

# Sing Ye Praise

## With Understanding

by Candace Hoeksema

Before we can understand what singing is, we must know what it is *not*. Singing is *not* just a good activity with which to begin the day. Singing is *not* an optional activity for a Christian child. Singing is *not* just an enjoyable aesthetic experience for those who sing well. In order to teach our children what singing is and how as Christians we should sing, we have to put forth effort continually to show them how important it is. I would like to look at the topic under four main headings:

- I. Teaching *about* singing
- II. Teaching *of* singing
- III. Teaching *through* singing
- IV. Teaching *critical* singing

In order to lay the foundation for good singing, we have to be certain that our children know what singing is and what their spiritual attitude toward it should be. First and foremost, they must realize that singing is a God-centered activity. God is the audience of our singing, just as He is of our prayers. This means that we must sing as reverently as we pray. We must also participate actively. Singing is not a time to sit back and let our minds wander. We have to think about and understand the words we sing.

Children can best learn this reverent, God-centered attitude not by talking about it, but by practicing it. Many *Psalter* numbers speak of praising and exalting God's name through singing. Take, for example, the versification of Psalm 92 in the first stanza of *Psalter* number 251:

It is good to sing Thy praises  
And to thank Thee, O Most High,  
Showing forth Thy lovingkindness  
When the morning lights the sky.  
It is good when night is falling  
Of Thy faithfulness to tell,  
While with sweet melodious praises  
Songs of adoration swell.

Joyful songs like these abound in the *Psalter*. We can point out their words to our children, and then lead them in enthusiastic worship through song.

Lest hymns be forgotten, we can find many of them that address God in the same reverent, praise-filled terms. "Now Thank We All Our God," "Oh Let Every Tongue Adore Thee," and "Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing" are just a few examples here.

Those songs we just looked at express joy and thanksgiving. Children should learn, however, that singing is appropriate and is also a source of comfort in times of sadness. Notice *Psalter* number 240, in which the songwriter pours out his trouble and sadness to the Lord:

Thou hast brought me down to darkness,  
'Neath Thy wrath I am oppressed;  
All the billows of affliction  
Overwhelm my soul distressed.  
Thou hast made my friends despise me,  
And companionless I go,  
Bound, and helpless in my bondage,  
Pining in my bitter woe.

With songs like this one, we can teach our children to turn to God in their times of sadness, seeking solace both in the words and the music.

Children can also learn the value and importance of singing by seeing the high priority that people in the Bible gave to it. It is amazing how often God's people worshipped Him through song. I will cite just a few instances: Miriam in Exodus 15, and Deborah in Judges 5 sang songs of victory after battle. At the dedication of the temple in II Chronicles 5:12, 13 the glory of the Lord filled the temple because of the singing of the Levites. Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn at the Passover (Matthew 26:30). Paul and Silas sang praises to God in the Philippian prison (Acts 16:25). Singing will be important in heaven. We read of the song of the hundred and forty and four thousand (Rev. 14:3), and of the Song of Moses and the Lamb (Rev. 15:3). We can make students aware of these Scriptural references to singing incidentally, when they come up in Bible study; or we can make a point of reading and discussing some of them in daily devotions.

Finally, in our daily singing, we should remind students over and over that singing demands active participation by everyone. Everyone has a voice, and Christians have a responsibility to use it as a gift from God. Emphasize the availability of the voice. It is the handiest instrument there is, and no one has to learn any complicated fingering for it.

In addition to learning that singing is important, children should also

learn that there is a proper way to sing. As teachers, we can do our part in teaching them the basics of good singing. Children should be reminded (not nagged), at first on a daily basis, about proper posture, tone, and pronunciation, so that good singing habits soon become second nature. It is important here that the teacher explains *why* good posture, for example, is necessary for good singing.

Children should be aware of several of the more “mechanical” aspects of singing. The first is *posture*. Students should sit (or stand) straight, with their feet flat on the floor. Explain why they cannot sing all hunched over or slumped in their seats.

Especially in the lower grades, work on *tone*. Get students to open their mouths more than just a slit by having them see how many fingers they can fit in them. Relaxed jaws and throats will also help them hit high notes much more easily. In this connection, watch the range of songs for younger children. If at all possible, try to keep this range between middle C and the D, nine notes above it.

As far as *pronunciation* is concerned, provide some very basic guidelines. These may include not hitting the “r” sound too hard, not hissing on “s” sounds, and being sure to add final consonants, especially “d” and “t.” At least with younger children, I would not become technical at this point. Strive for clear pronunciation with an open mouth. With some students, achieving that is quite an accomplishment.

Even at a very young age, children can learn to *interpret* the songs they sing — and this interpretation will get them to pay more attention to a song’s words. When the opportunity comes up, ask children to compare the moods of two songs like these:

By Babel’s streams we sat and wept,  
For mem’ry still to Zion clung;  
The winds alone our harpstrings swept,  
That on the drooping willows hung.

*Psalter number 379:1*

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!  
All that breathe, Jehovah praise;  
Let the voices God hath given  
Joyful anthems to Him raise.

*Psalter number 409:5*

Almost without being told, children will sing the first song quietly and prayerfully and the second one boisterously and zestfully.

Also by way of interpretation, let children find the climax of a song and build up to it. “Low in the Grave He Lay,” and “Oh, Come All Ye Faithful” are good examples here. Children also like the question-

answer relationship in a hymn like "Nothing but the Blood of Jesus." Capitalize on interpretation by having one group sing the question and the other the answer. Another good way of getting children to pay attention to the words and to interpret the song is to read through the words first, notice where there are no commas, and then sing it that way.

As far as *notation* is concerned, depending on the age of the children and the musical ability of the particular group, some basics could be taught. Younger children can simply follow the notes to see if they go up or down. They can learn some simple counting, mainly by clapping beat and rhythm. Older children who know some notes can be encouraged in part singing.

I would not over-emphasize this or any of the technical aspects of singing. Rather, I would emphasize first the *joy* of singing. Prepare students to be enthusiastic singers of God's praise throughout their lives. Interest in skills will follow if enthusiasm is there. Above all, maintain that enthusiasm, and do it by making singing an interesting experience. Here are just a few suggestions that will keep singing from becoming a humdrum activity: Occasionally teach a new *Psalter* number or hymn by rote. Have a room theme song — for a month or for the year. Sing a cappella at times. Have various smaller groups sing by themselves on songs that have a repeated line or a refrain. Teach a descant to a song.

Singing can also be a kind of tool, and in this way, we can teach through the use of song. We do not have to limit singing to the short session of *Psalter* or hymn-singing done in most classrooms every morning. Singing provides a good break in the middle of the morning or at the beginning of the afternoon. We can take time out to sing some God-centered songs at special times. Here are some practical suggestions: Begin the day with this morning song, sung to the tune of Tallis' Cannon:

Awake, my soul, and with the sun  
Thy daily stage of duty run;  
Shake off dull sloth and joyful rise  
To pay thy morning sacrifice.

Similarly, we can end the day with a closing song like this one, sung to the tune of *Psalter* number 403:

Another day of school is past,  
And we must say good-bye,  
And so, good-bye, our merry mates  
And teacher, dear, good-bye.

(continued on next page)

Oh may the Lord take care of you,  
May He take care of me,  
Till we again together meet,  
From evil keep us free.

Sing the words of the Lord's Prayer, perhaps when the children come in after lunch. Or sing other prayer songs, such as this one, set to the tune of *Psalter* number 8:

Jesus, high in glory,  
Lend a listening ear,  
When we bow before Thee,  
Children's praises hear.

Save us, Lord, from sinning;  
Watch us day by day;  
Help us now to love Thee;  
Take our sins away.

It goes without saying that we sing special songs at holiday times. Children seem to know and like Christmas carols; but at least in my experience, their knowledge stops there. They know very few Lent and Easter songs, and their knowledge of other holidays, such as Ascension Day and Pentecost, is sketchy — let alone knowing songs for them. We can do much to correct that.

We can also sing in connection with other studies. Science, especially nature studies, lends itself well to the integration of song. Several hymns speak in general of creation and of God as Creator. These include "For the Beauty of the Earth," "This is my Father's World," and "All Things Bright and Beautiful." Some *Psalter* numbers also mention specific aspects of creation. For an astronomy unit, number 403 is excellent. Stanza 2 reads in part: "Our Lord is great, He calls by name/ And counts the stars of night." There are many more songs, both hymns and *Psalters*, that could be used here.

With history, also, the opportunity to sing rises frequently. We can bring in the songs of the past, such as the Gregorian chants or the hymns of the Reformation.

Finally, we should teach our students to make careful, God-centered evaluations of the songs they sing. This applies first to hymns and Christian folk music. They should ask themselves if a particular hymn is solidly Reformed. I have trouble singing the words of such hymns as "In Christ there is no East or West," "Come to the Savior Now," and "Throw out the Lifeline."

Many hymns also are either very self-centered, rather than being

God-centered, or very trite and sentimental. I put such hymns as "That will be Glory for Me," or "Jesus bids us Shine" in the first category, and "Whispering Hope" or "The Church in the Wildwood" in the second. I find nothing wrong as such with hymns like these, but I would certainly point out their emphasis to the children and downplay them. Our children should sing the best that is available to them.

More importantly, I think that it is necessary that our children learn to evaluate the world's songs. Especially as children get older, they are bombarded with all kinds of music — rock, country, jazz — and its availability and the pressure their peers put on them to listen to it are often too much to withstand. We should discuss this music with them, both from a spiritual and artistic point of view. Then they will be able to make critical, independent evaluations of it, and not be swayed by the fact that "everybody listens to it."

I think there is a right and a wrong way to go about this discussion. Children and young people will not accept pat answers. They are too smart for that. They will not unquestioningly accept some of the objections I have heard. One such objection is that this music is wrong because it has a beat. Beat in itself is not wrong. Many classical pieces have a very definite beat. Another objection that does not wash is that those who compose and perform rock or country music lead immoral lives. Young people will point to the immoral lives of classical composers such as Wagner or Chopin or Liszt, and ask why we can listen to their music. We cannot say either that the lyrics are always bad. They may not be very uplifting at times, but they are not always down-right immoral. One more objection that is not always true is that these songs are not music, but just noise. Especially with country music, and with some rock, the music can be quite pleasing.

Rather than throwing these kinds of pat answers at them, we have to lead students to see that the world's music, especially rock, involves the combination of many factors. In her article in the November, 1981, *Beacon Lights*, Terri Garvelink lists some of the characteristics of rock music, and it is from her list that I draw:

1. Rock has an incessant, driving, physical beat that is designed to pound through and arouse a person.
2. From an artistic point of view, the vocal quality of this music is poor. It more often involves howling, growling, screaming, and moaning than it does singing.
3. It is designed for extremely high levels of volume, at which point it deteriorates into noise.
4. Very often, the lyrics are objectionable. Rock music often deals

with drug abuse, the occult or Satan worship, and homosexuality. Country music centers around different, but no less objectionable subjects, such as gambling, drinking, and cheating.

It is true that some country and rock songs have none of these characteristics. They have a beat, but it is not pronounced. The vocal quality is excellent. They need not be played loudly, and in fact may be quite soothing. The lyrics are not objectionable. However, these songs are few and far between, especially as regards lyrics, and in order to listen to them, we will have to wade through a lot of trash.

Christian young people in a quiet, rational discussion should be made to see that it is a combination of all these factors — beat, volume, type of singing, and lyrics, that makes the world's music objectionable to a Christian. With the proper guidance, they will want to substitute good songs for that kind of trash. But they will only do that if they have positive guidance and good examples to follow. Parents and teachers have to provide both. In all our children's musical experiences, I would emphasize the positive — not what *not* to listen to and what *not* to sing, but what *to* listen to, and what *to* sing. Teach them to look for the *best* music, music that is worthwhile for them to listen to and sing. ■ ■

## **One Heaping Cup of Love; Mix with Firmness and Understanding**

by Eunice Kuiper

Many times while I taught junior high classes, I listened to this comment from other teachers and parents: "How do you dare teach those big kids? Isn't it hard to keep them under control?"

My answer would often simply be: "I enjoy my junior high classes."

But these questions and the poor control over junior high and high school students that we sometimes witness makes us often wonder if these children change for the worse as they approach the junior high years. It is all too easy for teachers to shrug off the bad behavior with