

The Music Herald

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

Colossians 3:16

Imperfect Strains

We have looked at many text writers recently, but equally important to a good body of hymnody are the composers of its music. In the days of Watts, Wesley, Doddridge, and Rippon, hymn texts began to appear in astonishing number. But many of the hymns of these men, which we still love today, were resisted by the established church and would have been left to lie forgotten to posterity had it not been for the composers who took up the new texts and gave them new tunes by which they could be sung into the hearts of a generation. In this article, we turn to one of these composers, a little known man but one who was important and quite prolific in his day and whose music, though much of it has fallen into disuse, provided a vital link between the hymn writers of that day and us who still sing their hymns today.

Thomas Clark was born in 1775 in the historic city of Canterbury. His father William was by trade a cordwainer, and he was also a great lover of music and led the music in his church choir. Young Thomas was to follow in these same steps, as both cordwainer and musician.

Though the Clark family had historically been part of the Anglican church, it was the newly established Wesleyan Methodist Church in King's Street to which William Clark attached his young family. Wesley himself was still alive and had opened the church only eleven years earlier in 1764.

There in the church, as a young lad, Thomas watched with admiration as his father led the choir and instrumentalists. He was particularly fond of watching his uncle play a most unusual instrument, a large, bass wind instrument called a serpent for its serpentine shape. James Lightwood, a historian of Methodist music, says of Thomas that he “used to watch with awe the efforts of a stout uncle of his to control a somewhat unruly serpent.” It was no surprise then when Thomas, growing up in these surroundings, soon began composing tunes of his own.

As he reached maturity, Thomas began apprenticing under his father, learning the trade of shoemaking. By 1796, the twenty-one-year-old was a full-fledged cordwainer and working in his father's shop. He also acquired the responsibility of ringing the bells in many of the churches throughout the county of Kent in which he lived.

But even as he worked, it was music to his Lord that filled Thomas' heart and mind, and new tunes soon poured forth in a series of publications. In 1805, Thomas Clark published his first book of tunes. It was called *A Sett of Psalm and Hymn Tunes with some Select Pieces and an Anthem*. It was in this “Sett” that Clark's most famous piece first appeared. This was the tune “Cranbrook,” which we print on the next page. It is perhaps better known today as the folk tune “On Ilkley Moore.” But before it ever became attached to this folk text, it was a hymn tune. It is a charming little piece of striking beauty and simple grandeur, as voices pile on top of voices to build to a triumphant conclusion.

In its first appearance, “Cranbrook” was set with Philip Doddridge's short meter text “Grace 'Tis a Charming Sound.” It became such a beloved tune that it was quickly

set with many other texts and was even lengthened and adapted for common meter texts. It still appears in some hymnals today. One of its greatest pairings is with the text that was the most sung text on Christ's birth in Clark's day, “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night.” We have set it with this text on the next page.

The year after the publication of this “Sett,” Thomas Clark married Anne Ledger. The very next year, the Lord blessed them with a little girl named Catherine.

As Clark's family flourished, so did his composing. Between the years 1806 and 1825, he published twenty collections of tunes, eleven of those specifically for the body of hymn texts that was rapidly being produced among Nonconformist congregations. The new hymns of Watts, Wesley, Doddridge, and Rippon, all Nonconformists, were creating a need for new tunes. And while the established church was resistant to the new hymns, the Nonconformists like Clark welcomed them, and it was they who gave these hymns the vehicle they needed to be sung into the churches, homes, and hearts of a generation.

With only a brief glance through a hymnal, it is amazing how many hymn texts we sing today that are by Watts and Wesley. Yet without the tunes by such men as Clark, no doubt many of these hymns that we cherish today would have lain untouched today in some dusty hymn collection. It is thanks to the tunes of Clark and others like him, composed especially for these new hymns, that these hymns were able to be taken up in the churches and sung. Thus, though Clark's tunes have been largely forgotten, they were the vital link that preserved these hymns and passed them down to our generation today.

In 1823, Clark's father died, and he took over fully the cordwainer business. But he did not diminish his musical work. He heavily contributed to several new collections of tunes over the next several years. He also continued producing his own collections. In 1843, he published his largest work and one that he deemed very important, a six-volume work containing music for all of the 150 Psalms. He said very humbly of this work:

“While numerous compilations have been published, the Author is not aware that any one has hitherto set the whole of the Psalms to music. With himself it has long been a favourite object; and though in imperfect strains he has thus rendered his homage to ‘the sweet singer of Israel,’ it will prove to him a source of peculiar satisfaction, should the manner in which he has fulfilled his task, meet with the approval of the Christian Public.”

“Imperfect strains” Clark called his tunes, but they were indeed taken up by the “Christian Public,” and they gave to that “Christian Public” a rich store of hymnody.

Toward the end of his life, Clark left the Methodist church and it seems became a Baptist, still a lover of the hymns he had long labored to put in circulation. As he neared the age of seventy, he retired from his shoemaking. He continued to compose and to edit music collections right to the last, though with slower output. Finally, at the age of eighty-four in 1859, he died, leaving to the world a rich treasury of music and also a rich treasury of the hymns and hymn writers that he had made known to

Christendom, hymns that we still sing today.

Shortly after his death, Clark's tunes fell out of favor. The Enlightenment came on in full vigor and squelched the music of such self-trained composers. The Enlightenment created a taste for more refined music, "scientific" music it was called, and it looked with disdain on the music of the amateur composer, echoing Clark's own humble term of "imperfect" but in a scornful sense. The new music strove for smoothness and sweetness, but often at the expense of the melodic vigor and strength that

the "imperfect strains" had. And thus, Clark's tunes largely fell out of use.

This is lamentable. For, as we can see in his best known tune below, when we put his work to the test, we find that his music is indeed worthy of the great hymns it has preserved and that it is capable of conveying them beautifully and effectively. Indeed, what Thomas Clark humbly called "imperfect strains" are instead some of the finest ever written.

<http://www.wgma.org.uk/Articles/Clark/article.htm>

While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks

Nahum Tate, 1700.

CRANBROOK. C. M.

Thomas Clark, c. 1805.

The musical score is presented in four parts: Treble, Alto, Air (Melody), and Bass. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The lyrics are as follows:

Treble: 1. While shep-herds watched their flocks by night, All seat-ed on the ground, The an-gel of the Lord came

Alto: 1. While shep-herds watched their flocks by night, All seat-ed on the ground, The an-gel of the Lord came down,

Air (Melody): 1. While shep-herds watched their flocks by night, All seat-ed on the ground, The an-gel of the Lord came down,

Bass: 1. While shep-herds watched their flocks by night, All seat-ed on the ground, The an-gel of the Lord came

down, And glo-ry shone a-round, And glo-ry shone a-round, And glo-ry shone a-round, And glo-ry shone a-round.

The an-gel of the Lord came down, And glo-ry shone a-round, And glo-ry shone a-round, And glo-ry shone a-round.

The an-gel of the Lord came down, And glo-ry shone a-round, And glo-ry shone a-round, And glo-ry shone a-round.

down, And glo-ry shone a-round, And glo-ry shone a-round, And glo-ry shone a-round, And glo-ry shone a-round.



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