

Lecture #12 – Hymns and Poetry

I. Introduction

While much of our course will cover music, we cannot neglect the *words* that we sing. The words are the most important part of sacred music.

In this lecture, we will examine the lyrical side of sacred music.

We will focus on *hymns* in this lecture. Much of what we will cover will be applicable to other forms of sacred song, but the classic hymn is the apex of the art of sacred music.

II. Tunes and Texts

To begin, I would like to remind you that hymn texts and tunes have been considered as two separate entities in the past. In its strictest sense, a *hymn* is the text and not the tune or even the combination of the two.

Most hymnbooks before the late 1800's printed only the words to the hymns. The example below is a page from *Our Own Hymn-Book*, compiled by Charles Spurgeon and published in 1883:

WORLD RENOUNCED.

657 *Choosing the Pearl.* C. M.

1 **Y**E glittering toys of earth, adieu,
 A nobler choice be mine;
A real prize attracts my view,
 A treasure all divine.

2 Begone, unworthy of my cares,
 Ye specious baits of sense:
Inestimable worth appears,
 The pearl of price immense.

3 Jesus to multitudes unknown,
 Oh name divinely sweet!
Jesus, in Thee, in Thee alone,
 Wealth, honour, pleasure, meet.

4 Should both the Indies at my call,
 Their boasted stores resign,
With joy I would renounce them all,
 For leave to call Thee mine.

5 Should earth's vain treasures all depart,
 Of this dear gift possess'd,
I'd clasp it to my joyful heart,
 And be for ever bless'd.

6 Dear Sovereign of my soul's desires,
 Thy love is bliss divine;
Accept the wish that love inspires,
 And bid me call Thee mine.

Anne Steele, 1760.

That particular example was originally published as a poem in *Poems on Subjects Chiefly Devotional* by Anne Steele (under the pseudonym “Theodosia”) in 1760. A similar story can be told about many hymns and gospel songs.

It is chiefly a recent and American tradition to marry a tune and hymn text exclusively.¹ The text has traditionally been identified as the hymn itself. Paul Westermeyer describes hymns as “poetry for the congregation to sing”.²

III. Rhyme and Meter

The two key elements of poetry are the **rhyme scheme** and **metrical patterns**.

Rhyme Scheme

The rhyme scheme is the pattern of rhymes in the last syllables of each line. There are many different patterns that can be found. The method for noting the rhymes is to assign letters to each (e.g. ABAB, AABBA, ABABCDCDEFEGG³). Let’s look at a few examples:

Isaac Watts’s “Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun” (1719) uses an AABB pattern.

*Jesus shall reign where'er the **sun** (A)*

*does its successive journeys **run**, (A)*

*His kingdom stretch from shore to **shore**, (B)*

*till moons shall wax and wane no **more**. (B)*

Isaac Watts’s “When I Survey The Wondrous Cross” (1707) uses an ABAB pattern:

*When I survey the wondrous **cross** (A)*

*on which the Prince of glory **died**, (B)*

*my richest gain I count but **loss**, (A)*

*and pour contempt on all my **pride**. (B)*

¹ *Sing with Understanding*, 2nd ed. by Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath. p. 15.

² *Te Deum: The Church and Music* by Paul Westermeyer. p. 201.

³ Unique to Shakespearean sonnets.

Charlotte Elliott's "Just as I Am" uses an AAAB pattern:

*Just as I am, without one **plea**, (A)*
*but that thy blood was shed for **me**, (A)*
*and that thou bidd'st me come to **thee**, (A)*
*O Lamb of God, I come, I **come**. (B)*

Fanny Crosby's "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross" (1869) uses an ABCB pattern, rhyming on the second and fourth lines:

Jesus, keep me near the cross, (A)
*There a precious **fountain**; (B)*
Free to all, a healing stream, (C)
*Flows from Calv'ry's **mountain**. (B)*

B.B. McKinney's "Neath the Old Olive Trees" uses an AABCCB pattern:

*'Neath the stars of the **night** (A)*
*Walked the Saviour of **light**, (A)*
*In the garden of dew-laden **breeze**; (B)*
*Where no light could be **found**, (C)*
*Jesus knelt on the **ground**, (C)*
*There He prayed 'neath the old olive **trees**, (B)*

There is no real limit to the rhyming scheme, so long as it is recognizable to the human ear. However, the simpler rhyme schemes are more memorable, as easily illustrated with nursery rhymes. Almost all of the best-known hymns use simple rhyme schemes.

Metrical Pattern

From *Sing with Understanding*:

“A somewhat less obvious feature of poetry is its meter. Meter refers to a systematically measured rhythm of accent in verse (that is, rhythm that consistently repeats a single basic patten). Like all verse, hymns are organized into poetic ‘feet’. Each ‘foot’ consists of either two or three syllables, only one of which is accented.”⁴

There are many types of patterns for the feet, and they are usually identified using terminology we inherited from the Greeks. A few common examples⁵:

Iambic – two syllables – *unstressed stressed*.

“*A-maz-ing Grace, how sweet the sound*”

Trochaic – two syllables – *stressed unstressed*.

“*On-ward Christ-ian sol-diers march-ing as to war*”

Dactylic – three syllables – *stressed unstressed unstressed*.

“*Be thou my vis-ion, O Lord of my heart*”

Anapestic – three syllables – *unstressed unstressed stressed*.

“*There's a land that is fair-er than day*”

In poetry, the number of feet that appear in a line gives the form its name. Thus, four iambic feet per line is called *iambic tetrameter*⁶, etc.

Some songs are written without a pattern or with an irregular one. An irregular pattern can be a combination of different types of feet.

Tunes are generally written to match a pattern. Texts written in different types of feet or patterns simply will not work naturally with a tune that emphasizes the wrong beats. For example, “Be Thou

⁴ *Sing with Understanding*, 2nd ed. by Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath. p. 17.

⁵ Using information at https://scriptureand.blogspot.com/2016/08/the-meter-of-hymns_31.html - accessed 9-5-22

⁶ The prefix *tetra-* means “four”

“My Vision” and “Abide With Me” are both written with ten syllables/beats in each of their four lines. But the former is dactylic and the latter iambic. Though you technically could swap the tunes between these songs, it will not work practically because the emphasized syllables and beats will not match.

Hymn Meter

Instead of counting feet like in poetry, hymns are classified by counting the number of syllables in each line. These are indicated by a series of numbers representing the syllables of each line separated by periods.⁷ Some of these patterns are used frequently and have names associated with them.

Common Meter (abbreviated **C.M.**) – 8.6.8.6

Example: “Amazing Grace”

Short Meter (abbreviated **S.M.**) – 6.6.8.6

Example: “Blest Be The Tie That Binds”

Long Meter (abbreviated **L.M.**) – 8.8.8.8

Example: “Doxology”

Sometimes hymns will double the meter in each verse, creating two sets of four for eight total. To note these, a **D** for “double” may be added to the abbreviated name (**C.M.D.**, **S.M.D.**, **L.M.D.**)

Some hymns do not have a pattern they strictly follow and are classified as having **Irregular Meter**. An example of this is “The First Noel” which has some verses with extra syllables. When the verses do not have the extra syllables then the word is slurred across an extra beat.

⁷ There are two conventions to placing the periods. The one I am using places them between each number and is used on Hymnary.org. The other places the periods at the end of each couplet or section.

1. The first No - well the an - gel did say, Was to
 2. For all to see there was a star Shin - ing
 3. And by the light of that same star The
 4. Then let us all with one ac - cord Sing

Another example of Irregular Meter is found in “O Come All Ye Faithful”, where some verses do not have the pickup notes leading into the verses.

1. O come, all ye faith - ful, joy - ful and tri - um - phant, O
 2. Sing, choirs of an - gels, sing in ex - ul - ta - tion, O
 3. Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this hap - py mor - ning.

Hymns may also be classified as having **Peculiar Meter** (abbreviated **P.M.**). There are not just irregular, but practically unique to the text/tune. An example of this is “Almost Persuaded” with has a 9.9.6.6.6.4 meter. However, these are still categorized in many places¹⁰ as simply Irregular Meter.

If there is a **refrain** or **chorus** that is generally noted after the meter of the verses by adding “**with Refrain**” or similar. On Hymnary.org for example, “Jesus Loves Me” is classified as “7.7.7.7 and refrain”¹¹. Note that this does not specify anything about the refrain other than it exists.

IV. Content and Expression

Alfred Lord Tennyson, the Poet Laureate to Queen Victoria, stated “A good hymn is the most difficult thing in the world to write.”¹² It is combination of poetry, faith, and doctrine. It is truth expressed in art.

From *Sing with Understanding*:

⁸ <https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/142487> - accessed 9-5-22

⁹ <https://hymnary.org/media/fetch/142515> - accessed 9-5-22

¹⁰ Including Hymnary.org

¹¹ https://hymnary.org/tune/jesus_loves_me_this_i_know_bradbury - accessed 9-5-22

¹² *Sing with Understanding*, 2nd ed. by Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath. p. 19.

“In addition to outward structure and form, a hymn may be considered a poem by its inner content and expression. The great poet Milton said that the content of poetry must be *simple, sensuous, and passionate*. The hymn as a poem should possess something of all these qualities.

“Ideally, a hymn is written in clear, unambiguous language that is as obvious to the mind of a child as to that of an adult. It deals with profound thoughts but states them simply and directly. *Simplicity*, the servant of clarity, is a prime characteristic of hymnic expression.

“The hymn as poetry is also *sensuous* --it appeals to the senses. It draws its themes from the commonplace materials of life, and it conjures up images familiar to ordinary folk because it comes from what people see, feel, touch, and eat in everyday experience.

“A hymn is charged with *feeling*. It appeals to the heart, emotions, and mind. A hymn stirs the emotions and lifts the soul- comforting, challenging, making joyful or sorrowful, exalting sentiment, and quickening genuine feeling. Hymns are inherently passionate.”¹³

V. Poetic Devices

Just as we observed the different techniques employed in creating Hebrew poetry, there are many techniques used to create poetry beyond rhyme and rhythm. These heighten the truths express to new levels and emphasis. A few that can be observed:

Alliteration – repetition of opening sounds of words.

*“His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
till moons shall wax and wane no more.”*

Anaphora – repetition of a word at the beginning of lines for emphasis.

*“Mild he lays his glory by,
born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth,
born to give us second birth.”*

¹³ *Sing with Understanding, 2nd ed.* by Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath. p. 19.

Assonance – repetition of vowel sounds.

*“Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land,
tell old Pharaoh: Let my people go.”*

Chiasmus – crossing of lines and clauses

*“Jesus Holy is Thy name, (Savior)
I am all unrighteousness; (sinner)
False and full of sin I am, (sinner)
Thou art full of truth and grace. (Savior)”*

Climax – arranging ideas in increasing intensity

“Demands my soul, my life, my all”

Hyperbole – exaggeration for effect

*“O for a thousand tongues to sing
my great Redeemer's praise,”*

Metaphor – making a likeness or analogy by using one thing in place of another

“Life's evening sun is sinking low.”

Personification – representing something inanimate as a person

“My faith looks up to thee,”

Simile – comparing two usually unlike things using *like* or *as*.

“Like a river glorious is God's perfect peace,”

Tautology – repeating a thought in a different way.

“Jesus, thou art all compassion.” (1)

“Pure, unbounded love thou art.” (2)

VI. Literary Patterns

One final item to observe is the larger structural patterns of hymns. A few different classifications can be easily observed:

Itemization – combines many related ideas into one theme.

Verse 1 - “*Open my **eyes** that I may see...*”

Verse 2 – “*Open my **ears** that I may bear...*”

Verse 3 – “*Open my **mouth** and let me bear...*”

Call and Response – sometimes called **antiphony**, where each line is followed by a tag or refrain.

*“O for a thousand tongues to sing, - **CALL***

*Blessed be the name of the Lord! - **RESPONSE***

*The glories of my God and King, - **CALL***

*Blessed be the name of the Lord!” - **RESPONSE***

Dialogue – question and answer, conversation.

Verse 1 - “*What Child is this, who, laid to rest,” - **QUESTION***

Chorus – “*This, this is Christ, the King.*” – **ANSWER**

Trinitarian – similar to itemization, these hymns have one verse for each Person of the Trinity. A good example is “Come, Thou Almighty King”:

Verse 1 - “*Come, thou almighty King...*”

Verse 2 – “*Come, thou incarnate Word...*”

Verse 3 – “*Come, holy Comforter,...*”

Verse 4 – “*To thee, great One in Three...*”