

Week 11: Rare Meters

Be Thou My Vision

Text: Traditional Irish, c. 750

- The first English translation was by the linguist Mary Byrne, published in an Irish academic journal in 1905
- Eleanor Hull, founder of the Irish Text Society, adapted Byrne's translation into verse and published it in 1912 in her *Poem Book of the Gael*
- Its first use in a hymnal came several years later in the 1919 *Irish Church Hymnal*

Tune: Traditional Irish, 1909

- First published in Patrick Joyce's *Old Irish Folk Music and Songs* in 1909 as the tune for "With My Love on the Road"
 - Almost exclusively used with "Be Thou My Vision", a few other texts have been written for this tune, including Jan Struther's "Lord of all Hopefulness"
 - The name SLANE comes from Slane Hill in Ireland where St. Patrick was said to have defied the pagan king Loegaire by lighting a fire to celebrate Easter in AD 433
1. The meter of this hymn is based on groups of three syllables rather than groups of two like most of the hymns we've studied so far. How would you describe the "feeling" of this meter? Does it match the content of the text?
 2. To say this hymn is popular would be an understatement – a number of surveys in the past decade have consistently placed it in the top 5 "favorite" hymns. Why do you think this hymn has endeared itself to so many people? What features of the text or tune help in that regard?

O Laughing Light

Text: Silvia Dunstan (1955–1993), 1987

- Born in Simcoe, Ontario, raised by her Methodist and Salvation Army grandparents
- Given a musical education from nuns at the nearby St. Joseph's convent
- Through the convent, she met well-known worship writer Sister Miriam Theresa Winter, who encouraged her to use her talents in songwriting
- Studied theology at York University and Emmanuel College in Toronto, ordained in the United Church of Canada in 1980
- Served as chaplain in a maximum-security prison for 10 years, in addition to traditional pastorates
- In 1981 she made a transition from self-proclaimed "guitar-strumming, meter-mangling self-indulgence to form-following, tradition-loving classicism"
- Died at the age of 38, less than four months after being diagnosed with cancer of the liver
- She was prompted to write this text by her friend and mentor Alan Barthel, who was looking for a "fresh version" of the ancient Christian hymn "Phos Hilaron"

Said Dunstan of her approach to hymnwriting:

...'meaningful thoughts' in sloppy form are an impediment to the people's prayer, causing an undue focus on the work itself, rather than pointing to the worship of God.

Tune: John R. Van Maanen (1958–), 1998

- Also from Simcoe, Ontario, works as a freelance musician
 - Has set a number of Dunstan's texts to music, including another well-known hymn of hers, "You, Lord, Are Both Lamb and Shepherd"
 - The tune is named PHOS HILARON after the inspiration for Dunstan's text
1. The meter used by this hymn is 11.11.11.5, known as "Sapphic" meter because of its relation to the ancient Greek poet Sappho who used the same syllable pattern. What problems can you see that make writing in this meter difficult? How does Dunstan work around them in the text? How does the music help support the words in this meter?

2. The opening phrase is certainly a unique one – “O Laughing Light”. Does it change your perception of God at all? Does it fit the mood and intention of the original “Phos Hilaron” text? What about the rest of the hymn?

Fairest Lord Jesus

Text: Anonymous, 1662

- The original text “Schönster Herr Jesu” is recorded on a seventeenth-century manuscript in Münster, Germany
- Only after it was re-published in 1842 in *Schlesische Volkslieder*, a collection of folk tunes, did it reach widespread popularity
- The English translation we use today was written by Joseph Seiss in 1873

Tune: Anonymous, 1842

- Originates from the same region of Silesia (in modern-day Germany and Poland) as the text
 - Legend has it the tune dates back to the crusades of the twelfth century, leading to its common name CRUSADER'S HYMN
 - Scholars, however, place the tune as originating in the early eighteenth century
 - The tune is also known as ST. ELIZABETH, after Franz Liszt's oratorio “The Legend of St. Elizabeth” used it as a crusader's march
1. Appropriately for a folk song from a rural area of Europe, the theme of nature figures prominently in this text. How does this compare to other hymns that talk about nature, such as “This is My Father's World”, “Great is Thy Faithfulness”, or “How Great Thou Art”? What similarities are there? What is unique about “Fairest Lord Jesus”?
 2. The meter used here is quite irregular, with a mixture of two-syllable and three-syllable groups throughout. Does that irregularity come across when singing the hymn? What factors help keep method in the madness?