

**NEW TUNES TO
HYMNS ANCIENT
AND MODERN**

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New Tunes to Hymns Ancient and Modern by Richard Owen

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RICHARD OWEN

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COMPOSED BY

THE REV. RICHARD OWEN, M.A.,
Fellow of the Philharmonic Society, London.

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Preface.

IN times past there seems to have been a strange lack of principle in allying tunes to the words of hymns. One tune apparently was supposed to do for any number of hymns, if the metre would fit, whether such music chanced to be suitable or not. For example, the tune to the funeral "Brief life is here our portion," had to do duty also for the marriage hymn, "The voice that breathed o'er Eden," and "Melcombe" was used again, in spite of a false accent, for "Spir-IT of mercy, truth and love." Certainly the sense of the congruous must have been somewhat restricted. Then, not infrequently, the exigencies of the music forced the accent on the wrong word, sometimes even on the wrong syllable. Who has not been obliged to sing, against his better judgment, "In-FI-nite day excludes the night," or "Hark, THE glad sound the Saviour comes"? to say nothing of this choice couplet from "The sun is sinking fast":—

"Thus would I live yet now.
Not I but He—"

Here are some more very flagrant examples:—

"Hail TO the Lord's anointed,
Great David's greater Son!
Hail IN the time appointed," &c.

Notice the false accent on the verb:—

"He SHALL come down," &c.

Or again, on these syllables in another hymn:—

"From the overshadow-ING
OF Thy gold and silver wing."

The well-known tune to "A few more years shall roll" is perhaps more perverse. There we have:—

"Then, O my Lord, prepare (three beats)
My soul for that glad day,"

when of course it should be:—

"Then, O my Lord, prepare my soul
For that great day."

And what are we to think of this?—

"JE-rusalem on high
MY song and city is,
MY home whene'er I die,
THE centre of my bliss."

Adaptations also are unsatisfactory, however excellent the music may be. The hymn, "Glorious things of Thee are spoken," is usually sung to the Austrian National Anthem, which has very different associations. In any case, this sort of thing in the first verse is to be deplored:—

"On the Ro-ock of—
Ages fou-ounded," &c.

To remedy false accents such as these, many of the accompanying hymn tunes were written, and probably most people will agree that in such cases radical changes are desirable.

But in regard to the style of the greater number of these tunes, I am well aware that there are sure to be differences of opinion. Many musicians advocate diatonic harmonies for hymns and only the simplest melodic progressions. With that, I may say at once I disagree totally, for in nine cases out of ten it means intolerable dulness—a dulness, indeed, which nothing but long habit would endure for a moment. And I think we may take it as an axiom that in music of any sort dulness is *the* unpardonable sin, unless we except vulgarity, which is perhaps more distressing.

The harmonies of these hymn tunes are often chromatic, and purposely so. They are written with the definite intention of expressing certain emotions, and to ears accustomed to modern music, I take it that chromatic harmonies are absolutely necessary for this purpose, also that a certain freedom in pro-

gression is permissible. But, some may ask, is that really "sacred" music? Speaking generally, I answer that music is either good or bad (though of course bad music is not music at all, but is merely a distracting and disagreeable noise), and I doubt if any true distinction can be drawn between secular and so-called sacred music. If it is merely a matter of association, then some music intrinsically bad, may become at once "sacred"—through frequent use in church. People sometimes think that tunes wholly consisting of variations on the common chord constitute sacred music, or that anything by Handel, even an opera, if played slowly enough, comes under the same category.

To my mind, it is utterly absurd to write or to use any hymn tune without a distinctive and interesting melody, and the sooner stodgy German tunes give way to something more melodious, the better.

I am afraid people often like a poor tune, merely because they are accustomed to it. By a poor tune, I mean one consisting of a savage directness of rhythm, coupled with absolute commonness of melody and harmony. A good tune, in my opinion, is distinguished by a certain subtlety of rhythm, some departure from the ordinary melodic groove, and now and again an unexpected touch of harmony not always to be taken in at first hearing.

For a mission service or for unison singing, such music as the excellent and respectable tune usually associated with "Rock of Ages" is all that can be desired, but not, I submit, for a choir or indeed a congregation, with cultivated voices. For one thing, boys' voices at the present time are often properly and scientifically trained, and their high notes are their best ones. Many of us can remember how, in our childhood's days, certain hymn tunes were ruled out because they "went up to F." Nowadays, boys can sing A and B flat with ease, and the pitch is altogether higher. Any choirmaster will bear me out when I say that it is not desirable for boys' voices to be kept down perpetually on the low notes, of which this tune is entirely composed. Of course, I am writing from a musical point of view, and "in

quires and places where they sing," that side of the question must be considered. I ought to make it quite clear that the hymn tunes that I have written were only intended for trained voices. Many of these tunes have been already tested and sung in church by a well-trained choir. The music is, therefore, often purposely high-pitched, and often difficult, and the intervals are by no means invariably easy, but my experience has been that the more difficult a tune is, the better a good choir and an intelligent congregation will sing it.

Then can these hymn tunes be called congregational? That raises at once the vexed question of congregational singing. If people will practise them, they can sing them, but the parts certainly cannot be "put in" extemporaneously by the singer. A perfectly plain service, said throughout, is reasonable, intelligible and edifying; but there can be no half measures. If there is to be music at all in the worship of Almighty God, it must not be something inferior or practically worthless. Therefore it behoves congregations also, not only those who are engaged in leading the singing, to contribute their musical best. If people are going to sing by way of worship (and I am assuming that they do this not merely for the sake of hearing their own voices), let them practise the music first. It must not surely be said that "anything will do" in this connexion, and where people are capable of better things, a "bright, hearty" service is no excuse for offering to God that which costs them nothing. It has also struck me as being unfair on other people for an untrained singer to make his voice obtrusive in music more or less elaborate, without any practice beforehand, while the choir and others will only sing it after careful rehearsal. Naturally, there are certain parts of the service in which all may and should join heartily—the responses, for instance—but it is appalling to anyone with a musical ear to hear a droning vocal accompaniment to a hymn tune two octaves or so below the treble part, or to hear, as I have heard in cathedrals, ladies "singing second," *i.e.*, singing thirds below the melody, often regardless of the key. Is that instinct very far removed from the strong desire that oftentimes impels people to join in a rousing

chorus? Is there not sometimes such a thing as silent worship? To such queries I do not pretend to give an answer, but in submitting these tunes now to a wider public, I put forward some explanations with the hope that they may carry conviction, and that the music may prove acceptable and useful, perhaps interesting. I feel very strongly that dull music can only be classed with ugly architecture and drab decoration; and that only *the best*, musically and artistically ought to be offered for the service of Almighty God. May He not be extreme to mark what is done amiss.

In conclusion, I wish to offer my sincere thanks to the following authors or owners of copyright, who, for the convenience of singers, have kindly allowed me to print the words with the music:—The Archbishop of Armagh, The Rev. S. Baring-Gould, Messrs. Burns, Oates & Co., J. E. Bode, Esq., The Rev. F. G. Ellerton, Mrs. M. F. Maude, Messrs. J. Nisbet & Co., Geo. H. Fellowes Prynne, Esq., The Rev. A. Havergal Shaw, Mrs. Thring, The Rev. Mother (S. Margaret's Convent, East Grinstead), The Rev. R. Hayes Robinson, The Rev. H. Walsham How, and last, but not least, The Proprietors of Hymns A. and M. Every endeavour has been made to discover the holders of copyright words. If any words in which copyright exists have been printed without permission, I ask for kind indulgence.

It only remains for me to thank cordially Dr. Frederick Karn for correcting the proofs, and for much kind help.

S. PETER'S VICARAGE,
LEE, S. E.

October, 1905.