



Finding Out About Hymns

This topic can be addressed from various angles such as hymns in general, specific hymns and the use of hymns in worship. The relevant resources do, however, overlap.

FINDING OUT ABOUT HYMNS GENERALLY

Online resources

The leading digital resource is *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*, edited by J.R. Watson and Emma Hornby (<https://hymnology.hymnsam.co.uk/>). A paid subscription grants access to a wide range of articles, some general, many specific to individual hymns and others biographical.¹

Printed resources

Recent books well worth reading include J.R. Watson's *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* (Clarendon Press, 1997) and three volumes by Erik Routley which first appeared around 1980. *A Panorama of Christian Hymnody* shows, with examples, the development of various streams within hymnody; the book was updated and expanded by Paul A. Richardson (GIA Publications, 2005). *An English-Speaking Hymnal Guide* provides detail on many hymns used in the UK and the USA; this too was expanded, by Peter Cutts (GIA Publications, 2005). Completing the trio, *The Music of Christian Hymns* (GIA Publications, 1981), is a review of the history of the music of hymns. It has not been revised, but Paul Westermeyer's *Let the People Sing: Hymn Tunes in Perspective* (GIA Publications, 2005) also provides an extensive study of the hymn tune, its history and its use.

Various other books focus more on specific genres or periods. Examples include *The Eighteenth-Century Hymn in England* by Donald Davie (CUP, 1993); Ian Bradley's *Abide With Me: The World of Victorian Hymns* (reissued, Faber & Faber, 2010); and *Welsh Hymns and their Tunes* by Alan Luff (Stainer & Bell, 1990). At a less academic level, the power and potential of hymns is explored in Brian Castle's *Sing a New Song to the Lord* (DLT, 1994); for the broader context of church music, *O Sing Unto the Lord: A History of English Church Music* by Andrew Gant (Profile, 2015) is excellent.

Mention must also be made of the major historical reference resource for English-language hymns, the volume long known to students of hymnody as 'Julian': *A Dictionary of Hymnology* by John Julian, first published in 1892, revised up to 1907 but reprinted as recently as the 1980s; second-hand volumes can still be found for sale. Julian's work has some 40,000 entries, but nothing newer than his own era, since when thousands of hymns have, of course, been written, while many hymns sung in Julian's day have fallen out of use.

FINDING OUT ABOUT SPECIFIC HYMNS AND THEIR AUTHORS

Key questions here include: where can this hymn be found? What is its definitive version? What tunes are set to these words or what words to this tune? Who were the authors and how did the text and tune come to be written and to be paired? In many cases the *Canterbury Dictionary* will have the answers. Other resources fall into three types: anthologies, companions and indexes.

Anthologies

Here the reader is at the author's mercy as to which hymns are covered and which excluded. A good selection is found in J.R. Watson's *An Annotated Anthology of Hymns* (OUP, 2002), covering 250 hymns; Ian Bradley's *The Book of Hymns* (Random House, 2000) has 150. Other books cover

¹ Use of a corporate subscription is currently one of the benefits of membership of The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

different selections, sometimes focusing on the story behind each hymn rather than providing an analysis of its theology or language or details of its usage over the decades.

Companions

A 'companion' is, in this context, a reference work written to accompany a particular hymn book, giving additional details of that book's contents and contributors. Examples accompanying current hymnals include *Exploring Praise!* by Christopher Idle (2 volumes; Praise Trust, 2006, 2007); *Companion to Church Hymnal Fifth Edition* by Edward Darling and Donald Davison (The Columba Press, 2005); and the *Companion to 'Rejoice and Sing'* (Canterbury Press, 1999). However, changing times have rendered hymnal companions very much a niche product and in many cases none has been produced for the latest hymn book in a denomination or tradition; but Companions to older hymn books or from other denominations still have much to offer.

Indexes

HymnQuest (<https://hymnquest.com/>), a database developed by the Pratt Green Trust, contains the full text of over 34,000 hymns (often listing published variations) and lists many others, from over 500 books. The main focus is on the more recent hymnody of the British Isles; use is by subscription and some versions include the capability to download material. Lists of the contents of selected hymn books are also available, as are brief biographies of many composers and authors. Originally a CD-ROM, HymnQuest is now evolving into an online resource with enhanced capabilities.

Hymnary.org (<https://hymnary.org/>) describes itself as 'a comprehensive index of hymns and hymnals'. The Cyberhymnal (<http://www.hymntime.com/tch/>) contains texts and tunes (often with instrumental midi files) for many hymns, plus brief biographical details of authors; newer, more song-like items are included but some details have not been updated since the early 2000s. Both these sites have an American rather than a British focus. For older tunes, see The Hymn Tune Index (hymntune.music.uiuc.edu) which boldly claims to include 'all hymn tunes printed anywhere ... with English-language texts up to 1820'.

FINDING OUT ABOUT USING HYMNS IN WORSHIP

None of this detail has much value until the hymns identified are used in the church's worship (in its broadest sense, including prayer and instruction as well as praise). Recommended reading for wide-ranging practical advice on using hymns, leading choirs and enabling congregations to sing includes *The Singing Thing Too* by John L. Bell (GIA Publications, 2007); *Resounding Body: Building Christlike church communities through music* by Andy Thomas (Sacristy Press, 2020); and *Assist Our Song: Music ministries in the local church* by Douglas Galbraith (St Andrew Press, 2021).

On the question of which hymns to choose to accompany particular lectionary readings, other Bible passages or service themes, the Royal School of Church Music (<https://www.rscm.org.uk/>) publishes the quarterly planner *Sunday by Sunday* which suggests hymns and songs relevant to the 'Common Worship', Revised Common and Roman lectionaries. Similar suggestions (with traditional hymns, contemporary songs and Iona / Taizé-style material) can be found at the subscription-based Roots Explored website (<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/>); see also the Methodist site, Singing the Faith Plus (<https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/singing-the-faith-plus/>).

FINALLY ...

If none of the above provides you with enough information ... have you thought of joining The Hymn Society, and drawing on the shared knowledge, wisdom and curiosity of its membership?

MARTIN LECKEBUSCH – July 2023 – © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland
Ref HSSG29. For more in this series, see the web site below.

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For anyone who enjoys, sings, plays, chooses, introduces, studies, teaches or writes hymns ...

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