

This Day God Gives Me: A Folk Tune for Morning Prayer

By Cecilia Curran

Cat Stevens, known as Yusuf Islam since his conversion to Islam in 1977, made the tune BUNESSAN popular in the 1960s through his performance of "Morning Has Broken." Many people probably thought that Stevens had composed both text and tune. In fact, the tune is a Gaelic folk tune that probably originated in Scotland, and the text was by Eleanor Farjeon (1881-1965), who composed it at the request of Percy Dearmer for the British hymn collection "Songs of Praise" (1931).

The tune is named for the town of Bunessan on the Isle of Mull in the Inner Hebrides, off the west coast of Scotland. Mull, close to Iona, is the island where the Irish monk Columcille (Latinized as Columba) founded a monastery in the late sixth century from which monks brought Irish forms of Christianity to other parts of the British Isles and even to the mainland of Europe.

Before Percy Dearmer recruited Eleanor Farjeon to write a new text, BUNESSAN as a hymn tune was only known in association with the Gaelic text of a Christmas carol, "Leanababh an aigh," written by Mary MacDonald (1789-1872) and translated into English as "Child in the Manger" by Lachlan Macbean for the collection "Songs and Hymns of the Gael" (1888). Here is part of that English translation:

Child in the manger, infant of Mary,
Outcast and Stranger, Lord of us all,
Child Who inherits all our transgressions,
All our demerits upon Him fall.

Prophets foretold Him, Infant of wonder;
Angels behold Him on His throne.
Worthy our Savior of all our praises;
Happy forever are His own.

When he sang "Morning Has Broken," Cat Stevens/Yusuf Islam actually sang only the first half of Eleanor Farjeon's poem, and that is the text usually reprinted in hymnals. The second half of the text contains additional beautiful language:

Cool the gray clouds roll
peaking the mountains,
Gull in her free flight
swooping the skies:
Praise for the mystery
misting the morning
Behind the shadow
waiting to shine.

I am the sunrise
warming the heavens,
Spilling my warm glow
over the earth:
Praise for the brightness
of this new morning

Filling my spirit
with Your great love.

Mine is a turning,
mine is a new life;
Mine is a journey
closer to You:
Praise for the sweet glimpse
caught in a moment,
Joy breathing deeply
dancing in flight.

New Texts for Old Tunes

The ancient Scottish Gaelic tune remained little used until Cat Stevens popularized it. Now, however, the poetic meter used with this tune 55 54 D is becoming popular among writers of hymn and song texts. Here is one recent example of a hymn text written in this textual meter to be sung to BUNESSAN:

Always and ever, God reigns eternal,
Ceaseless, unchanging, Ancient of Days.
From choirs below and angels supernal
Alpha-Omega hears endless praise.

In the beginning, ere the first star birth,
There was the Father, Spirit and Son.
Maker, Creator, heaven and earth
Sprang from His will the plan was begun.

Down through the ages, secrets unlocking,
To save a people fettered with sin,
He sent the Word. He's tenderly knocking:
Open your heart and let Him come in.

Always and ever, you can be with Him
In paradise, there no more to grieve.
Praising forever, Savior and Sovereign
Through endless ages only believe!

[ALWAYS AND EVER. © 1997, Richard W. Adams. These lyrics may be freely reproduced, provided they are not altered, and this notice is on each copy.]

This Day God Gives Me: Prayer

The text we are proposing for use as part of a morning service in the beginning of the school year and even throughout the year, when appropriate, is also, in one sense, a new text for use with this tune. The current form of this text was written by Rev. James Quinn, SJ, and printed in his text collection "New Hymns for All Seasons" (London, 1969). It is, however, an adaptation by Father Quinn of a text that is far older than the Gaelic tune: the text called "St. Patrick's Breastplate" and ascribed to Patrick himself (372-466).

Unlike the Farjeon text, which refers only indirectly to God, the text that originated with St. Patrick speaks directly about God and to God in language that finds its origin in the dawn of western European Christianity. The "Breastplate," also known as the "Lorica," is a hymn that praises God as present companion, protector, and

Trinity.

If you use this text and tune as prayer, it would fit well into a brief service that would include the following elements:

Sign of the Cross

Greeting ("The Lord be with you . . .")

Introduction (based on the text of the "Breastplate"):

We begin today by calling on the name of the Trinity,
God who is three in one and one in three,
Father, Son, and Spirit,
Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier:
God who was, who is, and is to come.

Hymn: "This Day God Gives Me"

Prayer:

God who gives us strength and wisdom,
God our guide and our companion on the way,
be with us today.
Open our eyes to see your presence,
our ears to hear your word,
our hearts to receive your love.
We ask this through Christ, our Lord. (Amen.)

Reading:

(Perhaps a selection from one of the Mass readings assigned for this day.)

Intercessions:

(Mention should be made of particular needs as well as the general needs of the Church and the wider society.)

The Lord's Prayer

Blessing (based on the "Breastplate"):

May Christ be with us today,
before us, beside us, behind us,
in quiet and in activity,
in the voices of all who speak to us
in the hearts of all who care for us.
May Christ bless us today
and all the days of our lives
in the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. (Amen.)

This Day God Gives Me: Music Class

While this hymn probably shouldn't be used as the chief example in teaching musical concepts, it might serve as an illustration of certain concepts.

1) Time signature: The tune is written in 9/4. For students who have mastered basic times such as 4/4 and 3/4, this tune could serve as a challenge. How would they illustrate nine beats to a measure in which the quarter note gets one beat?

2) Text meter: The poem is in the meter 55 54, doubled (that is, 55 54 55 54). This means that the first three lines each have five syllables, the fourth line has four syllables, and then the pattern repeats. Apart from the examples given here, can you find any other texts with this meter?

This Day: In The Hymnals

Here are the references for the tune BUNESSAN with the text "This Day God Gives Me" in the major hymnals:

Youth Hymnals:

Hymnal for Catholic Students (GIA and LTP, 1988), #4
Rise Up and Sing (OCP, 1992), #66

Full Hymnals/Worship Resources:

Catholic Book of Worship III (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994), #650
Gather (second edition, GIA, 1994), tune at #546, text at #547
Gather Comprehensive (GIA, 1994), tune at #756, text at #757
Glory & Praise (second edition, OCP, 1997), #727
Journeysongs (OCP, 1994), #466
RitualSong (GIA, 1996), #4
The Collegeville Hymnal (The Liturgical Press, 1990), #426
We Celebrate Worship Resource, Deluxe Hymnal (WLP, 1997), #304
Worship (third edition, GIA, 1986), #673

Ms Cecilia Curran, a frequent contributor, has served for many years as a music educator in the Baltimore and Washington area.