

# How to “Re-tune” a Hymn

By Alex Mejias

*This white paper is designed to help teach you the basics about composing new music to accompany a hymn text that has been previously paired with a different musical composition (usually an older musical composition). However, this guide can also be helpful in composing music to words that you may have written yourself.*

*This is not an authoritative guide, not by a long shot. But hopefully it will give you some insight into our process and help spur your own creativity in re-arranging or "re-tuning" an old hymn or poem.*

## **Finding the Words**

Where are the best places to find unfamiliar, but really cool hymn lyrics? First, try the hymnal that sits right in front of you at your church. You'd be amazed at how many songs are in those things, many of which never see the light of day. And hymnals are usually organized thematically or in conjunction with a liturgical calendar. This was particular helpful for us, since our church service is liturgical -- that way I was able to find songs that fit into the different sections of the service appropriately. Usually churches are willing to part with a copy of their hymnals, but if not you can usually find your hymnal online for a good price on Amazon.com. (And there's always the library!)

Another great place to look is online -- try the Cyber Hymnal (Warning: this website has an automatic MIDI audio track that plays on each hymn's page. Muting your computer before searching is recommended) or the Oremus Hymnal for starters. A Google search for "hymnals" will reveal even more stuff.

As you begin looking at hymns, you can narrow your focus by searching by author (lyrics). Always pay attention to who the writer is of each hymn, including ones that you aren't planning on re-tuning but really like. My all time favorite hymn writer is Charles Wesley. Do you know who penned the words of your favorite hymn? Look her up and see what else she's written -- you might find some great stuff off the beaten path.

## **To Listen or Not to Listen:**

Is it a Good Idea to Listen to the Traditional Setting?

Before we move on to actually working on the hymn, it's really important to consider one issue that can easily cause some trouble when figuring out a brand new melody. Remember, almost every hymn has accompanying music that was written separately from the words. There's no "right way" to sing a hymn, just one that people might be really used to. You have every right to write your own music and sing it however you like. (\*Some

sources say that many of the tunes used on "traditional" hymns came from popular drinking songs of the day. Hmm.)

If possible, I recommend starting out with a hymn that is musically unfamiliar to you. For me (Alex), overcoming the phrasing is the hardest part about already having another melody in my head. I always feel best when I can look at the words with fresh eyes. (\*However, there is something to be said about "tweaking" an original melody, which I will deal with at the end of the series.) Once you've heard someone else's musical setting, it is usually much harder to blaze a new path. So what do you do if you've heard the setting before? Here are a few tips to get some fresh ideas flowing. Re-type the lyrics into a fresh word document, sans chords and structured however you think it should be written out. Start in a completely different key and/or time signature. Try a different feel (see future posts) or new tempo, anything at all to get your mind as far away from it's former setting as possible. Once you've done all that you should have some good distance from the previous melody. Even if you've still got that old tune in your head, don't worry -- just follow the upcoming steps and you should be fine.

### **Set the Tempo, Time Signature and Mood by Figuring Out the Big Picture**

This is a critical step in re-tuning hymns. What is the theme of the hymn? What aspect of the Gospel is the author trying to describe? Is it a hymn of praise naming all that God has done? Is it a song of lament mourning human brokenness or sin? Is it a song of confession? Is it a song of victory, praising God for his triumph over death? Where will this song fit into the service? These are just a few questions that you must ask yourself as you begin.

The answer to these questions will 1) determine the mood/feel/tempo of the song and 2) guide your sense of dynamics, climax, and resolution. Call me crazy but I just don't think you should play fast open chords on a song of lament. Rather the music should match the mood of the lyrics and build to the natural climax/resolution found in the lyrics. Hymns are usually designed to go from point A to point B, rather than dwelling on one single idea or bouncing around randomly. Don't fight that, rather work with and highlight it. Now that you've got a clear picture of what the song is about and where it fits into the service, set the mood and tempo according. Typically a song of confession is slower, sometimes using a minor key. A song of praise or rejoicing will usually be faster and in a major key. This is not a hard and fast rule, but is a really good starting place. Remember, you're not just writing music for the sake of the music. Music is the vehicle that carries the message (of the Gospel) into the deepest reaches of the human heart. Therefore it's not about the music -- it's about the message, it's about experiencing the Gospel through song and poetry.

***Don't skip this step, it is a crucial one.*** It's kind of like the mission statement of the song and will help keep you on track when you're tempted to move the song in a direction that is musically cool, but inappropriate for the overall song.

Now that you've determined the mood and tempo, you're ready to begin working on the melody!

### **Beginning to Write a Melody**

So this is where the rubber meets the road. It's time to write the actual melody line to of the song. Usually, the hardest part (for me) is coming up with the initial idea. Once I've got at least one line of melody that I like the rest tends to flow naturally (not always though, more will be said later about roadblocks). This step is all about getting started, finding one to three melodic "hooks" that the melody will be based around. Here's how to get started when you're staring the at lyrics.

Look to the lyrics. Are there any words that really stand out to you? What is the most compelling line in the song to you? What phrases do you want to highlight? Start there. I've found that I really need to feel something in my heart before any music comes out of me. Don't worry if it's not the first line of the song, this is just to get the creative juices flowing (Note: this is how I begin songs, but if you have a different way that's totally fine too). Once you've got something you can try building on that melodic idea.

Brainstorm. Once you've found some lyrics that you really like, it's time to begin coming up with ideas. In this phase it's important to let yourself sing or play something goofy. No idea is a bad idea. In fact, some songwriters start off just singing the most random thing they can think of. Anything to get your right brain engaged creatively. Give yourself some time to be silly and hold off any self-criticism during this phase. Once the creative juices are flowing, you'll be surprised at what you come up with. Take what you like from this phase and develop it, following the steps ahead.

*Brainstorming on Guitar:* If you're using an acoustic guitar to write, you can fool around with different chord progressions to see if you here anything. I recommend generally staying in the same key at first and starting with standard progressions (more will be said about this later as well) and then branching out to more interesting chord combinations. Go online and learn a new chord or a new fingering of a chord you already know. Or "borrow" a chord progression from a song you like and make some changes to get the creative juices flowing. There are so many other ideas for brainstorming, if you still need help drop me a note or search for songwriting techniques online.

Try some standard tricks/devices. A good way to develop a melody is by trying to match the words by taking notes higher (or lower) for lyrics that you want to emphasize or call attention to. Keep in mind melodic movement up and then down the scale, looking for chances to create ascending or descending lines. This is a very common device in many hymns, don't be afraid to use it to help build your new original melody.

In general, if you can get a few ideas going that's more than enough to write a solid melody. In the next step we'll talk about why that is so and deal with the structural elements of the melody that will make it memorable and 'singable.'

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Make sure you have some type of recording device to get your favorite ideas down on. I can't tell you how many times I've forgotten what I've done because I never recorded it. A mini-tape recorder is fine, but if you're a Mac person I recommend Garage Band which works with the built in mic on your computer. I'm not sure what the PC equivalent is, but I'm sure there's something.

### **Keep it Simple, Keep it Singable**

Remember whom you're writing for and why you're writing the song. This is a piece that non-musicians will be singing in a worship service, not a concert. This song is meant to bring people together, and should be accessible to everyone in the congregation, not just the former a cappella group members. Here a few guidelines to remember:

Keep the melodies relatively simple. There are no rehearsals so it's best for it to be easy enough to learn after hearing it a couple of times. Not every song needs to be congregational, so if you've got a melody that you're in love with that's really hard to sing, you may want to keep it and use it elsewhere as a special song. But if your intent is to write a congregational song, it's got to be simple enough to remember easily. This doesn't mean it should be boring and monotone, just try to limit and repeat the melodic ideas so there's not too much material.

Example of a difficult melodic structure:

Melody Line A  
Melody Line B  
Melody Line C  
Melody Line D

Example of an easier melodic structure:

Melody Line A  
Melody Line B  
Melody Line A  
Melody Line C

OR

Melody Line A  
Melody Line A  
Melody Line B  
Melody Line C  
Melody Line B  
Melody Line D

**NOTE:** there's no such thing as a wrong type of melody progression. This is just a guide to writing songs that a non-musician can learn and remember easily.

Keep it singable (Note: my spell check has told me this is not a word, you get the idea though, right?). Generally, I try to not to take a melody higher than an E one octave above middle C or lower than a C below middle C. By staying within this range, I can be sure that our congregation has a good shot at singing confidently and comfortably. Greater "singability" can also be achieved by moving the key signature down or up to adjust the highest and lowest notes in the song. Bottom line: If you are a soprano or tenor and the highest note is at the top of your range, the song is probably too high, lower the key.

Next, we'll take a look at the lyrics and how to work with tricky texts.

### **Working With The Words**

There are two common scenarios when you might want to change the wording of a hymn that you're re-tuning. The first is when you have a melody that you really like, but you're having trouble fitting all the words in, or if you're coming up short on words. In this instance don't be afraid to re-word a line or two. It's been done before and it will be done again -- remember, these lyrics are public domain, which means they are up for grabs and your creative interpretation is welcomed. Caveat: be careful to use wording that matches the overall song if possible. If you don't, your changes will stand out big time.

You also may want to change/edit words for theological reasons. In general I find most hymns to be solid theologically, but that doesn't mean they all are. The words are so important, so be sure to really (carefully) read and think about them before you finish your process. On a related note (and this is me personally), I am kind of sensitive when it comes to the masculine language that is used in hymns at times. I generally favor gender inclusive language (not in a dogmatic way though) and if I can easily change a word to accomplish that I'll definitely do it. Just a thought.

**NOTE:** Some folks who work with hymns often add an additional verse or completely rearrange words. That is always a good thing to do as long as you're able to do it in a way that is poetic AND makes sense. The beauty of hymns is that they are complete thoughts, almost mini stories that get you from point A to point B. They're not just a string of Christian jargon words stuck together to match a melody; (In my personal opinion) this is something that ideally would be retained in a hymn re-tune. That said, don't be afraid to move things around and bring your own creative voice in on the words.

### **Adding A Refrain**

Oftentimes when discussing hymns with people who prefer contemporary choruses, hymns are characterized as being too cerebral. The objection lies in the fact that in worship, we ought to be able to sing from our hearts and not have to spend the entire time figuring out the meaning of what we're singing or reading copious amounts of lyrics out of

a hymnal. Personally, I don't find hymns to be too cerebral and the lyrics (for me) touch deep places in my heart. However, I do recognize the benefit and meditative quality of lyrics that don't need to be read, that can be sung with eyes closed. So, when possible I try to get the best of both worlds by adding a simple refrain or chorus to hymn texts that otherwise flow from stanza to stanza. It's not something to be taken lightly, especially considering the depth and theological richness of many hymn texts. I find that the simpler, the better. For instance in our reworking of "Love's Redeeming Work Is Done," we added a refrain that just says "Alleluia." That's often a good place to start, it's simple and responsive and just about everyone agrees that it's kosher.

Not all hymns need a refrain, especially if the stanzas all end with the same closing line. But if your wanting to add meditative elements, it's a great addition. And if you're someone trying to add hymns into a more contemporary service, this will definitely help bridge the gap.

### **Closing Thoughts**

These insights are just a few ideas and guidelines that I hope will get you started and demystify the process a little. I want to be sure to say, though, that there's no right or wrong way to go about composing music for hymns. The best thing you can do is just jump in and start to find your own voice in writing. Don't be discouraged if your first song isn't the next Amazing Grace, it will take some practice. The more you write, the better – if you persevere, I'm sure that you'll find a melody that fits just right.

There are literally hundreds of hymns that are lying dormant in hymnals around the world. This wealth of Christian hymnody is just sitting there waiting for you to bring it to life. I hope you'll find some hidden treasures that will renew and inspire the body of Christ!

Was this helpful to you? Do you have a story that you'd like to share about how you used these tips to compose new music to a traditional hymn text? Please let us know and we'll post your story on our blog. Just email Alex – [alex@highstreethymns.com](mailto:alex@highstreethymns.com).