

## METRE IN HYMNODY – THE BASICS!

### by Revd Ian Worsfold

#### Introduction

The majority of traditional hymnody is set to metrical tunes. This means that there is a strict 'metre' adhered to in each line and verse of the hymn.

#### Numerical Indication

At the top of each hymn a series of numbers will appear, often separated by a dot (e.g. 8.7.8.7). (Dots are not always used, and sometimes the numbers are written out in pairs e.g. 87.87.)

The numbers refer to the number of syllables in each line of the hymn. So 8.7.8.7 indicates that there are four lines to each verse: line one has eight syllables; line two has seven; line three has eight; and line four has seven.

An example of this would be [The King of love my shepherd is](#) (*Singing the Faith* 479):

The King of love my shepherd is,	(8)
whose goodness faileth never;	(7)
I nothing lack if I am his,	(8)
and he is mine for ever.	(7)

#### Common, Short and Long Metre

Occasionally there will be letters instead of numbers to indicate the metre. These are shorthand ways of referring to commonly used metres and these are set out in the table below:

Abbreviation	Long Title	Metre	Example
SM	Short Metre	6.6.8.6	StF 658: <a href="#">A charge to keep I have</a>
CM	Common Metre	8.6.8.6	StF 440: <a href="#">Amazing grace</a>
LM	Long Metre	8.8.8.8	StF 1: <a href="#">All people that on earth do dwell</a>

When the letter 'D' appears in relation to a metre it simply means 'double the length' and indicates that a metre is repeated in order to accommodate all the lines. For example, StF 503, [Love Divine, all loves excelling](#), is marked 8.7.8.7.D. This means that instead of there being *four* lines alternating with eight and seven syllables there are *eight* lines, i.e. 'double' the length. This saves having to write 8.7.8.7.8.7.8.7.

## Iambic and Trochaic Stress

Two technical words to be aware of are ‘Iambic’ and ‘Trochaic’. These refer to where the stress falls in the rhythm of each line. The first example above, [The King of love my shepherd is](#) (StF 479) is 8.7.8.7 (*Iambic*). This means that the stress falls on the even numbered syllables:

The King of love my shepherd is etc...

An example of 8.7.8.7. (*Trochaic*) would be StF 341, [All for Jesus – all for Jesus](#), where the stress falls on the odd numbered syllables:

All for Jesus – all for Jesus etc...

It becomes important to be aware of this when choosing different hymn tunes as musically the stresses need to fall in a way that suits the words. So a hymn in the 8.7.8.7 (Iambic) metre would rarely – if ever – be sung to a tune set in the 8.7.8.7 (Trochaic) metre. Try swapping the stress on the two examples above to illustrate!

## Extended Metres and Metres with Alleluias and Refrains

A hymn tune marked with ‘and alleluias’ or ‘and refrain’ mean exactly that, and these portions of the hymn are in addition to the set metre. Again, this is something to be aware of if you wish to substitute such a hymn with another tune.

A tune marked ‘extended’ means that a phrase of the verse is repeated. A good example of this is StF 364: [O for a thousand tongues to sing](#) (CM Extended) in which the second and fourth lines of each verse are repeated.

## Metrical Index

Metre becomes an important tool when selecting hymns, as you may want choose a different hymn tune for the set words – perhaps to something more familiar or to create a different mood or tone for the words. In this case, the Metrical index in *Singing the Faith* or [on Singing the Faith Plus](#) becomes your friend as hymn tunes with a particular metre can often be substituted for another tune in the same metre.

For example, StF 610: [Best of all is God is with us](#) is set to ‘Chapel Brae’, an 8.7.8.7 (Trochaic) tune. This particular hymn also works perfectly well with ‘Cross of Jesus’ another 8.7.8.7. (Trochaic) tune, found at StF 169ii.

As indicated above, each tune is given a name so the two indices to be aware of in *Singing the Faith* are the metrical index of tunes (arranged by metre from Short Metre onwards; also [available on StF+](#)) and the alphabetical index of tunes (arranged, unsurprisingly, alphabetically!)

## Some Potential Pitfalls!

1. **Some hymns are firmly linked to a particular tune** and unless there is a good reason to change the tune (i.e. to make a particular statement in worship) it's advisable to use the set tune as congregations can become annoyed by such changes! An example might be singing StF 345: [And can it be that I should gain?](#) to a tune other than 'Sagina' despite there being an alternative tune offered!
2. **Not every substitution of a hymn tune will work**, so it's best to sing the hymn through, or have an organist play it through, to ensure that the tune reinforces the correct sense and tone of the words. For example, StF 141: [Abide with me](#) works very well to the gentle tune of 'Eventide', which carries a 10.10.10.10 metre. An alternative 10.10.10.10 tune might be 'Woodlands' (the most familiar tune for StF 186: [Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!](#)) The feeling of the words of Abide with me, however, would be drowned out by the more triumphant tune.
3. **Tune i or Tune ii?** In many cases, such as StF 169: [Come, thou long-expected Jesus](#), a hymn has been set to a first and second tune noted as i and ii. The editors of the hymn book have made a choice in these cases indicating that, in their understanding, the first tune is usually more associated with the hymn or more familiar in general than the second, although the second is also perfectly acceptable. In addition, there is often an instruction at the foot of the page: 'May also be sung to...' indicating another alternative, set to another hymn somewhere else in the book. In these cases, it's always best to sing the hymn through to the set tune and the alternatives to ensure that your choice reflects where you are in the worship at the point when the hymn is to be sung.
4. **Contemporary Hymns/Songs** are rarely set to a regular metre, although there are exceptions. Most are conceived as one offering of words and music. Occasionally worship leaders will try to substitute the tune of a contemporary song with a traditional hymn tune. Although this is usually to introduce newer material in a more accessible way, this rarely works as the song loses its integrity as one piece, and the traditional tune will rarely fit precisely – although, again, there are always exceptions.
5. **Irregular Metre Hymns** such as StF 700: [God weeps at love withheld](#) (2.4.4.8.8.2) carry the same issue as above. Again, it's often the case that a hymn has been conceived along with the tune and these are not easily separated... unless you want to write your own offering!
6. **Local Anomalies:** Some local churches have particular associations with tunes that will surprise you! Don't always assume that the organist will play the tune that you're expecting as the reply might come back: 'We always sing it to...!' If you have a preferred tune for a particular hymn, then be sure to communicate this to the contact person in the local church, if not the organist themselves. In any case, collaboration over these things is usually best to ensure that everyone is singing from... well you know!

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