



How does the choice of tune affect a hymn?

Short Guide No 15: How does the choice of tune affect a hymn?

It is a truism that words and music fit together like a horse and carriage and that each relies on the other for its effect. But in common English parlance hymns are known by their words ('Onward, Christian Soldiers') rather than by their tune names (SAINT GERTRUDE). However, it is usually the tune which remains in the memory and which supports the text. A whole tune can be recalled more readily than several verses of a hymn text.

The links between words and music

There are many instances of hymn texts which are inseparable from their tunes. From the earliest times we have plainsong office hymns, followed by metrical psalms and the great hymns of the Protestant reformation, such as 'Ein feste Burg' (translated *inter alia* as 'A safe stronghold our God is still') and 'Vater unser' (translated, 'Lo, God is here! Let us adore'). Then, from later periods, there are hundreds of texts which have quickly become associated with a particular tune, such as 'Guide me, O thou great Redeemer (CWM RHONDDA), 'Abide with me' (EVENTIDE) and 'Christ triumphant' (GUITING POWER), to name but three. Hymn-like worship songs are usually conceived as a single entity of text and tune, where the musical setting is a unique complement to the text; for instance Graham Kendrick's 'The Servant King' and Stuart Townend's 'In Christ alone'. All these examples illustrate the 'mystic union' between voice and verse.

The history of hymnody also throws up some curious secular connotations of the links between words and music. What we now know as the PASSION CHORALE was originally sung with the secular German words, 'My heart is distracted by a gentle maiden'. Even so, this does not detract from the devotional impact of 'O sacred head' when sung to this tune.

Some advantages and disadvantages of the use of metre

A feature of the hymn as a verse form is that, because of its metrical structure, with strophic repetitions of verses, the same musical material can be repeated for each verse. This simple structure has both advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage is that different sets of words can be sung to the same tune. Indeed, for much of the period up to the mid-nineteenth century, most congregations would have existed on a meagre diet of tunes in standard metres.

A tune from one era can often fit comfortably with a text from a different period. And this potential of a tune to acquire new words is illustrated by parodies of texts, e.g. 'While shepherds washed their socks by night' and some football chants.

An inevitable disadvantage of a strophic structure is that one tune cannot match the complexity of the changing sentiments and moods of several verses in the way that a more extensive musical setting can. When a tune is repeated for each verse one quickly gets to know how it goes, but there is always the risk of musical monotony.

Which is the correct tune to sing?

There are now thousands of hymn tunes, in a great variety of metres and styles, and inevitably, as with texts, only a small number of tunes will continue to be used in today's worshipping communities.

It is not always possible to determine one ‘correct’ tune for a set of words. ‘While shepherds watched’ can be sung to WINCHESTER OLD but equally well to ILKLEY MOOR (CRANBROOK). North American congregations sing ‘O little town of Bethlehem’ to ST LOUIS, not to FOREST GREEN or to Walford Davies’s CHRISTMAS CAROL. The choice of tune is often determined by people’s previous experience; some wedding couples will prefer Monk’s tune ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL to ROYAL OAK. There are texts which have acquired several tunes, e.g. ‘Praise to the holiest in the height’ which can, from British books, be sung to RICHMOND, GERONTIUS, BILLING or CHORUS ANGELORUM (SOMERVELL), each of which encourages a different emotional response in the singer. Sometimes a pairing is peculiar to one denomination; and it could be argued that the same words to another tune are actually a different hymn.

Very occasionally it can be salutary for a congregation to sing familiar words to a different tune, e.g. ‘Amazing grace’ or ‘There is a green hill’ to THE HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN; or even to change to a different tune during the course of a hymn; for instance in ‘Forty days and forty nights’ to sing the last two verses to BUCKLAND instead of AUS DER TIEFE.

Some performance considerations

It must be recognised that although there is a long tradition of congregational singing in Christian worship, community singing, whether by adults or children, is far less common than it used to be. For many people, being expected to stand up and actually sing something together is quite an unnerving experience. Consequently, care is needed both in the selection of material and in its presentation.

The manner in which a tune appears can have a significant effect on its impact and on the perception of words. The tempo, pitch and style of performance suitable to a large congregation in a resonant church would be completely inappropriate in, say, a small gathering in a hospital chapel. Although the pitch adopted in standard hymnbooks suits most occasions, there are times when a lower pitch is more appropriate, especially when hymns are sung unaccompanied.

The accompaniment of a tune should, by its very nature, be unobtrusive. But an insensitive accompaniment, paying little regard to the meaning of the words or the circumstances of the singing, can be a real hindrance. Accompaniments by musicians who play with knowledge and understanding of the words are likely to be more sympathetic to the meaning and spirit of the hymn than accompaniments which are created by mechanical means.

Using metrical indexes

Metrical indexes of hymn books are comprehensive and give a precise indication of the number of syllables to be found in a tune. But when checking that words will fit a particular tune it is always advisable to ensure that the match really does work, and for each verse. Care is needed, for instance, with the tune SLANE, which can be either 10 10 10 10 (dactylic) or 10 11 11 12. It is crucial that the overall message of the text must correspond with that of the music; otherwise the impact of the hymn will be lessened or even distorted.

Writing new texts and tunes

- Authors producing new texts must accept the discipline of writing to a strict metre. An occasional deviation from the metre may work, but too much freedom will make for uncertainty in the singing. New texts are often successfully written to existing tunes.
- Some new tunes have enlivened and enriched familiar words, e.g. CAMBERWELL for ‘At the name of Jesus’, but, in general, new tunes are rarely needed for existing words. There is, however, much demand for contemporary worship material, both words and music, within the traditions of the hymn as a genre.

Postscript

There are many advantages in printing the melody of tunes on service papers or making melody copies of hymn books available. Congregations are more musically literate than one might think and the sight of music helps not only the reading of the music but also an internalisation of the hymn as a whole. In a hymn, voice and verse are, indeed, inseparable.

Ian Sharp – June 2013 – © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland
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