

THE PROBLEM OF LEADING THE CHURCH'S PRAISE

The growing shortage of competent organists in many areas of Scotland has led to the search for alternative ways of leading the people's praise in Church, and it is with one of these that this article is concerned. Some years ago, it came to the notice of the Church's Committee on Public Worship that there was in use in one or two parishes in the Borders a mechanical contrivance which played items of praise pre-recorded on tape in a Hawick Church. As I happened to be living in the Borders, I was asked to investigate and report. I discovered that the moving spirit behind the project was Basil F. A. Wilson, headmaster of one of the large schools in Hawick. He both made the apparatus, and recorded the music. He kindly suggested that the best way to assess the value of the project would be for him to demonstrate it in my own church on two successive Sundays. This was done, and proved so successful that the Kirk Session decided to instal the necessary equipment, which has been in use for more than five years now.

The first thing to be said about the use of recorded music in Church is that it is, at best no more than a substitute, but it is a very adequate substitute provided care is taken to ensure that the equipment is of the highest quality, and adapted to the purpose for which it is to be used.

Having said that, there are certain points which must be borne in mind. First, if the danger of such recorded music becoming no more than a mechanical repetition of hymns and psalms which bears little relationship to the rest of the service is to be avoided, some adherence to the Christian Year is advisable. This involves, initially, recording a service for each Sunday of the year. In my own experience, this greatly increased the repertoire of the congregation, and added variety to the praise.

Second, in using the tapes, the most important thing is for the congregation to realize that the organ they hear is not accompanying but leading their singing. As the speed of the music cannot be altered as they sing, they must follow it, keeping in time with it. If they do not, the whole thing becomes impossible. This obvious truth takes no more than two Sundays to sink in, but once grasped there is no more dragging and wearisome dullness, if the recording is properly done. As each congregation has its own idiosyncracies as to tempo, and psalm tunes, it is as well for the minister, or some knowledgeable person to be with the organist doing the recording. One strange thing was discovered while recording the tunes, namely,

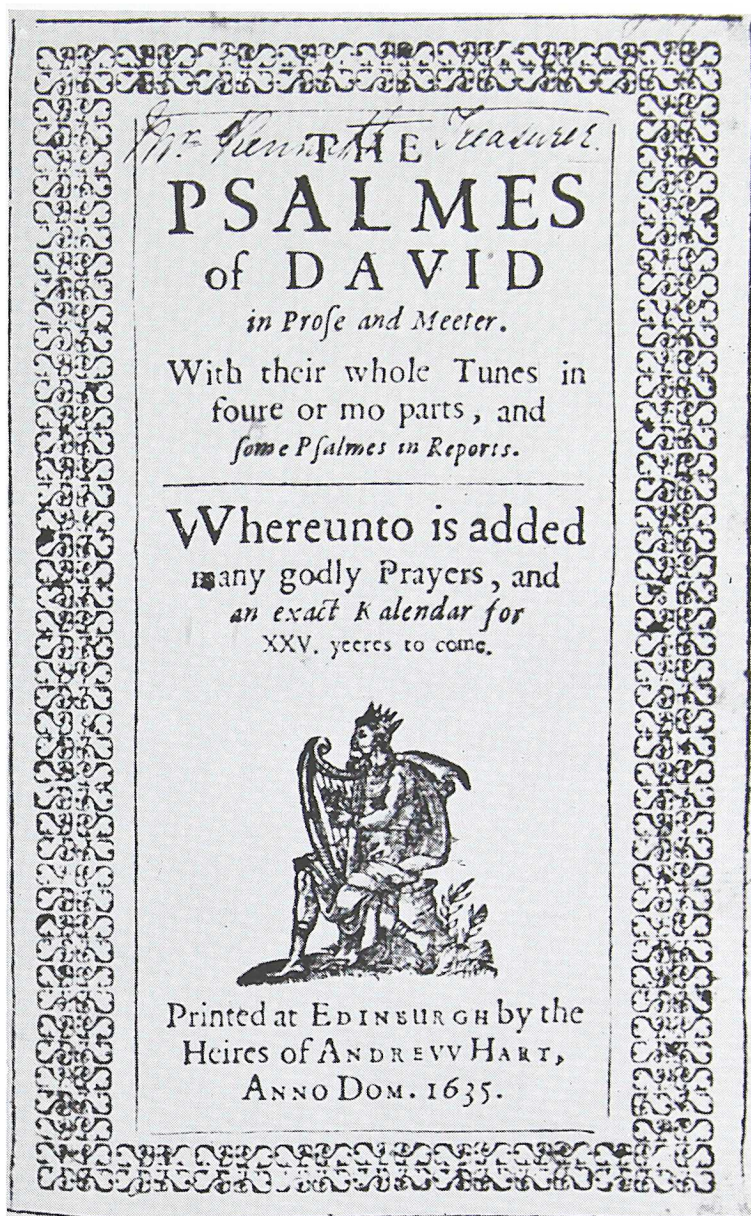
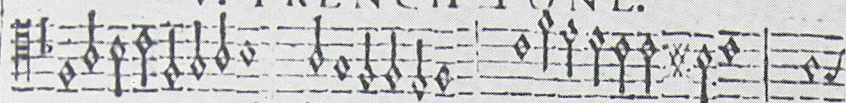
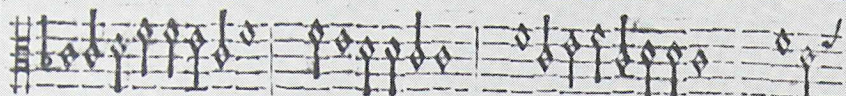


PLATE 1 Title page of the 1635 Psalter.
(Note also the 'many Godly Prayers')

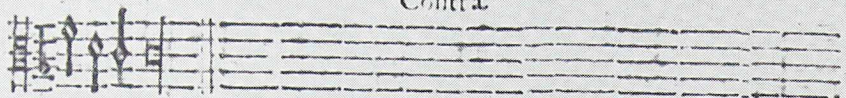
V. FRENCH TUNE.



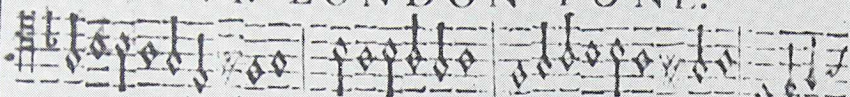
Tenor.



Contra.



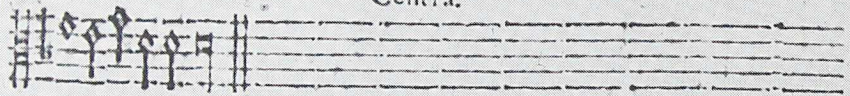
VI. LONDON TUNE.



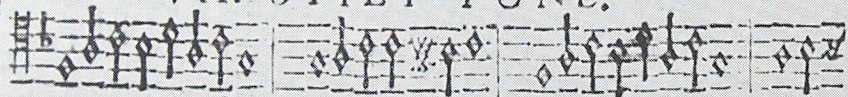
Tenor.



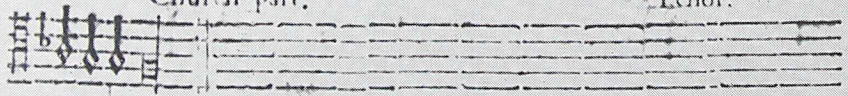
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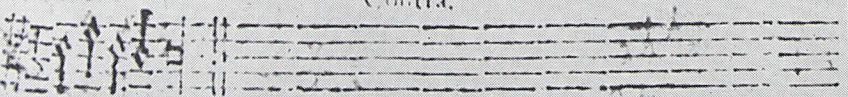
VII. STILT TUNE.



Tenor.



Contra.



The image shows a double-page spread of a musical score, oriented horizontally. The right page of the spread (on the left side of the image) contains the first two songs, and the left page (on the right side) contains the third song. Each song is written for two parts: Treble and Bass. The notation is in a historical style, likely 18th or 19th century.

V. FRENCH TUNE

Treble

Bass

VI. LONDON TUNE

Treble

Bass

VII. STILL TUNE

Treble

Bass

4

[illegible]

PLATE 3 Joseph Mainzer: Gaelic Psalm Tunes of Ross-shire, 1844 (shows Common Tune 'French' and Gaelic Tune French with pianoforte accompaniment and precentor's recitative: Gaelic and English Text).

that it is much more difficult for the organist to maintain an even tempo if there is no congregation present. He will tend to increase the tempo from verse to verse. If he discovers this to be the case it is often helpful for someone to be with him beating time for him.

One question that is often asked is about sudden emergencies which arrive from time to time too late to make a special recording. At such times, it is usually possible to substitute the words of a more suitable hymn, or psalm, for the one recorded, using the same tune. Care, of course, must be taken to ensure that the words substituted are in the same metre as the original. There will be very few occasions when it is impossible to do this.

Again, what happens when there is a Baptism? The baptismal hymn may be recorded on a separate small tape which can be put on instead of the hymn on the usual tape for that Sunday. When the Baptism takes place at the end of the service, as is recommended in the Book of Common Order, the hymn takes the place of the final hymn and the change can be made during the sermon. Where the Baptism is at the beginning of the service, the hymn can be substituted for the first hymn, and the change made in a similar way. A similar routine can be followed for services of confirmation, ordination of elders, and any other special service which demands one variant to the set tape for the particular Sunday.

The great festivals of the Christian Year can be recorded complete. As the tapes can be used over and over again, the music can be recorded each year to make room for any special items of praise that are desired. What I had in my own parish was some four or five tapes for each of the seasons, and the changes were rung on these.

For the marriage service sets of hymns can be recorded, together with suitable voluntaries. Should someone want special praise, a tape can be specially recorded for them.

Used sensibly, this method of leading Church praise has been found to be far more satisfactory than a good organ badly played, or, what is more common especially in the rural areas, a poor organ, indifferently played. Because it is possible on a good organ to provide a solid base impossible on the average American organ, the worshipper has more confidence and can participate more fully in the Church's praise. Indeed, where such a method is used, a noticeable improvement in congregational singing has taken place.

Finally, it should be clearly understood, that, however good, this is no more than a substitute for the well-played organ. But it has filled a need in some twenty parishes in town and country who would otherwise have been hard put to it to 'sing the Lord's song'.

A. W. SAWYER*

* We regret to announce the sudden death in the Bahamas of Dr Sawyer who took a keen interest in the work of the Society.