



Hymns On The Air

Treasure No 10: Hymns on the Air by Cyril Taylor: An article from Bulletin No. 41, October 1947

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I have been asked to review the field of hymn-singing on the air, and to say something about the criteria which govern the choice of hymns in religious broadcasts.

As these programmes stand at the moment, no less than thirty hymns are broadcast every week.

1. *The Daily Service* (Home Service, 10.15 a.m.). From the very first this has been one of the foundations of British broadcasting. It contains two hymns, the first being linked with the opening prayers of worship, thanksgiving, or confession, the second with the closing prayers of intercession.

For many years now—at any rate since the publication, in 1937, of *New Every Morning*, the prayer-book of the daily broadcast service—the choice of the hymns in this service has been restricted to those which appear in *H.A.M.* (1916) and *S.P.* (1931): in addition, however, we make a selection of metrical psalms and paraphrases which we know will be particularly appreciated by listeners in Scotland.

There are a number of hymns and tunes in other books which for a long time we have wanted to use in this service. At present, however, we deny ourselves that pleasure because listeners were originally led to expect both hymns to be chosen either from *H.A.M.* or *S.P.*, many of them bought these books, and we feel we ought to keep faith with them.

It is this desire to make a wider range of hymns available to listeners which has prompted the compilation of a new hymn-book which will be available before long, and will be used every day in this broadcast.

Almost every hymn-book draws, both for its words and its music, upon the riches of every-age. A book like *Songs of Syon*, admirably suited to the austere worship of a Religious Community's "daily round," cannot seriously be claimed to meet the needs of the majority of Christians, still less of that great host of people "on the fringe" with whom religious broadcasting is constantly concerned. So in this service we draw upon every type except one: the ancient Office Hymn is not very often represented. There is a reason for this: that type of hymn is most fully at home within a liturgical structure which places the emphasis upon objectivity, austerity, "timelessness." Nobody can doubt for one moment the incalculable value of this liturgical tradition in public worship; in the manifold acts of worship offered by a Religious Community any other framework would soon

become intolerable, and for any and all of us some measure of it is a healthy precaution against the minister's private fads and all unpleasant kinds of sentimentality. Now, the Daily Broadcast Service has a clearly defined structure, but it is not that of public worship: it is suited rather to the ethos of family prayers. The broadcaster, so far as he thinks of the listening audience as well as of God to whom the worship is offered, tries always to fix his mind upon one single listener—perhaps someone bedridden—and imagines himself praying and reading the Bible with that one person. In such a setting it is warmth, intimacy, informality which counts most. It also follows that certain of the more intimate and subjective hymns may rightly be used here, whereas their inclusion in acts of public worship is more questionable.

We often have to omit verses of hymns, owing to the demands of time; but this is generally gain rather than loss. Most hymns are too long, and every verse sung after the moment of artistic wholeness and satiation has been reached can only irritate and depress: the total effect is ruined.

The music in this Daily Service is sung by an unaccompanied octet of men and women—two groups divide between them the weekly course of services—and this fact has an important bearing upon the choice of tunes. A small group cannot “sustain” long verses set to big tunes which sound best when sung slowly and majestically by a large body of voices. Would that this were more clearly realized as a general principle of hymn-singing! It often happens, for instance, that big and elaborate Bach chorales are chosen for village services: it is done with the highest motives: it is known that they are “good music”: it is not known, alas, that they will never “come off” under those conditions. One would not readily choose, for example, at the Daily Service NUN DANKET or EIN' FESTE BURG, or even OLD HUNDREDTH, and big tunes like THORNBURY, LADYWELL, and KING'S LYNN are inappropriate here, because, though they can be sung in four-part harmony, they are essentially unison tunes. Every tune has to be judged on its merits as suitable to the particular conditions under which it is to be sung. We often use, of course, “Jesu, lover of my soul.” “What tune?” “Why ask?”, I can hear the purist reply: “ABERYSTWYTH, of course.” I believe he would be quite wrong. It is a slow mover; it needs a great body of voices for its full effect. We are happy to use HOLLINGSIDE, which we do not despise musically, and which can be sung lightly and effectively by eight unaccompanied voices. “Lead, kindly Light” is another obvious choice for this service. Again, shall we use Harris's ALBERTA? No: we believe that this grand melody demands for its full effect a big unison sweep rather than four-part harmony, and we therefore turn to SANDON which in the studio has a beauty unlikely to be achieved when it is dragged and sentimentalized by a congregation in church.

The choice of hymns and tunes for this service is in the hands of the Religious Broadcasting Department and its Musical Adviser, Dr Thalben-Ball. In making it, we have to bear in mind the nature of the listening “congregation.” It is not made up of members of the Hymn Society! It contains a great many elderly people, not a few of them invalids; there are also many housewives who listen as they go about their household chores. We receive a constant stream of moving letters from listeners who tell us that this short service is to them a spiritual oasis in an otherwise barren life. In face of all this, we cannot adopt completely rigorist criteria of choice; we do, however, try to hold constantly before ourselves our responsibility to set a high standard of choice as well as of performance, and we are fortunate in being able to go a good deal beyond what most churches feel themselves able to do in this regard. It is much easier for us to be adventurous than it is for them.

2. *Sunday Half-Hour* (Light Programme, 9-9.30 p.m.). This programme, which consists of community hymn-singing from various churches and halls all over the United Kingdom, has taken place every Sunday for over seven years. The audience is now greater than it has ever been, and

this bears witness to the fact that hymn-singing is nowadays our national form of folk-music. It is by far the most widely heard of all religious broadcasts, and the reasons are not far to seek. It is, as they say “easy listening”: the singing of familiar hymns arouses all kinds of old associations: the warmth, enthusiasm, and informality of the broadcast has an immediate appeal—it takes the listener out of himself and includes him in that “community” for which his soul cries out in this crowded yet lonely world.

The eight hymns are chosen by those in charge of the broadcast at its various centres, though the list is submitted to the Religious Broadcasting Department, to ensure that there is not an unbearable amount of repetition. Here is the place for those big hymns and tunes which are inappropriate in the quite different conditions of the Daily Service. The standards of choice are also less severe. This is essentially a popular programme, and we are bound to make room for those hymns which are dear to the hearts of the uncritical masses of the various denominations. It does often happen, however, that the more adventurous spirits choose one or two hymns which are less widely known than they ought to be.

Not even in this broadcast, far less in others, would we act upon Miss Inman’s principle that “the place for introducing new hymns is the local church, not the broadcasting system.” We want to try to lead as well as to follow.

3. *Sunday Services* (Home Service, 9.30 a.m. and 7.45 p.m.: Light Programme, 11.30 a.m-12 noon). These come either from the studio or from churches of all denominations. In the case of a studio service each broadcaster makes his choice from whichever book is familiar to him, and we put before him, when necessary, the criteria of choice outlined above under the heading of The Daily Service. When a service comes from a church, the hymns are chosen from the book in use there. If we are presented with a hymn which seems to us thoroughly unworthy of use in Christian worship we discuss the matter with the minister, and we always meet with understanding and co-operation.

4. *Think on These Things* (Light Programme, Sunday, 10.45-11 p.m.). In this programme an experienced broadcaster takes three or four hymns and speaks about their meaning. They are sung by a soprano and a tenor, with organ accompaniment.

This programme has met with a wide and enthusiastic response, which shows that people are more ready than is sometimes supposed to “think on” the meaning of the words they sing.

Hymns are, for most people their primary source of theology, and this broadcast, I believe, may well be a more potent means of evangelism and instruction than most sermons and readings from the Bible.

Such, at present, is the field of hymn-singing on the air. It is a wide one, and the responsibility of the Religious Broadcasting Department in this regard, as in many others, is heavy. May I say how grateful we shall be for any comments made in future numbers of this Bulletin which will help us to discharge it more worthily.

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