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# Sing to the Lord a New Song: John Calvin and the Spiritual Discipline of Metrical Psalmody

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Sing to the Lord a New Song:  
John Calvin and the Spiritual Discipline of  
Metrical Psalmody

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**M**usic has the power to shape us, to mold our thoughts and actions, to teach us. It is this truth that the Protestant reformer John Calvin recognized and sought to employ as he included the singing of psalms in his liturgy. In addition to corporate worship, Calvin encouraged his congregation to view the singing of the Psalms as a spiritual discipline; that by singing, people would be trained in holiness. To accomplish this goal, he worked to collect metrical psalms—psalms rewritten with meter and rhyme in the vernacular language—into a unified psalter that could be used in daily life.

The biblical psalms have played an important role in religious society and worship dating back to the reign of King David in ancient Israel. Both Jews and Christians consider the Book of Psalms to be a valuable collection of liturgical texts.<sup>1</sup> These 150 compiled psalms were used in a variety of ways, from prayer to prophecy to instruction to song.

Psalmody, or the singing of psalms, is as old as the psalms themselves. The superscripts preceding several psalms contain musical terminology and even performance directions, indicating that many of the psalms

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<sup>1</sup> James McKinnon, “Christian Antiquity,” in *Antiquity and the Middle Ages: From Ancient Greece to the 15th Century*, ed. James McKinnon (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1990), 69-70.

were specifically written to be sung and played.<sup>2</sup> Because the transmission of music at the time was entirely oral, little is conclusively known about the original methods of performance in the ancient Hebrew religious settings, though much speculation has been made.<sup>3</sup> Over time, psalmody has adapted over and over again for the sake of accessibility and functionality.

To appreciate the way the psalmic lyric was set to music, the lyric itself must be understood. Hebrew poetry vastly differs from a wide body of English poetry in that Hebrew poetry does not typically utilize the conventions of assonance, alliteration, and rhyme common to English poetry.<sup>4</sup> Instead, Hebrew poetry is characterized by imagery and rhythm, and most definitively by repetition. There is little formal distinction between poetry and prose.

This blurring of the boundary between poetry and prose is important to note when considering the way the psalms were sung. Allen Cabaniss points out four major ways that prose songs may have been sung.<sup>5</sup> First, a simple choral part could accompany a more intricate soloistic melody. Second, a group of skilled singers could be trained to sing a more complex setting of the text. Third, a soloist could improvise. And fourth, the text could be sung with “ecstatic, exalted, or elevated speaking” — in effect, chanting.<sup>6</sup>

Chant was a major step in the development of psalmody. Various dialects of chant exist, dating as early as the fifth and sixth centuries.

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<sup>2</sup> There is some significant debate on the historical and literary authenticity of the superscripts common in many modern translations of the ancient Hebrew manuscripts. However, that debate is not the focus of this paper and since the consensus is that the superscripts are authentic, I will assume them to be so.

<sup>3</sup> The work of musicologist Suzanne Haïk-Vantoura is an example of the many attempts to decipher and translate the Masoretic cantillation, the musical marks found in ancient Hebrew manuscripts.

<sup>4</sup> Susan E. Gillingham, *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 18-19.

<sup>5</sup> Allen Cabaniss, "The Background of Metrical Psalmody," *Calvin Theological Journal* 20, no. 2 (November 1, 1985): 194, *ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCO|host*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

The most common style of chant was Gregorian chant, so named for Pope Gregory the Great. Gregorian chant—also called *plainchant* or *plain-song*—was sung in unison and unaccompanied. Within this broad genre of music is a very specific formula for chant known as psalm tones. There were eight tones, one for each church mode, plus a ninth tone known as *Tonus peregrinus*, called “the wandering tone” because it does not remain in a specific mode.<sup>7</sup> These psalm tones are written in such a way that they may be paired with any one of the 150 psalms. Creating music that may be paired with multiple texts was a significant development in the evolution of music in the church and played an important part in psalmody.

Unmetered or *prose* psalmody was the primary vein of psalmody used in the liturgy of the early church, but it was not the only existing musical style of that period. In fact, outside of the church, songs with metrical verse were more familiar, dating back even to the Greco-Roman world.<sup>8</sup> It did not take long for the early Christian church to adopt this genre for their hymns, structuring the text in measured, rhythmic, and rhymed vernacular.<sup>9</sup> The practice of investing hymns with rhyme and meter was made famous by Saint Ambrose. His frequent use of quatrains in iambic dimeter was so widely exercised that it came to be known as *Hymni Ambrosiani*, or Ambrosian Hymns. Because they were easy to sing and remember, his hymns achieved enormous popularity in their day. The psalms, however, were not typically altered to fit within this framework, likely because their texts were considered too sacred to for “profane tampering.”<sup>10</sup> With few exceptions, this remained the case until medieval times.

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<sup>7</sup> In Gregorian chant, the church modes refer to the eight systems of pitch organization.

<sup>8</sup> Cabaniss, 194. Note: He asserts that “the lyrics of Sappho, Catullus, and Horace were meant to be sung” thusly.

<sup>9</sup> As the early church spread, new hymns were composed in the language common to the geography. The most common dialect in the church was Latin, but Greek, Syriac, and others were also used. A fine example of the practice of writing in vernacular rhyme and meter is a Greek hymn, “Shepherd of Tender Youth,” recorded by Clement of Alexandria. Cabaniss points out that the original hymn setting consists of “four quatrains in lively anapaestic rhythm.”

<sup>10</sup> Cabaniss, 197.

Metrical psalmody—the singing of psalms in a structured, metered pattern—was born out of a quest for functionality in an opportune historical moment. The prose psalter was popular because of the lyrical content it housed. However, there were serious challenges in setting the prose psalms to music. To try to keep the content alive, there was a push to imitate the psalms in hymnody, which further “debased” the biblical text. Metrical psalmody, though not perfect, solved many of these issues.

A series of unfolding events in liturgical music gave metrical psalmody the breath of life. Perhaps the most propelling of these events was the creation of the sequence in the late ninth-century liturgical repertoire.<sup>11</sup> In their conception, sequences were mere extensions of chants, often as an addendum at the end of the *Alleluia* of the Mass Proper. These early sequences began as improvisations without form or structure, but gradually evolved into more complex and distinct compositions. By the twelfth century, sequences were generally structured, syllabic compositions that usually featured a series of paired couplets sung to the same melody, followed by a final, unpaired sentence. As the sequence developed further still, it was common to find rhyming lines of even length without an unpaired, final sentence. Cabaniss believes this to have great impact on the world of psalmody. He writes:

It would appear then, that several factors served to set the stage for the development of medieval psalmody: (1) the immense popularity of the prose psalter, (2) the almost inevitable tendency to imitate the psalms in prose hymnody, (3) the influence of poets such as Ambrose who versified biblical teaching to make it more popular and easy to memorize, (4) the relative difficulty of producing versifications using classical meters, and (5) the opportune creation of the sequence. The abandonment of classical form in favor of the accentual rhythm of the sequence and the adoption of rhyme loosed old bonds. Imitation of the sequence is the principal factor of the emergence of the metrical

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

psalmody with which we are familiar, but we should keep in mind that it might never have come to pass had the other factors not opened the way for it.<sup>12</sup>

The sequence is thus an important stepping stone for metrical psalmody. The rhyming couplets, even line length, and consistent meter of the sequence were carried into the realm of psalmody to create this new genre. Perhaps the most important functional aspect of metrical psalmody was the inherent rhyme, rhythm, and repetition introduced through the sequence. In keeping with Ambrosian hymns, metrical psalms were structured in a way that facilitated easy reception and memorization.

Memorization is key. Many people from the early ages of the church through the medieval age were illiterate and could not afford or even understand a copy of scripture. Metrical psalmody provided a helpful way for the lay people of the time to remember the message of the psalms and recall them as they desired: the rhyme and rhythm of the metrical psalms made the scriptural texts easier to memorize.

In this sense, metrical psalmody can rightly be understood as a sort of spiritual discipline.<sup>13</sup> As people sung the psalms, the words and messages of the texts became embedded in their hearts, molding their character and actions. This idea became a driving force in the development and use of metrical psalmody, and it was particularly noticeable in the theology and practice of the French reformer John Calvin. Though Calvin was not the first to hold this view, his thoughts and writings more thoroughly developed the idea of metrical psalmody as a spiritual discipline.

In order to understand the reasoning behind Calvin's philosophy of music as it related to worship, his role as theologian and reformer must first be discussed. John Calvin was one of the major figureheads of the Protestant Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century. His writings and

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<sup>12</sup> Cabaniss, 198.

<sup>13</sup> A spiritual discipline is an activity undertaken with the desire of cultivating spiritual growth.

preaching were so influential that they have become the source documents for the theological system which today bears his name, Calvinism. As a reformer, Calvin sought to address what he believed were inaccuracies in Roman Catholic theology. While many of his criticisms of Catholic theology center on complex doctrinal issues, the practical outplaying of Calvin's attempts at reform can be examined through his views relating to art in the church.

Calvin's aesthetic sensibilities were stimulated only by art that was replete with purpose and meaning. Historian Leslie Spelman notes, "Calvin allowed very little place in his life for purely aesthetic enjoyment of art. His whole attention was directed to theological matters and the precise, and to him the inevitable, relation which these theological matters bore to human conduct."<sup>14</sup> In Calvin's mind, art that existed for the sake of art alone was a sort of idolatry and had no place in the church. He believed that art had been grossly abused by the Catholic Church in the way that it created "false idols" representing God and heavenly beings. All manner of the visual arts, from paintings to sculpture, were removed from the Calvinist places of worship so they would not draw attention away from the worship of God.

Calvin did not consider himself so "scrupulous" as to think that art should be done away with entirely, but he saw no valuable use for it in worship.<sup>15</sup> Music also came under close scrutiny. Since no message could be carried without text, instrumental music was also excised from his liturgy. Even the practices of polyphony and organ accompaniment were seen by Calvin as distracting from the meaning of the hymn and were not permitted. Although Calvin did away with much of the art that was remotely reminiscent of the art in the Catholic Church, he did keep one form; in fact, he did much to develop it. That form was metrical psalmody.

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<sup>14</sup> Leslie P. Spelman, "Calvin and the Arts," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 6, no. 3 (March 1948): 246, doi:10.2307/426481.

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Jon Allen, Bk. I, Chapter XI. 5, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1843), quoted in Cabaniss, 194.

John Calvin believed that metrical psalmody remained valuable to the church because the Psalms were directly taken from the Scriptures. At the same time, he recognized an even greater reason to keep the metrical psalms: they served as a vehicle to embed theological truths into the hearts and minds of the laity and to draw them into deeper communion with God. He understood the incredible power of music to affect and mold the human character, and he sought to wield it with care.

Calvin's convictions regarding the singing of the psalms as a spiritual discipline were birthed from similar beliefs held by influential thinkers and church fathers before him. This group includes such men as Saint Basil, Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Athanasius, and Saint Augustine. In the early days of the church, there was much debate about the sort of music that should be used and the sorts of music that should be avoided.

In the early centuries of the church, the prevailing philosophies of music and its effect on the human psyche came from the great Greek philosophers Aristotle, Plato, and Pythagoras as they sought to identify the relation of music and character. They all agreed that music had the ability to deeply influence emotion and to mold the life of the hearer. In *Politics*, Aristotle writes, "It is clear that we are affected in a certain manner, both by many other kinds of music, and not least by the melodies of Olympus; for these admittedly make our souls enthusiastic, and enthusiasm is an affection of the character of the soul. And moreover everybody when listening to imitations is thrown into a corresponding state of feeling, even apart from the rhythms and melodies themselves."<sup>16</sup> This conclusion is likely a derivation of the so-called Doctrine of Imitation that is found in *The Republic* by Plato,

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<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, "From the *Politics*," in Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History: Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), 18. Note: (A) The *melodies of Olympus* refer to phrygian melodies: the phrygian harmony is said to have the power of arousing enthusiasm. (B) Strunk notes that a probable correction of the Greek would read "by the rhythm and melodies themselves, even apart from the words."



Aristotle's mentor.<sup>17</sup> Calvin himself agreed with Plato regarding music, saying "there is hardly anything in the world with more power to turn or bend, this way and that, the morals of men, as Plato has so prudently considered."<sup>18</sup>

The ideas of these Greek thinkers no doubt shaped the philosophies of the early church regarding the power of music. And, as a result, the church fathers were very guarded and skeptical regarding the use of music in the church. Three-quarters of a millennia after Aristotle wrote *Politics*, Saint Augustine had this to say:

For sometimes forsooth, do I seem to myself to attribute more respect unto them than is seemly; yea, even whilst together with those sacred ditties I perceive our minds to be far more religiously and zealously blown up into a flame of devotion, whenas these ditties are sung, than they would have been, had they not been sung: yea, and I perceive withal, how that the several affections of our spirit, have the proper moods answerable to their variety in the voice and singing, and by some secret association therewith they be stirred up. . . . And yet again, so oft as it befalls me to be more moved with the voice than with the ditty, I confess myself to have grievously offended: at which time I wish rather not to have heard the music.<sup>19</sup>

Augustine acknowledged the strong correlation between music and emotion, and he was outspokenly concerned that music could produce a false spirituality. With great remorse, he admitted that he himself was often caught up in the music to the point that he lost focus on spiritual things. As a result, he was wary of using any sort of music in the church, even the Psalms set to music.

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<sup>17</sup> The Doctrine of Imitation is the idea that music that imitates a certain ethos, or emotion, would inspire that specific ethos in the listener(s).

<sup>18</sup> John Calvin, "Foreword to the Geneva Psalter of 1543," in Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History: The Renaissance* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), 157.

<sup>19</sup> Saint Augustine, "From the *Confessions*," in Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History: Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), 74.

Augustine's concerns did not escape the keen eye of Calvin. Historian Charles Garside, Jr. draws the link between the two: "Calvin had told the council in the *Articles* that he wished the psalms 'to be sung in the church as we have it from the example of the ancient church'. . . . Calvin's extensive reading in Saint Augustine since then had considerably deepened his knowledge of the ancient church, however, and as a result, he writes now, in effect, as a church historian, scrupulously clarifying and correcting the general statements he had made in 1537 and 1542."<sup>20</sup> Calvin found himself in agreement with Augustine regarding the power of music, though he could not bring himself to exclude it from his liturgy. Instead, he gave specific instructions on the way singing should be conducted, saying, "there must always be concern that the song be neither light nor frivolous, but have gravity [*pois*] and majesty [*maiesté*], as Saint Augustine says."<sup>21</sup>

Other church fathers, however, were more willing to risk using music in the church. For men such as Saint Basil, the way that singing affected the emotions was more positive than it was negative. The formative power of music could be used to shape the spirituality of the singers and hearers if used carefully. In Basil's mind, the "harmonious melodies of the Psalms have been designed for us, that those who are of boyish age or wholly youthful in their character, while in appearance they sing, may in reality be educating their souls."<sup>22</sup> He continued on with regard to the psalms, claiming that they held the power to heal the wounds of the soul, minister to the sick, drive away demons, summon angels, and give respite from daily toil.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Garside, Jr., "The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music: 1536-1543," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series* 69, no. 4 (1979): 20, doi:10.2307/1006143.

<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, "Foreword to the Geneva Psalter of 1543," in Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History: The Renaissance* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), 156.

<sup>22</sup> Saint Basil, "From the *Homily on the First Psalm*," in Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History: Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), 65.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

Basil's ideology concerning the sung psalms is echoed in the writings of one of his well-known contemporaries, Saint John Chrysostom. Chrysostom also comments on the practical nature of the singing of the psalms, adding to Basil's list of activities such as lulling a baby to sleep, lightening the hardship of the traveler's journey and the sailor's toil, and overthrowing the powers of demons.<sup>24</sup> In contrast to Basil, however, his writings focus less on the practical and more on the theoretical and the spiritual. Chrysostom writes, "God established the psalms, in order that singing might be both a pleasure and a help. . . . From the spiritual psalms proceeds much of value, much utility, much sanctity, and every inducement to philosophy, for the words purify the mind and the Holy Spirit descends swiftly upon the mind of the singer."<sup>25</sup>

The perception of the power of the sung psalms in the writings of Saint Basil and Saint John Chrysostom leads quite clearly into the later Renaissance thought of Calvin. In the foreword to the *Genevan Psalter of 1543*, Calvin wrote:

[And] in truth we know by experience that song has great force and vigor to move and inflame the hearts of men to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal. . . . Now among the other things proper to recreate man and give him pleasure, music is either the first or one of the principal, and we must think that it is a gift of God deputed to that purpose. For which reason we must be the more careful not to abuse it, for fear of soiling and contaminating it, converting it to our profit and welfare.<sup>26</sup>

With this thought in mind, Calvin set out to arrange metrical psalms and their tunes into collections known as psalters. These collections

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<sup>24</sup> Saint John Chrysostom, "From the *Exposition of Psalm XLI*," in Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History: Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), 68.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> John Calvin, "Foreword to the Geneva Psalter of 1543," in Oliver Strunk, ed., *Source Readings in Music History: The Renaissance* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1965), 156-157.

were not original to Calvin. There is historical evidence that the Psalms had been set to music and organized into a canonical hymnal by the Jews possibly even before the advent of Christianity.<sup>27</sup> Calvin himself even borrowed several tunes from existing German psalters when he undertook the project of constructing his first psalter.<sup>28</sup>

Calvin's first psalter, *Aulcuns pseaulmes et cantiques mys en chant*, was published in 1539. This first edition went through multiple revisions during the following two-and-a-half decades, most notably published in the years 1542 and 1562. The 1562 psalter, *La forme des prieres et chantz ecclesiastiques*, is the completed Genevan Psalter with 152 texts — the 150 Psalms, the Ten Commandments, and the Song of Simeon. These texts were paired with 125 unique musical settings. While Calvin did write several of the metered translations himself, a great number of the texts were completed by the French poet Clément Marot, of whom Calvin thought very highly.<sup>29</sup>

To give a picture of how these metrical psalms were constructed and realized, two examples have been included below. These two selections come from early editions of the Genevan Psalter as Calvin would have known it. Each of these examples were to be sung in unison with the voices only, as Calvin found accompaniment and harmony distracting from the text.

In the metrical setting of Psalm 19 (see Fig. 2), the use of phrases of equal length, end rhymes, and repeated rhythm patterns is quite clear (see Fig. 2.1). The rhythmic pattern of one semibreve, two minims, three semibreves, and a semibreve rest is repeated for all but two of the lines (see Fig. 2.2). These relatively short phrases with end rhymes, together with the repeating rhythmic patterns, make this psalm easy to sing and remember.

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<sup>27</sup> McKinnon, 70.

<sup>28</sup> John D. Witvliet, "The Spirituality of the Psalter: Metrical Psalms in Liturgy and Life in Calvin's Geneva," *Calvin Theological Journal* 32, no. 2 (November 1, 1997): 275, *ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCO|host*.

<sup>29</sup> Cabaniss, 202-203.

Although the second example, Psalm 100 (see Fig. 3), does not utilize the repeating rhythmic patterns to the extent of the first, there are still definite structural elements that help organize the piece and make it Feasy to memorize. The rhyme scheme for the setting of Psalm 100 is AABB and the lines each have four stressed syllables, creating a sense of direction and movement:

*Vus tous qui la terre habitez,  
Chantez tout haut à Dieu, chantez;  
Seruez à Dieu ioyesement,  
Venez deuant luy gayement.*<sup>30</sup>

These examples serve to illustrate the practical way in which metrical psalms served as a tool for spiritual growth. The careful attention to rhyme, meter, and rhythm reinforce the text and make it easier to memorize the text and recall it later. The music carried the message of the psalm into the heart of the singer.

In his extensive efforts of reform, Calvin's foremost concern was the laity. Part of the abuse of the Roman Catholic Church, he thought, was the disinvolvement of the laity in worship. In the Catholic Church, nearly every liturgical element was conducted in Latin by the priest and choir. The people hardly participated, and even if they had desired to participate, they would have found the Latin language of the liturgy an obstacle. Calvin, in response, crafted his entire liturgy in the vernacular so the people could be involved.<sup>31</sup> Regarding music in worship, he worked to give the congregation a collection of metrical psalms as a tool to help spur spiritual growth. His contribution to the collection of metrical psalmody speaks of his deep love of scripture and his great concern for the people he shepherded.

John Calvin recognized the formative power of music, and accepted the

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<sup>30</sup> "Shout joyfully to praise the LORD/ All you who dwell upon the earth./  
Worship the LORD with happy heart;/ Before him come with songs of joy."  
Versified by David T. Koyzis, Ph. D.

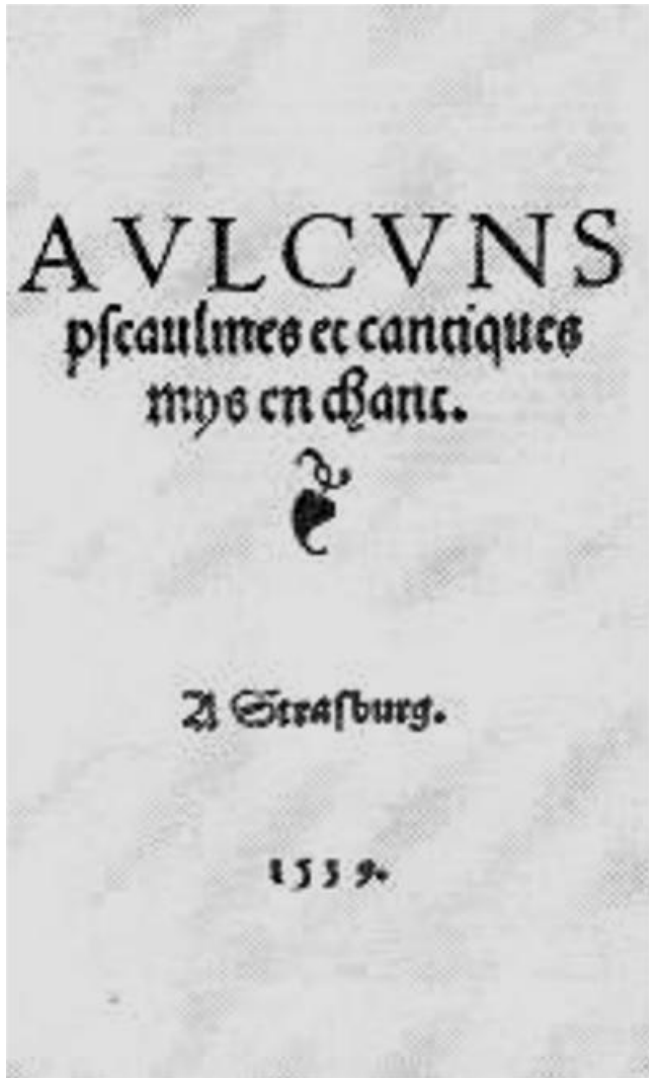
<sup>31</sup> Neil Stipp, "The Music Philosophies of Martin Luther and John Calvin,"  
*American Organist Magazine* 41, no. 9 (September 2007): 70, *ATLASerials*,  
*Religion Collection*, EBSCO|host.

responsibility and challenge of harnessing that power for good. His aim for spiritual discipline through music is echoed so poignantly in the hymn “When in Our Music God Is Glorified”:

How often, making music, we have found  
A new dimension in the world of sound,  
As worship moved us to a more profound  
Alleluia!<sup>32</sup>

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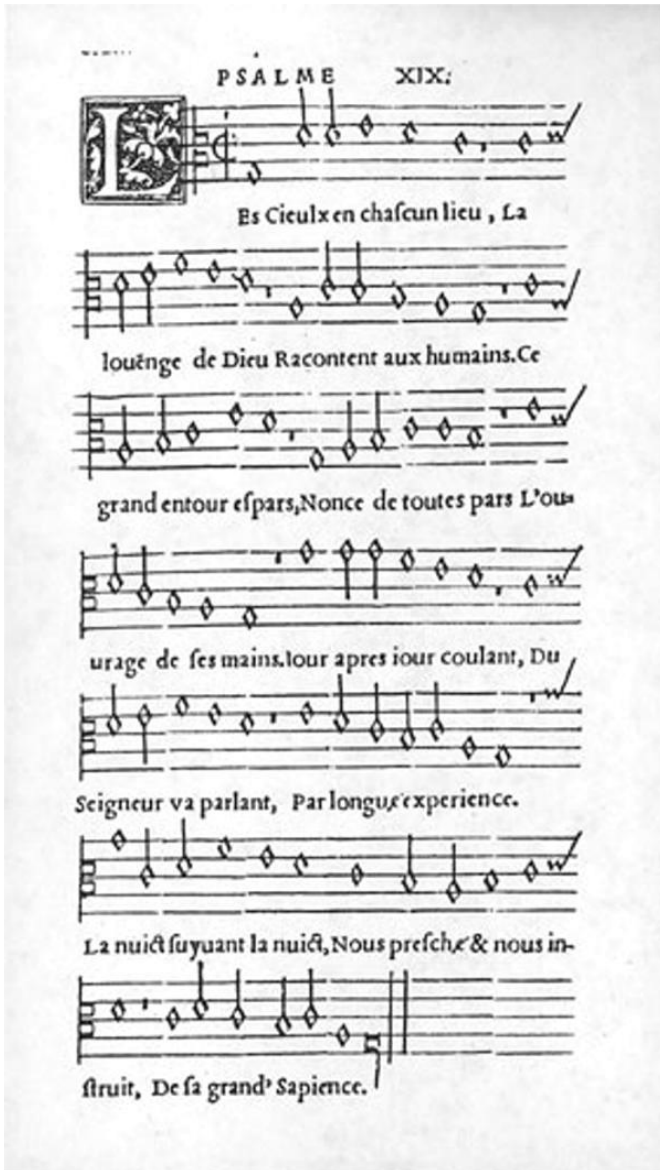
<sup>32</sup> Fred Pratt Green, “When in Our Music God Is Glorified,” in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987), 512.



**Figure 1.** Title page of Calvin’s *Aulcuns pseaulmes et cantiques mys en chant*, 1539.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Riese Heemskerk, “The Huguenot Psalter,” *Spindleworks*, Accessed September 16, 2014, <http://spindleworks.com/music/hugo/psautier.htm>.



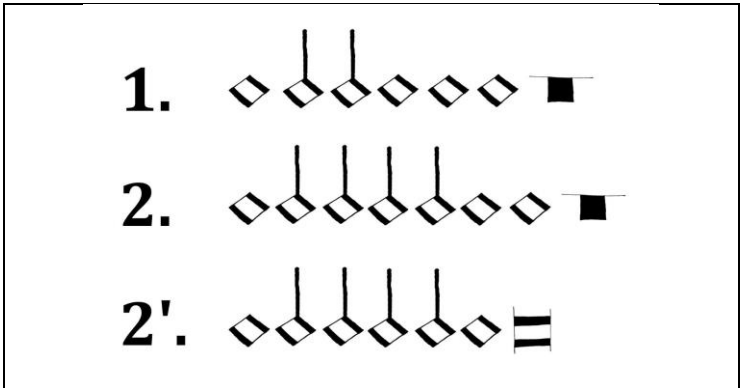
**Figure 2.** Psalm 19 from an early edition of Calvin's Genevan Psalter.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> David T. Koyzis, "The Genevan Psalter," last modified May 29, 2014, <http://genevanpsalter.redeemer.ca/index.html>.



<u>Rhyme</u>	<u>Text</u>	<u>Rhythmic pattern</u>
A	<i>lieu</i>	1
A	<i>Dieu</i>	1
B	<i>humains</i>	1
C	<i>espars</i>	1
C	<i>toutes pars</i>	1
B	<i>ses mains</i>	1
D	<i>coulant</i>	1
D	<i>parlant</i>	1
E	<i>expérience</i>	2
F	<i>la nuit</i>	1
F	<i>insuit</i>	1
E	<i>Sapience</i>	2'

**Figure 2.1.** Formal analysis of the metrical setting of Psalm 19



**Figure 2.2.** Rhythmic patterns in the metrical setting of Psalm 19.

PSEAV. C. TH. DE EE.

## Tubilate Deo.

*Icy l'Eglise est exhortee de s'assembler au Temple pour adorer Dieu, & lo benir pour sa misericorde & verité.*

Vus tous qui la terre habitez,  
Chantez tout haut à Dieu, chantez, Ser-  
uez à Dieu ioyeusement, Venez de-  
uant luy gayement.

Figure 3. Psalm 100 from the 1565 edition of Calvin's Genevan Psalter.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> "Psalm 100 in the Genevan Psalter," Wes Braden Hof, last modified January 27, 2010, <http://yinkahdinay.wordpress.com/2010/01/27/psalm-100-in-the-genevan-psalter/>.

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