

The Scottish Psalmody

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Introduction

What a wonderful Psalmody we have! Words which have been given to us by God himself and which have been sung by the people of God in worship down through the ages. The most important thing when we sing the Psalms is to think about the words we are using as we seek to worship God, but it is helpful to know a little about the tunes we use to sing those words. In this article we take a look at some of the tunes we use and set you some puzzles at the same time. See if you can answer the questions asked.

In our present Psalter we have 193 tunes, some of which date back several hundred years. Let's have a look at the names of some of them.

- Q** Can you put a name to a Psalm tune when you hear it? If the minister announces the names of the tunes to be sung during the service that can help us to get to know them. Do you have a Psalter?
- Q** Look at all the tunes called after place names in Scotland. There's Glasgow, Argyll, Ayrshire and many more. Do you know where Ericstane is? See if you can find it on a map.
- Q** Have you noticed that in our Scottish Psalter we also have many tunes called after English place names, such as York, Liverpool and Huddersfield?
- Q** What other countries can you find represented among our Psalm tunes?
- Q** I'm sure you've noticed how many tunes begin with Saint. We all know who Saint Paul was but what others can you find that begin with Saint? Do you have any idea who Saint Etheldreda was?
- Q** Can you think of a tune called after a person's name but without the Saint?
- Q** It's interesting to look at the small bits of information that are given on the half page where the music is printed. Notice for example that the first nineteen tunes in the Psalm Book all have (L.M.) after them. You probably know that the L.M. stands for Long Metre. Because the words of the Psalms have been put into a form that we can easily sing, we say that they are in **metre**. How many different metres can you find in the Scottish Psalmody?



Below the name and the metre we are told what **key** the music is in, that is, where to pitch it. No — not



throw it away — but to sing it so that the highest note and the lowest note are within our singing range. We are also given a clue as to what **scale** a tune belongs to. A scale is a bit like a musical alphabet; we take notes from the scale to make up our tunes.

Tunes with the home note Doh are **Major Scale** tunes. Most of the tunes we sing are Major. Tunes with the home note Lah are **Minor Scale** tunes. Coleshill is a Minor tune. Can you find some others? Some tunes which sound Major only use five notes. They belong to what is called the **Pentatonic Scale**. You can play Pentatonic tunes on a piano or keyboard using only the black notes. Kilmarnock and Torwood are Pentatonic tunes. Martyrs is an interesting tune. Its home note is Ray and it is based on a very old scale called the **Dorian Mode**.

On the right hand side of the page of the Scottish Psalmody we are told either the name of the composer of the tune or the source. This takes us into Church history and the history of music.

Psalmody in the Years 1500 to 1600

Have you ever thought about how the Psalms were sung in Biblical times? Throughout the history of the Jewish people, music played an important part, not just in their worship but also in celebrating important occasions. The melodies they used to sing the Psalms to have not survived but there are references in the Bible and in other writings which give an idea as to how they would have been sung.

In our present Scottish Psalmody we have preserved for us many old tunes from as far back as the Reformation — the 1500s and 1600s. Some were written by famous composers of the time, e.g. Thomas Tallis and Orlando Gibbons. Some come from collections of tunes from Scotland, England, Germany and France. Often the name of the person who composed the tune has been forgotten. Often it was only the melody that was in the collection and the harmony parts were written at a later date. However, there is evidence that the Scots of the 16th century delighted in singing parts.

Let us have a look at some of the collections which are mentioned in our Psalm Book.

Firstly from the **French-Genevan Psalter (1551)**, we have four tunes — Old 134th (or St. Michael), Old 100th, Geneva and Old 124th. The name associated with all four tunes is Louis Bourgeois, a very fine musician of his time. He lived around the same time as the great protestant Reformer, John Calvin. Both were born in France and found their way to Geneva where, along with believers of other nationalities, they found refuge from the fierce persecution that was raging against the Reformation. One of those spiritual refugees was John Knox, who was to have such an important influence in Scotland.

The second collection mentioned is **Este's Psalter (1592)**. From it we have the tunes Cheshire and Winchester. Thomas Este was one of the greatest music publishers, publishing much of the Elizabethan music of the time as well as Metrical Psalm tunes.

There then followed a number of editions of the Scottish Psalter. The 1615 edition contained some of the best known Common tunes — among them Dunfermline, French and Martyrs. These Common tunes were written for those who could not read, and they would learn the tunes by ear.

There were editions in 1625 and 1634, but it was the 1635 edition that is most notable. From this excellent Psalm Book we get the tunes Glenluce, London New, Wigtown and Duries 124th. In this Psalter there are tunes of three categories. Proper Tunes: which were tunes specifically intended for individual psalms as the Reformers wanted each psalm to have its own tune. Hence we have Old 100th and Old 124th; Common Tunes — these were as the 1615 edition; and Tunes in reports — These were more challenging to sing as there was some imitation between the parts. Tunes in reports include Aberfeldy and Bon Accord. This edition seemed to represent the peak of Psalmody. In fact the first Psalm Book to be published with any music had only twelve tunes!

Whatever happened musically speaking, one thing was certain; the words of the Metrical Psalms had taken deep root in people's hearts. The words were stored in their memories in such a way that when trials came and persecution raged they came readily to their lips. The Psalm Book was precious to them. It gave them words of strength, courage and comfort which helped them through very dark and cruel years.

In 1685 a young woman named Margaret Wilson was tied to a stake at the mouth of the river



Bladenoch near Wigtown. An older woman, also Margaret, was bound to a stake further out. The older one would drown first when the Solway tide came in. It was hoped that the younger Margaret would recant and give up the desire for freedom to worship God as the Bible teaches and not as the government was enforcing. However the young Margaret did not flinch. As the waters lapped about her she was heard singing from Psalm 25:

*To thee I lift my soul:
O Lord, I trust in thee:
My God, let me not be ashamed
Nor foes triumph o'er me.*

Have you got such words stored in your memory and heart to help you in the day of trouble?

The Years c. 1700 to c. 1800

After the turbulence of the 1500s and 1600s more peaceful times returned to Scotland. There was a national revival of musical interest but it was slow to reach the "man in the street". Traditional songs had lived on in the memories of the people and new collections began to be published. However, in the Church, the twelve tunes mentioned in the last article seem to have been the complete repertoire. One step forward was that they were harmonised.

Attempts were made to try and improve general musical standards in church singing. In a publication of 1726, a schoolmaster, Thomas Bruce, included explanatory notes along with the

twelve tunes. He also included eight tunes which had not been published before. They did not gain acceptance!

And then exciting things began to happen. In 1753, at the request of a number of ministers in the Aberdeen Synod, Thomas Channon, who had been in General Wolfe's Regiment and quartered in Aberdeen, was granted discharge from the army in order to instruct church people to sing "in the reformed way".

Channon's method was to organise choirs, seating them in a choir gallery; to abolish the adding of "graces" (extra notes) to tunes and to insist that tunes were sung as written in the music. He also encouraged singing at a brisker tempo (speed, pace), restored part singing, used a pitch-pipe so as to sing at the correct pitch and taught the people to read music using the Sol-fa method of notation (the one we use in our blue psalter). In those days it was considered irreverent to use the actual words of the Psalms to practise and so practice verses were used instead. The movement began in the Monymusk area of Aberdeenshire but soon spread through other parts of the country.

Two years later, in 1755, the Corporation of Glasgow engaged a Thomas Moore to do in Glasgow what Channon was doing in Aberdeenshire. He was a well-known teacher of Psalmody in Manchester. He also compiled books of Psalm tunes. From one of his books comes the tune Glasgow which you will find in your Psalmody. Moore became precentor in Blackfriars Church in Glasgow. Moore's tune books supplied music for all the choirs that were springing up all over the country. The monopoly of the twelve tunes was well and truly broken. Although the choir movement was very popular with so many people there was opposition to it.

Perhaps this is a good point to remind ourselves that, although it is wonderful to hear good singing, and it is a wonderful experience to take part in good singing, it is not the high standard of singing that pleases God. Yes, the Bible does teach us that whatever we do we should do it the very best we can but Heb. 11: 6 says "without faith it is impossible to please Him..."

We are encouraged to sing praise to our great God:

*"O come, let us sing to the Lord:
Come, let us every one
A joyful noise make to the rock
Of our salvation.*

*Let us before his presence come
With praise and thankful voice;
Let us sing psalms to him with grace,
And make a joyful noise." Ps. 95:1,2.*

The old Scottish tunes were **syllabic**, i.e., there was one note to each syllable. This was fine for people learning a new art at the time of the Reformation, but it severely restricts musical interest. What can help musical variety? Bach achieved it in his masterly use of harmony. He harmonised the tune of one chorale (a German Protestant hymn) eleven times! The tune was the same each time but the other three parts (Alto, Tenor and Bass) were completely different each time. Bourgeois, in the early French Psalter, on the other hand used varying rhythms. But England and Scotland took

the way of composing a melody so that it was less syllabic: the notes to be sung to one syllable are marked with a slur or underlined f.m.

Bishopthorpe by Jeremiah Clark was a revolutionary tune. It has a lovely melodic shape and is rhythmically interesting.

The Evangelical Movement in England produced a flood of new tunes. Most of the tunes of this period (1700 – 1800) in our Psalmody come from South of the Border, including Doversdale, Liverpool, University and Warwick. Can you find any Scottish ones?

As is the way, things got a bit out of hand. People even searched classical music for tunes which could be torn out of context and twisted to fit a Psalm metre. Decoration of the melody was carried too far. Even old dignified tunes like Tallis and Old 100th were filled out with extra notes. And, anyone could write a Psalm tune, couldn't they?

Once again it was time for some sound guidance . . .

1800 to the Present

Things had reached such a state that improvement was needed - both to the way of singing the psalms and also in raising the standards of sound musical values. Some of those who contributed to this improvement are mentioned below.

R.A. Smith, the son of a Paisley silk weaver, was precentor (and Session Clerk) at the Abbey Church. There he trained the very fine Abbey Harmonic Choir. In 1823 he moved to Edinburgh and became leader of Psalmody in St. George's Church. The minister, Andrew Thomson, was also a musician and he and Smith composed and published arrangements of the psalms as Anthems (choir pieces) most of which have not survived. Tunes that have survived from these men are St. Georges Edinburgh (Thomson's) and Invocation, Selma, Morven, St. Lawrence and St. Mirren, (Smith's).

Joseph Mainzer taught Sight Singing as well as other musical skills in Paris and then throughout Britain — he even got as far as Strathpeffer! He lived in Edinburgh from 1842 to 1847 and lectured and taught enthusiastically. While there he published the "Standard Psalmody of Scotland" and reintroduced many old tunes from the 1564 Psalter. We have his tune Mainzer in our Psalm Book.

T.L. Hatley was born in Greenlaw, Berwickshire and was one of the few precentors who came out with the Free Church at the Disruption in 1843. He was precentor at the Free High Church, Edinburgh and also to the Assembly. Hatley wanted to teach, not choirs, but congregations and he attracted huge classes — as many as 900 people in Greenock! He not only taught people how to sing but provided them with historical and critical information as well. Glencairn, Huntingtower and Leuchars were composed by him as was the melody of Cunningham.

William Carnie was an Aberdeen precentor and journalist and was responsible for similar improvements in the North East. He founded a "Psalmody Improvement Association" which was made up of 50 or 60 precentors. In 1854 he gave a memorable lecture in Aberdeen to about 2000

people. Such was his success that when John Curwen visited Aberdeen to propagate his Tonic Sol-fa System, a crowded audience showed him that they could already sing at sight, thanks to Carnie's teaching.

Hately and Carnie edited and published standard Psalters which helped to raise the standard of congregational singing. Their success was helped by the general and cultural interest of the time.

Curwen's Solfa System also helped and made the reading of music possible for hundreds of people and "The evils of singing by ear and indifference to guidance began to become mere memories."

Those mentioned above had a big influence on the singing of Psalms and in educating people to sing from music. However, there are one or two other Scottish names which appear in our present Psalter which may be of interest:

Hugh Wilson, a shoemaker and amateur composer, who was born in Fenwick, Ayrshire, wrote Caroline and Martyrdom.

John Turnbull from Paisley and a music-seller in Ayr, was a precentor, first in the New Church, Ayr, and then at St. George's Church, Glasgow. He composed the tune Torwood within the ruins of Torwood Castle near Falkirk.

John Campbell, another Paisley man who became a Merchant in Glasgow, gave us the tune Orlington.

W.R. Broomfield, originally from Inverary, came to Aberdeen in 1850 and taught music. His grave is in Allenvale Cemetery and notes of his tune St. Kilda are inscribed on a monument over his grave.

Kenneth George Finlay was born in Finnart and as well as being a Glasgow Merchant he was also an amateur musician and composer. He composed the tune Stracathro.



Those of you who live in Edinburgh or who can visit there might like to scramble up Calton Hill. Above the steps leading up from Waterloo Place there is a bronze plaque with three heads and three names. The plaque commemorates three Edinburgh precentors who were well known for their very fine voices. One of them had a famous daughter Marjorie Kennedy Fraser who collected and notated many Hebridean songs.

As exclusive Psalm Singers, our Church is part of a minority group of Christian worshippers. We do not need to be ashamed of this however. We sing words that God himself gave us and which have been part of our history for more than 400 years. We must not let people suggest that we have no music in our churches. Our music is unaccompanied vocal music. We are called to sing with grace in our hearts, worshipping our Lord and Creator, knowing that he looks on the heart. As congregations we are duty bound to sing in the

best way possible, displaying to any who observe us and listen to us that our worship is dignified but not dreary; solemn yet cheerful, showing our calm devotion and trust.

Praise ye the Lord; for it is good

Praise to our God to sing.

For it is pleasant, and to praise

It is a comely thing. Ps. 147:1.