

# The Genevan Psalter

## History and Purpose

Followers of the one true and living God have always sung the Biblical Psalms, since those Psalms were first penned. After God sent to earth His Son, the man Jesus of Nazareth, those who recognized and worshiped Him as Lord have continued to love the Book of Psalms. Christians have read and studied these Psalms, along with the rest of Scripture, but they have also sung them, as individuals, as families, and as congregations. Some have even taught that, in certain contexts, Christians ought to sing nothing else.

For over a thousand years following Jesus' time, the practice of singing Psalms in the public assembly continued. But during that time, in many places, Psalm-singing was gradually removed from the congregation and given to an appointed choir. It was also removed from the language of the congregation, as the Psalms were sung in Latin. And it was removed from the musical idiom of the congregation, what we would today call folk music, and sung as plainsong, which we call Gregorian chant.

During this same time, many Christians dissented from these and other practices which they believed were not from the Word of God. By the 15th century, many of these Christians began to be united, to speak and write widely, and to increase in number. Around 1450, some in Geneva were persuaded that the singing of Latin Plainchant Psalms by a trained choir had no place in the public assembly of disciples. It was therefore discontinued.

When John Calvin was called to Geneva around 1525, he was convinced that the congregation ought to be singing the Psalms in their own language and in their own idiom. He therefore commissioned a local composer, Louis Bourgeois, to begin writing tunes in a congregational style for the public singing of Psalms. Calvin himself began translating the Psalms into French meter to fit these tunes.

Later Calvin learned of a poet who was already doing this. This poet, Clement Marot (who was never a Christian and certainly not a Calvinist), had already made several French metrical Psalm settings of high quality. These were widely popular in the French courts. Calvin scrapped his own settings and commissioned Marot to complete the Psalter.

## Melodies

Bourgeois and Marot did not complete the work, but others took it up in the years following. By 1562 all 150 Psalms, the Song of Simeon (Luke 2:29-32), the Song of Mary (Luke 1:46-55), and the 10 Commandments (Ex 20:2-18), were being sung in French meter to 126 tunes. The original goal was to have one tune for each Psalm, but the composers stopped before the poets. Thus, 15 tunes are used twice, 4 are used three times, and 1 tune occurs four times.

Many of these melodies are very vigorous. This is often not recognized, because in many traditions the tunes are sung slowly, and often with simplified rhythm. However, in their original rhythms, at a brisk 'folk-song' tempo, some can be hair-raising, such as Psalms 2, 47, 99, or 148. It was not for nothing that Queen Elizabeth disdained them as "Genevan jigs." Psalm 68 was sung by the French Calvinists (Huguenots) going into battle. This association became so strong that in certain places even whistling the tune was outlawed.

Those which are less vigorous, such as Psalms 38 or 80 or 116 or 123, are of such beauty that even in a foreign language they are moving.

James Jordan, in his excellent lecture on the subject, says that the mournful Psalms have mournful tunes, and the joyful Psalms have exciting tunes. I cannot agree. Though this is often the case, there are too many exceptions to call it a rule. (Psalms 24, 42 & 60, for instance.) The modes used in 92 of the tunes (Aeolian, Dorian, Phrygian and their variants) sound to modern ears like minor keys, which we still associate with sadness. And though many of these are very upbeat, the minor 'feel' keeps even the most vigorous (like Psalm 2, 14, 128, 148) from becoming hysterical and frivolous.

These melodies are idiosyncratic. They have slight resemblances to many other styles, but strong resemblances to none. Some of their idioms are observed so consistently, those unfamiliar with them will find them similar to one another. "They're all the same!" is a common complaint regarding these tunes (as with unfamiliar music in

any genre). But in many important ways, they are not. Some similarities and differences are listed below.

Having been intimately familiar with all these melodies for several years, I have opinions about which melodies will be most immediately accessible to unfamiliar listeners. Those with long lines and complex rhythms may cause new singers to give up in despair. But I suggest the following list of forty-two tunes which should provide the easiest access to 55 Psalms in this incredible collection:

Psalms **2, 6, 12, 14** (with 53 which uses the same tune), **19, 20, 23, 24** (with 62 & 95 & 111), **29, 33** (with 67), **36** (with 68), **38, 40, 47, 51** (with 69), **61, 66** (with 98 & 118), **74** (with 116), **75, 77** (with 86), **80, 81, 91, 92, 93, 96, 99, 100** (with 131 & 142), **101, 110, 112, 121, 123, 124, 128, 130, 135, 136, 137, 138, 148, 150**.

This list could be considered a Genevan sampler. If you listen to each of these 21 times (necessary to make anything familiar), and are not attracted to them, the Genevan Psalter is not for you. If you begin to feel their power and beauty, I encourage you to move on to the rest of the riches which this Psalter contains.

### **Similarities:**

All the melodies are basically syllabic. That is, each syllable of text has only one note. Only 6 of the melodies contain any melismas (2 or more notes for one syllable) at all. These are 2, 6, 10, 13, 91, & 138. (By the way, this idiom has been imitated in the bass line by the harmonies used here. Only 10 of Goudimel's bass lines have melismas: 2, 6, 10, 43, 66/98/118, 91, 105, 117/127, 135/138. However, the other parts contain numerous melismas.)

All the melodies contain only two note values. In this work, they are written as half notes and quarter notes. I have lengthened the final note of each interior line so that the lines will not sound chopped-off. But this is a concession to actual practice and does not affect the essential nature of the tunes.

### **Differences:**

Where any English-language hymnal will contain many hymns using similar meters, the Genevan Psalter uses a bewildering variety of meters. For these 126 tunes, 109 meters are used. Only three meters are used more than twice. English singers expect predictable meters, so this variety will be at first off-putting. The tunes will seem unpredictable. "Where is it going to go next?" is a common complaint.

The number of lines is different, from 4 to 12. The total number of syllables varies much more than we are used to: from 28 syllables in Psalm 136 to 85 in Psalm 4. Often the lines are isolated from each other, but sometimes one will move into the next without pause.

Many of the melodies are syncopated, that is, they contain a note or two which come a half-beat earlier than expected. None of the tunes have the same syncopations. Some (like 47, 99, 141) contain a syncopation in every line. Others (like 37, 68, 119) have none: they could be barred with a 2/4 time signature without any cross-bar ties.

### **Harmonies**

Calvin believed that, in the regular meeting of the congregation, these tunes should be sung in unison, without harmony and without instruments. (His reasons for this are still a matter of debate.) But outside that setting, both harmony and instruments were encouraged, and widely used.

Many composers have harmonized these tunes, but the most popular and influential harmonic settings were written in 1564 by a French Calvinist, Claude Goudimel. Goudimel had already written several settings of each of these tunes in the complex, polyphonic style which was then a popular form of entertainment. In those settings, one part sings the Genevan melody while the countermelodies sing the same words at different times. Thus, though the singers are edified, the words are often not clear to the listeners.

But Goudimel's most influential harmonizations were in a 'homophonic' format, in which each of the harmonizing parts uses the same rhythm as the melody. Thus all the parts sing the same words at the same time. This 4-part, homophonic, 'note-on-note' format came to be called 'cantional' style. The historical impact of these settings was immense. It is now the standard 'hymnbook' style of harmony. As far as I can tell, Claude Goudimel invented it.

I have chosen to use these cantional settings for the book and website I assembled. I was inspired to do so by the work of Louis "Duck" Schuler in his groundbreaking and influential hymnal, the 2002 *Cantus Christi*. I have followed the format and part-writing protocols he used to arrange Goudimel's original into congregational format.

As far as I know, this work does not duplicate anything existing. Namely:

The 1984 *Book of Praise*, the official hymnal of the Canadian Reformed Church, contains the words and the tunes, but there is no harmony, and most of the words are not aligned with the music.

Current publications of Goudimel's original settings (easily available as Volume 9 of his *Complete Works*) are not at all suitable for congregational use. Each part is on a different line, the melodies are in the tenor, and the use

of double-whole, whole and half notes is perplexing to the modern church-goer who is used to halves and quarters. Many settings are pitched very high. Plus, there is only one verse of text printed, in French!

Duck Schuler appears to have done what I have done here, setting all the tunes with the *Book of Praise* lyrics, in standard hymnal format. But this also is not suitable for congregational use, because it is not available. I have not been able to obtain a copy, despite several attempts. Some 60 of his arrangements were included in the *Cantus*. But there were enough errors in both melody and harmony, as well as infelicitous part-writing, that I have not been able to use any of his arrangements here. (He would probably say the same of my work, and my gratitude to him is no less immense.)

In 2006, Inheritance Publications released a book titled *The Genevan Psalms in Harmony*, the work of Roelof and Theresa Janssen. This includes all the tunes, with lyrics from the *Book of Praise*, with harmonies based mostly on Goudimel's, though his harmony has been modernized and simplified. But this book is not designed for congregational use, since it is over-sized and very expensive. It is interesting and useful for instrumental accompaniment, and anyone interested in serious study should have a copy. But I believe a different approach is needed.

I have been guided by the *Book of Praise* and the *Cantus Christi* in arranging Goudimel's originals for congregational use. I used all the keys from the *Book of Praise*. As in the *Book of Praise* and the *Cantus*, there are no bar-lines. Also, rests in all parts indicate a cancellation of all accidentals. However, courtesy accidentals are used freely since these harmonies are sometimes surprising.

Nearly all Goudimel's homophonic settings placed the melody (called *cantus firmus*, or *c.f.*) in the Tenor, and all were in modal keys. I rearranged them all in modern cantional style, *c.f.* in the Soprano. But I retained all the modal harmonies, including some that may jar modern ears. The guidelines I observed are listed below.

- A. Preserve all the melodies and bass lines unaltered. (Exception: Twice the *Book of Praise* and Goudimel melodies differ; I chose the *Book of Praise*: Ps94, m4, sharp in Goudimel; Ps133, m5, sharp in *Book of Praise*)
- B. Preserve every note Goudimel wrote, adding and removing none. (No exceptions)
- C. Divide Goudimel's other harmony parts between Alto and Tenor.
- D. Observe all the part-writing rules which Goudimel observed. (Also two other rules, 1 and 2 below, which Goudimel did not observe.)
- E. Preserve from Goudimel the continuity of the harmony parts as much as possible, but sacrifice it to the following rules:
  1. No part above Soprano. (Exception: Ps50, m5)
  2. No part below Bass. (No exceptions)
  3. Alto and Tenor may cross freely, and all parts may overlap if necessary.
  4. No parallel Octaves. (Exception: Goudimel allows contrary parallel octaves between S & B, as Ps 95 & 96, )
  5. No parallel Fifths. (Exceptions: Goudimel allows it between phrases, as in Ps39 m3, Ps41 m3, Ps 65 & 72 m7, Ps113 m4)
  6. Observe the following part ranges (extended ½ step each side if necessary).
    - S: C40 to E56 (No exceptions, as in *Book of Praise*)
    - A: G35 to B51 (No exceptions)
    - T: D30 to F#46 (No exceptions)
    - B: E20 to C40 (Exception: Ps 84, 135: D18)
  7. No awkward jumps. (e.g. augmented 2<sup>nd</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup>)
  8. No more than an octave between any upper parts. (No exceptions)
  9. Close position where possible.
  10. Whole notes become Half notes, Halves become Quarters, etc. (Exception: last note of each phrase: Whole note + Whole rest becomes Dotted half + Quarter rest)

Also, finding no suitable harmony for the Song of Mary (Goudimel apparently skipped it), I was compelled to write one.

## Texts

Not only have these tunes and harmonies influenced western music, but the French poetry, particularly of Marot, set a standard in French poetry. Calvin may not have been a poet, but he was evidently a good judge of poetic skill.

My research has so far turned up 282 Genevan Psalm settings in English meter, most of them rhymed. (Sixty-

eight of the Psalms have only one English setting currently available: that of the *Book of Praise*, 1984.) I am not a poet nor a judge of poetry, but in the judgment of those I have consulted, these settings are uneven in literary quality. It turns out there are certain challenges in crafting acceptable English lyrics to tunes originally written for the French language. One factor is that French verse has a much greater proportion of lines with feminine endings than does English. We can hope that as more Christians begin to use this Psalter, more poets may rise to the challenge and produce English poetry which matches the French originals. I am very grateful to those who have risen to this challenge, especially the prolific Wolter van der Kamp and William Helder.

However, the value of the Genevan Psalter does not lie in its brilliant poetry. It lies in the power of the Psalms in any translation or paraphrase. And it lies in the power of these tunes to capture the imagination.

The only complete collection of English metrical settings to these tunes is the 1984 *Book of Praise*, published and used by the Canadian Reformed Churches. (This book is subtitled “Anglo-Genevan Psalter” indicating that the Genevan tunes have been used with English words. However, the term “Anglo-Genevan Psalter” refers historically to an entirely different Psalter, one assembled in England. It was influenced by the Genevan Psalter, but contained mostly different melodies.)

In this printing, I have chosen to use the lyrics from the 1984 *Book of Praise*. I have made a few minor editorial changes, mostly changing the Canadian spelling of such words as ‘favour’ and ‘defence’ to their American spelling. I have also altered a few lines which I believed would be misunderstood in singing. (Namely, I made minor changes in Psalms 3, 32, 44, 58, 89, 107, & 119 v60, major changes in Psalm 31.)

I have assembled a spiral-bound printing, not for public distribution, but for the private use and curiosity of a few friends, and for further proofing. In the future I hope to publish a hard-bound *Genevan Psalter* for sale for congregational use, using this same music but with a selection of the finest settings available. I have not yet typeset those. It may be several years, since the *Book of Praise* is currently being overhauled, and I will wait until that is complete. (Please view the history and progress of this project on its website, [www.BookOfPraise.ca](http://www.BookOfPraise.ca).) I have permission from the lyric copyright holders (William Helder, and *The Standing Committee for the Publication of the Book of Praise of the Canadian Reformed Church*), to publish these settings online. I will need their additional permission to publish a hard copy.

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For God’s Sole Glory,  
Michael E. Owens  
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