

“Thy Strong Word” Theology that Sings

by Nancy Raabe

Recently I was delighted to acquire a photocopy of the manuscript “Elementary Theory and Appreciation Applied to Common Church-song” by Henry J. Markworth, Paul Manz’s first organ teacher from age 7 through eighth grade. It’s *marvelously insightful, earthy, and opinionated* in all the best ways. In his discussion of “phrase vs. line” as it relates to hymnody, Markworth notes that “the extremely slow tempo [of churchsong] originally employed by our congregations, a carry-over from Europe, induced them to sing phrase-wise rather than line-wise.”¹

This observation came to mind over the summer in the context of the hymn “Thy Strong Word” (ELW 511, LSB 578, CW 280)—which, by the way, would be an excellent choice for Reformation Sunday. I was taking a weeklong course on rural and small-town ministry at Wartburg Theological Seminary and was asked to play for the Wednesday chapel service. The presider and preacher was the Rev. Mark Yakel-Juleen. That Monday he’d told me that the hymn of the day was to be “Thy Strong Word.” The hymn is truly a treasure of the church, but I have to confess that my reaction on this occasion was, “Really? During the summer?” I pointed out that resistance to this hymn has grown up around the slow tempo at which it’s

usually taken, which makes its six stanzas stretch over what can seem like an eternity. Rev. Yakel-Juleen’s response: “Make it work.”

The pairing of this text and tune was one of those landmark inspirations by which new life is breathed into the repertory of the church. We owe it to Walter Buszin of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. In 1954 Buszin was seeking a new commencement processional on the tune EBENEZER written by the Welsh organist Thomas J. Williams in the late 1890s, as we learn from Paul Westermeyer’s indispensable *ELW Hymnal Companion*.² Out of this came the commission for what became Martin Franzmann’s passionately prophetic text.

Why has it come to be played so ponderously? The *ELW Musicians Guide* concurs with tradition in its tempo recommendation of half note = 76–90.³ Even in Wales, however, the hymn is sometimes judged to be “most unsuitable ... for these words. It takes up too much of the ‘doubt and sorrow’ and not the ‘shining light.’”⁴

The crux of the problem lies in the tune’s ubiquitous triplets. Westermeyer quotes an expert in Welsh music who notes that “in the Welsh idiom, the triplet is sung heavily and deliberately.”⁵ But we are not in Wales. Franzmann proclaimed in a Reformation Sunday sermon that “Theology is doxology.

The triplets of EBENEZER ... are propulsive. They animate each measure and create the force by which measures are woven into phrases and phrases into lines.

Theology must sing.”⁶ When the triplets of “Thy Strong Word” are played heavily, they drag down the tempo and obscure the text’s stirring theology. Is there another way, one that would allow this theology to sing?

Consider that the triplets of EBENEZER are not ornamental, as they are in St. COLUMBA (“The King of Love,” ELW 502, LSB 709, CW 375). Instead they are propulsive. They animate each measure and create the force by which measures are woven into phrases and phrases into lines. This is clear when we take a broad look at the tune’s structure. Each four-bar line consists of two antecedent/consequent two-measure phrases. Each of those lines is shaped as an elegant arc—the first, second, and fourth convex, the third concave. Since the text was composed for this tune, it fits this very structure like a glove. From this broad perspective, we are able to hear each stanza as an eight-bar proclamation of a core theological truth followed by an *eight-bar outpouring of praise*.

In the earliest music of the Christian church—plainsong—tempo is understood to have been derived from the speed of human functions such as the

heartbeat or a walking pace.⁷ I timed myself at my normal out-for-a-walk pace, and it clocked in with each pulse at a metronome mark of 112. So I tried out half note = 112 on “Thy Strong Word.” Suddenly I found myself in the midst of an entirely new experience of the hymn, one in which the urgency of the proclamation demanded my full attention, body, mind, and spirit. Not only did the

music make sense but the lines of text were connected to each other with riveting urgency, in the manner of a Shakespeare soliloquy. Read the text aloud as if you were presenting it onstage, and it all becomes clear.

One of my favorite sayings was uttered by Gustav Mahler: “*Tradition ist Schlamperei*” (“tradition is slovenliness”), meaning

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that it is sheer laziness to keep repeating bad performance traditions just because “that’s the way it’s always been played.” Musicians spend a lot of time getting the right notes and the right rhythms under their fingers, but the critical matter of tempo is often overlooked in liturgy as well as hymnody. The vocation of leading the church’s song calls from us the very best we can bring to bear. Let us always be thinking critically and creatively about how to engage the assembly in proclamation through song. Your congregation will love this hymn anew, thanks to your leadership.

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Thy Strong Word



1 Thy strong word did cleave the dark - ness; at thy
 2 Lo, on those who dwell in dark - ness, dark as
 3 Thy strong Word be - speaks us righ - teous; bright with
 4 From the cross thy wis - dom shin - ing break - eth



speak - ing it was done. For cre - at - ed light we
 night and deep as death, broke the light of thy sal -
 thine own ho - li - ness, glo - rious now, we press toward
 forth in con - qu'ring wight; from the cross for - ev - er



thank thee, while thine or - dered sea - sons run.
 va - tion, breathed thine own life - breath - ing breath.
 glo - ry, and our lives our hopes con - fess.
 beam - eth all thy bright re - deem - ing light.



Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia! Praise to thee who light dost send!



Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia with - out end!

5 Give us lips to sing thy glory,
 tongues thy mercy to proclaim,
 throats that shout the hope that fills us,
 mouths to speak thy holy name.
 Alleluia! Alleluia!
 May the light which thou dost send
 fill our songs with alleluias,
 alleluias without end!

6 God the Father, light-creator,
 to thee laud and honor be.
 To thee, Light of Light begotten,
 praise be sung eternally.
 Holy Spirit, light-revealer,
 glory, glory be to thee.
 Mortals, angels, now and ever
 praise the holy Trinity!

Text: Martin H. Franzmann, 1907–1976
 Music: EMBELZER, Thomas J. Williams, 1869–1944
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Endnotes

1. Unpublished manuscript, 5, in the Markworth archives at the Center for Church Music at Concordia University Chicago.
2. Paul Westermeyer, *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010).
3. *Musicians Guide to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 227.
4. *Musicians Guide*, 119.
5. *Musicians Guide*, 119.
6. Martin H. Franzmann, *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966, reprinted 1994), 92.
7. Lloyd Ultan, *Music Theory: Problems and Practices in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1977), 23.