

## The Hymnody of the Church: Function and Form

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When Christians discuss worship, especially if their conversation is heated, they usually focus on one primary element of worship above others—music. The church's songs are without question the most controversial aspect of Christian worship. I am convinced, however, that some careful thinking about what Scripture has to say about our hymns, adequate understand of the purpose of power of Christian hymnody, and consideration of how the church's music has related to the culture around it throughout history will help us arrive at some conclusions about how we should go about choosing hymnody for our churches. In this chapter we will focus on the first two considerations, and in the next chapter we will look at some history and arrive and some principles for our choices.

Before we proceed, however, we should define what we mean by “hymn.” As with many other terms, “hymn” has several different definitions, and it can be used in a variety of ways. In its most basic definition, a hymn is simply a song of praise. A Christian hymn, therefore, is a song of praise to God.

The term may be used more narrowly, however. In some context it is appropriate to distinguish between a *psalm* and a *hymn*. Usually when these two terms are contrasted, the former refers to an inspired song and the latter a song of human composure.

Some suggest such a distinction in Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 where, along with “psalms” and “hymns,” the term “spiritual songs” is listed. Some see these three terms as distinct categories of songs, yet there is really no unanimity amongst scholars as to what, exactly, these terms signify. Some insist that “psalms” refers to biblical songs, “hymns” specifies songs written by humans and directed toward God, and “spiritual songs” denotes Christian songs directed toward other Christians. Others insist that “spiritual songs” are songs that the Holy Spirit is still inspiring today. The problem with this theory, however, is that there really is no evidence in the Bible or even in literature from that time to support such views.

I tend to lead toward the position that these terms can really be used interchangeably and that Paul didn't intend for them to be used as separate categories of song. In fact, some scholars argue that all three of these terms were used to designate particular songs within the Jewish Psalter, and I think the New Testament even bears this out. For instance, in Matthew 26 after Jesus and his disciples had observed the Passover Feast, verse 30 says that they sang a hymn. It was customary for Jews to sing one of the Hallel Psalms after the Passover Feast, so that's what they likely sang, and yet this passage calls that Psalm a hymn.

So I take these terms to be fairly fluid and flexible in their description of any sacred song intended to be sung by the congregation. We may in some settings distinguish a *hymn* from a *psalm* or even from a *gospel song* or *praise chorus*, and we will make such distinctions before this discussion is complete. However, at least initially, I will use the term “hymn” very broadly to describe any song written for use in Christian worship, and our goal is to come to some conclusions about how to discern which hymns we should use in our worship.

## **The Biblical Mandate**

The first question we must ask in this discussion is, “Why do we sing hymns in Christian worship at all?” Is the singing of hymns optional? Is it something churches do simply because it is enjoyable to affirm biblical truth that way? If a congregation or an individual doesn't want to sing hymns in their worship, may they get rid of singing altogether? These are very important questions to ask, because they get right at the heart of the function hymns play in our worship.

Put very simply, we sing in our worship because the Bible tells us to. As Greg has already mentioned, since the Bible is our supreme authority, we must do whatever it tells us to do in worship, and we may do only what it tells us to do. Since the Bible commands that we sing together as his people, we must have hymns in our Christian worship.

Let us begin broadly with some example of Old Testament commands to sing in assemblies. Psalm 149:1, for example, admonishes us to “Sing to the Lord a new song.” But notice the specific location of this singing: “in the *assembly* of the godly.” God has commanded us to sing to him, not only individually, but also corporately. Psalms 9:11, 18:49, 21:13, 57:9, 95:1 are additional examples of commands or illustrations of singing praise to God corporately. Ryan has explained the biblical mandate to gather corporately for worship, and singing is one element that should be a part of those gatherings.

But what about the Christian church specifically? I have already referenced the two most well-known commands to sing together, Ephesians 5:18-21 and Colossians 3:16:

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Notice the specific “one another” contexts of these commands, which indicates the corporate nature of the singing. Indeed, singing must be a part of the corporate gatherings of the church.

Now, I'd like to make one side comment about instrumental music in worship. Some traditions have argued that we may only use vocal music in Christian worship. They appeal to the authority of the New Testament Scriptures for what we may do, an emphasis that I greatly appreciate. They insist that since the New Testament only commands us to “sing,” making no mention of instruments, then we must limit ourselves to vocal singing only.

However, notice exactly what Ephesians 5:19 says. It commands that we sing *and* “make melody.” The term translated “sing” in this verse literally means to “make a melody with the vocal chords,” so it clearly refers to vocal singing as we would expect. But the word translated

“making melody” literally means to “pluck,” as on a stringed instrument. So this verse refers both to vocal and instrumental music.

So very simply, we sing in our worship because the Bible tells us to do so. This may seem obvious and simplistic, but it raises an important point: singing in Christian worship is not optional. An individual cannot just decide that because he doesn't like singing, he won't sing. A church can't decide that they're going to eliminate congregational singing and just have a concert with performers on a stage. The New Testament clearly commands that we sing and make melody in our corporate gatherings.

## ***The Purpose and Power of Christian Hymnody***

But let's get a little bit deeper than simply singing because we're told. *Why*, exactly, has God told us to sing in worship? We can certainly recognize why he commands things like preaching and praying and reading the Scriptures. But why sing? Is singing just another way for us to teach and affirm biblical truth? I think many Christians today see music in worship as simple that: a pretty way to teach doctrine. Yet if that is the only purpose of hymns, I can understand why some people really don't see the value of singing. Hymns certainly cannot teach as much truth as preaching does, so why do we waste our time? There is no way we can absorb all of the truth contained in a hymn text as we sing it, so why don't we just read it together? What is the point of singing doctrine?

While hymns certainly can be aids for teaching and affirming biblical truth, the reason we sing in our worship goes deeper than just teaching. The purpose and power of hymnody is rooted in what we are doing when we worship. Greg's definition is helpful:

*Christian worship is an expression of our affections that are evoked when we encounter the True and Living God.*

This definition is an excellent reflection of Christ's words to the Samaritan woman in John 4:24:

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

Notice the two essential elements of worship: spirit and truth, that is, expression of our inner beings to what we know about God. Or, as Greg has articulated, expression of our affections as they are evoked when we encounter the True and Living God.

Now how can hymns help us worship God rightly in this way? First, hymn texts do teach us truth about God and thus present him to us as one who is worthy of our affections. Without that encounter with truth about God worship cannot take place, and along with things like preaching and Scripture reading, hymns can help us encounter God in that way.

Yet it is the second element of worship for which music finds its primary purpose—spiritual expression of our affections. We have all likely heard the statement, “Music is the language of emotion.” Music gives expression to our hearts when words are not enough. This emphasis is reflected in both Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. Both identify the heart as the focus of our singing.

You see, Christian hymns go beyond simply teaching us truth about the True and Living God, they give us a language for the expression of our affections as they are evoked by him. Not only that, good hymns teach us what kinds of expressions are appropriate for God. Remember the important question Greg asked in the Introduction: are the affections that our knowledge of God evokes worthy of him? One tool that helps shape the way that we express our affections to God is the hymns that we choose to sing.

Now we must be precise in our understand of what, exactly, hymns do with relation to our affections. Notice that the hymns themselves do not evoke the emotion. Our affections are evoked *when we encounter the True and Living God*. It is truth about God that evokes our affections, not the music itself. Rather, the music gives language to the *expression* of our affections. It is one thing to have our affections evoked by truth about God; it is another thing to know how to express it. Hymns help us do that. There is a great difference between looking to music to evoke the emotions themselves and looking to music as material for expressing emotions that have already been evoked. In the first sense the music picks us up and does the work; in the second sense music provides us with tools to help us do the work ourselves. This may seem like I am nit-picking, but is an important distinction, especially when it comes to what music we will choose to use in our worship. We will discuss this point more thoroughly in the next chapter.

So the importance of hymnody in worship goes much deeper than doctrinal accuracy or enjoyable melodies. Sacred music gives us a language for the expression of our affections to God and can actually teach us what we should be expressing when we don't otherwise know how. Understanding the primary purpose and power of music in our worship reveals the necessity of evaluating not only the hymn texts, but also the form in which that text is presented. This leads us to our next topic of discussion.

## ***The Anatomy of a Hymn***

For many people a hymn is nothing more than some truth made pretty. But such an understanding would be like viewing a person as a soul with some pretty skin. Yet just as a human has a whole anatomy working together to make him what he is, so a hymn has many components that help it accomplish its purpose. Austin Lovelace wrote a classic book in 1965 called *Anatomy of Hymnody* in which he summarized the importance of understanding this:

A hymn is not an amorphous bit of spiritual protoplasm designed for the enjoyment of the man in the pew and for the creation of a pious feeling or a “religious mood.” Like the human body, a hymn has a skeleton (which can be called the metrical design) and characteristics determined by the choice of poetic “foot.” It is a complete body, made up of several parts (stanzas), each with its definite function. Its visage or physiognomy is determined by the poetic devices the poet chooses. Underlying all the physical features, however, is the soul of the hymn—man's response to God.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Austin Lovelace, *Anatomy of Hymnody* (Chicago: G.I.A., 1965), pp. 6–7.

In order to understand what kinds of hymns express appropriate affection for God, we need to understand something of how hymns work. And in order to understand how they work, we need to examine their anatomy.

## Content vs. Form

An important distinction we need to make is content vs. form. Content is simply the message of the text. So, for example, the content of a hymn like “Holy, Holy, Holy” would be the holiness of God, the Trinity, praise, God's mercy, etc.

But unless you just list God's attributes in that way, form is always involved. Form is the way in which something is shaped or presented. A form takes the basic content and shapes it in a certain way.

The easiest way to understand this is to consider various vessels. When you pour a liquid into a vessel, the liquid takes the shape of the vessel. The content itself does not change, but its shape changes.

With any art, form always shapes the content in such a way that it communicates something about that content. Form doesn't communicate in the same way as the content itself; form communicates to the imagination and the affections. Form changes the “feel” or perception of the content.

For example, consider type-faces, otherwise known as fonts. You can take a particular word or phrase and communicate different things by what font you use. For instance, let's use the word “cool.” “Cool” can mean a couple of different things. It can mean the opposite of hot or it can mean calm or it can mean hip. I can use form to communicate which definition I intend:

**COOL**

*cool*

**COOL**

Now let's take it a step further and consider the word, “God.” Remember when Greg said that part of our knowledge of God is what we imagine him to be like? Form communicates our imagination:

GOD

God

God

God

God

Each of these font faces—these forms—shape our imagination of what God is like.

I use the example of type-face only because it is visual, and it is easier to grasp how form shapes content with these examples than with poetry or music. But let's move now to content and form within hymns.

### Word/Phrase Choice

There are several different ways that content can be shaped within a hymn. The first is simply with what words are chosen to communicate the message. Words are important. How we put them together into phrases is important. Words are important because different words have different connotations—different “feelings” attached to them.

For example, in describing my grandfather to you, I might say that he is *ancient*. Or I may say that he is *elderly*. Or *frail*. Or *rickety*. Or *seasoned*. Each of these words has basically the meaning of *old*, but each word conjures up different kinds of images in your mind about my grandfather.

The same is true with the texts of hymns. What words are chosen and how they are put together shapes the content.

Consider this example: suppose I want to communicate the truth that God is all-powerful, that he promises to protect us, and that we should trust in him. Here are four different ways to communicate that content through poetry. Notice how the form shapes the content:

1. A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing;  
Our helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing;

For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;  
His craft and power are great, and, armed with cruel hate,  
On earth is not his equal.<sup>2</sup>

2. How strong and sweet my Father's care,  
That round about me, like the air,  
Is with me always, everywhere!  
He cares for me!<sup>3</sup>

3. So, when I'm lying in my bed,  
and the furniture starts creeping,  
I'll just laugh and say,  
"Hey, cut that out!"  
And get back to my sleeping.  
'Cause I know that God's the biggest,  
and He's watching all the while.  
So, when I get scared I'll think of Him,  
and close my eyes and smile.

God is bigger than the boogie man.  
He's bigger than Godzilla,  
or the monsters on TV.  
Oh, God is bigger than the boogie man.  
And He's watching out for you and me.<sup>4</sup>

4. Draw me close to you  
Never let me go  
I lay it all down again  
To hear you say that I'm your friend

You are my desire  
No one else will do  
'Cause nothing else could take your place  
To feel the warmth of your embrace  
Help me find the way, bring me back to you

You're all I want  
You're all I've ever needed  
You're all I want  
Help me know you are near.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, 1529.

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, ca. 1929.

<sup>4</sup> Veggie Tales, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Kelly Carpenter, 1994.

In each of these songs, the basic content is the same: God is great, and we can trust in him. On the propositional content level, each of these songs is saying something that is true. But when we get to the level of form—what words are chosen and how they are put together—each of these songs is shaping the content very differently.

## Poetic Meter

The next level of form is poetic meter and rhyme scheme. A poetic meter is basically how many syllables are in each line of the poem, and where the naturally stresses are. Consider this example:

A – **MAZ** - ing **GRACE!** How **SWEET** the **SOUND**  
That **SAVED** a **WRETCH** like **ME!**  
I **ONCE** was **LOST**, but **NOW** am **FOUND**;  
Was **BLIND**, but **NOW** I **SEE**.<sup>6</sup>

All hymns have some kind of meter like this, and we name the meters based on the syllable stress pattern. So, for example, with “Amazing Grace,” the pattern is weak-STRONG. This is the most common form in English poetry, called iambic. You have probably heard of iambic pentameter, a form which employs five iambic feet<sup>7</sup> (ten syllables) per line. Good poets know, as Lovelace relates, that this meter is “stately and noble and is best used for those texts which are propositional.”<sup>8</sup>

Other hymns written in the iambic pattern include, “O **GOD**, our **HELP** in **A** - ges **PAST**,” “A **MIGHT** - y **FOR** - tress **IS** our **GOD**,” and “A - **LAS**, and **DID** My **SAV** - ior **BLEED**.” You can see how in each of these cases the content is sober or noble, and so the poets chose the iambic pattern to shape the content in that way.

The opposite metric pattern and second most common is *trochaic*. This pattern is **STRONG**-weak. Examples of these include “**HARK** the **HER** - ald **AN** - gels **SING**,” and “**CHRIST** the **LORD** is **RIS'N** to - **DAY**.” Lovelace comments that this pattern “is more direct than iambic and is used where directness of thought and excitement are desirable,” as can be seen in the two declamatory hymns listed above. A good poet will consider the content, decide what it should “feel” like, and choose an appropriate meter to shape the content in that direction.

Two other common patterns are rare in classic hymnody, although they have been used more frequently in the past 100 years, for reasons we will consider in a moment. The first is *dactylic*, which is **STRONG**-weak-weak. Its opposite, *anapaestic*, is weak-weak-**STRONG**. Probably the most famous example of this pattern in English poetry is “’Twas the Night Before Christmas”:

'Twas the **NIGHT** before **CHRIST** - mas and **ALL** through the **HOUSE**  
Not a **CREA** - ture was **STIR** - ring, not **E** - ven a **MOUSE**.

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<sup>6</sup> John Newton, 1779.

<sup>7</sup> Each pair of weak-**STRONG** syllables is called a “foot.”

<sup>8</sup> Lovelace, p. 13.

This meter is uncommon in classic hymnody because unlike iambic or trochaic patterns, which shape the content toward stateliness or directness, an anapaestic pattern gives “a feeling of lightness” resulting from “the use of the basic triplet movement.”<sup>9</sup> This pattern “feels” light and skippy, and so it has not traditionally been used to shape serious biblical content. There are certainly exceptions to this,<sup>10</sup> and hymn writers over the past 100 years have certainly employed anapaestic patterns with more regularity (the reason for this is a subject for the next chapter), but the point here is simply to understand how poetic form shapes its content.

Allow me to borrow one final example from Lovelace to illustrate how poetic meter can change the “feel” of a particular content. Consider this content: It is quiet in a house on Christmas Eve. Depending on poetic form, a poet can shape that content to feel either light and frivolous or serious and foreboding. The poem already mentioned, “’Twas the Night Before Christmas,” is an example of the former. By use of anapaestic feet, the author shapes the content to prepare us to expect something fanciful and charming:

’Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house  
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

Yet what if the author had written the same basic content using an iambic pattern (weak - **STRONG**)?

’Twas Christmas eve, the house was still,  
And not a creature stirred.

Instead of giving a feeling of fun, an iambic pattern shapes the same content to feel more serious. Combining a serious meter with such content about a quiet Christmas Eve, we might expect the Grinch to show up at the house rather than Jolly Old St. Nick!

The point is this: form shapes content. It is not enough to ask about a hymn text: “Is the basic content of this hymn true?” If that were the only question to ask, then “God is Bigger Than the Boogie Man” would be a good hymn! Rather, we must also ask, how does the form of this hymn shape the content? Is the result a right way to imagine God or feel about him?

But I am getting ahead of myself. We will discuss the process of evaluating hymns more thoroughly in the next chapter. For now, let us move on to the hymn tune itself.

## Musical Form

Musical form shapes content in very similar ways to poetic form, yet it is a bit more abstract and thus considerably more difficult to readily recognize. But because music communicates by mimicking natural human expression, anyone can discern the basic meaning of music by simply listening closely and asking a few penetrating questions.

Music contains many different structural elements that work together to shape the content like cadences, tonality, tempo, meter, rhythm, dynamics, density, timbre, register, texture, and

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<sup>9</sup> Lovelace, 14.

<sup>10</sup> The most popular example is probably “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise.” Although the text employs anapaestic feet, the slower tempo in which the hymn is normally sung helps to hide the naturally light feel.

motives. Thankfully hymns are very simple musical forms, and so we really only need to concern ourselves with three of the most basic musical elements—melody, rhythm/meter, and harmony. We will also briefly consider the way a song is performed since that, too, shapes the content. Keep in mind that all of these elements work together to shape content, so evaluating each individually is a bit artificial. Our goal in considering these individual elements is that we might be able to evaluate how they work together to shape the biblical content of the hymn.

## **Melody**

Let us first consider melody. The melody is the tune you sing. Melody is really just a step above human vocal intonation. When we want to shape the way a word or phrase is perceived by a listener, we use tone of voice to do so. So if you were to ask me how I am doing, I may answer with the word, “Fine.” But my tone of voice can shape that content to connote very different messages.

If my voice begins high and moves down quickly, I am expressing genuine pleasure.

If my voice is relatively low and I stretch out the word in a soft tone, I am expressing that I am doing ok despite some kind of disappointment.

If my voice is harsh and quick, I am letting you know that I really am not fine.

Again, in each of these cases the content itself remains the same while tone shapes the underlying meaning. It is also important to recognize that tone of voice can actually contradict the normal meaning of the content, as when I express harshness using the word, “fine.”

Every parent is experienced in discerning the underlying meaning of phrases based on tone of voice. Have you ever said to your child, “Don't speak to me in that tone of voice.” Was the reason for your displeasure the *content* of what was said? Often not. Often you are displeased with your child's *tone*, because tone shapes the perception of content. So your child can respond, “Yes,” to a question you ask him, but by his tone you perceive underlying disrespect.

At its root, melody is merely an intensification of natural vocal intonation. We'll see this better in the next chapter, but the earliest forms of music were simple chants—not much more than intoning a text. Musical form has certainly evolved and developed far beyond that today, but at its root, melody is still based on natural human vocal inflection. American composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein summarized this point well:

Music is Heightened Speech. After all, what causes such a heightening? Intensified emotion. Hunger. Impatience. Certainly the deepest universals we all share are emotions, or affects; we all have the same capacity for passion, fear, anticipation, aggression. We all display the same physiological manifestations of affect; our eyebrows go up with anticipation; our hearts pound with passion; and fear affects us universally with goose flesh. And in the sense that music may express those affective goings-on, then it must indeed be a universal language.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Leonard Bernstein, *The Unanswered Question: Six Talks at Harvard* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1976), p. 15.

This is why any person should be able to basically discern the way a textual content is shaped by a melody. We can hear what is going on because such shaping is natural to us; we do it every time we speak.

## **Meter/Rhythm**

The next structural element of a hymn is its meter and rhythm. This is very similar to the meter and rhythm of poetry that we discussed above. The meter of a song is based on patterns of weak and **STRONG** beats, just like with poetry.<sup>12</sup> The weak and **STRONG** beats themselves, combined in a variety of durations within the song, are the rhythm. And just like poetry, meter in a hymn tune is usually either a feeling of two (weak-**STRONG** or **STRONG**-weak) or three (weak-weak-**STRONG** or **STRONG**-weak-weak).

Understanding this, you can see parallels between meter in poetry and meter in music. Just like with poetic meter, two-beat patterns usually shape the content to feel more serious, stately, or declamatory, while three-beat patterns often shape the content to have more of a light, waltz-like, or skippy feel. And this is why tunes with a two-beat feel will fit texts with iambic or trochaic poetic meter, and tunes with a three-beat feel will fit texts with anapestic poetic meter. There are exceptions to all of this, and this explanation is a bit simplistic, but it does summarize meter fairly accurately.

So how does this work? Well, similar to how melody is based on natural human vocal inflection, meter and rhythm are based on natural human body language. All humans express various emotional states using certain physical expressions. This is why you can look across a room at another person and perceive their emotional condition simply by looking at their facial expression, how they are moving, and how they are carrying themselves. Again, if I respond to your question of how I am doing with, “Fine,” but I have a frown, I'm stooped over, and moving slowly, my physical expressiveness shapes that content in a direction other than what would naturally be communicated with that word.

So meter and rhythm are intensifications of natural human physical movement. So just like with melody, any person should be able to basically discern the way a textual content is shaped by meter and rhythm. We can “feel” what is going on because such shaping is natural to us.

## **Harmony**

The third category of structural phenomena in a hymn is its harmony. While melody is related to vocal inflection and rhythm is related to physical movement, harmony is related more broadly to the created order in general. Let me explain what I mean.

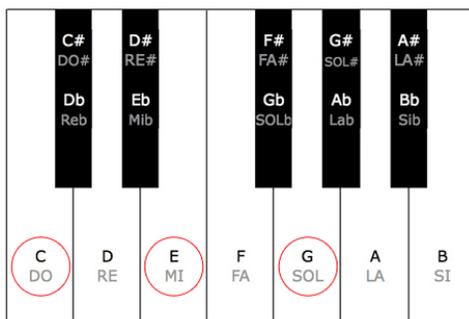
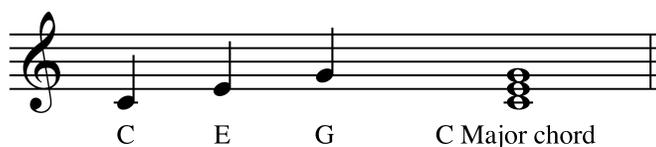
Simple harmony is the sound that is produced when two or more pitches are played or sung simultaneously. That sound production can express various feelings based on the natural relationships between the pitches. More complex harmony is pitch relationships over longer phrases of music, used to develop a particular “mood.”

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<sup>12</sup> Technically the “meter” of a hymn refers to the number of syllables in each line. Here, I am using the term “meter” in a purely musical sense.

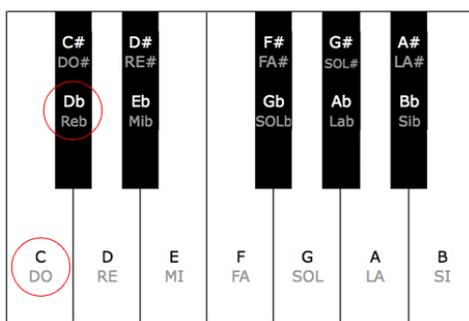
We all perceive the “feeling” of harmony instinctively. If I play a C Major chord, the harmony produced by the combination of the notes C, E, and G sound complete and restful to us. Musicians call this *consonance*.

Example 1: C Major chord



On the other hand, if I play a C and a D flat simultaneously, the harmony produced by that combination is harsh and unappealing. Musicians call this *dissonance*.

Example 2: Dissonance



In between these two extremes are many, many different pitch combinations and relationships that produce various harmonies. These harmonies can then shape content to “feel” sad, happy, restful, suspenseful, pure, harsh, longing, and much more.

We perceive this harmonic shaping naturally, as I said, because harmony is rooted in the created order—what is called the *harmonic series*. There is not time to explain all that the harmonic series is or what it implies. If you remember that all sound is vibration, and that pitches are produced by various ratios of sound waves, you have at least a basic understanding of harmonics. When notes are played or sung that fit into natural ratios, the sound is consonant; when the combination does not relate to natural ratios, the sound is dissonant. The progression of such pitch combinations then create harmony on a larger level. Thus how we perceive such relationships is based on the created order.

Now the explanation I have given is very simplistic and basic. There is much more to harmony than notes played simultaneously. Harmony is about relationships, and some of those relationships occur on much larger scales than just a moment-in-time chord.

But the point is that just like with melody and rhythm, any person can fairly easily perceive how harmony shapes content because harmony exists in the same ordered universe that we do.

## Performance

Finally, many other structural phenomena in music can be categorized under performance---how a hymn is sung, arranged, and accompanied:

- Tempo – the speed at which the hymn is performed. Like rhythm, various tempos correspond to our physical movements.
- Dynamics – the loudness or softness (or changes thereof) of the performance. Similar to melody, dynamics relate to vocal intonation.
- Density – the amount of voices or instruments played at once. Whether a hymn is sung just with voices, with a piano, or with a full orchestra shapes the content.
- Timbre (rhymes with “Amber”) – the tone color of various voices or instrument. The unique sounds of different instrument contribute to shape content. Some instruments sound pure, others mellow, some powerful, and others harsh.

Finally, the way in which an individual sings a hymn can shape the content of that hymn in drastic ways. Just with how a person uses his voice, he can shape a song of love for God to sound reverent, casual, romantic, or flippant.

Consider, as an illustration, the infamous example of Marilyn Monroe singing “Happy Birthday” to President Kennedy. The words she sang were certainly not controversial, but her tone, body language, and performance style created a scandal. Notice how even Wikipedia describes the event:

“Happy Birthday, Mr. President” was a song sung by actress/singer Marilyn Monroe on Saturday, May 19, 1962, for then-President of the United States, John F. Kennedy, at a celebration for his forty-fifth birthday, ten days before the actual day of his 45th birthday, Tuesday, May 29. Sung in a **sultry voice**, Monroe sang the traditional “Happy Birthday to You” lyrics, with “Mr. President” inserted as

Kennedy's name. . . . Afterwards, President Kennedy came on stage and joked about the song, saying, "I can now retire from politics after having had Happy Birthday sung to me in such a sweet, wholesome way," alluding to **Monroe's delivery**, her racy dress, and her general image as a sex symbol.

In this case, the textual content and even the musical form itself were far from offensive. Yet Monroe's vocal performance, delivery, dress, and image communicated subtextual messages that were missed by nobody. I raise this point only to illustrate that performance style shapes content.

The same is true when hymns are sung or played in worship. How we sing or play shapes the message of the hymn.

My point in considering the anatomy of a hymn is not to suggest that you need to memorize all of this pick apart each element to determine how form is shaping content. My goal was simply to demonstrate how each element does indeed shape the content in different ways. In real life, you're likely never going to try to figure out what the poetic meter is or analyze the harmonic progression. But whether you've be aware of it or not, form has shaped your affections and imagination with relation to the content. And so hopefully now you'll pay closer to attention to whether how the form is shaping the content is worthy of the content.

## Conclusion

The hymnody of the church is important to God only because how we express our affections to God is important to him. Some kinds of affections are inordinate—they are inappropriate for expression to God. And because a hymn, through poetic and music devices, can shape doctrinal content to express various kinds of affections, some hymns are appropriate for expression to God, and some are not.

Thus as Christians committed to expressing to the Lord affections that are worth of him, it is our responsibility to parse the meaning of hymns to discern whether they are best for use in Christian worship.

## For Further Reading

Aniol, Scott. *Sound Worship: A Guide to Making Musical Choices in a Noisy World* . Simpsonville, SC: Religious Affections Ministries, 2010.

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