The Music of the Genevan Psalter

One of the most important contributions that the Reformers made to the reformation of the church's worship was the restoration of congregational singing. To accomplish this they had to provide both new music and new lyrics: new music because the existing music was too difficult for congregations to sing and new lyrics because the existing lyrics were all in Latin.

Among the Lutherans, beginning with Martin Luther himself and continuing through the time of Johann Sebastian Bach about 200 years later, there developed a rich and extensive hymnody. But among the Calvinists things took a different turn: they began a new way of singing the psalms. First in Strasburg, and then in Geneva, Calvin introduced into the Reformed churches the practice of metrical psalmody. Clement Marot and Theodore Beza rendered all the psalms in rhymed verse and various musicians then set these verses to music. The Genevan Psalter, begun around 1538 and completed about twenty-five years later in 1562, was the result.

Various considerations governed the composition of the Genevan psalm tunes, among them: the music had to be suitable for worship, it had to be simple enough for untrained singers to sing, and it had to fit the lyrics for which it was written.

Suitable for worship

With regard to suitability for worship, Calvin spoke of the need for the music to have weight and majesty. While it may be somewhat difficult to define these terms precisely in this connection, it is certainly clear that the reformers believed that not all the music available to them was fitting as an offering to God. The first and most important consideration was that the music had to take into account that the people were drawing near to a God whose majesty demands fear and reverence. The light and frivolous could have no place.

This does not mean, however, that the music of the Genevan Psalter lacks joy. It is not only joyful when joy is appropriate, but even at times exuberant. Psalms 47 and 81 are examples.

Simple enough for untrained singers

The music also had to be simple enough for untrained singers. But, since simplicity pulls towards sameness and a lack of differentiation, ways also had to be found to maintain variety and interest as well as excellence.

The composers achieved simplicity by refusing to make use of several musical devices that are common even in later church music.

1) The music falls within a narrow vocal range, an octave plus one note. Most tunes encompass a range of middle C to high D, a few D to high E. The congregations therefore never had to sing more than nine different notes in the course of a single tune. Later church music frequently expands that range to ten or even eleven notes.

2) All of the tunes use only half notes and quarter notes: no eighth notes, no sixteenth notes and no dotted notes, all of which are quite common in more recent church music.

3) Psalms 2 and 6, and a few others, are exceptions, but the tunes are generally syllabic. There is only one note for each syllable in the lyrics.

4) There are few large leaps up or down from one note to the next. Small intervals are easier to sing than large ones. The most difficult larger intervals never appear.

5) Most lines begin and end with long notes, to give the members of the congregation time to gather their voices together at the beginning of the lines and to catch their breath between lines.

6) The congregation sang in unison and without even instrumental accompaniment to supply any harmony.

Now these are pretty stringent requirements. It's as if you were to go into one of the big box shoe stores where they have an enormous selection of shoes, but decide before you begin to shop that you are not going to spend more than thirty dollars, that the shoes must have no ornamentation like buckles or tassels, and that the leather must have a glossy finish. Those restrictions would severely limit your choices. But, as far as we know, the composers of the Genevan tunes imposed these musical restrictions on themselves, to make possible a truly congregational body of music.

Though the tunes are simple they also show an amazing variety, but a variety that is achieved in ways quite different from that of more recent hymn and psalm tunes.

Modern church music is written almost exclusively in major and minor keys. In fact, since the minor keys are very seldom used, almost all tunes sung today are in major. But there are twelve church modes and the *Genevan Psalter* uses nine of them. These modes, each of which has its own distinctive sound, permit a much wider range of expressiveness than major and minor tonalities.

The Genevan tunes also use an enormous variety of meters. By meter we mean the number of lines in the tune as well as the number of notes per line. Thus Psalm 1, for example, has six lines of music, the first two lines of ten notes, the third and fourth of eleven notes, and the last two again often notes each. The meter, therefore, is 10.10.11.11.10.10.

There are 125 tunes in the *Genevan Psalter* and 110 different meters, almost a one to one ratio of meters to tunes. For the sake of comparison, *The Psalter*, published by the United Presbyterian Church in 1912 and still in use in the Protestant Reformed and Netherlands Reformed Churches, has approximately four hundred fifty tunes and about fifty different meters, a ratio of one meter for every nine tunes. *The Book of Psalms for Singing*, the Psalter of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, also has about 450 tunes and about sixty different meters, a ratio of one to seven or eight. And *The Scottish Psalter* (or *The Psalms of David in Metre*) has all the psalms rendered in Common Meter (86.86) so that you could, if you wanted, sing all the psalms to only one tune. In fact, there was a time in the history of the Scottish Presbyterian churches that the congregations in general used only about ten tunes to sing the whole Psalter.

The meters of the *Genevan Psalter* are frequently asymmetrical. This also is unusual. The vast majority of tunes in more recent hymn and psalm books have very symmetrical meters: 86.86, or 88.88 or 886.886, etc. But the *Genevan Psalter* has meters like 89.889 (Psalm 15), 10.8.8.10.776.666 (Psalm 40), 11.11.11.11.667.667 (Psalm 79), or 66.77.66.666 (Psalm 97).

Also, it is possible, in many cases, to sing just half of the tune. *The Book of Praise* takes advantage of this only in Psalms 17 and 79, but it can be done with many other tunes as well.

Finally, the Genevan tunes have a great variety of rhythms. By rhythm I mean the patterns of half and quarter notes within the lines of music. Again this is unlike most later church music. The best way to illustrate this is to turn to Psalm 134. Psalm 134 has a symmetrical meter (88.88, what we call Long Meter today), but notice that, though the first three lines all have the same rhythm (1 long, 4 short, 3 long), the fourth line is different (3 long, 2 short, 3 long). This tune, under the name Old Hundredth, is found in nearly every hymn and psalm book that has been compiled since the Reformation, but rarely with the same asymmetrical rhythms. Usually you will find that the fourth line is made to match the first three, or that all the lines are reduced to quarter notes. Another example is Psalm 93. The meter is symmetrical (10.10.10.10), but the rhythm changes in every line, so that no two lines match.

Secondly with regard to rhythm, some lines begin or end with quarter notes: Psalm 1, lines 2 and 5; and Psalm 8, line 4 are examples.

Thirdly, we must not ignore the syncopations. Syncopations are shifts in accent, so that the accent falls in an unexpected place. These usually occur near the end of the line: Psalms 16, 78 and 105 are examples. But occasionally they occur earlier, as in Psalm 124. The meter is 10.10.10.10.10. All the lines, except the third, have a regular pattern of unaccented note followed by accented note. Syncopation occurs in about one third of the tunes.

It should be noted that the presence of eighth or sixteenth notes in modern hymn tunes does not indicate syncopation: these do not force a shift in the accents.

Matching music and lyrics

The third consideration for the composers of the *Genevan Psalter* was matching the expressive character of the music to the words of the Psalm. Music is a very powerful thing. It can *"enflame our hearts with a more vehement and ardent zeal,"* as Calvin says. But in worship that power must be made subservient to the words we sing. The important thing is the offering of our lips. The music does not stand alone, as in one of Beethoven's symphonies, but supports the text. To serve us well, then, it must not distract from or contradict what we are saying, but call our attention to the meaning of the words and stir us up to experience imaginatively the same things that the psalmists were experiencing thousands of years ago.

When we sing a sad psalm, the music should be sad, as in Psalms 6 and 51. If we sing a psalm of exultation the music should exult, as in Psalms 97 and 150. Psalm 84, a psalm of longing for God's house, expresses that longing in the music. The serenity of the music of Psalm 121 is a perfect match for the text, a psalm of quiet confidence in the watchful care of God. The modes allow a wider range of flexibility in this than the major and minor tonalities of more modern music.

But the matching of music to words is sometimes even more precise than that. Sometimes the music expresses exactly what the words are saying. Thus in Psalm 81, *"Sing a Psalm of joy. Shout with holy fervour,"* you cannot help but shout on the word shout. The long high note at the beginning of line 2 demands it.

Psalm 2 is even more interesting. This is a psalm about the rebellion of the nations and their kings against the Lord and his Anointed. The composer, therefore, could have given the music a defiant cast (a perfectly appropriate way to illustrate that rebellion), but he took a different approach. The first thing to note is that all the notes in the first three lines, except those at the beginnings and ends of the lines, are quarter notes. I think that you will not find this anywhere else in the whole Psalter. There are single lines constructed on the same pattern (Psalm 104, line 7), but not, I think, three lines together. All those quarter notes give one a sense of hurry, especially if the tune is played rather briskly as it ought to be. This sense of hurry reflects the restlessness and frenzy of the nations in their rebellion. The second thing to note is that the range is narrow and at the low end of the octave. You do not get above an A until the middle of the fourth line. So along with the hurry you have a kind of muttering or grumbling sound, which not only reflects on the character of the rebellion, but also reminds us of the derision that the Lord himself expresses in the second stanza. It is brilliantly done.

Also Psalm 130: in the psalm we cry to God "from the depths." From the first to the second note of the tune we fall into the depths, going from an A down to a D. After that fall, however, we begin to rise out of the depths again, but gradually: the rising is not nearly as swift as the falling. In the first line we get up to an F, in the second line back to an A, in the third line to a C, and, finally, in the fourth line to a D. This is the movement of the Psalm itself, for at the end we sing:

> *He will redeem His people,*
> *His chosen Israel,*
> *From all their sin and evil,*
> *That they His praise may tell.*

The *Genevan Psalter* was so successful that within a few years of its completion it had been translated into most of the languages of Europe, except (alas!) English, and has been in continuous use in at least some Reformed churches from the Reformation down to the present. It is a monumental achievement, rich in superb music but still truly congregational, and a wonderful heritage for Reformed churches throughout the world to draw on.

Ken Hanko