

Even Great Musicians Find Hymn Tunes Hard To Write

BY SIR RICHARD TERRY, *Mus. Doc.*

"How can one explain to the average person the difference between a good and a bad tune?"

To a cultured person the issue is so simple that an answer is hardly required; he *knows*. But to the average man (timid about his own critical faculty) the answer is not so easy, since it all depends on the angle from which you approach the subject; e.g., its melody, its harmony, its rhythm, its balance of phrase, or (most debatable of all) its aesthetic or devotional appeal.

Five Essentials

Firstly then: If the melody is strongly and clearly defined, free from triviality, banality or trite clichés; if it is readily picked up by a congregation *without a note of its harmony being played*, it is (other things being equal) a good tune. If on the contrary its melody is weak and sentimental, if it is reminiscent of the "drawing-room song" (as too many 19th century hymn tunes are), if its intervals are awkward (necessitating the use of an instrument to make them intelligible), if a congregation finds difficulty in "picking up" the melody from merely hearing it sung (unaccompanied) by a single voice, then it is a bad, or at best, an unsuitable tune.

Secondly: If the vocal harmonies or the organ accompaniments are bold, straightforward and diatonic it is good. If they are meretricious, "sugary" or sensuous it is bad.

Thirdly: If its rhythms are broad and dignified and free from that form of vulgarity known as "patter" it is good. If they are jerky, "jumpy," square-cut or vague or rambling, it is bad.

Fourthly: If its phrases are ill-balanced it is not a good tune. This point is not so easy to demonstrate in print; it is quite easy if one has a pianoforte with which to illustrate it. With a pianoforte one can demonstrate to the most indifferently-musical audience how phrases can be well or ill balanced by (a) contrast (b) repetition or (c) rhyme. These three cases may be illustrated respectively (from the "good" point of view) by hymns 206, 4, and 258 in *The Westminster Hymnal*. A case of ill-balanced phrasing

from the melodic point of view) is that of Dykes' popular tune to the equally popular hymn "The King of Love my Shepherd is." The first and third lines of the melody are very similar but not sufficiently alike to suggest repetition (for the sake of emphasis) or sufficiently unlike to suggest contrast (for the sake of variety); the second and fourth lines are identical save that an additional note is added to line four which just upsets the balance. And so, this tune which opens so beautifully in its first two lines, grows weaker in the third and peters out lamely in the fourth.

Fifthly: In the matter of æsthetic or devotional appeal—two points so subtle in essence, so real in effect; so unsusceptible to definition, so compelling to the sense—nothing short of a bulky treatise could do justice to the subject. So much depends on a variety of circumstances and occasions. A tune eminently suitable to one set of circumstances may be quite out of place in another. To take one example: Sullivan wrote a rousing tune (I am aware that highbrows call it "vulgar") to "Onward Christian Soldiers." It fulfils the idea of soldiers on the march and from that point of view it is inspiring. But by singing that tune to another hymn of *exactly the same metre* (e.g. Caswall's "Come ye little children" or — worse still — Faber's "Mary dearest Mother") the result is grotesque in the first instance and outrageous in the second. And yet it is *precisely the same tune*. Which only goes to show that tunes intrinsically good in one case may prove shockingly bad in others.

The truth is that in judging hymn tunes we seem to get "no forrader" for lack of a common denominator to our varying standards.

A hymn tune is such a *simple* form of musical composition that most people seem to think it must necessarily be an *easy* one. The reverse is the case. That is why hymn tune composition has such a fascination for the amateur and the *dillettante*. It is they—with their half-baked musicianship and their unerring instinct for the second-rate—who are the greatest obstacle to any progress in the vernacular hymnology. It is they who are the

most dogmatic in the way they lay down the law to the musician and the multitude alike. It is they who cling obstinately to a type of tune (with its weak melodies and saccharine harmonies) which was the (mid-Victorian) invention of a non-Catholic religious body and which is now repudiated even by them.

Thoughtful Catholics may reasonably ask why they should be held under the yoke of that deplorable passing fashion when the non-Catholic denomination which gave it birth has shaken that yoke from off its own neck.

These well-meaning and misguided *dilettanti* would do well to make an historical study of hymnology. They would then find (possibly to their surprise) that it is not sufficient to put a few notes together with pleasing and "correct" harmonies and call the result a hymn tune. A vernacular hymn tune is (I repeat) not an *easy* thing to write; it is a specially *hard* one.

A Surprising Feature

Mere musicianship is not necessarily a qualification. That is the "surprise" which I promise the *dilettanti* who do make a serious study of the subject.

Bach is regarded as the hymn-tune writer *par excellence*. But how many of our *dilettanti* are aware that (with a few exceptions) he merely added his gorgeous harmonies to *melodies written by lesser men*? Only one of Handel's hymn tunes has survived the test of time. Mozart wrote only two hymn-tunes and even they have never had a real vogue. Haydn is known by only one tune, and it is now doubted if the *melody* was really his. Beethoven had no flair for this form of composition. Mendelssohn's hymns are like those of Bach—fine harmonisations of other people's melodies.

No, my good and dogmatic *dilettanti*, the great composers have shown us that the flair for hymn-tune composition is a special one and by no means the possession of even the greatest musician.

What, then, are we going to do about it? Ah, there's the rub! But being an incorrigible optimist I am convinced that we shall soon see daylight if we honestly look for it, and—having found it—keep our eyes turned always to the light.

Our present difficulty is the lack of any standard, criterion, touchstone (or whatever you like to call it). At present we have (a) the non-musical person who says he knows nothing of the subject, (b) the *dilettante* who says he does, and (c) the musician who says

that hymn-tune composition is not necessarily a concomitant of musicianship.

Until we get some sort of fusion between these three types of mind little can result; but I am hopeful still.

If I had the wit of a Bernard Shaw or a Chesterton I might say something to the effect that when it comes to assessing the values of hymn-tunes there are two classes specially unqualified for the task — the musical and the unmusical.

Think this over. It is not such a paradox as it looks.

(*The Universe*)

A LAST WORD ON VERNACULAR HYMNS

BY SIR RICHARD TERRY

"We should rid ourselves of the 19th century illusion that hymns are meant for the choir."
—Sir Richard Terry.

Some little while back Sir Thomas Beecham (the only competent operatic director this country possesses) proposed a scheme for all-the-year-round opera at a cost to subscribers of ten shillings per annum, i.e., at tenpence per month or twopence a week.

His scheme was done to death by the very people who had professed their love of opera and had ceaselessly clamoured for it. Sir Thomas might have quoted the old couplet:

"No doubt you did well to dissemble your love;
But why did you kick me downstairs."

But he didn't. He contented himself with saying it seemed that the effect of opera on his countrymen was only comparable with the effect of all the red rags purchasable in Oxford street upon all the wild bulls of Adalusia.

Mr. D. B. Wyndham Lewis (in his priceless "Crazy News" column) took up Sir Thomas's parable and drew a delicious picture of half the British public staring at Sir Thomas with dilated fawn-like eyes and then bolting for cover, while the other half struck an attitude of truculent defiance and dared him to come on.

I could not help being struck—at the time—by the startling similarity of attitude between British (professed) opera lovers and British (professed) hymn lovers.

When anyone proposes amplification, emendation, improvement or readjustment of our scanty flock of vernacular hymns the result is the same. Half the populace bolt for the nearest cover and the other half dare the innovator to come on.

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