

Old and New Psalms

What makes a Psalm suitable for singing? First of all it is the text. We enjoy singing hymns that speak of joy or that are meaningful. An attractive melody is also important. We have several psalms in our Dutch Psalter versions that we seldom sing because the melody is unfamiliar. In America these psalms have been given a different melody so that they could be sung. For example, Psalms 10 and 11 have a different melody in the American version of the Psalter.¹

It is remarkable to me that so many psalms have a happy text and a sad melody. Take, for example, Psalm 100. It is hard to imagine a happier song: “Juicht aarde, juicht alom den Heer” (“Shout for joy oh earth, everyone shout for joy to the Lord”) in the Psalter version of 1773 and “Juicht Gode toe, bazuint en zingt” (Shout for joy to God, blow the trumpet and sing”) in the Psalter version of 1968. The text shouts for joy.

PSALM 100 Genève 1551

1 Juicht Gode toe, bazuint en zingt.
Treedt nader tot gij Hem omringt,
gij aard' alom, zijn rijkdomein,
zult voor den HEER dienstvaardig zijn.

E=3 PSALM 100 Phrygisch

Juich, aarde, juicht alom den HEER, dient God
met blijdschap, geeft Hem eer! Komt, nadert voor
zijn aangezicht, zingt Hem een vrolijk lofgedicht.

We often sing this psalm; and we do so because of the text, not its melody. In other words, the melody does not match the text. The superscript to the psalm in the 1773 Psalter version indicates that the melody is Phrygian. The superscription on the left reads E = 3. This is to say that the ending note of the song, which is the ground note, is the third on the bar, the ‘mi’ of do-re-mi. This psalm is sung in the mi-scale (mi, fa, so, la, ti, do, re, mi) and this particular kind of scale is called the Phrygian scale, even though it is no longer noted in the hymnal. In the new version of the Psalter (1968) the hymn is still in the Phrygian scale, but the poets of the new version chose to not give scales a central place, but rather to mention the origin of the melody. The melody of Psalm 100 came into existence in 1551 in Geneva; in the new version this is the information given in the superscription.

The poet Willem Barnard rewrote Psalm 100 and in the third stanza he does justice to the melody by rendering it: “*Treedt statig binnen door de poort*” (“Enter through the gate with stateliness”). Whenever we sing “*Zingt Hem een vrolijk lofgedicht*” (“Sing to him a joyful song”) I always feel something is not right. The melody goes down, while the text goes up in a matter of speaking. The new Psalter has not quite remedied this: “*Roept uit met blijdschap*” (“Shout for joy”), “*God is Hij*” (“He is God”) we sing in the second stanza. It does not sound joyful, however hard we try.

When our organist, the late W. van de Velde, accompanied us, he would start out by playing the melody as directed by the hymnal, in the key of D with two flats. To infuse some joyfulness he would play the fourth stanza in a higher note. In this case he would use the setting from the Psalter of 1773, which is in E.

We would then sing: “*Want God is overstelpend goed, die ons in vrede wonen doet*” (“For God is good beyond measure, who makes us live in peace”). It is still in the Phrygian scale, but at a higher key.

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¹ *Psalter Hymnal*, CRC Publications.