

Variety in Hymn Singing

“Looking at Old Hymns with New Glasses”

A presentation at the WELS National Worship Conference

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Hymns are religious poems set to music. Both text and music are integral to what makes a hymn. Our attention in this presentation will be to the performance of the music of hymns.

Hymns are congregational. They are intended to be sung by a group. They do not belong to the pastor or to the organist or to the church musician. They belong to the people.

Hymns are proclamation. In Lutheran circles they have been considered to be “teachers of the faith.” Since the time that Luther put hymns with meaty texts into the mouths of his congregation members, the Lutheran church has prized those hymns that teach the truths of the Scriptures.

Some hymns have naturally stood the test of time. Others have not fared as well and have been abandoned in favor of the “new” and “fresh.” Still others live in limbo – at times they are appreciated, at other times they are tolerated, at still other times they are despised. Today’s presentation will at times be aimed at this last group – those hymns in limbo. Why might a hymn be left in limbo? Could it be because of our congregational “performance practice?”

Congregational hymn singing has a tendency toward sameness. The variation in tempos of hymns is usually very narrow in a given congregation. The leading of hymns is generally done in a primary way – usually accompanied by organ or piano. (Even when accompanied by HymnSoft – the basic accompaniment is keyboard based!) The manner in which a hymn is sung has a tendency to fall into one mode.

I suggest to you that perhaps it would be good to take a look at some hymns and to reconsider our congregational “performance practice.” In other words, to “Look at Old Hymns with New Glasses.”

This title is not original with me. A few years back, I had the opportunity to spend a day with Alice Parker to talk about congregational hymn singing and to do it with a new set of lenses. Alice made a daylong presentation on hymn singing that encouraged the eight of us in attendance to set aside all the norms we associate with the singing of a hymn. We spent the entire day singing hymns without the aid of an instruments, not even a pitch pipe. That took away the comfort zone of the keyboard. Tempos were never assumed to be congruent with the hymn. The mode of vocal performance was not allowed to lapse into the “norm” but was explored and tested. Vocal variations and vocal additions to hymns were added rather than instrumental variations and additions with idea that the hymn is first and foremost a vocal performance.

The presentation today will explore some of these same avenues: alternation, tempo, dynamics, the canon, adding ostinato, and finally, new tunes for some worthy texts that appear to be in the limbo state.

Warm-up CW 293 “God’s Word Is Our Great Heritage”

I. Alternation beyond the norm

Example 1: CW 539 “In Christ There Is No East or West”

This hymn begs for a division of the text that will highlight a unique feature of the hymn – reference to the four points of the compass. An aural and visual presentation of this feature of the hymn may enhance not only the performance but also a delivery of the text and its uniqueness to those who both listen and sing.

Stanza 1:	Solo Voice(s) - One voice on each of the four lines of the hymn, sung from the four corners of the room.
Stanza 2-3:	All
Stanza 4:	Solo Voice(s) - Same as stanza 1.
Stanza 5:	All

Example 2: CW 434 “Lord, You I Love with All My Heart”

This classic text is constructed with a complete sentence concluding each of the three stanzas. The concluding sentence is always addressed to Christ, prays, and expresses complete confidence in the Savior who in his Word assures us that he will always act on our behalf that we might receive eternal life which he won for us. Could that concluding sentence jump off the page even more than it already does because of the melodic approach to the sentence?

The hymn also has a “fatigue” factor. It is long. It is a demanding melody. Voices become tired by stanza 3. An alternation plan could relieve this problem as well as enhance the singing of this marvelous text.

Stanza 1:	All
Stanza 2:	Women begin. Men enter at “Lord Jesus Christ, . . .”
Stanza 3:	Men begin. Women enter at “Lord Jesus Christ, . . .”

Example 3: CW 45 “Oh, Rejoice, All Christians, Loudly”

The body of the four stanzas is divided into two sentences each, a natural break for alternation. It would also seem natural for the refrain to be sung robustly by all.

Like the previous hymn there is a “fatigue” factor here.

This hymn will also lead us into the next topic of tempo. Consider this hymn in 2 beats to the measure rather than 4 beats to the measure.

The refrain is sung by All.

Stanza 1:	All
Stanza 2:	Right side (pulpit side?) sings sentence 1. Left side (lectern side?) sings sentence 2.
Stanza 3:	Left side sings sentence 1. Right side sings sentence 2.
Stanza 4:	All

II. Reconsider the tempo

Example 4: CW 230 “Lord Jesus Christ, Be Present Now”

It has been my experience that this hymn has a WELS “standard” tempo. I’m not sure it is the “standard” tempo of the hymn. Let’s experiment.

Stanza 1-2:	All
Stanza 3:	Women begin. Men sing “Hosanna to the Lord most high.” Women finish the stanza.
Stanza 4:	All

Example 5: CW 15 “Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding”

This example can easily be sung too quickly. It calls for a stately tempo and attention to the long two-measure phrases of this English style hymn tune.

Stanza 1:	All
Stanza 2:	Women
Stanza 3:	Men
Stanza 4:	All

Example 6: CW 93 “Hail to the Lord’s Anointed”

What is the best tempo for this hymn?

III. Revive a cappella

Example 7: CW 309 “Draw Near and Take the Body of the Lord”

This entire hymn could be done a cappella. It works well this way during the distribution of Holy Communion. A possible introduction and conclusion could be provided by a solo instrument – flute, clarinet, or oboe. For the introduction the solo instrument plays the melody of an entire stanza. For the conclusion the instrument plays the concluding line of the hymn.

For variety in the choir stanzas rearrange the parts – e.g. for stanza 3 basses sing the melody, tenors sing the alto part, sopranos sing the tenor part and octave higher, and altos sing the bass part an octave higher.

Stanza 1:	Choir (SATB as printed)
Stanza 2:	Congregation
Stanza 3:	Choir (SATB as noted in the instructions)

Example 8: CW 23 “Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel”

The plainsong melody of “Oh, Come, Oh, Come, Emmanuel” was intended to be sung a cappella. Some of its simple beauty is lost by adding harmony to it.

Stanzas 1-4: Four solo voices
Refrain: All

IV. Add an Ostinato

Example 9: CW 481 “O God, Your Hand the Heavens Made”

Ostinatos are repeated patterns that can be sung or played underneath a melodic line. Some hymns lend themselves to accepting an ostinato and can be easily be added as a performance feature. Admittedly they are the work of a rehearsed group and fall best into the category of choral variation rather than congregational song. However, a very simple ostinato, like the following example, could be added without disrupting congregational singing.

Before we add the ostinato, what is an appropriate tempo for this hymn?

Stanza 1: unison with keyboard
Stanza 2: unison with choir ostinato
Stanza 3: unison with keyboard—alternate first 2 lines; all sing the last 2 lines

Ostinato for st. 2.



To us are giv - en gifts di - vine.

For the final phrase of the hymn..



To us are giv - en gifts

V. Consider the canon

Example 10: CW 215 “Jerusalem, My Happy Home”

A canon is another name for a “round.” Some hymns, like the pentatonic (five note) melody of this hymn work perfectly as a canon. A choir could do a canon stanza as a form of alternation on the hymn. Or, the congregation could do the canon itself provided that there had been some time to instruct and practice. (Perhaps the idea of practicing hymns should be revived as well as the canon?)

What is an appropriate tempo for CW 215?

- Stanza 1: Unison
- Stanza 2: 2 part canon (sing the hymn through 2 times)
- Stanza 3: Unison with ostinato
- Stanza 4: 4 part canon with ostinato (sing the hymn through 2 times)
- Stanza 5: Unison

Ostinato

Je - ru - sa - lem, my hap - py home, When
shall I come to thee?

Example 11: CW 375 “The King of Love My Shepherd Is”

This hymn works so well as a canon, that I would consider it one of the most glorious of the canonic hymns in CW. It can be done in six parts. We will try a stanza or two to get an idea of how well this works and how enjoyable it is to be a part of such a hymn performance.

VI. What about Volume?

Example 12: CW 498 “Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire”

*As with tempo, congregations tend to sing all hymns within a very narrow dynamic range. Generally *mf* or *f* for everything – regardless of the organ registration. Might we consider giving instructions for dynamics for some hymns? Perhaps some could be sung softly or loudly all together.*

In this example, the ballad style of the hymn could be brought to light through a light presentation of the melody. Changes in dynamics can be used to shape the phrases.

Example 13: CW 110 “My Song Is Love Unknown”

Or, perhaps some could include a variation in volume, like the following.

- Stanza 1: *mf* medium loud
- Stanza 2: *p* soft
- Stanza 3: *mf* medium loud
- Stanza 4: *pp* very soft
- Stanza 7: *f* loud

Example 14: CW 554 “Oh, How Blest Are They”

Suggestions for dynamics?

VII. New Tunes for Old Texts

Looking at some old hymns with new glasses and trying various performance techniques may not produce the result we might hope for. There are some hymns that are falling out of use. A possible reason may be the tune to which the text is married. Perhaps the time has come to provide new melodies for some worthy texts.

Will new tunes rescue some worthy texts from the state of limbo into which some of them have fallen? Your reaction will be appreciated.

Example 15: CW:S 720 “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands”

Example 16: CW:S 728 “Jerusalem the Golden”

Example 17: CW:S 734 “When In Our Music, God Is Glorified”

Example 18: CW:S 768 “How Firm a Foundation”

VIII. How to “Look at Old Hymns with New Glasses”

1. Some resources can help. Some of the Alice Parker resources are valuable. They are available at www.melodiusaccord.org. An order blank with some worthy titles is printed below.
2. However, since hymns only “live” in performance, it is through performance that the best and most beneficial discoveries are made.
 - a. Get to “know” a hymn. Sing it out loud by yourself a cappella. Sing it for a few days. Commit it (or part of it) thoroughly to memory. Use bodily movement to get a sense of rhythm, phrasing, and dynamics.
 - b. What background can be found on the hymn? Is it from a particular compositional era? Would that era dictate a performance practice? (Start with *CW: Handbook*. That may provide a sufficient amount of information and clues to historical performance practice.
 - c. As you get to know the hymn, as you sing it to yourself out loud, experiment with tempo. Does the character of the hymn change by slowing down or speeding up? Does a change in tempo reveal a rhythmic structure or pattern that was not apparent at another tempo?
 - d. As the hymn becomes more and more familiar, think about performance practice. Does the text lend itself to some form of alternate singing? Would changes in dynamics help

convey the text to the singers? Could the hymn work as a canon? Would a snatch of the melody serve as the germ of an ostinato pattern that could be worked under the melody? Could all or part of the hymn be sung without accompanying instruments?

3. Talk about hymn singing in the congregation. No, don't just talk about it, sing! Worship committees and other groups responsible for worship planning would benefit greatly from singing together the hymns they plan for others to sing. This is work and additional time. I propose that it would be energy and time well spent.

4. If it takes you as a worship planner time to learn and "know" a hymn, wouldn't the same be true for a congregation? Long range planning for hymn singing could make it possible for a congregation to get to "know" a hymn well. That would require repetition that is well thought out with performance planning as an integral part of the long-range plan. And, consider having a time when hymns could be taught, caught, and enjoyed by the congregation outside of the worship hour.

Alice Parker - resources

www.melodiousaccord.org

Recordings

NEW SONG from OLD HYMNS is, like the recording described above, a demonstration of musical hymn singing. Available in cassette tape only.

SING! a hymn sing: Congregational Song Series, #3 is a collection of Hymns with Alice Parker leading a congregation, demonstrating the transformation that occurs when the hymns are sung musically.

Videos

When We Sing, conversations with Alice Parker and Friends, is a compilation of memorable moments from two MELODIOUS ACCORD Symposia, in 1992 and 1993. The participants include Carl P. Daw, Kenneth Nafziger, Don E. Saliers, Joelle Wallach, Brian Wren and others. Great hymn talk! 30 minutes.

The Reason Why We Sing is designed to make everyone aware of the power of song. Singing is worshipping. Here's how singing sounds and looks in different churches and settings. Alice Parker helps us rediscover the vitality of the people's song. 20 minutes.

Books

NEW! *The Anatomy of Melody*

The fruit of Alice Parker's many years of teaching, this book suggests a new way of listening, analyzing, performing and appreciating music, based on the single line that each one of us can sing. It forms the basis of her own composing, arranging and teaching, and would be an excellent basic textbook for theory, appreciation, composition, music education and general music classes.

NEW! *Reflections on Song: My Musical World*

A collection of Alice Parker's thoughtful and thought-provoking editorials from the Melodious Accord Newsletter 1985-2005.

Creative Hymn Singing gives specific instructions for finding the style and sound of hymns from different historical periods.