

Why Should The Devil Have All The Best Tunes?

Who asked this question?

I have always understood it to be a saying of William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, but a quick look at various web pages and we find that the saying is variously attributed to Martin Luther, George Whitefield, Charles Wesley, John Wesley and Rowland Hill (an evangelical preacher loosely connected with the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion) as well as to William Booth.

Further searching may have named more!

The first performance of the five Act semi-opera "King Arthur" (libretto: John Dryden, music: Henry Purcell) was given in London in 1691. In the final act, a soprano in the role of Venus sings the aria "Fairest Isle".

This aria became famous and remained extremely popular in the next Century.

Fairest isle, all isles excelling,
Seat of pleasure and of love
Venus here will choose her dwelling,
And forsake her Cyprian grove.
Cupid from his fav'rite nation
Care and envy will remove;
Jealousy, that poisons passion,
And despair, that dies for love.

The aria is still popular today – go to YouTube and you will find it recorded by many, many artists!

Look at the first line of Dryden's libretto – "Fairest Isle, all isles excelling" – does it remind you of another familiar first line?

"Love divine, all loves excelling" was written by Charles Wesley in the same style as the Dryden text.

When first published, John Wesley used the original Purcell melody for the hymn – a melody that was apparently called "Westminster". (Unfortunately I have been unable to trace any current existence of this tune).

Compare the opening texts:

Fairest isle, all isles **excelling**,
Seat of pleasure and of love
Venus here will choose her **dwelling**,
And forsake her Cyprian grove.

Love divine, all loves **excelling**,
Joy of heaven, to earth come down,
Fix in us Thy humble **dwelling**,
All Thy faithful mercies crown:

We can see that Wesley was writing a "Christian Parody" of the popular song.

"Love divine" has become one of the most favourite hymns of all time and three stanzas appear, unaltered, in all our hymn books. There was a fourth stanza – the original second verse – but it was not included as early as the publication of Wesley's hymns in 1779.

The words of that additional stanza:

Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit,
Into every troubled breast,
Let us all in Thee inherit,
Let us find that second rest:
Take away our power of sinning,
Alpha and Omega be,
End of faith as its beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty.

Submitted by Eric Brown