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Sounds for the Sanctuary: The Sacred Choral Music of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Through a Creative Liturgical Lens

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The output of Black musicians is uniquely peculiar and significant as it relates to the church—specifically, the Black church and its various members—and its fostering of musical gifts. While not a product of the Black church in the traditional sense, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was indeed a musician whose contribution to the practice of church music, mainly through sacred choral compositions, should not be overlooked. They are arguably his chief contribution to this institution in which his musical gift was nurtured as a young musical apprentice. This article explores the sacred choral music of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor through a liturgical lens, providing an overview of the composer's background in the church and a survey of several anthems.

Sacred Music Output

Historian Jeffrey Green offers an enlightening investigative article—of which an expanded version later appears in his book, *Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, A Musical Life*—about the early years of Coleridge-Taylor, which includes information on his father, Dr. Daniel Peter Hughes Taylor, whom Samuel never met. Interestingly enough, Green notes that an obituary in the *British Medical Journal* shared news about Samuel's father and his passing, asserting Dr. Taylor's paternal relationship to this famed "writer of sacred music and the author of 'Hiawatha.'"¹ While it is commonplace to laud Coleridge-Taylor for his cantata, *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*, it appears that the composer was also reasonably well known, at least for a time, on account of his sacred music. This notoriety is corroborated by the fact that prominent music publisher Novello printed Coleridge-Taylor's anthems, all of which were published² within a span of ten years beginning in 1891, with four more in the subsequent year. This renders his first published anthem at the age of sixteen and his last at twenty-six, though his sacred cantata, *The Atonement*, was published by Novello when Coleridge-Taylor was twenty-eight.

Coleridge-Taylor's output of sacred choral music is small; it is, however, peculiar that his works have fallen into disuse considering his prowess and popularity, and especially in light of Britain's quest for its distinctive musical identity and contribution.³ (This author notes that Coleridge-Taylor's harmony instructor, Charles Wood, is remembered only for a handful of anthems.⁴)

Coleridge-Taylor was an active church musician throughout his youth. Green notes that Coleridge was a frequent soloist with the church choir, and by age ten, Coleridge-Taylor was performing not only in church but also in school.⁵ His ecclesiastical affiliation boasts both Presbyterianism and Anglicanism, but he was exceedingly active in and formed during his time with the latter. Green notes that the "substantial inheritance of choral music possessed by the Anglicans was an important experience in the young composer's education."⁶ Despite the influence of the church on Coleridge-Taylor's musical development, much of the history surrounding his musical trajectory places a fair amount of emphasis on his time at the Royal College of Music

as an adolescent lad of fifteen years old. To be fair, the output of his anthems is a result of, or at least coincides with, his time and study at the Royal College of Music. Undoubtedly, his mentorship by Charles Villers Stanford and probable fraternization with the likes of Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst likely contributed to his formal composition of church/sacred music. Consequently, it is worth noting that as a church musician, Coleridge-Taylor made more of his lasting (or would-be) contribution as a composer rather than an organist or choirmaster, albeit also a conductor.

Choral music practitioner and Coleridge-Taylor specialist Zanaida Noelle Robles summarizes Coleridge-Taylor's anthems in her dissertation, particularly suggesting a corpus reading. In doing so, Robles elucidates broader revelations that may illuminate some aspect of Coleridge-Taylor's greater call, thus pointing more steadily to the significance of his sacred choral compositions. Reading his first anthem, *In Thee, O Lord*, as a statement of faith in his abilities to compose, Robles suggests a potential spiritual significance of Coleridge-Taylor's complete body of anthems, regarding his final anthem, *What Thou Hast Given Me, Lord, Here I Tender*, as a statement of resignation. Further, Robles also notes that Christian faith may not necessarily be an absolute for Coleridge-Taylor, though the indelible influence of English sacred choral tradition is without question.⁷

Robles's argument is entirely plausible, particularly related to faith commitment on Coleridge-Taylor's part. Amid the influence of Coleridge-Taylor's activity in church music making, very little information (comparatively) is typically discussed regarding his faith rearing in relationship to the church, let alone a profession of faith—in this case, Christian. Nevertheless, biographer Geoffrey Self notes that Coleridge-Taylor had a real but simple faith.⁸ On what basis does Self make that claim? It is somewhat unclear and without explication. Self mentions Coleridge-Taylor's faith to contrast the composer against Delius, Vaughan Williams, and Elgar, all of whom had significant roles with the Three Choirs Festival, even amid questions about their faith or lack thereof, in the years following Coleridge-Taylor's unsuccessful premiere of *The Atonement*. To contextualize, the question of faith is relevant given that

the Three Choirs Festival is a collaboration between three prominent cathedrals in Hereford, Gloucester, and Worcester and their church choirs.⁹

Considering the body of Coleridge-Taylor's sacred music output, and with Self's comment in mind, it appears likely that some aspect of personal faith might undergird Coleridge-Taylor's sacred choral output. The entire body of anthems can appropriately find its place throughout the Christian liturgical year, especially for significant "festival" seasons such as Christmas and Easter and the days surrounding them. Further, Coleridge-Taylor seems to compose in a declamatory style for chorus, leaving little room for obscured text. Yes, nineteenth-century English anthem compositional style generally frontlines text intelligibility. However, Coleridge-Taylor almost provides "choral recitative" in his anthems atop beautiful lyrical, linear, and lush organ accompaniment. In the absence of telescoped text, there could be something more to Coleridge-Taylor's aims in communicating the text, aside from being an inheritor of a tradition. And if true, this makes it all the more worthwhile to use his music in worship.

With or without a faith commitment, Coleridge-Taylor's sacred choral music contributions make stunning additions to weekly worship, whether in formal liturgical, high church or less formal, low church settings. Owing to the fact that all churches have a liturgy—or order of worship—the creative liturgical lens through which this author has considered these works should be understood as suggestions/consideration for the use of this music in corporate worship more broadly, not necessarily limited to only strict, formally liturgical, settings, though the music naturally lends itself to said conditions. This view also does not exclude or intend to suggest that these choral works should be excluded from concert performances. In the cases of some works, a concert setting or presentational offering might work best.

Selection of Choral Anthems

As previously stated, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor is an inheritor of and contributor to the English choral tradition of the Church of England. This is evidenced by several features, not least of which include his setting

of *Morning and Evening Service*. Though composed for worship, this work is especially viable for concert settings and can function on concert programs much like musical settings of its Roman Catholic Mass counterpart. Additionally, his anthems specifically showcase his awareness of liturgical and musical conventions such as verse anthems, integrating chorale/hymn tunes, use of the plagal "amen" cadence, and use of doxology—an expression of praise in celebration and acknowledgment of God.

The Lord Is My Strength is labeled a short anthem for Easter (which could be editorial), quoting two stanzas of Psalm 118. It is affixed with a chorale, which textually functions as a prayer for Eastertide—a term explicitly used in the composition's lyrics—and ends with a trinitarian doxology. Because this text is a Psalm, it can and should find multiple uses during various church seasons. However, if one adheres to liturgical seasons rather strictly (arguably appropriately), the closing chorale presents a potential problem lyrically on account of its use of the term *Eastertide*. (In the broadest application, one could argue that present-day Christians are always in a season of Eastertide as post-resurrection followers of Jesus.) To remedy this, if using this anthem outside of Eastertide, one might consider returning to the beginning of the anthem after the conclusion of the 6/4 section—which sets stanza seventeen of Psalm 118, singing through and ending on the downbeat of measure twenty to round out the performance. One might also decide to include and thereby conclude with the printed "amen" cadence.

Published simultaneously with three others, *Lift Up Your Heads* sets stanzas seven and eight of Psalm 24 in a lively manner, as indicated by the tempo designation. As a festival anthem, this setting fits appropriately in the weeks following Easter Sunday, though it could also find a home during Palm Sunday services. Additional uses throughout the year could include prelude or introit as a means of calling the congregation to worship in song; some congregations even use the label musical call to worship. Given this anthem's short, sectional construction—and its swift tempo marking—it could be deployed in conjunction with a reading of Psalm 24. Stanza 7, which corresponds with the first thirty-five measures of the anthem, including the brief

organ introduction, can serve as the refrain that is sung before beginning the reading, then again at the *selah* marking after stanza six, with a rendering of the complete anthem at the *selah* marking at the conclusion of the Psalm. One could also opt to sing the anthem from the beginning through beat three of measure 73 after the first *selah* marking, resuming with measure 74 to the end after reading the final stanzas of Psalm 24, after which the final *selah* indication appears.

In *By the Rivers of Baylon*, Coleridge-Taylor joins the roster of composers who have provided settings of Psalm 137, commonly under the Latin title *Super flumina Babylonis*. In this verse anthem, Coleridge-Taylor takes a few slight poetic liberties with the text, which is highly declamatory in style with rhythmic vitality aligning nicely with the natural pronunciation of the prose. Of course, the Psalms naturally reveal the conditions out of which they are born and to which they might apply. Since Psalm 137 is contextualized by Judah's exilic period in Babylon, this anthem pairs nicely with other Old/First Testament passages, not least of which is Jeremiah 29. Liturgically recalibrating and reconnecting this psalm to Jeremiah 29, particularly as it relates to contextualizing a familiar promise and message of comfort, will prove especially meaningful for worship constituents.

O Ye That Love The Lord may remind one of the hymn *Come, We That Love the Lord*, penned by Coleridge-Taylor's earlier church music predecessor (broadly speaking) Isaac Watts (1674–1748). Content-wise, these pieces have little to do with each other directly, although it might be a pleasant challenge to consider how each puts out a different kind of call to saints or “children of the heavenly king.” (Creative thinking could also be employed to consider uses of this Watts hymn in conjunction with Psalm 137, particularly when using Watts's hymn with the refrain affixed by Robert Lowry, which is often used at its title—*We're Marching to Zion*.) In this short four-voice anthem, however, Coleridge-Taylor uses the organ to primarily double choral parts as the singers intone stanza ten of Psalm 97, which encourages God's people to hate what is evil, knowing that the Lord preserves the souls of His saints.

Break Forth Into Joy employs scriptural texts associated with Christmas, setting verses from Isaiah and Luke.

This anthem also includes prose from the popular Christmas Carol *O Come All Ye Faithful* and would be fitting for a service of Lessons and Carols, a service in which Coleridge-Taylor's *Magnificat* from his *Morning and Evening Service* setting could also find a home. Consequently, other portions of Coleridge-Taylor's service settings, such as the *Nunc Dimittis* and *Benedictus*, can be used throughout the Christmas season. On the other end of that spectrum, *Now Late on the Sabbath Day* fittingly finds its home during the Easter Triduum, Easter Sunday, or Eastertide, utilizing text from Matthew 28, which chronicles Christ's resurrection, post-resurrection activity, and great commission(ing).

A soprano solo is deployed to serve as the angel's answer to the women gathered at the sepulchre as part of the Matthew 28 passage. But one might also consider utilizing a soprano soloist for the beginning portion of this anthem, depending on the skill of the choir; and even still, doing so despite the skill level of the choir offers another opportunity to engage the soloist and soloists' overall as an organic feature of church choral singing. This anthem will be especially appropriate during services in which the music is mainly responsible for communicating the story of Christ's passion and resurrection, perhaps without explication. Coleridge-Taylor's setting of this text underscores what this author perceives as his concern about text intelligibility and storytelling, not unlike Coleridge-Taylor's sacred music mentioned before and hereafter.

In *Thee, O Lord* can also find a place among Easter Triduum services, particularly Good Friday or those telling Christ's passion, specifically his seven last sayings. Coleridge-Taylor uses the first stanza of Psalm 71 to begin this economical (in length and voices) anthem before incorporating stanzas two and six from Psalm 31. The latter Psalm employs the words that Jesus uttered in what church tradition regards as his final saying: “Into Thy hands, I commend my spirit.” It is worth noting that Psalm 31 and Psalm 71 begin the same way. With this parallel to Christ, this anthem can provide a contemplative choral reflection and response to Christ's final saying.

While certainly the least ontologically liturgical, Coleridge-Taylor's *The Atonement* can undoubtedly trace its roots to the church music tradition. Geoffrey Self

Table 1. Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Compositions for Liturgical Use

Title	Liturgical Use*
Break Forth Into Joy	Advent, Christmas
By the Rivers of Babylon	Lent, Ordinary time, Service of lament
In Thee, O Lord	Lent, Good Friday
Lift Up Your Heads	Advent, Epiphany, Palm Sunday, Ascension, Ordinary time, Introit, Call to worship
Now Late on Sabbath Day	Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter, Eastertide, Ascension
O Ye That Love the Lord	Lent, Ordinary time
The Lord Is My Strength	Easter, Eastertide, Ordinary time
"Jubilate Deo" from <i>Morning and Evening Service in F Major</i> , Op. 18	Ordinary Time, Matins, General use, Introit, Call to worship
"Magnificat" from <i>Morning and Evening Service in F Major</i> , Op. 18	Advent, Christmas, Christmastide, Evensong, Lessons and Carols
"Benedictus" from <i>Morning and Evening Service in F Major</i> , Op. 18	Epiphany, Matins, Christ the King Sunday, Communion
"Nunc dimittis" from <i>Morning and Evening Service in F Major</i> , Op. 18	Advent, Christmas, Christmastide, Evensong, Lessons and Carols, Dismissal/Benediction, Funeral/memorial services
"Te Deum" from <i>Morning and Evening Service in F Major</i> , Op. 18	Ordinary time, Lent**, Eastertide, Matins, Communion
<i>The Atonement</i>	Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday

*While Holy Week is regarded as part of Lent, it is treated separately in this table to add specificity of recommendation and to account for non-liturgical churches.

**Depending on the context, Te Deum settings may not be the most musically appropriate during this season, given their typically joyful settings.

regards *The Atonement* as an embryonic opera, costumed in the cantata and oratorio vein of Mendelssohn and Dvořák.¹⁰ It is well documented that the reception of *The Atonement* was catastrophic upon its premiere: the Three Choirs Festival, for which it was commissioned. This was in part due to the high “consumer” expectation set by Coleridge-Taylor’s *Hiawatha’s Wedding Feast*. However, a later performance at Royal Albert Hall was met with much gratification.¹¹ Coleridge-Taylor contended that his music (referencing his cantata) was misunderstood, at least in part because of his race.¹² Interestingly, John Stainer (who was thirty-five years Coleridge-Taylor’s senior) composed his passion, *The Crucifixion*, just under twenty years prior, which received similarly themed criticism. Regardless of why it was initially unpopular, it is still part of Coleridge-Taylor’s output of sacred music, though not composed for liturgical use; this is perhaps the missing nuance that critics of the music did not acknowledge. Given that it is labeled as a cantata and that Self (though he personally considers it a small-scale opera) affirms its place in the lineage of the cantata and oratorio tradition, this choral masterwork might also find a liturgical use, given the cantata and oratorio ties to formal liturgy, especially by the historical connection points to medieval liturgical dramas.

Absolutely, this work requires high levels of musical proficiency to execute skillfully and may very well be beyond the scope of many church choirs. Nevertheless, it is dynamic in its musical storytelling, as it provides a complete Passion narrative starting in the garden of Gethsemane, even giving musical voice to characters in the story who are often unrepresented. While breaking away from some conventions associated with works within this style/tradition, Coleridge-Taylor still employs historical precedents of a baritone-voiced Jesus, a turba or chorus representing the narrative Jews, and also maintains later developments that would have been common practice of the day—for example, an active chorus participating in the storytelling. If nothing else, excerpts from this masterwork can uniquely enliven present-day services of Christian worship. With this masterwork in conjunction with his anthems, church choral musicians have at their disposal treasures for creative liturgical use across denominational lines—

treasures and sounds for the sanctuary. **C**

NOTES

- ¹ Jeffrey Green, “Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: The Early Years” in *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Autumn 2001): 135.
- ² Novello published all of Coleridge-Taylor’s anthems except for *What Thou Hast Given Me*, *Lord Here I Tender*, which was published by Maxwell and Co. in 1905 and will not be considered in this article.
- ³ Zanaida Robles offers her DMA dissertation from this same vantage point—the question of/realization that Coleridge-Taylor’s sacred music is largely unperformed—and provides a valuable resource through her work in performing and analyzing Coleridge-Taylor corpus on anthems and service music. See Zanaida Noelle Robles, “The Sacred Choral Works of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor” (DMA diss., University of Southern California, 2014), 40.
- ⁴ Geoffrey Self, *The Hiawatha Man: The Life and Work of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor* (Hants: Scholar Press, 1988), 16.
- ⁵ Green, “The Early Years,” 143; Jeffrey Green, *Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, A Musical Life* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), 31.
- ⁶ Green, *A Musical Life*, 18.
- ⁷ Zanaida Noelle Robles, “The Sacred Choral Works of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor.”
- ⁸ Geoffrey Self, *The Hiawatha Man*, 140.
- ⁹ “Our History,” 3choirs, January 31, 2025, <https://3choirs.org/about/our-history>.
- ¹⁰ Self, *The Hiawatha Man*, 140.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 136.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 135.