

Worship Music, part 6: Contra Goudimel

by James B. Jordan

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The wonderful revival of the singing of the Genevan Psalter is now being accompanied by a belief that the right way to sing these tunes is with the accompaniments provided by Claude Goudimel. Just recently I heard another complaint about these “Goudimel psalms,” and my heart sank again.

I discussed this problem in *Rite Reasons* 91, September, 2006, in a review of the excellent *Cantus Christi* hymnal. There I wrote that “the Genevan psalms were written and designed to be sung without harmony and without accompaniment. We know that they were sung very fast, save of course for those with a more penitential or lamentational text. *Cantus Christi*, however, uses the four-part harmonies produced by Claude Goudimel. This encourages people to sing parts, which in turn slows the music down. . . . Moreover, Goudimel was a late Renaissance, pre-Baroque composer, and his harmonies sound strange to modern ears. They are often modal harmonies, and we are not used to such.”

I continued: “Beyond this, *Cantus Christi* puts in all the pauses at the ends of all the phrases in the Genevan Psalms. This has the effect of killing the rhythm in psalm after psalm. There is apparently some question as to whether all the 'commas' in the music were observed as actual pauses (rests) in Geneva, where the psalms were sung rapidly, but it is certain that in later times many of the rests dropped out. We have to remember that congregational singing was a very new thing at the time of the Reformation, and the 'how music should sound' was still under some influence from Gregorian chant. Once the churches got used to singing, the hymns and psalms acquired consistent rhythm, not using lines that died at the end of each phrase.”

I wish to expand upon this point. I have in my library the fourteen volumes of the complete works of Claude Goudimel, published by the Institute of Medieval Music in 1983. I also have, however :

English Versions:

The Christian Reformed *Psalter Hymnals* of 1959 and 1988, both of which (especially the latter) have Genevan Psalms, harmonized for musicians and singers. Herein many of the rests are omitted, making for smoother singing.

The 1912 Presbyterian *Psalter* in its later edition for the Protestant Episcopal Church, containing as an appendix a number of Genevan psalms.

Lutheran and Episcopal hymnals usually have several Genevan Psalms. Again, seldom are all the original 'rests' found in these singing versions

French Versions:

Psaumes et Cantiques of the French Reformed Church of 1895. What my father bequeathed to me here is an edition in two voices, melody and alto only. The psalms are in original rhythm, but with fermatae at the end of each line. The fermata nowadays indicates holding the note, but originally it often meant only that a line or phrase had ended. Whether the note was held was up to the musician. (See “Fermata” in the wikipedia.)

Le Psautier Français published by Reviel in 1995. The psalms are represented in four-part harmony, and in harmonies by Goudimel, by Goudimel as altered by others, by Claude LeJeune, and by some

modern composers. Half rests are placed at the end of each line, but an asterisk indicates which rests (and which accidentals) are regarded as optional by the editors.

Dutch Versions:

You better believe it! And thanks to a bequest to Biblical Horizons from Marguerite Lane, I have a small collection of psalters from her pastor father. Here are some – I have several other Dutch versions – together with a few I've collected myself:

Het Boek der Psalmen, published by Eerdmans in 1942 from a 1773 edition. Here we have only the melody, as is fitting (since the Dutch do not harmonize when singing). Although the style of notation is pre-modern, we do have the original rhythms. The ends of the lines are indicated by a dot.

De Melodieën der Psalmen, by J. H. Götz and F. J. Schweinsberg, published in 1911. This version is for organ, piano, or choir. It is not in rhythm, every syllable of the sacred text being given equal weight (!) as was customary for a while.

The Nederlanische Hervormed Kerk's *Psalmen en Gezangen* of 1938. The psalms are in rhythm, with rests after each line. Harmonies are by early 20th century composers.

Orgelbegeleiding bij het Psalmzingen, published in 1947. This golden book is for pianists and organists, with simple and direct harmonies by Jacq. P. Bekkers and Jac. Kort. (Biblical Horizons makes copies available for \$8.00.) The harmony moves with each half note, not with each quarter note, making for smoother and easier singing. Hash marks indicate the ends of each line, but shorter hash marks indicate where one continues to the next line without taking a rest. This is important, and we find it in many books, because it indicates that in practice the Genevan singing churches did *not* take a rest after every line. Some may do so, and perhaps Calvin's Geneva originally did so (I do not know). But in practice over the centuries a kind of musical common sense has taken over.

De Melodieën der Psalmen, by J. Worp, published in 1935 and several times thereafter. This edition has every note equal. An edition issued in 1953 and again several times thereafter, uses the original Genevan rhythms. A rest is placed after each line.

Hungarian Versions:

Református Korálkönyv. This fine accompaniment book evidently first appeared in 1948, then in 1959, and my edition in 2002. The first part of the book, the Psalter (Zsoltárok) is of course Genevan, this being the Hungarian Reformed Church, and we get two versions of each Psalm. In each case, the first version the harmony by half notes (notated here as crochets) and the second version moves the harmonies by quarter notes (notated here as quavers). A number of Hungarian church musicians provide the harmonies. As with the Bekkers and Kort version above, the ends of lines are indicated by hash marks, with half hashes indicating where the line continues to the next without a rest.

Now I wish to draw two conclusions from this survey. First, it should be clear that in the actual singing church, as opposed to musical notation on *some* pages, stopping and dying at the end of every singing line is not necessarily the rule. In actual practice, many if not most churches took a rest after every second line in the more regular psalms.

Second, notice that every psalter mentioned above was produced by a church musician for use in

congregational singing, except for one. That one exception is that of Claude Goudimel. In fact, Goudimel wrote several harmonizations of the Genevan Psalter, but none of them for congregational use.

Understand: In the churches there were no musical instruments and no harmonizations. Hence, the harmonized versions produced by Goudimel, LeJeune, and others were not for congregational usage. They were for an elite group of educated people who not only knew how to read words but also could read music and had the money to buy partbooks to sing from. The printing press had been invented, but paper and ink were very expensive up until the industrial revolution.

Now, this relatively elite group of people was used to complex and sometimes unexpected harmonies. This was how art music was written in these days. What this means is that the Goudimel harmonies, while fine and good music, are not always apt for congregational use. Congregational song is not art music but the highest form of folk music, for it must be singable by a large number of people.

I submit that there is good reason not to try and use Goudimel's harmonies in worship. They were not written for that purpose, and while sometime they work just fine, there have been many other harmonizations composed over the centuries in the churches that have lived with these tunes. Practice has taught what works well and what works not so well.

At the same time, we need to bring the Genevan psalms, or many of them, into our English singing churches. This is a collection of some of the finest congregational song ever written. Many of the melodies come from Gregorian chant. Deddens has written concerning the study of Pierre Pidoux, *Le Psautier Hunuenot, I: Les mélodies, II: Documents et Bibliographie* (Basil, 1962):

Pidoux looked for the sources of the Psalm melodies of the Genevan Psalter and published many documents which are important in discovering the origin of the Psalm melodies. Time and again his conclusions go in the same direction as those of other contemporary investigations. He proved that in many cases the Psalm melodies were derived from hymns of the *Antiphonarium* and the *Gradual*, two books consisting of Gregorian chants. Remarkable is his discovery that not only the melodies of Geneva, but also those of Strasbourg go back to these sources.
(<http://spindleworks.com/library/deddens/psalmOrigins.htm>)

Deddens' valuable essay can be consulted for information on other studies and dissertations that establish the same point.

It is true that not all the Genevan tunes are equally good, but most are excellent. It is also true that it takes a bit longer to learn them because they are more involved than what Americans are used to, but the reward is significant: Almost every psalm has its own tune, so that one gets them locked into the mind. Also, the extra time it takes to get the melody down is an aid to memorization.

And finally, of course, it is true that Genevan Psalm are not in fact psalms. They are sermons based on the psalms. They are not a substitute for singing the psalms straight from the Bible, and it is a significant error in the Calvinistic traditions that they have been misused in this manner. The abuse of the Genevan Psalms, however, is no argument against their proper use.

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