

Singing the Psalms: A Brief History of Psalmody

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A glossary of relevant terms appears at the end of this study.

Psalmody is the use of the biblical psalms in worship, as distinguished from *hymnody*, the creation and use of extrabiblical poetic and musical compositions in worship. The distinction goes back to the Bible itself, in Paul's admonition to edify one another through the use of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), although we should not assume these were mutually exclusive categories. The study of psalmody is a subdiscipline of hymnology, an extensive field which has occupied the attention of learned musicologists. Here we can present only some brief remarks.¹

Early Christian Psalmody

In biblical worship, the psalms were chanted or declaimed. We do not know exactly how this music sounded, though recent research has confirmed the similarity between Hebraic music and ancient forms of Christian chant. (See the article on Music and Worship in the Bible on this web site.) The psalms formed part of the developing liturgy of the Eastern and Western churches, along with Greek and Latin hymnody. In the Western church, the psalms found more regular usage within the "offices" or daily periodic worship of the monastic communities. The Catholic heritage of chant, often called Gregorian chant because of the influence of Pope Gregory the Great (540-604), includes the use of the psalms sung to standard "tones" or melodies according to conventional rules. This music was performed by choirs of clergy or members of monastic orders, who had developed the necessary skills. Originally the psalms were sung monophonically, i.e. with one unharmonized melody, or "plain chant." In the later Middle Ages additional voices were introduced, with such devices as counterpoint (a different simultaneous melody) or *organum* (a sustained tone over which others sang the melody). The departure from the simpler form of chanting was opposed by those who believed that more elaborate musical detail called attention to the performance and thus degraded the worship of God.

This early psalmody was exclusively vocal. It is paradoxical that the psalms, which so often mention the use of musical instruments in the praise of God, were sung for centuries in the church without any instrumental accompaniment. Today both the Eastern Orthodox churches and some Reformed and other Protestant groups exclude musical instruments from use in worship.

Psalmody in the Reformation

With the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century came the thrust to involve all worshipers, not just the clergy, in the music of worship. But there were differences among the Reformation movements over the type of music that should be used in worship. The German-speaking Lutherans and pietists developed a tradition of hymnody, producing chorales with freely composed devotional texts. They also made greater use of instruments, especially the organ. The French-speaking Calvinists of Geneva held a stricter view of what was acceptable in worship and limited their music to the biblical psalms, New Testament hymns and a few other portions of Scripture. Excluding instruments was a corollary of the Reformed stress on the responsibility of the congregation, as a whole, for the expression of worship instead of trained professionals.

But musical conventions had changed with the Renaissance, and people were now familiar with secular music marked off by measures instead of unmeasured chanting. To enable the congregation to join in the psalms, it was necessary to recast them into a singable metrical structure and to introduce rhyme. However, the Calvinist emphasis on the authority of the Word of God rendered this practice problematic, for it required altering the biblical text, destroying the Hebrew parallelism. The stated goal became to produce singable psalmody while changing the words of the Bible as little as possible, though in actual practice the best results were often obtained through more than a slight alteration. The *Genevan Psalter* (first edition 1542) set a high standard for the metrical psalters that were to follow in the Reformed

churches of Holland, England and Scotland. Many of the tunes used in later editions were composed by Louis Bourgeois, some of which (including Old Hundred, the familiar “Doxology”) are still in use.

English Psalmody

Psalmody as a form of congregational singing came to its greatest development in the English language. The Church of England came under heavy Reformed influence, leading eventually to what we know as the Puritan movement with its emphasis on church government and worship according to New Testament patterns. In the early stages of the English Reformation, the Catholic heritage of Latin hymnody — which had largely fallen out of use in any case — was laid aside, and in its place metrical psalmody was introduced. In 1562 John Day printed the *Book of Psalms* with psalm texts translated by Thomas Sternhold, John Hopkins and a number of others. This psalter used tunes from the *Genevan Psalter* and from English sources, including popular ballads. Day’s psalter remained in use for more than 250 years and went through more than 600 editions. It was also known as *Sternhold and Hopkins* after its main translators, and was later called the *Old Version* after Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady brought out their *New Version of the Psalms* in 1696. The *Old Version* established the standard patterns which came to dominate English psalmody: Common Meter (8.6.8.6), Short Meter (6.6.8.6) and Long Meter (8.8.8.8). Musicologist Henry Wilder Foote remarked, “Next to the English Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer* the metrical psalms were the most influential literary contribution made by the Reformation to the religious life of the English people.”² A *Scottish Psalter* first appeared in 1564, with several subsequent editions.

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were a time of religious turmoil in Great Britain as various ideologies struggled for control of the Church. The reign of the Catholic queen Mary Tudor (d. 1558) meant persecution and exile for many Protestants. She was succeeded by Elizabeth I (reigned 1558-1603) who failed to reform the church to the degree many Protestants desired. As a result, separatist groups formed that worshiped outside the established church — the beginnings of the congregational or “gathered church” movement — and some of these groups moved into exile in Holland. In 1612 in Amsterdam, Henry Ainsworth published his *Book of Psalms* for the use of these congregations, including 39 tunes of English, Dutch and French origin. The Ainsworth psalter was brought to Plymouth Colony in 1620 by the group we know as the Pilgrims and was used there for a generation.

Another form of psalmody that developed during this period was Anglican chant, which was non-metrical and thus resolved the problem of the need to alter the biblical text. In Anglican chant the first portion of a line is sung on a sustained pitch with harmonic support, with the final syllables resolving in a short series of chords. Anglican chant had the advantage of preserving the Hebrew parallelism of the psalms, but since it was suited more for choirs than for congregational singing it was not taken up by the “nonconformist” churches that emerged from the English Reformation. In America, the Episcopal Church continued to use the metrical psalms, either *Sternhold and Hopkins* or the *New Version*, until the rise of church hymnody in the nineteenth century.

Early English psalmody, like the psalmody of plain chant, was almost exclusively vocal. Organs were found in only a few of the cathedrals and larger churches. Although many Reformed leaders were skilled in music, they believed that instruments were appropriate only for secular music or for personal devotion and not for public worship. In the church service, a leader (in England the church clerk, in New England a deacon or “precentor”) would “set the tone” which the congregation would follow. Later some instruments began to be used, beginning with the pitch pipe and bass viol (“church bass”), then treble instruments such as the flute. Except for some Episcopal churches, organs were not introduced in New England until the mid-nineteenth century. The earlier psalm books which included music printed only the melody.

Psalm Singing in America

The first American psalter, *The Whole Book of Psalmes Faithfully Translated into English Metre*, was produced by the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony beginning in 1640. It is known as the *Bay Psalm Book*, the first book to be printed in English-speaking North America. It did not include music, but recommended the use of the tunes in Thomas Ravenscroft’s psalter of 1621 which comprised 97 tunes

representing the finest English psalmody available at the time. (The 1651 edition of the *Bay Psalm Book* was called *The Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs of the Old and New Testaments*.) Musicologists, however, note a deterioration in the quality of psalmody from the days of the *Genevan Psalter* and Ainsworth. While these earlier psalters had used a variety of metrical patterns for psalm settings, the *Bay Psalm Book* represents a general reversion to the three standard forms, which were easier for congregations to learn in the frontier setting where musical training was not readily available.

Congregational singing in New England, especially in isolated communities, continued to deteriorate through the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth. The first wave of emigrants from England to the Plymouth and Bay colonies and to Connecticut had included people of education and musical background, but the harsh conditions of frontier life meant that, as new generations succeeded the “first comers,” people no longer possessed the skills necessary for high quality singing. Many could not read, much less read music, and psalm books — seldom available in sufficient quantity — often lacked musical notation. The stream of new emigrants for religious reasons, who might have brought with them the necessary skills, dried up once the Puritan and Independent influence came to power in England with the protectorate of Oliver Cromwell (mid-1600s).

In many parishes, then, singing reached a low point. The number of psalm tunes known to the typical congregation was greatly reduced, and confined to the simplest meters. The psalm tunes, originally vigorous, were slowed by giving all their notes equal length, supposedly in the interests of solemnity. Because people could no longer read music the practice developed of “lining out” or “deaconing” the psalm. The leader would read a line of text, then sing it and the people would repeat, a procedure described by one critic of the time as “praising God by piece-meal.” It was time for a change.

The seeds for a revival of singing in the New England church were already being sown in England. In 1696, Tate and Brady had issued their *New Version*, introducing some fine tunes such as “Hanover” and “St. Anne” (attributed to William Croft). The work of Isaac Watts (1674-1748) marks a watershed in the history of English hymnody, for in his *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* (1719) he broke with the tradition of “close fitting” translations and produced hymns that were poetic paraphrases of the biblical psalms. (The best-known today are probably “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past,” Psalm 90; and “Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come,” Psalm 98.) Watts’ approach to the psalms was “evangelical,” in that he was not hesitant to incorporate elements of the Christian gospel into his psalm paraphrases. Watts’ hymns were not introduced into the Anglican community until much later — in Anglican chant, the psalms were brought into the orbit of Christian faith by adding the *Gloria Patri* at the end — but his work was taken up by the Independent or congregational churches.

New England: Revival, Reshaping and Reaction

The clergy of New England, who were better educated than their congregations and almost always more forward looking, took the lead in the renewal of singing. In a 1721 sermon Cotton Mather, minister of Boston’s original North Church, raised the issue of the purpose of psalm singing in worship. His answer: “Outward Melody in Religious Singing is no small help to inward Devotion.” To sing the psalms helps the worshiper to commit Scripture to memory and to apply it to Christian living, because “there is a natural Aptitude in Singing to compose and unite the Thoughts, to engage and fix the Attention.”³

Because most printed psalters in use at this time lacked musical notation, singing had to be “by rote,” either from memory or by lining out as described above. The renewal of psalmody introduced singing “by rule,” that is, from notes written on ruled lines or musical staff. Younger people, especially, eagerly received musical training in singing schools. New psalters appeared incorporating the paraphrases and hymns of Isaac Watts and others, sometimes printing music in several parts.

But this revival of musical skills had unintended consequences. It led to the rise of choirs and musical professionals, with the result that the role of the congregation as a whole was downplayed. Moreover, the new psalters in use were mostly printed in England where composers were taking a new approach to settings of the psalms and other texts. Instead of publishing “standard” tunes that would fit any number of psalms, based on meter, they were producing musical settings for specific psalms in which the music was intended to express the meaning of the words.

From this it was a small step to begin treating the musical setting as a work of art in itself. American composers such as William Billings (1746-1800), Daniel Read (1757-1836), Timothy Swan (1758-1842) and Amos Bull (1741-1825) began to create settings of psalm or other religious texts that were suitable for choral performance rather than congregational participation. Rapid tempos, word repetition, imitative voicing (“fuging”) and other devices made the music too complicated for the use of the typical worshiper. While the names of Billings and his contemporaries are associated with this first flowering of American musical composition, their aim had departed considerably from Mather’s ideal for psalm singing in which the “outward melody” should foster “inward devotion.”

Understandably, a reaction set in amongst the clergy of New England, leading to a return to the metrical psalter with its simpler tunes more adaptable to congregational use. The work of American composers was largely set aside. Watts eventually became a standard in New England, displacing the Bay Psalm Book, and his work served as the basis for a number of psalters by other editors. But in many churches the distinction between psalms and hymns was retained in public worship, and congregations were sharply divided over the use of other than “close fitting” metrical psalms.

The “great psalmody controversy” echoed for more than a century, with the Presbyterians of the middle colonies retaining the exclusive use of metrical psalms well into the nineteenth century. Some Reformed and Presbyterian groups continue to hold to the “regulative principle” of worship, the view that Christian worship may include only those elements specifically authorized in the New Testament. In these communities the opinion persists that “there is no evidence from Scripture that can be adduced to warrant the singing of uninspired human compositions in the public worship of God.”⁴

Eclipse and Revival of Psalmody

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the near eclipse of psalmody in most Protestant communions of North America. Popular taste encouraged the introduction of the devotional lyric and the gospel song into public worship. Often set to folk melodies, these compositions featured emotional and subjective expression of the faith. At the same time, in those communions where a higher educational level prevailed there was a burst of newly composed church hymnody. This led eventually to the recovery, in English speaking worship, of some of the great hymns of the German Reformation and the Latin and Greek traditions. The powerful influence of the biblical psalms is evident in the fact that some of the best work of the nineteenth-century hymnists consisted of paraphrases of the psalms.

But except in the practice of some liturgical churches and those few Reformed groups which retained the belief in singing psalms only, the explicit use of the psalms in public worship was generally confined to the spoken word: in Scripture lessons and responsive readings, or in the psalms of Morning and Evening Prayer in the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*. In the Roman Catholic Church, portions of the Latin Mass such as the *gradual* (between the epistle and gospel) were based on psalm texts, but the congregation participated only passively through following the service in the missal.

The liturgical renewal of the post-World War II era saw the beginning of a return to congregational participation in using the psalms. For example, *The Methodist Hymnal* of 1964 specifically called for the “psalter or other act of praise” at one point in the service; however, it was to be spoken responsively rather than sung. Within the Anglican community a few prominent church musicians were leading in a recovery of plain chant.

The renewal of Roman Catholic worship following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was marked by increased participation in acts of worship by the congregation, including the use of psalms between the Scripture readings. Catholic musicians soon produced a wealth of “responsorial psalms”, in which one verse is selected as an introduction and refrain (antiphon) to be sung by the congregation, with other verses sung by a cantor. Psalm singing in this form had been developed prior to Vatican II by Joseph Gelineau, a French Jesuit priest, and is sometimes called Gelineau chant. The responsorial psalm has made its way into the worship of other communities, especially the Episcopal Church.

Developments within Protestant worship have also brought about a revival of psalm singing. The simple psalm settings created by the ecumenical Taizé Community of France for its own daily worship have found use throughout the Christian world. The *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) introduced

“pointed psalms,” or psalm texts with symbolism allowing them to be sung to a set of psalm tones in a the manner of Anglican chant. The *Psalter Hymnal* of the Christian Reformed Church (1987) includes metrical settings of all 150 psalms. Protestant and Catholic musicians alike have created a wealth of Christian song in popular or contemporary style, a feature of the Praise and Worship movement; much of this music takes the form of Scripture songs using psalm texts. These examples demonstrate the persistence in Christian worship today, especially in the Western world, of psalm singing including all its historic forms.

¹ Not included in this discussion are the many anthems, motets and other choral compositions using psalm texts which are intended for performance by choirs or other concert ensembles.

² H. W. Foote, *Three Centuries of American Hymnody* (1940, reprint 1968), p. 23.

³ David P. McKay, “Cotton Mather’s Unpublished Singing Sermon,” *New England Quarterly*, XLVIII, September 1975. Cited in Richard Crawford, “Mainstreams and Backwaters of American Psalmody, 1770-1840,” ©1996 Recorded Anthology of American Music, Inc. (Notes for recording “Make a Joyful Noise” issued by New World Records; other material in this section is dependent on this source.)

⁴ John Murray, “Song in Public Worship,” in David Lachmann and Frank J. Smith (eds.), *Worship in the Presence of God* (1992), p. 190.

Glossary: Psalmody, Hymnody and Song

Psalm: The biblical psalm, or the psalm as translated in its original structure (English, Latin, etc.).

Psalter: A collection of biblical psalms, with or without musical notation, for use in worship.

Metrical Psalm: A biblical psalm translated into (English) verse, either “close fitting” or loose. *Examples:* “All People That on Earth Do Dwell” (Psalm 100, Isaac Watts), “The Lord’s My Shepherd, I’ll Not Want” (Psalm 23, Scottish Psalter, 1650).

Psalm Paraphrase: A hymn based on a psalm or part of a psalm (different degrees of paraphrase). *Examples:* “Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come” (Psalm 98, Isaac Watts), “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past” (Psalm 90, Isaac Watts), “Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven” (Psalm 103, Henry F. Lyte).

Pointed Psalm: A psalm with the words printed with special symbolism indicating the manner of chanting. *Example:* Anglican chant.

Responsorial Psalm: A psalm, one verse of which is used as an introduction and refrain, with other verses interspersed (usually sung by a cantor). *Examples:* Latin plain chant, contemporary Catholic/ecumenical liturgy.

Scripture Song: A contemporary worship chorus using a Scripture text or paraphrase thereof; may be a psalm in whole or part. *Examples:* “This Is the Day” (Psalm 118, Leona Von Brethorst); “Let Us Exalt His Name” (Psalm 34, Stuart Dauermann); “The Lord Reigns” (Psalm 97, Dan Stradwick).

Hymn: A freely-composed hymn which may or may not relate to a specific Scripture text. Strictly speaking, a hymn is directed to Deity or celebrates divine attributes or activity, as contrasted with a gospel song or devotional lyric. *Examples:* “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (Martin Luther), “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise” (Walter C. Smith), “Crown Him with Many Crowns” (Matthew Bridges).

Gospel Song/Devotional Lyric: A religious lyric expressing an aspect of personal faith. The distinction between these categories is mainly a matter of musical taste. *Examples:* “Amazing Grace” (John Newton), “It Is Well with My Soul” (Horatio G. Spafford), “Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine” (Fanny Crosby), “Wonderful Words of Life” (Philip P. Bliss), “How Great Thou Art” (Carl G. Boberg).

Psalmody, singing of psalms in worship. In biblical times professional singers chanted psalms during Jewish religious services. Occasionally, the congregation interpolated a short refrain between the chanted verses. The alternation of soloist and chorus was called responsorial psalmody (see.Â Another method, antiphonal psalmody, was the alternation by two half choirs in the singing of psalm lines or half lines (see antiphon). Psalms were also sung without either refrain or alternating singers (direct psalmody). These methods of psalmody were adopted by the early Christian Church in the East and West.Â Laudemont Ministries - A Brief History of Psalmody. Article History. Article Contributors. Load Next Article.