

Re-Valuing Women Hymn Writers

Lyn Loewi

Under the toil and the striving,
Under the sorrow and stings,
Always serene, aye persistent,
Something in every heart sings.

Sarah Collins Fernandis (1863-1951)¹

Where do we go from the monumental and lovingly prepared 1982 hymnal? So much has changed. Forty years ago, women wrote just 5% of the hymnal texts, but since that time, have stepped fully into their roles as theologians, priests and bishops. They have so much to say. How do we sing a new song? While we honor the men whose music and texts inspire our worship, we have normalized the invisibility of women, unconcerned about their absence, their missing wisdom, the prophetic voices silenced. Most of the 1982 women authors lived in the 19th century: Cecil Frances Alexander, Christina Rossetti, and others. Of the living poets, only one hymn was newly published: Linda Wilberger Egan's "*The First One Ever*." The text celebrates biblical women and their ability to recognize Jesus as Lord, Messiah, and risen Savior.

The first one ever, oh, ever to know of the birth of Jesus, was the Maid Mary,
was Mary the Maid of Galilee, and blessed is she, is she who believes.
Oh blessed is she who believes in the Lord, oh, blessed is she who believes.
She was Mary the Maid of Galilee, and blessed is she, is she who believes.

Linda Wilberger Egan (b.1946)²

The Bottom Line: We have barely scratched the surface of what women have to offer in congregational song.

A History of Women Hymn Writers-A Sampler³

The First 1500 years

The fact is, we know that nuns and women in lay religious communities (like the Beguines) were singing chant, but not a lot of music has been preserved. The earliest hymn poet we know by name is the Byzantine nun Kassia (c.810-865). Founder and first abbess of a convent near Constantinople, her chants were so well liked in the 9th century they were included in official service books.⁴ Hildegard von Bingen (1078-1179) produced more music and theological writing than any other woman of the Middle Ages.⁵ She wrote simple hymns like "O fiery spirit" as well as virtuosic chant. Her responsory "O vos angeli" has a vocal range of two and a half octaves, giving a musical picture of angels descending and rising between earth and heaven. The English mystic Julian of Norwich (c1343-c1416) wrote *Revelations of Divine Love*, the earliest work in England by a woman. She wrote, "As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother."⁶

The Bottom Line: Women have always been making sacred music

The Printing Press Changes Everything

In the Protestant Reformation Martin Luther, like Jan Hus before him, wrote hymns in his native language, making scripture accessible to ordinary people. Hymns provided simple music and straightforward texts, in contrast to the extravagant liturgies of the Catholic Church. New hymns, printed on newly invented Gutenberg printing presses, were then made into hymnals small enough to be carried in the pockets of the faithful.⁷

In the Reformation and other theological revolutions against the established church, such as those of the Anabaptists, Huguenots, Moravians, or Puritans, women participated alongside men. Lutheran Elisabeth Cruciger (1500-1535), daughter of Polish nobility and the wife of Caspar Cruciger, a professor of theology at Wittenberg, only lived long enough to write one hymn, “Herr Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn” later used in Bach’s cantata 96.⁸

The Bottom Line: Women’s hymns spoke from the margins, distinct from the narratives of dominant power.

Nineteenth Century Hymns From Parlor-Bound Women

In the 19th century, thousands of hymns were written by women. Some were renowned poets and “women of letters,” such as Christina Rossetti, the Brontë sisters, Cecil Frances Alexander, and Frances Ridley Havergal. Others wrote hymns for the Great Awakening, a revival that swept America. These songs preached repentance, salvation, and temperance. When factories along the Erie canal disrupted rural life, “The power of steam and the anxiety of industrialization were answered by the power of Christ and the assurance of the Gospel.”⁹ Before the revival one in ten Americans was a church member; by the end, *eight* out of ten. Women wrote 25 to 33% of hymns; hymns for sinners, children, and missionaries.¹⁰ They occupied the niche we might call, “Matrons of Morality.”

Fanny Crosby (1820-1915), a blind poet, wrote somewhere between 5,500 and 9000 hymns. The number is unclear because she used as many as 200 pseudonyms. Her hymns, such as “I am thine, O Lord,” “Jesus is tenderly calling you home,” and “Tell me the Stories of Jesus” were written for the destitute of New York City where she lived. She was part of the “rescue mission” movement, aimed at the homeless, immigrants, and the poor. She was also the first woman to speak before the U.S. Senate, when in 1846 she lobbied for the education of the blind.¹¹

The Bottom Line: Women felt called to be the voice of social reform.

From the Civil War to Suffrage (1861-1920)

The emancipation of enslaved people brought the question of personal freedom for women to a boiling point. Women abolitionists wanted their own freedom as well as the right to own property, to vote, and to change repressive laws. In 1863 Unitarian Olympia Brown (1835-1926) was the first woman ordained by her denomination. She fought for women’s suffrage and cast her vote in 1920 at the age of 85. The parlor-bound women were getting restless.

The Progressive Era (1890-1920) was marked by even greater political agitation. Women demanded labor reforms, the right to divorce, and to keep one’s children after a divorce. Women like Jane Addams, Ida B. Wells, Susan B. Anthony, and Mary Church Terrell organized social movements to

push back against discrimination and the harms of industrialization. Women attended universities in larger numbers, and new employment opportunities arose. Yet, when Ralph Vaughan Williams edited the 1906 English Hymnal he made a point of throwing out 50 years of hymns by women for their “self-centered sentimentalism.”¹²

Rev. Richard Allen, who founded the African Methodist Episcopal church in 1794, also published the first Black hymnal in 1801. Bound in a 3” x 5” format, the texts used strong imagery, emotional appeal, and easily sung refrains.¹³ The hymns resembled the camp songs of the revival movement and were the model for later gospel hymnody. Over time, the quality of this music was debated and frequently purged by hymnal compilers, white and black.¹⁴ One intriguing question is whether Richard Allen’s hymns influenced the first revival hymns or the other way around.¹⁵ Another question is whether Ralph Vaughan Williams’s purging of “sentimental” hymns was as much a repudiation of Black hymn writers as women hymn writers. Both groups sang from a place of abject dependency. While the music of women hymn writers was discarded, their music lived on to some extent in the Black church. Consider the white English writer Elizabeth Codner (1824-1919), who wrote “Even me.” The hymn appeared in 801 hymnals with the text:

“Lord, I hear of show’rs of blessings Thou art scatt’ring full and free.
Show’rs the thirsty souls refreshing; Let some drops now fall on me.
Even me, Lord, even me. Even me, yes, even me.”¹⁶

Like the Canaanite woman seeking crumbs of mercy from Jesus,¹⁷ the singers of this hymn turned to God for meager handouts, drops of blessing. Small wonder then that during the Great Depression, gospel music, initially rejected as low-brow or coarse by aspiring African Americans, became highly popular.¹⁸ And evidently, since the hymn appears today in both the *African American Heritage Hymnal* and *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism*, the message still resonates. Black women writers of gospel hymns included Sallie Martin (1895-1988), Doris Akers (1923-1995), and Lena McLin (b. 1928).¹⁹

The Bottom Line: Many women hymn writers were “erased” for writing hymns deemed overly emotional/needy.

From the 19th Amendment to the Ordination of Women Priests (1920-1976)

Cultural icons of the 1930s and 40s included Wonder Woman (1931), Nancy Drew (1930), and Rosie the Riveter. These smart, feisty characters worked their way into the imagination of millions of women including Supreme court Justices Sandra Day O’Connor, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Sonia Sotomayor.²⁰ A real-life heroine came in the person of Eleanor Roosevelt, who threw herself into Depression-era relief efforts. These icons were kind and competent, intelligent and curious, seeking fairness and restorative justice. They and others of their time escaped the prison-like confines of the 19th century parlor to join more vigorously in the noise of the marketplace. Women were doing the work of men during WWI and WWII, redefining a woman’s place. The opportunities seemed limitless until the 1950’s and the Baby Boom sent women back to the kitchen.

The Bottom Line: Women began to imagine lives of greater purpose.

The 1960’s and 1970’s

The 1960’s were a time of revolution: class, race, and second wave feminism, and yet, the growing evangelical movement was highly patriarchal. Their hymnals had only 1-10% hymns by women,

focusing instead on kingly power and authority, ancient creeds and the end of time.²¹ Little attention was given to the radical, inclusive ministry of Jesus. A fitting counterpoint then, was the publication of *The Cambridge Hymnal* in 1967.²² Composer Elizabeth Poston (1905-1987), as music editor, commissioned hymns by Elizabeth Maconchy (1907-1994), Imogen Holst (1907-1984), and many others, and wrote some herself. She also composed over 60 descants.

Despite apocalyptic threats, the ordination of women was grudgingly approved in 1974 (1994 in the UK) and precipitated an outpouring of hymns by nuns, women theologians and educators. This watershed historic event continues to transform the church. As women priests assume a consistent presence at the altar, the language of our liturgy has become less patriarchal.

The Bottom Line: Women sought new, gender-inclusive names for God.

“Sing to the Lord a New Song, or; What’s Next?”

Two important Episcopal supplements have been published since the ordination of women. *Wonder, Love and Praise* (1997) included newer hymn writers, about 18 % of them women. Rev. Sylvia Dunstan, like many new women clergy, began her ministry among the forgotten.²³ Working as a chaplain in a maximum security prison, Dunstan used images from Exodus in her hymns.

“All who hunger gather gladly; holy manna is our bread.
Come from wilderness and wand’ring.
Here in truth we will be fed.
You that yearn for days of fullness,
all around us is our food.
Taste and see the grace eternal.
Taste and see that God is good.”

Voices found was the first authorized hymnal by, for, and about women.²⁴ It was interfaith and ecumenical. Compiled by the Women’s Sacred Music Project, *Voices Found* made three important contributions: 1) a conscious effort to include hymns about biblical women, saints, and mystics 2) expanded imagery for God avoiding traditional male pronouns, and 3) the voices of new women theologians and priests. Hymns by Shirley Erena Murray, Ruth C. Duck, Bernadette Farrell, Jane Marshall, Rae Whitney and so many others, saw God in the faces of all humanity. They wrote with new urgency about oppression, justice, healing, and our fragile earth.

The search for new hymns, new voices, new gifts continues. A query to the AAM online discussion list revealed that AAM members use more than 20 hymnals from other denominations when selecting hymns. We are supplementing our worship music with more voices from the margins.

The Bottom Line: As church musicians, we are looking for new songs.

Conclusion, or the Beginning of Something

As a tradition, too often we suffer from a cultural bias called “white sexual narcissism.”²⁵ That means we give positive values to works by white men and negative values to works by women and as a result, have ignored or erased centuries of poetry and music by women and other marginalized populations. Singing in a womanist, non-binary, post-colonial world is no easy task, and our hymnals fall short of

addressing these contemporary topics. Theologian and civil rights leader William McClain (1938-2020) explained the power of our hymns:

“Our music tells who we are, where we come from, what we feel, what our philosophy of life is, who we feel close to or alienated from, and who we want to be close to. Our songs, more than creeds or doctrinal statements, reveal what our people believe. While they may be poetry, they do not always fit Wordsworth’s notion of “thoughts recollected in tranquility.” The offerings are hidden fire, spiritual explosions, quests of the untamed heart.”²⁶

Singing hymns of hidden fire may require going beyond what we know, beyond our comfort zone, but we’re assured that this effort is salutary: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given *for the common good*.”²⁷

Just as in the legend of Scheherazade, our shared stories benefit us all, telling of a strange and wonderful divine presence in the world.

Conclusion

**i found god in myself
and i loved her,
i loved her fiercely²⁸**

Ntozake Shange

-
- 1 Sarah Collins Fernandis was a Black poet and hymn writer. She graduated from Hampton Institute in 1882. These lines come from her poem, “Music”, published in 1925. Jon Michael Spencer, ed. *Unsung Hymns by Black and Unknown Bards*. A Special issue of *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology*. Volume 4, Number 1, Spring 1990. Duke University Press.
 - 2 *The Hymnal 1982*, (New York, New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), Hymn #673.
 - 3 Janet Wootton, *This is our Song* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf&Stock, 2010).
 - 4 Hildegard Publishing has two collections of Kassia’s hymns.
 - 5 “Music.” The International Society of Hildegard von Bingen Studies. <http://www.hildegard-society.org/p/faq.html>
 - 6 *Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich, chapter 59, written in 1373. “So Jesus Christ who sets good against evil is our real Mother. We owe our being to him-and this is the essence of motherhood!-and all the delightful, loving protection which ever follows. God is as really our Mother as he is our Father.” (Chapter 59)
 - 7 Wootton, p. 39.
 - 8 “Elizabeth Creutziger.” Hymnary.org, https://hymnary.org/person/Creutziger_Elisabeth.
 - 9 Jill Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States* (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), p. 190.
 - 10 Wootton, introduction p. viii.
 - 11 “Fanny Crosby,” Wikipedia, 17 October 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fanny_Crosby.
 - 12 *The English Hymnal*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1906), Preface p. vi.
 - 13 Eileen Southern, “Hymnals of the Black church” *The Black Perspective in Music* Vol. 17, No. 1/2 (1989), p. 155.
 - 14 Ibid
 - 15 Ibid p.156.

-
- 16 “Elizabeth Codner.” Hymnary.org (https://hymnary.org/text/lord_i_hear_of_showers_of_blessing#Author)
- 17 Matthew 15: 21-28
- 18 Felicia Monica Patton, *Hidden Figures: Unsung Sheroes, Silent Voices of Sacred Music: An analysis of the significant contributions of six oft ignored African American female hymn writers/composers* (Masters thesis, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2018).
- 19 Mildred Denby Green, *Black Women Composers: A Genesis*, (Woodbridge, CT: Twayne Publishers.) p. 115.
- 20 Maria Tatar, *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces* (New York, N.Y.: Liveright Publishing Corporation, A Division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2022), p.209.
- 21 Wootton, introduction viii.
- 22 David Holbrook and Elizabeth Poston, editors, *The Cambridge Hymnal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).
- 23 *Wonder, Love, and Praise* (New York, New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1997) Hymn# 761 v.1 with comments about Dunstan’s life.
- 24 *Voices Found* (New York, New York: Church Publishing, 2003).
- 25 Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 88. Williams uses the term white racial narcissism for preferring the color white over the color black. I have extended her meaning to include gender.
- 26 William B. McClain, Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington DC. Foreword, *Unsung Hymns by Black and Unknown Bards*, edited by Jon Michael Spencer, A special issue of *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology*, vol 4, no. 1, Spring 1990. Duke University Press.
- 27 I Corinthians 12: 4-7
- 28 From, “A Laying on of hands,” poem by Ntozake Shange (1948-2018).