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PSALMODY, SHAPE NOTES, AND SANKEY: THE EVOLUTION OF PROTESTANT AMERICAN HYMNODY IN THE 19TH CENTURY

By Paul T. Anderson

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, churches were attempting to overcome a crisis occurring with their singing. The most common type of singing was psalmody, or setting the psalms to music, and it had gradually deteriorated to a state that was hardly recognizable as music. In some places, only a handful of tunes existed, and all songs were sung to these melodies. Without musical ability or songbooks, leaders used a technique called "lining-out" in which they read a line of the text and the congregation sang it back. The lyrics came straight from the Bible, and with little musical ability, emotion was a negligible part of the singing.[1] With improvements in the lyrics, rhythms, emotional appeal, and overall quality of hymns, nineteenth century Protestant American hymnody evolved from crude psalmody to gospel songs with influences from the American frontier, new denominations, and the African-American spiritual.

To address some of the problems of psalmody, new composers began translating and rearranging lyrics to make them more appealing. New melodies and harmonies became more complex, while the musical literacy of the general populace had declined. This left only a select few participants in "singing schools" as a *de facto* choir. Debates about part division by gender and about folk and classical pieces drove the publication of a plethora of hymn books. The 1804 *Christian Harmonist*, published by Samuel Holyoke, was one of the first hymnals to be approved by a particular denomination, the Baptist Church. This

[1] William J. Reynolds and Milburn Price, *A Survey of Christian Hymnody* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 1999), 97.

approval would lead to hymnals that taught the particular tenants of an individual sect instead of common elements of the Christian faith.[2] Such feuding only added to the cacophony of sound emanating from American churches.

In the first few decades of the nineteenth century, church leaderships began to realize that the decline of singing pointed at a weak spot in their oversight. Church leaderships developed techniques that began trends across the board that were aimed at reviving this crucial part of worship. Some of these rules attempted to make singing easier. Leaderships sought to create music that was not too complex and could be easily sung, that seamlessly fit the lyrics and music of a piece together, and that could be sung by everyone present, although aid from a choir and organ were often encouraged.[3] These goals for church music worked to lower the bar for a church to achieve good-sounding music.

Other efforts involved educating the general populace into some degree of musical ability. Frontier revival meetings began using the camp-meeting song, which used catchy melodies with repeating choruses that spread quickly within the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches.[4] Lowell Mason began holding music conventions in cities along the east coast to teach people to read music in 1834. The teachers instructed their pupils to pass newly-learned skills on to other people in an effort to reach as many people as possible.[5] Between these two general tactics, churches aimed at a resurgence of musical value in worship.

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[2] Robert G. McCutchan, "American Church Music Composers of the Early Nineteenth Century," *Church History* 4, no. 3 (Sept. 1933): 146, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3159846.

[3] John Ogasapian, *Church Music in America, 1620-2000* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 126.

[4] Reynolds and Price, 104.

[5] McCutchan, 150.

Another method of learning music, closely associated with the camp-meeting song, that emerged in the early years of the century was the shape note system. This notation style replaces the simple round heads on music notes with shapes, each one denoting a different pitch. Shape note singing is such a basic form of learning music that people could quickly become fluent and even attain great skill at singing.[6] While many variations within this style emerged, the basic idea remained the same. The biggest difference that arose within the shape note school was the number of shapes, and therefore note names, utilized.

One system, an import from Europe most popular before 1839, used only four notes: "fa," "sol," "la," and "mi." To correspond better to the seven-note major scale of western music, composers sometimes used "fa," "sol," and "la" twice, with "mi" as the highest pitch. Thus, this system was often referred to as "fasola" singing.[7] Other composers used a seven-note system, where each of the musical notes ("do," "re," "mi," "fa," "sol," "la," and "si") had their own shape. The balance of popularity tipped in 1839 toward this system, in part because the seven-note system was favored by Lowell Mason.[8] While shape note singing became wildly popular for a time, it eventually experienced a decline, particularly in the northern parts of the United States. This was hastened by the growing popularity of the seven-note system over fasola singing, because the differences between shape notes and traditional notation was minimized.[9]

However, fasola singing left a lasting impact on American hymnody. "New Britain," a tune published in 1829, was published in *The*

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[6] Ogasapian, 112.

[7] Phil D. Perrin, "Systems of Scale Notation in Nineteenth-Century American Tune Books," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 18, no. 3 (Autumn 1970): 257, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3344465.

[8] Ibid., 259.

[9] Perrin, 261.

Southern Harmony in 1835 as the setting to the most famous text by John Newton. It is indelibly recognized as "Amazing Grace" even today.[10] Even as the urban areas and large eastern churches abandoned the four-note system, teachers found it to be incredibly effective in their work on the frontier in the South and West.[11] Additionally, fasola hymnals like B.F. White and E.J. King's *The Sacred Harp* are still in use in the South. These books, which contain mostly hymns written originally in the fasola style, also contain works from other composers that have been adapted, including one from Lowell Mason, who despised the emerging Sacred Harp style of music.[12]

In the mid-1800s, denominational groups began to grow more diverse, providing hymns drawn from the backgrounds of diverse songsters. "He Leadeth Me" was written by Joseph Gilmore, a Baptist, after a lesson he delivered about the twenty-third Psalm.[13] The Baptist Rev. Samuel Smith penned "My Country 'Tis of Thee," which was performed first on Independence Day in 1831 by a choir led by Lowell Mason and quickly became popular nationally.[14] Mason also wrote the tune usually used for the hymn "Nearer My God to Thee", as well as "My Faith Looks Up to Thee", which was written by Congregationalist Ray Palmer.[15] Presbyterians George Duffield and Edward Hopper wrote

[10] Reynolds and Price, 108.

[11] Robert Stevenson, "Protestant Music in America," in *Protestant Church Music: A History*, ed. Friedrich Blume (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975), 677-678.

[12] David Warren Steel, "The Styles of Sacred Harp Music," in *The Makers of the Sacred Harp* ed. Laurie Matheson (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2010), 50.

[13] Reynolds and Price, 114.

[14] Henry Wilder Foote, *Three Centuries of American Hymnody* (Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press, 1961), 225-227.

[15] Reynolds and Price, 114.

"Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus" and "Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me," respectively.[16]

The Unitarian movement of liberal thought and reform contributed a number of hymns to history. Samuel Johnson and Samuel Longfellow published two hymnals in the mid-1800s that included the hymn "Lead, Kindly Light" and gave songs to the most progressive wing of religion in the country.[17] Julia Ward Howe, a committed pacifist and abolitionist in Washington, D.C., wrote her most famous work to replace the words to the common army camp song "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave," and published "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in 1862.[18]

John Greenleaf Whittier has an interesting place in the history of American hymnody, in spite of the fact that the hymns he wrote are rarely remembered today. Instead, others took portions of his other poems and set the passages to music, and these resulting songs have endured more than his original works. Whittier, a Quaker, had many of his most famous pieces set to tunes composed by Unitarians like Johnson and Longfellow. English Unitarian Garrett Horder was the first to use Whittier's most famous contribution to the field, "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind," in song.[19] While Unitarians, Baptists, Methodists, and Congregationalists dominated the American hymn scene, other groups, such as the Lutherans, also wrote hymns during the mid-nineteenth century, though few of them are still in use, and most of them were heavily based on European roots.

Perhaps the most distinct style of Christian song to be heard during the nineteenth century was the African-American spiritual. Black Christians in America, both slave and free, tended to be predominantly

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[16] Reynolds and Price, 115.
[17] Foote, 236-237.
[18] Foote, 252-253.
[19] Ibid., 256-257.

Baptist or Methodist. These denominations spread during the Second Great Awakening and antebellum revivals largely due to their emphasis on emotion over the established religious structures. These emotions appealed to the poor and enslaved, as did the self-identification with the enslaved Israelites.[20] These emotions were one of the most integral parts of Afro-American singing and were often expressed with movement and shouting.[21]

Another major characteristic of the spiritual is the unique phrasing. Sources argue about whether the spiritual is predominately African in nature or merely an adaptation from white folk and camp-meeting songs.[22] However, most scholars on both sides of the debate agree that the distinct rhythm of the spiritual, relying heavily on the off-beat, is African in origin.[23] The call-and-response style of many spirituals is an adaptation of the "lining-out" psalmody practice, still sung in the mid-nineteenth century in parts of the South.[24] Choruses of spirituals were often interchangeable, and could be sung to many different songs. This was a practice borrowed from camp-meeting songs, which may have originally been contributed by the black populations at camp meetings.[25]

The quality of the singing of black communities was often considered by white contemporaries to be superior to white singing.[26] The lyrics, sung in the slave dialects, often reflected the stories of the Israelites while also expressing a desire for liberation.[27] One of the best

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[20] LeRoy Moore, Jr., "The Spiritual: Soul of Black Religion," *American Quarterly* 23, no. 5 (Nov. 1971): 660-661, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3344465.

[21] Ogasapian, 176-177.

[22] Moore, 662.

[23] Ibid., 664-665.

[24] Stevenson, 680.

[25] Ogasapian, 179.

[26] Ibid., 173.

[27] Moore, 661.

examples of this sort of spiritual is "Go Down, Moses," which contains the lines "Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land/Tell ole Pharaoh, let my people go."[28] These spirituals were the repertoire of the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University, who toured the United States in the 1870s, bringing them to the attention of new white audiences. At the same time, newly-freed blacks began moving away from the use of spirituals, seeing them as a relic of slavery, and towards the gospel song.[29]

The gospel song may be the most important innovation in Christian singing in the mid-nineteenth century. Just before the Civil War, spiritual renewal swept through the country in a tide of revivalism. This passion manifested in a wave of new songs. Emerging from the already popular camp-meeting songs and the hymnals produced from the singing schools from the early parts of the century was the Sunday school song. These songs were first published by William B. Bradbury in a number of collections between 1841 and 1867.[30] Many of these collections were hymns that were already published, though sometimes in an altered state. For instance, Bradbury published both "Sweet Hour of Prayer" and "He Leadeth Me" set to his own tunes.[31] Sunday school songs tended to be less formal than the approved hymns already compiled in the official denominational hymnals. These newer songs drew heavily on the camp-meeting songs popular earlier in the century, both in their popularity and in their format. Instead of being published in official hymnals, they were printed in small collections meant to supplement the approved repertoire.[32]

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[28] J. B. T. Marsh, *The Story of the Jubilee Singers: with their songs* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1877), 142, https://archive.org/details/jubileesi00mars.

[29] Ogasapian, 181-182.

[30] Reynolds and Price, 117.

[31] Foote, 264.

[32] Stevenson, 685.

Often, these Sunday school songs were written by people with little or no formal music education. Bradbury's successor was a Baptist with no formal music background named Robert Lowry. Lowry penned the words and music to a number of hymns, including the tune for "I Need Thee Ev'ry Hour," as well as both the lyrics and music for "Nothing but the Blood."[33] It was through the mixing of these more popular types of Christian songs— the camp-meeting songs, the songs that emerged from revival singing schools, and the beginnings of the Sunday school movement— that the gospel song came.

Gospel songs are distinct from the hymns that came before them in a number of ways. They were more rhythmic than most of their predecessors, and almost always included a chorus, which was not a common practice. Their lyrics focused on the core message of the gospel and tended to be less theological and more vernacular.[34] The list of names associated with the writing, performance, and spread of these gospel songs is incredibly long, though four names stand tall above the rest. In 1874, Philip Bliss published a small collection of songs titled *Gospel Songs*, and the now-ubiquitous name is taken from this volume.[35] Bliss, a student of Bradbury, is responsible for such classics as "Let the Lower Lights Be Burning" and "Wonderful Words of Life."[36] Additionally, he composed the music to H.G. Spafford's "It Is Well with My Soul," and published music with Ira Sankey.[37]

Inextricably linked with the appearance of the gospel song was the beginning of the career of Dwight Moody, a preacher who travelled around the country in the mid- to late- 1800s to hold revival meetings.

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[33] Reynolds and Price, 117-118.

[34] Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate!: Church Music in the Evangelical Tradition* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 1981), 132.

[35] Reynolds and Price, 117-118.

[36] Ogasapian, 187.

[37] P. P. Bliss and Ira D. Sankey, *Gospel Hymns No. 2* (New York: Biglow and Main; Cincinnati: John Church, 1876), 78, https://archive.org/details/hymnsno02blis.

He was joined in 1871 by Ira Sankey, who had worked for a number of years with the Young Men's Christian Association. Sankey acted as the song leader for Moody, and began publishing his own songs while the two were in Great Britain in the 1870s. The music of the Moody/Sankey campaigns achieved great renown less because of their originality of style and more because the emotions and style made their hymns so incredibly popular. Few of Sankey's lyrical compositions remain popular today, though many of his tunes endure, including the melody to "The Ninety and Nine," which Sankey composed on the spot at a meeting in Scotland.[38]

Sankey also composed music for a number of hymns written by the fourth major gospel name, Fanny Crosby. Blinded by poor medical treatment when she was only six months old, Crosby later drew on her blindness and her love for poetry in her songwriting.[39] Over the years, she was calculated to have written over eight thousand hymns and poems.[40] Among her tremendous body of work are the lyrics to "Rescue the Perishing" and "To God Be the Glory." The chorus of another of her songs, "Blessed Assurance," contains the lines "This is my story, this is my song/Praising my Savior all the day long."[41] The heavy emotion, as well as the lyrical focus on the individual's relationship with God, are consistent characteristics of the gospel song.[42]

By the middle of the nineteenth century, as music evolved, a number of new debates had erupted. Episcopalians and other liturgical

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[38] Foote, 266-267.

[39] Fanny Crosby, *This Is My Story, This Is My Song*, retold by S. Trevena Jackson (Belfast: Ambassador Publications, 2003), 18.

[40] Ibid., 47.

[41] Ira D. Sankey, *Gospel Hymns Nos. 5 and 6 Combined: For Use in Gospel Meetings and Other Religious Services* (New York: Biglow and Main; Cincinnati: John Church, 1876), 40, https://archive.org/details/gospelhymn5600sank.

[42] Reynolds and Price, 121.

denominations pushed back against popular forms of congregational singing in favor of more dignified hymns performed by a quartet or boys' choir.[43] Others, such as Alexander Campbell and the Disciples of Christ, pushed back against the growing use of organs and other mechanical instruments in worship in favor of congregational a cappella singing.[44] They emphasized focus on the elements of worship found in the New Testament, which notably did not include instruments. Arguing against the idea that instruments were beneficial additions to worship, Campbell wrote in the *Millennial Harbinger*, "to all spiritually-minded Christians, such aids would be as a cow bell in a concert."[45]

By the end of the century, American church music was almost unrecognizable from its origins in psalmody. The popular gospel songs dominated evangelical churches, while more traditional hymns continued to be written by liturgical churches. The lyrical makeup of hymns, as well as the format and complexity, varied widely, which led to a wide range of expressed emotions. The twentieth century continued to bring new religious movements, which resulted in the massive diversity of Christian music that is evident across all genres of music. Simultaneously, the legacy of spirituals, gospel songs, and Sacred Harp singing can still be heard in churches across the country.

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[43] Stevenson, 684-686.

[44] David W. Music, *Instruments in Church: A Collection of Source Documents* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 145.

[45] Alexander Campbell, "Instrumental Music," *Millennial Harbinger Series IV* 1, no. 1 (Dec. 1851): 581-2, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3344465.

The photograph depicted here is the classic hymn “Amazing Grace” in shape notes. Interestingly, “Amazing Grace” was published as “New Britain” in an 1847 publication of Southern Harmony.