

WEB REVIEW: *HYMNARY.ORG*—A COMPREHENSIVE INDEX OF HYMNS & HYMNALS
<http://www.hymnary.org/>

By David Mayo

There can be no doubt that *Hymnary.org: a comprehensive index of hymns and hymnals* lives up to its title of being “a comprehensive index of hymns and hymnals.” This notable online index of 5,183 hymnals and over one million published hymns is a project of the Christian Classics Ethereal Library and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship under the leadership of Harry Plantinga and Greg Scheer. Drawing upon important resources such as Julian’s *Dictionary of Hymnology*, hymnal handbooks, and the entire contents of the *Dictionary of North American Hymnology*, the site is indeed impressive and comprehensive. As one explores the website and discovers what it has to offer, it becomes clear that this resource is much more than a typical website of hymnals and hymns. Significant information about the hymnals and hymns is electronically linked to particular denominations, melody searches, worship music from (a few) publishers, and lectionary aids, which makes *Hymnary.org: a comprehensive index of hymns and hymnals* an online hymn and worship music database for worship leaders, church musicians, hymnologists, and amateur hymn lovers.

While the homepage is visually clean and organized, the website itself is deep and wide. It will take the user diligence and time to fully discover what is available. To give an example of this, one of the many subject areas available is called “lectionary.” It is an amazing journey exploring hymns and hymnals in connection to the lectionary in this website. Under the main heading of “Browse,” “Lectionary Week” is one of three subheadings (or just “Lectionary” under another “Browse” drop-down). Choose “Lectionary” and a convenient monthly calendar comes up, which allows the user to select any date of interest. When a date is selected, the general lectionary year (A,B,C), the particular liturgical season, and scripture texts for that day are given. Under the scripture lessons are several suggested titles of hymns chosen by one of the editors. The hymn titles are hyperlinked to give basic information about the hymn text, background information about the hymn with scripture references that correspond to that hymn, music suggestions from sacred publishers connected to the website, and the possibility of exploring the hymn further with four other tabs from which to choose—“related tunes,” “media,” “products,” and “instances.” The “related tunes” tab lists related hymn tunes with the possibility of hearing a rendering of the melody. (It would have been helpful to offer some explanation about the criteria used for deciding what a related tune was.) Clicking on one of the related hymn tunes gives the user information about the hymn tune with the chance to explore “related texts” to other hymns that are similar. The next tab, “media,” has various media representations of the hymn or hymn tune that include a visual rendering of the tune on a music staff and/or an audible rendering of the hymn tune and a Sibelious Scorch (a free Internet plugin that allows the user to view, play, and transpose music in the browser window). The next tab, “products,” offers hymn arrangements in various forms (organ, piano, handbell, vocal, etc.) from the few music publishers that are connected to the website. These are music suggestions that go along with the selected hymn. There are several filters to help narrow the music search to give the desired results. The final tab in this subsection of the lectionary page is “instances,” which gives the name of hymnal(s) and the hymn number in that particular hymnal. In addition, an icon of the media that are available for that hymn is listed with each hymnal in this area. The media options for the hymn offer the possibility of text information, tune information, text, score audio, and page scan. One should keep in mind that “Lectionary” is just one of three subareas in “Browse”; there are five other main subject boxes.

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One of the more interesting subject areas of those five is “melody search.” It does exactly as the name implies—search (hymn) melodies. In this area, there is an electronic keyboard with rhythm and rest icons so the user can compose a melody to search in the database. Once the melody has been composed and submitted, the database retrieves similar melodies from the vast library of hymn melodies that appear to be a match. Information for each hymn melody includes the tune name, composer, and hymn instance (musically showing the hymn tune on a music score).

As illustrated, there is a wealth of information in this website. It is ironic that this is the website’s greatest asset as well as its greatest deficit. The depth and scope of information on hymns and hymnals included in this site is nothing short of impressive, and the ways of exploring that information are numerous. However, finding the best way to search with those various options can be challenging. There are times when it is difficult to know the best way to conduct a search or which area takes one to what information. For instance, does one use the “Browse” drop down at the top of the page, or does one use the “Browse” box in the middle? Both have the same topics just arranged in a slightly different order or they are titled something slightly different.

Besides the cautionary note mentioned above, there are a couple of small matters that, while not detracting from the wonderful information available in this database, are worth mentioning. The first matter is mentioned in the spirit of encouragement. As a church musician, I hope that the website might be able to expand the publisher options to include more than five music publishers. The publishers can be found in the product area (or “store” in other areas), which not only allows the user to find hymn arrangements from those publishers but also gives music suggestions on the hymn being searched. This is a great function and no small matter. It would be even more useful if there were more publishers from different denominations or traditions.

One subject area was perplexing. The “Widget” includes an “iPad application” with other areas to explore hymns and hymnals like a “search graph,” a “hymnody map,” a “text comparison,” and an “advanced search” that can be found elsewhere on the website. Without getting too technical, it is unclear how this page is a Widget page, particularly as we understand that word in today’s technological age. The page has helpful information, but the general category is not particularly helpful to those wondering how to best search the homepage.

Nevertheless, these are just small matters that should not take away from the impressive quality of the website. In fact, there are other good areas that deserve mention, like the forum area. Here hymnary users can ask and answer questions about hymns, hymnals, or the hymnary.org website, encourage suggestions for improvements, donate or trade hymnals, ask about editorial standards, and learn more about hymnary.org and offer feedback. All in all, I recommend this website to those that use or want to learn more about hymns and hymnals for worship and/or research. Searching the website may take a little getting used to but it is well worth the effort because it will be interesting, informative, and helpful.

