

The Music Herald

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

Colossians 3:16

Early American Psalmody, Part 3: “The Commonest Motion in English Verse”

Last month, we looked at the second style of early American psalmody, the dactylic style, which sought to convey texts more clearly by using patterns of dactyls. This month, we turn to the third style, the triple time style, which was developed around the same time and for the same reason as the dactylic style. Both of these styles were seeking to craft music that would match the natural rise and fall of speech and thus convey texts with clarity and force. While the dactylic style did this with dactyls, the triple time style, as its name expresses, did this by making use of triple time and its inherent odd number of beats in each measure. As we shall see, this turned out to be ideal for conveying the texts of early American psalmody and dominated the tunes of American psalmody throughout the 18th century.

The triple time style developed directly because of the accent pattern that was predominant in the texts of the 1700s. In the poetic hymn texts of the day, the iambic accent pattern was by far the most common accent pattern in use, and indeed it still is today. This pattern begins with an unaccented syllable, follows that with an accented one, and continues this alternating pattern to the end. This well-known text by Watts is a good example:

When I survey the wondrous cross
 On which the Prince of Glory died,
 My richest gain I count but loss,
 And pour contempt on all my pride.

Notice that the first syllable of each line is unaccented () and the second is accented (/). These two syllables together make up the first metrical foot of the poem, and this metrical foot is called an iamb (/). Notice that the rest of the poem is simply a series of consecutive iambs, and the pattern is never broken. Poetry written in this pattern is called iambic poetry.

The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* says that the iamb (/) is “overwhelmingly the commonest type [of motion] in all English verse.” And this is in turn due to the fact that, as Richard Crawford says, the iamb is “the pattern that most easily fits the accents of English words.” Thus, the iambic pattern has proven to be the ideal accent pattern for the English language and constitutes the main body of Psalm and hymn texts.

With such a stock of iambic texts, the composers of the early 1700s sought a musical style that could match and convey well this “commonest motion in English verse,” and thus it was that the triple time style arose. The triple time style took one further step from the common-tune style than the dactylic style did. Of the four elements that made up the common tune style, the dactylic shared two and departed from two — it remained in (1) duple time and retained (2) a through-composed melodic structure, but it no longer had (3) notes of equal value or (4) lack of written embellishment. Now the triple time style

Styles of Early American Psalm Tunes

1. Common-Tune Style
2. Dactylic Style
3. Triple Time Style

departed one step further, leaving duple time for triple.

In triple time music, measures are divided into three beats. This presented the composers with a beautiful opportunity for achieving their goal, that of bringing out the accent pattern of iambic poetry. The first unaccented syllable could be placed on the third beat of the measure as a pickup note, and then the accented syllable could land on the first beat of the first complete measure and continue to be held through the second beat. And so the song could continue, always giving the third beat of the measure to the unaccented syllable and always giving the first and second beats to the accented syllable. This doubly emphasized the accented syllables, giving them not only the stronger beat of the measure but also double note value.

Example from “Bath”

This was not the first time that triple time music was ever used in psalmody. Triple time had been used almost a hundred years earlier, but not in this way. This was the first time that it was used to emphasize the accented syllables of iambic poetry.

Thus a golden match between text and music was struck. The triple time style achieved in a more consistent and perfect way what the dactylic style could only approximate. The dactylic style, as its very name implies, would be better suited to dactylic poetry, which consists of a pattern of one accented syllable followed by two unaccented ones. While the dactylic style worked for the iambic poetry with which it was set, it was not ideal. It was the triple time style that turned out to be ideally suited for iambic poetry. It matches the text accents perfectly and consistently, and it does so in a way that is also beautiful and pleasing to the ear. The “commonest motion in English verse” had found its vehicle and would put it to maximum use over the next century.

This triple time style appeared in the early 1700s, close on the heels of the dactylic style. One of the earliest triple time tunes to appear was “Bath,” in 1713. We will look at it on page 2. As one of the earliest tunes of the style, “Bath” presents the style in its purest, simplest form, with every accented syllable on a whole note and every unaccented syllable on a half note (except for the second to last measure which reverses the pattern for variety).

It is interesting to mark the changes over the century, as composers, first in England and then in America, experimented with varying the rigid structure of alternating half notes and whole notes. They first experimented with dividing the whole note occasionally into two slurred half notes, smoothing out the melodic contour. We will see a very early example of this in “Mear” on page 3. Then composers began dividing the half note into two slurred quarter notes. Later, even further decoration was

added, including dotted note patterns, which enlivened the rhythmic motion and decorated the melody.

By the 1740s, triple time seems to have been mastered in England, and by the time of William Billings in the late 1700s, it was at its height in America as well. Billings' triple time piece "Brookfield" is a classic and beautiful specimen of the style at the height of its maturity. The piece is beautifully ornamented but not overdone. And it uses an ideal blend of whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, and dotted note patterns that make it, in the words of Richard Crawford, "an especially supple, imaginative use of triple time." We will look at it on page 4.

With the mastery of triple time, English composers turned their attention back to duple time in the mid-1700s and pioneered the next style that would come to America, which we will consider next month.

For now, we close with a brief word about the triple time tunes. Their sublime beauty and the precision with which they convey their texts have earned them a place among the most ancient and beloved Psalm tunes, the "old slow Church Music." In writings of the time, the

triple time tunes are often mentioned in the same breath as the "old slow Church Music." One tunebook compiler, of the Lowell Mason reform leanings, gave praise to three triple time tunes along with "Old Hundred" and set them apart from "light and airy tunes" by saying:

"By long experience . . . I find that there is as many different tastes for Music, as other things. Some will be pleased with Old Hundred, Bath, Plymouth, Wantage, &c. Others would prefer light and airy tunes."

Daniel Read, himself an American composer of psalm tunes who later joined the reform movement, also praised these tunes along with "Old Hundred," saying:

"I have no doubt that some of the old tunes (as Old Hundred, Mear &c) will live when hundreds of modern pieces will be buried in oblivion."

Indeed they do and should. These are some of the finest pieces of psalmody. They convey their texts, the "commonest motion in English verse," beautifully and clearly and should be sung wherever English hymns are sung.

Bath

One of the earliest triple time tunes, "Bath" is a profoundly simple tune. Its melodic range spans no more than a minor sixth, and its melodic motion is predominantly stepwise. Yet it possesses a beauty that has made it a favorite ever since its first appearance in 1713. An anonymous tune, it was immediately taken up and reprinted by others, appearing in ninety separate collections in its first century of existence. It was approved by many churches for use in worship. It even survived the wave of musical reform in the early 1800s, when much American psalmody came under heavy criticism as being homespun and rugged. The reformers looked upon this tune with favor and deemed it beyond the reach of their criticism. And it continues to be sung today by those who still love the simple beauty of the old Psalm tunes.

The text is by Isaac Watts, and, coupled with the tune that conveys it so well, it causes those who sing it to ponder the work of Jesus Christ on the cross in ways that perhaps they never have before.

BATH L.M.

A Major Isaac Watts, Hymns III, No. 10.

English, 1713.

1. Na - ture with o - pen vol - ume stands, To spread her ma - ker's praise a - broad; And
 2. But in the grace which res - cu'd man, His bright - est form of glo - ry shines: Here,

3. Here his whole name ap - pears com - plete; Nor wit can guess, nor rea - son prove, Which
 4. Here I be - hold his in - most heart, Where grace and ven - geance strange - ly join; Pier -

5. Oh! the sweet won - ders of that cross, Where God, the Sav - iour, lov'd and dy'd! Her
 6. I would for ev - er speak his name In sounds, to mor - tal ears un - known, With

ev - 'ry la - bor of his hand, Shows some - thing wor - thy of a God. lines.
 on the cross, 'tis fair - est, drawn In pre - cious blood, and crim - son

of the let - ters best is writ, The pow'r, the wis - dom, or the love.
 cing his Son - with sharp - est smart, To make the pur - chas'd plea - sures mine.

no - blest life my spir - it draws, From his dear wounds, and bleed - ing side.
 an - gels join to praise the Lamb, And wor - ship at his Fa - ther's throne.

Mear

This anonymous tune was first published in London around 1720, and it first reached the shores of America in 1737. By 1810, it had been reprinted one hundred twenty times, even more than “Bath.” It is this tune that received such high praise the reform-leaning Daniel Read when he said that it would “live when hundreds of modern pieces will be buried in oblivion.”

The opening melodic interval of a fifth in the tenor is a striking beginning. In the latter part of the second phrase, the beautifully interacting parts work through the circle of fifths to arrive at the harmonic climax on the second note of the third phrase. In the fourth phrase, the tune comes to a very satisfying conclusion, the melody beginning with that same melodic interval of a fifth that it opened with, tying the piece together, and then working its way downward to the tonic, once again supported by beautiful parts that create a fitting final cadence.

In this tune, we see one of the first steps of decoration in a triple time tune, the slurred half notes given to correspond with the sixth syllable of the first phrase of the text. This technique for breaking up the strict alternation between whole notes and half notes soon became widely used, as well as quarter notes and dotted note patterns, as we will see in the tune on the next page, “Brookfield.”

This text, Watts’ version of Psalm 96, is the text most commonly paired with “Mear” throughout its many printings. It is a very Christ-exalting text, declaring His Kingship over the earth and warning the nations of His righteous and just judgment. “Mear” conveys well both the joy of the nations that own Him as King and the dread of those that reject Him.

MEAR C.M.

G Major Isaac Watts, Psalm 96.

English, ca. 1720.

1. Sing to the Lord, ye distant lands, Ye tribes of ev'ry tongue, His
2. Say to the nations, Je - sus reigns, God's own al - might - y Son: His

3. Let heav'n pro - claim the joy - ful day, Joy thro' the earth of be seen; Let
4. Let an un - u - sual joy sur - prise The is - lands of the sea; Ye

5. Be - hold! he comes, he comes to bless, The na - tions as their God: To
6. But, when his voice shall raise the dead, And bid the world draw near, How

new dis - cov - er'd grace de - mands, A new grace and no - bler song.
pow'r the sink - ing world sus - tains, And grace and sur - rounds his throne.

cit - ies shine in bright ar - ray, And fields in cheer - ful green.
moun - tains sink, ye val - lies rise, Pre - pare the Lord his way.

show the world his right - 'ous - ness, And send his truth a - broad.
will the world - ty na - tions dread To see their Judge ap - pear!

Brookfield

The tune “Brookfield” is a singular tune in American psalmody. Its composer, William Billings, was one of the most popular composers of the day and his tunes were some of the most frequently republished by other compilers. But among his very widespread pieces, this one was the one that stood out and was the most widely published in his own day. This is no wonder, for it is a truly beautiful tune. One time through it, and singers are left profoundly struck by its power and beauty.

The tune is the epitome of the triple time style. It is an ideal blend between the consistent structure of the style and its varied decorations. It uses the structure to its fullest to match and convey iambs. And it blends this very tastefully with the decorations of the style, combining them all (half notes, quarter notes, and dotted note patterns) into one unified but beautifully varied piece.

One feature that is unusual for a triple time Psalm tune of this era is the fact that its second phrase is almost identical to its fourth phrase, making the tune almost have the structure ABCB. Such repetition of phrases was to become common in the next tune style, but it was not yet.

This tune, like “Bath” and “Mear,” also received praise from the musical reformers of the early 1800s. The reformer Thomas Hastings spared no criticism of Billings when he called his first publication “ridiculous in the extreme.” But of the composer’s masterpiece, Hastings was compelled to say, “His Brookfield has been deservedly popular.” So it has.

This is the text for which Billings wrote the tune “Brookfield.” The triple time tune, in the minor key, with beautiful but tasteful decorations, brings across stunningly the sobriety and glory of these last moments of Jesus’ earthly life.

BROOKFIELD L.M.

D Minor Isaac Watts, Hymns III, No. 1.

William Billings, 1770.

1. 'Twas on that dark, that dole - ful night, When pow'rs of earth and hell a - rose A -
 2. Be - fore the mourn - ful scene be - gan, He took the bread, and bless'd and brake: What

3. This is my bo - dy broke for sin, Re - ceive and eat the liv - ing food: Then
 4. For us his flesh with nails was torn, He bore the scourge, he felt the thorn: And

5. For us his vi - tal blood was spilt, To buy the par - don of our guilt; When
 6. Do this, he cry'd, 'till time shall end, In mem - 'ry of your dy - ing friend; Meet

gainst the Son of God's de - light, And friends be - tray'd him to his foes.
 love through all his ac - tions, ran! What won - d'rous words of grace he spake!

took the cup, and bless'd the wine; 'Tis the new cov - 'nant in my blood.
 jus - tice pour'd up - on his head. Its hea - vy ven - geance, in our stead.

for black crimes of big - gest size, He gave his soul a sac - ri - fice.
 at my ta - ble and re - cord The love of your de - part - ed Lord.

We have given over these last three pages one of the earliest samples of the triple time style, "Bath" (1713), then one slightly later but still early sample, "Mear" (1720), and finally one late sample, "Brookfield" (1770). In all three of these, as in all the tunes in this series of early American psalmody, the melody is in the tenor voice, in the third line. As we have noted before, these tunes were sung a cappella, and both the top line (the treble) and the tenor were sung by both men and women singing an octave apart from each other. And they 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, 3/2, tells us that they should be sung at a metronome setting of 60, 60 for every half note.

References:

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