

Recycling the

From barroom ballads to German jigs, hymn writers have taken sacred lyrics and matched them to the music of their day. By Dean Merrill



Martin Luther's opponents complained, "His songs have damned more souls than all his books and speeches."

About the time George Washington and his army were mopping up the British "red-coats" in America, a London organist named John Stafford Smith wrote an eight-line drinking tune. Whether he was trying to help drown British embarrassment over events in the colonies we don't know, but his melody was well received by the boys at the pub.

They called themselves the Anacreontic Society, after a Greek poet who wrote mostly about women and wine. The society's president, Ralph Tomlinson, came up with some words to go

with Smith's tune; the last line of each stanza urged members to "entwine the myrtle of Venus with Bacchus' vine." Bacchus, you may recall, was the Greek god of wine whose worship often resulted in orgies.

The notes were a little spread out—they covered more than an octave and a half—but that didn't seem to matter if the singers were drunk enough.

As time went by, other Englishmen wrote words to fit Smith's tune, some of them political satire, some rather racy.

You've never heard of any of this? Sure you have. In fact, you could hum

the melody perfectly from memory. Francis Scott Key's poem, "The Defense of Fort McHenry," was matched with this music (somewhere around the 80th use of the tune!), and today our hearts swell with patriotic pride every time we hail not Bacchus' vine but "the land of the free and the home of the brave."

This kind of thing happens all the time in music. Elements are snatched from here and there to make songs that appeal to the masses. Purists may sneer about "unworthy" melodies and "trite" chord progressions. But song-making goes on unhindered.

Secular

Sometimes whole tunes are lifted, as in the case of "The Star-Spangled Banner." More often bits and pieces are recycled: rhythm patterns, harmonies, inflections, moods. Music today in many churches is a potpourri of many styles—not only the classics and traditional hymns but also snatches of folk music, soul, big band, rhythm and blues, jazz, and yes, even rock.

Songs of the people usually are not created *ex nihilo*—or else the people wouldn't recognize them. Very little is totally original, and very little is worth carving in granite. Almost all is borrowed and bent, melted down and recast, to the point that categorizing is pointless ("this is spiritual; that's worldly").

Songwriters who have stirred our spirits throughout the centuries usually have been less concerned about origins than about effect. "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded," for example, is one of the most dignified hymns in the book. The words, honorably enough, are said to have been penned by Bernard of Clairvaux, the 12th-century mystic. But the tune? A German jig (obviously slowed down) harmonized by a man who knew plenty about writing tunes from scratch: Johann Sebastian Bach! Why in this case did he adapt something from the dance floor? Because the common people would readily sing it.

When Martin Luther realized the majority of church songs in his day were addressed to the Virgin Mary or other saints, he began writing new lyrics and borrowing tunes from the *Minnesingers*—German folk musicians who traveled and sang mainly about love and beauty. No wonder some of his opponents complained, "His songs have damned more souls than all his books and speeches."

Not all Protestants caught Luther's strategy, however, and 150 years later, church music had again been frozen into one "proper" style: the Psalms of David rephrased as Renaissance poetry. A rebellious English teenager named Isaac Watts began pushing the barriers. His first effort, based on Revelation 5, was "Behold the Glories of the Lamb."

His parents and church were forthright enough to applaud his efforts—and to ask him to write another hymn for the next Sunday. The young Watts kept up that pace for the next two years!

In the 1700s, Charles Wesley produced approximately 6,500 hymns, mostly to augment his brother John's sermons—but precious few melodies. He borrowed most of them from the theater, the street, or from composer George Frederick Handel.

A song called "Fairest Isle, All Isles Excelling" promptly became "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." Wesley even had the nerve to commandeer the national anthem, "God Save the King," and recast it as "Come Thou Almighty King." (The Italian tune we use today was a later insertion.)

Again, there was resistance. Again, voices cried against the impropriety of such patchwork. In the early 1800s, one American Presbyterian minister went to preach at a church that recently had installed an organ. Such an instrument, the elderly man averred, had no place in a house of worship. He was introduced to pray, but he snapped, "Call on the machine! If it can sing and play to the glory of God, it can pray too!"

We laugh at such rigidity. Then we are caught short to realize that in our own time, we sometimes frown at other "machines"—the synthesizer, perhaps, or the amplifier, or the drum set.



Ira Sankey, songleader for D. L. Moody.

Moody Press

One who led the fight to get an organ installed in his home church was Ira Sankey, later D. L. Moody's beloved song leader. Sankey did not write as many songs as he ferreted out from others for use in the meetings.

Sankey's heirs have been doing much the same ever since—borrowing, adapting, rearranging, experimenting to find sounds and words that will catch the ear of the people. Their songs admittedly are perishable, like a winter coat that serves you well for several seasons, but gets threadbare or out of style and has to be replaced. That's just the way coats—and choruses—are.

It is hard for *all* of us to let music evolve, to admit that the way we sang as children is not the way things must stay, now and forever, world without end, amen. How much better to regain the carefree spirit of Clement of Alexandria, who around A.D. 200 wrote, "We cultivate our fields, praising; we sail the seas, hymning; our lives are filled with prayers and praises and Scripture readings, before meals and before bed, and even during the night. By this means we unite ourselves with the heavenly choir."



Dean Merrill is a church organist who also has written a dozen books and is senior editor of *Leadership Journal*.