

## What We Sing in Church, and Why...

If you are a history buff, or even if you're not, the history of church music is pretty fascinating. Singing in church has been alternately embraced, vilified, tolerated, devalued or celebrated, and it has been controversial in many places at many times. A few facts for your consideration:

- References to the use of music appear in both the Old and New Testaments, particularly the singing of the psalms.
- Some music dating from the first Christian era was associated with paganism and magic, or with other activities capable of arousing the baser passions; these were attacked with vehemence by church fathers.
- The performance of elaborate music with impressive ceremony has always been used to project images of power and piety.
- Monks have sung and still sing the psalter as a contemplative exercise.
- The many types of chant include: Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Syriac, Beneventan, Gallican, Mozarabic, Ambrosian, Solesmes, Byzantine, Slavonic, Serbian, Carpatho-Rusyn, Kondakarion, and Glagolitic.
- Early 14<sup>th</sup>-century French innovations in rhythm and meter provoked Pope John XXII to denounce composers for “preferring their new inventions to the ancient chants of the Church” and for producing “a multitude of notes so confusing that the seemingly rise and decorous fall of the plainchant melody ... is entirely obscured.”
- In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, music printing helped disseminate mass settings by Josquin, Palestrina, and many others. The liturgical use of the organ and other instruments also became firmly established. However, all instruments were banned from use in church in late 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italy.
- During the Reformation, Martin Luther created many congregational hymn tunes and versions of the psalms in everyday language. Lutheran music made sophisticated use of these tunes in cantatas, passions, and works for organ. In Geneva, John Calvin restricted song to congregational renditions of metrical psalms.
- After 1750, Catholic church music approached contemporary operatic and instrumental music, relegating the celebration of High Mass to the realm of religious spectacle.
- Mendelssohn revived Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829.
- 19<sup>th</sup>-century Protestants and Catholics began to return to chant and to music in the style of Palestrina.
- Russian plainchant served as the basis for All-Night Vigils by Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, some churches began to replace art music in worship with radically acculturated forms of “pastoral” music. Examples include “ethnic,” “folk,” and commercial (e.g. “praise music”) styles of sacred song.

A hymnal is always an eclectic selection of tunes and texts, and our two UU hymnals are no exception. A tune written in the time of Pope Gregory (Gregorian chant) may have been used with a set of words (religious poetry) written hundreds of years later, and a translation of those words might be the version we see in front of us. Musical styles in our UU hymnals

range from chant to American gospel to rock and roll, to reggae, jazz, blues, Lutheran chorales, Renaissance dance tunes, Romantic symphonies – you name it, and we've got it. Poetry dates from antiquity to just a few years ago. Prior to publication, all of these hymns were tested by a committee and by many congregations for musical quality and ease of singing. Some of the hymns are easier to sing than others, but taken together, they represent very well the human family searching for spiritual solace and clarity over a long period of time. Our net is cast very wide and brings in many riches. What a heritage!

I like to think of all the people involved in the creation of our hymnals. Were they oppressed and seeking solidarity? (We Shall Overcome) Were they lonely? (In My Quiet Sorrow) Defiant? (Lift Every Voice and Sing) Overjoyed? (All Creatures of the Earth and Sky) Troubled? (Comfort Me) Yearning? (I Took My Spirit to the Sea). There is a story behind each hymn and each anthem. When we sing music in church, we are asserting our membership in the human race and drawing in all the ancestors. It doesn't matter how we sing, it matters that we sing.

And now for a little philosophy . . . As a professional performer of "early music," I thrive on the understanding that music is a wonderful way to understand the cultures of the world across both time and space. It brings us closer to one another by revealing the common language of music.