

Music of the early Methodist Church

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What comes to mind when one hears the phrase “music of the Methodist Church?” It would be comparatively easy to answer the same question about the Roman Catholic Church or the Lutheran Church. What exactly is Methodist Church music? Is there a uniquely Methodist form of church music? If so, can we find it in the compositions of great composers and their organ and choral music? To answer these questions one must turn to the origins of the Methodist Church.

A common method for the study of music history involves searching for great composers and their creations. Proceeding in chronological order, one focuses on the best works of composers from each historical period. What would we find if we adopted this composer-oriented approach to the study of Methodist music? The answer is rather surprising – there are no great classical composers who wrote primarily for the Methodist church! According to *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, “Methodism has produced no great musicians... Those who have achieved distinction.. have not remained within her fold”¹ A good example of this trend can be found in John Wesley’s own family. His nephew Samuel (1766-1837) was the greatest English composer and organist of the early 19th century. Yet he converted to the Catholic Church early in life for musical reasons. His nephew’s son Samuel Sebastian Wesley (1810-1876) was one of the greatest mid-19th century English church musicians, but he worked and composed for the Anglican Church. In the realm of classical church music it appears that even members of the Wesley family found no place in the Methodist Church.

An attempt to study Methodist music from the angle of classical organ and choral music, then, is bound to fail. A more productive approach would be to examine the music the early Methodists actually sang, particularly during the lifetime of its founders. It will be in the realm of congregational singing that we shall find music important to Methodist Church.

One must always keep in mind that John Wesley was an Anglican priest whose father was also an Anglican clergyman. Doing so illuminates two important facts. First, the congregational music he grew up with was that of the Anglican Church, which comprised only sung metrical versions of psalm texts. Though a small number of hymns and tunes existed, the Anglican Church opposed their use throughout the 18th

century.²

John grew up singing these simple psalm tunes at home, at school, and later, at university. The second important fact to keep in mind is that Wesley's efforts were targeted at a reform of Anglican Church from within. Rather than trying to create his own church that would compete with the Anglican Church, he encouraged his followers, particularly in the early days, to attend their own Anglican Churches frequently. Since he wanted his followers to attend their own churches as well as his meetings, he was careful not to schedule his activities at the same time as local services. The Methodist movement focused its activities on preaching and the singing of hymns, so in the early days there was simply no need for Methodist organ or choral music. Their only music was that of the hymn tune.

John Wesley was very particular about the texts his people were to sing, and how they were to sing them. From the beginning of the movement, Methodists were famed for their hearty singing. The opposite was apparently true in the Anglican Church, so this contrast gave rise to some jealousy on the side of the Anglicans. How was it that John Wesley enabled his followers, many of whom were uneducated members of the lower class, to sing with confidence? Before examining the actual tunes selected by Wesley for his movement's use, let us see what contemporary writers had to say about the singing of the Methodists.

Only a few years after the beginning of the Wesleyan movement, John Scott commented in his *Fine Picture of Enthusiasm* (1744) that the Methodists already had some of the most melodious tunes ever composed for church use. And of their singing, he said, "There is great harmony in their singing, and it is very enchanting."³ Another writer commented in 1787 that "for every person drawn away from the Anglican Church by good preaching, ten had been drawn away by music."⁴ Singing occurred mainly at two types of Methodist meetings: the popular preaching service, which included a hymn before and after the sermon, and the "love-feast," where several hymns were sung at the conclusion. But it wasn't only at indoor meetings that Methodist hymn singing was remarked upon. Charles Wesley was known for leading his followers in hearty singing as they walked along public roads between gatherings.⁵ In fact, hymn singing became a trademark of Methodist worship, so much that it "aroused the envy of Anglicans."⁶ Some of this jealousy appeared in print. A 1762 pamphlet includes a chapter entitled "The Methodists' profane Manner of Singing."⁷ Its author criticizes Anglican churches for singing light music, but says that at least they hadn't gone so far as the Methodists, who sang popular ballad tunes in church."⁸

The Methodist leadership made very specific directions on how the people were

to sing. In 1746, it suggested the following to its preachers. 1) To be careful to choose hymns proper to the congregation. 2) To choose hymns of praise or prayer. 3) To beware of singing too much – though many Wesleyan hymn texts were very long, no more than 5-6 verses were to be sung at a time. 4) To regularly stop the singing and ask the people if they knew the meaning of what they had just sung. This was one of John Wesley’s favorite techniques. The following year at Conference preachers were forbidden to use their own hymns in service – only those approved by the Wesleys were to be sung. Nearly 20 years later the Conference of 1765 continued to instruct its leadership. In that year they were told the following. 1) To teach the people to sing note by note. 2) To have the people sing Methodist tunes before any others. 3) Not to let the people sing too slowly. 4) To encourage everyone present to sing. 5) To correct wrong singing.

The most valuable comments on Methodist singing come from John Wesley himself in the prefaces to his hymnbooks. The following comments are found in the preface to “Sacred Melody”, the melody portion of *Select Hymns* (1761). I have shortened them to include their most salient points. 1) Learn these tunes before any others. 2) Sing them exactly as they are printed here...If you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can. 3) Sing All. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. 4) Sing lustily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan. 5) Sing modestly. 6) Sing in time. Whatever time is sung be sure to keep with it. Do not run before nor stay behind it... 7) Above all sing spiritually.

In contrast with the typical Anglican clergyman of his day, Wesley not only wanted his people to sing well, he knew exactly how and what he wanted them to sing. How many clergy of today invest so much of their time and interest in the singing of their congregations? All of these efforts paid off, of course, for the Methodists were known as the greatest hymn singers of their day.

We next examine the music Wesley had approved for his people to sing. As we look at the various hymn tune books published by Wesley, it is important for the reader to keep the following facts in mind. A hymn is a text written to be sung; it may be a paraphrase of a biblical text, though not a psalm. Many dictionaries define it as a song of praise to God. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* states that a hymn is a “sacred lyric of original content for use in worship, as distinct from a metrical translation or paraphrase of a psalm or of some other portion of scripture or liturgy.”⁹

A tune is the melody used to sing the hymn. Modern hymnals nearly always have texts and tunes printed together, giving one the idea that a text + a tune = a hymn. This is not the case. Another fact to remember is that a psalm, even when sung, is not a hymn.

Since the Anglican Church in Wesley's day permitted only psalm singing, it could be said that the Wesleys were pioneers in creating a new type of English congregational song – the hymn. Referring to *New Grove* again, "The hymns of John Wesley and his brother Charles began a new era in the history of the English hymn, in which words and tune were alike aimed to arouse the emotions of a religiously awakened congregation."¹⁰

By the time of John's death in 1791, the Wesleys had published four different hymnbooks that included tunes, as well as many others that did not. At this point, each of the hymnbooks with tunes will be examined in order of publication.

1. ***A Collection of Tunes set to Music, as they are commonly Sung at the Foundery (1742)***

This was the Wesley's first hymnbook published with tunes. Because it includes hymn texts instead of psalm texts, and because it includes hymn tunes, it is thought to be an innovative attempt to provide music for congregational singing. This hymnbook included 43 melodies; each was paired with its own hymn. None of the melodies were harmonized – only the melody of each tune was printed. We can assume from this fact that the singing was meant to be in unison and unaccompanied. There were three main types of melodies included: 13 German chorales, 19 English psalm tunes, and 10 tunes are from various sources, including one melody from a Handel opera. This hymnbook, with its inclusion of melodies from varying sources, pointed toward a new direction in English congregational singing. Tunes that appeared in this book and are still in general use include "Bedford," "Winchester New," "Hanover" and "Easter Hymn."

(These can be found in 日本基督教団讃美歌 as numbers 33, 60, 76, and 148, respectively.) Unfortunately, the editing was so poorly done that it was never reprinted. [Lightwood p. 16]

2. ***Hymns on the Great Festivals and other occasions (1746)***

This was the second Methodist hymnbook published with melodies. It was meant to provide hymns for the special occasions of the church year, such as Christmas. Thus, it was not meant to be a general use hymnbook. This book is very important in the history of Methodist church music. It contained the first set of tunes composed specifically to be sung with Methodist hymns. For the first time we find a genre of music that is uniquely Methodist. All 24 of the melodies were newly composed for the

collection by J. F. Lampe (1702/3-1751), a German living in England. Lampe composed mainly for the opera, and these melodies were in the style of the 18th century English theatre music. As can be seen in the example below, a continuo bass line is provided, showing that these hymns were meant to be accompanied by either harpsichord or organ, and cello. To modern eyes, the melodies seem quite florid and must have been difficult for a congregation to sing. In fact, they may have originally been composed to be sung as solos.^{1 1} The Wesleys were very pleased with the results, however, and promoted their use in Methodist societies. Although many of these tunes were sung by Methodists for the next 60 years, they gradually passed out of use. At present day one will find very few, if any, of these original tunes in modern hymnals. Strange as it may seem, the first truly Methodist music, approved by the founders of the sect, is now rarely sung, even in Methodist churches.

3. *Select Hymns with Tunes Annexed* (1761) [“Sacred Melody”]

The third Methodist hymnbook containing music, *Select Hymns*, was meant as a general use hymnbook. Not only interesting for its musical contents, John Wesley’s preface is an important statement of early Methodism’s attitude towards hymn singing. In the preface, he says “I have been endeavouring for more than 20 years to procure such a book as this. But in vain: Masters of music were above following any direction but their own. And I was determined, whoever compiled this should follow my directions: Not mending our tunes, but setting them down, neither better nor worse than they were. The following collection contains all the tunes which are in common use amongst us.”^{1 2} This last statement is important to us – it tells us that the melodies included in this hymnbook are the precise ones in use in the Methodist Church in the 1760’s.

The book was printed in two parts. Part one consisted of 133 hymns. Part two contained twelve pages of basic musical instruction, and 102 melodies. Each melody was paired with the first verse of the text to which it was to be sung. Part two was also sold separately under the title “Sacred Melody.” One tune that was new at the time of the 1765 second edition of “Sacred Melody” probably first appeared in this tune book. The tune name is Helmsley and it is sung widely today. (It can be found in *日本基督教団讚美歌二編* as number 54.)

What kinds of melodies were included in this publication? Some of Lampe’s tunes were reused from “Hymns on the Great Festivals.” Some of the melodies found in the 1742 “A Collection of Tunes set to Music” also appear. Perhaps most interesting to readers today was a third category of tunes – those which were adaptations of popular tunes of the day. Two titles which seem particularly amusing are “Busy

curious, thirsty fly,” by Maurice Greene, and Purcell’s “Dialogue between Cupid and Bacchus.”

4. *Sacred Harmony* (1781)

This is the last hymnbook with tunes released during John Wesley’s lifetime. It was a companion to the 1780 hymnbook, and replaced “Sacred Melody.” Out of its 118 hymn tunes, 107 were from “Sacred Melody.” One major difference from the earlier publication was the inclusion of bass lines for all of the tunes. 5 melodies also had a 3rd part. This move shows a demand for harmonized tunes – which might indicate a move toward accompanied singing, or at least, singing in parts. One of the tunes new in this collection was “Leoni,” which can be found in most modern hymnals. (日本基督教団讃美歌, number 85) One other interesting point to this hymnbook – two anthems^{1 3} for choir were included. The inclusion of harmonized hymn tunes and anthems points to a trend towards formalism in Methodist worship. We will examine this topic below.

As was mentioned above, Methodist hymn singing was at first unaccompanied. As Wesley’s movement grew from its roots as a reform movement it began to look more and more like an independent church (though it did not fully split with the Anglican Church until after Wesley’s death). Preaching houses begin to be called chapels, and services began to take on a more formal aspect. There are records of choirs and organs in some of these chapels. Though the original role of the choir (where it existed) was simply to support the hymn singing, it appears that they began to sing anthems as well. It is also recorded that John Wesley accepted organs in churches, but that he was suspicious of their effect in Methodist meetings.^{1 4} There is a story that John was asked if he approved of organs in his meeting houses. The supposed answer was that there was “no objection to their being there provided they are silent.”^{1 5} While this story is probably apocryphal, it demonstrates the suspicion the early Methodists had for formalism in worship, as represented by choirs and organs.

One must be careful not to transfer the Wesleys’ supposed dislike of organs in worship to a general dislike of organs and classical music, however. Charles Wesley’s sons Samuel and Charles were both child prodigies, and their London house had two organs in a large room arranged for concerts. The leading members of London society are recorded to have attended these concerts; young Charles was invited to perform before the King. Rather than disliking the instrument itself, it was apparently the formal atmosphere created by organ music in a service that the John Wesley wished to avoid.

After the death of John Wesley (1791) and the formal split with the Anglican Church (1795), formal music gradually infiltrated Methodist services. Conference

attempted to limit formal choral music in its 1805 meeting; 3 years later it attempted to limit the use of organs in service. Eventually, organs were endorsed by Conference in 1820, ending official opposition to their use. The American Methodist Conference is recorded as having banned organs, instruments and choirs in their 1804 Conference. This ban did not hold for long, for in 1815 the use of organs was officially allowed, if only for the support of hymn singing. The 19th century shows a trend towards more and more formal music in Methodist worship – full choirs, paid soloists, and organs in their chapels. A study of 19th century Methodism in the U.S.A. would reveal a continuing dichotomy – full choral services in the large cities as opposed to the new styles of revival, gospel and folk hymns in the countryside. But this would require another article to detail, and it is at this point our study of Methodist music will close.

The origin of the Methodist Church as a reform movement affected the music it approved from the earliest days. Not only did it reject formal liturgical music, it emphasized vigorous unaccompanied congregational hymn singing. This powerful singing of new kinds of texts and music gave the Methodist services an atmosphere totally distinct from the Anglican Church. When formalism began to creep in to the services of the Methodists Church a struggle began between those who desired a more dignified type of service and those who wished to remain true to the roots of Methodism. This duality persists in the church to this day, and is the reason it is difficult to answer the question “what is Methodist music?”

¹ *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, 1974 ed., s.v. “Hymn Writers,” by Guy E. Snively and Carlton Young.

² *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Hymn,” by Nicolas Temperley.

³ James T. Lightwood, *Methodist Music of the Eighteenth Century* (London: The Epworth Press, 1927), p. 24.

⁴ *Sekai Ongaku Dai Jiten*, 1993 ed., s.v. “John Wesley,” by Nicolas Temperley.

⁵ *New Grove Dictionary*, s.v. “Methodist Church Music,” by Nicolas Temperley.

⁶ *The Encyclopedia of World Methodism*, 1974 ed, s.v. “Music,” by C. W. Towlson.

⁷ The title of the pamphlet was *Parochial Music Corrected* by William Riley (1762).

⁸ Lightwood, *Methodist Music of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 30.

⁹ *New Grove Dictionary*, s.v. “Hymn,” by Nicolas Temperley.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Hymns on the Great Festivals and Other Occasions*, with a Forward by Carlton R. Young (London: M. Cooper, 1746; facsimile reprint of the first ed., Madison: The Charles Wesley Society, 1996), p. 15.

¹² Lightwood, *Methodist Music of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 27.

¹³ Anthem = A choral setting of a religious or moral text in English, usually for liturgical performance. (*The Grove Concise Dictionary of Music*)

¹⁴ *New Grove Dictionary*, s.v. “Methodist Church Music,” by Nicolas Temperley.

¹⁵ Lightwood, *Methodist Music of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 41.

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