

The Genevan Psalter – 450 years

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In 1562 the first complete version of the Genevan Psalter was published. It had taken more than twenty years to get to that point and it had not been an easy journey. In this article we trace the history of the Genevan Psalter and offer some reflections on its character and significance.ⁱ

Any historical discussion of the Genevan Psalter will have to mention the name of John Calvin. His understanding of worship was foundational for the Genevan Psalter. Calvin believed that the ministry of praise is an important part of the worship service and that singing God's praises is a *congregational* ministry. One of Calvin's problems with worship in the Roman Catholic Church was that the congregation was not singing anymore: Most of the singing was done by the clergy or by specialist singers. First and foremost, then, Calvin wanted the congregation to sing again.

Another important aspect of Calvin's understanding of worship is that he believed that especially *the Psalms* should be used for the ministry of praise. Even though Calvin was not completely opposed to the singing of hymns, there is no doubt that he preferred the Psalms.

There was, however, a practical problem: How can a group of untrained voices like a congregation sing the Psalms? Would a congregation be able to *chant* the words of the Psalms literally as they are found in the Bible? Probably not. So Calvin adopted the practice which he had seen and heard in Strasbourg: Have the congregation sing *metrical versions* of the Psalms on melodies that are singable for the average person.

Calvin did more than just provide the vision for a Psalter in French. He also initiated its production. Seeing that metrical versions of the Psalms did not exist, he started initiated the production of a French Psalter. He started the project while he was serving the French refugee church in Strasbourg in 1539. He continued to move the project forward for the next twenty-three years until it was finally finished in 1562.

Editions

The historical development of the Genevan Psalter is interesting. While Calvin remained the man who provided the stimulus to bring the project to completion, various people were used to compose texts and melodies. The first edition (Strasbourg, 1539) was a small collection of 22 psalms and hymns which included thirteen versifications by the gifted poet Clement Marot. This man was a highly acclaimed poet who had friends in high circles. Even the French king, Francis I, knew him personally and liked his work. No doubt, the fact that Marot was involved in versifying Psalms for the Genevan Psalter was an important factor in its success.

The melodies for the first edition were mainly borrowed from the songbook of the German church in Strasbourg. One of the most famous melodies from this collection is the current Psalm 68 which was composed by Matthias Greiter.

After a few years Calvin moved back to Geneva and in 1542 a new edition of the Psalter was published, in 1543 followed by another one. The main author of the texts was, again, Clement Marot. The main composer of melodies was Guillaume Franc. One of the best loved melodies from this collection is the melody of Psalm 24 (also used for 62, 95 and 111).

Soon after this, both Marot and Franc left Geneva. Marot's task as a poet was taken over by the theologian Theodore Beza. Franc's role as composer of melodies was taken over by Louis Bourgeois who served in the Genevan churches as a kind of music director. Bourgeois composed many well-loved melodies, the most famous among them probably the tune of Psalm 134 (the 'old hundredth') which is also used for the hymn 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow.' In 1551 an expanded edition of 83 Psalms was published with a number of new melodies by Bourgeois and new texts by Beza.

Unfortunately the gifted Bourgeois left Geneva soon after this. He had made the mistake of making improvements to the notation of the Psalm book without asking permission from the city magistrates. He was arrested for his efforts and Calvin had to intervene in order to get him out of jail. In those days tinkering with music notations could put you in dire straits!

The project was continued with another composer: a certain Maistre Pierre, whose real name was probably Pierre Davantes. Beza continued to take care of the texts. Finally, in 1562 a complete collection of the 150 Psalms was published. John Calvin was able to see the completion of a project that was close to his heart a few years before his death.

Popularity

The Genevan Psalms became very popular throughout French speaking Europe in a very short time. The Huguenots in France enjoyed singing the Genevan Psalms during their worship services but not just there. When war broke out between Huguenots and Roman Catholics the Psalms functioned as war-songs of the Huguenots. Beza's version of Psalm 68 was heard on the battlefield: "God shall arise and by his might put all his enemies to flight; his triumph will be glorious." If Huguenots were arrested and executed because their faith they would sing Genevan Psalms as well. In one such incident fourteen Protestant martyrs sang Psalm 79 as they were led to the scaffold: "Your land, o God, the nations have invaded; by heathen hordes your heritage was raided."ⁱⁱ

Even in aristocratic and royal circles the Psalms of Marot and Beza found appreciation. Many people know that Queen Elizabeth I of England did not think highly of the Genevan Psalms. In her opinion the melodies lacked dignity and she referred to them as 'Genevan jigs.' Less known but more impressive is the report about king Francis I of France. The king had never allowed the Reformation to take root in his country. Under pressure from the Roman Catholic Church he had even banned the publication and distribution of the Genevan Psalms. Nevertheless, when King Francis was on his deathbed he ordered the Psalms of Marot to be read aloud for his consolation!

Melodies

Scholars have long debated the origin of the Genevan melodies. For some time the theory was popular that many of the Genevan melodies were modifications of *chansons*, songs that people were singing in the streets and the bars of Geneva. Although this theory could perhaps explain Queen Elizabeth's reference to 'Genevan jigs,' it does not pass muster. After all, Calvin had told the composers that the melodies should have a dignity that is fitting for worship, so it is highly unlikely that the composers would have used folk melodies of the kind that are used in streets and bars.

The common opinion among scholars today is that most Genevan melodies were new creations while some of the melodies were based on hymns from the repertoire of the Roman Catholic Church. A well-known example is the melody of Psalm 80 which is remarkably similar to the old hymn *Victimae paschali laudes*. Another example is Psalm 141 which is closely related to the hymn *Conditor alme siderum* (each melody has four lines, the third line is identical).ⁱⁱⁱ

Another argument to support the theory that most melodies were new creations is the choice of modes to support the content of the specific Psalm. There is no room in this article to discuss the concept of the so-called church modes, but the Genevan composers certainly succeeded in creating melodies that support the message of specific Psalms. The melody of Psalm 51 (in the Phrygian mode) supports the content of the Psalm which is a prayer for forgiveness. The melody of Psalm 19 (in the Mixolydian mode) supports the content of the Psalm which praises the Lord's revelation in creation and in his Word. Even though it can be argued that not all melodies support the content of the Psalm fittingly (Psalm 60 is an example), in most cases the composers have succeeded in creating melodies that convey a sense of worshipful dignity, which is exactly what John Calvin wanted these melodies to do.

Datheen's Psalter

Given the immediate popularity of the Genevan Psalter in the francophone world, it is not surprising that attempts were made to translate the Genevan Psalms into other languages. In 1566, only four years after the publication of the complete Psalter in Geneva, Rev. Peter Datheen published a complete translation of the Psalter for the Dutch churches. Datheen's Psalter had significant deficiencies: The 'meter' did not always match the melody, resulting in awkward emphases. Still, within a few years it became the official Psalter of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands.

Not everyone received Datheen's Psalter with enthusiasm. Many congregations, especially in the eastern part of the Netherlands, continued to sing hymns from the Lutheran tradition. People complained that Genevan melodies were too difficult to sing. Of course, during those days church organs were not used for accompanying the singing. Following Calvin, most Reformed people thought that the organ was too frivolous an instrument to be used in the worship service. The congregations had to make do with the service of the precentor (*voorzanger*).^{iv}

For a few centuries the singing of the Psalms remained a difficult topic on the agenda of ecclesiastical meetings. Perhaps there is some consolation here: The complaint that Genevan melodies are difficult to sing is not a recent (or purely North American) problem.

We do not need to deny that there is difference in quality among the Genevan melodies. Most melodies are excellent, beautiful, singable, fitting to the words of the Psalms. Other melodies do not

have those excellent qualities. On the whole, however, the Canadian Reformed Churches have inherited a real treasure from the Netherlands, and ultimately from Geneva: A complete collection of metrical versions of all the Psalms on melodies that enables the congregation to sing God's praises with reverence and dignity. It is a collection worth keeping.

ⁱ A helpful resource for this article was Jan R. Luth, "Het Geneefse Psalter." In Karla Apperloo-Boersma & Herman J. Selderhuis (eds.), *Calvijn en de Nederlanden* (Apeldoorn: Instituut voor Reformatieonderzoek, 2009), 182-193.

ⁱⁱ For these and other reports regarding the use of the Genevan Psalms during the religious wars in France, see Rowland E. Prothero, *The Psalms in Human Life* (New York: Dutton, 1905), 190-191. Available online.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information on the origin and character of the Genevan melodies, the articles by Pierre Pidoux are still a good read: Pidoux, "History of the Genevan Psalter" (translated from French), three articles, *Reformed Music Journal*, Volume 1 (1989). Available online at spindleworks.com

^{iv} For more information on the Genevan Psalter in the Netherlands, see: Jan R. Luth, "Het Geneefse Psalter in Nederland." In Apperloo-Boersma & Selderhuis, 194-209.