

Protestant Worship Music

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CALVINISM

Calvinism might be called Protestantism in exile, since it was developed in Geneva by men who had fled their own lands—at least temporarily—to escape the persecutions suffered by dissenters. It lacked the national characteristics and the strong organization of Lutheranism. No rulers of principalities supported Calvin as they supported Luther. Except in parts of Switzerland, Calvinism was subject to effective opposition from the Catholic church, which held sway in most countries where the Calvinists sought to establish their reform.

Unlike Luther, who retained many of the traditional forms and adapted much of the Latin liturgy, the Calvinists made a clean break with the past, eschewing all ceremonies and customs that could be identified with the Roman church.

Among the babies thrown out with the bath water was worship music. All the slow, painful advances of centuries which have so far been described in this book, all the flower of church music that had blossomed in their own time, became as if they had never existed as far as the Calvinists were concerned.

Church musicians are apt to deplore the brake applied to church music by Calvinistic influence. The tradition that none but the very simplest of music has a place in public worship remains strong to this day among large groups of people and has, to some extent, thwarted the efforts of those who would dedicate the very finest of music to the service of Him by whom it was inspired.

In fairness to Calvin and his early followers, it must be admitted that there was some justification for their drastic action. Traditional forms had lost much of their original meanings. Intended as aids to worship, they had been invested with such importance in themselves that they had become distractions. Music was no exception. The elaborate motets and masses of the time, requiring all the skill of trained choirs, often missed their real purpose. The situation described in Chapter I existed then as now: worship ceased while the attention of singers and congregation was diverted to a musical performance. Even the ecclesiastical authorities, who countenanced a great deal of formalism for its own sake, were moved to protest the elaborations of the music from time to time.

Where Luther sought to restore to music its proper function as an aid to worship, the Calvinists threw it out almost completely.

There were practical reasons for abolishing all but the simplest of music, although how far they were taken into account at the time we cannot know.

Although inspiration for the movement stemmed from Geneva, there was nothing like a central governing body, nor would the Calvinists have wished one. A great deal of freedom for individual congregations was advocated; and it may have been feared that the retention of music would lead not only to the continuance of some Latin forms but also to the introduction of frivolous, worldly airs.

There were probably few musicians among the Calvinists. The reform movement had not the support of kings and nobles, except in some Germanic principalities, and most musicians were dependent upon royal, noble, or ecclesiastical patronage for their livelihood. Nor did the Calvinists inherit large churches with organs, trained choirs, and a tradition of music as the Lutherans did.

Without competent musicians to give it direction, and lacking facilities for worthwhile performance, perhaps it is as well that music was dropped from Calvinistic worship.

There seems to have been no objection to music as such. We have seen that, in Calvinistic Holland, Sweelinck and others entertained audiences in churches at times other than those of public worship, and editions of psalm tunes in four parts argue that people were able to sing those parts.

But in public worship, organs were silenced; and the singing was confined to rhymed paraphrases of the psalms, sung in unison. These *metrical psalms*, as they are called, followed closely the original prose settings in the Bible.

Following is Psalm 100 in its biblical and metrical forms.²

O be joyful in the Lord, all ye lands: serve the Lord with gladness, and come before his presence with a song.

Be ye sure that the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his

people, and the sheep of his pasture.

O go your way into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, and speak good of his Name.

For the Lord is gracious, his mercy is everlasting: and his truth endureth from generation to generation.

All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
Him serve with fear, His praise forth tell,
Come ye before Him, and rejoice.

The Lord, ye know, is God indeed;
Without our aid He did us make;
We are His flock, He doth us feed,
And for His sheep He doth us take.

O enter then His gates with praise,
Approach with joy His courts unto;
Praise, laud, and bless His name always,
For it is seemly so to do.

For why? the Lord our God is good;
His mercy is for ever sure;
His truth at all times firmly stood,
And shall from age to age endure.

Wm, Kethe, 1561.

All paraphrases were not as well done as this one. Some of the early ones were crude: even some that have survived until the present day would make a poet squirm.

The Calvinists' insistence on the use of metrical psalms to the exclusion of all other types of hymns had a twofold purpose: first, to avoid the Latin hymn which, in addition to its association with the Roman church, sometimes expressed doctrines contrary to the reformers' beliefs; second, to discourage a crude hymnody in the vernacular which might go quite as far afield in the matter of doctrine.

The objection to "human" hymns did not extend to the psalms for, while the paraphrases were certainly the work of men, the subject matter was clearly defined in the prose version. A passion for purity could have been more completely satisfied by retaining the prose psalms; but that would have meant the retention of the plainsong chant which bore the stamp of Rome, while trend was towards measured music to tunes more readily sung by the people.

Metrical versions of the psalms were many. Two of Calvin's countrymen, Clément Marot and Théodore de Bèze, prepared paraphrases in French between 1539 and 1562, and these were translated for the use of the German Reformed Church by Ambrosius Lobwasser. The tunes were largely the work of Loys Bourgeois (c. 1523-1600), Claude Goudimel (c. 1505-1572), Guillaume Franc (d. 1570), and Claude Le Jeune (1528-1601) who, besides their compositions in other fields, identified themselves with the French Huguenot movement. Both Bourgeois and Franc spent some years in Switzerland as a result of their Protestant activities in France.

In 1540, *Souter Liedekens*, perhaps the first complete metrical psalter, was published in Antwerp. The tunes were borrowed from Dutch folk songs; and many of them were, in turn, borrowed by the Genevan compilers of psalters.

The English and Scotch, too, had paraphrases to some of the psalms, although it is not known where they got their earlier tunes. A curious collection was that of Robert Crowley, whose complete book of metrical psalms (1549) was provided with only one tune—a plainsong chant in the tenor, harmonized for four voices. The melody note was unchanged in the first and third lines (the harmonizing voices changed only once), and the only variety was provided by the inflections of the chant which appeared in the

second and fourth lines. The British carried these psalms, and those of Sternhold and Hopkins, without tunes, to Geneva, where they were placed in the melting pot of psalmody.

The first Anglo-Genevan psalter, based on Sternhold and Hopkins and containing tunes, appeared in 1556. John Day published editions of Sternhold and Hopkins in 1561 and 1562, the first prefaced with instructions for learning to sing—thus setting a fashion—the second containing the whole psalter and sixty-five tunes. Therafter, new collections of metrical psalms were numerous and frequent.

It was the incomplete psalter of 1561 that the Scottish reformers took home from Geneva. It was completed and published in 1564 and was in use in the Presbyterian Church for many years.

At first, only the melodies of the tunes appeared in the psalters and, since congregational singing was in unison and there were no organs, the melodies were sufficient to meet all needs. Later on, first on the continent then in Scotland, harmonized tunes appeared with the melodies in the tenor, although they were by no means generally used in public worship. With parts provided, the people were enabled to indulge their love of music in seemly fashion and to practice the art of part-singing—but principally in their own homes.

In the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, particularly, where the tradition of austerity in public worship persisted until late in the nineteenth century, and still persists in some localities, many interesting and quaint practices became themselves traditional. Some were begun quite early; others came later. Few of them were adopted by all congregations, but the use of most of these practices spread to England and, later, to America.

On the precentor, or “uptaker of the psalms,” rested the responsibility of leading the singing. Some precentors sounded the opening note on a pitch pipe, a graduated wooden tube whose length, and therefore pitch, could be adjusted by a stopper. But even such an innocent instrument as a pitch pipe was considered unseemly by many congregations, and the precentor had to find the note unaided. The mark of a good precentor was the ability to set a pitch that would be within comfortable range of all the congregation. He did not always find the desired note on his first attempt and would allow his voice to rise and fall, something in the manner of an intonation, until he felt that he had achieved the right pitch. Possibly because of his unwillingness to admit his inability to give out the correct note at once or because he thought he was adding something desirable to his performance, he might add some ornamental notes to the principal one whether he needed to or not.

The pitch having been decided upon, the congregation was still not ready to sing the psalm. In the early days of the reform movement, books were not always available; and even when they were, many people could not read them. That the congregation might know and sing the words, the minister or the precentor read out the psalm a line at a time, the people singing each line after it was read. This practice, besides interfering with the sense of the words, frequently led to confusion in singing the tune. Intent upon listening to the words, the congregation—and often the precentor—forgot the pitch and might begin the second line higher or lower than the first. Precentors sometimes actually forgot the tune to which the first part of a psalm had been sung and wandered to another one. Canny precentors who were “lining out” the psalms avoided such confusion by monotoning the line on the first note that was to be sung. In the Scottish highlands, later on, precentors lined out psalms in a sort of improvised melody which centered around the dominant and led into the proper tune which the congregation was to sing.

Lining out or “deaconing,” as it was later called in America, was intended only as a temporary measure to be used until the people could read the psalms from their books. Unfortunately, the custom became so firmly established that it was continued long after its usefulness was past. As late as the middle of the nineteenth century it was abandoned by some religious bodies only in the face of bitter opposition from some of their members.

The pitch set and the first line announced (in far less time than it has taken to read about it), the precentor began the psalm, lengthening the first note to give everyone a chance to join him. The line was sung very slowly, becoming even slower as the end was approached, and the second line was announced. The lengthened first note of each line, called the *gathering note*, came to be recognized by publishers of psalm tunes; and even some modern hymnals use it, together with a lengthened last note to balance it off.

Even if nothing had been added to the precentor’s giving out of the note and the lining out of the psalm, the intention of the leaders of the reform to have the psalter sung in a dignified, straightforward manner would have been defeated to some extent. But, human nature being what it is, the people could not resist adding something of their own to the simple tunes. As the austere plainsong chant had been made the subject of elaboration and variation centuries before, so the English and Scottish Calvinists sought to ornament the psalm tunes, generally with less happy results.

The more musically gifted of the reformers did make a worthwhile contribution by a type of composition known as *reports*, motet-like versions of the psalms, such as those by Goudimel. Those which appeared in the Scottish psalter of 1635 generally allotted the psalm tune to the tenor, with long gaps between the lines which were filled by imitations and elaborations by the other voices. (This is reminiscent of the more skilled treatment of the German choral in the choral-prelude form.)

Amateur attempts to brighten up the psalm tunes were, however, cheapening and disastrous. The long, sustained notes were replaced by trills or any other ornaments that suited the fancy—and the fancies of all members of the congregation did not always agree. Skips of intervals beyond a second were often filled in with improvised notes “to avoid the roughness of a leap,” as one later writer put it. In fact, the number of added notes often far exceeded the original, and some of the tunes in their “ornamented” state defy recognition.

The metrical psalms laid the foundation for the modern hymn—indeed, the transition from psalter to hymnary was easy and natural once the prejudice against “human hymns” was overcome. That their greatest possibilities were seldom realized by early congregations does not lessen their value to later generations.

Their popularity led to a widespread interest in part singing, even where harmonized versions were not in use in public worship. It became customary to preface the tune book proper with instructions for singing in parts, and those capable of teaching the art had no lack of pupils. There were far more people capable of singing four-part harmony than there are now.

Again we must caution the reader who uses the list of references at the end of this chapter that modal harmony and irregular rhythm, which marked the original versions of many metrical psalms, are not reflected in modern versions.

²The prose version is that of the Great Bible of 1539, translated from the Vulgate by Coverdale. The Authorized, or King James, Version was not yet in existence when the metrical paraphrases were made.