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The Hymn as Protest Song in England and Its Empire, 1819–1919

Oskar Cox Jensen

The Chairman of the Board peers, mid-interrogation, at the supplicant before him: a young man, ragged and self-evidently desperate. The Board on which he sits is that of the Mendicity Society; one of London’s more notorious self-appointed institutions for the dispensation of stern justice and occasional largesse. If the beggar before him should prove worthy, he shall be given a meal, maybe even the chance of some menial labor. “How do you beg?” the Chairman asks.

“I sing hymns, sir.”

“Oh, one of the pious chanters.” The Chairman grins at his fellows, who share his mirth. They have heard this sort of thing before.¹

This incident took place on Friday, February 16, 1838. By this date, hymn singing as a form of busking had become a common part of the urban soundscape, particularly in Britain. So much so that, among a certain stamp of monied individual, it provoked only cynicism. An article in the English Gentleman advised its readers in 1845, “Never give a farthing to beggars who sing hymns. As an unvarying rule they are impostors, who hope to extort money by the mere annoyance they cause.”² It is unclear where the imposture came in exactly, unless it was the same accusation we may read between the lines of the Mendicity Society chairman’s wry aside.

His reasoning ran thus: The performance of a hymn was calculated to appeal to the moral feelings of respectable passersby. Calculation is far removed from godliness. Therefore, the simple act of hymn singing in the hope of gain betrayed the singer’s innate a- or immorality. A catch-22 situation in which the singer could not win, but one that was eloquent of the regard in which the hymn was now generally held: once theologically suspect as introducing the fallible words of authors into divinely ordained worship, but by this time—1838—an accepted part of the Church of England service and more widely seen as a marker of respectable piety.³ The cynicism of a select few in authority was testament to the moral and cultural capital the hymn had more generally accrued across English society, hence its potential as a strategy for obtaining alms.⁴

In this instance, however, the singing beggar was far from the “impostor” his judges may have thought him. John James Bezer, 22, was wracked by compunction at the situation in which he found himself. Sacked, penniless, and needing to provide for an ill wife and newborn child, he had spent a week busking as a hymn singer in the parts of London that lay as far as he could walk from his own neighborhood. In his memoir, he writes at length of his shame and trepidation, as well as of his success—and, most tellingly, he contrasts his weekdays on the street with the Sabbath, which he observed devoutly.

On that day I sang too, but then it was in the dark at S—es Street Chapel, Bethnal Green. The congregation little thought when I gave out, with a deep sigh, “God moves in a mysterious way,” that I had sung it scores of times on the previous days in the streets! Ah! the heart only knoweth “its own bitterness[.]”⁵

Bezer’s is an experience I have returned to several times in my scholarship,
by both the specifics of his singing practice and the dilemma with which he wrestled. It is noteworthy here that Bezer, a Dissenter, found himself able to overcome his religious qualms in order to find favor (he was lavishly remunerated) among what must necessarily have been a predominantly Anglican body of passersby. Still more to my purpose in this article, it was the disbelief and hauteur of the Mendicity Society board that drove Bezer to join the radical cause of Chartism the very same evening. Mainstream and respectable though it had become, the sincerely felt hymn was still wholly proximate to the act of political protest.

In what follows, I wish to interrogate the association of the hymn with protest song over the century between 1819 and 1919, in a journey that will take us from a prisoner in irons, speeding across the Lancashire moors in a soldiers’ coach; to hot summer nights in the public spaces of Winnipeg, Manitoba; to the monster meetings of the Midlands in the 1830s. Given that one of our chief objects is the fluid, contested meaning of the word “hymn” itself, it may simplify matters to settle on a working definition of “protest song,” a twentieth-century anachronism (save for one “Protestlied für Schleswig-Holstein” from 1848) that continues to evade scholarly consensus. By “protest song,” I mean a song bent to the purposes of political activism, seeking to help effect some change (progressive, reactionary, or otherwise), the lyrics of which contain an element of appeal or demand—that is, that make themselves part of an explicit manifesto for political action. Such songs have a long history that reaches back, in England, at least as far as the dissolution of the monasteries—and in the nineteenth century, such songs achieved a strong identification with that shifting thing we will broadly call the “hymn.” It is, above all, the logic of that association that I seek to propound here.

Ever since its initial popularization in eighteenth-century Methodism, the hymn made an ideal vehicle for political protest, from its early association with non-Established denominations to its subsidiary functions as tool of exhortation and proselytization. Seeking to create in congregations a fit disposition to facilitate the working of prayer, the hymn necessarily had the potential to help enable other, more mundane attitudes also. It was this rhetorical potency that made the form so suspect at first, an artificial and dangerous innovation. Much has been written of late on the role of communal hymn singing in creating a sense of shared identity and purpose—a role with evident application to the struggles for enfranchisement that were fought by the nineteenth-century working classes—though less, perhaps, has been made of Mark Booth’s nuanced point that “when [a hymn] is sung outside the church . . . it makes a congregation of the singers present,” and the specific implications of this act for political legitimation. In the century after the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, when a peaceful demonstration was brutally suppressed by troops, causing 18 deaths and hundreds of injuries, the conferring of a sort of sacral aegis upon a body of people constituted against the wishes of force-wielding authority was of paramount importance.

A hymn, unless wholly secular (more on which below), is essentially a petition. The congregation petitions the Lord—for forgiveness, redress, grace, simple affirmation—in a rhetorical act that relies wholly upon faith and sincerity, since
in the absence of any manifest, physical incarnation of divinity, that supplication is worthless without belief. This act is externalized, given voice as well as the quality of music—since I am speaking here of sung hymns, rather than those poems called hymns (just as there were poems called odes or ballads). Translated to the political arena, this rhetorical convention to an extent legitimizes, even sacralizes the voicing of appeals, demands, grievances, while allowing for a constructive ambiguity as to the precise authority—divine or mundane—being petitioned (though by no means insisting upon a mutually exclusive dichotomy). More specifically, the form of the hymn allows for choices of both arrangement and lyrical mode of address that have precise political application even within a devotional framework.

These are large and ranging claims. To pursue them more closely, I will concentrate upon three cases from across this off-centered century of 1819–1919: each focusing upon a single writer and small body of hymns, and each investigating one dimension of the hymn-as-protest-song. First, the hymn under duress, as exemplified by Samuel Bamford. Second, the hymn in the open air, as exemplified by Ebenezer Elliott. Third, the hymn as Trojan horse, and its role in the secularization and radicalization of congregational culture itself, as exemplified by Eliza Flower. I will end in women’s suffrage and the twentieth-century afterlife of the “protest hymn.” But first, the confines of this argument must shrink, to four cold walls and an iron grille.

Samuel Bamford, Incarcerated
April 1817, and a prison coach speeds south toward London. The night is “gleamy and starlit,” the country is rural. Within the coach, four manacled radicals are carousing, heedless of the irons on their legs. With “pathos and solemnity,” the prisoners unite in singing “Glory to Thee, My God, This Night,” which “brought the singing parties of our own homes to our recollection,” as one of the four—a 29-year-old weaver called Samuel Bamford (1788–1872)—later wrote in his memoirs. The scene as Bamford remembers it is deliberately atmospheric, part of a work that stakes his claim as a leading (and literary) figure of the radical and Chartist movements. The memoir, Passages in the Life of a Radical, is a text that continually breaks into song via the interpolation of lyrics into the narrative—and one that, in covering these most turbulent years either side of Peterloo, demonstrates the young Bamford’s commitment to hymn singing at a time when he was frequently either in prison or at risk of a return there.

In this first, nocturnal instance, the four prisoners turned to a hymn that might have been expressly written for the purpose. Its likely tune, Tallis’ Canon, was suitably simple. Its author, the seventeenth-century cleric Thomas Ken (1637–1711), had himself suffered imprisonment and trial under James II. Its lyric, a humble and effacing request for divine shelter and refreshment overnight, must have comforted and fortified its four faithful singers. Bamford’s account goes beyond the hymn itself to highlight its affective role in memorializing better times, “the singing parties of our own homes,” to which they hoped to return. As a hymn well known to its singers, it also lent the reassurance of a shared text and convention to the potential instability of an impromptu performance—a pattern that we will see recur throughout this article: spontaneity, but with recourse
to the familiar, rather than the full improvisation of text or tune. For this beleaguered, microcosmic congregation, the hymn helped transcend their confinement on both a spiritual and a social level. It was a lesson Bamford would remember in the years that followed.

As alluded to above, these were the years before the hymn received official sanction from the established Church of England, when the form’s congregational usage was restricted to Dissenting denominations, most notably Methodism. Even among his fellow activists, Bamford—who wrote at least five hymns himself—struggled against opposition to the form. As Bamford explained,

I often said to my companions; “observe our neighbours, the Church-folks,—the Methodists,—and the Ranters,—what charms they add to their religious assemblages by the introduction of vocal music. Why has such an important lesson remained unobserved by us? Why should not we add music, and heart-inspiring song to our meetings? and then I wrote my “Lancashire Hymn,” to one of the finest trumpet strains I ever heard. . . . These verses were intended to have been sung at a meeting of perhaps two thousand people, which about this time was held at Middleton; but, unfortunately for their purpose, and not less injudiciously, they were first submitted to John Knight, and one or two others, whose insusceptibility could not find any charms in music . . . . The proposal to sing was by these persons condemned as “an innovation,” and the idea of introducing music at our meetings, was abandoned.15

It is unclear why Knight in particular, whose radicalism was if anything more energetic and dangerous than Bamford’s, held out against this “innovation.” Much older than Bamford, he may simply have been the conservative Bamford paints him—or his objections may have stemmed from principle, a post-Benthamite rationalism or utilitarianism that regarded music’s appeal to the passions as inappropriate for serious political discourse.16 In prison, however, Bamford was (ironically) free to exercise his hymn writing and singing proclivities. Thus, following the aforementioned coach journey, we find him in Coldbathfields jail, as one of six inmates confined to a room “about ten yards in length, and three in width.” As he makes clear in multiple accounts, it was here that, “in order to divert my mind from the contemplation of my unhappy condition, I composed the . . . Union Hymn.”17 Its four verses amply fulfill the conditions of protest song I have outlined above, couched in an optimistic vein, envisaging a better future “When woe, and want, and tyranny, / Shall from our Isle be swept away” thanks to the actions of the “brave men of the union” who are exhorted to rise up and risk death as they “strive for liberty.” Although, uncharacteristically, Bamford did not specify his favored tune, his account of its first renditions in Coldbathfields makes clear its role in both sustaining the prisoners’ collective morale and proselytizing for their cause, in a manner reminiscent of that first nighttime airing of “Glory to Thee, My God, This Night.”

[W]e stirred up the fire, drew our seats to the hearth, and spent the remainder of the evening in conversing about our families and friends, until the hour of rest approaches, when we agreed to conclude by singing the Union Hymn, which I gave out for that purpose. . . . Thus we made the very walls of our prison to vibrate with the shout of liberty; and ever after, so long as we continued together, we sung the above as our evening hymn.18
Tellingly, Bamford and his fellow inmates thereafter replaced Ken’s older and purely devotional hymn with this contemporary, topical, and thoroughly politicized creation in their daily act of simultaneous worship and defiance. Clearly, self-expression and original composition were central to their practice, part of the assertion of a distinct working-class voice, unafraid to mix faith and politics— but also indicative of the importance of authenticity, and the credibility derived therefrom: today, we still recognize that trope of the prison composition, the circumstances of its creation so integral to its status.

Two years later, Bamford repeated this act with his “Hymn to Hope. Written in Lincoln Castle,” now enshrining the circumstances of its composition within its formal title. In later anthologies, he would enlarge upon this origin story, giving its full title as:

Hymn to Hope, Respectfully inscribed to Joseph Harrison, confined in Chester Castle in 1821, for having attended and taken part in a “Seditious Meeting” at Stockport, to petition for Reform. [T]he Author being then confined in Lincoln Castle, for having attended the Manchester Meeting of August 16th, 1819. Tune.—“The God of Abraham praise.” Hebrew Melody.¹⁹

The simple tune was well chosen, bolstered by the anti-Establishment connotations of its Jewish origins, its English paraphraser Thomas Olivers’ humble status as a Methodist shoemaker, and Olivers’ lyric’s rejection of worldly power and exaltation of “sacred liberty.”₂⁰ Moreover, on this occasion Bamford’s own rewriting was more closely tied to circumstance, beginning:

When Freedom bade adieu,
And for a while withdrew,

There was a light of heavenly hope
that kept in view;
Afar it faintly shone,
As might some star alone,
That rode amid the storm when
all the rest were gone.

By its fourth verse, the hopeful moral is drawn:

And though unfeeling might
Affections dear may blight,
And though beneath the arm
of pow’r doth bend the right,
This cannot always be,—
The millions will be free,
Oh! they will rise to
vindicate humanity.²¹

More clearly than ever, the hymn’s authority and message derive from personal experience and suffering, and subsequent singers are enjoined to share its writer’s simple faith that, though now in chains, they will be free—the literal example lending weight to the wider metaphor, and given both authority and plausibility by the devotional context (this is not just the people’s will, but God’s; therefore, it must ultimately triumph).

Bamford wrote three other songs either dubbed hymns or set to a hymn tune, all of which have been discussed elsewhere.²² While it is in the above two compositions that we see most brilliantly the importance of the prison to both the hymn and its rendition, it was Bamford’s very sensitivity to that context that led to the superseding of his “Union Hymn.” For some time later, when incarcerated in Lancaster Castle prison, he changed his companions’ evening observance from the “Union Hymn” to the “Lancashire Hymn,” the better to fit their surroundings. “We closed the door of our day-room during this piece of devotion—for we always sung in the true spirit of devotion—and surprised, at
first, our almost insensible turnkeys, by the awakening of tones of sublime and
heart-stirring music.”

I think it is reasonable to respect Bamford’s insistence on “the true spirit of
devotion” here. But we can also appreciate the artistry and calculation on display. The
“Lancashire Hymn” was in every respect a more heightened work than its predecessor.
Musically it is quite demanding, arranged in four parts to a relatively elaborate tune
(see Ex. 1). Lyrically, it represents an intensification of the hymn-as-protest.

Beginning with a very pointed appeal to “Great God! who did of old inspire / The
patriot’s ardent heart,” the hymn moves inexorably from supplication to a program
for action, ending with the stirring call, “If England wills the glorious deed / We’ll
have another Runnymede [sic].” Though written in vain “for public meetings,” its
performance by prisoners will have lent an additional resonance to verses that depict
their plight (“The dungeon door hath opened wide, / Its victims to immure”). Yet
the act of singing transformed the singers from “victims” to the righteous, united in
faith, hope, and purpose, making Bamford’s claim of astounding their captors a most
plausible one.

Captivity, in fact, afforded the hymn singer an ideal platform for the act: shored
up by the precedent of biblical figures and martyrs who had undergone similar
durance; the time-defined period of incarceration serving as perfect metaphor
for lyrics of future freedom and justice; the relative sensory deprivation of the jail
conferring greater momentousness upon the participatory event. For the hymn
writer, too, prison provided both the perfect conditions for composition and the stamp
of authenticity, of status-through-suffering. It was not only Bamford who stressed
the prison origins of his hymns; subsequent Chartist leaders and writers such as Thomas
Cooper also made a point of it.

In the face of this potent forum for seditious expression, prison authorities
had a difficult decision to make: a ban on singing might be judicious, but it was
not so simple to forbid formal acts of

Example 1: Samuel Bamford, “The Lancashire Hymn” (1818). Adapted from FALMOUTH in Ralph Harrison,
Christian devotion. As the century wore on, no standard policy resulted, but some institutions were forced to resort to ad-hoc repression, as one inmate of Yarmouth Gaol recalled in his memoirs:

We sang Sankey’s hymns with such gusto as to attract the attention of the prison authorities . . . considering such joyous song inconsistent with the sombreness of prison life, they forbade the hymns, and sent us back to the psalms and paraphrases with their plain puritanical tunes.

In this instance, there is a blurring between the form and the expression: it was the gusto that proved objectionable, even subversive, but the form of the hymn that was banned—the suggestion being that it was not Sankey’s lyrics that contained the potential for protest, even considering his long-standing association with nonconformism, but rather the boisterous expressiveness that their tunes enabled. Incarceration frequently sharpened the edge of otherwise innocuous hymns: Sir William Baker’s “O God of Love,” written in 1861, became an icon of morale-boosting protest when sung by conscientious objectors interred in Wormwood Scrubs prison some 55 years later, as Fenner Brockway recalled:

when Sunday came and I went to chapel, the joy of being one of the eight hundred C.O.’s there was almost intoxicating. You should have heard them sing

O God of Love, O King of Peace,
Make wars throughout the world to cease . . .

Though Brockway’s account presents the experience as practically serendipitous, unprompted, the choice of hymn was far from accidental: along with many other songs of praise and worship, it figured prominently in The Fellowship Hymn Book (1909), a compilation that was a foundational source for the subsequent Conscientious Objector’s Song Book (1916). One hymn common to both collections, and honored with pride of place in the former, was perhaps the single most powerful hymn—if it was a hymn—of the century: Ebenezer Elliott’s “The People’s Anthem.” It is to Elliott, this anthem, and the open air that—after this period of enforced enclosure—we now emerge.

Stepping Outside

The nineteenth-century vogue for politicized hymn books, compiled by and for the use of different activist organizations, has received a great deal of recent scholarly attention, sparked by the rediscovery of the National Chartist Hymn Book (1845), successor to Thomas Cooper’s Shakespearean Chartist Hymn Book—a phenomenon that, as we have seen, continued into the twentieth century. In repurposing a form of devotional song, originally intended as an adjunct to congregational worship, as a script for direct action and activism, working-class radicals were fruitfully entangling two hitherto discrete forms of assembly. The third text in the National Chartist Hymn Book is something of a meta-exaltation of the very practice it attests: its first line runs “Assembled ’neath Thy broad blue sky.” In sacralizing this form of outdoor assembly to mundane political ends (“Demand your rights! let tyrants see / You are resolved that you’ll be free”)—and in insisting on the religious element of the action—songs such as this served not only as both hymn and partisan anthem (in the modern sense), but as a form of simultaneous reassurance and protection in an era when the right to assemble in public space was hotly contested and frequently denied.
Naturally, this aegis of protection was not always reliable—but its invocation as an aid to morale was a core element in the vital, dangerous direct actions that typified the nineteenth-century struggle for reform and representation by both men and women. As Bowan and Pickering record in their *Sounds of Liberty*:

Writing in 1880, Frank Peel recalled a serious melee in Halifax in 1842 when, as a ten-year-old, he had witnessed a very large crowd of women turn-outs standing “in front of the magistrates and the military” daring “them to kill them if they liked”. “They then struck up [Samuel Bamford’s] THE UNION HYMN”, he continued. “Singing this stirring hymn they defiantly stood in their ranks as the special constables marched up, but their music did not save them, for the constables did not hesitate to strike them with their staves.”

Cynically, the spectacle of an unbowed body of women singing a hymn while under physical assault by armed men was politically far more potent than their swift and silent dispersal would have been, and in this sense, the hymn served its political purpose admirably as part of what David Nash has described as the “eclectic search for morality.”

Musically as much as ideologically, it is easy to see why radical groups—likely to be pious Dissenters—adopted hymns to soundtrack their outdoor marches and demonstrations, for all that conservative elements such as Bamford’s bugbear, John Knight, frowned at the idea. Collective singing, in unison or more especially, as time went on, in harmony, disciplined and regulated a collective body in a manner that was far less confrontational than the military-style maneuvers which, in 1819, had been seized upon by authorities as a reason to demonize the Peterloo protestors.

The generation that followed Bamford made the outdoor hymn central to their activism. In the early 1840s, Chartist leader Thomas Cooper led groups of hymn singers through the streets of Leicester in a subversive blend of open-air service, carol concert, and show of force. But he was also one of many figures who embraced the practice of Methodist-inspired camp meetings: large gatherings, most prevalent in the industrial north of England, held on open hillsides and centered around the mass singing of hymns. By 1842, the Chartist press was publishing hymn texts that had been democratically selected specifically for these meetings, and circulated in advance; Ernest Jones even wrote a “Hymn for a Chartist Camp.” For a generation still indebted to Romantic idealism, the open and elevated terrain heightened the exalted and egalitarian sentiment of the movement, imbuing the occasion with a sense of sublimity that no ecclesiastical architecture could rival—especially considering that most Anglican cathedrals and churches were off limits.

The hymns’ lyrical rhetoric consistently reflected this context, figuring the singers’ agency through motifs of mass platforms and assemblies, and rejecting an Anglican preference for “I,” “me,” and “my” in favor of “we,” “ours,” and “us.” This open-air idealism may even have found expression in the rare instances of musical composition and arrangement undertaken by Chartist activists. David Kennerley’s analysis of William Jones’s hymn “Immortality” argues for a more corporate form of voicing in which there is no distinguishable or consistent ‘melody’ line, and consequently a more
equal sharing of importance between the voices...it strikes me that Jones's rejection of harmonic hierarchy in favour of something that seems more egalitarian may, possibly, represent a distinctively Chartist approach to musical composition—an approach partially indebted to and enabled by the spirit of the camp meeting, rather than formalized congregational practices.

In the same piece of analysis, Kennerley makes the single most profound observation I have encountered concerning this hymn culture, one that crystallizes the potential of the outdoor assembly en masse. Referring to a dominant rhetorical trope of the hymns' verses exemplified in couplets such as

'Tis the nation's voice I hear,
Shouting, "Liberty is near."

he comments that “in the very act of performance, their words find their own fulfillment. By singing these hymns in the open air, the Leicester Chartists might well come to imagine themselves to be as ‘free’ as the birds they echoed, or hear in their own massed voices the shout of Liberty as foretold by [W. S.] Villiers Sankey.” For an assembly of protestors-cum-faithful, whose ultimate goal was political representation, what could possibly be more conducive to good morale and hope of success than to join in singing words that realized their own rhetorical potential in the moment of expression? So many of these hymns included sentiments that might be paraphrased as “Hear the voice of liberty echo to the skies!” —sentiments that, in the singing, were rendered true. Thus the protest hymn became, for the singers, the perfect primer for the eventual goal (together, we can make this come true)—besides surpassing the potential of the purely devotional, congregational hymn, in that the latter relied purely upon faith that could not be rewarded in this world, whereas the former provided evidence of faith rewarded within its own performance.

**Ebenezer Elliott, Air-borne**

The hymn writer whose works instigated and sustained the post-Chartist continuation of this air-borne practice more than any other was Ebenezer Elliott (1781–1849), the autodidact Yorkshire writer and industrialist generally known to contemporaries as “The Corn Law Rhymer” due to his preoccupation with that single issue. Elliott, whose writings took many forms, followed up his enormously successful collection of *Corn-Law Rhymes* with 1835’s *Corn-Law Hymns*, of which his biographer and son-in-law John Watkins wrote: “He entertained sanguine hopes that they would be sung in churches; but the Church of England would deem the very thought sacrilege. Fitter that they should be sung in an unwalled temple, uncircumscribed by any roof save the floor of heaven. Elliott poured forth his whole soul in those orisons.”

This conforms entirely with what we have observed thus far: the subversive status of these protest-hymns dictated their extramural performance; their writing was a sincere and even pious act; the association with the open air redounded to their association with the sublime. Watkins was, of course, a highly partial commentator; these 20 works were to prove less popular than much of Elliott’s other lyrical output, and several of them are hard to think of as hymns in any functional sense. Yet they are largely well conceived for the context we have described, with many verses such as this, the second of the second hymn, epitomizing the ideal of the open-air hymn of protest that makes manifest its own imagery in performance:
Hark! how it floats the vale along!
'Tis music's voice, 'tis Nature's song!
It charms the woods, the rocks,
the skies;
And, hark! how echo's soul replies!
Give us Freedom! Give us Freedom!
Free Trade. 43

The sixth hymn ends by envisaging “An avalanche of men . . . Though slow to move, mov’d all at once, / A sea, a sea of men!”; the seventeenth insists self-demonstrably, “Hark! millions cry for justice, Lord!”; the ninth identifies the singing protestors with divine wrath:

For wrongs go forth in might,
Like whirlwind on the sea;
When vengeance strikes for right,
What is he, Lord, but thee?

Politically loaded throughout with lyrics that entangle biblical allusion with topical political events and metaphors of worms and drones, many of the hymns are admirably fit for purpose. Yet it is not in them that we find Elliott’s chief contribution to the form and cause of radical protest, but in one of the last pieces he composed before his death: “The People’s Anthem.”

“The People’s Anthem” was first published in Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine in 1848, and Elliott’s own death a year later did nothing to diminish its impact. 44 If anything, its success over the next 70 years or so was only bolstered by disassociation with Elliott, to the extent that the structure and content of its three verses underwent almost immediate revision, becoming standardized in a form quite different from that of the initial publication. And while the same magazine could write of the anthem’s musical setting in May 1850 that “we are glad to see that these fine stanzas of the Corn-Law Rhymer have at last found fitting musical utterance. The composer is not unworthy of the poet,” later generations would sing the song in total ignorance of its origin. 45 In 1890s New Zealand, it took pride of place in Socialist Church Hymns under the anonymous title “When Wilt Thou Save the People?” (its first line); and in Canada in the 1910s, it had become the equally anonymous “Labour Hymn” for striking workers. 46

These retitlings are apt tribute to the democratic, unfettered goal of radical hymn singing, with authored compositions passing into common ownership—but they also do something more, insisting on the song’s status as “hymn” (or implying the same by the standard congregational practice of referring to a song by its opening line) rather than employing the increasingly ambiguous term “anthem.” This rhetorical sacralization was echoed in the lyrical changes. The hymn’s original form contains the poetically striking but theologically controversial proposition that:

Thy angels are our brothers
. . . . . .
In Eden rescu’d, let us twine
With mortal virtues love divine,
And be earth’s angels.

Since most Christian theology would conceive of angels as a higher and separate order of being to humanity, this intrusion of liberté, égalité, fraternité into the celestial sphere may have proved too much for many pious singers. Subsequent versions replace this final image with the less contentious lines that Elliott originally included in the song’s first verse:

God! save the people! thine they are,
Thy children, as thy angels fair;
Save them from bondage and despair,
God! save the people!
— in so doing, standardizing the refrain across the verses in a manner more conducive than Elliott’s own shifting end-lines to the hymn’s wide and long-lasting dissemination.

A similar process may be observed in relation to the song’s tune (see Exx. 2 and 3).

At Elliott’s request, “The People’s Anthem” was set to music by his friend William Thorold Wood (1816–1888). Something similar had happened a few years previously, when Elliott’s “Corn Law Hymn” (ca. 1839) was put to a simple, undemanding eight-bar


For the full score, see https://oursubversivevoice.com/song/12241/.
melody in three parts by “A Friend.” But Wood’s arrangement was quite different. Wood was an intellectual with radical-genteel and aristocratic antecedents, who would go on to found a series of feminist Portuguese newspapers with his wife Francisca de Assis Martins; at the time of “The People’s Anthem” he had a very minor reputation as a composer of dances, most of them commercial but including “The Free Trade Polka” (1846); his early song for bass voice “In Joyous Youth” (1835) was reviewed by the Court Journal as “clever” in part and “creditable” to an amateur, though highly flawed; he would go on to set another of Elliott’s songs upon the latter’s death, as well as several other topical songs and a highly esoteric collection of musical illustrations for Henry James Slack’s philosophical treatise The Ministry of the Beautiful that are no longer extant. In sum: Wood was a rarefied and aspirational amateur composer, a world away from the demotic camp meetings of the northern hillsides.

Nonetheless, his “People’s Anthem” sold well enough to receive a “New Edition. Second Thousand. Price 1s” by January 1851, thanks in no small part to the efforts of the Westminster Review, the flagship journal of London’s freethinking philosophers. Besides favorable notices in Tait’s, the Weekly Dispatch, and the Nottingham Review, his composition glowed in the following write-up from the Westminster Review:

...a most convincing proof that musical genius of high order is not wanting amongst us. The “People’s Anthem,” consists of a quartette, semi-chorus, and chorus, and has been performed at large meetings at the London Tavern and elsewhere, with admirable effect. The words are very grand and striking, and were written expressly for Mr. Wood by the people’s poet, Ebenezer Elliott, with the hope of stimulating a lofty tone of patriotic feeling. We cannot doubt that, before long, this truly noble piece will be heard all over the kingdom. It is the Marseillaise Hymn of that peaceful progress to which the efforts of our best minds and hearts are directed, and will be received with enthusiasm wherever a right English feeling prevails.

Here, as in comparisons with “Rule, Britannia!” from the Nottingham Review and indeed in the piece’s title and opening line—an explicit riposte to “God Save the Queen”—we see an early emphasis on both its secular, national significance, and its musical credentials as a sophisticated and mature composition. Airings at aspirational London “soirées” only furthered this Liberal, metropolitan, aestheticized identity—enough to shift a couple of thousand copies, but not quite the thing to secure a place among the core repertoire of the Anglophone world’s working classes.

Wood’s composition is an impressive piece of through-composed music, 64 bars long, frequently modulating key, and progressing through escalations of tempo, dynamics, and participation, before ending in an extended coda of seven variations on the phrase “God Save the People!” for “full chorus.”

In the concert halls of its first performances, it may well have had a striking effect upon those select audiences, given the cumulative impact of its sequence of grand musical gestures. But such is not the stuff that popular hymns are made of. Travel forward 69 years to a summer’s night in Victoria Park, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. This vast, green, tree-lined space near the City Hall had long been a locus for protest, and in May and June 1919 it hosted
Example 3: Ebenezer Elliott, “The People’s Anthem” to the tune of Josiah Booth’s COMMONWEALTH (1888), first verse

When wilt Thou save the people? O God of mercy! when? Not

kings and lords, but nations! Not thrones and crowns, but men!

Flowers of Thy heart, O God, are they! Let them now pass, like weeds, away! Their

heiritage a sunless day! God save the people!
weeks of demonstrations during a general strike. Thousands of protestors, many of whom were arrested, joined their voices in singing the “Labour Hymn”—which, as we have heard, was their name for “The People's Anthem.” But they sang it, as had any number of groups across Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada since 1888, to Josiah Booth’s (aptly titled) tune Commonwealth (Ex. 3). Though this melody modulates halfway through from E minor to E major, it consists of just 16 bars within a much narrower pitch range, and involves none of the repeats or elaborations of Wood’s earlier composition. It is infinitely more plausible a tune to be sung by thousands, outside and unrehearsed.

Wood’s tune was testament to a particular moment, a period of 1830s–1840s sympathy for the radical cause among London’s intellectuals that expressed itself more in metropolitan concert culture than en masse and on hill or plain, and that was accompanied by a subtext of middling oversight and appropriation of working-class struggle that militated against a warm welcome from the masses themselves. Booth’s tune was less bound, and less compromised, by this originary context. It required a vehicle such as this second tune—so emblematic of regular and earlier hymn culture as typified by the National Chartist Hymn Book, which saw congregations choose whichever tune they knew best that fitted a particular meter—to ensure the longevity and geographic spread of “The People’s Anthem,” no longer an anthem in the narrow sense, but a true and democratized hymn.

Eliza Flower, in Concert
Perhaps no “hymn” ever received a greater outdoor rendition than “The Gathering of the Unions,” later more generally known as “The Union Hymn,” but not to be confused with Samuel Bamford’s piece of the same name. Admittedly, the most splendid account of its singing by “a hundred thousand voices” at the Birmingham monster meeting of May 7, 1832 was written by the song’s own lyricist, Harriet Martineau (1802–1876), from whom also derives the claim, repeated at the century’s end, that it was “then familiar to every child in the land.” But the bare fact of its performance by the assembled masses on Newhall Hill is indisputable, and its qualities are exemplary of the themes of this article. Alluding to the mounted soldiers of the Scots Greys standing by, Martineau wrote that “the Hymn seems to tell that the warlike intentions were wholly on one side”—testament to the respectable, pacific, and protective connotations of that appellation, “hymn.” Its lyrics typify that ideal of self-realization, the first two verses ending with the repeated refrain:

And hark! we raise from sea to sea,  
The sacred watchword, Liberty!153

It further combined sacred credentials—“God is our guide!”—with the rhetoric of protest: liberty, freedom, “a tyrant faction's doom,” and a rational, nonviolent program of action: “By union, justice, reason, law.” Its enduring success was assured by its prominent place in political hymn books, most famously the international Labour Church Hymn Book. And in a strong echo of “The People's Anthem,” while the 1896 edition of this hymnal still included the original music by Eliza Flower (1803–1846), rendered accessible in tonic solfa notation, editions from 1912 onward replaced this short but nonetheless technically challenging composition with a new setting by W. H. Bell that was regarded as more amenable to the new century.
While Martineau was happy to adopt the shorthand label of “hymn” for the song, there is no indication that its composer, Eliza Flower, did likewise: instead, the original sheet music was subtitled “March and Song.” Indeed, while Flower’s activism was expressed in a significant number of topical protests, most called “songs” but some, such as the hugely ambitious “Hymn for the Polish Exiles” (another cowrite with Martineau, this time in support of those patriot fighters that the Russians had sent to Siberia) styled as hymns, none of these pieces featured in her most significant body of work, the two-volume *Hymns and Anthems* that, in the early 1840s, became the official repertoire of London’s South Place Society—a key Dissenting institution characterized by its intellectual radicalism.\(^56\)

The story of South Place, and likewise the story of Eliza Flower, is long, complex, and fascinating, but its relevance here is as a site of subversion: less in the realm of national and franchise politics, with which it was undoubtedly entangled, than in the fraught question of what should constitute sacred music, religious observance, and that singular thing that has slipped in and out of definition across this article: the hymn itself. Even before Flower’s time, South Place was riven by musical controversy. From its founding in 1793, as its historian Moncure Conway wrote a century later:

> It had begun with Winchester’s hymn-book, but in 1810 adopted Aspland’s (Unitarian) collection. In 1815, Mr. Smith, the organist, was requested “to introduce such tunes as are adapted to hymns of a particular meter, and to use the same sufficiently frequent to enable the congregation to join in so noble a part of the worship of God.” It was also ordered “that the choir be so enclosed as to prevent rude or unruly persons from intruding themselves thereinto.”

In 1817, the inauguration of its new minister, William Johnson Fox (1786–1854), led to a revolt against “the practice of introducing in the service of this chapel, solos, duets, and sacred pieces in which the congregation cannot unite, [which] is quite incompatible with true devotion, and contrary to the general wishes of the congregation.” Organ voluntaries were subsequently banned, but the innovators—backed by Fox—eventually won out, and thereafter its history was one of symbiotic musical and theological evolution.\(^57\)

In large part this evolution, helmed by Fox, was influenced by his two wards, Eliza Flower and her sister Sarah. Their musical innovations were not art for art’s sake but arose from a deep engagement with how best to approach both the divine and the mundane through music.\(^58\) Sarah Flower wrote of hearing a Handel recital at the 1827 Norwich Music Festival that “in all the choruses of praise to the Almighty my heart joined, and seemed to lift itself above the world to celebrate the praises of him to whom I owed the bliss of those feelings; but the rest of the ‘Messiah’ dwindled to a mere musical enjoyment.”\(^59\) It was to confront this problem of “mere musical enjoyment” that the three of them collaborated on Sarah Flower’s hymn “Nearer, My God, to Thee”—which is still famous the world over—resulting in a towering, 108-bar, through-composed work for soloist, choir, and full congregation, conceived as an intensely concentrated spiritual-intellectual dialogue.\(^60\) Especially in the early years of their collaborations, Martineau was a key influence—and contributor—and the latter’s recollections of her earliest encounters with hymn singing are powerful testament to the earnestness of the group’s efforts.
The woe-breaking one was the German Evening Hymn. The heroic one, which never failed to rouse my whole being, was “Awake, my soul; stretch every nerve,” sung to Artaxerxes.—In those days, we learned Mrs Barbauld’s Prose Hymns by heart; and there were parts of them which I dearly loved: but other parts made me shiver with awe. . . . Heaven opened before me at the sound of my own voice[.]61

Perhaps the most successful of their collaborations in the realm of “protest hymns” was Martineau’s lyric “All Men Are Equal,” which Eliza Flower set as a relatively simple 24-bar arrangement in four parts (see Ex. 4). Its listing in Hymns and Anthems even specifies it as “very simple in character, not requiring the aid of a trained choir.” Though the harmonies vary, the melody sets the six-line verses as three identical pairs of question-and-answer—a plain and elegant attempt to further the lyric’s democratic, anticolonial proposition of universal and global equality.62

Once again, this hymn appeared in much later editions of the Labour Church Hymn Book, and received a warm review in the Sydney newspaper The Watchman (March 25, 1909).63 In these, as in the 1892 Ethical Songs with Music, its explicitly Deist lyrics were altered to achieve an entirely secular lyric—an editorial reworking that itself echoed the (increasingly secular) spiritual journey of Eliza Flower, as well as that of her friend and contemporary, the radical hymn composer Sophia Dobson Collet (1822–1894), and her later successor at South Place, humanist composer Emily Josephine Troup (1853–1913).65 Hymns and Anthems was itself a doubly radical collection, its lyrics mixing sacred and secular sources including activists such as Martineau, Robert Nicoll, and even Ebenezer Elliott, and its music, still more controversially, pairing Flower’s own compositions with the (often secular) work of the Germanic composers then in vogue in London’s liberal circles: Mozart, Spohr, Beethoven, Mendelssohn—who was extremely kind about Flower’s own compositions—and Hummel.66 A review in the Examiner makes clear both the collection’s form and its idealism:

chiefly for four voices . . . though among the number are several solos; but all followed by a choral response, in which the choir are sometimes alone, and

sometimes joined by the congregation.

. . . The present volume is divided into three classes—“Adoration,” “Aspiration,” and “Belief”—the words intended to concentrate the feelings on each of these states of mind, and to strengthen and exalt the devout tendencies of all.67

Such was, it seems, the sincere intent: to employ the techniques of the latest art music, to which Flower and her circle were so attached, to the betterment of congregational devotion. But the result appears to have been, from a conventionally religious perspective, quite the reverse.

Three years later, a year before both Flower’s death and the publication of the collection’s second volume, 22 of her Hymns and Anthems were given in concert at Crosby Hall, a venerable if decrepit venue on London’s Bishopsgate Street.68 Taking place in a secular hall on a Wednesday evening, advertised in a conventionally formatted program that listed the star singers, lyrical sources, start time, and seat prices, this “Performance of Sacred Music” was in every respect a society concert, not an occasion for worship. There were solos and encores. This time, the Examiner’s review refined its description of the works as “rather, musical illustrations of the varying moods of devotion.”69 Though this review was highly complimentary, it exhibits a tension between sacred and secular—a consciousness that, in being subject to a review at all, this was an event that required careful framing: “such a variety of power was in these sincere and passionate utterances of thought and feeling, such an earnest reverting to first principles, and so implicit a faith in their readiest translation into sound, that the enthusiasm of the auditory increased steadily to the close[.]” “Enthusiasm” was itself a word that, to contemporaries, entailed a complex dance of religious and secular connotations, both positive and negative, and thus wholly appropriate to the subversion that was taking place under Fox’s ministry.70 For, just as the Chartist working classes were sacralizing their assemblies on northern hillsides, London’s radical elite was secularizing its spaces of worship, making concert audiences out of congregations.

South Place after Fox and Flower would go further still, reserving the explicitly religious texts within Hymns and Anthems for the trained choir, and assigning humanist pieces to the erstwhile congregation. In the 1880s and 1890s, the accompanying sermons began to be replaced by “lectures,” illustrated by Flower’s hymns, entirely reworking their original purpose as instruments of devotion.71 In 1888, it was renamed from a Religious to an Ethical Society (as it remains to this day),72 in the ultimate logical extension of Fox and Flower’s own secularist innovations.

Such was the wider tendency of any nondenominational use of hymns for political purposes in the nineteenth century. As Bowan and Pickering note of Joshua Hobson’s Chartist Hymns for Worship (1843), the stated aim of the collection was to be “Without Sectarianism.”73 Dissenting political movements were aimed at uniting different denominations in a single body, and the hymns had to fulfill this end. While there is nothing inherent in either a Deistic or an ecumenical approach that renders it less theologically or spiritually rigorous than the attitude of a given denomination, the logical tendency to compromise, to steer clear of sectarian specificity, may have had significant repercussions for the subsequent history of the protest hymn. The twentieth century inherited a form of
protest song that had musical and rhetorical coherence, but far less devotional import: all sound and piety, but, in theological terms, perhaps signifying nothing.

So far as hymns of protest are concerned, the most significant legacy of Martineau and Flower, Collet, and, later, Troup was the hymns of the suffragettes, so characteristic of the last decade of this off-center century. Though well supplied with composers such as Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) and Alicia Needham (1863–1945), many suffragettes marched to the sound of familiar hymn tunes such as “Men of Harlech,” which served as the setting for, among other songs, the anonymous “Rouse, Ye Women,” and Theodora Mills’s “Shoulder to Shoulder” (both ca. 1910). It is notable that, though religious observance was a feature of many suffragist marches, neither of these lyrics is explicitly devotional; rather, it is the cause that is “sacred,” while “God speed you!” is a cry that emanates from “towns and cities.” These secularized protest hymns, exhorting their singers onward rather than upward, were the result of what we have observed at South Place and elsewhere: the sounds of worship; the words of secular political struggles; the spatial contexts of street and square.

They were, moreover, the final great flourishing of the form. Thereafter twentieth-century England, as an increasingly secularized society, began to eschew the hymn as a sonic vehicle for protest, its qualities superseded either by the less freighted marching songs that had come out of the American Civil War and other conflicts, more wholly secular, or, conversely, by the increasingly credible religious form, not of the hymn, but of the spiritual. Unlike the hymn, tainted with the musicological legacy of imperial domination, the spiritual possessed greater political capital for use in the causes that would dominate radical struggle in the Anglophone West.

Today, after generations of more atomized, individualized, and commercialized forms of both musical expression and political experience, the hymn-as-protest is vanishingly rare in England—in sharp contrast to its continued and even increasing usage in postimperial states such as South Africa during apartheid—becoming a form employed only by a few exceptional individuals such as Sue Gilmurray of the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship.

The fate of Hubert Parry’s setting of Blake’s verses as “Jerusalem” is emblematic: despite being dedicated to the suffragettes by its composer, its subsequent association with the Women’s Institute, the school assembly, and indeed with the church congregation itself, has rendered it anathema to most radical causes in the twenty-first century. The sonic and performative properties of the hymn, so perfectly suited to the mass protests of the nineteenth century, have proven out of step, quite literally, with subsequent sensibilities of protest. Piety, musical precision, disciplined movement, ill accord with the radical causes of the past 60 years. The protest hymn book has been closed.
NOTES


2 “Beggars,” English Gentleman 34 (December 13, 1845).


4 For a rather wonderful fictional demonstration of this strategy, see Sylvia Townsend Warner, Summer Will Show (London: Penguin Classics, 2021 [1936]), in which the protagonist briefly masquerades as an escaped nun and sings “English hymns” on the streets of Paris in 1848.


6 His favored hymn, which was William Cowper’s famous poem set to the tune of CHURCH STREET, is an especially intriguing detail, since I have been able to unearth only a single four-part setting of a hymn tune of that name, from Halifax rather than London. It is a sprightly arrangement with some ambitious melodic phrases, far from the psalms and dirges of contemporary cliché, yet not especially easy to reduce to a single part. If this was indeed Bezer’s tune of choice, it is testament to his musical ability in adapting the congregational piece to a solo street performance. See Martin V. Clarke, “The Illingworth Moor Singers’ Book: A Snapshot of Methodist Music in the Early Nineteenth Century,” Nineteenth-Century Music Review 7 (2010): 81–103, fig. 5.

7 Eckhard John and David Robb, Songs for a Revolution: The 1848 Protest Song Tradition in Germany (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2020), 13. This song’s lyrics may be read at https://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=101867.


12 Samuel Bamford, Passages in the Life of a Radical (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1884 [1884]), 78–79.

13 See https://hymnary.org/text/all_praise_to_thee_my_god_this_night.


15 Bamford, Passages, 123–25.


17 Samuel Bamford, An Account of the Arrest and Imprisonment of Samuel Bamford, Middleton, on suspicion of High Treason. Written by Himself (Manchester, 1817), 4–5.

18 Ibid., 41–42.

19 Samuel Bamford, Hours in the Bowers. Poems, &c. (Manchester, 1834), 50.


21 While Bamford’s lyrics are available in many nineteenth-century compilations, they are most easily accessed at https://minorvictorianwriters.org.uk/bamford/b_poetry_index.htm.


23 Bamford, Passages, 207.

24 See https://minorvictorianwriters.org.uk/bamford/c_poems_4.htm#195.

25 Cooper, indeed, went as far as to produce a short collection of songs entitled Prison Rhymes (ca. 1842), readily accessible at https://minorvictorianwriters.org.uk/cooper/b_prison_rhymes.htm.


29 Ibid.

30 See note 10 above.

31 https://www.calderdale.gov.uk/wws/search/controlServlet?pageId=Detail&DocId=102253&PageNo=4, where the entire hymn book has been digitized.


33 Cited in Bowan and Pickering, Sounds of Liberty, 294.

34 This may go some way to explaining the “irony” that, in the 1870s, rural laborers united to the sound of hymns rather than ballads, as discussed in Alun Howkins and C. Ian Dyck, “‘The Time’s Alteration’: Popular Ballads, Rural Radicalism and William Cobbett,” History Workshop Journal 23 (1987): 20–38, at 36.


39 Kennerley, “Building a Radical Counter-Culture.”

40 Ibid.


42 The Poetical Works of Ebenezer Elliott, the Corn-Law Rhymer (Edinburgh, 1840), 167–73.

43 Ibid., 169.

44 Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine (1848): 403.

45 Also quoted in a full-page advertisement in the Westminster Review Advertiser (January 1851).

46 Bowan and Pickering, Sounds of Liberty, 330, 320.


48 Information and score communicated to me by Robert Saunders, via private correspondence.

1850); *Era* (November 3, 1850); *Westminster Review Advertiser* (January 1851); and *Westminster Review* 55 (1851): 274.


53 British Library Music Collections H. 1917 (4). This is a single-sheet edition, bound within a volume collating Eliza Flower’s “secular” compositions.

54 Date and place of publication of this work vary by edition; for example, both London and Manchester in 1895, or Nottingham in 1912.


58 The term “art for art’s sake,” coined by Théophile Gautier in 1835, would become a much more prominent part of the aestheticized ideology of the generation following the Flower sisters.


60 *Hymns and Anthems*, 1: 39–42.


65 See Bowan and Pickering, *Sounds of Liberty*, 242, and, for Collet, the ongoing work of Clare Midgley.


68 The program, for Wednesday, November 22, 1845, is included in the British Library’s binding of the two volumes. For the venue, see https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/bk9/pp15-32.


72 See conwayhall.org.uk for the current institution, which continues to combine its ethical community mission with excellent concert programming.

73 Ibid., 296.


78 The global context is of course another and far larger matter, beyond the scope of the present article, while even within Britain, Northern Ireland, Glasgow, and Wales continue to afford a very different experience to England. See the extended bibliography at https://oursubversivevoice.com/bibliography/, in particular *Songs of Social Protest: International Perspectives*, ed. Aileen Dillane, Martin J. Power, Eoin Devereux, and Amanda Haynes (London: Rowan & Littlefield, 2018); and Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

79 For an interview and links, see https://oursubversivevoice.com/interview/sue-gilmurray/.