



The Beauty of Hymns in 21st. Century Liturgy

BY HEGEN EVANS NGADI

A Presentation to the Inter Churches Music Festival Workshop

Saturday 9th March, 2024

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INTRODUCTION

Playback of a popular western hymn **(1½ minutes)**

To God be the glory....

Participants sing popular African hymn **(1½ minutes)**

Siaveye yinze usalanga, Kristo a salanga mu yinze×2

21st century is characterized by:

- (i) Simplicity, hook and entertainment
- (ii) Urgency of acquisition without much care of the process. This is the killer of what would be the best product/s.
- (iii) Industrialization and entrepreneurship that insist on mass trade for broad income.
- (iv) Easy access to information, transport and communication.

The great space provided by fundamental freedoms have laid the foundation of carefree lifestyle. The traditional way of doing things has almost been trashed for the new found enlightenment.

This has compromised the depth of modern/contemporary hymns leading to extemporization.

To discuss hymns appropriately, we have to put the following in focus:

1. Definition
2. Types of hymns
3. Structure of hymns
4. The process of writing hymns
5. History:
 - i. Old Testament
 - ii. New Testament
 - iii. Golden age of hymns (1707 – 1866) 150 years
 - iv. The father of hymns (Isaac Watts – July 17, 1674 to November 25, 1748 England)
 - v. Early authors
 - vi. Style of composition
 - vii. Influence in early church

Definition

1. A metrical composition adapted for singing in a religious service.
2. A song of praise or worship, sung in honor and adoration of God.

Early hymns originated from deep meditation, prayers or poetic words of prayer- deeply emotional. This was influenced by personal life experience, an experience with God e.g. dreams or generally the study of scripture

Hymns should be simple and directed to soul and spirit nourishment.

Types of hymns

- a. Failed hymns
- b. Successful hymns
- c. Good hymns
- d. Great hymns

(a) Failed Hymns

The first of these categories is that of the failed hymn. A failed hymn is a hymn that is not sung. Such a hymn could be new or old, published or unpublished. Whatever it is, wherever it comes from, if it isn't sung, it doesn't work.

Reasons for failed hymns

Technical ineptitude.

It's possible to have a good lyrical or musical idea, yet execute that idea so badly that the idea is defeated by the execution. Hymns with unclear writing and badly broken meter fall into this category. So too do hymn tunes that are overly complicated or have arrangements with serious harmonic flaws.

Does not resonate with the singers or target audience

This can be true of bad hymns, but it can be true of technically proficient hymns too. The latter are like the girl with the nice personality. They have a list of positive attributes a mile long, but nobody's interested. A hymn that is a sparkling technical achievement but gets ignored is still a failure.

Maybe the core thought simply doesn't interest most worshipers. As a rule of thumb, if the hymn isn't about something that would make a good Internet meme, the core thought is probably not good enough. For whatever reason, hymns like this are sung politely rather than enthusiastically and soon discarded.

Boring music

A hymn with boring music ideas will not strike worshipers. The music of the hymn matches the text emotionally. "He Bore It All" was sung (and to a diminishing extent is still sung) despite a dreadful text-tune mismatch. However, a weak tune will doom a hymn.

(b) Successful Hymns

These are hymns that are sung. They capture the attention of Christians so that they appear in worship.

These hymns do not have to be good. In fact, most of the new hymns that are sung in any era are not good. However, all of them have some quality that makes them stand out from the mass of failed hymns.

This quality could be lyrical. The hymn could say something that Christians want to say. The central core thought can be surrounded with bad writing but if it resonates powerfully enough, worshipers will sing it anyway.

These hymns often use so much repetition that the lyrics contain little or no depth in content.

(c) Good Hymns

A good hymn is a hymn that is sung outside its own time. Generally, it takes about 100-150 years for a hymn to be proven good (or not). Time is a ruthless winnower of hymns. The vast majority of hymns from any era will fall into disuse before the first century elapses. Today, it is the repertoire of Southern gospel hymns that is being winnowed in the United States of America. In about 50 years, ***the chaff of the contemporary era will begin to be separated from the wheat.***

Here in Kenya, we the current crop of composers MUST grab the open space and engage in hymn composition rise to the precincts of this level. Write and write so that time will sieve and next generations ageless hymn from us.

With few exceptions, any hymn that survives this process will be good. Charles Wesley wrote thousands of hymns. We sing the dozen best. Fanny J. Crosby likewise wrote thousands of hymns. Perhaps a couple dozen of her hymns remains in use today. Many more of those hymns were sung in their own time, but once they ceased to be trendy, they lost their appeal and were forgotten.

For a hymn to meet the threshold of a good hymn, it should have:

- (i) A well thought good or appealing tune.
- (ii) Good content
- (iii) Smooth writing
- (iv) Matching text and tune

It has to work as a hymn, not merely as a cultural expression.

(d) Great Hymns

These ones are sung broadly; outside their own time and religious/musical tradition. They have:

- (i) Compelling thoughts
- (ii) Strong content
- (iii) Striking music that they have a universal appeal to believers.

These are the hymns that everybody knows: "***Holy, Holy, Holy***", "***Amazing Grace***", "***The Church's One Foundation***", and so on.

Only William Bradbury among composers consistently produced great hymn tunes. No era of hymnody has contributed more than a hundred or so to the list. Such a repertoire can only be developed by the efforts of thousands over the course of centuries.

There is a bigger push by contemporary enthusiasts to replace **the Grand Old Hymns** by something stylish that fit and feed the ego of the current crop. Unfortunately, this is what will brutally murder hymns that fight for space using this framework alone!

The Grand Old Hymns been tested and refined in a way that no contemporary praise song yet has been. They rely not on trendiness, but on spiritual strength.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A HYMN

a) Strophic in nature

It has stanzas whose other name is verses. Some hymns have a stanza and a refrain, also referred to as chorus while others have many stanzas sung to same music.

b) Emotional

Testimonial hymns can be highly emotional e.g. It is well

c) Poetic

Not every word spoken or thought is fit for inclusion in hymnal lyrics. It is the choicest words that are used making it poetical.

d) Four – part harmony

Generally, the four – part harmony of SATB is favored in hymns for obvious reason – the church is mixed i.e. consist of males and females and a hymn must help unite them in singing to worship God in one accord.

e) Chords change frequently

Hymns are highly dependent on primary chords although according to the message portrayed chords change to paint words appropriately with meaning.

THE PROCESS OF WRITING HYMNS

Provocation

Provocation refers to what exactly triggers a composer to write a hymn. The synonyms are:

- Encourage,
- Stimulate,
- Stir,
- Inspire,
- Incite,
- Excite,
- Motivate e.t.c.

They are varied though not limited to the following:

- Requisition by a choir, festival.
- Thematic occasions e.g. Easter, Christmas, celebrations etc.
- Testimony
- Preaching or teaching the word of God
- Study of scripture
- Prayer
- Vision, revelation or a dream.

The Scripture

Take the bible verse positively and spend some time to read through to get to the depth of it. However, or whatever triggered your intent to write, always attach it to a bible verse which will guide you, through the hymn to reach out to felt and unfelt needs of people now and the generations to come.

Meditation

Take your sweet time, never rushing to listen to God's intent. Here, you begin to visualize the intent of the author as well as the direction to be taken in writing.

Lyrics

Chose correct lyrics. The best word from the presented words are ones to be used. For example, a whole passage of three or five bible verses can be summarized in one line in a stanza.

Melody

Chose a melody that fits well with the text of choice. Your choice of melody may be leading you to a suicide mission from the onset. Choose well!

Editing

Put text to music arranging stanzas chronologically for correct flow of events or ideas. If a chorus is used, it must be to highlight the main idea.

Assessment

Don't keep your complete work in your file awaiting training your choir or submission to a festival. Allow your works to be laid down on the ground for critique by music professionals and the consumers to raise issues that will help the hymn. Sometimes brutal truth may fall direct in your face that the whole hymn must be re – constructed. Feel not offended take it positive for it will build you into a better composer of hymns.

Test – Run

Let a friend choir rehearse and present formally or informally
Record and listen to it as well as allow others to listen to point the case for it and against it.

Publishing

Before putting it up for public consumption allow those close professionals help make all proposed corrections

CONCLUSION

I declare myself as a hymn enthusiast who is ready to go to everything possible to build great hymn repertoire.

We all have an obligation to make the 21st century produce hymns that transcend ages. To do this I propose:

1. Establishment of a hymn bank for storage, dissemination and access.
2. Establish a trusted accreditation music society
3. Unite church establishment and choirs through ICMF to market hymns from this bank nationally and internationally.

And finally, all who are here; the musical and the not so musical, never allow the gift God has given you be trampled upon. Don't be relegated to the level of a beggar for opportunities. Present yourself as a professional with skills necessary for opportunities that come.

Remember unity is strength and division is a weapon of the weak.

Write, write and write.

Thank you. - Hegen Evans Ngadi