STUDYING AND SINGING THE PSALMS

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In May 2023, the University of St Andrews in partnership with the Royal School of Church Music in Scotland ran a one-day short course inviting participants from any church background and at any level of skill to engage with and learn about different traditions of singing psalms. Staff from the University's Music Centre led the proceedings, which saw just over 40 people thinking about why psalm singing is so important to Christian worship. This essay is a reflective description of that day, with some end notes about the music we prepared, and suggestions for further reading.

Scotland today is a much more secular place than it once was, with growing numbers of people no longer identifying with any religion at all, and at least some people have suggested this is not a bad thing if it leads to less sectarian division.[1] For those who remain within a church, one might think that this is a good moment to consider what we share as Christians, branches of the same vine, as much as what divides us. A naïve person might imagine music to be a universal language (really, it is not) that could assist with such conversations. The reality, and the challenge, is that musical difference is one of the most self-evident markers of different communities of faith practice. Pondering this, how do we overcome musical differences, to understand the commonality we share in the Bible, our shared foundational text – albeit a text that is a tad more complex than an IKEA self-assembly instruction booklet in terms of interpretation and application?

Our 'Study and Sing' day was simply headlined 'Psalms'. We do, thankfully, all share that common key word, which proved to have some considerable gathering force. Those who came into the space were from a range of confessional backgrounds, revealed in discussion to include Church of Scotland, Scottish Episcopalian, Roman Catholic, Free Presbyterian, Baptist, and probably others not declared; we didn't "capture data" but conversations revealed that this was a genuinely ecumenical group, which enabled people to bring a wide range of insight both before and during discussion into the room. Evidently those present all thought psalms were important: they would

1 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2014: Public Attitudes to Sectarianism in Scotland (published 20 February 2015), https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2014-public-attitudes-sectarianism-scotland/pages/5/

not have come into the space otherwise. But it was genuinely exciting to realise how much this connected all of us, even if we might have experienced different musical traditions in our singing of these texts.

The format of the day was a series of six sessions, leading with discussion prompts on the topics 'why do the psalms matter' and tackling some questions raised by the thorny issue of translation. These two topics laid open both what brought us together, and potentially, what might divide us. Thankfully the differences were acknowledged politely. From there, we looked at different traditions of singing psalms. Each block here used a combination of initial information (what the approach was, and why), leading quickly into a shared experience of the music, then a review in discussion of what it offered us. Repertoire included unison plainsong with a suggestion of how this could be modernised using simplified chants and pew Bibles; harmonised chants (the 'Anglican' tradition); responsorial chants (variable verses, communal responses, common in Catholic usage); metrical psalms (so central to the Reformed Scottish tradition); and one example of a hymn paraphrase by Isaac Watts, that 'read' the original psalm in the light of Gospel-led theology. Finally, we learnt, together, a contemporary praise song using part of a psalm text and using an arrangement of a traditional Scottish melody. Together, the examples showed a tradition that both has deep historical roots and a drive to renew itself for contemporary worship. Hopefully, participants gained insights into carefully curated historical repertoires alongside an openness to renewal, and how both approaches might be helpful to congregations. People were happy to be advocates for what they know, to receive the viewpoints of those who felt strongly about their particular traditions, and to be open to learning new material.

As a teacher, I know that I can stand and talk 'at' a class in a conventional lecture for 50 minutes, and maybe one or two things will stick, possibly more if the students take good notes. However, this is not the most effective way of deepening critical engagement, and certainly not a great way to transform how people feel about topics. Moreover, if the topic is genuinely one that suggests different participant-led experiences and points of view could be helpful, then front-led teaching is a positive inhibitor to transformation. Where the 'leader' can be useful is in supporting the experiential learning; organising discussion points and bringing material into the space and, once in the space, singing with and alongside the discussion. I am fortunate to

have a fairly decent natural voice and use this alongside simple hand-gestures to teach people tunes. (I hope John Bell would approve!)

There are different ways to support each other in singing psalms and spiritual songs, and simply having the courage to open your mouth and make a noise in the presence of others is something we need to encourage in each other. An interesting discussion point in the day was how different people may need to breathe more or less frequently, and how to make space for each other to find where we need to breathe. Our bodies as well as our minds need to be productively engaged. We bring our whole selves to God when we sing the psalms.

At the end of the formal 'study' day we brought the material into an end-of-day evening service using the Anglican Evensong liturgy, inserting psalm alternatives to the more conventionally Anglican Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis canticles. Not everyone stayed for that service – whether because they needed to drive home or for other reasons – but most did, and we also had people attending the service who hadn't been there for the whole day. RSCM Singing Days normally place 'the choir' separate from the congregation, but for our service, we all sat together in the main body of the church, and everyone – even those late through the door – were encouraged to sing together, helped by those who had practised and learnt the material through the day.

Feedback has been positive.

So, psalms matter. Not everyone holds out for the only singing in formal worship to be scriptural, but certainly a goodly portion surely should be, and the obvious core is the section of 150 Biblical songs specifically designed for singing in worship. The first session of the day allowed some review and discussion of the reasons why the psalms are so important to the Christian communal worship tradition, framing this by core passages from Ephesians 5:19-20 and Colossians 3:16-17. Prompts in the participants' packs and presentation slides led into discussion that highlighted how psalms reflected a tradition of the monotheistic faith we share with Judaism, connecting us, through this tradition, with Jesus and his disciples, and speaking today to both individual and collective relationships with God. Psalms can articulate theological ideas as well as praise; they acknowledge God's presence in our lives, and give us space for emotional and thoughtful response. They can be used to connect the Old and New Testament readings, raising questions that

we need the full light of the Gospel (and then a lot of careful prayer and reflection) to resolve. They give a space for human emotions, even those troubling emotions which may need to be calmed and re-orientated. We sing through the psalms, often, to a place of greater calm. Singing together regularly through the psalms helps to sustain and strengthen faith. Points offered from the floor included the observation that music helps to fix Scripture in the memory, so we can carry it into our lives (most people have a 'favourite psalm' that has helped them with particularly challenging periods of their lives). Singing psalms allows us to bring our whole selves into God's presence.

Discussion around translation was not overly technical because, for a day like this, we weren't equipped to handle original Biblical languages; although clearly a few participants had at least some knowledge of Hebrew, they were tactful in how they deployed this! We discussed the reasons for translating into vernacular languages, but also the challenges this presents both to theological coherence and also, practically, for singing together. The psalms are devotional poetry; ideally any translation should preserve thought-provoking parallelism from the original verse. But a translation that is syntactically complex, or which ignores what the human lungs can sustain, may not be easy to sing.

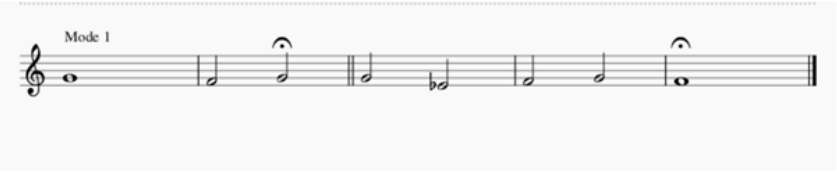
We focussed in on the text Psalm 42, a good psalm for preparing for worship: 'Like as the hart for water-brooks / in thirst doth pant and bray' (1650 Westminster or Scottish Psalter). This helped us to explore how different translations facilitated different approaches to singing. The 1650 metrical translation (designed for strophic setting) was compared with a version from the 1561 Anglo-Genevan psalter provided by Philip Ross of Dundee.[2] Both evidently allow for clear syllable-by-syllable singing, with the earlier setting reflecting something of the rhythmic variety derived from its Francophone precursors. Comparing both of these to the prose New International Version we could see why a pew Bible prose translation might not be easy to sing to (where does one breathe? Breathing together is key to singing together). Rhyming, common in metrical settings, is also helpful for fixing texts in

2 Philip Ross has usefully prepared Muse Score pdf versions of some particularly useful psalms, drawing on the 1650 Scottish Psalter, the Genevan Psalter and resources from the Free Church of Scotland: see the Dundee Presbyterian Church website: https://www.dundee.church/music/

memory. Comparing this to the texts from the Anglican '*Book of Common Prayer*', which were designed for chanting, can help make texts unfold more gradually using more standard syntax, providing that phrase lengths acknowledged the need to breathe. We also looked at a rather idiosyncratic US version from 'The Message Bible' that presented an irregular prose translation that was almost impossible to sing and designed more for individual (and in this case, rather culturally specific) prayer rather than collective worship.

From there, we looked first at traditions based on chant – where the lexical structures of the text fundamentally shape the singing, exploring how simplified versions of psalm chants might be applied to pre-prepared psalm texts (i.e. changing between bold and non-bold type to indicate changes of pitch). These were sung in unison, unaccompanied.

Figure 1: Simplified Psalm Mode 1, with Psalm 42:1-2 showing mark up for pitch changes.



[1]As the deer pants for streams **of** water :
so my soul pants **for** you, **my** God.

[2] My soul thirsts for God, for the liv-**ing** God :
When can I go **and** meet **with** God?

While not particularly interesting musically, this method does facilitate a threshold level of congregational singing and allows the text to unfold at the speed of natural speech. A very limited pitch range also places few demands on untrained voices. During Covid, I had found that in online worship we could use this method to share verses of psalms sequentially, taking turns. Zoom does not allow simultaneous singing-together, but with a very simple chant such as the one shown above, those gathered online could share these verses together, singing one-at-a-time. Coming back into church together, post-Covid, we have maintained this in our Sunday morning services in St Andrew's Episcopal Church. Mostly, it works well, as long as the text is carefully prepared to steer the congregation through the pitch shifts, and there is some light vocal leadership from e.g. a cantor or small choir. The

method requires very little musical literacy as the chants are very simple, although possibly there are more 'interesting' ways to set texts! It does require a bit of 'set up' by the music leader, preparing the texts to be sung week-on-week, using a translation recommended by the Minister in charge. If anyone would like a set of these simplified chants, please contact me and I'll send through a pdf.

Approaches derived from the chant tradition are obviously the Anglican (or 'prose chant') tradition, and the responsorial (often heard in Catholic churches) traditions. Both use harmony to introduce a bit more aural variety, while maintaining the text-led focus of the plainsong tradition. The Anglican tradition relies more heavily on choral leadership and may not transfer easily into congregations who do not have this resource although, where present, it can be a vehicle for renewal (chants are not that difficult to compose). The responsorial tradition can also work with a cantor singing the verses, alternating with a congregation repeating a single line of text as a response, although what we did was to have everyone singing everything with very simple harmonisation.

Metrical psalm singing is central to Reformed Scottish worship, a technique learnt from French poetics which works with syllable counts within lines. In contrast with the chant tradition, melody takes a more prominent role in priming the minds and bodies of the singing congregation to connect with the text; a tune repeats across many verses. As is well-known, English-language poetry is not entirely based on syllable counting, and maintaining the meter can result in some unusual word order. However, once this repertoire is learnt, the characterful vigour of these translations can lift prose into poetry, and well-known and recognisable tunes can fix words in the memory. There are good reasons why this tradition is important to building and maintaining congregational worship in the communities where this is part of core practice, and good reasons why this approach spread more widely as the basis of all-congregational singing, influencing other forms of hymn composition, including psalm paraphrases.

Up to this point, the emphasis was on singing ALL verses in a psalm. Our final session thought about songs selecting some but not all verses from psalms, using these as particular prompts set to modern tunes. The emphasis for our purposes was on participatory singing, although we did find time to discuss the issues raised by the style of singing led by praise bands. Much

of the way in which modern people experience music today can feel rather passive – being sung to, rather than singing together. The emphasis of the day was on participation; but it may also be worth considering making some space in worship for some moments where listening to psalms being sung could also be an aid to prayer, particularly where praise songs linger on a particular verse.

I realise that readers of this journal may not need to be told much of the points made above. However, being able to articulate the comparative strengths and rationales of different approaches in a systematic way was designed to give everyone space to appreciate the reasons why particular ways of singing mattered and work in particular contexts. Music is not a universal language; it relies on historically constructed repertoires and patterns of social maintenance, and different approaches connect with different communities of practice. If we are unreflective in what we do, it can be tempting to defend 'our practice' partly as an extension of our cultural identity, rather than thinking more carefully about how it helps us to live as better Christians. Listening to others' experiences, we can perhaps value our own tradition alongside respecting the reasons for the differences, possibly opening ourselves to new insights, and basing this shared learning on a common respect for the Scripture that underpins all our endeavours.

That, in summary, is what we did. Why did we do it? I suppose my hand needs to go up, because through Covid lockdown, I came to understand that singing psalms was a very important part of my own faith practice. I run music – and the choir – at St Andrew's Episcopal Church, St Andrews, and also teach at the University of St Andrews Music Centre. From 2019-20, my University has run a taught postgraduate MLitt programme in Sacred Music, a partnership between the University's Music Centre and the School of Divinity. Students from the Masters course helped with accompaniment throughout the day and in the final service, so this was useful to their learning. I teach a seminar on psalms as part of that degree, and also as part of an undergraduate elective module on Scottish music, as metrical psalms are an important part of Scotland's cultural identity. Folding students into a day designed for general public participation helps us to see how different ages and stages can help sustain our worshipping together; it was useful modelling this to the students!

I am grateful for the support of the Scottish Regional Team of the Royal School of Church Music, who helped to promote the day in their networks and publications, and who helped on the day to manage registration and welcome people into the space. The RSCM has a great deal of experience running 'singing days', and these people – particularly Ian Munro, the Regional Manager – were invaluable to making the day feel welcoming and friendly, and not too 'academic'. Coffee breaks and shared packed lunches were opportunities to continue the conversations, with their assistance. The RSCM also agreed to our using copies of some of their music materials.

To conclude, I also teach ethnomusicology and have learnt through that discipline to think that making music together is a fundamental part of how human beings function socially. Making the right kind of music, with the right words, is also how we maintain ourselves as rightly orientated towards others; including, in my own experience, towards God. We relate, we pray, we think, we feel, towards God, through music; the psalms acknowledge and embrace this.

Service Music:

- Introit: Psalm 121, 'I to the hills will lift mine eyes', metrical setting with words from the Westminster (Scottish) Psalter of 1650, tune Dundee (French), (1615) – a psalm of Ascent, preparation for worship.
- Psalm 42, 'As the deer pants for streams of water', using a plainsong unison chant sung by all, and a pointed text using the New International Version of the Bible.
- *OT Reading: Romans 15:1-13.*
- Psalm 98:1-6, 'All the Ends of the Earth have Seen the Salvation of Our God', a responsorial setting by Alan Johnson from the *RSCM Book of Psalm Songs* (draft, not yet published).
- *Gospel Reading: Luke 9:1-17.*
- Psalm 67 'God be Merciful Unto Us and Bless Us', text from the *Book of Common Prayer*, sung to an Anglican Chant composed by Richard Evans, Emeritus Organist at St Andrew's Church, St Andrews, Fife.

- Psalm 84, 'How Lovely is Thy Dwelling Place', contemporary praise using a traditional Scottish tune, arranged by David Illiff, from *RSCM Songs, Psalms and Spirituals* (2011).
- Final Hymn: Paraphrase of Psalm 117 by Isaac Watts: 'From All that Dwell Below the Skies'; tune *Lasst uns erfruen*, from Geistliche Kirchengesänge (Cologne, 1623), arranged Vaughan Williams (derived from Geneva Psalter tune for Psalm 68).

Further reading suggestions include:

- Douglas Galbraith, *Assist Our Song: Music Ministries in the Local Church* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 2021)
- Calvin R Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2007)
- John D Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship: A Brief Introduction and Guide to Resources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007)
- N T Wright, *The Case for the Psalms: Why They Are Essential* (Harper Collins, 2016)

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