

Metrical Psalmody

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Geneva and France

Calvin and those who adhered strictly to his system of thought held that nothing that was not authorized in Scripture was to be continued in Reformed practice. Our chapel organ would have been about as popular as the Pope in Geneva—the city’s last organ was melted down for tin. Calvin and most of his followers found the folk music of the day frivolous and the polyphony of the Roman church too elaborate and fanciful—a song in harmony was considered a “playe tune” in *The Genevan Service Book of 1556*. Music’s emotional power was to be feared. The Psalms, he held, were the only appropriate material to sing in the church, and even this was to be done within strict boundaries.

Around the same time that Calvin’s reformation was progressing in Geneva, Clement Marot was paraphrasing the psalms into French metrical verse (basically making Hebrew poetry match the meter and rhyming tendencies of modern poetry). Around 1542, Marot ended up in Geneva with Calvin after he was forced to flee France because he was charged with heresy after the publication of his work. Soon thereafter he died. Calvin had Theodore Beza, who arrived in Geneva in 1547, given the duty of completing the Psalter.¹ The completed French Psalter was published in 1562. It contained 125 tunes. It is known for its wide variety of poetic meter. This French Psalter would influence numerous later publications.

England and America

The first published English metrical Psalms appeared around 1543 in a volume often thought to be of Lutheran origin. The music was all in unison and used melodies from Lutheran chorales and Gregorian chant. Henry VIII banned the volume three years later. Its influence was not significant.

In 1562 a more important collection of English metrical Psalms appeared. Thomas Sternhold played a large role in the composition of these metrical Psalms. He hoped they would provide an alternative to the vulgar songs in vogue at the king’s court. Some believe the Psalms from this 1562 collection (most attributed to Sternhold and John Hopkins) were never intended for the divine service, but found their way into it because of their popularity with the people. This would not be the first or last time such a thing has happened in church history.

The 1562 Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter and those that followed also found their way to the colonies (along with the French Psalter and other translations). In 1640, the colonies saw their first homespun Psalter produced. It was called the Bay Psalm Book. It was much more precise in its relation to the Hebrew than its predecessors had been. Many welcomed a more literal rendition of the original—mainly those who found the others used in Europe too free in translation and fanciful in prose. Not unlike the NASB, however, while a fine translation and rendering of the original, many found the Bay Psalm Book awkward when used in worship. For example, the 23rd Psalm appeared as follows:

The Lord to mee a shepherd is,
want therefore shall not I
Hee in the folds of tender-grasse,
doth cause me down to lie:
To waters calme me gently leads
Restore my soule doth hee:
he doth in paths of righteousness:
for his names sake leads me...²

There were no tunes included in the Bay Psalm Book, only a list of tunes from other books that may prove useful.

¹ Beza would be Calvin’s successor and would further develop Calvin’s theology, especially with regard to double predestination.

² *Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship*, 64

In 1696 in London *A New Version of the Psalms of David, fitted to the tunes used in Churches*, by Nahum Tate and Dr. Nicholas Brady appeared. The Sternhold and Hopkins work became the “Old Version.” The New Version was clearly less literal and more poetically adept than its predecessors. This riled some conservative feathers. Remember, this was not a time when artistic freedom and creativity was being fostered in Calvinist England. The New Version never really rivaled the Old in popularity. The New Version was really more of a step toward the flowering of English hymnody than an expression of what would be considered the typical Metrical Psalmody of the day.

The Decline of Metrical Psalmody in England and America

The eighteenth century lacked the seventeenth’s appreciation for the metrical Psalm. The stranglehold that Metrical Psalmody had on English church music in the 1600’s stifled the development of other musical styles and forms. The Psalms are a gift from God and a devotional jewel to be cherished by the church for all eternity, but they are by no means the be and end all of Christian devotional aspirations. The other day, Professor Tiefel told us that the Gloria Patri was placed at the end of the Psalms as a way of inserting Christ (the New Testament) into them (the Old Testament). When the Reformed churches, especially of England, restricted themselves to the Psalms for the musical and metrical expression of their faith in worship, they were restricting themselves to a “hymnal” that, while Christocentric as all of Scripture, was nevertheless neither frequent nor explicit in its mention of His person. In addition to that, the English (unlike some other Reformed communities) had also restricted themselves to a limited number of meters and tunes which chained those seeking to create new music for the church. “Psalm singing became a traditional and lifeless practice.”³

With time the Psalms began to be less strictly translated. Strict paraphrase gave way to a pretty close paraphrase, which gave way to a very loose paraphrase, which eventually ended in a hymn verse. With time men could more and more express themselves devotionally in song apart from the verses of the Psalms. Interestingly, the parish clerks who led the singing of the Psalms unwittingly played a role in this process. Since organs were scarce and many of the faithful were illiterate (at least musically), these men used to set the pitch and then sing verses, which the congregation would repeat. At times, when particular verses seemed unfit for the occasion or perhaps even unnecessary in their personal opinion, the clerk had the freedom to omit them. This gradually led to a less strict adherence to the literal, word for word reproduction of the Psalter and set precedent for the relaxing of the standards mentioned above. The Restoration of 1660 also encouraged this trend, as liturgical music was reintroduced and promoted. The verse anthem, with alternating solo and chorus parts was also introduced around this time.

One of the first and most influential men to take advantage of this move toward hymnody was Isaac Watts (1674-1748). Watts was frustrated by the Psalmody of his day and the strict boundaries musicians were forced to work within. His father challenged to him to produce something better if he thought everything else was so bad and Isaac set out to do just that. His “A Short Essay toward the Improvement of Psalmody” outline what he thought a hymn should be. It should be our word to God more than God’s word to us. It should be evangelical in content but free from a strict re-presentation of passages of Scripture. There should be hymns for all sorts of different occasions and experiences which the church and individual Christian may encounter.

Hymnody soon prevailed. Yes, there were the stalwarts in the Established and Dissenting church unwilling to trade David’s psalms for Watt’s “flights of fancy.” They claimed these new hymn writers were secularizing the church’s music and introducing an elaborateness that did not belong in it, but they soon were drowned out by the howl of approval from congregations hungry for this new spiritual fare. There would be room in the church for both musical styles and it would be all the better for having them both.

³ *History of Church Music* by David Appleby, 108