

# Introduction to French Metrical Psalmody

## I. Introductory statements:

Apart from the Lutheran version of the Protestant Reformation which gave rise to [Lutheran Hymnody](#) and which was the rebirth of TRUE congregational hymn singing for the first time in about 1000 years, there were two other branches of the Protestant Reformation, namely :

1. The Protestant movement in France/Switzerland leading to the development of **French Metrical Psalmody**.

2. The Protestant movement in England leading to the development of [English Metrical Psalmody](#) and [Scottish Metrical Psalmody](#).

Each of these made specific contributions to the history of hymnody and will have to be examined independently.

[In the following article, MH refers to *The United Methodist Hymnal*; PH refers to the *Presbyterian Hymnal*; H82 refers to *The [Episcopal] Hymnal 1982*.]

## II. [French Metrical Psalmody](#)

John Calvin (1509-64) was born in Noyon (France) in 1509 and studied Latin and theology at the University of Paris and law at Orleans. He published in 1532 a reputable edition of Seneca's *De Clementia* which immediately got him in trouble with the Catholic church (at the time they had a problem about the revival of ancient texts). Unsafe in Paris, Calvin retreated to Basle, and in 1536 issued a handbook of Protestant theology, **The Institutes of the Christian Religion**. Passing by chance through the city of Geneva (Switzerland), he was persuaded to stay and the city council offered him employment as a teacher of scripture.

The Reformation in Geneva up till the time of Calvin consisted of little more than lots of rhetorical sermons and broken statues all over the city. Calvin, who was trained as a lawyer, had been employed at Geneva for about 4 months when he confronted the city council with a program of desirable reforms. He was extremely 'practical minded' and the disorganization of the city as a whole really bothered him. He began to seek an organization of the Church and ministry which would ensure decency and order. Like all other Reformers he assumed that this could be achieved by a systematic reproduction of the practices of the primitive Church as disclosed by history and the New Testament.

His original ideas were rejected by the Council and he was forced to flee the city (his 'exile' to Strasbourg from 1538-1541). However, they later came around and he was called back, triumphantly, and persuaded the city council to establish a series of regulations known as the **Ecclesiastical Ordinances**. From 1541 Calvin's program was put into practice.

Calvin is perhaps best known for his doctrine of election, that is "God does not will all men to be saved; that men were created by God whom he decreed from all eternity to be consigned to eternal destruction." [sic!] Ultimately, this was to be the major "stumbling block" for Calvinism. However, people were not drawn to Calvinism essentially for theological reasons. They seemed drawn more by the moral and devotional power inherent in the teaching, i.e., the Calvinists were austere, fearless, hardworking, devout people of the Bible. They knew what they believed, they knew what they must do, and they knew by what authority they must do it. For a hundred years they were the most potent religious force in Protestantism.

The austerity of the Calvinists was extended to include church music. Specific ideas of music were influenced by certain passages of scripture (Amos). Consequently, musical instruments were associated with immoral behavior, especially that behavior associated with taverns (drinking, merry-making, etc.). Eventually, all the church organs in Geneva were destroyed and the pewter in the pipes were melted down for plates. In addition, only scripture could be sung and this only in unison; harmony was judged to be too sensuous for the Church and was consequently forbidden.

Despite all this, Calvin was familiar with the tremendous influence that religious song has on the spread of religious doctrine. It seems certain that Calvin's decision to include singing in the services of his church may be traced to the period of his "Exile" (mentioned earlier) in Strasbourg from 1538-1541. It was there that he found chorale-singing firmly established amongst the Lutheran Protestants and was no doubt influenced by its possibilities as a factor in public worship. At any rate it was at Strasbourg that he compiled the book from which the whole subsequent literature of vernacular psalmody (singing in the native language) is derived.

In addition to the singing of the Lutherans, Calvin became familiar with the metrical settings of Clément Marot and eventually published 30 of Marot's settings in his first Psalter in 1539. Later, when Marot arrived in Geneva to avoid persecution in France, he set 20 more for a total of 50. Marot finally left Geneva and moved to Turin where he died soon after (in mysterious circumstances -- probably from poisoning). Theodore Beza eventually versified the remaining Psalms and a complete edition was published in 1562, containing all 150 Psalms, together with the 10 Commandments and the Nunc Dimittis.

For our purposes today, the main hymnic heritage from Geneva is with the Genevan Psalm tune and not the texts per se. The texts, of course, were French and consequently can only be sung in translation. All the translations of the metrical Psalms in English which are in use today stem from the British tradition.

However, concerning the Genevan Psalter, there were several versions and each successive version became more complete and more congregational than its predecessor. A 'first version' was uncovered in the Royal Library of Munich in 1878 and dates from 1539 (see, Richard Terry's, Calvin's First Psalter ). A final complete version of the Genevan Psalter was issued in 1562 (see Eric Routley's, The Music of Christian Hymns ).

The success of the Psalters has much credit due to Louis Bourgeois (c. 1550) Bourgeois wrote most of the tunes for the Genevan Psalter and has been called "the Father of the modern hymn tune."

### **Characteristics of Genevan Psalm Tunes:**

1. a congregational quality
2. tonal, although many are modal
3. syllabic
4. ingenious melodies which anticipated harmonic melodies
5. variety of meters

50 of the Psalm texts were by Clément Marot. The remaining 100 were by Theodore de Béza.

Although, Louis Bourgeois wrote most of the TUNES in the Genevan Psalter, settings of these tunes were later made (and published) by Claude Goudimel (1505-1572). A final edition of the Genevan Psalter with Goudimel's settings were published in 1603.

The melodies of the Genevan Psalter gained wide use in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe, being spread not only in the French-speaking areas but also in Germany, Holland, England, and Scotland, and from these lands, later to the American Colonies, particularly by the Reformed and Congregationalist Churches.

### **Legacy of French Metrical Psalmody:**

#### **Texts**

The legacy of French texts in English traditions is negligible (probably nonexistent) for the fact that the original Metrical Psalm texts were in French. Translation of the French into English is impractical (except for purely academic pursuits) because a Metrical Psalm has to be rhymed and metered. Consequently, for English Metrical Psalmody text writers had to start from scratch with the original early English translations of the Bible.

#### **Tunes**

Tunes, on the other hand, is an altogether different matter. The primary legacy of the French Metrical Psalm tradition for English speaking Christians is musical, particularly the French Metrical Psalm tunes. Tunes first appearing in Genevan Psalter which are still in use today include:

[OLD 100TH OLD 100TH \('All people that on earth do dwell'\) -- MH 75](#)

[OLD 113TH OLD 100TH \('All people that on earth do dwell'\) -- MH 75](#)

[OLD 100TH \('All people that on earth do dwell'\) -- MH 75](#)

[\('T'll praise my maker while I've breath'\) -- MH 60](#)

[RENDEZ ^ DIEU OLD 100TH \('All people that on earth do dwell'\) -- MH 75](#)

[\('T'll praise my maker while I've breath'\) -- MH 60](#)

[OLD 100TH \('All people that on earth do dwell'\) -- MH 75](#)

[\('T'll praise my maker while I've breath'\) -- MH 60](#)

[\('Father, we thank you who has planted'\) -- MH 565](#)

[PSALM 42 OLD 100TH \('All people that on earth do dwell'\) -- MH 75](#)

[\('T'll praise my maker while I've breath'\) -- MH 60](#)

[\('Father, we thank you who has planted'\) -- MH 565](#)

[OLD 100TH \('All people that on earth do dwell'\) -- MH 75](#)

(I'll praise my maker while I've breath') -- MH 60  
('Father, we thank you who has planted') -- MH 565  
('Comfort, comfort you my people' ) -- PH 3  
OLD 134 [also, ST. MICHAEL] ('Stand up and bless the Lord') - MH 662  
OLD 124TH [also, GENEVA 124, TOULON] ('Go forth for God, go to the world in peace') -- MH 670  
NUNC DIMITTIS OLD 100TH ('All people that on earth do dwell') -- MH 75  
(I'll praise my maker while I've breath') -- MH 60  
('Father, we thank you who has planted') -- MH 565  
('Comfort, comfort you my people' ) -- PH 3  
OLD 134 [also, ST. MICHAEL] ('Stand up and bless the Lord') - MH 662  
OLD 124TH [also, GENEVA 124, TOULON] ('Go forth for God, go to the world in peace') -- MH 670  
OLD 100TH ('All people that on earth do dwell') -- MH 75  
(I'll praise my maker while I've breath') -- MH 60  
('Father, we thank you who has planted') -- MH 565  
('Comfort, comfort you my people' ) -- PH 3  
OLD 134 [also, ST. MICHAEL] ('Stand up and bless the Lord') - MH 662  
OLD 124TH [also, GENEVA 124, TOULON] ('Go forth for God, go to the world in peace') -- MH 670  
[also, LE CANTIQUÉ DE SIMŹON] ('O Gladsome light') -- MH 686  
DONNE SECOURSOLD 100TH ('All people that on earth do dwell') -- MH 75  
(I'll praise my maker while I've breath') -- MH 60  
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[also, LE CANTIQUÉ DE SIMŹON] ('O Gladsome light') -- MH 686  
('Hope of the world') -- pH 360  
GENEVAN 130OLD 100TH ('All people that on earth do dwell') -- MH 75  
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[also, LE CANTIQUÉ DE SIMŹON] ('O Gladsome light') -- MH 686  
('Hope of the world') -- pH 360  
('Lord, when you came to Jordan') -- PH 71 [see PH index, p. 708 and look at the entry for Genevan 130 for a good "howler."]

See [Melodien](#) (Midi files of all tunes from the Genevan Psalter -- great site!)