

How Methodists Sang Their Story

B R I A N H O A R E

Brian Hoare, former President of the Methodist Conference, explores how the Wesleys shaped many of the Methodist hymns, and how their influence resonates in our worship today.

The Preface to the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book opened with the familiar words: 'Methodism was born in song'. Wesley saw the hymnbook as 'a little body of ... divinity' and Methodism has always sung its creed. If you knew your hymns you knew your faith!

Early Methodist hymn singing evolved against a background of traditional Anglican hymns which generally used one note per syllable (as, for example, in 'O God our help in ages past'). John Wesley called this 'singing in a slow drawling manner' and it soon fell out of favour with Methodists. He wrote: 'We sing swift, both because it saves time and because it tends to awaken and enliven the soul'.

Wesley preferred simple tunes. He wrote: 'There are two things in all modern pieces of music which I could never reconcile to

common sense. One is singing the same words ten times over; the other, singing different words by different persons at one and the same time'. Wesley judged 'It has no more religion in it than a Lancashire hornpipe'!

Charles Wesley's hymns proved challenging to composers who were used to traditional Anglican hymnody. He often used metres which the old Anglican tunes did not fit. Consequently, many new Methodist tunes were written, usually by leading chapel singers who were gifted in writing good singable tunes rather than using trained musicians. The tune *Diadem* (to 'All hail the power of Jesus' name') composed by James Ellor, a hat maker, is a good example.

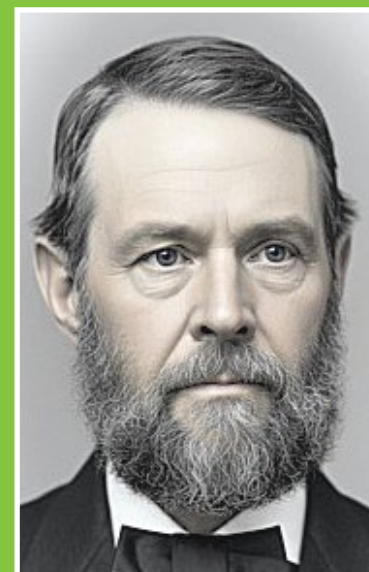
The 'feel' of Wesley's hymns with their emphasis on personal experience was also new and

needed different styles of tune. Composers began putting two or more notes to a syllable and tunes became more melodious, florid and repetitive. Chorus hymns became popular. Congregations wanted variety and a new form of hymnody emerged which was distinctively Methodist.

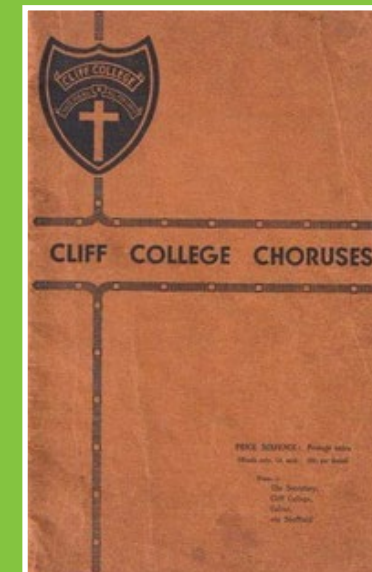
Much to the annoyance of High Churchmen, the Wesleys were happy to adapt popular tunes from any source, however secular. Yet even a great critic of the Wesleys, Dr John Scott, admitted: 'The Methodists have got some of the most melodious tunes that were ever composed for church music; there is great harmony in their singing and it is very enchanting'. Methodist hymns were music for the people. No longer were congregations dictated to by choirs and clergy: they sang music they enjoyed as an exuberant expression of their faith.

In Wesley's day, hymns were usually sung unaccompanied, but increasingly, Anglican congregations aspired to a more refined style of music with organs, choirs and anthems. John Wesley did not approve! His *Large Minutes* ruled: 'Let no organ be placed anywhere till proposed by the Conference'. Not that Wesley disliked organs, but their cost, the expense of tuning them and paying an organ blower was unjustified. Organs were not officially sanctioned in Methodism until 1820 – and even then, they remained contentious. When the Leeds Brunswick organ was installed in 1826 over a thousand members left Wesleyan Methodism!

In rural chapels things were different. They were largely unable to afford organs anyway, and instead 'gallery choirs' were formed to help lead the singing.



James Ellor



Cliff College Choruses



Gallery singers



The organ at Brunswick Methodist Chapel

Increasingly, after Wesley's death, other musical instruments were introduced to accompany the choir.

One of the first fruits of the Methodist Union in 1932 was the publication in 1933 of *The Methodist Hymn Book (MHB)* which was used for the next fifty years. The Preface explained that it aimed 'to provide a collection of tunes which, while giving appropriate expression to the sentiment of the hymns, shall be true to the robust and simple Methodist spirit and thoroughly adapted for congregational singing. For such purpose ... simple, persuasive melody is essential'.

The publication of MHB was followed in 1934 by another book very different in style: the *Cliff College Chorus Book*. Reflecting the college's strongly evangelical tradition it contained simpler songs and choruses, often quite short and with catchy tunes, which became popular in midweek women's meetings and youth groups as well as the college's evangelistic missions. Subsequent years saw the emergence of other books such as *Youth Praise*, *Sound of*

Living Waters and then collections like *Mission Praise* and *Songs of Fellowship*, all arising out of the explosion of new song and hymn writing in the late twentieth century.

As MHB was approaching fifty years old, Conference decided a new hymnbook was needed and *Hymns and Psalms* was published (1983). However, it had come just too early to be able to include more contemporary material which Methodist congregations increasingly wanted to sing, and within three decades a further 'authorised' Methodist collection, *Singing the Faith*, appeared (2011), this time including a good amount of the newer hymns and worship songs.

The church scene today is dramatically different from that of the 18th century. We live in far more ecumenical times and many characteristics of Methodist hymnody have spread through most denominations. Contemporary Christian worship is broadly eclectic. We all sing each other's songs! Just as the Wesleys had trawled their music from many

sources, so in that sense we have all become more 'Wesleyan'. Wesley urged his people to sing both 'lustily' and 'spiritually' and whatever book we sing from, we must do the same today.

REV BRIAN HOARE

Brian is a retired Methodist minister who, besides various circuit appointments, was New Testament Tutor at Cliff College, Secretary for Evangelism in the Connexional Team and President of the Conference (1995-96). He is well known as a hymn writer and musician, and has also served as both chair and magazine editor for MET's predecessor movements.

