THE HYMNS OF JOHN AND CHARLES WESLEY

Two of the most significant hymn writers in the 18th century were the brothers John and Charles Wesley. They came from a family of talented musicians and served as Anglican priests. Their commitment to observing strict discipline in their devotional life earned them the term “Methodists,” hence they are attributed with the founding of the Methodist denomination. Like other reformers, however, they did not intend to found a new church and Charles remained a priest in the Church of England until his death.

Charles Wesley left a legacy of hymnody, approximately six thousand hymn texts! This is ten times the output of Isaac Watts. John served primarily as an editor, but he also cared deeply about hymn singing. His “Directions for Singing” can still be found in the The United Methodist Hymnal. Together, the Wesley brothers had a tremendous impact on hymnody both in England and beyond.

DIRECTIONS FOR SINGING
from John Wesley’s Select Hymns (1761)

I. Learn these tunes before you learn any others; afterwards learn as many as you please.

II. Sing them exactly as they are printed here, without altering or mending them at all; and if you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can.

III. Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing.

IV. Sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.

V. Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.
VI. Sing in time. Whatever time is sung, be sure to keep with it. Do not run before nor stay behind it; but attend close to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can; and take care not to sing too slow. This drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from us, and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.

VII. Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

These directions resonate with us today as much as they did in the 18th century.

What traits characterized Wesleyan hymns?

**FORM**

Used a rich variety of poetic meters.

Used phrases in such a way that natural pauses in thought often coincide with ends of lines. This makes Wesley’s texts especially suitable for singing.

Used scriptural paraphrase more freely. Instead of simply restating a biblical phrase, he often comments upon them in creative ways.

Used such poetic devices as rhyme, repetition, anaphora (the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses), chiasmus, (a rhetorical device in which two or more clauses are balanced against each other by the reversal of their structures in order to produce an artistic effect and so forth.

**CONTENT**

Marked by a full use of Christian themes and beliefs.

Full of scriptural allusions. They are “finely wrought biblical mosaics.”

Expressive of every mood of Christian experience, with the predominate characteristic being joy and confidence.

Marked by as implicity and directness that allows them to be embraced across the Christian spectrum.

Embraced the church year and wrote many hymns on the Eucharist. The Wesleys’ commitment to the sacraments would be dismissed by later followers, but has begun to see a revival in Methodist churches.
Deeply reflective and personal in their expressiveness and, on occasion, even autobiographical, focusing on a conversion experience.

*The format is taken from Sing with Understanding, by Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath, pp. 138-139; Church Street Press, Nashville, TN*

© The Leadership Program for Musicians. All rights reserved. Used with permission.