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THE LINED-HYMN TRADITION IN BLACK MISSISSIPPI CHURCHES

BY BEN E. BAILEY

THE PRESENT STUDY of the lined-hymn tradition in nineteen black churches in and around Grenada, Durant, and Jackson, Mississippi, was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Five of the churches are located in rural areas; the remaining fourteen are found in small town and city environments. The denominations represented among the churches are the Baptist, Methodist Episcopal, Christian Methodist Episcopal (hereafter, CME), African Methodist Episcopal (hereafter, AME), and Holiness.

The lined hymn is so called because its performance involves the chanting (or "lining out") of one or two lines of the hymn by a leader, to which the congregation immediately responds by singing, without accompaniment, the hymn lines to the appropriate tune. William Tallmadge, Gordon Myers, and George Pullen Jackson all have described the style.¹ In discussing the role of the leader, Myers states:

How did the Precentor actually perform his duties? After choosing the tune, he sang, or "lined out" the first line of the Psalm, and the congregation repeated it after him, verbatim. Then came the second phrase, repeated again by the congregation, followed by a third phrase, the fourth, etc.²

The style is also known as "surge singing," and the hymns themselves are often called "Dr. Watts" because many of the texts, though not all, were taken from the work of the English cleric, Isaac Watts (1674-1748).³ Only two Watts texts, for example, are represented in the repertory of the churches investigated for the present study. These texts will be discussed later.

Gilbert Chase asserts that lining-out was used in folk psalmody in England and Scotland and that the practice was continued in early New England because of the high rate of illiteracy among the congregations of European colonists and the omission of printed music from the *Bay Psalm Book*.⁴ John Tasker Howard mentions the prevalence of the practice among blacks.⁵ It was natural that the enslaved blacks, when they were converted to Christianity, should readily accept the practice as a part of the white man's religious rituals, for lining-out was very similar to the call-and-response practice characteristic of much African music performance practices.

When black Protestants began to withdraw from white churches to establish their own congregations in the late eighteenth century, they

carried with them the lining-out practice. And although lining out may have been necessary at first because of the illiteracy of the congregations and the scarcity of hymnbooks with printed music, the practice lingered long past the stage when it was essential for congregational singing. It became a stylistic convention in the black churches; black renditions of the hymns became something distinctly different from what was heard in the white churches from which the blacks had departed. This is the most tenable explanation to be offered for the persistence of the practice in contemporary black churches. Thus, the lined hymn in the present day black church represents the fusion of two musical cultures—the African and the European.

In contemporary black churches, the lined hymn is usually reserved for performance in the devotional or "prayer service" which precedes the worship service proper. The elders of the church seat themselves before the congregation and take turns in "raising" (that is, choosing and leading) the hymns and praying. It is an almost invariable practice that the worshippers will stand to sing the last stanza and then, after sitting down, continue to hum at least one more stanza as the elder or deacon prays. When they have finished humming this additional stanza, the worshippers may make verbal ejaculations and comments or cry out, groan, and hum bits of melody as the elder continues to pray. Once the prayer is finished, another elder raises another hymn and the entire procedure is repeated until it is time for the worship service to start, generally signalled by the arrival of the minister in the pulpit, the sound of the piano or organ, and the procession of the choir. Used in this way, the lined hymn helps to set an emotional tone for the service which is to follow.

Occasionally, a hymn is lined and sung following a particularly fiery and stirring sermon. A skillful preacher is well aware of the approach of the emotional peak in the delivery of his sermon, and often himself will raise a hymn at this point. An alert, objective observer can readily perceive the sheer artistry used by such a minister. When he has brought the congregation to the level of full involvement in his sermon, as indicated by their shouts of "Amen", "Preach it", and other such forms of "witnessing," he will slide into lining-out a hymn without any loss of rhythm in his delivery or break in the degree of intensity, and the whole church will literally burst into song, so that it is difficult to tell when the sermon ended or the hymn began. Indeed, some preachers have been observed to continue to preach as the audience sings.

Lined hymns also find abundant use during the week-long revival services sponsored by the churches which are held in late summer and early fall in order to win converts and to revive the faith of believers. The singing at such meetings is likely to be particularly rich and full because the meetings often draw participants from congregations of churches in neighboring communities and towns, thus creating larger groups of singers.

The repertory of texts and tunes used by the nineteen congregation investigated for the present study appears to be limited to eight hymns. While the songs are generally referred to as "Dr. Watts", the investigator found only two Watts texts in use, as mentioned above. The following list identifies the hymns and their authors. All are generally available in the hymnbooks used in black churches, except that I was unable to find a tune for the Watts text "I love the Lord; He heard my cries." (See the Appendix for the texts and associated tunes.)

Thomas Shepherd (1665-1739)

"Must Jesus bear the cross alone?"

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

"I love the Lord, he heard my cries"

"Am I a soldier of the cross?"

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

"A charge to keep I have"

"O, for a thousand tongues to sing"

"Father, I stretch my hands to Thee"

John Newton (1725-1807)

"Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound"

Horatius Bonar (1808-1889)

"I heard the voice of Jesus say"

By far, the most popular of these hymns are "Amazing Grace" and "I heard the voice of Jesus say," and the tunes commonly associated with the hymns are well known. Two other hymns very popular among the churches I visited, "Father, I stretch my hands to Thee" and "I love the Lord, He heard my cries," are not so generally familiar and the original tunes not so easily found (see Examples 1 and 2). To be sure, hymn melodies or their variants may be used with different texts; each congregation has its own peculiar variant of the basic tune. A visitor from another church, however, would have no difficulty singing with the host congregation, once the hymn has been "raised" and he recognizes the tune that is being used.

The relationship between hymn texts used in the black lining-out tradition and the different tunes associated with them has not been thoroughly explored and, consequently, opens up a whole new area for investigation. "Must Jesus bear the cross alone" and "Amazing Grace" in their "lined-out" versions are easily recognizable as being based on the tunes associated with these hymns in contemporary hymnbooks, "Maitland" and "McIntosh," respectively (see the Appendix). But as late as the 1940s, the tune "Pisgah" was inseparable from Newton's text, "Amazing Grace," and it was that tune that served as a base for an

elaborate surge-song long popular among black congregations.⁶ To cite another example, the tune "Arlington," composed by Thomas Arne, now generally associated with the Watts text, "Am I a soldier of the cross" (see the Appendix), was used with another Watts text, "There is a land of pure delight," at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁷ And yet another example is "A charge to keep I have," which is associated with a Lowell Mason tune in the Baptist tradition and the tune "St. Thomas" in the Methodist tradition (including the AME and CME churches).

A superficial listening to the lined hymns may lead to the erroneous conclusion, because of the extremely slow tempos, that the songs are unmetrical. Deeper study reveals, however, that there is a steady pulse which, once established, is likely to be unerringly maintained. The highly ornamented style, along with the slow tempo, probably contribute much to obscuring the pulse.

The principal notes of the melodies generally adhere to the European major scale and its pentatonic derivative, but there are also occasional modal inflections. The most interesting tones are the ornamental ones, which are often quarter tones or smaller. In fact, some pitch changes are barely perceptible, but one realizes how vital they are to the style once he has tried to conceive of the performance without them. The effect cannot be captured with conventional notation. When one tries to apply academic labels to the ornaments, it seems that the most appropriate term might be *appoggiatura*, which are most often used on scale pitches; but other ornaments often may be performed on pitches smaller than the semitone. An occasional anticipation on a scale pitch is also heard.

Coupled with this predilection for ornamentation is the practice of slurring into principal melody notes; and while there is some slurring from below, the greater tendency seems to be towards slurring from above. It is the slurring process that reveals the kind of ornamentation used. In addition to the frequent *appoggiatura*, one also finds the neighboring tone and the anticipation; curiously, the passing tone occurs infrequently.

Usually the cadence formula, whether a line is chanted or sung, is based on a falling interval, generally a major or minor third, and may involve two principal notes or an ornament and a principal note. Often these cadential formulas are preceded by a rise in pitch.

Four-part homophonic texture is foreign to the style. The singing is largely "in unison" (actually, heterophonic) with the male voices doubling the female voices at the octave. An occasional third or sixth arises from the heterophonic nature of the singing, in which individuals sometimes abandon the principal melody notes to interpolate other tones or to improvise short melismas.

Example 1. Father, I stretch my hand to Thee

Leader: Fa - ther, I stretch my hands to Thee

Congregation: Fa - ther, I stretch my hands to Thee

Leader: No o - ther help I know.

Congregation: No o - ther help I know.

Example 2. I love the Lord; He heard my cries

Leader: I love the Lord, He heard my cry,

Congregation: I love the Lord, He heard my cry,

Leader: And pit - ied ev' - ry groan.

Congregation: And pit - ied ev' - ry groan.

GOSPEL PEARLS

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A characteristic feature of the singing is the lack of precision in the attacks and releases of phrases. After chanting his line the leader may begin singing before the congregation staggers in after a beat or more. Individual singers drop out in the middle of a phrase, only to "surge" back in before the phrase is ended. A few singers might prolong the final tones of a phrase after the majority have finished it. In some instances, such a prolongation may last well into the leader's next chanted line. This lack of precision also contributes to the heterophonic effect mentioned above.

The vocal quality of the singing is unpolished, guttural, and nasal—nasality being important to the humming which is integral to the style. Falsetto singing seems to be particularly valued because of its ability to soar above the main body of the singing in improvised melismas. The leader also makes frequent use of falsetto in lining the hymn.

Before beginning this study, the present writer felt that the practice of singing lined hymns persisted mainly in rural Baptist churches, among the older and least formally educated congregations. Surprisingly, and gratifying to me, my research did not support such an assumption for the churches included in this study. On the contrary, I found that the preservation of the practice in its richest form is to be found in some of the large, urban churches, without regard to denomination, age, or educational level of the members. Indeed, two of the largest churches in which the practice is strongest are churches in the largest city in the state, with congregations made up largely of highly educated, professional classes. And some of the most active participants in the tradition are the youth. It appears that the practice of lining-out hymns in some black churches of Mississippi persists in a healthy state.

Tougaloo College

NOTES

1. William H. Tallmadge, "Dr. Watts and Mahalia Jackson—The Development, Decline, and Survival of a Folk Style," *Ethnomusicology* 5 (1961): 95-99; Gordon Myers. "The Precentor: Early America's Unsung Hero," *Music Journal* (January 1972): 28-32; George Pullen Jackson, *White and Negro Spirituals: Their Life Span and Kinship* (Locust Valley, New York: J. J. Augustin, n.d. [1943], pp. 284-251.
2. Myers, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
3. Jackson, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-249.
4. Gilbert Chase. *America's Music: From the Pilgrims to the Present*. (New York: McGraw-Hill 1955), p. 31.
5. John Tasker Howard, *Our American Music: Three Hundred Years of It*. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1939), p. 423.

6. See Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

7. Communication from Eileen Southern, who reports that the tune "Arlington" is indicated for the singing of "There is a land of pure delight" in the AME Hymnal published in 1837.

APPENDIX: Eight Hymns Associated with Lining-Out Practices in Black Churches

All these hymns can be found in contemporary AME hymnals, except that no melody is given for "I love the Lord." Other sources for some of the hymns include *Gospel Pearls* (published by the [black] National Baptist Convention in 1921); Ira Sankey's *Gospel Hymns, Nos. 1 to 6 Complete* (Excelsior Edition, published in 1895); *Baptist Hymnal* (1956 edition); *Methodist Hymnal* (1939 edition). It is of interest that all the hymn texts are indicated as C.M. (that is, common meter with alternating lines of eight and six syllables) except "A charge to keep I have," which is marked S.M. (short meter with lines of six syllables). Observe, however, that the third line of this text breaks the rule with its eight syllables. In summary, none of the hymns associated with "lining-out" employ the very common L.M. (long meter with eight-syllable lines) or the less common, other Protestant hymn meters.

A charge to keep I have (S.M.) - Charles Wesley

Lowell Mason



St. Thomas



1. A charge to keep I have
A God to glorify
A never dying soul to save
And fit it for the sky.
2. To serve the present age
My calling to fulfill
O may it all my powers engage
To do my Master's will!
3. Arm me with jealous care
As in thy sight to live
And, oh, thy servant, Lord prepare
A strict account to give!
4. Help me to watch and pray
And on thy self rely
Assured, if I my trust betray
I shall forever die.

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound (C.M.) - John Newton



1. Amazing grace! how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind, but now I see.

2. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!
3. Thro' many dangers, toils, and snares
I have already come
'Tis grace hath bro't me safe thus far
And grace will lead me home.
4. The Lord has promised good to me
His word my hope secures
He will shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

Am I a soldier of the cross (C.M.) - Isaac Watts



1. Am I a soldier of the cross
A follower of the Lamb
And shall I fear to own His cause
Or blush to speak His Name?
2. Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease
While others fought to win the prize
And sailed thro' bloody seas?
3. Are there no foes for me to face?
Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend to grace
To help me on to God?
4. Sure I must fight, if I would reign:
Increase my courage, Lord
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
Supported by thy word.

5. Thy saints in all this glorious war
Shall conquer, though they die
They see the triumph from afar
By faith they bring it nigh
6. When that illustrious day shall rise
And all thy armies shine
In robes of victory through the skies
The glory shall be thine.

Father, I stretch my hands to Thee (C.M.) - Charles Wesley

Chelmsford



Unknown



1. Father, I stretch my hands to thee
No other help I know;
If thou withdraw thyself from me,
Ah, wither shall I go?
2. What did thine only Son endure,
Before I drew my breath!
What pain, what labor to secure
My soul from endless death!
3. O Jesus, could I this believe
I now should feel thy power!
Now my poor soul thou wouldst retrieve,
Nor let me wait one hour.

4. Author of Faith, to thee I lift
My weary, longing eyes:
O let me now receive that gift,
My soul without it dies!
5. Surely thou canst not let me die;
O speak, and I shall live;
And here I will unwearied lie,
Till thou thy spirit give.
6. The worst of sinners would rejoice,
Could they but see thy face
O let me hear thy quickening voice,
And taste thy pard'ning grace!

I heard the voice of Jesus say (C.M.) - Horatius Bonar

English folksong



Downs (Lowell Mason)



1. I heard the voice of Jesus say
 "Come unto me and rest
 Lay down thou weary one, lay down
 Thy head upon my breast."
2. I came to Jesus as I was
 Weary and worn and sad
 I found in him a resting place
 And he has made me glad.
3. I heard the voice of Jesus say
 "Behold, I freely give
 The living water; thirsty one
 Stoop down, and drink, and live."
4. I came to Jesus, and I drank
 Of that life-giving stream
 My thirst was quenched, my soul revived
 And now I live in him.
5. I heard the voice of Jesus say
 "I am this dark world's light
 Look unto me, thy morn shall rise
 And all thy day be bright."
6. I looked to Jesus, and I found
 In him my star, my sun
 And in that light of life I'll walk
 Till traveling days are done.

I love the Lord: he heard my cries (C.M.) - Isaac Watts

(No tune available)

1. I love the Lord: he heard my cries,
 And pitied every groan:
 Long as I live, when troubles rise,
 I'll hasten to his throne.
2. I love the Lord: he bowed his ear,
 And chased my grief away:
 Oh, let my heart no more despair
 While I have breath to pray.
3. The Lord beheld me sore distressed;
 He bade my pains remove;
 Return, my soul, to God, thy rest,
 For thou hast known his love.

Must Jesus bear the cross alone (C.M.) - Thomas Shepherd



1. Must Jesus bear the cross alone
And all the world go free?
No, there's a cross for everyone
And there's a cross for me.
2. How happy are the saints above
Who once went sorrowing here!
But now they taste unmingled love
And joy without a tear.
3. The consecrated cross I'll bear
Till death shall set me free
And then go home my crown to wear
For there's a crown for me.
4. Upon the crystal pavement, down
At Jesus' pierced feet,
Joyful, I'll cast my golden crown
And his dear name repeat.
5. O precious cross! O glorious crown
O resurrection day!
Ye angels, from the stars come down
And bear my soul away.

O for a thousand tongues to sing (C.M.) - Charles Wesley



1. O, for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise
The glories of my God and King
The triumphs of His grace!
2. My gracious Master and my God
Assist me to proclaim
To spread thro' all the earth abroad
The honors of Thy Name
3. Jesus! the Name that charms our fears
That bids our sorrows cease
'Tis music in the sinner's ears
'Tis life, and health, and peace.
4. He breaks the power of canceled sin
He sets the prisoner free
His blood can make the foulest clean
His blood availed for me.
5. He spoke, and, listening to His voice
New life the dead receive
The mournful, broken hearts rejoice
The humble poor believe.
6. Hear Him, ye deaf
His praise, ye dumb
Your loosened tongues employ
Ye blind, behold your Saviour come
And leap, ye lame, for joy.

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Ethnomusicology, Vol. 5, No. 2. (May, 1961), pp. 95-99.

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