

Hymns in Concert

I'm sending something a little different today - an invitation to actively explore the hymnal through the lens of concert music. Sometimes running into a familiar tune makes an unfamiliar work much more enjoyable. This was revised and updated from a presentation at Senior Fellowship in October 2018.

Consider **purposeful listening**. Take time to focus on the music. Use headphones or good speakers. At other times, for longer works especially, background listening is certainly fine.

Computers are best for music listening. Cell phones are convenient, but be **sure** that you are not using cellular data. Audio/video uses a great deal of data. Most, but not all, wireless connections today have more than enough bandwidth.

In a browser or with an app open **YouTube** (they have a monopoly). In the search box type the name of the composer and the work you want to hear without punctuation (for example **Vivaldi Gloria**). Some of the examples below, printed in bold, add the name of a conductor or another word in order to call up a preferred performance as a first choice. You will typically get several choices to scroll through. Be prepared to deal with a variety of sound and picture quality, off topic videos, and commercials. YouTube will also keep feeding videos unless you stop it. That's part of the price of the "free" service. These searches worked on 5/18/20, but the results will change over time.

Listening Recommendations

Martin Luther famously insisted that everyone in the parish should sing, not just those in charge or in service. The first parish hymn book was in 1529. Luther, who could play the lute and sing well, contributed several hymns, both words and (reportedly) music. A Christmas carol "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come" (MH 134) was later adapted into a set of organ variations by J. S. Bach which were then orchestrated in the twentieth century by Igor Stravinsky (**Stravinsky Von Himmel Hoch Jurowski**).

Luther's Battle Hymn of the Reformation was "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (MH 325) which our hymnal also has in the original German "Ein' feste Burg ist unser

Gott" (MH 597). J. S. Bach, himself a Lutheran, set the hymn in his Cantata Number 80. This can be sung by a large choir, but some interpreters prefer one to a part (**Bach Ein Feste Live**). The opening sets only the first verse and takes about eight minutes. The more familiar harmonization is the last verse. Felix Mendelssohn was also a Lutheran (from a Jewish family). Luther's tune is featured in the fifth and final movement of his "Reformation Symphony" (**Mendelssohn Symphony 5 Frankfurt** _ the hymn tune begins at 23:00). The work also quotes and develops the Dresden Amen (MH 648).

J. S. Bach is a fountain of church music, often setting and enriching tunes written by others. The familiar flowing tune for Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring (MH 599) is part of Cantata 147 (**BWV 147 Koopman** the tune starts at 16:28). Johan Cruger's tune we know as "Now Thank We All Our God" (MH 31) was set by both Bach (**BWV 79** the tune starts at 8:25) and by Mendelssohn in a choral of his Second Symphony (**Nun danke alle Gott Mendelssohn**). Although it would help to know German, the entire Symphony is a "Hymn of Praise" (**Mendelssohn Symphony 2 Halle**). The choir doesn't sing for the first 24 minutes.

Composers sometimes insert a tune that already has meaning to the listener into a larger work. Charles Ives, writing in the early 1900's in Connecticut, frequently mixed hymn tunes with other borrowings from American music. The first movement of his Third Symphony (**Ives Symphony 3**) develops "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing" into a fugue which leads into "What a Friend we Have in Jesus" (MH 337). The tunes are chopped up and notes are changed. **Ives Symphony 2 (Bernstein)** is a wild mix of hymn tunes and popular tunes from 1900's New England. **Ralph Vaughn Williams's Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis** is a beautiful set of variations on the fugal tune we know as "All Praise to Thee" (MH 496).

Some hymn tunes are adapted from master composers. "Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken" (MH 376) is Franz Joseph **Hyden's Emperor's Hymn** from his String Quartet Number 62. "My Jesus as Thou Wilt" is a lyric theme found in the **Overture to Die Frieschutz** (The Free Shot) by Carl Maria von **Weber**.

"Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee" (MH 13) comes from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (**Beethoven Symphony 9 Berlin** _ the hymn tune starts at 1:01:50). "Be Still My Soul" (MH 73) comes from a stirring anthem written in 1899 for Finland by Jean Sibelius (**Finlandia Hymn Helsinki**). For Beethoven and Sibelius there is a lot of storm and stress before the calming.

For calming music, let's go back to the beginning. **Gregorian Chant** written down in Medieval times from ancient roots, this is our earliest notated music. Listen for a few minutes to get the idea of the sound. In the original form only one line of music was sung flowing without our modern ideas of tonality or note length. About thirty years ago a recording by monks surprised everyone by making chant a "classical" best seller. Many find the sound meditative and soothing. As part of the Roman church service all but a few Greek words are in Latin. Examples in our hymnals in English include "Of The Father's Love Begotten" (MH 92) and "Come, O Creator Spirit, Come" (MH 211).

The Catholic Mass (and later church versions) includes areas of the service that are traditionally set to music. With some variation (for special occasions) famous composers set the following parts (all of which can be searched): **Kyrie** (requesting God's mercy, WB 144), **Gloria**, **Credo** (Nicene Creed), **Sanctus** (holy) and **Benedictus** (benediction), and **Agnus Dei** (Lamb of God). Echoes of this tradition are all over our hymnals, often with texts changing with the Protestant tradition. In terms of great composers there there's a lot to choose from. Franz Joseph **Haydn** and Wolfgang Amadeus **Mozart** both wrote a dozen or more settings of the mass and these are very listenable works.

Johann Sebastian Bach's B Minor Mass clocks in at about two and half hours. Listen in parts. Late in his life Bach appears to have cared less about performance and more about demonstrating what was possible in music and to the glory of God. The opening Kyrie is astonishing fugal work (**Bach Kyrie Gardiner**). For sheer drama listen to Bach's setting of a few words in the Nicene Creed on the words "Et exspecto resurrectionem" (I look for the resurrection of the dead). The choir is at first solemn, but soon becomes exuberant and joyful on the thought (**Bach et exspect Savall**).

Antonio **Vivaldi** most famous liturgical work only set the **Gloria** portion, but the opening chorus is a lot of fun with the Latin words familiar from "Angels We Have Heard on High" (MH 127).

This is a very short list. Explore and enjoy.

