

## THE LDS HYMNAL: VIEWS ON FOREIGN EDITIONS

### The Spanish Hymnal

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The Church in the Latin-American countries faces acute problems in relation to music and worship. While this is not readily apparent to the general Church membership and leadership, it is of great concern to aesthetically-minded members in Latin America who wish to upgrade church life in its various facets and to help their brothers and sisters in their upward reach. Of these people, the most sensitive towards music and poetry realize that there is a problem that should be faced squarely in the very near future, and it has to do with finding ways to provide the Church with an inspiring corpus of music which can aid the worshipper in fulfilling his desire to commune with his Creator. Such music would also be capable of teaching the doctrines, commandments, and ethical laws in the mind of the worshipper; remind him of his relationship with Deity; and help him celebrate the joy of being part of the Restored Church.

In speaking of a corpus of music I refer not only to hymns, but also of choral and organ music, the shortage of which is indeed a more acute problem. Nevertheless, the scope of this article is limited to the musical portions of the worship services which directly involve congregational participation, namely, hymns.

It is evident that those who produced the first and only hymnal for the Spanish-speaking countries had lofty goals. These goals need not now be changed, but only more effectively achieved. As it now stands, the Spanish hymnal is a conglomeration of mediocre and bad translations of English texts, set to music of the same calibre. The bad, unfortunately, is prevalent.

There is a need for a revision and expansion of the Spanish hymnal which would yield a new collection of hymns accessible to the majority, musically, poetically and theologically. The texts should be easily comprehensible when read or sung and should be written in currently-used Spanish. The latter is imperative, and would exclude many archaic translations. This obviously places the responsibility of creative work on the native talent to produce its own literature.

The Spanish hymnal came to life in the 1940s. Before then congregations used a book which contained only texts, with accompaniment played from either the English *Deseret Sunday School Songs* (1909) or *Latter-day Saint Hymns* (1927), according to the occasion. Congregations learned the tunes by rote, and there was no singing part.

I remember as a young boy the excitement with which the new hymnal was received in Buenos Aires. A collection of beautifully-bound musical settings of our own hymns was beyond everyone's expectations. This, of course, satisfied a tremendous need, and the effort put into its production deserved the praise it received.

Members of the Church in those years came essentially from the middle and

lower-middle classes; many had limited educations and lived relatively simple lives. Although sensitive to the gospel, they were generally indiscriminating in other aspects of their religious and secular lives. They took the new hymnal to their hearts and were thrilled to have it, and for many years it satisfied its intended purpose. However, as time went by, the Church attracted converts with higher education, experience, culture and expectations. As these new members began to take a closer look at the hymnal they realized that it left many things to be desired.

The Spanish hymnal is derived from the American *Latter-day Saint Hymns* of 1927 (over 200 selections) and the *Deseret Sunday School Songs* of 1909. Many of the original English texts are poetically weak to begin with. They seem only to get worse in translation, and have a certain awkwardness when coupled with poor tunes. The translations are extremely poor, so much so that many hymns are unintelligible at first sight, yielding exact meaning only after careful reading. In order to fit text to music, the translators often wrenched the syntax terribly. For example, the meaning of a phrase or stanza is often dependent upon the phrase or stanza which follows it. Frequently one must wait until the end of a stanza to catch the verb needed to complete the action. Language difficulties are compounded by inferior musical settings.

Another weakness of the Spanish hymnal is its use of archaic and obsolete words and phrases, making understanding difficult without the assistance of a dictionary. Owing to these and related problems, many hymns are shallow in content and extremely naive. The gospel and ballad type tune comprises over one third of the entire hymnal. Both text and music in the majority lack dignity, substance and character.

As one peruses the pages of the Spanish hymnal, it is evident that its compilers aimed at functionality—a hymnal for all seasons to be used by all organizations of the Church. The first thirty-five selections are geared to primary-aged children. Many of these are didactic in nature and not all are faith-promoting or spiritual. One song is entitled "Let's Brush Our Teeth."

Next there are ten Christmas hymns, all set to traditional American tunes. One New Year's song is included, which, considering its quality, would have been more appropriately placed in the children's section. The text continues with a dozen songs for youth. The remaining selections touch many different subjects of the Restored Gospel and embrace many styles, including Psalter, Eighteenth-century Methodist tune and Victorian. There is an abundance of American gospel songs such as "In Our Lovely Deseret" and "When Upon Life's Billows," characterized by their rather tongue-in-cheek dotted rhythms. Another species is what Verena Hatch terms "Latter-day Saint choir anthems," a combination of Methodist and Victorian hymn styles. In the Spanish hymnal these are assigned to the congregation in spite of their length and high tessitura. Most are rarely sung due to their difficulty.

The Spanish hymnal served a particular need at a particular time; the Church was brought to the Spanish-speaking countries by North Americans who were challenged with providing the converts with hymns that would reflect the Restored Gospel and Latter-day Saint philosophy. At that time there was no other way to do what they did. The result, obviously, could not have been better than the original source, and as we all well know, our musical heritage embraces the banal along with the sublime. For countries of Catholic background, rooted in the Latin European tradition, the implantation of a foreign mode of expression represented in the musical forms found in the hymnal, and the total neglect of any indigenous material, has been both an imposition and a disservice.