good hymnal provides a topical index on a wide range of material which can be fitted appropriately and effectively into the service. The minister or lay worker should exercise careful judgment in the choice of hymns. The first hymn is usually an objective one, calling the attention of the worshiper to the reality of God's presence in the midst. A hymn may precede the pastoral prayer to assist in setting the mood and thought of the congregation, or it may follow the prayer to prolong its expressive moment. A hymn likewise may precede the sermon to point up its theme. After a sermon that has generated commitment or consecration, the congregation may express itself in a hymn of dedication. When it is clearly understood that the singing has a raison d'être, the whole hearted response of the people will be forthcoming.

The choir can play a vital role in encouraging activity on the part of the congregation. If the choir sings with spirit and enters into the mood of the several acts of worship, the congregation will be animated thereby to a more sincere participation. The organist, too, can do much to promote the spirit of worship through music. He

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Hymns Ancient and Modern (Revised)} (London: William Clowes and Sons, Ltd., 1950), ix.

\textsuperscript{11} Waldo Selden Pratt, \textit{Musical Ministries in the Church} (New York: Schirmer, 1915), p. 58.
must play the hymns with correct phrasing, and through choir and organ undergird congregational singing. By the careful manipulation of the stops, the color tone of the organ is made to support the character of a given hymn. The introductory stanza should inform the people concerning the proper tempo of the hymn.

"Hymn singing will fail in congregations where there is no spiritual earnestness or religious life that craves expression." 12 It can be a tremendous stimulant to Christian experience, however, when it is cultivated with understanding and used with wisdom. One has only to look at its effectiveness in teaching the Gospel to the German Lutherans, or at the Reformed Movement of Calvin with its eventual spread to Holland, England, and the American colonies. "It has often been remarked that the sterling quality of the Scottish character is partly due to the persistent use for generations of the Scottish metrical version of the Psalms, with its singular earnestness and directness." 13 One need not wonder at the peculiar power of Methodism when he remembers that its hymnody, beginning with the genius of Charles Wesley, played a noble role. Even the gospel hymn, if one of better quality and if used discreetly, can be of genuine service in uniting brethren in the rewarding experience of prayer or praise. Sankey, the proponent of the gospel hymn movement in America, speaks of its success when used in congregational singing in Edinburgh, Scotland:

The intense silence that pervaded that great audience during the singing of this song at once assured me that even "human hymns", sung in a prayerful spirit, were indeed likely to be used of God to arrest attention and convey gospel truth to the hearts of men, in bonny Scotland, even as they had in America. 14

The hymn tune and the text should "wed" well, consequently the words and music should be compatible. They must agree in several areas. The declamation of the words should be well studied and stress placed on important words and syllables. Terms designating the Deity, important nouns and words of action, should usually receive the heavy accents. With respect to meaning, the tune should emphasize the text by allowing the important notes to correspond to the important words. A note may be important because of accent, or extra duration, or higher pitch, or a combination of any of these. Likewise, the melody and harmony should portray what the text is trying to say. One may consider the hymn as a miniature "tone poem," as it conveys the mood of the song.

12. Ibid., p. 75.
13. Ibid., p. 66.
The hymn composer should not take his task lightly. He must write what the people can sing to their edification, and in so writing he has to avoid both the temptation and snares that lie in the way of all communal disciplines: Mass hysteria, superficial kindling of irresponsible emotion, and all forms of dishonesty and guile—and also that temptation to educate, to preach something other than the Gospel of Christ, to interpose a musical idol between the worshiper and the altar.  

The words or expressions of Christ and His Gospel are most sacred terms for the Christian. As such, they should be treated with great reverence. The Word is deserving of the best techniques of music composition.

Yet there are those who wilfully or ignorantly insist on adulterating the Word by setting it to secular forms of music. How out of place for churches to blatantly advertize "gospel hootenannys" when a raucous night of song is staged. The performers croon and stamp out the beat, apparently ignorant of the incongruity of wedding the Word to this form of entertaining music.

Only worthy music should be found in the company of the Word. Young people especially should learn to discriminate among the several types of secular music. Wholesome folk and ballad music will often furnish a needed outlet for adolescent expression of energy. In serious moments youth will the more appreciate turning to the great hymns of the Church for strength and inspiration.

Tactful church leaders may well organize special classes or clubs for the study of the different music types. This will result not only in the improvement of musical taste but will also serve to increase one's understanding and appreciation of Christian hymnody.

Another disturbing trend of late is the use of secular tunes for the setting of sacred text. "Carry Me Back to Old Virginy," written by James A. Bland, is a part of the early folk music of America. It has been widely sung and will be immortal in collections of folk music. The text and tune are inseparable, and the mention of either one immediately brings the association of the other. The musical setting reeks of melancholy and nostalgia. Yet several publishers have coupled this tune with the doleful text, "Carry Me Back to Calvary's Mountain." The association here is irreconcilable. In the first place, because of their long association, it is not possible to divorce the text and the tune of "Virginy." Secondly, the tune is sad, homesick, and hardly fitted to elevate this sacred theme. Thirdly, the parallelism in the title of the original folk text and the parodied religious effort is unfortunate. Among other tunes used in

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similar fashion are those from "Old Black Joe," and "On Top of Old Smokey." The western song "You are My Sunshine" has the audacity to become "Christ is My Sunshine." Many more are to be found in commercially-minded copyrighted publications.

If one is disposed to write poems on sacred themes, he will do well to find a fresh, singable tune that will convey the expression of the text. The two can live and grow together as one. On the other hand, a melody which has been associated with a secular text and which has found large acceptance in this regard can hardly be divorced from its secular association.

In the earlier development of sacred music, the church leaders realized the importance of using proper music forms in the sanctuary of God. Pope John XXII, in 1324, emphasized the central position of the liturgical melodies and the restriction of secular compositions and influences. In his decree, he rejected any means of musical composition which expressed contemporary secular art and also any projection into experimental techniques. "New means of composition would be acceptable only after they had been tried and had lost their force in contemporary secular music; only then could they be used to create an ecclesiastical music that was universal, not given to extremes and free from echoes of secular music." 16 For centuries the Church held to this viewpoint.

A composer of a later period who was concerned about the forms of sacred music was Michael Haydn (1737-1806). "Everywhere he endeavored to escape the jaunty, entertainment type of church music and to create a style distinct from the secular media." 17 This purity of style is evident in his hymn-tunes, Lyons (O Worship the King), or Greenland (The Day of Resurrection).

The Church must continually defend its borders, and use only those music forms which bring honor to the words of Christ. There should be a continual sifting process whereby unqualified musical techniques are discarded and only worthy tunes and harmonizations employed in the setting of hymns. Hymns are the media by which the congregation offers prayer and praise. They provide an avenue for the teaching of the truths of the Gospel. In addition, the use of music through hymn singing can help to create right attitudes for Christian living. "Each singing experience can be a time of re-dedication, re-commitment and renewal; each worship service another opportunity to make a decision for the Christian life." 18

The Apostle Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 14:15, "I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also." He

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17. Ibid., p. 170.
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emphasized the importance of understanding not only what he was singing but of being understood by his brethren. Herein lies the value of using the best musical forms for the high calling of singing the Gospel of Christ. Music that is destined to carry the truths of Scripture should be conscious of its sacred duty. It should be dynamic and earnest in its endeavor to inspire sincere participation, thereby achieving a unity of fellowship among believers. The tune and the harmonization should provide a proper setting for the text. The message then will be more readily understood. Salvation will be sought. Christ will become enthroned in the heart of the believer. Music then will have fulfilled its mission.