

THE AMERICAN ORGANIST
Hymns from the Psalm versions of

Isaac Watts



Stanzas gently read,
selected,
edited,
and fitted to tunes
of many styles,
and brought
forward 300 years.

Adrienne Tindall, Editor
Morgan Simmons, Consulting Editor

IN MELODY AND SONGS: HYMNS FROM THE PSALM VERSIONS OF ISAAC WATTS, ed. Adrienne Tindall, with Morgan Simmons, consulting editor. Vernon Hills, Ill.: Darcey Press, 2014. \$25.00. Darceypress.com. A quick look at the popular hymn website Hymnary.org reveals a dismal image: a graph titled "Inclusion in Hymnals," referring to the number of occasions a text by Isaac Watts is found in print. The falloff is steep from 1760 to the present, with half of the collapse occurring within the first generation. Watts seems to have bottomed out sometime after the Sec-

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ond World War. This is a terrible state of affairs for a writer who contributed so seminally, and was once sung so widely. Today, Watts is found in a mere 1% of English-language hymnals, down from one hundred percent in 1761, according to Hymnary.org.

Lewis Carroll didn't help any; *Alice in Wonderland* contains more than one parody of Watts, including "How doth the little crocodile" and "'tis the voice of the Lobster." After 1865, when the novel was published, the decline quickened.

But Watts is a distinctive, prolific, and influential voice in English poetry; and his style, though at times a little too earnest and dangerously easy to mimic, cuts straight to the heart and deserves respect. His verses speak with unfailing candor, and candid souls should respond.

Adrienne Tindall is resolved to turn things around, and in her new collection of Watts texts, set to fresh tunes, she may succeed. *In Melody and Songs* is a wonderful, very useful collection, and deserves your attention. Her foreword tells the story of her purchase of a reprint of Watts' *The Psalms of David* of 1719, and her growing conviction that these texts should have a new life.

In a companion foreword, Morgan Simmons makes the case for a judicious updating of the texts, neatly illustrating the point with Watts' own admonition to keep the psalms "lively." The word did not then, as it does now, mean "up-tempo," but rather "fresh," "comprehensible," "alive to the reader."

Some texts are abridged and rearranged, others are largely intact. For the most part, the languages updates are unobtrusive and accomplish exactly what they set out to do. All the texts are back in print after a hiatus.

With a few exceptions, the tunes carry a 2013 copyright; some older ones are included, as in Austin Lovelace's delightful AUSTIN'S GARDEN HYMN, from 1961. This is a charming, pentatonic-flavored tune, and it suits the words to a T. Indeed, the tunes are quite elegant overall, and one has a sense of inevitability and clarity in almost every case. Some are classical in style, others more folk-like; with a few exceptions, I feel they work very well. One of the more challenging tunes, BADES by C. Martin Straub, makes extensive use of ties and syncopation. Here, the steady pulse of the left hand anchors one, and the result, though tricky, evokes the text "God binds the oceans in a chain" effectively.

Consulting editor Morgan Simmons contributed four tunes, including HEAVENLY FRUIT, which opens the collection. These are in a traditional voice, carefully written to remove ambiguity about breaths and prolongations of notes. Of his harmonizations, my favorite is for LAND OF REST, set here to words from Psalm 36 but certainly useable as an alternative harmonization anytime. As far as familiar tunes, there is JERUSALEM by C. Hubert H. Parry. The text, from Psalm 100, fits nicely.

There are several indices, including a

collection of the texts used, and examples of the alterations as well as a composer index that references psalm, hymn number, tune name, meter, and first line. Finally, there is a first-line index. Most remarkable is a "Key to Psalm 119," showing occurrences of verses of this longest psalm in Watts' work and in this hymnal.

As the book generously allows reproduction for use in worship, I field-tested several of these hymns at my own church, using them as anthems with summer congregations and inviting everyone to sing, and to comment freely afterwards. I heard numerous positive responses from choir and congregation alike. As the leader, I felt I had real quality to work with as well.

I strongly recommend this hymn collection, and agree with the editors that it's high time we had another look at the lively Dr. Watts. Things do not move in one direction only; there is a scripture about the wise steward who can bring forth things old and new. I'm happy to have this volume of things old and new in my collection, and plan to use it regularly.

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