

# HYMN PERFORMANCE

EILEEN M. JOHNSON

## *Hymn Performance: “I-to Loh Isn’t There”*

A few summers ago at a Hymn Society conference, I happened to have an informal conversation with Jorge Lockward<sup>1</sup> as we were walking to a meal. Jorge is from Latin America, and our talk turned to global song. I confessed to Jorge that sometimes, I was reluctant to lead global song in my local congregation because I wanted to “do it right” and I wasn’t sure if I could. I wanted to be respectful of the various cultures represented in world music by presenting the material using appropriate performance practice. I said, “I can’t lead an African song the way Patrick Matsikenyiri can, or an Asian song the way I-to Loh<sup>2</sup> can.” Jorge replied, “Yes, but on Sunday morning, I-to Loh isn’t there—you are.”

What a word of grace—but also of challenge! I may not preach like Peter, and I may not pray like Paul, but I *do* happen to be the one who has been given the task of leading congregational song at my local church. I would guess that the same is true for many of you. How can we, in our local place, lead global song effectively? Let me begin to answer this question by saying that I believe global song gives us an opportunity to open a window (or maybe even a door) to another way of looking at the world—and another way of looking at God. This is especially true when the music is non-Western. When we sing these songs, we can give our congregation at least a taste (if not a mouthful) of something “other.” One reason for providing this experience is to remind members of the congregation that they are part of something much, much bigger than just their own local parish—they are participating with Christians as far away as Zimbabwe or Taiwan in giving expression to our universal song of praise to God. Singing songs of the world church gives us a chance to “draw the circle wide.”

Practically speaking, what does this mean? I think one of the best ways to help give the experience of “other” is to adjust our performance practice accordingly. I recognize that we *won’t* be able to sing these songs exactly the way they are sung in their original context. For one thing, we likely won’t have the same instruments available. (Does anyone out there have a gamelon or sitar handy?) We won’t have the same aesthetic as far as what constitutes a “beautiful” vocal tone. If we choose to sing a song in the original language, we probably won’t have a native speaker pre-

sent. However, as my friend Jorge reminded me, I am the one who is going to be there on Sunday morning, with my single drum and assorted collection of hand percussion instruments, and a guitarist who can play rhythmically in the key of F, if I’m lucky. Obviously, some compromises will be necessary. I also realize that there is a danger of oversimplification or overgeneralization. For example, *every* Hispanic song may not need maracas and guitar. Yet, with a little creativity and sensitivity, I believe it is still possible to evoke that sense of participation in something outside of our normal frame of reference.

For a concrete example of how to apply some of these ideas, let’s look at an African hymn which should be familiar to many of us. “Jesu, Jesu” by Tom Colvin has been included in several current North American hymnals. Although the text was written by a Westerner (Tom Colvin was born in Scotland and later ordained by the Church of Scotland), the tune, CHEREPONI, is an adaptation of a Ghana folk song; it was collected by Colvin at Chereponi in northern Ghana. (It’s important to remember that when working with folk melodies, there is no one “correct” version or arrangement.) I found two arrangements in the hymnals I surveyed, one by Jane Marshall and the other by Charles Webb.<sup>3</sup> Marshall’s arrangement is a simple unison setting that emphasizes the folk quality of the tune. Chord symbols are included in some hymnals. The arrangement by Charles Webb is also designated “unison,” but the writing easily lends itself to adaptation for two- or four-part singing.

Both of these arrangements can work very well on either organ or piano. If using the organ, a light registration would be appropriate. That being said, I must confess that I do not use *any* keyboard at all when leading this hymn! (The one exception would be if the hymn was unfamiliar to the congregation. In that case, I would use the piano to help support the singing, but only until I felt the congregation was comfortable. If I had a choir to help lead, I wouldn’t use the piano at all.) What I do use is a variety of hand percussion and one or more drums, depending on how many people I have available to play. At a minimum, I try to have one person playing eighth notes on some type of shaker.<sup>4</sup> I happen to have a Ghanaian shaker (it is a gourd with seeds tied to the outside), so I use that. I also have a second person playing dotted quarter notes on a drum. As with the shakers, I have a few different drums available, including a good sized djembe as well as a smaller ceramic drum. At times, I’ve also used non-African drums, including congas, a bodhran—even the floor tom from our trap set. The melodic instrument is my own voice, with the support of the choir.

# Jesu, Jesu

Text: Tom Colvin

Tune: CHEREPONI, Irr. with refrian

## Refrain

Je - su, Je - su, fill us with your love, show

us how to serve the neigh - bors we have from you.

1. Kneels at the feet of his friends, si - lent - ly wash - es their feet,


Mas - ter who acts as a slave to them.

Ghana folk song, adapted by Tom Colvin Words & Music © 1969 Hope Publishing Co.  
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As I mentioned above, the two hymnal arrangements of CHEREPONI are unison settings. However, harmony is very characteristic of African music. An African song such as *Siyahamba* or *Sanna, Sannanina*, sung in parts and accompanied only by percussion, has an unmistakable sound and can be very exciting indeed.<sup>5</sup> A couple of years ago, I wanted to have a setting of CHEREPONI in parts that my choir could use, but the four-part arrangement I came up with sounded too much like a “regular” Western hymn. So, I came up with a three-part setting (see example). By using triadic chords in inversion and having a higher tessitura in the men’s part (resulting in a little more strident tone in amateur singers), I tried to create a sound that would remind the listener of Africa. The only accompaniment I used was a drum and shakers.

For all of these performance suggestions, I give the disclaimer that I am not trying to produce an “authentic” rendition that would satisfy an ethnomusicologist, and I don’t believe that achieving such a rendition should be our goal when we lead these songs in worship. However, using the resources available to me and drawing on my own knowledge of African song, I *have* tried to extrapolate in a way that will give my congregation at least a taste of Africa. Organists are very familiar with the practice of trying to approximate a particular registration on an instrument that doesn’t have exactly the right stops needed. Missing stops notwithstanding, the goal is to get as close as possible to the original sound intended by the composer. The same principle applies here. Our performance practice should not be haphazard. It is important to learn as much as we can about the style of music we will be leading. Whether the music is sacred or secular, recordings by native musicians are invaluable; listen to them carefully. If possible, hear such music performed live. As your budget permits, acquire native instruments. Watch others who are skilled in leading global song.<sup>34</sup> Notice what works—and what doesn’t work.

Leading global song may well seem a daunting task, particularly if we feel our resources are limited. However, I have seen Patrick Matsikenyiri effectively lead a congregation in enthusiastic singing using nothing more than his voice and a hosho (a gourd shaker from Zimbabwe). If we can, in whatever small degree, help our congregation experience connection with a larger circle, I believe we have been faithful to our task. Remember: I-to Loh isn’t there. *You* are. 

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Jorge A. Lockward is Global Praise Program Coordinator of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. He has recently edited a trilingual hymnbook in the Global Praise series, *Tenemos esperanza/Temos esperança/We have hope*. This book features Latin American song in Spanish, Portuguese and English.

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Patrick Matsikenyiri is retired Professor of Music and Culture at Africa University, Mutare, Zimbabwe, and has had a distinguished career in Zimbabwe as a headmaster, teacher and musician. Dr. I-to Loh, FHS, is president emeritus of Taiwan Theological Seminary and College and was general editor of *Sound the Bamboo*. Both are members of the Global Praise Working Group of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. For a detailed discussion of their life and work, see C. Michael Hawn, *Gather into One: Praying and Singing Globally*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003.

<sup>3</sup>Jane Marshall’s arrangement appears in the *Book of Praise, New Century Hymnal, Presbyterian Hymnal, Psalter Hymnal, and Worship*. Charles Webb’s arrangement appears in the *Baptist Hymnal, Chalice Hymnal, United Methodist Hymnal* and *Worship and Rejoice*.

<sup>4</sup>There are many different types of shakers. Inexpensive plastic eggs are available at many music stores. African shakers made from gourds can be found in more specialized stores or online. When my husband, Dan Damon, traveled to Zimbabwe, he found people using a variety of homemade shakers, including one made with a stick, pebbles, and a rubber toilet bowl float.

<sup>5</sup>For some wonderful examples, including *Sanna, Sannanina*, listen to the recording by Africa University Choir, *Africa – Praise I*, GBGMusik CD 1-004.

<sup>6</sup>We have been very fortunate to have persons like I-to Loh and Patrick Matsikenyiri lead singing at some of our Hymn Society Annual Conferences. The opportunity to sing under their leadership should not be missed.