When Words Call the Tune

Treasure No 68: When Words Call the Tune by Ian Sharp:
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There are age-old associations between what John Milton so aptly termed ‘voice and verse’. The hymn is just one of many genres that link words with music, and my specific brief is to consider the mutual impact of words on music in the context of the singing of Christian hymns. Hymns are communal, performed items of choral music and in an act of worship you are unlikely to hear the words of hymns without any music. It is surprising, then, that although words and music have, individually, been given much scholarly attention, the creative relationship between the two has received less scrutiny. Some standard texts, such as J. R. Watson’s *The English Hymn* (1997) refer to the hymn in performance, but only in general terms. Even a masterly study of the musical features of tunes, such as John Wilson s ‘Looking at hymn tunes: the objective factors’ (in *Duty and delight: Routley remembered*, 1985) which is strong on musical analysis, is surprisingly reticent on the influence of text on tune. Perhaps such a stance is inevitable, for when in common parlance we speak of a hymn we normally mean the words by themselves. Tunes are often referred to as, for example, ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’ and not ST. GERTRUDE. But it takes two to tango, and in a hymn you can’t have words without the music. My task, then, is to attempt to define the essential features of hymns as they are sung. I will also explore some of the challenges facing the composer of hymn tunes. Inevitably, my illustrations will be limited—to hymns in the English language, and to a fairly traditional repertoire of hymnody.

Take Henry Vaughan’s ‘Peace’, as it appears in Donald Davie’s *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse*. This poem exists in its own right and is intended to be read, silently or aloud. But when set to music and text can acquire different shades of interpretation, as in Parry’s ‘My soul, there is a country’, a motet from his ‘Songs of Farewell’. Here, seventeenth-century words are set to music written in the years immediately after the first word war, in what some would say is a perfect union of meaning and metre. By way of contrast, let’s consider another musical setting; the same words, but this time set to a hymn tune. I take the example from the *BBC Hymn Book* where the tune is called CHRISTUS DER IST MEIN LEBEN. It is also known as VULPIUS or PASTOR, and it appears in several standard books. What we see on the page of the hymn book is slightly different from the layout of the original poem. The words are now numbered as verses, and above the tune are the numbers 76 76. But when we test out the number of syllables in the first two lines of the first verse we get not 76 but 75. Something’s adrift here, as we might find out when we sing the verse, for it’s difficult to fit the words ‘Far beyond the stars’ to the tune. This is why editors have had to find various ways of overcoming this little metrical ambiguity.

My soul, there is a country
Far beyond the stars.

Where stands a winged sentry
All skilful in the wars.

What are the significant differences between Parry's choral piece and the hymn? We can note how the words are given different emphases in the two versions. In the through-composed anthem every word is given its own interpretation. And indeed, Parry repeats 'my soul', at the beginning (some would say thus stressing a personal response very early on). In the strophic hymn a regular metre is preserved, or imposed, but, inevitably, with the same music being used for five verses, many of the nuances of the meaning of individual words are lost. A comparison of the aspects of performance brings out the following differences. An anthem has to be sung by a trained choir. It can be appreciated, passively, by listeners, and these days, mostly through recordings. A hymn, though, is most likely to be sung by a congregation. The pleasure is in taking part, not necessarily in listening.

So what is our overall verdict on these two settings of the same text? A strophic hymn is more likely to be aesthetically neutral. It will carry the language of the words but not always the full sense of the meaning. By way of contrast, the impact of a through-composed anthem is potentially artistically complex and evocative. The strophic hymn is utilitarian in function, and is, by some criteria, of lesser value than a choral piece. When sung by a congregation, though, a hymn might, by virtue of its very neutrality, have many advantages. It can leave more to the imagination of the singers and enable them to concentrate more on the words. There are also practical considerations, for in a hymn-singing context large numbers are able to join in the singing; people who, incidentally, might recall the text, even many years later. Few anthems can claim to be known and internalised by thousands! A hymn can equally well be sung by a one singer or a small group, in harmony or unison. It can be unaccompanied or accompanied by diverse instruments; and it can be transposed to a different key, without insulting the composer!

On balance, then, a strophic hymn has much to commend it in a liturgical context, and as we will see later, hymn tunes themselves can have many artistic merits. A technical analysis of the music of a hymn tune will necessarily include several aspects: metre; rhythm; melody; harmony; texture; structure; as well as the overall mood of the music. Above all, a tune must be singable and memorable. Many of these elements are, as John Wilson has suggested, 'objective' factors, yet all are influenced by culture, language and religious conventions. The style of hymn-singing, in, say, Nigeria, reflects national and cultural considerations, and is very different from what we might find in Newcastle or Nova Scotia. Hymn Tunes, then, might be simple in form, but their potential impact is out of all proportion to their brevity.

I now wish to consider the close relationship between words and music in relation to two broad categories, mood and metre. First, mood. The overall mood created by the union of text and tune is more than the sum of the parts. We all have views on the suitability of any match of text and tunes and not surprisingly there are many shades of opinion, determined by our personal, cultural and liturgical expectations. This is characteristic of the richness of the hymn-singing experience. Some tunes are inextricably linked to their original words, and continue to be so. For instance, the ancient plainsong tunes, those which have no named composer, have the feeling of being created simultaneously with their texts; and there is something about the union of sense, words and syllables, which is uniquely fashioned. So, the plainsong tune TE LUCIS ANTE TERMINUM is a genuine partner for the mood and meaning of the Latin text for the office of Compline. And this tune will also go with any translations of the original text, with any infelicities being the result of some slight unevenness that can occur when one language is used to interpret the phrases of another. (There is also the different issue of what *The English Hymnal* rather quaintly describes as 'modern tunes' being sung for these texts. When harmonic or 'modem' music is used the overall impact reflects the mixture of styles.)

As far as perfect unions go, one would expect that any setting in which the words and the music are written by the same person would show a unity of intention, if not an equally matched technical competence. In many of the hymns and songs of Graham Kendrick we find an unmistakable single-mindedness which is a defining characteristic of this idiom; 'Meekness and majesty', 'The Servant King', 'Shine, Jesus shine'. The words and music fit together like a hand in the glove. Inevitably, though, authors who are also successful composers are very much in the minority. (At our Leicester Conference we enjoyed singing Basil Bridge's words, 'This is the truth we hold' to his own tune HARROLD, written for *Rejoice and Sing* (1991) as a worthy alternative to the tune LITTLE CORNARD.)

By far the greatest number of hymn texts are sung to tunes which were composed independently of the words. And those texts which are strictly metrical and can be given a strophic interpretation are structured in such a way that they can be sung to several different tunes. This fact along makes hymn-singing distinctive. Admittedly, there are some famous secular poems and verses that have been given many different musical settings over the years; 'Oh mistress mine' comes to mind. But a hymn book contains hundreds of examples of texts that can form open-ended partnerships with diverse musical interpretations. It is therefore almost axiomatic that the musical settings will superimpose a mood which is distinctive and sometimes even at odds with the original text.

Some matches seem to be made in heaven. Here are some more, chosen almost at random from the repertoire of strophic hymnody. EVENTIDE for 'Abide with me ; ST ANNE for 'O God, our help in ages past'; AMAZING GRACE for 'Amazing Grace'; FOREST GREEN for 'O little town'. But, wait a moment, I hear you say—surely Americans sing 'O little town' to ST LOUIS. And what about KINGSFOLD, Barnby's BETIILEHEM and Walford Davies' two tunes for those words—WENGEN and the carol version of 'O Little Town'? It seems that one text can sometimes have several eminently satisfactory marriage partners, with each union emphasising a different kind of relationship. This fact is well-known to editors of books and to those who select hymns for worship. Members of congregations also have strong views on the subject, but, sadly usually only when 'they sang, or played the *wrong* tune for those words'! A tune can alter not only the impact of individual words in a text but also the whole meaning. In an article in *The Hymn,* for Jan 2002, Vol. 53. No. 1, Kenneth R Hull examines 'Text, Music and Meaning in Congregational Song'. He gives a lucid analysis of the links between music and language with particular reference to strophic song, as an art song and as a hymn. He takes as his main illustration the text, 'Amazing Grace' and its musical setting to four different tunes; NEW BRITAIN [AMAZING GRACE], ANTIOCH, THE THIRD TUNE [TALLIS], and LONDON NEW. He demonstrates how contrasting musical settings can bring out new meanings in John Newton's words. All tunes are a metrical best fit, yet each has a strong character which coalesces with the text in a special way.

We can all quote instances of the impact that music has on words, sometimes in strange ways. One instance of an unfortunate liaison is Henry Lyte's beautifully crafted words, 'God of mercy, God of grace', traditionally sung to Henry Smart's tune HEATHLANDS. This text was given a 1960's 'waltz tempo' makeover in John Glandfield's CRESCENT ROAD; a good intention, I would say, but inappropriate for these nineteenth-century words, with their sedately-fashioned phrases and rhymes.

I now offer a far-fetched illustration, just to make the point that the choice of music really does matter. Imagine that, as an editor of a new anthology of hymns and songs for children you consider that there is still value in promoting Reginald Heber's 'By cool Siloam's shady rill'. But your market research shows that BELMONT is too languorous a melody for twenty-first century children, so you choose THE LINCOLNSHIRE POACHER as the set tune. Yes, take it fast—two in a bar—to appeal to the young!

By cool Siloam's shady rill
How sweet the lily grows!
How sweet the breath, beneath the hill.
Of Sharon's dewy rose!

Lo! Such the child whose early feet
The paths of peace have trod,
***WHOSE** secret heart with influence sweet*
Is upward drawn to God.

Perhaps my illustration is not really all that absurd, but I think it serves to show two things. First, and most importantly, that one has to be extremely careful when matching words with music, especially for public worship. The mood and the associations of the music will make or mar the words. And second, that it is not good enough merely to seek a tune by consulting a metrical index. I will return to this point later. There is no one formula for the perfect match between voice and verse, but in general terms an empathy of literary and musical styles is required; with equal portions of the common touch, artistic integrity and inspiration! A tall order! I give another instance of one such perfect union: Michael Saward's 'Christ triumphant' as sung to John Barnard's GUITING POWER. This union is given the blessing of the Royal School of Church Music in its *75th Anniversary and Resource Book* for 2002, complete, and indeed crowned, with a celebratory descant.

At this point I am going to risk another note of frivolity, and demonstrate how ecclesiastical tunes might be put to secular uses. Why (to adapt a phrase) should the church have all the good tunes! Not football songs but some words by James Reeves. I've discovered that this little verse will go to ST MARGARET, with very slight adjustments!

The King sent for his wise men all
To find a rhyme for W;
When they had thought a good long time
But could not think of a single rhyme,
'I'm sorry,' said he, 'to trouble you.'

It goes without saying that merely singing these words to a hymn tune does not fashion them into a hymn. Tunes, by themselves cannot do this.

Talking of rhymes, there are some really atrocious ones in hymnody. Bad rhymes are even more obvious if the words of a hymn are said, and not sung. (From time to time I participate in the said version of the Morning Office according to the Roman Catholic rite, in which there is a hymn at the beginning. Said, and not sung, this can appear most bizarre.) Music has the ability to diminish the impact of many an unfortunate rhyme. But in this connection we might care to note David Wilbourn's 'Diary' in the *Church Times* for 4 June 2002 which has a section entitled 'Trim the hymns'. He explains that he has been reading through *Common Praise* in its entirety.

> By the time I'd overdosed on its 628 hymns, I was left pondering what a very odd activity hymn-singing is. Surely hymns are the oral version of stained-glass windows, their memorable and usually patronising rhymes aimed at instilling doctrine into the illiterate masses.
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> What, then is their purpose in a very different society, which has unlimited access to the written word? Isn't the most profound theology best expressed by blank verse,
> and rendered jejune by having to scan? Is God happy with being condemned to rhyme with sod for all England's hymn-singing eternity?

What. I wonder, is our own reply to this criticism? Are the rhymes of hymnody so off-putting, or are they there as part of a tradition which helps people to remember words? Of course, there are many ingenious ways of getting words to scan. As an illustration of an unusual and clever rhyme I would like to quote the word 'Josephine', which Elizabeth Cosnett rhymes with 'love could mean' in her hymn about Josephine Butler (in Elizabeth Cosnett's *Hymns for Everyday Saints*, Stainer and Bell. 2001). In my short metre tune, ALLERTON, set to these words. I have tried to match the spirit as well as the metre of the words, with music which is traditional and yet, I hope, memorable. I have deliberately written 'joined up' lines of music, to fit the sense of the words.

For God's sake let us dare
To pray like Josephine.
Who felt with Christ the world's despair
And asked what love could mean.

Clearly, central to our discussion of words 'calling the tune' are the sometimes competing claims of words and music. Which, indeed, are the more important? Richard Strauss took up this issue in his opera *Capriccio* which is a dramatised conversation piece on whether words or music are of greater importance in opera. What of the words and music in hymns? Let's consider some well-known words. Charles Wesley's 'Love divine'. Do we associate these words with a tune as we read them? I suggest that we do, and that is one reason why we can remember the words.

(At this point in the talk a little experiment was conducted. Hymn Society members were asked to sing 'Love Divine' to two tune—HYFRYDOL and BLAENWERN—not quite simultaneously, but alongside each other. Both tunes are Welsh and in a similar musical metre. The singers started with one and alternated with the other tune when the word 'change' was called out! Although everyone knew both tunes, each tune had such a strong character that it was surprisingly difficult to move over to the next phrase of the melody at the appropriate time. The point was made that tunes are extraordinarily evocative and powerful and, when sung communally, work in an almost magical way on the intellect, the emotions, and they remain in the memory, like an indelible dye.)

So much for the mood of tunes; now for a discussion about aspects of metre and the technicalities facing composers and those who place tunes with words. A text with several verses set to one tune—a strophic setting—needs to have a regular and predictable number of syllables and stresses, yet authors do not always appreciate the fact that this must be so. Published material usually obeys these basic conventions, yet there are still instances of unfortunate accentuations, some of which we take for granted. Consider the words 'The strife is o'er, the battle done'. The natural stresses are these: 'The **strife** is **o'er**, the **battle done**', certainly not '**The** strife is o'er' as sung by thousands every Easter to GELOBT SEI GOTT. The accents of the original Latin 'Finita jam sunt praelia' sit comfortably with the tune, and Francis Pott did his best with the English translation, but we are still left with a bumpy ride at the start. At the same season of the year the music of ST ALBINUS has for generations encouraged us to believe that 'Jesus lives no longer now'! Unless, though, we do as the music copy bids us in *Ancient and Modern* (Standard Edition) and observe the pause over the third note in H. J. Gauntlett's tune! The change of just one word can upset the natural flow of the music; the metre might still be correct but the sense is wrong. We find that in *The English Hymnal* we sing, to ST FULBERT, 'and **crushed** the serpent's head', but the compilers of *Ancient and Modern* think fit to give us the inelegant 'cru**shing** the serpent's head'.

These are small points, but considering the number of times that a set of words might be sung to a tune, it is not surprising that any little flaws of metre and rhetoric begin to jar. It is far from easy to write a hymn text, and, in some respects one has to be more than a mere poet to be a good hymn writer. Here is the last stanza of Ted Hughes' poem 'Carol', written, as the author indicates, to the tune of 'Once in royal David's city':

Then God touched the little atom
And the altered heavens cried:
'What was Danger shall be Beauty
And the atom be man's bride:
And the frailty of her defenses
Bring man's iron to its senses.

These are noble and powerful words but just try singing the last two lines! It's obvious that a congregation would have difficulties, for the ending of IRBY requires a 77 or 88, not a 97 (or 8). I do not have time to dwell on the intricacies of metres, feet, and rhetoric. In this connection I can do no better than refer readers to the late Bertram Bamby's *In Concert Sing: concerning hymns and their usage* (Canterbury Press. 1996) which demonstrates a classical scholar's insights into the relationship between voice and verse. I also recommend David Wright's article in our own *Hymn Society Bulletin* 232, Vol. 16, No.l 1, June 2002. on 'The Many Mysteries of Metre'. If you want to know the difference between iambic (ti **tum**) and and trochaic (**tum** ti) look no further! Although one should start with counting up the number of syllables for each verse, there is much more to fitting a tune to words than this. I must here mention one particular pitfall which still causes unnecessary rhythmical trauma in the pews, SLANE comes in two versions, 10 10 10 10 and 10 11 11 11, and woe betide any accompanist who plays the wrong one! Have you, like me, experienced this unseemly confusion?

Music, I would claim, can do much to overcome the idiosyncrasies of verse, but not without some tensions on the way. The strong character of BENSON, of irregular metre fame, has taken countless singers through the potential metrical minefields of 'God is working his purpose out': Vaughan Williams' SINE NOMINE just gets away with 'The King of glory passes on his way': and Holst's CRANHAM still trips up many a Christmas chorister with 'Yet what I can I give him'. Some worship songs from the 1970's and later are difficult to perform because of their very free use of metre. Their understandable desire to echo the words of scripture, verbatim, can make it almost impossible for those not already familiar with the song to fit the words of the tune. Suzanne Toolan's words and music for 'I am the Bread of life' are a case in point, and, from a practical standpoint, such material is better performed by a music group, not by a congregation unfamiliar with the song. But perhaps singers have more resilience that I give them credit for!

Of course, unusual metres in the words do not necessarily imply difficulties in the music. Music can, in fact, stress almost any word in a text, even in a simple strophic setting. Read over any couple of lines from a hymn text: for instance. 'Ye holy angels bright who wait at God's right hand', emphasising just one word. Now try stressing a different word. Tunes can do this, accentuating certain notes by rhythmical or melodic position, or by harmonic support. So the OLD 100TH gives us '**All** people that on **earth do dwell**', whereas the same words set to MELCOMBE would come out as 'All **peo**ple that on **earth** do dwell'.

There are some metres that appear to be awkward, or unusual, yet when the words are clothed with music everything proceeds smoothly. Take the metre, 7777 as an illustration. Each line sounds, in musical terms, more like 1234567(8). i.e. the final syllable of each line is lengthened, to make a balanced musical phrase. Try singing BUCKLAND to numbers in this way, and you will find that the final 7 in each line will be a long note. As an illustration of what I might call 'false friends'—that is to say metres and tunes that appear to match, but do not do so in practice—I invite you to look at these words by Andrew Pratt and try singing them to BUCKLAND.

Let us celebrate this life,
Sing thanks to God for living;

All creation's gift and prize
Remembered in the giving.

Nicholas Williams, the commissioning editor at Stainer and Bell, asked me to try my hand at writing an original tune. I could not crack this one at first! And then I realised that lines one and three were '**tum** tees' (**troch**ees), and lines two and four were 'tee **tums**' (i**ambs**). Surely the metre would be better notated as 14 14 (irregular)? My tune MERE, for these words, can be found in Andrew Pratt's *Whatever Name or Creed* (Stainer and Bell. 2002). I have, as it happens, set quite a number of words with unusual metres, and in our *Act of Praise* (July 2002) the selectors kindly included my tune BURGESS HILL, written for Martin Leckebusch's words, 'For riches of salvation'. The metre comes out at 7575 7777, so my tune is probably a 'one off'. The words are not difficult to set because they have a strong metrical flow and the stresses are consistent for each verse.

In my journey through the shared territory of words and music there are several areas that I have left uncovered. I have not dealt with the purely musical significance of tunes, or with the many ways in which tunes have influenced words; as in Holst's music for 'I vow to thee my country' or the use of the Eric Coates' DAMBUSTERS MARCH for Richard Bewes' words. 'God is our strength and refuge'. I have not had time to cover many of the intricacies of metre which have proliferated since the eighteenth century. Neither have I considered more extensive musical settings, such as tunes which repeat words (as in the ILKLEY MOOR version of 'While shepherds watched'). Performance considerations merit much fuller treatment—the tempo, pitch and setting of tunes. Even the look of the words and music on the printed page or overhead slide have an influence on people's perceptions of the ease or difficulty of singing. And the cultural, social, theological and ecclesiological dimensions of hymn singing merit much further investigation. When words call the tune there are indeed a thousand, thousand songs to sing. And so, by way of a final illustration, I commend a tune which was written in 1969 for James Montgomery's words, 'Songs of praise the angels sang'. The tune is John Wilson's LAUDS, in a triple metre. We can compare it with the more four-square and predictable NORTHAMPTON, an alternative tune. Note the long notes in the fourth line of each verse of John Wilson's tune—a distinctive feature. In the version in *Hymns and Psalms* (1983) there is a made-to-measure Descant, yet another instance of a composer putting his technique to good use. I have chosen this hymn for several reasons. First, because of the apposite meaning of the words themselves, as we sing our 'Songs of Praise'. Second, as a tribute to John Wilson, whose work with and for hymnody has done so much to enhance people's enjoyment and understanding of the art and craft of hymn writing. And third, as a telling instance of the flexibility of the strophic form of the hymn, whereby different tunes can fit happily with the same words. As we sing this hymn we can reflect on the potential of music to bring out the meaning of a text, through metre, mood, structure and interpretation. A hymn can be both personal and communal; it can exist in performance and also in the memory of performance; it can flourish in the humblest of circumstances and in the grandest of liturgies. And in words and music hymns do indeed point us to the songs of heaven.

Saints below in heart and voice,
Still in songs of praise rejoice,
Learning here by faith and love.
Songs of praise to sing above.