

SING A NEW SONG

How to Read a Hymn

A hymn is a combination of a text and a tune.
A hymnal is a collection of hymns. While hymns and hymnals change over time, these songs help connect the people of God through music.

Not all hymns are found in hymnals. Hymns may be memorized, on a screen, led by a song leader...

Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee

We Praise You, O God

TEXT MATTERS

Who is singing? Is this a personal hymn—I, me, mine—or a collective hymn—we, us, ours?

Where is God? Is God the one being addressed? Is God the subject? Is God the speaker?

Where is Scripture? Is the hymn a paraphrase of a biblical passage? A retelling of a story from Scripture? An answer to a question from the Bible?

What is repeated? What ideas, phrases, or images are repeated throughout the song?

CM (8-6-8-6)
COMMON METRE What is the meter? This is the poetic rhythm of the hymn, the number and pattern of syllables per line.

Was it translated? Were the words originally written in a different language? What changes might have been made when the text was translated?

Have the words changed over time? Reading through a hymn, do you see words that seem outdated? Can you think of a new way to express the same sentiment? Do the words reflect the church and what we believe?

MUSIC MATTERS

Tune: All hymn tunes have a unique name, traditionally written in capital letters.

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Melody and Harmony: Some tunes are written with a melody only so that the congregation sings in unison. Others are written to be sung in parts and will include harmony.

Key: Tunes may be written in major or minor keys. Some hymns will even change keys! The key can change the way the hymn sounds.

Repetition: There might be patterns or parts of the song that repeat. Each verse of the hymn might not begin or end in the same way.

Time: The time signature tells how many beats per measure.

Accompaniment: Some hymns are written to be accompanied by a particular instrument or designed to be sung without an instrument. Do you notice instructions for instruments (such as guitar chords) included in the music?

TUNE AND TEXT

Texts and tunes that we now sing together were not always written at the same time. In fact, some texts and tunes were and still are written many decades (or centuries) apart. Many texts can be sung to a different tune. Be on the lookout for notes that provide an alternate tune for the text.

CONTEXT MATTERS

ORIGIN

Where were the text and the tune created?

When were the text and the tune written?

History: Was the tune or the text written as a hymn? Or was the tune originally a popular folk tune or from secular music? Was the text originally a prayer or poem? Were the tune and text written together?

Community or Tradition: Does the text or tune come from a particular religious community or cultural tradition?

Story or Purpose: Is there a story behind the hymn? Was the hymn written for a certain occasion or to teach a particular doctrine?

USAGE



Season or Sacrament: Is this hymn used to celebrate a particular sacrament or season of the church?

Part of Worship: Is this hymn used in a particular part of worship?

STYLES AND KINDS OF HYMNS

Plain-song or Chant: These hymns, originally sung by medieval religious communities, have speech-like rhythms emphasizing the words being sung. Examples: "Of the Father's Love Begotten," "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"

Psalter: Many hymns are interpretations of the Psalms, and collections of these hymns are called Psalters. Some are close paraphrases, while others are more loosely based on a psalm. Examples: "All People That on Earth Do Dwell," "The King of Love My Shepherd Is"

Service Music: These short pieces of music are sung responses connected with particular acts of worship. Examples: Doxology, Gloria Patri

Taizé: From the Taizé Community in France, these short hymns repeat one or two lines of Scripture or sacred text and are often designed to accommodate several different languages. Examples: "Live in Charity (Ubi caritas)," "Come and Fill Our Hearts"

Shape Note or Sacred Harp: This is a particular musical style that grew out of New England and Appalachia. These hymns were originally sung without accompaniment. Examples: "What Wonderful Love Is This," "How Firm a Foundation"

Spiritual: From the Black church, spirituals were first sung under slavery and include coded language. While many of the original authors are unnamed, the songs have been a source of strength and identity for the Black community and a foundation for modern gospel music. Examples: "Guide My Feet," "There Is a Balm in Gilead"

Praise and Worship: These are more contemporary songs, written for worship and personal devotion, often with a strong emphasis on individual faith. Examples: "Shine, Jesus, Shine," "You Are Holy (Prince of Peace)"

Many classical hymns from England, France, and Germany were composed among churches of the Protestant Reformation. Examples: "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," "O Sacred Head Now Wounded"

"Global" Songs: North American Christians have come to know and love many hymns and songs from other parts of the globe, such as Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Examples: "Ossu," "Siyahamba," "Uno epige"

New Texts and Tunes: Poets and composers are still writing new hymns all the time, responding to fresh insights and emerging concerns. Examples: "Womb of Life and Source of Being," "Touch the Earth Lightly"