

SELECTING THE RIGHT TUNE (2)

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It seems to me there are three minimal requirements for acceptable psalmody: an appropriate tune, sung in the right key, with a sense of rhythm. The lack of any of these is enough to undermine a singing irretrievably. This discussion will focus on the first of these three. In all I say please be assured that I recognise the diversity of the Free Church. We are not a large church but there are considerable differences of situation, culture and sociology from congregation to congregation. In particular, I don't forget the noble commitment of small congregations with limited resources. Inevitably I must generalise - but always bearing in mind the need for adaptation to local circumstances.

Using the Recommended Tunes

The first big generalisation I shall make - indeed the main thrust of all I shall say is that, for the responsibility of selecting the right tune, help is at hand. Both of our psalters contain tune recommendations for each psalm - in some cases for each phase of the psalm. Many of these recommendations represent time-honoured tradition; others are the result of careful consideration and re-consideration by the editors. But how widely are these recommendations followed?

We tend to be unaware of the peculiar things about the Free Church because we are so used to them; and none is more peculiar than the fact that there are places where the tunes that are sung are not those matched to the psalms in the psalter, but what amounts to a selection of the precentors' favourites. How did we get into this unhelpful eccentricity? It doesn't happen in any other church - unless of course, the Reformed churches that are even smaller than our own. The reason for this oddness seems obvious enough: we never really stopped to think what we were doing. This discussion opener is therefore a plea to do some serious thinking about the way we conduct our psalmody. It is long overdue.

As soon as we think about it we must surely realise that the matching of tunes to the words that are sung in worship is a responsibility way beyond the competence of a local precentor. Certainly, all my life, I have never considered myself competent to do it. And why does it not happen in any other church? Do our precentors have such a profound knowledge of music and of the psalms that they are able to do what the leaders of the praise in other churches never take on themselves? The advantages of following the tune recommendations in our psalters are not hard to identify:-

- They encourage the use of a wider repertoire. The repeated use of a limited selection of tunes has a deadening effect on people's singing. A wider selection will tend to refresh and enliven their singing.
- Singing a wider variety of tunes serves to highlight the range of the Book of Psalms.
- It would obviate the sad mismatches of words and tune which we have all experienced from time to time and which can be so damaging to the spirit of a service.
- A tune helps to imprint words on the memory. The association of a particular tune with any given psalm helps us to retain the spirit-inspired words we sing. This invaluable aid to memory is greatly weakened by the 'pick'n mix' approach to tune

selection.

Are these not sufficient reasons to support the view that the single step of generally adopting the choice of tunes given in our psalters would have a transforming effect on the psalmody of many of our congregations? Their worship would be enriched and their singing might become an attraction rather than a problem to those from outside our church.

Cultivating Discernment

While most situations are covered by my general recommendation there may still be occasions when a precentor is thrown back on his own judgement: e.g. when the minister chooses two portions of the same psalm and only one of the tunes given in the psalter is known to the congregation. A discerning precentor could be expected both to see the value of the psalter recommendation and to make a wise choice when he has to use his own judgement.

Cultivating such discernment is clearly a matter of considerable importance. In our tradition generally two people are involved in leading public worship: the minister and the precentor. We put ministers through an increasingly rigorous training, but we make no training requirement for precentors - an anomaly which will no doubt be addressed in other sessions.

Beyond that it may be said that the wider a precentors' experience of music and especially the music of metrical psalmody, the more likely he is to make discerning choices. The sad fact is that there are many excellent tunes even in our traditional psalter which are largely unknown in our congregations. Not only are congregations being short-changed when they could be enjoying a much more varied and stimulating repertoire, we have also failed to give them a feel for the distinctive quality of metrical psalmody. Three aspects of our current situation call for comment.

1) A neglected heritage

The measure of our neglect is easily enough demonstrated. We are used to doing most of our singing in Common Metre, a practice started in the Scottish Psalters of 1615 and 1635. Our traditional psalter contains twelve tunes from these sources: ABBEY, CAITHNESS, CULROSS, DUNDEE, DUNFERMLINE, ELGIN, GLENLUCE, LONDON NEW, MARTYRS, WIGTOWN, YORK. How many of these are regularly sung in our congregations?

I could continue on similar lines through later centuries showing that while, of course, we do continue to sing a considerable number of the historic psalm tunes, far too many have been forgotten. The character of our repertoire has also been diluted by the introduction of other influences - for example the Methodistic, 19th century American hymnody, Victorian sentimentality. Too much of what has passed for psalmody in our congregations has virtually been a contradiction of the central ethos of our church.

If that observation surprises you or seems to stretch credulity you only need to dip into the various histories of church music in Scotland to find an explanation. For many long years congregational praise was generally in a sad state. Singing itself was much improved in both the Free Church and the Church of Scotland in the second half of the nineteenth century, but after 1900 the small minority who adhered to the Free Church obviously lacked the musical leadership to be aware of - never mind appreciate - and foster a re-discovery of the rich musical heritage of metrical psalmody. What had

happened in effect was we had lost touch with our roots and, in spite of all the efforts of the Psalmody Committee in the last thirty years, we still have some way to go to recover the situation. Does it matter? There may be some who don't very much care. My response to that kind of attitude would be to ask, "What is the point of the Free Church?" I liked the way someone much younger than myself put it to me some years ago. She said, "The Free Church still has something to say." The Free Church does have something distinctive to say, and if you believe that is important one of the ways of saying it is by valuing our musical heritage.

2) *An obscured heritage*

Musical naivety is no more to our credit than any other kind of naivety, and as with the other kinds, is always liable to do more damage to the cause we represent than we would ever expect. The Free Church still has something to say, but in our music are we saying it or are we obscuring it? Without a doubt we are always saying something when we sing - both in the way we sing and in what we sing. Do we realise what impression our singing makes on people who haven't spent all their lives in the Free Church?

Does habitually slow singing, for example, not convey to them the impression we are only half-alive? Did you know that the Puritans used to describe the tune OLD 100th as 'a lively jocund air'? Matthew Henry in his biography of his father describes how he used to sing the psalms in family worship. "He sang the psalms and he sang them quick." The vigorous 18th century psalm tune ST STEPHEN with its well-sprung rhythm is exactly the kind of tune we should be singing, but how often have you heard it sung in a way that shows no appreciation of its real character? Have you considered the fact we may send out the message that our gospel is just for simple-minded folk by singing the corny, jingly tunes which are still not absent from our repertoire? Or what about rather sentimental tunes, or the over-sentimentalising of even really good tunes? Does that not send out the message you need to be a bit weak-minded to believe the kind of things we believe? And what about the repeated singing of a small selection of over familiar tunes along with an unwillingness to sing anything different? It may, of course, arise from timidity - or less attractively from complacency and self-satisfaction. All cultural narrowness is surely to be regretted. It sits uncomfortably with the grandeur of Reformed theology's vision of the Creator-Redeemer whom we worship.

3) *The continuing relevance of our heritage*

By advocating a greater appreciation of the distinctiveness of the musical genre which is our heritage am I advocating an inward-looking, rather than an outward-looking, stance?

Far from it. Anyone who knows anything about the music of congregational song in this country knows that the hymnody of the major denominations all grew out of metrical psalmody. No music is more highly regarded by the leading church musicians of our day than the historic psalm tunes.

In *Sing Psalms* we have a collection of tunes which is thoroughly up-to-date, and to some people that may be a little daunting. But if there is one word which sums up the character of the collection it is 'continuity'. No one would want to claim it is the last word in psalmody for the 21st century. But what we can say with some confidence is that it is as good a foundation for 21st century psalmody as one could well expect. The

very full and favourable reviews it received from both the British Hymn Society and the American Hymn Society are sufficient endorsement for such an estimate, along with favourable comment from other significant sources.

I began by suggesting that the first requirement for acceptable psalmody is the choice of an appropriate tune for the words we sing. I firmly believe this can be significantly enriching to our worship and also facilitate the communication of our message to those we desire to reach with the gospel. What if we could so sing that outsiders coming into our services would be moved to ask themselves, "What is it about these people? The way they sing tells you something about the quality of their lives. Is it that they have seen something of the glory of God, and what they have seen has changed them and given them something other people don't have?"

Shouldn't it always be our aim that our praise would be the best it can be to the glory of God, and by its evident reality commend our Saviour to others? With the blessing of the Holy Spirit it can be so. For this we should constantly pray. But real prayer is always accompanied by appropriate effort – in this case the effort of thinking through what we are doing, and learning a lot more about the music which is the vehicle of our praise.

EXAMPLES

From early psalters:-

Psalm 126 (1650) - ABBEY. The tune is simple but well constructed and has more musical power than others which are more pretentious. It is such a happy tune it suits Psalm 126 admirably.

Psalm 141:1-4a - SOUTHWELL. There aren't many minor key Short Metres. We have only two. This is a beauty and clearly the best tune for Psalm 141.

Psalm 55:1-8 – ST FLAVIAN. Simple again, but with so much beauty within a small compass. Consider how perfectly adapted it is to draw us into the emotions of this psalm.

From the 18th century:-

Psalm 113 – SURREY. A change from Common Metre. Don't you feel there is a breadth about this tune which accords well with the breadth of the psalmist's theme?

From the 19th century:-

Psalm 100 – DIADEMATA. Is this the most brilliant match in the book? A powerful, joyous tune to an excellent Short Metre version of the psalm.

Contemporary tunes:-

Psalm 131 – REDEMPTOR. As beautiful as they come. The calm at the heart of the psalm is perfectly caught in the mood of the tune.

Psalm 135 – JOHN STREET. A splendid 8 7 8 7 tune from our friend Isobel Gordon, capturing so well the triumphant note that runs through this psalm.