

HYMN PERFORMANCE

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"Seek Ye First"

Before the so-called worship wars, before I had even heard the term "contemporary Christian music," I remember singing "Seek Ye First" at church camp. Each evening, we gathered for worship in the Pavilion. Sitting on picnic tables in front of a big stone fireplace, we began the service with about twenty minutes of singing, either led with a guitar or unaccompanied. (After all, it was a Mennonite camp!) That camp singing was my introduction to what we now think of as "contemporary Christian music," or CCM¹—and it has fed me all my life.

When I was first asked to write this column, I decided almost immediately that I would include a song from the CCM genre. It took me some time, however, to finally settle on a specific song. I chose "Seek Ye First" as a representative CCM piece for several reasons. First of all, it has stood the test of time. It has made its way into several denomination hymnals (see Table 1), and despite being written over thirty years ago, it is still on CCLI's list of top 100 songs.² In addition, the piece has several things to recommend it: the text is based on scripture (Matthew 6:33), the form is balanced (two eight-bar phrases), the harmonic progression is logical, and the melody is easily accessible. Finally, I have used this piece successfully in both "traditional" as well as "contemporary" services—in short, I know that it "works" as a congregational song.

Rags to Riches

Karen Lafferty, both composer and text author of "Seek Ye First," was born in Alamogordo, New Mexico in 1948. She earned a Bachelor of Music Education at Eastern New Mexico University in 1970 and also had additional private study. In 1971, Lafferty decided to change her career path; she became worship leader and concert artist at Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa, California.³ The next part of her story sounds a bit like a fairy-tale:

Feeling a call to live what she believed, Karen Lafferty left her job as an entertainer to devote her life to full-time Christian service. In 1971, while in the midst of struggles to pay her monthly bills, she attended a Bible study that coincidentally was based on Matthew 6:33, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God . . ." She went home, picked up her guitar, and set the words to music. First published by Maranatha! Music and recorded on its Praise album (1972), "Seek Ye First" launched Lafferty into full-time music ministry and now the royalties provide a considerable portion of the support for her missionary work.⁴

"Seek Ye First" originally appeared with only one stanza. The second stanza and the "Alleluia" descant were included in *Songs for Celebration*, 1980.⁵

Which Version?

I was pleased to discover that "Seek Ye First" is included in several current hymnals.⁶ However, I was surprised to find that there was considerable variation among the settings (see Table 1). In the sixteen

Table 1. "Seek Ye First": Differences among hymnals

Hymnal	Tune	Verses	C/D	U/H	Chords	St. 1	St. 2	St. 3
Baptist Hymnal	LAFFERTY	2	none	H	no	His	ye	n/a
Chalice Hymnal	SEEK YE FIRST	2	D	H	yes	God's	ye	n/a
Common Praise	SEEK YE FIRST	2	C	U	yes	God's	you	n/a
Gather Comprehensive, 2nd ed.	SEEK YE FIRST	3	C	U	no	His	ye	man shall
Hymnal 1982	SEEK YE FIRST	2	C	U	no	its	ye	n/a
Hymnal: A Worshipbook	SEEK YE FIRST	2	C	U	yes	his	ye	n/a
Journeysongs, 2nd ed.	none given	3	C	H	no	his	ye	you do
Moravian Hymnal	LAFFERTY	3	D	H	no	his	you	we do
Presbyterian Hymnal	LAFFERTY	2	D	H	yes	His	ye	n/a
Psalter Hymnal	LAFFERTY	3	D	H	yes	his	you	we do
The Book of Praise	SEEK YE FIRST	3	none	U	yes	his	ye	we do
United Methodist Hymnal	SEEK YE	2	D	H	yes	his	ye	n/a
Voices United	LAFFERTY	3	D	H	yes	God's	you	we do
With One Voice	LAFFERTY	3	D	H	yes	its	you	we do
Worship, 3rd. ed.	SEEK YE FIRST	2	C	U	no	his	ye	n/a
Worship & Rejoice	none given	2	D	H	yes	its	ye	n/a

C/D—canon or descant; U/H—unison or four-part; St. 1, St. 2, St. 3,—text variations in stanzas one, two and three, respectively

books that I surveyed, three different tune names are used: LAFFERTY (six occurrences), SEEK YE FIRST (seven occurrences), and SEEK YE (one occurrence). Two hymnals do not list any tune name. Both four-part and unison settings are used. In nine books, three stanzas are included; the others have two stanzas. In those books which list chord symbols, there is variation in the chords used. The most unusual difference I found was between those books that designate the tune as a two-part canon (mostly unison settings) and those that indicate a descant (mostly four-part settings). In fact, the descant and the second part of the canon are the same melody. In one book (*Common Praise*), the descant/2nd canon part is printed as a refrain following the stanzas.

I recognize that the text of "Seek Ye First" may be problematic for some, in part because of its odd mixture of modern and archaic language (for example, both "ye" and "you" appear in the first stanza). Several hymnals have made small alterations to the text to make it more consistent, as well as more inclusive. In some books, "his righteousness" in stanza one has been replaced by "God's righteousness" or "its righteousness" ("its" referring to the kingdom of God).⁷ In stanza two, "ye shall find" is sometimes replaced by "you shall find." In those books which include the third stanza, the original "man shall not live" is almost always replaced by "we do not live;" in one hymnal "you do not live" is used instead. My hope is that an acceptable version of the text can be found among these several choices.

Performance Options

One of the reasons I continue to use "Seek Ye First" is that I find it to be amazingly versatile. It can be rendered very effectively in a wide variety of styles. Listed below are several suggestions for performance; hopefully these ideas can serve as a springboard for further creativity.

Play the four-part setting "as is," either on the organ or the piano. When using organ as the accompanying instrument, I suggest tying beats one and two, and beats three and four, when there are repeated notes in the base line (see measures 3, 10, 11, and 14). This produces a half-note bass line, with occasional moving quarter notes, which will help emphasize the 2/2 meter. Organists can also take advantage of colorful stops to solo out the melody and/or the descant.

Sing the four-part setting unaccompanied, supported by the choir if needed. I have found this treatment to work particularly well as either a call or response to prayer. I encourage my singers to "ear out" their own harmonies, in addition to using the printed page.

When the piano provides the accompaniment, use accompaniment figurations that are idiomatic to the instrument. For example, use arpeggiation in the bass and play just the melody with the right hand. Make the melody "sing" as only the piano can do. A word of

caution about arpeggios: avoid extensive use of an Alberti bass (root-fifth-third-fifth on eighth notes); this tends to sound wooden or mechanical. Instead, play the root, fifth, then the third above (see musical example). As an alternative, the right hand can play all the notes of the chord, with the melody on top, while the left hand plays half notes (typically the root of the chord, or a chord tone that will result in a pleasing bass line). If the singers are very confident and know the piece well, the pianist can simply play (or "comp") half-note chords.⁸

For informal or more intimate settings, such as a small group meeting, use guitar alone. The piece was originally composed on guitar, so it works very well with this simple, folk-like treatment. A basic strum, played in a steady, rhythmic manner, will produce a more upbeat feeling, while a quiet picking pattern will be more contemplative in mood. For larger settings, use guitar with other instruments, such as piano.⁹

Improvise an interlude for use between stanzas. This is not as difficult as it may at first sound. In jazz and blues (and to some degree, rock) performance practice, improvisation usually occurs over a fixed chord progression, commonly known as "the changes" for a piece. The chords and the number of measures in a piece determine the shape and length of the improvisation. Jazz soloing is simply "looping" through a particular piece several times. *Seek Ye First* is a sixteen-bar form (or eight-bar, if written in 4/4). The chords used are the same ones that a guitarist would play.¹⁰ The harmonic rhythm is fairly slow, usually one chord per bar, which makes it easy to improvise over. The simplest method is to play a half-note bass line, similar to the one described above. The right hand plays whole or half notes, using chord tones. A pleasing melody can still be created using this technique. The next step is to use a more elaborate bass line, perhaps incorporating arpeggios, or passing quarter notes. The right hand also plays a more elaborate melody, but one that still "fits" the chord progression. The musical example shows a rather simple improvisation in this style. Depending on the harmonic sophistication of the player, more complex chord changes can be incorporated on subsequent repetitions. However, good taste should always guide one's choices; it is important to use a harmonic "palette" that is appropriate to the tune, which in this case is a simple, folk-like melody.

Use this piece during Communion. Depending on the practice of your congregation during distribution, "Seek Ye First" can be played as an instrumental solo, or used as one of the communion hymns. If an instrumental version is called for, this is a perfect opportunity to try a more extended improvisation.¹¹

As a representative CCM piece, "Seek Ye First" obviously works well with a band. A basic complement of instruments would include guitar, bass, and drums. Piano and/or synthesizer could fill out the sound. In this setting, band members play using the chord sym-

Seek Ye First

Descant

Al - le - lu - ia,

D F#m G D

1. Seek ye first the king - dom of God,
2. Ask, and it shall be giv - en un - to you;

Al - le - lu - ia,

G D Em7 A7

and seek his and righ - teous ness,
and seek and ye shall find;

Al - le - lu - ia,

D F#m G D

and knock, all these things shall be add - ed un - to you.
and the door shall be o - pened un - to you.

Al - le - lu - ia!

G D A7sus A7 D

Al - le - lu, al - le - lu - ia!

WORDS and MUSIC: Karen Lafferty, 1972

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SEEK YE
Irr.

Seek Ye First

Music by Karen Lafferty
piano arrangement by Eileen M. Johnson

Musical notation for measures 1-4. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is 3/4. The melody is in the treble clef, and the bass line is in the bass clef. Chords are indicated above the staff: D, F#m, G, D.

Musical notation for measures 5-8. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is 3/4. The melody is in the treble clef, and the bass line is in the bass clef. Chords are indicated above the staff: G, D, Em, A7.

Musical notation for measures 9-12. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is 3/4. The melody is in the treble clef, and the bass line is in the bass clef. Chords are indicated above the staff: D, F#m, G, D.

Musical notation for measures 13-16. The key signature is D major (two sharps) and the time signature is 3/4. The melody is in the treble clef, and the bass line is in the bass clef. Chords are indicated above the staff: G, D, A7, D.

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bols as their guide, rather than the printed notes. The keyboard player normally comps chords (as described above), while the guitarist can play rhythm or lead. Because of the text, it is most appropriate to play "Seek Ye First" as a ballad. This "feel" is set up by the drummer and bass player. The bass player can play an appropriate line using the rhythm of dotted half note, quarter note, on root tones. For a quieter sound, the drummer can use brushes instead of sticks.¹² A meditative piece like this one provides an opportunity for band members to exercise musical sensitivity and restraint. It is important not to overdo, but rather to evoke a quiet mood that draws the congregation into prayer. When my band plays "Seek Ye First," we use the last four bars as the introduction, sometimes with only the piano playing, sometimes with piano and guitar. The entire ensemble sings the first verse in unison. Depending on the amount of music we need, we will either sing the piece through, with an instrumental solo between verse one and two, or, for a longer version, we will have the instrumental solo after verse two, then repeat verse one. We use the descant for the final verse, and end with an instrumental tag of the last four bars, mirroring the introduction. We never play above mezzo-forte.

In Conclusion

I realize that the choice to include a song from the CCM genre probably elicited groans (or worse) from some readers. However, I believe there are several good reasons to include a CCM piece. First, I think it is foolish to simply ignore this trend in congregational song. While recognizing that some (perhaps much) of this music has a limited lifespan, and that the CCM industry is clearly driven by consumer economics, at the same time this music *is* what is being sung in many of our churches. We cannot critique well what we do not know or understand.¹³ Second, I believe it is possible to find good, usable material in *every* genre of congregational song.¹⁴ As worship leaders, we have a responsibility to find the best available from *all* sources. No one wants to eat meat and potatoes at every single meal. Finally, I know from repeated personal experience, both as a worshipper and a worship leader, how powerfully this music can touch people. On different occasions, my band members have shared how a particular song perfectly captures where they are in their faith journey, whether the song is calling them to deeper faith, challenging them to greater discipleship, providing comfort during a difficult moment, or simply expressing "Yeah God!" It is this experience, more than any other reason, which validates this material for me. When I sang "Seek Ye First" around the campfire, my heart was touched. When I sing or play this song now, my spirit continues to be nourished. My prayer is that others too will find at least one good pasture in the CCM landscape, and likewise will be richly fed.

Notes

¹A variety of terms are used to describe contemporary Christian congregational song, including "praise and worship music," "praise songs," and "contemporary Christian music" (CCM). While recognizing that all these terms have their limitations, for the purpose of convenience, I will use CCM in this article.

²See http://www.ccli.com/ccli_services/SongSelect06/index.cfm (accessed June 28, 2006). Unfortunately, this section of the CCLI (Christian Copyright Licensing International) website is only available to CCLI license holders that have subscribed to the SongSelect search service.

³Carlton R. Young, *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 578.

⁴Marilyn Kay Stulken, *With One Voice Reference Companion* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), p. 122.

⁵Young, p. 578.

⁶The following hymnals were surveyed: *Baptist Hymnal*, *Chalice Hymnal*, *Common Praise*, *Gather Comprehensive*, 2nd ed., *Hymnal 1982*, *Hymnal: A Worshipbook*, *Journeysongs*, 2nd ed., *Moravian Hymnal*, *Presbyterian Hymnal*, *Psalter Hymnal*, *The Book of Praise*, *United Methodist Hymnal*, *Voices United*, *Worship*, 3rd ed., and *Worship and Rejoice*. "Seek Ye First" also appears in the Lutheran supplement, *With One Voice*. However, it is not included in the *New Century Hymnal*.

⁷The NRSV translation of Matthew 6:33 reads: "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." However, a footnote lists "its" as an alternative for "his."

⁸When playing in this style, it is customary to use the chord symbols, rather than the printed notes. Chords should still be voiced so there is smooth voice leading from one chord to the next.

⁹When using a guitar in a larger room, always be sure to mic the instrument properly. I have been to numerous services where I could see the guitarist playing quite energetically, but due to poor mic'ing I heard very little!

¹⁰Note that there are variations in the chords used among the various hymnal settings. As part of preparing for an improvisation, the performer must decide which chords (or set of changes) s/he will use. It is helpful to consider several options before deciding on a final version. The principles of common practice harmony should always serve as a guide.

¹¹For those more comfortable with printed music, Douglas Wagner has a setting of "Seek Ye First" which also incorporates the Pachelbel Canon. This may sound strange, but it is very tastefully done. This arrangement is available for either organ or piano from Hope Publishing Company, Carol Stream, IL: *Seek Ye First: Praise and Worship for Organ* (code 8086), and *Seek Ye First: Praise and Worship for Piano* (code 8118).

¹²It is beyond the scope of this column to describe a "ballad" drumming pattern in detail. Most experienced drummers will know what to play after being told what the rhythmic feel (i.e., style) of a given piece is. As an alternative, one can tell the drummer to "play this piece like you play *Song X*," with *Song X* being a piece in a similar style.

¹³For a discussion of various issues related to CCM, see Margaret Leask, "Contemporary Christian Music: Religious Song in an Electronic Era," Kenneth R. Hull, "The Challenge of the Praise Chorus," Robin Knowles Wallace, "Praise and Worship Music: Looking at Language," and Terry W. York, "Add One Hymn: Recipe for CCM and 'Modern Worship' Congregational Song," *The Hymn* 55 (July 2004), pp. 7-33.

¹⁴For a thorough and well thought-out methodology for selecting CCM, see Terri Bocklund McLean, *New Harmonies: Choosing Contemporary Music for Worship*, (n.p.: The Alban Institute, 1998). McLean uses several criteria in her evaluation, such as: musical form, musical style, quality of text, theological content, compositional techniques used, appropriateness/relationship to the worship theme, placement in the service, and appropriateness for a given congregation. Another very helpful resource for choosing seasonal or lectionary-based CCM is Terri Bocklund McLean and Rob Glover, compilers, *Choosing Contemporary Music: Seasonal, Topical, Lectionary Indexes* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2000).

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