Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

The Yale ISM Review
VOLUME I • NO. 1: Song
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Editorial

By Jeremy | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

We are pleased to present a new venture: The Yale ISM Review. Published by Yale Institute of Sacred Music, it is a biannual, open-access online publication serving practitioners in the fields of sacred music, worship, and the related arts. You are invited to join us for stimulating discussions, enriched by contributions from Yale faculty and others who are leaders in their fields.

Our inaugural issue is organized around the theme of song — that deeply human expression so important to worship, yet also fragile and needing care if it is to flourish. The theme of song is reflected here through music, poetry, art, and prayer; in these pages you will discover connections between song and human health, philosophy, architecture, and more.

Thank you for visiting us today. If you like what you see, subscribe! Subscription is absolutely free and open to all.

~ Rita Ferrone, editor
November 19, 2014
Publisher’s Welcome

By Melissa Maier | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

Welcome to The Yale ISM Review, a new publication from the Yale Institute of Sacred Music! This biannual online periodical reaches out to parish leaders and practitioners of all kinds who have an interest and investment in sacred music, worship, and the related arts.

One of the two founding benefactors of the ISM, Mrs. Clementine Tangeman, was deeply devoted to those who are actively engaged in these pursuits, as you are. Through her role as hymnal co-editor of the Disciples of Christ (Christian Hymns, 1947), her support of the Union School of Sacred Music, and, of course, her and her brother’s (J. Irwin Miller’s) bequest that founded the Yale ISM, she showed her commitment to a mission that remains vitally important today: “We hope that, in this new Institute, the function of music and the arts in Christianity will receive new strength through the preparation and training of individual musicians, artists, and teachers who understand their calling in broad Christian terms not exclusively within the limits of their disciplines.”

And so we extend this invitation to you, our readers, to “receive new strength” and enjoy the breadth of vision reflected in the writing and media you will find here. The Review will offer you a window through which you will see some of the activities the ISM sponsors throughout the year. But even more, we believe you will find tools and insights that will help you in your work: as you accompany congregational song, unlock the Scriptures, celebrate the liturgy, minister to the sick, bring images to life through story, color, form, and verse. This is not a how-to manual; in fact, we hope it will complexify, rather than simplify, issues that you face for the sake of voices who are not easily heard in a world filled with the noise of the mp3’s, video games and television advertisers.

You will not find alumni news here, though you may hear from alumni. You will read work of faculty, but in a way that bears on practices of living communities of faith. And you will meet the many friends of the ISM who stand with you in the daily work you do to give hope, life, and health to those God places near you. Innovation will converse with tradition, practice with theory. As we do this work, we stand in the company of Christian communities across time and space, and we converse with our relations in every faith tradition.

As I invite you into this conversation, I do so with thanks for all those who have set the table: my faculty colleagues in the ISM who continue to shape the content, our beloved staff and editorial committee who support and nurture the process, and, of course to Rita Ferrone, our visionary and intrepid General Editor, who will be your primary guide through the material.

Though we reach out to you through the electrons we sometimes despise as a culture, we will savor the image of you reading these pages in your home or study, on the porch, under a neighbor’s tree, or at the altar of your parish. Pray for us as we prepare what we hope you will receive as a gift, and give us, in return, your thoughts and feedback as this publication continues to grow.

Enjoy — and may God bless you.
When I was asked to give a talk for a group of musicians recently, my hosts came up with the topic: “Why sing? Why pray? Why bother?”

I never would have thought of that.

To me, singing is like breathing. I can’t imagine life without song, nor can I imagine life without communal sung prayer. But I am not in the majority. Increasingly, song that wells up from a community’s heart and shared life is an endangered species, needing careful tending if it is to survive. Church communities must present a convincing case for communal worship, and perhaps most especially for the assembly’s song. Creating an environment conducive to the flourishing of this profoundly human activity takes work; it cannot be taken for granted.

“I wish someone would write the elevator speech,” church musician Dale Adelmann once said to me, “to explain why those who don’t consider themselves singers should sing anyway.” The default assumption of many today is: “Singing is for singers” — an elite group who possess special skills — “but not for me.” And, if others are able to do it for me, why should I even try? Experts at the International Laboratory of Brain, Music, and Sound Research in Montreal put the number of people who have trouble singing at about 60%. The situation is far different in traditional societies, where singing is practiced from the cradle.

Churches are perhaps the last bastion of communal song in American life. Consider how other streams of shared song have dried up: Singing in the family circle is out of fashion. It’s no longer common for parents to sing lullabies to their children. The National Anthem is sung by soloists at ball games. Even the birthday song has been replaced, in restaurants, by recordings or ditties barked out by the wait staff — with no participation by the patrons expected or required. Is it any wonder that congregational singing in church requires more effort and commitment, if it is to endure?

Yet singing together is a formative experience. It does something for people that can’t be gained in any other way. Its imprint goes deep. When memory fades and cognition falters, song remains.

In light of both the importance of communal singing and its fragility as a human art form, our inaugural issue of The Yale ISM Review is devoted to the theme of song.

Our issue opens with a poem by Chris Wiman. Tom Troeger, in his essay on critical standards for hymn texts, affirms that the beauty of song deepens prayer. From the perspective of human health, Mark Lazenby reminds us that singing is a bodily act with theological consequences. James Abbington describes Black spirituals as sacred folk song. And, finally, Nicholas Wolterstorff, by opening a window on work songs, offers fresh insights into the very nature of song in worship.

The psalms constitute a privileged body of song for those religious traditions formed by the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Thus we have included three short essays on singing the psalms: Judah Cohen provides a reflection from a Jewish perspective, Paul Inwood from a Roman Catholic perspective, and Don Saliers from a Protestant perspective.
The biblical and mystical insight that creation itself sings to the glory of God prompts us to include two additional contributions. John Coburn’s *Canticle of the Sun II* incarnates the praises of creation as visual art. The floor mosaic of the Honan Chapel sings with the Three Young Men in the fiery furnace.

No less important than the question of *why* we sing or *what* we sing, however, is the cluster of issues concerning *how* we sing. How do we make it possible for assemblies to sing wholeheartedly and well? Ike Sturm reflects on the experience of eliciting song in worship from the perspective of a jazz musician. From the organ bench in Christ Church, New Haven, Tom Murray shows us how he leads song in a more traditional church setting.

The landscape of worship today is changing, as multiple musical styles and new technologies come into play. Three of our contributors help us to understand the challenges and opportunities of this time. In order for people to sing well, physical spaces have to cooperate. Scott Riedel charts the issues of acoustic design in constructing and renovating houses of worship. Emily Brink explores the ways in which new songs find a home across cultural boundaries, fostering relationships in a global church. Karen Westerfield Tucker carefully evaluates the “costs of extinction” of hymnals, those long-lived servants of communal song.

Each issue of the *Review* will conclude with “A Final Note.” This feature intersects with the theme of the issue from a different direction, inviting us to consider something we may not have noticed before. The final note in this issue belongs to the poet, Chris Wiman, who places before us the existential question: what has become of our voice?

To all our contributors: Thank you. To all our readers: Enjoy.

~November 19, 2014

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FOOTNOTE

[If I could write a cry]

By Melissa Maier | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

If I could write a cry

if I could reduce

or maybe raise

all music to a moan

savage unsayable psalm

barb and balm

of my unbreakable heart

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Christian Wiman is the author, editor, or translator of nine books, including My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer (2013). His new book of poems, Once in the West, was released in the fall of 2014. His spare, precise poems often explore themes of spiritual faith and doubt. For ten years, he served as editor of Poetry magazine; in 2013 he joined the faculty of Yale Institute of Sacred Music and Yale Divinity School.

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Recommended Citation: Wiman, Christian (2014) “[If I could write a cry],” The Yale ISM Review: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 4.
Available at: http://ismreview.yale.edu/

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On the Cover

By Melissa Maier | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

The Yale ISM Review

VOLUME I · NO. 1: Song
from the mosaic floor in the Honan Chapel (1916), photographed by Daniel C. Doolan. Photograph used with kind permission of the Board of the Honan Trust, Cork. See more at the Honan Chapel & Collection online.

Cover design: Maura Gianakos, Yale Printing & Publishing Services
Song Whose Beauty Deepens Prayer

By jeremy | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

*This article is abbreviated and emended from Thomas Troeger, “Afterword,” in Song that Blesses Earth: Hymn Texts, Carols and Poems (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).*

When and how does a hymn text deepen a community’s prayer? When not and why? We do not answer these questions in a vacuum but from a consciousness that has been shaped by a multitude of different forces. Theological convictions, literary tastes, cultural biases, the music of language as we have absorbed it throughout our lives, the impact of new knowledge and ways of understanding the world, the vividness of our imaginations, the song that has nurtured our faith, and the ethos of our home worshiping communities — all these and more shape the critical sensibilities with which we respond to hymn texts. In some of these realms we may share substantial common ground, but in others the landscape of our hearts will have very different contours and features.

It is easy to take the contextual forces that shape our values and standards for granted, especially if we have grown up singing hymns from a particular book. There is something finished and solid about a hymnal, as though its contents were a collection of fixed pieces, as immoveable as the skeletal structure of fossils. The resistance that new hymns and new hymnals encounter in many churches gives witness to this misperception of what in fact is a spirited history, often reflecting, as Eric Routley points out, the theological turbulence that has marked the church’s story:

Periods when somebody somewhere is tearing up the turf and asking questions and organizing rebellions and reconstructing disciplines produce hymns: when the steam goes out of such movements, or they become part of an expanded main stream, hymn writing goes on in a more tranquil way, but never for very long. Another colour is added to the picture by another ‘movement,’ and that movement brings new hymns and new kinds of hymn into the repertory.[1]

Routley’s insight about the dynamic character of hymnody illuminates our contemporary situation. We live in a period when many people in many places are “tearing up the turf and asking questions and organizing rebellions and reconstructing disciplines.” David Mahan states the challenge in broad but succinct terms: “How can the Church revitalize its speech in such manner that its own language regains a foothold in the discourses of the public square and, indeed, in the imagination of late-modern audiences, such that the gospel once more becomes intelligible as well as compelling to them?”[2] Mahan raises the question while examining the work of three poets who strive to achieve an idiom that bears fruitful witness to the gospel now, but it applies with equal force to hymn writers. Mahan describes how daunting the task is, quoting Geoffrey Hill’s vivid phrase, “the acoustical din that surrounds us all,”[3] and acknowledging in his own words: “So vast and so demanding are the challenges now facing the witnessing Church in its late-modern contexts that all variety of resources of language and of the imaginative intelligence should be marshaled for this decidedly public enterprise we call theology.”[4]
Summoning the “resources of language and of the imaginative intelligence” to break through “the acoustical din,” hymn writers might choose to use exclusively the idiom of the world as we know it now — its societal fragmentation, its cultural diversity and conflict, its cosmological vastness. Or hymnists might assume the coherence of the faith-world that fed earlier generations of poets, cultivating the vineyard of images and understandings that have sustained the church’s song through the centuries. Or the hymn writer might combine them both, drawing upon our global and scientific vision to expand the perimeters of tradition, and using tradition as a source of wisdom and revelation that deepen the meaning of our contemporary life. It is this latter, integrative approach that I have chosen. My desire to fuse tradition and innovation manifests itself in the three major criteria by which I judge my own work as well as that of others: musicality, structure and meaning, theological depth. I believe these to be the qualities that make for song whose beauty deepens prayer.

Although the music of language and the music of song and instrumental performance are not identical, they are related. What Seamus Heaney hopes for his poetry would resonate with the aspiration of many composers. Heaney writes that his “effort is to repose in the stability conferred by a musically satisfying order of sounds.”[5] A rigidly theological mind may find this too esthetic for the writing of hymns, asking: does not right doctrine and clear theological thought take precedence over “a musically satisfying order of sounds?” The question assumes an over-simplified understanding of how theology is manifest through the confluence of language, singing, and instrumental accompaniment when hymns are used in worship. I can illustrate this with an e-mail exchange that preceded my writing a hymn for a church’s anniversary celebration. The congregation wanted a new text that could be sung to a traditional setting, but they were still trying to settle on what the setting would be. Both of the e-mails were written by the pastor prior to my beginning work on the poem, and although she included helpful history and news about the congregation that would influence my creation of the text, I find it revealing how she discusses the musical sound that she has in her head for the church’s anniversary hymn:

_I am drawn to the grand tunes but, after hearing a little more about our story, you may have other suggestions. Grosser Gott, wir loben dich is another strong tune that is only used once in the Presbyterian Hymnal. Depending upon how it is played, it seems to me it can be placed in a number of positions in worship. Andy [the church musician] and I will play through some possibilities on Monday._

The pastor demonstrates an awareness of the complex interrelationship between language and music: she acknowledges that, once I learn about the congregation’s story, it may touch off a different sound in my head. She later wrote me again after she and the musician had chosen the setting to which they wanted me to compose their anniversary hymn text:

_The one we decided upon is Grosser Gott, wir loben dich. It does not necessarily fit the hymn placement after the sermon, although no hymn can be ruled out, but it serves well as an opening and closing hymn. I realize that it is a fairly grand setting — but it will fit well into our space and we have the organ to support it. In addition, on our Anniversary Sunday we will have timpani, violin (and one more instrument which I don’t remember) — all Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra players — with which to introduce the hymn._

Consider the number of factors that went into this decision: the tonal character of the music (“a fairly
grand setting”), the flow of the liturgy (“the hymn placement” in the service), the church’s nave where it would be sung (“it will fit well into our space”), and the varied instrumental accompaniment (“the organ to support it” and members of the Symphony Orchestra “to introduce the hymn”). All of this preceded the writing of the text, and all of it rumbled around in my heart — “grand” musical sound, architectonic space, organ, timpani and violin — as I worked to create a hymn that opens:

Every planet, star and stone,
every atom charged and spinning,
every cell of blood and bone
trace to you, God, their beginning.

To exist in time and space
is itself a gift of grace.

After several drafts, I chose this opening stanza because the simple words, the ring of the rhymes, and the rhythm of the poetry produce to my ear the kind of “grand” sound that the pastor described in her e-mails. To quote Seamus Heaney again, I found in it “the stability conferred by a musically satisfying order of sounds” as well as theology I could offer with conviction.

I consistently raise two questions about a hymn’s structure and meaning, the second major category of my critical criteria: Does the hymn take us somewhere, gathering momentum from stanza to stanza? Is there immediately accessible meaning that will stand up to repeated singing and deeper reflection over time?

Although I find singing cyclic congregational song, for example, music of the Taizé community, prayerful and moving, I am drawn as a hymnpoet to creating sequential hymns. Sequential hymns put forth an argument or narrative line or poetic conceit that progresses from stanza to stanza.[6] I strive for a sense of development whose meaning is comprehensible upon first singing, yet rich enough to bear repetition and to produce new insights upon closer reading. In the words of Christian Wiman, I hope to attain “a surface clarity without sacrificing depth or complexity.”[7]

Because Christ teaches that the Spirit will guide us “into all the truth” (John 16:13a), theology can never be satisfied by confining itself to the Bible. We have to ask: Where is the Spirit leading us now? What reveals the Spirit? What blocks the Spirit? These are questions of theological depth, my third criterion for judging hymn texts. Edwin Muir helps me understand why such depth is an essential antidote to the distortions of our technologically obsessed culture. Over fifty years ago he traced the malaise of our culture to its “lopsided development”:

Something in the apparent progression [of ever-expanding human knowledge] has not progressed; for myself I would call it the imagination which would have made us able to use for purely human purposes all that applied science offers us. A lopsided development, whether of the body or the mind, is a diseased development, and is bound to lead to strange and unpredictable results.... What we are troubled by is the sense that science has run on
far ahead of us, and that we are without the wisdom to use for our good the enormous power which it drops in passing into our hands.[8]

The “lopsided development” includes a neglect of theological depth, of what has been variously called through the centuries: mystery, wonder, spirit, God, the holy, the transcendent, the numinous. Writing new hymns in an era of “lopsided development” seems a modest effort at correcting its distortions. Nevertheless, it is a witness to the resurrection, to the way God disrupts the suffocating assumption that human thought and accomplishment define the boundaries of reality. The risen Christ, then, is the ultimate source of song that deepens prayer:

The risen Christ disturbed
far more than earth and stone.

Christ crumbled certainties inferred
from all that’s fixed and known:
the “facts” that we’ve defined —
that life is pulse and breath,
that wisdom is a heart resigned
to finitude and death.

Christ opens to surprise
the truth we presupposed:
accepted thought that calcifies
and views the world as closed.

Divine vitalities
from God’s deep heart and core
rise up with Christ as energies,
alive forevermore.

Refreshing, buoyant streams,
yield our mind and heart
to look beyond our plots and schemes
to where God’s visions start:
inside an empty tomb
where dawn dispels the night
and earth becomes the holy womb
of newborn life and light.[9]

Thomas H. Troeger studied to become a flutist, but under the impact of a great preacher, he decided to prepare for the ministry. A pastor for seven years, he then began teaching homiletics, hymnody, and liturgics. His scholarship has focused on the role of the imagination in preaching and worship, and his creative work includes hymns and lyric poems. He is the Lantz Professor of Christian Communication at Yale Divinity School and Yale Institute of Sacred Music.

FOOTNOTES


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When I was asked, as a nurse, to offer a workshop for the Congregations Project “on health and wellness as dimensions of the Christian life,” I was told that the theme was embodiment. My mind did not immediately turn to the pages of nursing research on wellness in community, but to my childhood memories of being raised in American Pentecostalism.

Ours was a little church in Southern California, near the birthplace of the movement in Los Angeles. There, at the Azusa Street Mission, Brother Seymour, an African American, preached and founded Pentecostalism.[1] Nurtured by people who had sat under Brother Seymour’s preaching at Azusa Street, our church took great pride in that heritage. Although my memories begin nearly seventy years after the origins of the Pentecostal movement, older people in our church exhorted us to worship in the way that Brother Seymour had taught. We sang, we shouted, we danced, we spoke in tongues, and we were slain in the Spirit; that is, we used the whole of our bodies in worship, and we did it until we were physically worn out. When I hear the words embodiment, Christian life, and community, my mind turns to memories of my childhood church community and its embodied style of worship — a style of worship in which the movements, the voice, and the posture of body were central.

The body, the nurse-researcher in me says, is a singular organism made up of many systems that work together in awesome and mysterious, yet scientifically understandable, ways. Yet, when I think of the body as a philosopher of religion, I think of Paul’s use of the human body as a metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12:12: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (RSV). Paul goes on to strain the metaphor; but when I focus just on the opening phrase of the sentence that begins verse 13 — “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” — I am able to get past the strain. It suggests that, though we are many, we are baptized into the one commonality of the Christian life. With this commonality in mind I am able to ask, as a nurse, whether there is a relationship between health and wellness as dimensions of the Christian life, and the communal aspect of that life.

Some General Observations

Let me say something general about the extensive literature on religion and health. Harold Koenig offers three major theoretical paths through which religion can contribute to better health:

• as a complex set of coping methods helping the individual to handle psychological stress and its physiological consequences;
• as a pro-social force giving the opportunity to give and receive social support;
• as a method of behavioral control requiring and supporting the individual in avoidance of health-destructive behaviors, such as hazardous drinking, illicit drug use, or excessive eating.[2]

The nurse-researcher in me understands these theoretical paths as paths that the scientist can study, since they involve variables that can be measured. But the worshiper in me, instead of following theoretical paths, asks:

• Where is the human body in communal acts of worship?
• Where is the communal body of worshipers?

Medical scientists gain clinical knowledge about human health from observations at the laboratory bench and through the collective statistics of randomized controlled trials in which one group gets an intervention and another group does not. Such trials, however, will not help us when it comes to understanding the human body in communal acts of worship. If one believes that those acts are what faithful Christians do, one cannot in good conscience randomize some Christians to engage in them and others not. We cannot ask faithful people to go into a control arm of an intervention trial and stop being faithful, so the usual methods of gaining clinical knowledge are not available in studying communal acts of worship.

Some researchers, using epidemiological methods such as large population-based surveys, have found some association between religious practice and health. For example, researchers in California have used the 2003 California Health Survey of 41,873 people to ask whether attending worship influenced health behaviors. They found that engagement in healthy lifestyle behaviors significantly increased among those who reported attending worship, compared to those who do not attend worship — for all population groups, including gender, race, and ethnicity.[3] And researchers in Hungary found that practicing religion in that post-Communist country was associated with better mental and physical health.[4] Powerful though these studies are, they still miss the element of the human body in communal acts of worship.

What Happens in Worship

To get a handle on the human body in collective acts of worship, I went looking in the nursing literature and found an article by one of nursing’s intellectual giants, Patricia Benner, which suggests that the human body allows for knowledge that is not sought by epidemiologists and researchers, whether bench or clinical. She says that embodiment allows for perceptual apprehension of our commonly inhabited worlds. Embodiment, that is, allows us to meet one another in a common world (a shared logical space), and it allows us to understand one another through our perceptual apprehension of one another in that common world (of shared logic).[5]

To engage in communal acts of worship is to inhabit a common world. Through our perceptual apprehension of one another through acts of worship, we learn about our bodies and act upon this knowledge to improve human health.

The scholarly literature on communal singing provides insights about such singing as an act of worship. Krause and Hayward investigated the relationship between religious music and health over three years among 1,024 adults of sixty-six years and older. They report on four findings that create a sort of syllogism:

• people who attend worship services more often reported stronger emotional reactions to religious
those who were more emotionally involved with religious music were more likely to feel a close sense of connectedness with other people;

● those who reported feeling more closely connected with others were more hopeful about the future; and

● those who reported feeling more hopeful about the future were more likely to rate their health more favorably over the three years.[6]

Krause and Hayward did not claim that attending worship services in which there is religious music improves human health. Rather, they said that individuals who attend worship services in which there is religious music rated their health more favorably. These worshipers may have had poor health, and surely, some of them in a sample of this size and age must have had chronic illness, though Krause and Hayward do not tell us. But individuals in this study perceptually apprehended the common world brought on by religious music, and this perceptual apprehension enabled them to come to some collective knowledge of hope, regardless of the clinical facts they may have faced. The many came together as one body and there, in the acts of that common body, knew the hope of their faith which, although they may have had illness, inspired them to think favorably about their health. This was the second step in my process of thinking that we learn about how to improve human health through the communal acts of worship: through faithful worship we learn hope, hope that transcends the reality of the facts of human frailty and illness.

Singing Promotes Well-Being

Krause and Hayward’s focus on religious music sent me on another hunt in the literature, to discover the effect of music on human health. I found what you all may very well already know: singing promotes well-being. Grape and colleagues enrolled eight amateur and eight professional singers in a study using electrocardiograms to study the effect of thirty minutes of singing on singers’ hearts. They took blood samples before and after singing to measure the effect on markers of inflammation and hormones in the blood. Analysis of the electrocardiograms suggested that singing promoted cardio-physiological fitness. This fitness was most evident among the professional singers. However, markers of inflammation decreased after singing among the amateur singers, and the hormone that produces feelings of love and trust, oxytocin, increased among all the singers after singing for thirty minutes. Amateur singers reported increasing joy and elatedness after the thirty minutes of singing, and all singers reported more energy and relaxation.[7]

Singing in communal acts of worship thus can improve our heart function, decrease inflammation in our bodies, and produce a hormone that causes us to bond with each other. During the physiologic act of common singing, through the release of oxytocin, those who sing learn to trust each other. So this was the third step in my process of thinking that we learn about how to improve human health through communal acts of worship: the act of common singing improves our cardiac function, lowers inflammation, and affects our physiology such that we come to love and trust each other. In this common love and trust the many voices become one choir, one community, one body of Christ.

A Physico-Theological Lesson

We Pentecostals had figured it out a long time ago. We sang as one, shouted as one, danced as one, spoke in tongues as one, and let the Spirit overcome us as one. The theme of Christian unity was important for American Pentecostals and John 17:21 was considered a key verse: “That they all may be
one, as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us....” (KJV).[8] Through acts of communal singing our very physiology bears witness to God’s handiwork among us and our oneness as the body of Christ.

Koenig posits religion as a complex set of coping mechanisms, a pro-social force, and a method of behavioral control. But the communal acts of worship are more than that: they open up for worshipers a common world in which we gain knowledge of our oneness. Vickhoff and associates measured the heart rate of singers while humming a single tone, singing a hymn, and then singing a slow mantra.[9] They found that song structure and heart rate variability are connected. When singers sang the same regular song structures in unison, their hearts accelerated and decelerated at the same time — as one. The experiment concluded that the “external and visible joint action” of singing in unison “corresponds to an internal and biological joint action.”[10]

Acts of communal singing may shape our views of our health. They may inspire in us hope that transcends disease and discomfort. They may improve our cardio-physiologic fitness, reduce inflammation in our bodies, and release a hormone that causes us to bond with each other. Most important, however, acts of communal singing in worship create the common world in which we learn the physico-theological lesson of our embodiment: though many, we are the one body of Christ.

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FOOTNOTES


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Sacred Folk Song

By Melissa Maier | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

Several years ago I was privileged to speak at length with William L. Dawson (now deceased), the world-renowned African American composer and arranger of Negro spirituals and former director of the celebrated Tuskegee Institute Choir. He asked me to define a “spiritual.” Completely intimidated, I attempted to put a few feeble words together as if I were composing an entry for the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, to which he responded, “That’s too many words that aren’t saying anything!” He finally answered, “The spiritual is simply a sacred folk song created by the people.”

The answer was simple but not simplistic. After hearing Mr. Dawson’s definition, I began to reflect on all the sacred folk songs to which I had been exposed in the African American tradition. How were these songs produced? What characteristics did they have in common? I observed that they were created by an individual or individuals of a particular group and adopted by that group for singing that both reflects and communicates the system that produced them. They faithfully convey popular sentiments and beliefs. They express deep emotions. They reflect religious or secular experiences or attitudes. But, most importantly, they were created by the people — the folks — not by skilled composers and trained musicians.

In Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death, Howard Thurman observed that within the Negro spiritual “is the secret of [the enslaved’s] ascendancy over circumstances and the basis of their assurance concerning life and death.”[1] In Folk Songs of the American Negro, John W. Work III asserts that African American songs are “full of Scripture, quoted and implied,” because for centuries — if reading was permitted at all — the Bible was usually the only book the enslaved were allowed to “study.”[2]

Wendell P. Whalum affirmed that “The serious sacred music of the oral tradition is primarily individual-to-group music. It begins with the individual but is made into final composition, finished and polished by the group.... An individual contributed a musical ‘thought,’ and the group worked it over and over, reshaping phrases, adding and subtracting notes, filling in melodic gaps, adjusting harmony and rhythm. Many spirituals died when they failed to do what the group intended them to do.”[3] I recall on many occasions hearing Dr. Whalum say that “spirituals can be learned in two minutes or less if it’s a real spiritual.” Whalum’s statement is best illustrated in his arrangements entitled “Three Congregational Folk Spirituals”: “Leaning On The Lord,” “Four and Twenty Elders,” and “Fare Ye Well.”

Zora Neale Hurston provides support for Whalum’s claim in her classic The Sanctified Church as she differentiates and distinguishes between what she refers to as “neo-spirituals” (concert or arranged spirituals) and the “genuine spiritual” (or folk spiritual).

To begin with, Negro spirituals are not solo or quartette [sic] material. The jagged harmony is what makes it, and it ceases to be what it was when this is absent. Neither can any group be trained to produce it. Its truth dies under training like flowers under hot water. The harmony of the true spiritual is not regular. The dissonances are important and not to be ironed out by the trained musician. The various parts break in at any old time. Falsetto often takes the place of regular voices for short periods. Keys change. Moreover, each singing of
the piece is a new creation. The congregation is bound by no rules. No two time singing is alike, so that we must consider the rendition of a song not a final thing, but a mood. It won’t be the same thing next Sunday.

Negro song to be heard truly must be sung by a group, and a group bent on expression of feelings and not on sound effects....The real Negro singer cares nothing about pitch. The first note just bursts out and the rest of the church join in — fired by the same inner urge. Every man trying to express himself through song. Every man for himself. Hence the harmony and disharmony, the shifting of keys and broken time that make up the spiritual.[41]

In his collection *Spirits that Dwell in Deep Woods: Prayer and Praise Songs of the Black Religious Experience*, Wyatt Tee Walker introduces twenty-four songs that he identifies as “spin-offs of the early hymn-book era in Black religious life (c. 1885–1925).” He contends that “Like the spirituals, in this respect, these have no identifiable authors. The body of this music expresses in individual form the collective consciousness of the community in matters of religious belief. There is in this music the flavor of both spiritual and Black Meter Music without any real loss of its own identity.”[5] Some of the most familiar songs in this collection that continue to be sung in many Black churches today include “Glory, Glory! Hallelujah!,” “Jesus is a Rock in a Weary Land,” “Jesus on the Main Line,” “Something on the Inside Working on the Outside,” and “You Can’t Make Me Doubt Him.”

In a 1981 lecture at the Hampton University Ministers’ and Musicians’ Conference, Dr. Whalum strongly advocated bringing the folk spiritual back into our worship services as congregational music. He maintained that spirituals could be used not only in prayer meetings and mid-week services but also as functional music for the Christian Year. He affirmed “When Blacks sing spirituals, they are singing them from their roots. They are singing them from an inner feeling, a kind of outward manifestation of an inner-living essence, feeling something very deeply. Blacks have not, as a rule...been afraid to enjoy their music. They have not been afraid to let it relate to something in their own lives and to recognize it as a good remedy for something in someone else’s life.”[6]

In many instances, sacred folk songs have been dismissed or overlooked because they were not seen as “serious” or “art music” and therefore were thought to have no place in divine worship. It has often been assumed that there could be little or no biblical foundation or theological grounding in these “simple little songs.” I strongly argue to the contrary. These sacred folk songs are biblically based, theologically astute, culturally relevant, accessible, and provide a tremendous liturgical vehicle for full, conscious, and active participation in worship. They are functional music and can provide musical support and enrichment for various portions of worship such as introits, prayer responses, scripture reading, healing and anointing services, meditation, baptism, Eucharist, reflection, fellowship, and all types of service or ritual music for the Christian year.

Sacred folk songs are created by anonymous individuals or groups of individuals. They lack the musical sophistication of notated music. This does not mean, however, that they are not intelligently conceived. Fortunately, today there are more and more resources that have notated these gems and have been sensitive to the idiomatic characteristics and performance practice of the people producing them. John Blacking once wrote, "In societies where music is not written down, informed and accurate listening is as important and as much a measure of musical ability as is performance, because it is the only means of ensuring continuity of the music tradition. Music is a product of the behavior of human groups,
whether formal or informal: it is humanly organized sound.” [7]

Sacred folk songs of various traditions not only enhance the full, conscious, and active participation of the congregation, they also broaden our understanding of all of God’s people and their contexts. Through these songs, “a call to worship can to be sounded, praise can be declared, faith can be confessed, a text from the Bible can be heralded, faith can be confessed, repentance can be invited, a prayer can be offered, and sacrifice can be encouraged.[8] They should be sung with intensity of conviction that can move the souls of people who feel jaded, empty, and defeated by the deadening oppressions and confusions of life. Sing until the power of the Lord comes down!

James Abbington is associate professor of church music and worship at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. He has been Executive Editor of the African American Church Music Series published by GIA Publications in Chicago for over fifteen years and has published several books, recordings, worship resources and collections for organ and congregational song. His most recent publications are Readings in African American Church Music and Worship, Volume 2, and Singing Our Savior’s Story: A Congregational Song Supplement for the Christian Year (Hymn Texts since 1990).

The resources below are strongly recommended for anyone who wishes to explore further the folks’ sacred song in African American spirituals.

- African American Heritage Hymnal (GIA Publications)
- Total Praise Hymnal: Songs and Other Worship Resources for Every Generation (GIA Publications)
- Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro, edited by R. Nathaniel Dett (available through Hampton University Bookstore, Hampton, VA)
- American Negro Song: 230 Folks Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular, edited by John W. Work III (Dover Books on Music)
- Spirituals Triumphant: Old and New, edited by Edward Boatner and Willa A. Townsend (available through the Sunday School Publishing Board of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., Nashville, TN)
- Songs of Zion (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House and Abingdon Press)
- Slave Songs of the United States: The Classic 1867 Anthology, compiled and edited by William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison (Pelican Publishing Company)

FOOTNOTES


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My topic in this brief essay is work songs, that is, songs sung as accompaniment to work rather than songs about work. My main thesis is that such songs are a gratuitous and creative excess in which the song enhances the work and the work enhances the song.

The manual labor that work songs accompany can be performed without the songs: spinners can spin and rowers can row without singing. Sometimes the singing establishes a rhythm that is essential for coordinated activity; but there are other ways to establish a rhythm for the work than by singing. From the standpoint of getting the work done, the singing is unnecessary. It’s an excess. Except for those cases in which some overseer orders the workers to sing, it’s a gratuitous excess.

Just as the work can be done without the singing, so too the singing can be done without the work; that happens when work songs are performed in concert. With respect to the work, the singing is an excess; with respect to the singing, the work is an excess.

The situation is not entirely symmetrical, however. The work is already there; the singing is not. Singing is introduced to accompany the work; seldom is work introduced to accompany the singing. In the term work songs, the word work is the modifier and the word songs is the substantive. Our terminology would better reflect the reality of things if we spoke of sung work.

I said of the singing that it accompanies the work; I might also have said of the work that it accompanies the singing. In each case, however, the word accompany is misleading. It suggests mere simultaneity. The singing and the working do, of course, occur simultaneously; but their relation goes beyond that. It’s integral. When workers sing while working, they create an entity of a different genre. There is now neither ordinary work nor ordinary singing but sung work, an entity of a new genre in which the singing and the working coinhere — to borrow a term from theology of the Trinity. In his fine book Work Songs, the music historian Ted Gioia remarks, “The work of the poorest laborer is still a process of creating and of making something where before there was nothing.”[1] Singing while working is a manifestation of human creativity; the gratuitous excess represented by sung work is a creative excess.

In situations of labor under duress, this creative excess is the manifestation of a spirit that refuses to be crushed, refuses to be reduced to a mere hoer of cotton or splitter of rocks. By singing, the workers manifest an indomitable sense of their ineradicable dignity. One can see why overseers in prisons sometimes refused to allow the laborers to sing.[2] They wanted to crush the spirit of the prisoners, but the singing was an indication that they had not succeeded. Prison Songs is a recording made by Alan Lomax in 1947–48 of songs sung by prisoners in the Parchman Farm prison in Mississippi.[3] In 1996 a researcher played it for a group of ex-prisoners living in the South Bronx and asked them what they thought. One said, “You’re trying to save your sanity…. You’d lose your spirit if you didn’t sing.” Another said, the songs are a manifestation of the will of the human spirit. That will is something within me. It says that I have something that I can do to get myself out of this, too, or get through this day, or cope with tomorrow, and
not just lay back and hope that someone else will come to my rescue. So I think these songs have a great value, a great lesson: the will of the human spirit — the will to survive and go on, no matter what, and in spite of everything.[4]

If the singing and the labor are to coinhere, the singing has to fit the work. Thus it is that

defies our conception of an “artistic performance.” Its pace can be repetitive and predictable; often it strives to achieve effects that, in other settings, would be dismissed as merely monotonous.... The rhythms are typically slower than most other types of traditional songs, sometimes positively sluggish.[5]

The demands of physical labor typically require a measured approach — what one might call the “work song law of conservation of energy.” Pacing is critical, and the song leader is responsible for seeing that the workers do not exhaust themselves in their efforts but rather can continue to the end of day.[6]

Not only must the tempo of the song fit the tempo of the work, but the rhythm of the song must fit the rhythm of the work. In case the work has no inherent rhythm, the rhythm of the song has to be a rhythm that can be imposed on the work. For some types of work it was important, or even indispensable, that the actions of the individual workers be synchronized; in those cases, the singing had to have a rhythm that could serve that function. Track 2 on Prison Songs, “No More, My Lord,” and track 13, “Early in the Mornin’,” are fascinating examples of this. Both are sung to the action of chopping wood; in both cases, not only does the rhythm of the singing establish a rhythm for the swinging of the axes, but the ringing percussive sound of the axe-blows is an integral element of the music. “Many compelling recordings of work songs would be deprived of their vitality if the sound of the tools were taken away.”[7]

If the song is to fit the work, the expressive character of the song must also fit the nature of the work and fit the mood typical of those who perform the work. Writing about the music of African tribes, the ethnomusicologist Rose Brandel observes that these peoples do “not deliberately project the ‘work music’ upon the scene in the manner of modern factory psychologists. Rather, the music seems to be an expressive outgrowth of the labor itself.”[8]

Those who sang while working obviously found their new creation, sung work, to be more gratifying than the same work done without singing; that’s why they sang. What was it about this new entity that they found more gratifying? When Lomax asked Bama, an inmate in the Parchman Farm, why he and his fellows sang, Bama said, singing makes the work “go so better.”[9] Singing changed the work for the better; singing enhanced the work. The same thing can be said about the effect of the work on the singing. The work changes the singing for the better, enhances it. About sea shanties Gioia says:

Cut off from the activities that gave it meaning, the shanty has become just another song. This transition can only be lamented, for the work-a-day circumstances that gave birth to the shanty also imparted the rough-and-ready beauty that made them so inspirational and
Let’s set off to the side the enhancement of the singing effected by its combination with the work and reflect on the enhancement of the work effected by its combination with the singing. What was it about sung work that made the work “go so better”? We have already noted one of the ways in which the singing made the work go better: the rhythm of the singing coordinated the activity of the individual laborers. And often the singing energized the workers. In Gioia’s words, the songs “impart vitality and energy to an undertaking.”[11] When accompanied by singing, tasks “have a stronger and more insistent force of momentum behind them.”[12] In addition to enhancing the work, the singing enhanced the workers’ experience of the work. It reinforced their sense of being engaged in a common project: they were in it together. The creative excess of the singing blurred the distinction between work and play by introducing a dimension of play into the work. In these ways, singing enhanced the experience of the work whether or not the work was pleasant.

It was especially when the work was unpleasant, however, that singing was important. Much of the work that human beings have performed while singing is tedious, and the singing alleviates the tedium. I quoted three words from what Bama said to Lomax when Lomax asked him why he and his fellows sang while working. Here is more of what Bama said:

When you singin’, you forgit, you see, and the time just pass on ‘way; but if you just get your mind devoted on one something, it look like it will be hard for you to make it, see, make a day. The day be longer, look like. So to keep his mind from being devoted on just one thing, why he’ll practically take up singin’, see.[13]

What was it about sung work that made it more gratifying? My answer thus far has taken its cue from the comment made by Bama that singing makes the work “go so better.” Singing enhances the work and the workers’ experience by coordinating the activity of the workers, energizing them, and taking their mind off the work. These are functional considerations, beneficial effects of the singing on the work. Gioia doubts that such functional considerations exhaust the matter, and I think he is right. His guess and mine is that the workers often found their expression of creativity intrinsically good and not just instrumentally good. They sang for the sheer joy of creating sung work. Sung work was an end in itself for them, just as absorbed attention to a work of art may be an end in itself for others.

It would be impossible to describe everything about sung work that would have made the workers want to do it for the joy of it. But one thing that would have made it joyful was the solidarity that they would have experienced. They would have experienced the solidarity of jointly expressing the sentiments in the words of the songs. They would also have experienced the solidarity inherent in group singing: each singer adjusts his singing to the singing of his fellows.

Gioia describes well an important additional aspect of the “meaning” of work songs:

[The work song] is a musical “genre” that is much more than a genre because it emerges as a transformational tool. Even more striking, this source of transcendence was reserved as a special support for those on the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder — the most
oppressed laborer and even the slave or prisoner. When all else was taken away, it remained inalienable. Members of the leisure class, representatives of the ruling powers, were all but excluded from tapping into its power. The nature of this social role — so strange and amorphous, yet so tightly defined — adds to the rich complexity of this body of music.[14]

The enhancement of work by singing is just one example of what is perhaps the most common of all the many ways in which the arts enter into our lives: the arts enhance our activities and enhance our experience. Consider hymns. Work songs are close to disappearing from the modern world; hymns are not.

Worshipers can praise God in spoken prose; sometimes they do. With respect to the action of praising God, singing is an excess. The excess does not merely coexist with the praising, however. The singing and the praising join together to create an entity of a new genre: sung praise. In this new entity, the singing and the praising coinhere. This new entity enhances the praise. Praise is work, of a sort; sung praise is sung work.

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FOOTNOTES

[4] These comments are to be found in the booklet accompanying the CD.
[7] Ibid., 155.
[8] Quoted in Gioia, p. 56.

[9] The comment is to be found in the booklet accompanying the CD *Prison Songs*.

[10] Ibid., 136.


[12] Ibid., 178.

[13] From the booklet accompanying the CD *Prison Songs*.

[14] Ibid., 260.

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Available at: http://ismreview.yale.edu/

View article as a PDF: Work Songs
Ask directors of amateur Jewish choral societies to name great pieces of “Jewish music.” Chances are, their answers will include several psalm settings: from selections of Salomone Rossi’s 1622–23 Songs of Salomon, to Louis Lewandowski’s 1870s showpiece arrangement of Psalm 150, psalm settings by prominent Israeli composers such as Tzvi Avni and Yehzekel Braun, Leonard Bernstein’s 1965 Chichester Psalms (Pss. 100, 108, 2, 23, 131, 133), Robert Starer’s Psalms of Woe and Joy (Pss. 6, 136, 148), Benjie Ellen Schiller’s Psalm 150, and even, as a crossover curiosity, Franz Schubert’s late 1820s setting of Psalm 92. Featuring Hebrew texts, these settings connect singers with traditional canons of Jewish knowledge. At the same time, they represent “art” as long-form examples of melody, harmony, and form.

Ask congregants what psalms they know from the liturgy. Some might offer numbers (150, 145, 92, 23), or substitute Hebrew names (“Halleluyah,” “Ashrei,” “Mizmor Shir”/“Tzaddik Katamar,” “Hashem Ro’i”); some might identify specific liturgical moments for introducing sets of psalms (Kabbalat Shabbat, P’sukei D’Zimrah, Hallel). But to most, psalms instead integrate deeply into Judaism’s ritual fabric: as a spiritual “warm-up,” as part of the liturgy’s emotional trajectory, as spiritual sustenance when preparing a body for burial, as a marker of spiritual time, as a medium for private reflection. For most worshipers, psalms are one part of a multilayered liturgy, alongside prayer texts, biblical and rabbinic writings, praise songs (piyyutim), and vernacular-language readings. Worshipers include psalms in their musical knowledge, whether in near-silent prayer, lined-out, read in interpretive translations, or sung with full-throated melodies. But, for the most part, Jewish worshipers don’t “sing psalms.” Rather, they pray, using all of the textual and musical sources available to them in a single worshipful package.

In my years of studying cantors, I have seen the psalms receive respect as part of a larger body of Jewish prayer materials. But I don’t recall hearing students or cantors give the psalms their own category, or hearing the psalms singled out as a unique genre within Jewish worlds of music.

Look closer in all of these settings, and you’ll see an internally consistent system at work. The act of singing psalms in concert offers a means for Jews to connect to broad social and spiritual conversations. In 1963, Washington, D.C. cantor Sholom Katz led a “Choir of Cantors” on a two-LP album of psalm settings, where he noted that “the Psalter has become the hymnbook of humanity because it is an inexhaustible and indispensable expression of the human spirit.” Fifty years later, the Zamir Chorale of Boston released its album Psalmsensation, presenting prominent psalm settings by Jewish composers alongside settings by William Billings, Charles Ives, and other international artists, to create “a multiethnic concert experience.” Follow many of these same singers into personal and communal prayer settings, however, and the psalms will change their role accordingly. Such is the flexibility of a canonical text, both liturgically and musically. Through whispering or recitation, monophonic or choral singing, Jews thus mediate the psalms’ foundational place in Judeo-Christian tradition with their own specific traditions of spiritual practice.
Judah M. Cohen is Lou and Sybil Mervis Professor of Jewish Culture and Associate Professor of Musicology at Indiana University. He has authored The Making of a Reform Jewish Cantor: Musical Authority, Cultural Investment, and Sounding Jewish Tradition: The Music of Central Synagogue. Recent publications include the “Jewish Music” article in the second edition of the Grove Dictionary of American Music, and the Music entry for Oxford Bibliographies in Jewish Studies. He is currently at work on a study of World War II-era narratives in musical theater.

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Recommended Citation: Cohen. Judah M. (2014) “Great Art and a People’s Music,” The Yale ISM Review: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 9. Available at: http://ismreview.yale.edu/

View article as a PDF: Great Art and a People’s Music
Psalm Singing in Roman Catholic Liturgy

By Melissa Maier | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

Before the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholics were an unbiblical people. Today, all that has changed and the scriptures are familiar to regular churchgoers. Two major factors in making this transition have been the use of vernacular translations and the reintroduction of the Responsorial Psalm into the Mass after an absence of over fifteen hundred years.

With the Responsorial Psalm, the object of the post-conciliar liturgical reformers was to place into the mouths of worshipers the sung texts of brief psalm extracts as refrains, for this was always a sung item in the form in which it flourished in roughly the fifth through sixth centuries. The reason it had died out was because the musicians got hold of it, resulting in its replacement by prolix Latin Gradual chants, which effectively excluded the assembly as the music became more and more elaborate.

The post-conciliar reformers, then, were intent upon engaging the people once again as an integral part of the chant after the First Reading, which links that reading to the Gospel. To aid this, along with the reinstatement of the Responsorial Psalm, has come the reinstatement of the role of the cantor or psalmist (and this in turn has led to the development of the ministry of cantor or leader of song for the entire celebration, not just the psalm).

The classic Responsorial Psalm form consists of a refrain (often called a response) sung first by one or more cantors and repeated by all, followed by a stanza (often of four lines, or two psalm verses) sung by the cantor, with the people singing the refrain after each stanza. The form is called “responsorial” not just because it includes a response but because it is a response (to the First Reading). Not all scholars agree that this is the case, but the General Instruction of the Roman Missal does include instructions for singing the “Responsorial” Psalm without a response. (Very few people in fact do this.)

Responsorial psalmody developed out of an earlier form in which an Alleluia or other brief refrain was sung by the people at the end of every line of the psalm. The effect was something like a litany, and it is sometimes known as “antiphonal psalmody.”

A large musical repertoire has been generated in different styles over the forty-five years since the revised Ordo Lectionum Missae appeared in 1969. Some have been disappointed that the new Lectionary contains only excerpts from the psalms, normally four stanzas, rather than psalms being used in their entirety (which has in fact happened more recently with the increasing use of Entrance and Communion psalms with their antiphons). Complete psalms are, however, used in the Liturgy of the Hours, where they are bookended with an antiphon before and after. (For that reason this form is often incorrectly known as “antiphonal psalmody,” whereas, in its monastic form, it should be termed “alternating psalmody,” as it is sung by two sides of the choir or church in alternation.)

Anglican and Episcopal churches have also now adopted the responsorial format as a new way of singing the psalms, though not yet to a large extent. In the Catholic Church, the Psallite project has shown the pathway for numerous new variants on the basic refrain-plus-psalm form, and future challenges are emerging in the area of multilingual or intercultural psalmody. The Responsorial Psalm is undoubtedly one of the success stories of the post-conciliar reforms, and one can truly say that the vast majority of congregations now respond enthusiastically to the Psalmist’s exhortation: Psallite.
Paul Inwood is an internationally-known liturgist, composer, organist, choral director, author and clinician. His work is found in hymnbooks across the English-speaking world, and he is a frequent contributor to liturgical journals, blogs and forums. He was responsible for the introduction of the music of Taizé into the UK in the 1970s and the music of the Iona Community into the USA in the 1980s. From 1986 to 1998 he was a president of the international liturgical music study group Universa Laus. In 2009 he was named Pastoral Musician of the Year by the National Association of Pastoral Musicians.

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Recommended Citation: Inwood, Paul (2014) “Psalm Singing in the Roman Catholic Communion,” The Yale ISM Review: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 10. Available at: http://ismreview.yale.edu/

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She seemed to be nearing her last breath. The family had gathered. Then, unprompted, her young granddaughter started singing “The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want” to the old Scottish tune. Suddenly Psalm 23 was on her lips and the room filled with sung prayer.

This is one of the profound dimensions of singing the psalms: when they become the language of the heart, all of life can be sung. The trust, the praise, the comfort are here, but so also the lament, the trembling, and the anguish. Psalms provide for us a language that addresses God with the whole of life. They are the language of the soul made audible.

Whether it is “Out of the depths,” or “Make a joyful noise,” or “Create in me a clean heart, O God,” these ancient scriptural texts are always now: this feast, this fast, this grief, this gathering. The human body and the human spirit are given over to the Holy One who hears us in season and out of season. In that sense, the Psalter always lies in wait for us to discover anew the divine prompting.

Yet the psalms are also given to faith communities as discipline and rehearsal. Both are required for maturation of life with God. The psalms discipline us to all the great themes of scripture: creation, covenant, sin and struggle, instruction, hope, and the vision of a redeemed world. We learn to sing and pray over time even when we don’t “feel” exactly what the texts image. This is part of the mystery: we are called to rehearse for what we don’t fully understand about our world, the divine promises, and ourselves.

Like learning to play an instrument or learning to love deeply, learning to sing the world and our lives to God takes time. Sometimes the “music” comes naturally, but it often takes a long time before the psalms begin to sing us. The multiple musical forms given to the larger Jewish and Christian traditions blessedly come to our aid. Various traditions are more at home with some forms: metrical, responsorial, antiphonal, chant, improvisational, and through-composed. (Think here of the glorious tradition of choral anthems.) If we are fortunate, we may be able to sing the psalms in all these forms, thus liberating — even in the same psalm — multiple layers of meaning and relevance.

In my own experience as musician and as member of the assembly, I especially treasure how singing the psalms opens the emotional range of Christian faith. Sharing psalms, even in the simplest of musical settings, puts me in solidarity with others who also know the broken heart, the angers and fears, as well as unbounded joy and thanks. A community thus created also begins to sense that we are actually part of the greater chorus of the whole of creation: “Let everything that breathes, praise the Lord.” To sing and make music, no matter how humble, is a gift. Thus we render the exchange gift back to God — singing our lives and our world to the true Source of life and world.

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Recommended Citation: Saliers, Don E. (2014) “All of Life can Be Sung,” The Yale ISM Review: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 11.
Available at: http://ismreview.yale.edu/

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Canticle of the Sun II

Synthetic polymer paint on canvas; 91.5 x 91.0 cm
Canticle of the Sun II is one of three related works by the Australian artist John Coburn (1925–2006): Canticle of the Sun (1965) oil on board, 162.0 x 152.5 cm; Canticle of the Sun II (1967) oil on canvas, 74.5 x 85.0 cm; and the 1974 work pictured above. Alex Mitchell writes of Coburn that “he sought a confluence of Western European culture, the Roman Catholic religion, Aboriginal spirituality, and nature.”

The title and inspiration of this work come from a song composed by the thirteenth-century mystic Francis of Assisi.

Most high, all powerful, all good Lord!
All praise is Yours, all glory, all honor, and all blessing.

To You, alone, Most High, do they belong.
No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your name.

Be praised, my Lord, through all Your creatures,
especially through my lord Brother Sun,
who brings the day; and You give light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!
Of You, Most High, he bears the likeness.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars;
in the heavens You have made them bright, precious and beautiful.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
and clouds and storms, and all the weather,
through which You give Your creatures sustenance.

Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water;
she is very useful, and humble, and precious, and pure.

Be praised, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
through whom You brighten the night.
He is beautiful and cheerful, and powerful and strong.

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Mother Earth,
who feeds us and rules us,
and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Be praised, my Lord, through those who forgive for love of You;
through those who endure sickness and trial.

Happy those who endure in peace,
for by You, Most High, they will be crowned.

Be praised, my Lord, through our sister Bodily Death,
from whose embrace no living person can escape.
Woe to those who die in mortal sin!
Happy those she finds doing Your most holy will.
The second death can do no harm to them.

Praise and bless my Lord, and give thanks,
and serve Him with great humility.

Some of Coburn’s best-known works appear in venues for the performing arts. He designed the *Curtain of the Sun* and the *Curtain of the Moon* for the Sydney Opera House. *The Creation*, a work comprised of seven tapestries, was given as a gift from the Australian government to the United States. It hangs in the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.

— Editor

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FOOTNOTE


View article as a PDF: [Coburn Canticle of the Sun](#)
The River of Life

By Melissa Maier | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014
River of Life Mosaic
The iconographic program of the mosaic floor of the Honan Chapel is shaped by liturgical song. The Canticle of the Three Young Men in the Fiery Furnace (Daniel 3:51–90) is quoted in the borders of the mosaic. It is a canticle of praise, calling the whole created world to bless and exalt God above all forever. All the creatures and elements named in the canticle are depicted in the mosaic, though not all have identifying descriptions. Shown above is the river of life, which flows from a sunburst at the western end of the chapel, where the baptismal font is now located, down the center aisle, to the altar.

The Daniel Canticle is sung at the canonical hour of Lauds on Sundays and feast days. Lauds, or Morning Prayer, is an office celebrated in the light of a new day and associated with Christ’s resurrection. In the edition of the Roman Breviary current at the time of the floor’s designing, this canticle was followed by three praise psalms (148–150). In the mosaic, verse 7 of Psalm 148 appears at the point where the western end of the nave meets the central aisle, leading Jane Hawkes to observe that “the decoration of the chapel, and the manner in which it is organized, can be understood within the framework of the celebration of Lauds.”[1]

The Daniel Canticle is of course not merely a hymn to the wonders of nature. In the biblical narrative the song arises from the pure hearts of three young men who were willing to undergo martyrdom rather than practice idolatry. Miraculously preserved from the fire that ought to have burned them to death, they sing this song. Christians have read the story of the three young men as a type or figure of the resurrection, lending an additional layer of theological significance to the song as an expression of eschatological hope. The passage from Daniel describing their trial by fire was included in the Roman Catholic lectionary for the Easter Vigil (from 1570 to 1951) as part of the catechumens’ final catechesis before baptism.

— Editor

FOOTNOTE

Listen

Songs are born when we listen to the Spirit of God moving within and around us. I serve as music director for the Jazz Ministry at Saint Peter’s Church in New York City. Our jazz liturgies, at 5 p.m. on Sunday, began in 1965 and provide fertile ground for cultivating innovative sounds and song-leading techniques. I am extremely blessed to have a close-knit family of friends, artists, and pastors who dramatically shape the songs that accompany our worship. Recently, I have been noticing more and more connections within my life and the lives of those around me — the joy, pain, sorrow or rebirth that draws us nearer to God and to one another. How does the divine composer weave together our imperfect songs and actions into the brilliant fabric of lives restored, redeemed?

Improvisation

Improvisation, which is essential to jazz, opens to us a process mirroring God’s work on earth. Walking amidst trials on my own journey, my spirit fills with new songs as life springs up around me. Here is enough inspiration for a lifetime of creative responses. Whenever we recognize that our song is a gift it relieves us of the burden of self-reliance and encourages openness to grace and connection with others. As we listen more intently, we let go of our agendas and fears, heightening our awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our community. Silence clears our head and heart, opening space for God to take root in our imaginations. Attention to the quiet, still voice in our midst promotes harmony among those gathered for worship and an awareness of our personal and communal role in the larger world. The process of self-realization and relationship to those around us requires deep listening, which is the essence of improvisation.

One of my teachers speaks of “finding” a song rather than composing it. I admire this attitude and have found it to be true in my own practice. I play musical ideas over and over again until something speaks to me. I recall a scripture verse from my childhood: “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.”[1] To anyone who searches for a way to practice improvisation, a simple method for approaching this art form is revealed in these words: Ask. Seek. Knock.

A Simple Method

ASK  When we ask for guidance and courage to take the next step into the unknown territory of improvisation, we ready ourselves to step into the musical moment, clearing our mind of anything preordained. Improvisation asks for increased trust among the congregation and fellow musicians, since anything new requires patience and cooperation. Asking can be a communal process: an assembly poses questions to itself about an alternative way to approach music in worship.

Whenever an individual or group moves away from the written page, there will always be a great temptation to return to something that is planned and comfortable. However, jazz artists are defined by their desire to counter this natural impulse, adapting the music as needed for each occasion. Visionary saxophonist Charlie Parker once said, “I realized by using the high notes of the chords as a melodic line, and by the right harmonic progression, I could play what I heard inside me. That’s when I was born.”[2]
In order to seek the Holy Spirit’s movement through our instruments and voices, we listen carefully, praying that God will work within us. Practicing countless melodic and rhythmic variations, we hope to eventually let go of what is familiar to us and become fluent vehicles for the Spirit in our midst. Improvisation allows for active responses to a baptism, birth, death, or pointed text. Human error and hilarious moments lighten the mood and require quick thinking for our song leaders, bringing everyone closer together and reminding us to not always take our songs too seriously.

I have a fond memory of an improvised psalm setting where the simple refrain “be glad” emerged within the assembly over the course of the piece. After everyone finished playing and singing, my two year-old daughter sang a solo version of the refrain. This moment of childlike faith and innocence led to a church filled with joyous laughter at the impromptu coda.

When we courageously put an idea into the world, we are knocking at someone’s door. Our action will have internal and external reactions as the notes that we choose are echoed and countered by our community. I usually find this step a leap of faith and the most difficult one to take. However, once an idea or motive comes forth from our mind and instrument, only listening is required to move forward. We listen as we go, adding musical ideas organically and gluing phrases one to another like building blocks. When others join the conversation, we need to open our ears to these stimuli: text, line, texture, dynamics, harmony, phrase, emotions, and surroundings.

It helps to limit musical choices at the outset to avoid being overwhelmed with options. Deciding on a single mode, rhythmic feel and three- or four-note possibilities facilitates confident language and communication.

Bringing Jazz to Church

Challenges arise when bringing jazz to church. Aural teaching, which is commonly used to introduce new songs to the assembly, has its drawbacks. Text is frequently simplified for ease of repetition, producing truncated phrases and forms. The impact of extended lyrics in printed songs or hymns can be lost. In addition, jazz can sometimes instill fear of the unknown or the feeling of a members-only club to which only the performers are invited or welcome. In a quest for deeper, more authentic artistry and communion with God, some musicians have turned inward, unearthing extended, prayerful musical meditations. This movement raises questions however. How can we relate improvising techniques to the whole church and not just the musicians leading worship? Can the church open its doors to these artists and their songs without disrupting a sense of flow, mood, or intended focus within the liturgy?

Although these challenges are real, jazz also offers brilliant gifts to the church. Reflecting Christ’s vulnerability and forgiveness, this art form embraces our faults and relates to us, regardless of where we are on our spiritual path. The wealth of texts, hymns, and songs that the church already possesses informs new styles and ideas that can be developed uniquely for each congregation and generation. In the jazz ministry at Saint Peter’s we encourage congregants to participate in singing, or even speaking, a psalm or prayer with improvised accompaniment. We have asked ourselves how traditional elements might be re-imagined in a modern context, employing innovative harmonies or rhythms from our culture and from others around the world. The result has been a creative and ongoing process.

One of our song leaders, Melissa Stylianou, described her Sunday experiences at our church in this way:
Jazz Vespers is the musical highlight of what can be a totally crazy week filled with teaching, my own shows, all that commuting, other “side man” gigs, and the delights of being a new mother. I know when I come here, I’ll be challenged by the compositions, and challenged by the freedom that Ike gives us: the license, and even the imperative, to create something in the moment that really means something to us and that is communicated to (and sometimes sung by) the congregation. The freedom of not knowing what is coming next is sometimes uncomfortable for me, but I’m always amazed at how this large group can work together in the moment like one organism…. One of the things that stuck with me from my theater school days, and which I draw upon all the time when singing this music is something a teacher said to us one day: “Be Here Now.” It’s harder than it sounds and takes constant vigilance, but it really does make a difference in making music (and in life in general), and I feel like it’s an apt explanation for why this band can do what it does: we’re all working hard at Being Here Now.

A rendition of Psalm 37 was recently completely improvised at our jazz vespers with members of our band, Evergreen. A dancer from our community, Hannah Barnard, joined us in a free dance response to the text and music. The psalmist proclaims, “Commit your way to the LORD; put your trust in the LORD and see what God will do.” The approach for many of our jazz liturgies involves giving musicians the psalm text with no written music or chords. In this case, our guitarist, Jesse Lewis, begins improvising with no instructions or limitations, using only the words and the service context as his guide. Once a drone or harmonic foundation is established along with vibraphonist Chris Dingman, singers Melissa Stylianou and Chanda Rule knit together words and melodies. As the refrain is developed in the moment, it is repeated and shared aurally with the congregation. The singers may introduce multiple refrains, rounds or harmony parts, but in this example a simple phrase is echoed in the middle and at the end of the piece. The ensemble accompanies, using only their ears and experience, building trust and friendship based on constantly watching out for each other and elevating the whole body above a single part. Church members and visitors are welcome to join in singing, regardless of age, note-reading ability, or language skills.

**PSALM 37 Improvisation**

This past Lenten season our song leaders taught a song called “Listen” each week to the congregation. The song allowed the assembly and guest musicians to sing and play without any printed music while lighting candles, offering prayers, and moving throughout the sanctuary. Using this simple “lead sheet” format also allowed adaptation for diverse musical groups to participate in the song throughout the Sundays of Lent. These included *a cappella* singing, a jazz/gospel quartet, a chamber ensemble of strings, and a big band.
Listen

(Slowly, gently)

Listen, listen, be - o - pen, O my heart.

(ad lib...)

Listen, listen, be - o - pen, O my heart.

Additional verses to replace "listen" ad lib.

Watching, watching...
Waiting, waiting...
Ever mindful...
Night is falling...
Love is calling...
In this moment...

Lyrics c. 2004 Bret Hesla - bret.hesla@gmail.com
Used with permission. Music c. 2014 Ike Sturm
The following video shows my wife, the singer Misty Ann Sturm, leading us in our setting of Psalm 23. This piece contains a mix of fully notated chamber parts with improvisation integrated into the saxophone, guitar, bass, and drums. “Restores my soul” emerges as a refrain that we teach to the congregation. Even within the rhythmic context of an odd meter, having the song leader model the line confidently alone, then welcoming participation with repetitions of the refrain, helps the assembly to learn comfortably and immediately. With *a cappella* singing, this technique allows for flexibility in form and duration and often leads to meditative repetitions beyond the written form.

**PSALM 23**

**Conclusion**

As I look back over several years’ experience of creating original songs, I see a strong common thread woven through them all: the theme of restoration. In retrospect, the work of the Spirit becomes evident in ways that even I was not aware of at the time. I am learning that my personal musical statements speak out long before I understand what is actually happening in my spirit.

During these years, my father has battled cancer and he has recently passed away. His journey has been defined by unbelievable strength and perseverance. The challenges involved have called out love and faith from him and those around him. A collection of songs about renewal has grown out of this season in my life, with the help of some of my closest friends and family. The project is called *Shelter of Trees*, the title being drawn from a text written by my friend Cheryl Mitchell. A line from her beautiful poem became our refrain: “Close your eyes and be, and you will be with me.”

**Shelter of Trees**

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*Ike Sturm* is a bassist, composer and teacher, serving as Music Director for the Jazz Ministry at Saint Peter’s Church in New York City. Ike and his ensemble, Evergreen, frequently create and perform original music for liturgies at Saint Peter’s and gatherings around the world.

[www.saintpeters.org](http://www.saintpeters.org)
[www.ikesturm.com](http://www.ikesturm.com)

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**FOOTNOTES**


Preparing a Hymn

By Melissa Maier | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

Editor's Note: Leading and enhancing congregational singing is an art to which the organ is exquisitely well-suited, when played in ways sensitive to the particularities of the text and the needs of the singing
assembly. In the videos below, organist Thomas Murray walks us through some foundational issues in preparing to play a hymn. Each video concludes with the hymn played and sung through with choir and congregation at a Sunday liturgy at Christ Church, New Haven.*

“O Bless the Lord, My Soul” (St. Thomas [Williams])
(Click title for hymn PDF)
#411 in The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal)

“O Ye Immortal Throng of Angels Round the Throne” (Croft’s 136th)
(Click title for hymn PDF)
#284 in The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal)

Production Credits
Sachin Ramabhadran, producer/editor
Jeff Hoyt, director of photography
Mateusz Zechowski, audio recordist

*The organ at Christ Church is the William G. Kibitz Memorial Organ, built in 2005 by Lively-Fulcher Pipe Organ Builders. The 59 stop, 63 rank, and 3752 pipe instrument is named in honor of Fr. William Kibitz, the eighth rector of Christ Church, who served from 1950-1978. The organ specifications are online here.

Thomas Murray is the Yale University Organist, serving on the faculty at the School of Music and Institute of Sacred Music. His performing career has taken him all over the world. The American Guild of Organists named him International Performer of the Year in 1986, and the Royal College of Organists in England awarded him an FRCO diploma honoris causa in 2003. In 2007 the Yale School of Music awarded him the Gustave Stoeckel Award for excellence in teaching. He is artist-in-residence and principal organist at Christ Church Episcopal in New Haven.

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Recommended Citation: Murray, Thomas. (2014) “Preparing a Hymn 1,” The Yale ISM Review: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 15a. Available at: http://ismreview.yale.edu/

Recommended Citation: Murray, Thomas. (2014) “Preparing a Hymn 2,” The Yale ISM Review: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 15b. Available at: http://ismreview.yale.edu/

View article as a PDF: Preparing_a_Hymn-Thomas_Murray
Acoustic Challenges in Worship-Space Design

By Yale ISM | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

Worship is a multisensory activity, employing sights, sounds, scents, and tastes that immerse individuals in both personal devotion and communal action. Particularly during sung and spoken parts of a service, the assembly actively participates together in prayer and praise. This shared experience of speech and song builds community and draws all into the closer presence of God and of each other. Song gives an added dimension and artistic rendition to texts. It has the capacity to connect worshipers not only with each other in the here and now, but also with others across time and space.

For song to happen during worship, a great company of individuals must contribute to the interaction. These include not only the worshipers and leaders joined together at the moment in a hymn, psalm, or canticle on any given Sunday. The great company also includes composers, text-writers and poets, printers, publishers and editors, instrumentalists, singers and directors, instrument makers and tuners. These and a host of others all have added their contribution, even from across decades, so that a hymn can be sung in the great “today” of the liturgy.

Why Buildings Matter

A key element in giving life and vitality to song and to creating an environment that invites and encourages all to sing (even those who may be reticent) is the architectural-acoustical space that envelopes assembled worshipers. An architectural environment and its acoustical character can inhibit or encourage song. An environment that distributes sound energy evenly throughout a room and that has a reverberation period that blends sound energy and allows all participants to hear each other can inspire and magnify song. It opens up new dimensions of participation. An environment that obstructs, separates, and absorbs sound energy away from the assembly, on the other hand, can stifle, dampen, and deaden the song, even of those most inclined to enthusiastic participation.

The creative designs of architects and acousticians thus have the potential to make music and song an inspiring, community-building part of worship. The geometric form and size of a room, the location of furnishings, instruments, and people, and the interior finish materials (sound-absorbing, -reflecting, or -diffusing) all contribute to the success or failure of song-supportive acoustics. Long and tall “shoe-box”-shaped rooms with generous cubic-air volumes remain key ingredients in acoustic success [see Figure 1]. Round, conical, “fan,” pyramidal, and square geometric forms with limited air volumes are typically not conducive to good song and participatory acoustics. The placement of musical instruments, leaders, and assembly, so that sound can be projected directly and without obstruction to and from all, is also important to acoustic success. An appropriate ratio of sound-reflective and sound-diffusing materials in a room for a “live” reverberation is also necessary, as is the absence of intruding noise and acoustic anomalies. Given these many variables, the task of achieving a good architectural and acoustic design can be difficult. In addition, there are often societal and functional challenges to achieving a song-supportive worship space today.

Figure 1: Christ Presbyterian Church, Madison, Wisconsin

Example of a well-proportioned geometric form and air volume. Interior-finish surfaces are primarily reflective and diffusive of sound, with an approximate 2.0-second reverberation period that enables
liturgical song. Ensembles that lead music in both traditional and contemporary styles sound originate on the long axis of the room.

View toward Chancel

View toward Traditional Music Gallery

**Negotiating the Challenges**

The first challenge may be the apparently reduced societal interest and aptitude for involvement in song. Communal singing, in either secular or sacred settings, is less frequent today than it was in our
parents’ or grandparents’ generation. Music is more often heard and observed than participated in. The public even seems to have difficulty singing “Happy Birthday” in tune! Music education is often one of the first victims of school budget cuts. Given these realities, it is essential that the church find ways to support and enhance the song of the faithful. The biblical directive to “sing unto the Lord” is clear, and the inspirational and community-building benefits of group singing and speech during worship are obvious. Communities that fail to support worship and song with commodious architectural and acoustic environments place the heritage and future of corporate worship at risk. Mary sang when her cousin Elizabeth greeted her as “blessed.” The angelic host sang at Jesus’ birth. The angels sing around the throne of heaven. The disciples sang a hymn before they went out. We must do likewise.

Another challenge is the current nature of congregational song itself. The standard and traditional hymn form, while very much alive and well, is not the only musical style used in worship by many congregations today. Gospel, spiritual, contemporary, jazz, ethnic, and call-and-response, are but a few of the musical forms used in worship — often by the same congregation in the same building and during the same service. The diversity of styles, instrumentation, and tempi represented in congregational song today become scientific and design challenges. Although the goal of facilitating musical participation by the assembly remains the same across the stylistic soundscape, the reality is that these musical types require different reverberation periods and settings for best rendition. Up-tempo and percussive music will need shorter reverberation periods, while melodic and organ-oriented hymnody is best with generous reverberation periods. Some instruments are “acoustic” and resonate with air, such as organ pipes, strings, woodwinds, and brass. Other instruments, such as electric guitars and keyboards, require electronic systems to create tone. Variable environments, with movable sound-reflective or sound-absorptive features that can shorten or lengthen the reverberation period in a room and shift the distribution and diffusion of sound, are helpful tools in meeting diverse musical and acoustic needs in a room [see Figure 2].

**Figure 2: The Community Church of Vero Beach, Florida**

Wall and ceiling treatments are primarily sound-reflective and sound-diffusing, so that the room is supportive of congregational song. Retractable draperies increase or decrease the reverberation period to tailor the room to different musical styles and occupancy rates.
Lack of understanding or appreciation and funding challenges can often work against supportive architectural and acoustic settings for worship. Attitudes such as “It doesn’t matter. Who can hear or appreciate good or bad acoustics anyway?” or “Good acoustics are for the Carnegie Hall crowd, not for us” or “It only needs to be ‘good enough for church’” all lead to less than noble or functional worship spaces. The fact is that if something is worth doing, it is worth doing well. The worship of the Lord should receive “first fruits.” Lost opportunities do matter and can be harmful by diminishing inspiration and not being inviting. The reactions and future choices of a visitor or “seeker” at worship can be significantly influenced either by dull and lifeless, or by vibrant and active liturgy and song. Long-term church members may not be able to verbalize their reactions to liturgical song, but dull or vibrant perceptions indeed have an effect. It may be easier to exclude these factors from building budgets because acoustics, music, and liturgical song are ephemeral, unlike bricks and mortar.

A common current practice is that of “value engineering” a design after a project price quotation is received. To lower project costs, under a “value engineering” plan, apparently unnecessary features are
skimmed away from a design. The thick and dense gypsum board walls that reinforce low-frequency sound energy, the hard-surface flooring that aids in reverberation, and the lined HVAC ducts that suppress background noise might be replaced with lower-cost thin walls, carpeted floors, and hard ducts. The result is a room that has poor musical presence, suppresses liturgical song, and magnifies unwanted noise. While realistic budgets are essential, so is the need for a worship environment that meets its functional goals.

Inappropriate reliance on technology can also create challenges to congregational song. A worship space might be viewed mistakenly as only a lecture and concert hall, where the single acoustic goal is to deliver electronically reinforced speech and music to the “audience” in the “auditorium.” Extensive systems can be designed and installed to accomplish high-energy sound projection. To be sure, the speech of sermon, lessons, prayers, and instrumental and vocal music must be well presented to worshipers. Often forgotten in this approach, however, is the fact that the congregation’s interaction in liturgy and song is fundamental to worship and community. The members of the assembly must hear each other well and not be only recipients of spoken and sung presentations [see Figure 3]. Further, the assembly must not be overwhelmed by excessive amounts of “lead” sound during their participation. While electronic room-reverberation simulation technologies have been invented, these systems cannot replace the truthful sounds of human voices traveling, blending, and reinforcing each other in the life-giving air of a reverberant architectural space. More speakers and microphones cannot supplant human interaction and participation.

Figure 3: Harvey Brown Presbyterian Church, Louisville, Kentucky (second photo by Eric Wolfram)

Reverberation period was too low and singing diminished before renovations; carpeted flooring and soft-wood ceiling materials absorbed sound energy even though the geometric form and air volume were good. The building redesign with hard-surface flooring and sound-reflective ceiling treatments increased the reverberation period to be song-supportive. Pews are now canted to draw worshipers together.

Before
Best Practices

What are the architectural and acoustic factors that enable and enhance the song of God’s people at worship? Important ingredients, in appropriate proportion and relationship, include:

- A generous cubic air volume
- An enhancing and enveloping geometric building form
- Good proximity and location of worshipers, leaders, musicians, instruments, and furnishings
- An appropriate ratio of sound-reflective and sound-diffusive interior finish materials and surfaces
- The control and absence of interrupting noise and acoustic anomalies
- Appropriate use of electronic technologies
- A means and methodology of accommodating differing musical styles and forms within the same room
- Realistic project goals and budgets
- A keen appreciation of corporate worship, prayer, praise and song as a prized heritage, present gift, and future investment for a community.

Whatever the size of a worship space or the stylistic music leanings of a faith community, there is a fundamental biblical and liturgical need for worshipers to participate together in song. The architectural and acoustical design details that facilitate this participation are what distinguish a worship space from other places of public assembly. In the worship space the assembled faithful are not just receivers and observers of speech and music; they are active participants in sung and spoken liturgy. It is therefore a high priority to design a worship environment that has the capacity to support and encourage the singing of all. Recognition of this priority, and careful attention to the acoustic-design factors described above, can result in functional, elegant, innovative, and inspirational environments that encourage faith communities to worship with songs of prayer and praise.
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Except where noted, all photos by Scott Riedel.


View article as a PDF: Acoustic Challenges in Worship Space Design
One of the joys of traveling is to worship with communities far from home and discover they sing a song you know. A song born in one context can be adopted in another, and both communities can claim that same song as their own. The unity of the body of Christ comes to expression in new ways when we sing the same song together across geographical, cultural, and denominational boundaries.

I've been intrigued lately by the concept of adoption as a response to the basic human need to belong, to not be alone in this world. The concept of adoption took on new interest for me when I became the adopted grandmother of an adopted child, now eight years old. Experience as a hymnal editor has also shaped my thinking, as new hymnals embrace more songs from around the globe. We've never had so much to choose from.

For centuries, Christian songs migrated almost exclusively from the West to the East and South. Western missionaries brought the gospel around the world, carrying with them not only their Bibles but their psalters and hymnals. As a result, many classic Western hymns are known and loved around the world. But, as the Christian church continues to grow in the global East and South and produces many new songs from communities of faith there, the traffic has begun to flow in the other direction. This article explores a few adoptions in both directions, based on international worship experiences. The examples are drawn from two hymnals published in 2013, *Lift Up Your Hearts* (LUYH), of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the Reformed Church in America, and *Glory to God* (GtG) of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

**Migration from the West**

Isaac Watts’s metrical version of Psalm 90, sung to the tune ST. ANNE, is probably the most widely sung setting of that psalm in the world today. My most powerful experience of singing it was in a worship service in Ghana. The service began with a choir processional, and then we all sang

\[
\begin{align*}
O \text{ God, our help in ages past,} \\
Our \text{ hope for years to come.}
\end{align*}
\]

Something happened to me in Ghana that day. I understood as I never had before, that “they” were not singing “our” song, but that both American and Ghanaian churches have adopted this song from England. Both countries were colonized by England, and both have received “O God, Our Help in Ages Past” by adoption.

At a 2012 worship conference in Indonesia, a festival of favorite hymns was held at which, to my astonishment, I knew almost all of them. They sang Fanny Crosby’s “Blessed Assurance” exuberantly. This song, which was so popular in the United States, is known around the world because Christian missionaries shared it. In 2008, I attended a Fanny Crosby hymn festival at the Kampong Kapor Methodist Church in Singapore. It celebrated the release of a song collection and CD entitled *Blessed Assurance: Hymns of Fanny J. Crosby*, with fifteen arrangements by composers from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the Americas. Amazing!
The New China Hymnal (1983), the official hymnal of the registered churches in China, holds surprises like the African American spiritual “Lord, I Want to Be a Christian in My Heart.” At the Gangwashi Church in Beijing, I told them that this song had come from African slaves, but it was eventually adopted by descendants of slave owners and finally, in the late twentieth century, made its way into North American hymnals. I wondered with them who might have chosen this song for their Chinese hymnal. Could it have been an American who perceived a connection between this spiritual from suffering slaves and the suffering of the Chinese people during the Cultural Revolution? Then they sang it — in Chinese, of course, most from memory, and many with tears. They had adopted this song, and it had become theirs before they had any idea of its origin. By learning where it came from, they came to understand more deeply why it meant so much to them. They were united in suffering with adopted brothers and sisters in Christ whom they had not known before. This song was their song.

The adoption agents in these three examples were missionaries who had brought songs from Western psalters and hymnals. Over the past fifty years however, because of new technologies and globalization, a whole new level of migration has occurred. The Internet and social media have accelerated the process of song adoptions — along with much more of Western culture — around the world. There are adoptions of new hymns in the classic tradition: Carl Daw, for example, has two hymns translated in the Hymnal 21 of the United Church of Christ in Japan. But Western youth culture, via the Internet and
social media, is now the major adoption agent. At Beijing’s Haidian Church, near the university district, many students came to an English service, partly out of curiosity and partly to practice their English. As they sang “Lord, I Lift Your Name on High”[3] over and over, I saw many young people take cell-phone photos of each screen projection so that they could take the song home with them.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, Christians faced the challenge of adopting musical expressions which, although traditional to local cultures, had been suppressed by missionaries as unsuitable for worship. In a 2004 interview, Dr. A.A. Agordoh, a leader in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Ghana, told me that his church was very concerned in the 1970s about losing its young people. After much study and prayer, the leaders decided to move beyond the cultural restrictions taught by missionaries generations ago, and to allow dance and drumming in worship — two aspects of African song that are part of their cultural heritage. That decision was crucial in indigenizing Christian worship in their culture. The same story has been repeated throughout much of Africa and beyond. The church in Africa has witnessed remarkable growth, and an important part of that growth came when the people were encouraged to develop their own songs in their own musical languages.

**Migration to the West**

The Western church is now blessed to be on the receiving end of a growing repertoire of global songs that offer new life to worship in the West. The hymnals *Glory to God* and *Lift Up Your Hearts* added dozens of songs from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, many in the original languages. The process of international song adoption can be documented by comparing the last two editions of these and many other North American hymnals. Although quite new, this process is already in full swing, with songs offered now for adoption at the congregational level. A remarkable Index of Genre and Musical Styles in *Lift Up Your Hearts* lists twenty-one categories of genres and traditions, including Settings from Africa; Asia and the Pacific Islands; Latin America and Southern North American Countries, States, and Regions; and even a category of Settings from the Middle and Near East. The latter is the area most neglected by the larger Christian church and a place of great suffering today, but it possesses a rich heritage of congregational song.

In general, African songs were the first to be adopted, especially some of the freedom songs from Southern Africa like “Siyahamba/We Are Marching.”[4] A study of the last three editions of North American hymnals reveals that even the presence of African American song is relatively recent in hymnals used by white congregations. We might ask whether the adoption of some African American...
spirituals now appearing in hymnals paved the way for acceptance of songs from Africa, or if the direction was the other way round. African American songs were first collected in separate publications before being adopted by denominational hymnals; James Abbington lists eighteen such hymnals and supplements published since Vatican II.[5]

The growing number of Latinos in the United States has certainly sparked interest in adopting songs from Latin America. Church-music publishers have provided some separate Spanish-language hymnals, but many Latin American songs with bilingual texts have now been adopted in English-language denominational hymnals. “Pelas dores deste mundo/For the Troubles”[6] is a powerful example from Brazil that helps Christians pray for justice in a suffering world.

Asian songs have been the most challenging to adopt. There is so much diversity, so many languages and cultures, that fewer Asian songs have found their way into Western hymnals. Nevertheless, the vibrancy of an Asian hymn festival led by Swee Hong Lim and Chi Yi Chen at the July 2014 conference of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada had everyone singing with exuberance, especially the Korean song “Jukkeseo wangwiye/The God of Glory.”[7] This song may find its way into many Western congregations long before the next generation of hymnals.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Even as North American hymnals are starting to include many songs from around the world, local communities continue to wrestle with diversity within their own context. Vast numbers of people are migrating. Refugees, torn from their homelands, are settling in new places, including new places in North America: people from around the world are moving into our neighborhoods, not only in the major urban centers, but also into smaller cities and towns. Sometimes they form their own congregations by language and culture, at other times they show up at traditionally Anglo churches. A lot is at stake when it comes to acknowledging the unity of the body of Christ in ways that move beyond toleration and hospitality to *adoption* into our worshiping communities.

Perhaps the international song adoption process may also pave the way for adopting more of the maturing body of worship songs from contemporary North American culture. The same kind of wrestling with questions of culture and authenticity that took place in Ghana in the 1970s needs to happen in North America. The us/them divide among and even within some North American congregations is still very deep when considering so-called “contemporary” and “traditional” services. In an effort to help bridge this divide, the contents of both *Glory to God* and *Lift Up Your Hearts* have been made available for projection.

Adopting songs from around the world can strengthen our unity as brothers and sisters in Christ in joyful and prayerful worship. The number of songs from around the world that are newly available in North American hymnals and also on licensing lists points to a continuing role for hymnal editors and congregational worship leaders: the role of international adoption agents.

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FOOTNOTES


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Recommended Citation: Brink, Emily R., (2014) “International Adoption Agents,” The Yale ISM Review: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 17. Available at: http://ismreview.yale.edu/

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Have Hymnals Become Dinosaurs?

By Melissa Maier | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

This essay is an edited and adapted version of the Kavanagh Lecture, entitled “Have Hymnals Become Dinosaurs?: The Costs of Extinction,” delivered on October 24, 2013 at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music.

Three scenarios — all of them real — can set the stage to address the question of the “extinction” of hymnals.

A congregation oversubscribes the cost of buying new denominational songbooks that contain a mixture of old hymns and recently-composed songs. The congregation’s minister approaches a pastoral colleague assigned to a smaller, struggling congregation, and offers her the surplus money for a similar purchase. “No, thank you,” she says. “We no longer use books since the lyrics are projected on the screen along with the other texts for worship. Although we are small, this is a forward-looking community. We are not interested in print books that are a relic of the past. Besides, we don’t want to be encumbered with books to hold because we prefer to be free to lift our hands or clap as we sing.”

In speaking about resources for worship, the pastor acknowledges that he never uses the denomination’s hymnbook. “I like having the freedom to choose music from any source. Of course, we have our CCLI [Christian Copyright Licensing International] and onelicense.net licenses. I find songs that best fit the theme of the day and that can get the congregation really ‘in’ to their worship. Hymnals are far too restrictive.”

A student in my introductory worship course, upon learning that the day’s session will focus on music in worship, comments in class: “I hope you aren’t going to talk about hymns and hymnals. They really are irrelevant to today’s worship. The music is old fashioned and the words are often boring. I’d like for us to talk about ‘contemporary’ music and music that is produced individually or collaboratively by people in an emerging-style congregation. That really would be more helpful for us as future pastors.” Although the Masters of Sacred Music students in the room cringe at that remark, they are a minority compared to the heads nodding in affirmation of the student’s request.

We are all aware of churches where the blue, red, black, or green hymnal remains safely tucked in the pew rack for the duration of the Sunday liturgy. In some instances, denominational leaders have encouraged hymnal-using congregations to lay their books aside in the name of growth and “relevance.” Indeed, some of these churches have experienced growth in numbers after giving up their hymnbooks. Even in Catholic churches, the Gather or equivalent songbook collects dust while the monthly rotation of “missalettes” is used. So it is a bit of a surprise that, in 2013, two new denominational hymnbooks were born: the joint publication of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the Reformed Church in America presented under the title Lift Up Your Hearts: Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs; and Glory to God, from the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. In response to the trends of the times, both of these books are available in hard-copy and electronic forms. Lift Up Your Hearts comes in multiple
digital formats that include schemes for projection, printing, and reading. *Glory to God* is offered in a web-based electronic edition that is searchable and includes audio clips. What some declare to be a dying life-form has been acclimatized to the digital age.

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Is this simply a last-ditch effort to save the hymnal from extinction as a species? Should hymnals go the way of the dodo and the dinosaur, given the changes in today’s worship climate? Most certainly they should, if one considers the comments of many church leaders, worship leaders, laity, and seminarians. Yet, it is clear that the leadership of these three Reformed denominations had a different perspective when confronted with the choice between reinvigorating the hymnal — helping it adapt to a new environment — or to letting it pass away. The “Theological Vision Statement” (2009), written by the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song and included in the back of *Glory to God* as Appendix I, succinctly articulates their logic for the continuation of the hymnbook genre. I state it here in full, for it provides a foundation for a more fleshed-out discussion of the costs of extinction.

Collections of hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs give voice to the church’s core beliefs and theological convictions. Their texts are “compact theology,” and the selection of hymns and songs, the order in which they are presented, and even the ways in which they are indexed shape the theological thinking and ultimately the faith and practices of the church.

Previous hymnals have responded to the needs of the church and the world by highlighting the rhythms of the church year, the centrality of the psalms in the prayer and praise of Reformed churches, the corporate witness of the church to the world, the seeking of God’s peace and God’s justice, and the rich musical and poetic resources of world Christianity. All these motifs remain important and should be retained, in one way or another, in this collection.

This collection of hymns and songs, however, will be published amid different conditions than those that molded previous hymnals. It will be offered in a world in which trust in human progress has been undermined and where eclectic spiritualities often fail to satisfy deep spiritual hungers. It will be used by worshipers who have not had life-long formation by Scripture and basic Christian doctrine, much less Reformed theology. It is meant for a church marked by growing diversity in liturgical practice. Moreover, it addresses a church divided by conflicts but nonetheless, we believe, longing for healing and the peace that is beyond understanding.

To inspire and embolden a church facing these formidable challenges, the overarching theme of this collection will be God’s powerful acts of creation, redemption, and final transformation. It will also bespeak the human responses that God’s gracious acts make possible. In other words, the framework for this collection of congregational song will be the history of salvation.

This theme of salvation history answers the needs of the church and the world in the following ways:
The priority placed on God’s acts offers hope to those whose faith in human efforts has been undermined.

A focus on salvation history reminds a church and world riddled with anxiety, frustration, and conflict that love has come to earth and that the risen and ascended Christ is alive and active.

The emphasis on God’s provision for us invites our grateful response. It makes a place for expressions of corporate commitment as well as personal devotion.

The framework of salvation history is widely inclusive. It has places for existing hymns and invites the writing of new words and music to supply major omissions. It makes room for the whole of the biblical witness, not only psalms and the Gospels that are already well reflected in hymn texts, but also the segments of the Scriptures that are not. It incorporates the events of the Christian year, the sacraments, and the mission of the church throughout the world as Christ’s living body.

As such, this framework both encompasses and enriches the liturgical practices that exist in the church. It includes the christological rhythm of the liturgical year, from Advent to the Reign of Christ, but also places the liturgical year in the wider framework of God’s covenantal acts in creation and toward Israel. It challenges all users, whatever liturgical patterns they use, to shape their worship by the full extent of the biblical narrative.

The rich narrative of salvation history — with the life stories of people like Abraham and Sarah, Eli and Samuel, Boaz and Ruth, Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch — makes audible the manifold ways in which God engages people of different ages, nationalities, races, and genders.

The framework of the history of salvation offers a theological rationale for asking us to learn songs that come from cultures different from our own: Pentecost teaches us to speak and hear the gospel in many tongues and languages and only thus, “with all the saints,” to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ (Eph. 3:18). We do not sing hymns and songs because they were birthed in our culture; we sing them because they teach us something about the richness that is in God.

Likewise, the notion of salvation history invites us to bridge the divide between different musical styles and traditions. As scribes who have been trained for God’s reign will bring out of their treasures “what is new and what is old” (Matt. 13:52), so musicians are invited to lead us in songs both old and new, in praise of a God who is the first and the last, the ancient of everlasting days, and the Lord of the new creation.[1]

To address the question of whether or not hymnals are outmoded, it is necessary to consider their functions and purposes. First, we will focus on the hymnal as a theological primer, and then consider the hymnal as the repository of the church’s witness through the ages. Finally, we will look at the hymnal as a witness to the present age and the age to come.

The Hymnal as a Theological Primer

The Presbyterian “Theological Vision Statement” makes it clear that, above all, the hymnal encompasses layers of theological reflection on the Christian faith. By the “compact theology” found in each hymn, pieces of the narrative of God’s salvation and the hymn writer’s interpretation of them are provided. They are then, in performance, knit into the larger fabric of the doxological and liturgical event. No single hymn or song is capable of conveying the full story of salvation. As we know, some are better at articulating basic Christian beliefs and experiences than others. Ideally, the text and tune of each hymn or song serve as a memory aid, reminding the singers of the broader narrative of God’s work in creation and in human life. What is expressed in a hymn is, by design and of necessity, incomplete.

To speak of hymns, however, is not necessarily to speak of hymnals. The pastor previously described
was quite happy to retrieve the sung repertoire of his congregation from a variety of sources and not just out of a single, discrete publication of texts and melodies. Positively put, such an approach may provide greater musical flexibility in worship planning and practice. In addition, communities may engage new musics as they emerge rather than wait for months or years before they are approved for a collection. Congregations, and especially worship leaders and pastors, are free to develop their own repertoire. But what is seen as beneficial may be also regarded as problematic. The freedom to develop a repertoire might mean that certain aspects of the narrative of salvation and the experiences of Christian life are overlooked or, at the other extreme, over-emphasized. Preachers often have their favorite homiletic axes to grind, and a musical repertoire of limited theological content may be used as an aural lubricant to ease the delivery. Along with the problem of a truncated range of songs of faith, there is the dislocation of the repertoire of a congregation from the wider song of the church. Hymnal committees, slow though they may be, select songs to speak to a broad constituency. Through a system of checks and balances, a representative committee also gives attention to theological diversity and integrity. The loss of such diversity and integrity can be registered as but one price that would be paid for the extinction of hymnals.

The Presbyterian Statement acknowledges that hymns articulate the faith of the church, and that the organization of the collections themselves does so as well. The Presbyterian committee was not the first to make this observation. Almost 230 years earlier, the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, wrote in his Preface to the voluminous *Collection of Hymns for the Use of The People Called Methodists* (1780) that the book was “large enough to contain all the important truths of our most holy religion, whether speculative or practical” and that the contents were not “carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians.” The book was “in effect a little body of experimental and practical divinity.”[2] Thus the value of hymnals is not just that they conveniently contain the repertoire of words — and often music — to be used for Christian worship and devotions. Hymnbooks or songbooks, by their contents and by the method of their organization, teach the faith of the Church — and, in the case of denominationally authorized books, convey the particular doctrines or theological emphases of that branch of the Christian tradition. Between two covers, the *lex orandi* and the *lex credendi* stand together.

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Because hymnals are intended for the congregation, they are, in effect, the liturgical and theological books of the people, who are thus enabled to articulate their praise and thanksgiving. Since these books are literally “at hand,” their contents — the words of hymns and the theological shape of the entire collection — can (ideally) be more readily assimilated and “owned.” What is “confessed with the lips” therefore can both reflect and shape what is “believed in the heart” (Rom.10:9).

While hymnbooks, by their organization, offer a theological framework, this structuring cannot be identified as a systematic theology. As the hymnologist Paul Westermeyer observes, the arrangement of hymns should be identified more as a “synthetic” theology than one that is systematic. Hymns are usually multivalent and so can fit under more than one heading typical of a systematic theology; indeed, the “individual parts and their whole draw together many connections in a totality about the Christian faith that is fundamentally doxological and cannot be easily systematized.”[3] This is one reason why it is difficult to locate a particular hymn by using a topical index. But the absence of a systematic theology and the utilization of a synthetic theology do not mean that there is no theological coherence or flavor to a hymnal.
To return to John Wesley’s 1780 Collection “organized according to the experience of real Christians” as an example, we find a hymnal that takes the shape of Wesley’s proclaimed via salutis, or way of salvation, so important for Methodism as a movement within the Church of England. The Collection begins with hymns inviting to repentance, and continues with hymnic prayers for repentance and true faith. The penultimate section provides hymns under the headings “Rejoicing,” “Fighting,” “Praying,” “Watching,” “Working,” “Suffering,” “Groaning for Full Redemption,” “Brought to the Birth,” “Saved,” and, interestingly, given the personal focus of the previous headings but in keeping with Wesley’s missionary convictions, “Interceding for the World.” The final section is designated for the worship of the Methodist society with the headings “Giving Thanks,” “Praying,” and “Parting,” a tripartite simplicity that little indicates the spiritual and emotional intensity of society gatherings. The via salutis structure (in full or in part) persists in Methodist hymnals on both sides of the Atlantic more than two centuries later as a type of identifier for Methodist hymn and song collections. The United Methodist Hymnal (1989) tucks the old via salutis scheme into a broader five-section structure, in which the first three sections are assigned to each person of the Trinity, the fourth section identified with “The Community of Faith,” and the fifth focused on the eschatological “New Heaven and New Earth.” The old via salutis structure straddles the section assigned to the work of the Holy Spirit (beginning with invitation and repentance) and the “Community of Faith” section in a sub-part that is designated “The Nature of the Church,” in recognition that Methodism no longer self-defines as an ecclesiola but as an ecclesia. For Methodists, the preservation of a theological organizational shape within the hymnals across the generations has been a conscious recognition of a particular Methodist identity. This organizational structure also played a catechetical and instructional role for Methodists. Prior to the existence of a seminary education for aspiring clergy of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, assigned books were read as part of a ministerial Course of Study, and on the list was the denomination’s hymnal. An 1860 essay describing this Course indicated that consideration was to be given to the hymnal’s arrangement: “parts, sections, sub-sections, consecutive order of the hymns; as they are all arranged in philosophical order, with headings suggestive of the particular subjects, and specially framed to assist in selection for particular purposes and occasions.”[4] The Preface to the United Methodist Hymnal (1989) affirms this heritage: “Next to the Bible, our hymnals have been our most formative resource.”

Changed or modified theological and liturgical emphases are often indicated in the organization of a denomination’s hymnal. A good example is demonstrated by a comparison of the Congregational Church’s Pilgrim Hymnal (1958) with its successor the New Century Hymnal of 1995, which was produced as the second hymnal for the United Church of Christ, the denomination born from the union of the Congregational Church and the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Missing from the older hymnal is an explicit section-heading that references the liturgical year, though the Preface to the book notes that the hymns mark “the changing yet recurring accents of the Christian year,” and christological hymns pertinent to Advent through Ascension and Reign appear under the heading “Our Lord Jesus Christ.” A new denomination and the influence of the liturgical movement likely encouraged the liturgical year heading in the New Century Hymnal under which includes, quite remarkably for historic Calvinists, hymns for All Saints Day.

The synthetic theological aspect of hymnal organization identified by Westermeyer is especially evident when comparing the 1940 and the 1982 Episcopal Church USA hymnals. Both books include a section of “General Hymns” that contains texts that overlap in content with selections in the other headings of “Daily Office,” “Christian” or “Church Year,” and “Sacraments and other Rites.” The subsections of the 1982 book are far more detailed than that of the 1940 collection, especially under the section “General Hymns,” which supplies subsections in roughly a creedal outline. The placement of service music, which
moved from the back of the 1940 book to the front of the 1982 book, speaks of both convenience for practice and of liturgical identity.

Even hymns in collections designed for multiconfessional or nondenominational use are often framed within a theological system. Two books produced in Australia by editorial committees with Anglican, Churches of Christ, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and Uniting Church members took up the same creedal structure in each book (The Australian Hymn Book [1977]; Together in Song [1999]). Such collaborative work and the repeated structures in the books gave testimony not only to the theological and liturgical sharing of the ecumenical creeds, but also to a type of hymnic ecumenism that recognized the possibility of separated Christians singing many of the same songs together. An example of a nondenominational book is A Hymnal For Colleges and Schools, published in 1992 by Yale University Press, which is organized according to salvation history, from creation to eschaton. Embedded within this scheme, in a section designated “The Faithful Life,” are subsections placed in a sequence corresponding to a liturgical ordo. Though not confessional, this book’s organizational agenda places the worship of an academic community within the narrative stream of the whole church.

With the loss of a hymn and song repertoire demarcated between the two covers of a book — or with the absence of an organizational system delineating theologically the contents of a digital file — the church has lost a key mechanism for teaching the faith both obviously and subtly. A single song text projected on a screen or printed in a worship leaflet dislocates that text from the wider theological and doxological milieu.

A single song text projected on a screen or printed in a worship leaflet dislocates that text from the wider theological and doxological milieu.

While it is true that the single song text may function as a memory aid or mnemonic device, its usefulness may be much more limited when separated from the wider and deeper pool of the hymnal, where a text connects thematically with those before and after it. For newcomers to the faith, a text’s wider theological connectivities might not even be recognized.

My own earliest theological education, besides church school and Sunday worship, came from reading the hymnal. Headings and indices were not neglected as I combed through our church’s hymnal as a way of amusing myself during especially boring sermons. I supplemented my experience of the liturgical year as celebrated in the congregation with hymns under the appropriate headings; the poverty of Advent hymns in our book was not lost on me. As a young pianist and then organist, I routinely played through the family’s copy of the denominational hymnal to put in my fingers what I had read with my eyes. How can my faith-formative experience be replicated to a generation that knows no hymnbooks in the pew or in the home? Such is a cost of extinction.

The Hymnal as the Repository of the Church’s Witness through the Ages

Just as a circumscribed and theologically synthetic hymn and song repertoire is better able to express and convey the fundamental teachings of the Christian faith, so too it is more capable of exposing diachronically the lived faith of Christian communities. The inclusion of representative texts and tunes from previous eras and the current one declare implicitly that the church does not in each generation re-create itself de novo, although it is always an ecclesia semper reformanda, offering “new songs” to the Lord (Ps. 144:9; Rev. 14:3).[5] In a sense, a hymnal that includes the song of the church through the ages functions as a poetic and musical witness to the communion of saints, both the triumphant and
The texts of hymns and songs together in a discrete collection provide a time-specific — yet in many ways also ageless — compendium of Christian life and experience: sorrow and joy; repentance and
forgiveness; praise, adoration and thanksgiving; communion and mystery; and so forth. These texts and tunes still speak to the spiritual journey and experience of Christian people today, and in most cases the date of their writing is forgotten. How often is it remembered that “Amazing Grace” is an eighteenth-century text written by a former slave trader and usually sung to an early nineteenth-century tune? In our generation, it is a hymn of comfort sung at Christian funerals; and it is embraced widely in American society at times of community protest or tragedy. Another example, the ubiquitous “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow,” was written in the late seventeenth century and is commonly set to a sixteenth-century tune. The hymnic witness of the past is enduring. Such timelessness and timeliness is also shown in the creation of new texts based on the work of earlier writers. The hymn writer Jean Janzen, born in 1933, often finds her inspiration in such ancient works as those of Julian of Norwich:

Mothering God, you gave me birth in the bright morning of this world.  
Creator, source or every breath, you are my rain, my wind, my sun.

Mothering Christ, you took my form, offering me your food of light,  
grain of life, and grape of love, your very body for my peace.

Mothering Spirit, nurturing one, in arms of patience hold me close,  
so that in faith I root and grow until I flower, until I know.[6]

Thus, the decision to forfeit the use of a hymnal or a songbook in effect cuts off a congregation from its heritage and its memory. The loss of a hymnal lessens the likelihood of an awareness of the diversity and unity of Christian experience both chronologically and geographically. It also obscures the truth that “through the church the song goes on”[7] and that “the church in liturgy and song, in faith and love, through centuries of wrong, has borne witness to the truth in every tongue.”[8] As A. Royce Eckhardt, editor of the 1996 Covenant Hymnal, rightly notes:

The vast ocean of Christian hymnody transcends our individual limits and our specific place.  
The hymnal reminds us that God, the creator of the whole universe, took mortal flesh among us in a specific time and place; and that the hymnal, in both its universality and its particularity, protects us from believing that only the song of our time and our place, is the one that really matters. No, we are part of a much larger, ongoing song.[9]

The Hymnal as a Witness to the Present Age and the Age to Come

Not only do hymnals expose diachronically the lived faith of Christian communities, they also express synchronically — in the present time — the church’s witness. This is indicated by the sharing of an authorized denominational hymnal among the congregations of that denomination and sometimes by congregations outside the denomination. A note at the front of Evangelical Lutheran Worship indicates that the book is commended for use in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, thereby linking those congregations musically and also liturgically since calendars, propers, liturgical settings, and texts for sacraments and sacramental rites are included in the book. Other congregations, and even denominations, may use this hymnal, drawing them into the tight network as well. These congregations are then linked by the work and music of worship — the ordering of the gathering, the proclamation of the word, the fellowship of the table, and
the sending forth to mission and service. The Introduction to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* makes this point with these eucharologically-framed words: “May this book of the church...be [a servant] through which the Holy Spirit will call out the church, gather us around Jesus Christ in word and sacrament, and send us, enlivened, to share the good news of life in God.” The ties that bind by the use of a hymnal locate a single congregation in a broader company, which then allows these congregations to speak together to the present age. Thus, the connections between a local community and the global church become more tangible. However, this is not to suggest that churches engage in an absolute equivalence in worship practice and music selection, since what is expected in most instances is a unity without an imposed uniformity.

Although hymnals under different titles rarely have identical contents, the similarities between them connect congregations, even when words are adjusted by translation or a scrupulous editorial committee and musical settings are not alike. The sharing of a hymnic repertoire unselfconsciously pushes the work of ecumenism forward as a witness to the churches — and to a skeptical world. There is something remarkable about Catholic congregations singing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” The hymn “Sing of Mary, Pure and Lowly” by Roland Palmer that is familiar to Catholics appears in the current United Methodist hymnal — and not in the section on Advent, which is where Mary is typically hidden in most Protestant hymnals.

Hymns in a shared repertoire connect us ecumenically and globally. Congregations in areas that once received the hymns of Western missionaries are now exporting their songs of faith to hymnals produced in countries that those missionaries came from. For example, the South African songs “Siyahamba,” “Thuma mina,” and “Mayenziwe” have become staples in North American hymnals. Spanish-language hymns are sung in congregations where there are no native Spanish speakers. Tunes, as already noted, sound the worldwide aspect of the church and animate the singers in common melodies and rhythms. Hymnals today are multicultural, multiethnic, multiconfessional, global. Perhaps there is at least musical truth when we sing:

> In Christ there is no east or west,  
> In him no south or north,  
> But one great fellowship of love  
> Throughout the whole wide earth.\[10\]

The repertoire within hymnals is also designed to speak truth to the concerns of the present age and to point to God’s unfolding, yet not fully revealed, future. New texts that speak the faith and utilize the new musics of the age are included to energize the faithful and to entice the lapsed and curious. Issues of common concern are addressed, and their inclusion in hymnbooks is a check against the particular, and perhaps limited, commitments of worship leaders and their congregations. Since the 1960s, hymns that convey urgency for the care of God’s good earth have been assigned a place in hymnals. One text on this theme, written by the New Zealand native Shirley Erena Murray (born 1931), appears today in numerous hymnals worldwide:

> Touch the earth lightly, use the earth gently,  
> nourish the life of the world in our care:  
> Gift of great wonder, ours to surrender,
trust for the children tomorrow will bear.

We who endanger, who create hunger,
agents of death for all creatures that live,
we who would foster clouds of disaster—
God of our planet, forestall and forgive!

Let there be greening, birth from the burning,
water that blesses, and air that is sweet,
health in God’s garden, hope in God’s children,
regeneration that peace will complete.

God of all living, God of all loving,
God of the seedling, the snow, and the sun,
Teach us, deflect us, Christ reconnect us,
using us gently, and making us one.[11]

Not surprisingly, themes of peace and justice are topics for contemporary hymn writers and come especially from the pen of the aforementioned Adam Tice, born in the United States in 1979. His hymns are starting to appear in the newest North American hymnals and give voice to the understanding that the hymnal is a medium of prophetic witness. Tice’s hymn “The Church of Christ” considers the church of the present and of the future:

The church of Christ cannot be bound
by walls of wood or stone.
Where charity and love are found,
there can the church be known.

True faith will open up the door
and step into the street.
True service will seek out the poor
and ask to wash their feet.

True love will not sit idly by
when justice is denied.
True mercy hears the homeless cry
and welcomes them inside.

If what we have we freely share
to meet our neighbor’s need,
then we extend the Spirit’s care
through every selfless deed.

The church of Christ cannot be bound
by walls of wood or stone.
Where charity and love are found,
there can the church be known.[12]
Conclusion

The cost of hymnal extinction is indeed high. A hymnal gives checks and balances to an individual’s or a congregation’s preferences and dislikes, and it pushes a community to consider the wider church in terms of commonalities of faith and similarities of practice. The extinction of hymnals may unwittingly contribute to an additional fracturing of an already broken church. An additional cost of extinction is the loss of a significant means of preserving the fullness of Christian identity and of locating individual and community in the ongoing narrative of the Christian story.

Have hymnals become dinosaurs? The energies put into the publication of recent hymnals by composers, authors, editorial committee and consultants suggest otherwise. Are hymnals an endangered species? The answer remains yes. But, from my perspective, hymnals must have a place in the church’s future, whether in print, digitized, or in some other form. To conclude with the words of Mary Louise Bringle, chair of the editorial committee for the new Presbyterian hymnal *Glory to God*:

[A] hymnal is like a telephone in ways other than the fact that both bear replacing long before they physically wear out. Like a telephone, a hymnal is also a medium of communication to bridge distances and differences. Old hymns, psalms, spirituals and gospel songs serve to bridge generations far removed from each other, connecting today’s congregations with resources and relatives from centuries past. New songs build bridges, too, honoring the contributions of contemporary worshipers....

Most significantly of all, however, worship songs communicate the adoration of believers to the One who gave breath and continues to inspire words in our minds and melodies in our hearts. Surely, far more important than pleasing ourselves with what we sing in worship is making a sacrifice pleasing to God. And that sacrifice just might mean setting aside our personal preferences in order to sing the heart songs of our neighbors, freshly available to us in new hymnals — even when the old ones have worn so well.[13]

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FOOTNOTES


[8] From “When in Our Music God is Glorified” by Fred Pratt Green.


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View article as a PDF: Have Hymnals Become Dinosaurs?
[It may be Lord our voice is suited now]

By Melissa Maier | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

It may be Lord our voice is suited now
only for irony, onslaught, and the minor hierarchies of rage.

It may be that only the crudest, cruelest transformations touch us,
gauzeworkers in the hallways of a burn ward.

I remember a blind man miraculous for the sounds of his mouth,
every bird rehearsed and released for the children to cheer.

Where is he now, in what icy facility or sunlit square,
blackout shades and a brambled mouth, singing extinctions?

Christian Wiman is the author, editor, or translator of nine books, including My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer (2013). His new book of poems, Once in the West, was released in the fall of 2014. His spare, precise poems often explore themes of spiritual faith and doubt. For ten years, he served as editor of Poetry magazine; in 2013 he joined the faculty of Yale Institute of Sacred Music and Yale Divinity School.

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Recommended Citation: Wiman, Christian (2014) “[It may be Lord our voice is suited now],” The Yale ISM Review: Vol. 1: No. 1, Article 19.
Available at: http://ismreview.yale.edu/

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