

The Development of Sacred Singing

Church music has become an important part of most Christian worship services. First, it helps place bible verses into melodies with feelings and emotions. Second, it allows church members to participate in a service. But while these two primary functions have remained the same over many years, the ways people sang sacred music changed a great deal during the early and mid-1800s.

The first church music was "lined out"

Before the Second Great Awakening (1800-1830s), most denominations and churches in America used a singing practice called "lining out," or lining. Lining out helped church members know the melody of the song, since musical instruments were forbidden in most denominations. Lining out also helped churches that could not afford to buy hymnals or songbooks for everyone in the congregation to use. Lining out also allowed church members who could not read to join this part of worship.

But the process was not very spontaneous, and it was often very slow -- one hymn could take twenty minutes to line out and sing! In addition, preachers at revivals did not think lining-out helped continue the excitement, inspiration, and enthusiasm they worked so hard to generate in order for sinners to repent and be converted. Many people wanted a new way to worship through song.

But people who wanted change ran into a few major problems: How could they teach a new song to people who did not have songbooks or to people who did not know how to read either music or words? And, what music would be used?

The solutions to some of these problems came by keeping many of the well-known words and setting them to familiar dance tunes or old ballad melodies that people already knew. They also repeated simple choruses that only changed a few words. They could sing a whole new verse by interchanging words like "father," "deacon," "sister," "brother," and "sinner," for example.

Singers loved the new music because it helped express the broad range of emotions they felt. The new tunes became so popular that by the 1830s people began writing down their favorite melodies and publishing them in harmonized versions. These books were called shape-note, or shaped-note, tunebooks.

Changes in the southern white church

Shape-note tunebooks introduced a whole new system of musical notation. Instead of using note heads that were all round (the traditional style), the new system used note heads that were arranged in a scale of triangles, ovals, squares, and diamonds. These shapes represented the seven notes on the musical scale: "do," "re," "me," "fa," "sol," "la," and "si."

People learned the new system quickly and easily. While some used tunebooks to learn on their own and in small groups, others learned from traveling teachers who led singing schools. And they also learned at all-day events called "singings," which were really early music revivals.

At singings, people gathered together by the hundreds to learn about the notation system and then to sing all day long from their tunebooks. The popularity of shape-note singing even led some churches to begin using tunebooks instead of the official hymnals of their denominations (which used the all-round notes in the traditional style). In response, Baptists,

Presbyterians, Methodists, and other groups eventually issued their denominational hymnals using shaped notes.

Changes in the southern black church

African Americans also crafted their own unique style of sacred music. They combined words and harmonies from hymns with some of their musical traditions from Africa. Enslaved persons, who often could not read and, of course, owned no music books or hymnals, created a magnificent body of sacred songs that they learned by hearing, passed along by singing, and stored in their memories.

Because their music sounded so very different, some whites were disturbed by what they heard. In 1860, one professor at the University of North Carolina wrote his wife that when the slaves sang, they sounded like "a parcel of frantic creatures." Such comments did not bother the slaves, though -- they responded that they were not singing to please their earthly masters, but their heavenly one.

The next steps

Both white and black sacred music changed dramatically after the Civil War. Churches began installing organs and pianos to lend dignity and refinement to their services. Choirs also became more common with members wearing robes, sitting in assigned seats, and performing special music. And before long, music directors started selecting and leading music in worship services.

While many people liked these changes, others agreed with one Iredell County woman who grumbled about her church choir, "They take their seats up front...and they do the praising all by themselves." Despite her complaint, choirs, anthems, and choir directors became standard features of most religious services. From its roots in the music of the early 1800s, sacred music continues to inspire worshipers and encourage participation in religious worship services throughout the countryside.

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This 1837 hymnal used "shape-notes" to help worshippers read the music as they sang.

3 January 2018 | Campbell, Gavin J.

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