

## The Music Herald

*“Teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”*

*Colossians 3:16*

### Early American Psalmody, Part 2: “Guiding a Sacred Text Through Time”

Last month, we looked at the psalm tune style that dominated the psalmody of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century America, the common-tune style. And we saw this style grow in complexity under the hand of new composers in the early eighteenth century. We turn now to the style that grew out of this movement toward increased complexity, the dactylic style. This is the second of five styles total in this study, as we can see in the blue box on the right which will grow to include all five by the time we finish.

The dactylic style is named for its chief distinguishing feature from the common-tune style: the dactyl. The dactyl is a rhythmic feature in which the first note of three has twice as much value as each of the next two notes. In other areas, the dactylic style is the same as the common-tune style: (1) it is still in duple meter, and (2) it still has a through-composed melodic structure (the melody never repeating a whole phrase). But its one significant difference is that its notes are no longer all of equal value; instead it changes the rhythmic motion by adding the presence of dactyls. Small though it may seem, this is a pivotal difference.

It is significant that the fundamental change from the first style to the next occurs in the area of rhythmic motion. We will find this to be the case through all the styles of psalm tune that we have yet to cover, and for good reason. Psalmody and hymnody are unique among music types. For them, the central object of the music is, simply and only, the successful communication of the text. And the way this is done is by “guiding [the text] through time,” as articulated by Richard Crawford. Thus, the way the music moves through time is the single most significant factor in psalmody and determines its overarching style categories.

In the case of the dactylic style, the introduction of dactyls in the early 1700s reflects a significant change in the treatment of text. It reveals the fact that composers were now writing tunes with specific texts in mind. Though some common tunes, interchangeable with any text of the same meter, were still being written, the composers of the early 1700s were finding new power and precision in crafting tunes specifically for certain texts, bringing out and highlighting the words of those texts.

In a dactylic style tune, not every note receives the same emphasis, and a pattern of emphasis and non-emphasis can be created that mimics the natural rise and fall of speech. By changing how frequently the dactyls occur and where they occur, tunes can be crafted to match specific texts. Thus while dactylic style tunes are more limited than common-tune style tunes in the number of texts they can convey well, they are capable of delivering the texts they do carry with more clarity and force than the equal note values of the common-tune style. This is the beauty and power that composers of the early 1700s were exploring and making use of.

Of course, such a change was not readily accepted by all. One of the earliest dactylic tunes, “Aylesbury,”

#### Styles of Early American Psalm Tunes

1. Common-Tune Style
2. Dactylic Style

published in 1718, was struck up at a church service in Canton, Massachusetts, on February 11, 1770. It is recorded that, “On the striking up of Ailesbury [sic] . . . old William Wheeler got up and went out of meeting.”

Perhaps William Wheeler objected to the brisker tempo suggested by the new style. Or perhaps he feared a complete loss of the old common-tune style. These were real fears in that day, and indeed, similar questions are still worthy of being asked and answered whenever any musical style is offered today. Choosing to sing one style means necessarily choosing not to sing another style. “Old William Wheeler’s” concerns should not be flippantly shrugged off, but should be honestly handled in every age and concerning every piece of music. Change should not be resisted for tradition’s sake only, but every change should be examined for its merit and soundness.

Dactylic tunes eventually took firm hold in New England. They became a very commonly used and effective tool for conveying texts clearly and precisely. Some of the most beloved Psalm tunes of that day, and still today, are in this style. We give three samples over the next few pages.

This style of composition lasted throughout most of the 1700s. It began in the early part of the century among English composers, and by the latter part of the century, when American composers sprang up, dactyls had taken firm hold in psalmody, and they formed the style for many American compositions.

Music historian and scholar David Warren Steel says that this “rediscovery [of] an intimate relationship between words and music” is “one of the greatest accomplishments of the early American composers.” Of course, in the dactylic style, this “rediscovery” was still in its beginning stages, and much more intimate ways to pair music with text would be developed over the next several years, such as word painting, set pieces, and anthems. But the dactylic style was an important step in that direction, and its simple beauty and utility are still unsurpassed even by the more elaborate features of later styles, and many of its tunes are still the best vehicle for conveying their texts.

This brings us up to the next style that we will examine next month, yet a further step in that same direction. This further step almost coincided in time with the development of the dactylic style and employed the same technique of lengthening some notes and shortening others, but in a different way. We will look at this next style next month.

For now, we close. These dactylic tunes are an important part of our psalmody heritage. They made a breakthrough in text handling that has shaped the ensuing history of psalmody and hymnody. For they pioneered a way to “guide sacred texts through time” with new power and clarity that has given us a rich store of hymn tunes and texts that are uniquely suited for each other.

We have given over these three pages two early samples of the dactylic style, “Aylesbury” (1718) and “Wells” (1724), and one late sample, “Windham” (1785). In all three of these, as in last month’s tunes, the melody is in the tenor voice, in the third line. The Psalm tunes of this era were still mostly sung a cappella, and both the top line (the treble) and also the tenor were sung by both men and women singing an octave apart from each other. Also, these tunes were to be sung in a key comfortable for all parts, not necessarily in the keys in which they are written. The time signatures of these songs, like those of last month’s songs, give a clue as to their proper tempo; these in particular should be sung at a metronome setting of 60, 60 for every quarter note in “Wells” and “Windham” and 60 for every half note in “Aylesbury.”

### Aylesbury

Nothing is known of the composer of “Aylesbury,” the tune that caused such a stir in Canton, Massachusetts. The tune first appeared in 1718 in a tunebook called *A Book of Psalmody* published by John Chetham in London, England. It soon became one of the most popular short meter Psalm tunes in existence. It was often paired with this beautiful rendering of Psalm 23 by Isaac Watts.

It is a profoundly simple tune, with but one basic melodic contour repeated in each phrase and one rhythmic pattern, that of dactyls (of which it contains five). Though still considered a through-composed piece, it comes very close to repeating its first melodic phrase in its last melodic phrase, with only the beginning note being different. It has a simple beauty that conveys very well such a text as Psalm 23.

#### AYLESBURY S.M.

A Minor Isaac Watts, Psalm 23.

English, 1718.

1. The Lord my shep-herd is, I shall be well sup-plied Since he is mine and I am his, What can I want be-sides?  
 2. He leads me to the place Where heav'n-ly pas-ture grows, Where liv-ing wat-ers gent-ly pass, And full sal-va-tion flows.

3. If e'er I go a-stray, He doth my soul re-claim, And guides me in his own right way, For his most ho-ly name.  
 4. While he af-fords his aid, I can-not yield to fear; Though I should walk through death's dark shade, My shep-herd's with me there.

5. In spite of all my foes Thou dost my ta-ble spread; My cup with bless-ings o-ver-flows, And joy ex-alt my head.  
 6. The boun-ties of thy love Shall crown my foll'-wing days: Nor from thy house will I re-move, Nor cease to speak thy praise.

### Wells

“Wells” is the prototype of dactylic style tunes. What “Old Hundred” is to the common-tune style, “Wells” is to the dactylic style. From its first publication in 1722 until 1810, “Wells” was printed one hundred sixty times in America, second only to “Old Hundred” itself in number of printings during this era.

The tune first appeared in a tunebook published in England called *The Spiritual-Man's Companion*. It was written by the tunebook compiler, Israel Holdroyd, a composer about whom very little is known, except that he was a composer of psalmody in Halifax, West Yorkshire, England. Whatever the details of his life, he has left his mark on the world and given it a priceless treasure in this single tune. Its very endurance testifies to its quality. It has remained in continuous print ever since its first publication and still today continues to be found in some hymnals and sung in places throughout the English-speaking world. Richard Crawford notes its remarkable spread across geographic and time boundaries by saying, “WELLS was a favorite at all times and in all places.”

The text here given is the one with which “Wells” was most frequently paired. Like tunes in the common-tune style, tunes in the dactylic style were frequently sung with multiple texts, but their number of possibilities was more limited due to the presence of the dactyls and the resulting emphasis of certain syllables over others. This text is a hymn by Isaac Watts drawn from Ecclesiastes chapter 9, exhorting man to use carefully the brief season of life that he has been given, before he lies forgotten in the grave.

“Wells” provides a classic sample of the dactylic style. Exactly two dactyls occur in each phrase and in a regular pattern. A dactyl opens the tune, then comes a long note, then comes another dactyl, and then the phrase closes with another long note. The tune follows this exact pattern in each of its four phrases. This is an excellent way to achieve unity in a through-composed piece. With no repetition of whole melodic phrases, some kind of repeated pattern is necessary in order to achieve unity. The repeated pattern of dactyls does this beautifully.

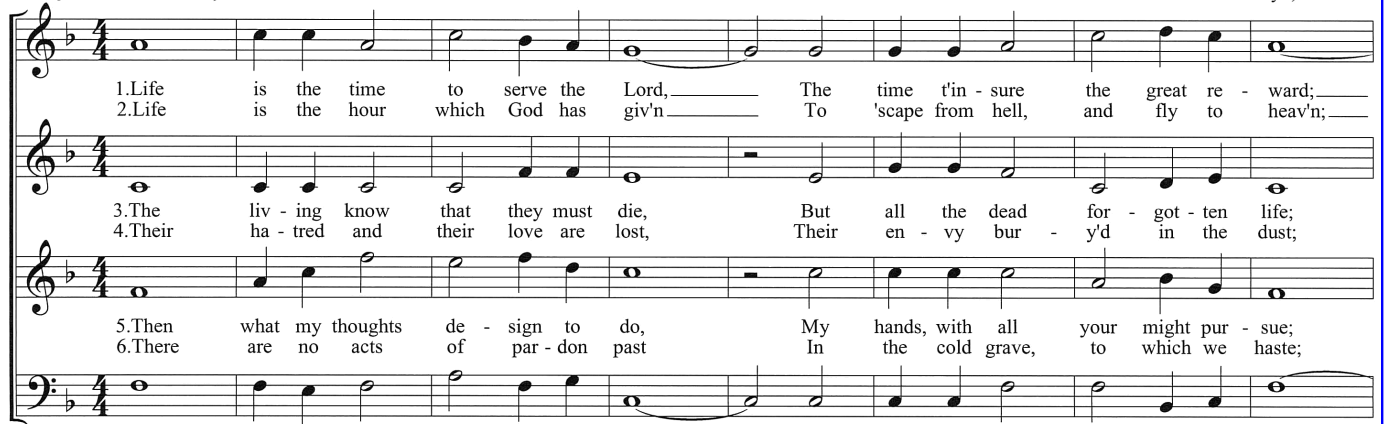
Holdroyd further united his piece by repeated small portions of melodic phrases. Notice that the last four notes of the first phrase are exactly the same as the last four notes of the third phrase. The same relationship is shared by the last four notes of the second phrase and those of the fourth phrase. Providing even more unity, these two sets of shared notes are exactly the same melodically as one another, except that they are a fifth apart from each other. Another beautiful touch of unity, yet with sufficient variety, is that the first four notes of the third phrase follow the very same pattern as those of the fourth phrase, only a step higher. “Wells” is a masterpiece in its beautiful blend of unity and variety.

A “favorite at all times and in all places,” “Wells” is a particularly choice tune of the dactylic style. It conveys its text in a clear, powerful way by “guiding it skillfully through time.”

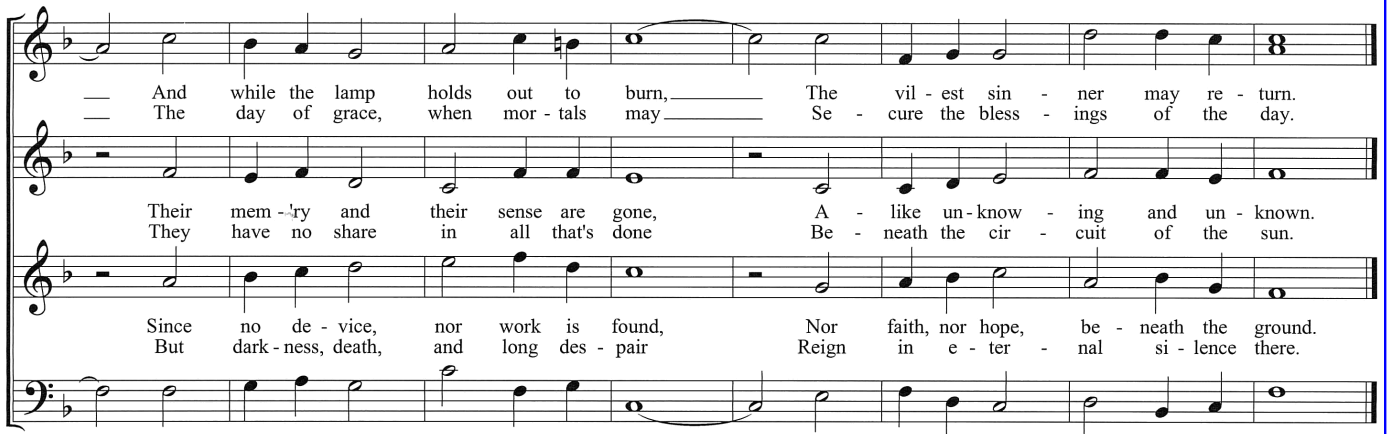
F Major Isaac Watts, Hymns I, No. 88.

## WELLS L.M.

Israel Holdroyd, ca. 1724.



1. Life is the time to serve the Lord, The time t'in - sure the great re - ward;  
 2. Life is the hour which God has giv'n To 'scape from hell, and fly to heav'n;  
 3. The liv - ing know that they must die, But all the dead for - got - ten life;  
 4. Their ha - tred and their love are lost, Their en - vy bur - y'd in the dust;  
 5. Then what my thoughts de - sign to do, My hands, with all your might pur - sue;  
 6. There are no acts of par - don past In the cold grave, to which we haste;



— And while the lamp holds out to burn, The vil - est sin - ner may re - turn.  
 — The day of grace, when mor - tals may Se - cure the bless - ings of the day.  
 Their mem - ry and their sense are gone, A - like un - know - ing and un - known.  
 They have no share in all that's done Be - neath the cir - cuit of the sun.  
 Since no de - vice, nor work is found, Nor faith, nor hope, be - neath the ground.  
 But dark - ness, death, and long des - pair Reign in e - ter - nal si - lence there.

## Windham

“Windham” is a late-1700s, American imitation of the English dactylic style. Indeed, its rhythm seems to have been borrowed directly from that of “Wells.” Its first three phrases are rhythmically identical to those of “Wells.” In the last phrase, “Windham” begins with a dactyl and then continues the quarter notes over two more syllables, departing from the pattern but driving even more forcefully to the end.

The composer of “Windham,” Daniel Read, was born in November of 1757 and grew up on a farm in Massachusetts. By the age of sixteen, he was already composing music, self-taught. “Windham,” one of his masterpieces, was one of his earliest tunes. It appears in a 1785 manuscript of Read’s, which puts him at either seventeen or eighteen at the time of its composing, a remarkably young age for producing such a tune as it turned out to be. When “Windham” was published in 1785, it was quickly taken up by other publications and became one of the most popular of all American-composed tunes.

What is most remarkable of all is the praise it earned from Lowell Mason in the 1840s. Mason and his colleagues were severe critics of the compositions of amateur Americans, advocating strongly the refined European style of composition that had developed by the early 1800s. Mason spared no criticism in condemning what he considered extremely inferior productions from amateur American musicians. But in “Windham,” even he could see unusual quality and worth. When it was at one time suggested that perhaps Read did not write it but instead Martin Luther, it was Mason who defended Read’s authorship and, in doing so, he praised his ability with words that are truly remarkable coming from him:

“The tune *Windham*, is an original composition of the late Daniel Read of New Haven, Conn., and was first published in one of his books 40 or 50 years ago. I have taken particular pains to ascertain the facts in this matter, . . . and I am entirely satisfied that to our own countryman belongs the credit of this popular tune. . . . And it is a fine tune we may well be proud of; it has been sung for half a century, and it will probably continue to be sung longer than any other piece of music that has ever yet been composed on this side the Atlantic.”

It must be said that Mason did not approve of the harmonization of “Windham” that is given here. In Mason’s “corrected” version of the tune, the harmonic parts are significantly altered. But the melody (given here in the

tenor voice) is mostly left untouched as Daniel Read wrote it, a testimony to Mason's sincere admiration for the tune. We give the original harmonization here as Read composed it, with all of its stark and bold character that Mason so opposed.

The text given here is the text for which it was written and with which it was almost always found. As was so often the case in this era of American psalmody, the text is by Isaac Watts. The solemn forcefulness of the dactylic style conveys the sobering text with unmistakable clarity.

## WINDHAM L.M.

F Minor Isaac Watts, Hymns II, No. 158.

Daniel Read, ca. 1785.

1. Broad is the road that leads to death, And thou-sands walk to - geth - er there,

2. "De - ny thy - self, and take thy cross," Is the Re - deem - er's great com - mand!

3. The fear - ful soul, who tires and faints, And walks the ways of God no more,

4. Lord, let not all my hopes be vain; Cre - ate my heart en - tire - ly new;

— But wis - dom shows a nar - row path, — With here and there a — trav - el - er.

Na - ture must count her gold but dross, If she would gain this heav'n - ly land.

Is but es - teem'd al - most a saint, And makes his own de - struc - tion sure.

— This Hyp - o - crites could ne'er at - tain, — And false A - pos - tates nev - er knew.

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