

The Right Tune:

Pairing Proper Music to Hymn Lyrics

Yesterday I gave a long lecture describing and recommending songs from the *Cantus Christi* 2020. I am sure that everyone there didn't know most of the songs. That's true of most of the music in the book. And that was not an accident. We intended most of the songs to be unfamiliar. And that's because, like a lot of music books, it's an educational book. It has not only things you know, but things you'll like to learn.

But, there's more to it than that. After all, there are lots of things we as a congregation could sing about. Subjects and ideas that would edify us if we sang them. Some of those subjects, we sing about a lot, and we know a lot of songs about. Praise to God, for instance, or Christmas. Some subjects, we don't know many songs about, like Baptism or Pentecost. And some subjects, we might not know any songs about. Like forgiving other people, or serving other people. Or, it might be a song about the praise of God, but it's praising Him for something we don't often mention in our hymns, like deliverance from enemies.

And that's not because there aren't any hymns on those subjects. There are plenty. We just don't know them. The book of Psalms is like that. Most Christians don't sing most of them.

Now someone might ask, "Why would we sing songs on those subjects?" But that's for another lecture. We're assuming that you want to sing a new song, that you want to learn and to say more than just everything you've said already.

If you do, then of course, you'll be singing new words.

By the way, when I say, "new", I mean "new to us". Some of them are quite old.

And if I have new words, of course I want new music for them. And that will mean learning the music, till it's not new. Till I know it, till I own it, as well as I own "Joy to the World". Till it dwells in me richly.

But someone will say, why does it need to be new music? Why can't we sing the new words to music we already know? And of course we can. Many new hymns are put to recycled music. Especially when the new song is from the Book of Psalms, in the Bible. Most books of Psalms meant to be sung—they're called Psalters—are full of recycled music. And that works okay.

So why ask anybody to learn new music? If familiar music works?

Well, I gave one reason yesterday: because it's beautiful, and we like beauty. We like to learn and enjoy more beauty, just like we enjoy learning more truth, and more goodness. And we enjoy beautiful music **more**, when we know it well. In fact, that's one of the characteristics of beautiful music: that the more you hear it, and the better you know it, the better you like it.

And that's enough reason for some of us. So if you're convinced, you can ignore the next ten minutes. But there are lot of other reasons to learn new music for new words.

- We have lots of great tunes available. Sticking with the music we already know, we're playing in a puddle, when the whole ocean is just around the corner.
- You're more likely to remember the words if you know them to their own tune. We have a limited capacity to connect words with music. Singing more 5 or 10 stanzas to a tune, will weaken or break the other connections.
- A practical reason too: If some Psalm tunes are familiar and some are unfamiliar, you know what will happen. The Psalms with unfamiliar tunes won't be sung as often, or at all. Unfair bias.

- Learning new tunes is the easiest and most enjoyable way to improve our musical experience. There are lots of other ways to do better, to do congregational music better, to increase our quality and enjoyment. We could learn to sing harmony. We can learn to READ music. We can add more instruments. We can sing with better tone. Most of us would enjoy just singing louder. We can improve the acoustics of the room. We could use more dynamic variety, like the Welsh do, don't sing all the stanzas the same volume. We could sing all the Psalms. But the easiest and quickest way to improve our musical experience, is to **own** a beautiful new tune.

- It's long-term thinking. We can have musical wealth and richness, the same way we have any wealth: long work in the same direction. It will take a while, but we have a while. We're starting a movement, we're building a culture.

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And I could go on, but this seems like plenty of reasons, doesn't it? But I'll tell you, from most people, I get pushback. Even from musicians who I expect would want to teach and learn new music. Even from Reformed Christians, who believe in beauty, and who believe that nothing is neutral, and even from Postmillennial Christians who believe we're preparing for a long-term future, and we're not in a hurry. We are not about to be raptured, and we have time to do things really well. To do things right! I get almost nothing but resistance. In fact, even the *Cantus* committee I was working for wasn't convinced, and they wouldn't have minded filling the book with familiar music, and repeating tunes lots of times.

And some of the objections I hear:

- It's easier. Yeah! I'm serious, people actually say that! Well, of course it is, but since when is that a reason for doing anything? What worth doing is easy?

I just want to pull my hair out when people say this! You picked a familiar tune for this Psalm, because it was easy? I mean, I don't know what to say!

Actually, I do know what to say. Learning new music is not that hard. I'm not talking about learning a cantata: this is a hymn tune! It's meant to be sung by untrained singers! And yeah, learning new music is harder than not learning new music. Obviously. But if you learn by listening, it's very easy. Takes almost no work at all. And the work that it does take, is fun! And once you do learn it, the work is over!

- Christians have done this for centuries: borrowed music for new words. And that's true. But so what? Maybe they were wrong; if that was a mistake, let's not repeat their mistake. Or, it might have been the best they could do. Maybe they weren't lazy, maybe they just didn't have very many tunes. And if it was really the best they could do, then they did right, and God bless them. It's NOT the best WE can do.

We can do better. And in everything **else** we put our hands to, we **want** to do better. Don't we? We intend to do better. So let's do better with our music too.

And besides that, Christians have NOT **always** borrowed music for new words. They have also written more music. We have literally tens of thousands of hymn tunes we could sing. Probably hundreds of thousands. In the 1890s John Julian estimated a million English language hymn texts had been written, and half a million tunes. And that was a hundred years ago! So, it's clearly not true that Christians have always been content reusing tunes.

But let's just say there are 100,000 hymn tunes that an untrained singer could sing, and only one in 20 is worth learning. (Which is about right--lots of boring tunes out there.) That's 5000 tunes!

And you might say, I couldn't learn that many. But, aha. Here's where God's design of our brain comes in. You can, easily, learn that many tunes, and if you listen to much music you probably have. People are often surprised when they see the number of songs they know. I have a playlist of 20,000 MP3s and I complain I have nothing to listen to, because I know it all!

- And another argument I get, for using familiar music, is that the familiar hymn tunes are not that distinctive. They can carry lots of words. It doesn't really matter

This gets to the heart of the issue, I think. People treat music like dirt: like you can plant many different plants in it and they should all grow fairly well.

Well, I don't know whether I'll ever find anyone who cares much about this, but I find that attitude very disrespectful. I mean, if you'll forgive the analogy, it'd be like me telling my son, "most women are not that distinctive. You could marry any of them. One's as good as another." Well, my goodness, if that's your attitude, I hope you don't get married! You have no business matching tunes to lyrics if you have that little respect for them.

On the other hand, it might be the tune really is that bland. There's plenty of boring tunes out there. In that case, why would you ask someone to sing it? We have way too many interesting tunes to waste time with boring ones. Or, it might be that the tune is like PARK STREET or DUNDEE, and it's been forced to carry too many lyrics over the years. My heart goes out to tunes that get abused like that. I want to rescue them, take them to a safe house. Or they might be both boring and abused, like DOWNS, used 5 times in the old *Trinity* and not worth singing even once!

- But aside from all this back-and-forth debate, I would emphasize: It **can** be done. It has **been** done. Looking at cultures who've done it—Anabaptists, Mormons, the American Singing School movement, the entire nation of Wales—did they say, "We're doing the best we can?" No, they made "the best they can" better.

Now of course, this is only one side of the story; there are arguments for using familiar tunes. But I'm not going to make them, because I'm not trying to give a balanced view of the subject. This debate has been going on for centuries, between common tunes and proper tunes, and obviously the common tunes side usually wins, which is why most hymn tunes have names: we expect to use them for more than one lyric.

But by and large, the argument is between beauty vs. utility, between richness vs. convenience. And on that debate, I've taken a side! And I think that the side of convenience and utility does not need anyone to argue for them. That point of view is well defended by inertia. People will go on using familiar tunes for unfamiliar words, even if no one defends it. Because it's easy.

So, okay. I could go on. And I have. But not now. Let's assume we're convinced. We have a text to sing and we want to respect it with its own music.

So I'm going to show you how I do this. In some detail. Not because I expect most of you will ever do this, though I hope some of you do. But I'd like to show some of the care and respect that goes into the songs we sing.

Well, first of all, I'd point out that it doesn't always work this way around. I don't always start with the words. Sometimes I find a tune that's so lovely, that enriches my life so much, that I want to sing it. And I want to share it with other people. So I look for words that fit it. And if I can't find any, I might hire somebody to make some. Right now I have several people I can call on

to make poems, but I'm always looking for more. Most poets are busy doing other things, like earning a living, because I can't afford to pay them much. Sometimes I get some really lovely words. Everything in the book by my brother Donald, for instance, and all of Valerie's Psalms, were commissioned for tunes that I had. And I have a lot more tunes that need lyrics. And I know where to find even more.

But most often, I start with the words.

So let's pick a Psalm out of the hat, and say I want to sing Psalm 52. I look in my inventory, and I see 5 settings.

[Demo 1: Show and play all five]

And they're fine, but let's say none of them quite fit my needs, for one reason or another. So what do I do?

Well, first I go to my Metrical Psalter Database.

[Demo 2: open MS WORD file]

Here I've typed the first stanza of all the metrical Psalms I can find. Or almost all; I still have 5 or 6 collections I haven't entered. But Psalm 52 is finished, because I finished it up just for this lecture. :-) They are roughly in historical order, so the oldest are first.

Psalm 52 doesn't have as many as some: only has 31. Most of the Psalms have more than 40. Notice that Barlow has two: that's because he completed Isaac Watts' Psalter, and Watts skipped this Psalm.

Notice I don't have the *Scottish Psalter* in here, because the poetry is uniformly terrible. Same with the *Irish Psalter*, and the *Bay Psalm Book*. I think it makes a mockery of Scripture. The original Psalms are poetry of the highest order. Even non-Christian poets recognize that. But a lot of **metrical** Psalms are some of the worst poetry ever made. So I don't use them.

And there's some in my database I'll never use, like the 1887 Psalter, and JRB, which is J. Rossie Brown's *Murrayfield Psalter*. But some of them I can use, though I might need to rewrite some of the phrases.

So which one should I find a tune for? I've highlighted some that I know I want to use some day; I've already evaluated the poetry and it's above average.

And you can see which ones I've already matched and typeset, and which ones have been recorded, by the word DONE and whether it's underlined.

A lot of times I'll go through and look at the lyrics more closely to see if any of them suit what I'm looking for particularly well. Do I want a longer, sermonized Psalm for this application, for instance, or a shorter summarized Psalm; which emotions do I want to bring out, and so forth. And I'll also read the Psalm in a couple prose translations first.

[read if time]

But some of these meters I don't want to use for this class because they have too many tunes to choose from. Common Meter, for instance, 8.6.8.6., I have several hundred tunes, great tunes, in Common Meter and Common Meter Double, but it would take all our time just to listen to half of them.

And by the way, to anyone listening: if you're going to make a metrical Psalm, and I hope some of you do, please don't use Common Meter! We don't need any. Every single Psalm already has at least 6 and probably more than ten in that meter. So, at least look at them all and decide they're all bad and you can do better. But better idea: be creative! Pick a meter that has the feel of the Psalm.

So, let's choose Ward's setting, in 10.10.11.11., 4 stanzas. Even though I know Rowland Ward's poems don't rhyme, which is a strike against them, this one was apparently good enough in other ways that I highlighted it to use.

So I go to the Psalm 52 folder, and the subfolder called "originals". Again, this folder happens to be full, but most of them aren't, because this is an ongoing project. And I open Ward's file, so I can look at it while I'm listening to the tunes.

[Demo 3]

Then the fun part: picking a tune. So what am I listening for? What kind of tune? What mood? Well, what's the mood of the Psalm? What did you feel when we read it? Well, it's not particularly happy, though it's certainly not sad. It's definitely confident, from beginning to end. Most of it I'd call "stern", wouldn't you? A little "angry" wouldn't be out of place. There's some mocking in vv.6&7. It's for sure "sober", not light-hearted. And I think there's a bit of brag, actually. After all, it starts out scoffing at the wicked for bragging in evil, and ends up with the righteous man bragging in God. So yeah: stern, brag, a little angry.

And what about this poetic setting, what feeling does that have? This is an unusual meter, in that it has a lot of triplets. Technically they are called dactyls—DA-duh-duh, DA-duh-duh—which have a lot of light beats and give the poem a light-footed feel. Perhaps slightly light-hearted. But like I say, it's not a light-hearted Psalm, so that lightness will have to be sarcastic, not carefree. Now, he has it matched to HANOVER, which is a royal and majestic tune, not at all suitable, as I find that Psalm poets don't have a good sense of what tunes will work.

So it's just a matter of opening files and listening to them, and singing the words with them, and seeing how they match.

Turns out, I haven't found a lot of tunes in this meter. The good ones are rather precious.

AUSTRIA (Beethoven) This one is not very interesting: a bit aimless, a bit tedious. It's mostly in here on the strength of the composer's reputation, but I'm not sure I'll ever use it. Great composers are seldom write good hymn tunes. I know of maybe ten such tunes.

HANOVER This was Ward's choice, as I mentioned. Considerably too majestic for Psalm 52. I might never use it, since it has some weak connections with hymn lyrics, and the first 5 notes are the same as LYONS (O Worship the King). I only have it in here because I might someday find a Metrical Psalm that it fits so perfect it blows everything else away.

LAUDATE DOMINUM (Gauntlett) Those suspensions are good. Oh, that's a good suspension! Play it again. Oh, look how those high notes emphasize important words. line 2 st.2 goes down as the words go down. This is a strong contender. I'll keep this one open.

LAUDATE DOMINUM (Parry) A much superior tune, but here again, it's too majestic. Plus, it already has some connections but they're not strong, which is why I have it in here. Frankly, I'm hoping to get good lyrics for Psalm 149 matched to this tune, so I'm not going to use it.

MONTGOMERY Yeah, that's too triumphant, not angry enough. Look at that rising triad in m.6. "Triumphant, dude." A lot of these are going to be pretty triumphant because this meter has been associated for a long time with Psalm 149, as well as 104.

OLD 104th These are already in use, actually. Shouldn't be in here.

PADERBORN Well, that has some interesting spots. It's much too cheerful for Psalm 52, but it would be a lot of fun to sing. Unfortunately, I'm not sure it could ever really catch on since the first 5 notes are identical to two much more popular tunes, LYONS (Oh, Worship the King) and HANOVER.

RIPON I'm still working on the harmony.

SHERSTON Huh! Intense! Changes key in there. That's full of surprises! Well, it's well-made. The melody wouldn't be too hard, though the part singers would give me some dirty looks. But it has tension and a little anger, doesn't it? With all those twisted chord changes. And those huge jumps in m.13. We'll keep this open.

SPETISBURY Okay, that's creative. It's a pretty cohesive tune, but it's not super memorable on first listen. It sits pretty high, too, in lines 1 and 3, and that's appropriate for the aggressiveness. Hm. I think in the end it's a little too comfortable for this Psalm. But I could be persuaded. We'll keep it open.

ST. IGNATIUS That's a little too pretty, with those running scale melismas. It would suit st.4 pretty well. But no.

ST. MERRYNN Hm! That builds to a climax! Look at that bass scale, and those melody jump-ups. Hm, that's a little too Victorian even for me. Wow, the third line builds just like the first, but with even stronger harmony! Wow, so there's the real climax! Well, that was a journey! Pretty intense. Hm. It's a very strong contender. My only concern is that it doesn't emphasize any important syllables. It's like it matches this Psalm, but not this poem. But we'll keep it open.

STANLEY BEACH Oh, I love it. Oh, that's perfect. Let me look at the other stanzas. Okay, lightning strike! This is obviously the one. It builds steadily to the middle through a series of smaller build-ups. And even after the highest notes, which are usually the climax of any hymn tune, it continues to build. So it has plenty of tension, and can carry the anger well, but also the assurance of st.4. But it's not exotic; it has almost a homespun sound to it, like a tune you just came up with on the spot. Easy to like. And I love that little dip in m.9: Sounds a little like a cry, doesn't it?

Well, that will almost certainly win the marbles, and I would be content to stop there, but, we only have two more, so let's just be complete.

THOUGH TROUBLES ASSAIL That's too simple for my taste. Most of the *Zion's Harp* tunes are a little too predictable for me.

VESTAL Well, that's interesting! On first blush the harmony seems more interesting than the melody! I actually think that would work, but, it's not better than STANLEY BEACH.

So, to skip to the end of the story, STANLEY BEACH was so obviously right I didn't even check the others again. LAUDATE DOMINUM (Gauntlett) would have worked fine if I hadn't yet collected STANLEY BEACH, and there might be a better tune out there that I haven't found yet. But that's the nature of this business.

And another secret I'll let out: the reason I wasn't satisfied with the other settings I had, and the reason I didn't talk about Psalm 52 in the *Cantus* yesterday, is because I was thinking of this church, Christ Church Twin Cities, to give a Psalm setting as a gift. Since I didn't know much about the church I needed to make sure it wasn't too complicated, while of course still interesting and memorable. So that would have been BRYN CALFARIA, but I also know that since you put on this conference you are open to learning new music, so BRYN CALFARIA was out.

So here's the whole song, and let's learn it in the time we have left.