

The Music Herald

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

Colossians 3:16

Early American Psalmody, Part 4: “Singing Lustily and With Good Courage”

We have come now through three styles of early American psalm tune: (1) the common-tune style, which is characterized by duple meter, a through-composed melodic structure, delivery of the text in notes of equal value, and lack of written embellishment; (2) the dactylic style, which conveys texts more forcefully by using patterns of dactyls (one long note followed by two shorter notes); and (3) the triple time style, which strikes the golden match between iambic texts and music, skillfully using the accented and unaccented beats of triple time. We now turn to the fourth of five styles total, the decorated duple style.

As we saw last month, by the 1740s, triple time had been practically mastered by the English composers of psalmody. Thus it was in this decade that a new style of duple tune developed.

The development of this style was led by the Wesley brothers, the founders of Methodism. By this time, congregational singing in the Anglican Church had severely declined. Music was concentrated in choirs, and the average person in the congregation sang very little and very unskillfully, being unable to read the printed music. A cold religion had gradually replaced the vibrancy of the Reformation era church.

Seeking to change this and to encourage true piety and reform congregational singing of hymns, John and Charles Wesley, in addition to their other reforms, borrowed tunes and tune styles from well-known instrumental pieces of their day, tunes that the mass of people would already recognize. The tune style primarily borrowed was a spirited style with lively rhythmic motion, such as would characterize a march. It is made up of duple meter with the motion moving in quarter notes and decorated here and there with eighth and sixteenth notes, hence called the decorated duple style. As John Wesley expressed in the preface to his tune book in 1761, he wanted the people to sing “lustily and with good courage.” These bright tunes certainly encouraged such singing.

The Wesleys and early Methodists are controversial, and the merit of their influence on Christianity over the long run has been much debated. They did much good, restoring warmth and Godliness to cold hearts and lives. They also brought in the seeds of dangerous tendencies, such as leaning on inward feelings rather than on the Scripture alone. In their reform of music, they likewise did much good while at the same time some of the errors also crept in unintentionally.

One of the most noticeable changes in their day is that of shifting from Psalm texts to hymn texts. There was already a movement toward the Psalm-based hymns of Isaac Watts and even his hymns not based on the Psalms. But the Wesleys and their contemporaries, such as John Newton, William Cowper, and Phillip Doddridge, produced a flood of new hymns, ushering in a new era. While many of their hymn texts are excellent and worthy and have added much to Christianity, there are some dangers that must be guarded against.

First of all, hymns can become so popular that

Styles of Early American Psalm Tunes

1. Common-Tune Style
2. Dactylic Style
3. Triple Time Style
4. Decorated Duple Style

they push out the singing of Psalms, consequently leaving out important subjects that need to be addressed in song. Sadly, this did happen to a degree in this period.

Second, hymn texts, because they don't have to be drawn directly from a Scripture text, can allow error to creep in. This also occurred to a degree. The Wesleys and many of their contemporaries were in some areas affected by a pietist, almost Gnostic mentality, believing that the outer, material world is corrupt and that only the inner, spiritual world and the life to come are desirable. Many of the hymn texts of the day reflect this error, expressing a longing to leave the body and be in Heaven. While this is indeed the destiny of the Christian and is spoken of often in Scripture, his “pilgrimage” in the world is not a thing to be detested, and the material world is not itself evil. It is created by God and, though groaning under the curse, is given to man to subdue and transform. Hymn texts must keep this entire truth in right perspective.

In spite of all, the Lord used the Wesleys to make a worthy contribution to Christianity and to psalmody. Religion was lifeless and congregational singing was truly in need of reform, and though there were errors, the tunes they used were largely appropriate to the task. Their borrowing of “secular” tunes is not to be equated with borrowing tunes from the world today. These particular “secular” tunes were, and still are, good, solid pieces that do not violate the purpose of music with manipulative melodies, harmonies, or rhythms. Though lively, they are not sensual. They encouraged a whole generation to sing and to sing with joy and cheerfulness, “lustily and with good courage.”

This decorated duple tune style was characterized by unique features that reflected its unique origins. For the first time in English psalmody, tunes began to use repetition of musical phrases, a technique that gives unity to a piece. This had long been a technique in instrumental music, but had been virtually unknown in psalmody. Now, just as in instrumental music, psalm tunes began to appear in patterns of repeated musical phrases, such as AABA, ABCA, and other patterns.

Another feature of the new style is its setting in time signatures that suggest a brisker tempo. In that day as we have seen, time signatures served as tempo markings in addition to defining the basic unit of time for the piece. So far in this study, all the duple tunes that we have looked at have been in the time signa-

John Wesley's Singing Instructions

1. Learn these *tunes* before you learn any other.
2. Sing them exactly as they are printed here.
3. Sing *All*.
4. Sing *lustily* and with a good courage.
5. Sing *modestly*.
6. Sing *in time*.
7. Above all sing *spiritually*.

ture 2/2 or 4/4. Now tunes began appearing in 2/4, which, according to the standards of the day, meant the tune should be sung twice as fast as one in 4/4.

This brisker tempo, as well as the fact that the tunes were almost universally written in major keys, reflects the fact that these tunes were being written for the relatively new body of hymn texts, texts written primarily on cheerful subjects, such as Heaven, no longer on the wide range of subjects found in the Psalms.

We have noted in the last two tune styles the linking of tunes closely to specific texts, and this trend continued in this fourth style, with cheerful tunes matching cheerful texts. Tunes in this style are often named for some word in the text, indicating that they were written with that specific text in mind.

The decorated duple tunes are also often in trochaic meter. Charles Wesley, author of over 6,000 hymns, wrote most of his hymns in trochaic meter, rather than the iambic meter used almost exclusively by Watts and earlier authors of metrical Psalms. It seems that he was writing to match the meter pattern of most instrumental tunes of his day. Thus the new body of texts and the new tune style needed and reflected each other.

The decorated duple tune style proved to be ideal for the purpose for which it was born. Encouraging congregations to sing “lustily and with good courage,” it was caught up quickly in England and then carried to America where American composers began composing with these

same features. No doubt some of their tunes were also borrowed from instrumental pieces while others were borrowed in style without being directly borrowed from existing melodies. We give an early sample of an English tune, “Amsterdam,” on page 3 and a later sample of an American tune, “Jordan,” on page 4.

Despite the fact that the new tunes were often written for hymn texts, as opposed to Psalms, nevertheless they still are categorized as 18th century English and American “psalmody.” They come at the latter end of the period of exclusive psalmody and just before the wholesale change to hymns. The songs in this transitional period is still, as a whole, classified as “psalmody.”

About two decades after the decorated duple tune style, the fifth tune style would be developed, as composers explored yet a different use of quarter notes in duple time. This fifth style is the last style of early American psalmody, and we will consider it next month.

While the early Methodists are controversial and their influence has been mixed, they did make a worthy contribution to Christianity and to psalmody and hymnody. Their setting of sacred texts to bright, uplifting tunes and teaching of congregations to sing heartily and joyfully as commanded in Scripture, “lustily and with good courage,” has done much good for Christendom. These bright tunes of the decorated duple style remain as fresh today as then. With some still found in hymnals, they remain an exhortation to sing “lustily and with good courage.”

We have given on page 3 one of the earliest samples of the decorated duple style, “Amsterdam” (1742), and on page 4 one of the later American samples, “Jordan” (1786). In both 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. These tunes also, like the others, 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 signature of “Amsterdam,” 2/4, tells us that it should be sung at a metronome setting of 120, 120 for every quarter note. Strictly, the time signature of “Jordan,” 2/2, should set that tune at a metronome setting of 60, 60 for every half note, but as we will note, this tune may well have been intended to be sung at a faster tempo.

Amsterdam

This tune is a classic example of the decorated duple style. Its melody is in the structure AABA, very telling about its instrumental origins. The original melody was composed by a German cantor and organist named Johann Georg Hille in 1739. It was adopted by the Moravians, a pietistic group of Christians in Moravia, as a hymn tune which they named “Service.” The Moravians and their music had a large influence on John Wesley, and it is not surprising that the Wesleys would take the Moravian tune and modify it for their own use. The melody first appears in this modified form and with the name “Amsterdam” in the Wesleys’ tunebook of 1742, *The Foundry Collection*. We have given both the melody of “Service” and the full setting of “Amsterdam” on the next page.

The tune “Amsterdam” is most often paired with this text by Robert Seagrave. Seagrave was a second generation Anglican preacher. He was a staunch defender of orthodox Christianity, defending the authority of Scripture against the rationalism of the day. Though ordained an Anglican, he eventually withdrew from the Established Church and was a devoted supporter of the Nonconformist preaching of George Whitefield, writing in defense of Whitefield’s work against the critics among the Anglican clergy. Whitefield wrote to him, “And is one of the priests also obedient to the word? Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath translated you from darkness to light, — from the power of Satan to the service of the ever-living God.” Edwin Hatfield, author of *The Poets of the Church*, sums up Seagrave’s life by calling him “a clear-headed, orthodox, able, and godly minister of Jesus Christ.” Seagrave published a book of hymns, both composed by himself and composed by others. Again Hatfield comments, saying that “his hymns are mostly in advance of the times in which he lived — quite superior to much of the material of which the Compilations of that day were framed.”

This text is his best known. “Amsterdam” conveys it jubilantly, as the soul “rises,” “stretches his wings,” and “pants to view God’s glorious face.” Notice the lively quarter note motion, the decoration with eighth and sixteenth notes, the major key, the AABA melodic pattern, and the trochaic meter pattern. All of these features combine to produce a joyful, spirited tune that invites “singing lustily and with good courage.”

The Tune "Service," Which Became "Amsterdam"



G Major Robert Seagrave.

AMSTERDAM P.M.

English, 1742.

1. Rise, my soul, and stretch thy wings, Thy bet-ter por-tion trace, Rise from tran - si - to - ry things, Tow'rds heav'n thy na-tive place.

2. Riv - ers to the o - cean run, — Nor stay in all their course; Fire as - cend - ing seeks the sun — Both speed them to their source;

3. Fly me rich - es, fly me cares, While I that coast ex - plore; Flat - t'ring world, with all thy snares, So - lic - it me no more.

4. Cease ye pil - grims, cease to mourn, Press on - ward to the prize: Soon our Sa - viour will re - turn Tri - um - phant in the skies:

Sun, and moon and stars de - cay, Time shall soon this earth re - move, Rise my soul and haste a - way, To seats pre - par'd a - bove.

So a soul that's born of God, Pants to view his glo - rious face; Up - wards tends to his a - bode, To rest in his em - brace.

Pil - grims fix not here their home: Strang - ers tar - ry but a — night, When the last dear morn is come, They'll rise to joy - ful light.

Yet a sea - son and you know Hap - py en - trance will be giv'n, All our sor - rows cast be - low, And earth ex - chang'd for heav'n.

Jordan

The tune "Jordan" by William Billings is the decorated duple style at its height in America, about forty years after "Amsterdam." Though the melody never repeats an entire musical phrase, it does repeat the opening of the first phrase as the opening of the second and again suggests the same opening as the opening of the fourth phrase.

It also sets two stanzas of text, very unusual until then in American psalmody. This indicates that Billings wrote this tune specifically for this text, demonstrating that increasing link between tune and text that we have noted throughout this study. The title "Jordan," drawn from the text, also makes this clear.

Though the time signature is 2/2, the motion is bright and all of its other features so mark it as a decorated duple that the argument has been made that it could as well have been set in 2/4.

The tune "Jordan" became very widespread and popular. It was among the few American compositions that survived the musical reform that arose in the early 1800s and the only composition by Billings to do so. The musical reformer Thomas Hastings seems half in admiration of the tune and half in contempt of it in this paragraph:

"Jordan, if indeed the melody was ever invented by [Billings], had claims somewhat beyond mediocrity. It has lately found its way into one of the leading publications of Boston, an honor, however, of which it is not worthy."

Whatever Hastings' controversy with "Jordan," this decorated duple tune has proven itself a "worthy" vehicle for the text it carries. Its bright melody and pleasing harmony lift the mind and heart to see, "with unbeckoned eyes," the "land of pure delight" and the "sweet fields beyond the swelling flood" that "stand dressed in living green," as Watts so beautifully pictures Heaven.

JORDAN C.M.D.

A Major Isaac Watts, Hymns II, no. 66.

William Billings, 1786.

Where saints im-mor-tal reign; In-fi-nite day ex-cludes the night, And plea-sures ban-ish pain.

1. There is a land of pure de-light, Where saints im-mor-tal reign; In-fi-nite day ex-cludes the night, And plea-sures ban-ish pain.

So, to the Jews, old Ca-naan stood, While Jor-dan roll'd be-tween.

Sweet fields, be-yond the swell-ing flood, Stand dress'd in liv-ing green: So, to the Jews, old Ca-naan stood, While Jor-dan roll'd be-tween.

2. There everlasting spring abides,
And never-with'ring flow'rs;
Death, like a narrow sea, divides
This heav'nly land from ours.
But tim'rous mortals start and shrink,
To cross this narrow sea,
And linger, shiv'ring on the brink,
Through fear to launch away.

3. Oh! could we make our doubts remove,
Those gloomy doubts that rise —
And see the Canaan, which we love,
With unbeckoned eyes.
Could we but climb where Moses stood,
And view the landscape o'er;
Not Jordan's streams, nor death's cold flood,
Should fright us from the shore.

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