

Did the Wesleys Really Use Drinking Song Tunes for Their Hymns?

This short article is reproduced from [The United Methodist Church](#) website, and written by [Dean McIntyre](#).

I include it here because of the rumor that the Wesleys used drinking songs for the melodies of some of their hymns. This false idea is commonly used as an excuse for lowering the standard in religious music, so as to copy the world.

There is a popular misconception that continues to survive among United Methodists that John and Charles Wesley made use of tavern, drinking, or bar songs, as melodies for their hymns. The same is often heard of the great reformer and musician, Martin Luther.

This claim is sometimes made to show the extent of their evangelistic zeal; namely, that they would go out into the secular culture, even into the taverns, saloons, and parlors frequented by the sinners they sought to redeem and make use of the musical language, the familiar drinking song tunes, for their own sacred hymns.

The claim continues to be made today by some musicians, pastors, worship leaders, composers, and hymn writers. Unfortunately, this is a misapplication of a historical inaccuracy.

Confusion of Terms

The truth is that the Wesleys and Luther never made such use of saloon songs, nor would they have condoned such use. The misconception stems from confusion over a musical term *bar form*. In German literature and music of the Middle Ages, *Bar* was a poem consisting of three or more stanzas. Each stanza was divided into two *Stollen* (section a) and one *Abgesang* (section b), which yielded a form of AAB.

The term *bar form* is commonly used today to refer to any poem or musical composition in this AAB form, or any variation of bar form, such as AABA.

A number of Luther's hymns and tunes used this form, in-

cluding *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. Other chorales (*Praise to the Lord, the Almighty*) and hymns (*What a Friend We Have in Jesus, Come, Christians, Join to Sing, When I Survey the Wondrous Cross, Rescue the Perishing*) also use bar form.

A number of tunes accompanying Wesley texts in the current *United Methodist Hymnal* also use bar form, including:

- Praise the Lord Who Reigns Above, UMH 96
- Thou Hidden Source of Calm Repose, UMH 153
- Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus, UMH 196
- Hail the Day That Sees Him Rise, UMH 312
- Love Divine, All Loves Excelling, UMH 384
- I Want a Principle Within, UMH 410
- See How Great a Flame Aspires, UMH 541
- Come, Let Us Use the Grace Divine, UMH 606
- O the Depth of Love Divine, UMH 627
- Because Thou Hast Said, UMH 635
- Give Me a Faith Which Can Remove, UMH 650
- Come, Let Us Join Our Friends Above, UMH 709
- Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending, UMH 718

It is not difficult to understand how the musical term, *bar form*, also sometimes referred to as *bar tune*, can become confused in an uninformed person's mind with barroom tune, drinking song, or some other title to indicate music to accompany the drinking of alcoholic beverages.

The Wesleyan Aesthetic for Hymn Tunes

There is also the deeper issue of whether the importing of secular and drinking songs into the church to accompany congregational singing would be acceptable to the Wesleys. Wesley issued three collections of tunes:

1. the *Foundery Collection* in 1742,
2. *Select Hymns with Tunes Annex* (in which first appears his celebrated "Directions for Singing," reprinted on page vii of *The United Methodist Hymnal*) in 1761, and his last,
3. *Sacred Harmony*, in 1780.

What we find in these collections yields an important insight into Wesley's musical aesthetic for hymn tunes. Here we find the simple, traditional psalm tunes and hymn melodies, primarily from Anglican song. A number of these survive in our own 1989 *United Methodist Hymnal* (nos. 60, 96, 142, 181, 302, 385, 414, 450, 682).

However, many of Charles Wesley's texts were in increasing number and complexity of meter and required new sources for tunes to accompany them. John made use of new tunes composed or adapted from folk tunes, sacred and secular oratorio, and even operatic melodies.

It should not escape us that whenever Wesley allowed the use of secular music as from oratorio and opera he used music of accepted high standard and almost always from classical rather than popular sources. In no instance did Wesley turn to tavern or drinking songs or other such unseemly sources to carry the sacred texts of songs and hymns.

Another help to understanding what Wesley considered appropriate in hymn tunes is to be found in his *Directions for Singing*. Of particular importance is a portion of his fourth direction:

Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.

It is clear that Wesley intends the "songs of Satan" to no longer be sung. Also important is his seventh direction:

Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or

any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

Wesley's aesthetic to "above all sing spiritually" simply would not allow drinking songs to accompany hymn texts.

Finally, in no hymn book, tune book, or other publication of the Wesleys can there be found any example of or encouragement to use drinking songs for singing hymns.

What About Today?

The question still remains,

"What about today? Just because Luther and the Wesleys didn't use drinking song tunes and other popular music for their hymns, does that mean we shouldn't?"

Whether Wesley did or didn't use drinking songs is not really the issue. Rather, the issue is *why* Wesley did or didn't use them. Wesley found the close association of hymn text and tune (even commonly referred to as a "wedding") to be of such importance that the use of tavern songs was beneath consideration. It was never a possibility.

That question remains for us to answer today. Do we find it acceptable, appropriate, and commendable to select the music of drunken sailors or the local tavern for our worship? If Wesley's reasoning for the Methodists of his time remains valid for our own, then the answer is no; and those who choose to use such music in worship should be able to dispute Wesley's practice convincingly.

Further, those who justify in our day the use of secular culture and influences in United Methodist worship by claiming that Wesley used drinking songs in his own day should be called to account.

For Further Reading

Bar Form entry in *Harvard Dictionary of Music* (2d edition, revised and enlarged) by Willi Apel (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969)

Bar Form entry in *Encyclopaedia Britannica Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal* by Carlton R. Young (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993)

John Wesley's Choice of Hymn Tunes by Fred Kimball Graham (1988), *The Hymn* 39 (4):29-37

Sing with Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Hymnology by Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980)