

Foreword

Introduction: The Power and purpose of hymns

Music is a mystery.

Let me begin with a personal anecdote. I recall chatting with a man about his church activity – raised in the church, he had not attended a meeting in decades, was now outside the church and firm in his resolve that he would remain so. “But you know the one thing I miss, Mark?” he said almost wistfully, “Singing the hymns”. The music of his childhood still had a welcome place at the core of his soul, still had the power to comfort and inspire.

Hymns are at the core of our sacrament meetings, setting the tone, “inviting the Spirit”, as we say, and this is no mere cliché. Hearing the music and participating in the singing can have a profound emotional and spiritual effect on us. We feel peace; we feel unified as saints; we contemplate doctrine and receive the Holy Ghost in a powerful way; we worship our God and strengthen our faith.

And not only do hymns enrich our sacrament meetings: I have been in High Council meetings where the Stake President commented (and all agreed) that the opening hymn was so sweet, so uplifting, we could close right now and the meeting would have been profitable; one of my most successful priesthood lessons consisted of a close reading of *How Firm A Foundation*, digesting some of the profound gospel insights contained therein; I have counselled with the weeping sinner who could see no way forward and quoted: “Eyes that are wet now, ere long will be tearless. Blessings await you in doing what’s right! Do what is right; let the consequence follow ... God will protect you; then do what is right!”; I have sacred memories of singing hymns and Primary songs to my little ones at bedtime, “So, little children, let’s you and I try to be like him: try, try, try”, and resolving in my heart to do so.

Mormon hymnody

Good hymns sound natural, effortless, simple. Yet there are significant technical challenges to be met in hymn writing: hymns must be singable by those without musical training; new hymns must feel familiar, yet contain something special and new; hymns must follow strict restrictions of vocal range and voice leading; hymns express the church’s unique culture.

What does a Mormon hymn sound like? That’s difficult to define. Mormon hymns are generally conservative in style and technically refined, tending to a 19th century idiom but also tending to the folk style as opposed to the formal (not surprising given the time, place and social class in which our church culture took shape). Several of our hymns, including the iconic *Come, Come Ye Saints* and *A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief*, came from *the Sacred Harp* and its American frontier folk-hymn tradition. Interestingly, speaking of the *Sacred Harp*, many of those hymns are in minor mode, but all but *four* of

our current hymns are in major keys¹. Many times I've heard people say they love those minor hymns and wish there were more. Perhaps this is a preference that has changed. I've written several new hymns in the minor mode for this collection.

There are other ineffable characteristics that can only be appreciated by someone immersed in Mormon culture for many years. Being raised in the church, I have the feeling that I can tell a Mormon sounding hymn when I hear it. I can only assume other Latter-day Saints will understand what I mean. (That's not to say that there aren't hymns from other faiths that satisfy the LDS sensibility – but then again, we express that sensibility in the hymns we chose to adopt.)

My history of hymn writing

I attempted my first original hymn as a teenager, writing my own texts – mostly because I didn't have anyone to collaborate with. I also did new settings of a few texts from the hymnbook. I suppose that in the fifteen years between then and graduate school (where I studied composition) I wrote eight or ten hymns. Some were even pretty good, but looking back now I see that they were technically flawed and either quite derivative or unsuccessfully experimental. Several got performed though, and the excitement of my music being sung in public was a marvelous encouragement to keep going.

After university there was no hymn writing for at least ten years, when I came across the first in a series of online articles by Orson Scott Card about hymn writing from the poet's perspective. I managed to get Scott's attention with a couple of settings of texts he had included in his article and his initial feedback was very positive. It was followed within a few weeks by 56 pages worth of hymn texts and a question: "How much work are you willing to put into this with me? I can tell you right now, I want to include your music ... with the published book." I was willing to work. Over the following few months I wrote a few dozen hymns and eventually after three years or so had completed 55 original settings of Card hymns.

I think I had matured a lot as an artist since my student days. I was no longer self conscious about writing unabashedly traditional music. My concern was not to impress, but to express. I gave little thought to the trained musicians but kept to the principles of simplicity, beauty and testimony. As I set about creating music for these wonderful texts that I had been given, I realized that something profound had changed within me; I felt an unusual confidence and creative energy take hold. I thought to myself, "Mormon hymnody was mother's milk to me; Mormon doctrine, culture and testimony are my 'native air'². I have served as a church musician since I was a deacon, studied music and composition to a professional level. Choral music is my specialty. I have been preparing for 50 years for this task: I was made for this." I felt this was something I could do as well as anyone in the church. I blush to write that

¹ The four being *Lord, We Come Before Thee Now*, *If You Could Hie to Kolob*, *That Easter Morn*, and *Ring Out, Wild Bells* – and two of *them* substitute the major chord at the end of the last verse in what's called a *Tierce de Picardy*, thus abandoning the somber minor final cadence.

² *Prayer is the soul's sincere desire*, Hymns, 145.

– and it’s for others to decide if I succeeded – but I’m saying that’s how I felt at the time I was writing these hymns.

Technical considerations in hymn composition I: Working with the Text

Now to some of my thoughts on hymn writing for the composer. It should be obvious that the primary consideration when writing a hymn is the voice. The melody must be in a range that is singable for the average person: just over an octave range from C to the upper D (perhaps stretching a whole tone on either side of that range occasionally). It should be relatively uncomplicated, having enough repetition to be logical and readily learned by the untrained singer, yet also having enough variety to avoid becoming boring.

Above all, the melody must enhance and express the meaning of the words. This can be tricky when the different verses of the hymn don’t match the exact syntactical and emotional points. If the verses are quite different from each other in this way, it can be an even greater problem. A common example is the last verse of “Come, come ye Saints”, where the sombre thought, “And should we die before our journey’s through”, is at odds with the cheery, hopeful exhortations of the first three verses. Organists wonder what to do with this: a little slower? A softer registration that swells to a grand forte in the middle of the verse? – it’s the rare organist that can pull that off. Another prime example is the last verse of “Battle Hymn of the Republic”. But these hymns are so strong overall that the momentary mismatch is endured without complaint³.

Scott’s hymns often have a wonderful twist in the last verse. Take for example “We Shall Become Thy Sons”. The opening verses speak of priesthood service and close with the statement, “Thus we shall become thy sons”. Then the last verse speaks of the women in our lives, specifically our wives: “Sealed to these beloved ones, thus we shall become thy sons”, and in a single phrase is expressed not only tenderness for our wives, but also the doctrine that only through the temple sealing can we achieve exaltation! I remember the first time I read through that hymn during my lunch hour and thinking, “Verse one, hm-hmm, that’s nice; verse two, fine”. But then I came to the final chorus and the Spirit encompassed me and I thought, “Wow. This is powerful, unique.” I printed out the words to take with me and composed the melody that day on the train home.

Why do I mention this here? Because usually you write the melody to the first verse and then try it out on the others, but sometimes it’s best to take that special last verse and set it to music. Now, if all the verses match one another lyrically (as Scott’s almost always do) this won’t introduce any musical problems with the other verses, but the strongest verse has set the tone for the whole hymn. And in

³ A side note: sometimes ambitious music directors will attempt such effects with the congregation, but I have learned that if you try anything too fancy the result will likely be confusion and frustration – or perhaps bemusement – in the congregation: just the opposite of what is wanted. The hymn must serve the saints, not the other way around. Hymn singing must bring the peace and joy of the Spirit to the congregation. Period. Save the choral effects for the choir. (Indeed, promote, embrace, relish the choral effects with the choir!)

any case, you want to be sure that when the “punch” comes – so to speak – in that last verse, that the music will support it.

A point of controversy between composers and poets is repetition of lines, and Scott is no exception in this regard: he doesn't like it. If he'd wanted to repeat a phrase he would have done it. However, after some discussion (and, I guess, after establishing some trust that the result would be good) he graciously allowed me some latitude in this matter, acknowledging that a song is different than a poem and sometimes the music *needs* a phrase to be repeated. A well-known hymn that illustrates this point is *God be with you till we meet again*⁴. Remarkably, the whole 16 measure first verse and chorus consists of:

God be with you till we meet again at Jesus' feet;
By his counsels guide, uphold you;
With his sheep securely fold you;

Basically, aside from the “God be with you” phrases, the unique content of each verse is a single rhyming couplet. The rest of this one-and-a-half page hymn is filled out (with marvelous effect) by repetition and variation of a most significant phrase.

Ideally such repetition not only serves a musical need, but enhances the sense of the text as well. I never repeat a phrase if (a) it doesn't occur on a significant, repeat-worthy phrase and (b) it doesn't work for every verse without major textual alterations. Often it will be the last line that is repeated, but sometimes an inner line, as in *The Laborer Is Worthy*, where the third line is repeated. In the case of this hymn, it adds a touch of irony (or perhaps appropriateness) in the first verse where the repeated phrase is, “It cannot be delayed”, thus delaying the end of the verse.

Technical considerations in hymn composition II: Melody

A note about my hymn melodies: I like them to have motivic unity, meaning small melodic fragments are repeated and altered. My hero in hymn writing is Alexander Schreiner and he gave us some truly masterful examples. Have a look at *Thy Spirit, Lord, has stirred our souls*. There are three phrases (not the usual four!) with exactly the same rhythm, made up of two halves, the first featuring two falling thirds, the second one a step lower, and then a short scale up and down. The second phrase is the same as the first, only higher. The third phrase is back down in the range of the first, but partly inverted, with rising seconds instead of falling thirds and then the scale up and down, this time returning all the way down to the starting note. This is an exceptionally tight melody, very economical in its motivic material, but that material is interestingly and masterfully varied throughout. *In memory of the crucified* is another good Schreiner example, four phrases made of scales that rise a fourth and fall back (the third phrase is an exception in that it leaps instead of stepping through the scale, but it's still a rise of a fourth that is followed by a scale down). Not all good melodies are so economical, but all good melodies do

⁴ *God be with you till we meet again*, Hymns, 152.

involve a satisfying mix of repetition and variation⁵. One happy result of good construction is that it makes the melody logical and more easily learned and remembered.

The rhythmic construction of a hymn is supremely important in matching and enhancing the text. Scott loves unusual constructions and rhyme schemes, so this leads to some unusual melodic structures. The rhythm is usually the first thing I settle on: what metre will suit this hymn? (I try out several.) Are there points in the poetry that should be emphasized with longer time values? Here is where you let the text lead you very directly.

Technical considerations in hymn composition III: Harmony and Voice Leading

Although I strive to keep things simple, my harmonic language is often more adventurous than most Latter-day Saints will be used to. I love lots of rich four-note chords; I love suspensions; I love seventh chords and I especially love the major triad with an added ninth (in any inversion)⁶. I love the minor mode and a much higher proportion of my hymns are in minor than what we find in the current LDS Hymnbook. I find V-I cadences dated and usually avoid them (a personal bias, admittedly). In fact, many of the hymns in this book end on a chord other than the tonic, or modulate to a different key altogether from the start of a verse to the end. I love the “reverse plagal” cadence (I-IV) in *The Laborer Is Worthy* and hope in performance it is left as it stands, resisting the temptation to add the tonic E-flat chord at the end. Many medieval compositions ended this way, before the V-I cadence became the norm; I find it somehow very appealing.

My melodies often hearken back to folk song and their modal tendencies (for example, mixolydian or pentatonic tunes). Perhaps this is related to the years I spent conducting and arranging for an Irish choir. I love the folk songs of the British Isles, which are the seed bed for so much American folk music. Such melodies are structured quite differently from European classical melodies, and this makes for some unusual harmonic progressions and voice leading. For example, there is an important commandment about four voice writing which every harmony student learns: thou shalt not have two voices move in parallel octaves or fifths⁷. While I do avoid parallel fifths, I’m not so fanatic about it as some other composers I’ve talked with. I let my ear be my guide. Sometimes I justify fifths because

⁵ This is true of all music in some way or other, not just hymns and songs, so I’m not revealing any astounding insight into music theory here, but it is something all composers do either consciously or intuitively – usually a combination of both.

⁶ That chord is most satisfying on the IV chord, or on the tonic (but not the final tonic chord) and appears in practically every hymn I wrote for this collection.

⁷ And it’s a good rule in traditional harmony, because parallel fifths and octaves generally sound bad. This is because the ideal in this style is to have the four voices be independent while they intertwine pleasingly. Octaves and fifths are such an acoustically “strong” interval (meaning that the frequency ratios are very simple, 2:1 and 3:2 respectively) that when two voices move in parallel octaves or fifths to two other notes of the same interval, the voices sound like they are tied to one another and not independent. Subtle perhaps, but quite noticeable. Kind of like a bad fashion combo. Fulfills the basic requirements of clothes, but is not aesthetically pleasing.

they involve the third and seventh of a seventh chord; sometimes I purposely desire the parallelism; sometimes the solutions for avoiding them *diminish* the beauty of the progression, so I leave them in. Always the result sounds pleasing to my ear, which is ultimately all a composer can or ought to go by.

Originality in hymn writing

One basic goal I strive towards: the hymn must be special. After all is said and done, after all the technical restrictions that I've mentioned have been satisfied, if it doesn't bring something unique to the table, if it substantially mimics something that's already in the hymn book, then what's the point? It won't be performed widely or come to be valued by people if it doesn't contain something they don't already get (and usually better) somewhere else. This is perhaps the hardest thing to achieve and it is not for the composer to say whether he or she has been successful in the attempt. I know that I enjoy these compositions almost a decade after I wrote them, most of them are unlike anything in the current hymnbook and I'm excited to make them available to others.

Conclusion: the creative process

I hit a rich creative vein with this work, especially in the first months, composing two or three or more hymns a week, sometimes two or three different settings of the same text in a matter of days. I recall once starting on a text and emailing Scott the finished score an hour later. I worked out new tunes humming to myself on the train to work, walking home at night, lying in bed, sitting in sacrament meeting, walking through the mall: when you get in a creative groove like this, not only does the inspiration flow quickly, but in wide variety, the subconscious sometimes creating melodies seemingly spontaneously in the depths of your mind.

I recalled at the time the story of a 20-something Paul McCartney at the height of his writing career, when he and John were creating hit song after hit song after hit song, whole albums full of them. Paul says that one night he awoke in the middle of the night hearing a song in his head. He stumbled over to the small piano in his room and played it through a few times so he could remember it and went back to sleep. He did remember it in the morning: it was a beautiful little tune that he was sure he must have unconsciously remembered from somewhere. He would play "Name That Tune" with people to see if they could recognize it, tell him where it came from, but everyone said, "Paul, it's beautiful mate, but I don't think I've heard it before. It's an original as far as I can tell." Eventually he wrote words to go with his dream-tune: "Yesterday all my troubles seemed so far away".

Such magical, effortless creativity; and it seemed it would go on forever. But it didn't.

It never does.

I knew as I wrote hymn after hymn (and they seemed very good to me and to people I played them for) that this was a moment in my life to be savoured, a moment that would be one day but a memory.

It's a good memory. A sacred memory.