

Chapter 5: How Should We Sing a Hymn?

"I see, I feel, I know what power there is in singing... Singing to the Lord was meant to open up the hearts of those who participate in it, and carry them near to God. There is no time when we come so near to God's face, and speak to him so nearly, as when we sing... Give me a singing church. In a church where the Spirit of the Lord dwells, singing must break out..."

Henry Ward Beecher

'Joyful' Noise

On one particular episode of the popular television show "Touched by an Angel", one of the main characters asked a fellow angel how she could praise God when she was given such a terrible voice. The angel replied that we are commanded to make a 'joyful' noise, not a 'beautiful' noise – in other words, to sing joyfully. God already knows and does not care about the quality of our voice – He cares about hearing that the Gospel has brought joy into our lives. Our singing of hymns helps bring joy into our own lives as well as into the lives of those who worship with us. When we don't sing we deprive ourselves and our neighbors of this fellowship and spirit. What style or genre of hymns we sing is not important – that we sing joyfully is what it is all about.

We are told to make a "joyful noise" no less than seven times in the Old Testament.¹ The root Hebrew word is 'hariu', and literally means 'to mar' (by breaking); figuratively 'to split' the ears (with sound), i.e. 'shout' (for alarm or joy). In the King James Version it is also translated as 'blow an alarm', 'cry' (alarm, aloud, out), 'destroy', 'make a joyful noise', 'smart', 'shout' (for joy), 'sound an alarm', 'triumph'.² When the Children of Israel shouted to bring down the walls of Jericho, this is the Hebrew word used to describe the sound they made. In the Book of Job, when the morning stars 'shouted' for joy, this is the word used to describe their shout. When Zechariah commanded "Shout, O daughter of Zion", this was the word used to describe her shout. When Isaiah told the watchmen to lift up their voices, once again this verb was employed. If we were to follow this scriptural command, our chapel windows would live in fear of breaking with every meeting!

Why Do We Sing?

One of the reasons Christians come together on a day of worship is to fellowship and nurture each other in spiritual matters and in spiritual ways. And one of the highest forms of Christian worship and fellowship is the singing of hymns.

I belong to a local Sacred Harp group.³ Sacred Harp is the old-style congregational singing method predating the congregation's use of such luxuries as pianos and organs. The name derives from the idea that the vocal cords, being the only actual musical instrument directly created by God, are in fact a very 'sacred harp'. One evening, as we were raising the roof in musical praise, one of my fellow singers pointed out that at church on Sunday, where mumbling has become the accepted way to sing, he

1 - Psalms 66:1; Psalms 81:1; Psalms 95: 1,2; Psalms 98:4,6; Psalms 100:1

2 - See STRONG'S EXHAUSTIVE CONCORDANCE.

3 - also called 'Shape Note' or 'Southern Harmony'

physically cannot sing the high notes or sing loud - both of which he does with great ease at our Sacred Harp singings. It wasn't a matter of not *wanting* to - it was a matter of not being *able* to. We came to a swift conclusion that only among a like-minded group of volumed, enthusiastic singers, are we able to use our 'sacred harp' to its Divine Fullness.

This thought has impressed me greatly as I go to church each week and hear the mumbling. I've come to realize that the difference in the spirit of the songs is not in finding new tunes or newer language, but finding a place in our heart for that hymn to take root and letting it sing out through our spirit. As we do this, we fulfill the Christian mandate of fellowshiping our fellow worshipers by sharing our spirit with theirs. And a true spirit nature, when shared with a fellow Christian, cannot be shared through mumbling. Instead, we will find ourselves assisting and fellowshiping them by singing out and praising He whom has gathered us to worship. We assist them in singing louder and higher. We assist them in the miracle of finding out that every hymn can have a place in their heart - and that they, too, can sing out loud and clear from that sacred place in our heart.

And what a lesson in life this is! For only with the assistance of those around us - hopefully a kind and compassionate congregation of fellow Christians - do we reach higher and more fully fulfill our role and purpose here on Earth by better preparing to return to Him who gave us life, breath - and song.

Singing for our own spirituality is a part, but not the whole purpose, of Christian hymn singing. We should be singing with the goal of not only raising ourselves, but to fellowship, comfort, and raise our brothers and sisters. Through this we will find - as individuals and as congregations - the true fulfillment of worship through Christian hymn singing.

John Wesley's Singing Rules

John Wesley, one of the founders of the Methodist movement, wrote these "Directions for Congregational Singing":

1. **Sing all.** See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up and you will find a blessing.
2. **Sing lustily, and with a good courage.** Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of it being heard, then when you sing the songs of Satan.⁴
3. **Sing modestly.** Do not bawl, as to be heard above, or distinct from, the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.
4. **Sing in time.** Whatever time is sung, be sure to keep with it. Do not run before, not stay behind it; but attend closely to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can. And take care you sing not too slow. This drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from among us, and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.

4 - Wesley was writing in 1761, and his words may seem harsh to a 21st Century listener. When he speaks of the "songs of Satan" he is merely using a phrase contemporary to his time which simply refers to non-church music. Don't read any thing else into it as that is *all* he meant.

5. Above all, sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this, attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve of here, and reward when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.⁵

Sing Them As They Are Written!

When George Careless arrived in Utah from England, Brigham Young invited him to become conductor of both the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and the Salt Lake Theater Orchestra. Discussing the assignment, President Young said to him: "I like soft music. I have heard the angels sing so sweetly."

"But would you be fed on honey all the time?" asked Brother Careless.

"No, certainly not," replied the prophet.

"Some of our hymns require bold, vigorous treatment; others, soft sweet strains..."⁶

Every song in a modern hymnal has instructions as how to sing them. Let's review some of those over-looked instructions.

Tempo ... Every song was written with a tempo, or 'speed' in mind. Most modern hymnals have that tempo designated - older hymnals don't as it was tradition for the congregation to find that tempo that felt good. I must note that older hymnals were used in a time that congregations were much more active singers than they are today, and one would often just need to mention a tune name and their mind was already to the tune and pitch needed. Today, when so many of us look at hymn singing as a chore to be endured, we need all the clues we can get.

Attitude Instruction ... Along with the Tempo instructions, many songbooks - including hymnals - have a word or phrase to describe the attitude with which the song should be sung. The "Battle Hymn of the Republic", for example, has the directions in my hymnal to be sung "with spirit", while "Silent Night" should be sung "peacefully".

Words of instruction in the current LDS hymnal are:

boldly ... brightly ... calmly ... cheerfully ... confidently ... with conviction ... with devotion ...
with dignity ... earnestly ... with energy ... energetically ... enthusiastically ... expressively ... with
exultation ... exultantly ... fervently ... firmly ... gently ... humbly ... joyfully ... jubilantly ... lightly ...
majestically ... meekly ... with motion ... peacefully ... prayerfully ... reflectively ... resolutely ...
reverently ... smoothly ... solemnly ... with spirit ... tenderly ... thankfully ... thoughtfully ...
triumphantly ... with vigor ... vigorously ... worshipfully

Notice there is not one word about mumbling or whispering.

5 - David W. Music, "Hymnology, a Collection of Source Readings (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1996) 139-140

6 - As told in STORIES OF OUR MORMON HYMNS, J. Spencer Cornwall (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1963) pg 265

What I Teach the Children

The first week I was called lead and teach the music for the children at church, I made a visual aide that was a set of controls to set for each song we sang; much like the controls you would find on a radio or a stereo. It was a set of one dial and three slide bars. I introduced the children to each control and we talked about how and when we would set each one a different way. After that, I would set the controls before each song to show the children how we were going to sing. These settings were:

VOLUME: The first control was a big round volume control knob... which seemed to be set on HIGH most of the time as I was trying to teach the children that they were supposed to sing out and sing loud. As one of our songs explained, "A song is a wonderful kind of thing, So lift up your voice and SING!"

ATTITUDE: This was a slide bar that could be slid up and down to show in what type of attitude we were to put our mind into for the song. (NOTE: There was a picture on each end of the slide bar to show the two extreme ends of the resulting setting.) Were we going to be kneeling with a reverent mind such as in "I Thank Thee, Dear Father", or are we going to be rousing our enthusiasm with a "marching song" used to rally the Lord's troops into battle - such as "Battle Hymn of the Republic" or "Onward Christian Soldiers"?

ACTION: What action is the hymn preparing is for? What will we be performing because of or during this song? What is it motivating us to do right now? Are we doing a "wobble song" designed to work the wiggles out of little children who need a rest from being reverent? Or are we getting ready for prayer? Are we singing "We fold our arms and bow our heads", or are we singing "We'll sing and we'll SHOUT"?

ADDRESS: Who are we addressing - or singing about - in this song? Would we speak differently if addressing our Heavenly Father or addressing our parents and friends? Our enthusiasm and volume and attitude would not necessarily change, but the note of respect in our voice would change.

These four helped helped my innocent little congregation understand what was needed in singing each song.

Public Worship through Hymns

Every church and congregation has a set standard for their musical worship. In the case of the LDS Church, the current hymnal and children's songbook are the primary source for all musical worship in a public setting. But the door has *never* been closed for utilizing other hymns and songs - current instructions from the First Presidency invites local leaders to employ music from outside the hymnal as long as the music conforms to the style and spirit of the music in the hymnal and the text is doctrinally correct.⁷ The current handbook specifies that music performed as solos or by groups during a worship service are not done for performance sake but to aide worship – they should draw attention to *the message of the song* and not to *the performer*.

7 - Handbook of Instructions (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998) pgs 289-294. See also page 236 for use of music in Primary. See also letter dated November 7, 2002, signed by the First Presidency, reiterating the handbook's instructions.

Private Worship through Hymns

Although the congregation in which you worship has standards for worship through music, these standards do not apply to your private worship at home. Alongside the many Mormon Tabernacle Choir albums on my music shelf there are many hymn albums that would never be heard inside my church as they are recorded outside my congregation's musical parameters. Literally every form of hymn has found its way into my collection and into my private worship. Each form has a time and place in which it best expresses my thoughts and feelings in worship.

Often Christian singers feel constrained to remain faithful to one style of hymns. I am an American of British ancestry, and I belong to a church whose roots came from New England's Puritan soil. Hence one would think the hymns I am most familiar with are the somewhat-solemn hymns from a background of hard wood pews and often equally-solemn faces.

Suddenly, my church found itself running from persecution and on a trek across a continent that literally rivaled Moses and the Children of Israel. Added to this New England background was the frontier-conquering concepts of "Marching towards Home" and of life being a journey, and their newly-written hymns reflected these views. Tunes they could march to became acceptable as they sang these hymns while marching across a continent.

This same church has now become a world-wide church, embracing all people regardless of background. Soon church members will realize that many of those from outside the Puritan, New England, English cathedral musical experience are joining the church in families and groups. They are bringing the gift of their music to the altar, and we will have the opportunity to be blessed by that gift.

The world is a big place, and many other people worship that same Being I worship, and they do it with equal reverence, although with a different singing styles, volumes, and levels of displayed enthusiasm. Just as the Church took on new forms of music and expression as it progressed, so do we as individuals as life's experiences and trials brings out in us new things to express. Once the blinders over my hymn experiences came off and I discovered a whole world of hymns and hymn styles out there, I fell in love with folk and country gospel hymns. I am now a faithful Sacred Harp singer, supplementing my Sunday singing with the higher volume and foot-stomping enthusiasm of this grand style of worship. In addition, I have been introduced to the soulful enthusiasm of Full Gospel, and no one is the same once this style has touched your soul!

Music is, in a sense, a language that speaks to a person's heart. I laud the mission of Sister Gladys Knight and the Saints Unified Voices Choir - for her to utilize the music language of her youth in introducing LDS hymns to others of her music heritage is a very brave thing! What many don't realize is that Latter-day Saints are not her target audience - she is reaching out to those for whom her musical style is their 'native language' and announcing the dual message of Jesus Christ and the Restored Gospel in a way that could not happen if it were not being done in their musical language. And yet, in fulfilling this mission, look at the effect she is having upon Latter-day Saints who aren't even her target audience! Many Latter-day Saints are being introduced to the gospel music she learned as a five-year-old choir member in the Black Baptist church of her youth, and they are loving the fresh, new messages they are hearing. Perhaps we have learned that we need a course at the missionary training centers to learn the musical worship languages of those to whom we are sending missionaries...?

As the church make converts from other societies and cultures, those converts bring what is best from their culture into the church and enhance what is already there. We who are greeting them at the

door with open arms must accept the gift they bring and find in it what is good and worthy to embrace. I can think of no greater gift than that which is being brought into the church as more and more converts bring their music and their ways of expressing that music. They are bringing a fresh enthusiasm for worship music, and personally I think they have a lot they can teach the rest of us.

Tradition!

I very much appreciate the words of a fellow hymnist:

"We know that hymnody not only withstands the threats of its challengers, it conscripts the best of their ranks. Religious folk songs, gospel songs, and praise choruses, each in their turn, challenged mainstream hymnody. These contenders sought to usurp hymnody by popular demand and acclamation. Yet, hymnody marched ever forward, absorbing into its hymnals the best along the way."⁸

What is 'traditional' but yesterday's 'contemporary'! Handel's MESSIAH debuted in a public house because church leaders thought it too daring and secular to be performed in a church. Folk and country hymns were once relegated to hillbillies and cowboys. But in time the best of what was once 'contemporary' or 'folk' stands the test of time and becomes 'tradition'. And this process will continue as we find new ways and means to praise God through hymns. Hymnist Andrew Donaldson suggests:

"I believe we need to encourage and challenge text and tune writers who love popular song forms, yet who are dissatisfied with the shallowness of much that is offered by Christian Contemporary lyricists and composers. We need to encourage them by keeping the doors open for "contemporary" music where appropriate in worship, and by continuing to provide forums where this music can be experienced and evaluated.

"We need even more to challenge composers and lyricists not to be content with shallow and glib expressions of Christian worship, but to write songs with theological depth, and to compose music that allows congregations to sing, pray, proclaim, and worship in spirit and in truth."⁹

I do *not* fear the future of traditional hymnody as new cultures and peoples bring their best to the church - I am eager to embrace and share the best of their traditional along side the best of what I have already known and embraced. My church's hymnal, once an icon of New England and British worship, now includes hymns with tunes that are European and American folk tunes. As more and more join the flock from Asia and Africa and South America, I pray we can glean from each other and share a new, combined way of worshiping and praising the same God and His Son through hymns.

8 - Terry W. York, the HYMN, July 2004, page 29

9 - Andrew Donaldson, "CCM Artists and Hymn Recordings", the HYMN, Autumn 2006, pg 29