

Correlations Between the Formal Characteristics of Trans-Atlantic Folk Hymns and Cultural Expression

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In the 1930s, American scholars of sacred music first identified a particular type of hymn tune that reflected the folk traditions of its area of origin. Labeling these pieces folk hymns, they first associated them with southern sects and denominations that embraced shape-note notation, but later expanded this understanding to include other regions, denominations, and notational systems.

Folk hymns in America display a spectrum of cultural expression that reveals a greater trans-Atlantic history. In particular, folk hymns among English-language denominations differ in origin and process than their German-language counterparts. Among English-language groups many reflect oral dissemination, Germans individual expression based upon printed sources. However, both cultural traditions include tune families, or variant melodic and harmonic settings of related melodies.

The paper discusses the correlation between cultural expression and formal compositional processes through an in-depth study of two folk hymn tune families, a Scottish sacred contrafact and a German chorale tune, as documented in my database “Southern and Western Sacred Music and Influential Sources (1700-1870).” The results of these two inquiries reveal cultural differences in approach and aesthetic, and illustrate the complex relationship between formal elements such as compositional process and origin, form, and melodic variation, and broader cultural expression.