

Goudimel, Harmony, and Rests

A response to James Jordan

Michael E. Owens

July, 2009

I rise in reply to an article titled *Contra Goudimel*, published April, 2009, by James Jordan. In this article Mr. Jordan argues against the common pairing of Genevan Psalm melodies with the harmonies of Claude Goudimel. His reasons are as follows:

1. Printed harmonies encourage people to sing parts which slow the music down.
2. Goudimel's harmonies are modal and sound strange to modern ears.
3. Pauses at the end of each line break up the rhythm of the tunes
4. Goudimel's harmonies were not written for congregations
5. Many other harmonies have been used.

In replying to Mr. Jordan, -may I call you Jim?- I have certain well-defined misgivings. Anyone should feel nervous disagreeing with a man so well-read and well-spoken, who can make his opponents look like complete idiots and make you laugh in the process.

But beyond these obvious reasons, I am reluctant to disagree with Jim's article because I agree with it so strongly.

In plain, I believe his facts are correct, and I share his worthy goal. We both want vigor and vitality in Genevan Psalter singing, and we both believe there is not One Right Way to sing them. And I certainly agree – it's high time this was pointed out – these tunes are not intended for Psalms, but for poetic sermons based on the Psalms.

However, I believe none of our agreements, and indeed none of his arguments, reflect badly on Goudimel's homophonic settings. Some relevant facts were overlooked.

1. Printed harmonies encourage people to sing parts which slow the music down.

But Jim, this is an argument against using harmony in any congregational music. Is that what you want?

Though they have power and nobility at a slower tempo, in general a faster tempo is preferred for most of these tunes. (The exceptions are obvious.) But will harmonies slow them down? The evidence is against it. Goudimel's harmonies can be sung quickly.

-Jim doubtless has heard more live performances of Genevan psalms than I have, by an order of magnitude. But in my observation, the instrumentalists and/or the song-leader determines tempo, regardless of harmony. In these cases, I submit that what really slows down these tunes – what Jim should really be railing against – is the organ. The slowest Genevan singing I've heard (on some fabulous recordings from Inheritance) was in unison with diatonic organ accompaniment. In fact, to point the finger for the slowing of Genevan singing, or of any singing, look no further than the king of instruments. (For further illustration, check the Genevan psalms on YouTube.)

-Even in groups which sing acappella, with little or no song-leading (Covenanters, Mennonites, Plymouth Brethren), tempo is not determined by harmony. It's determined by age. Older people sing slower.

-The Goudimel recordings at the Genevan Psalter Resource Center have been criticized for being too fast, though that judgment is subjective, and in practice limited only by clarity of articulation.

2. Goudimel's harmonies are modal and sound strange to modern ears.

The first response to mind it so facile I'm reluctant to give it. But I will.

So?

The melodies are modal as well. Now perhaps Jim prefers the melodies in diatonic form, as they've appeared in many of the publications he's cited. That's fine. They work that way. In that case, the

harmonies should certainly be diatonic as well. But when the melodies are modal, what's wrong with modal harmonies? Strange may mean off-putting, or it may mean attractive.

Plus, modal melodies or harmonies, or anything that sounds odd, will not sound odd for long if repeated.

And furthermore, are these harmonies too complex for congregations? Again, the evidence is against it. Having sung and recorded all the parts of every selection in the *Cantus Christi* and the *Genevan Psalter: Goudimel Edition*, I believe I'm qualified to offer an opinion on the matter. Goudimel's harmonies are no more complex than most of the other selections in the *Cantus*, and less than some. As in those cases, if the harmonies are too complex for you, sing the melody.

3. Rests at the end of each line break up the rhythm of the tunes.

Sure, if the rests are not properly observed. But why should 'stopping' imply 'dying'? Can't the rhythm keep going while we take a breath? Indeed, with instruments involved, the problem evaporates. But even acappella the rhythm is easily kept up. Again, the recordings at the Resource Center are cases in point.

Notice, here too, despite the title and opening paragraph, this is not an argument against Goudimel. It's an argument against breathing. As such, I predict the argument will fail.

A little background: In their original form, the melodies contain only two note values, long and short. They're been notated variously. Most of the internal lines end with a long note and a rest of equal length, though some phrases are connected. In actual practice, this long end note is often held longer than written, and the rest is shorter than written. Just long enough to take a breath, in fact. Thus in some publications, like the *Cantus*, the long note is written longer and the rest is written shorter. In fact, in some cases, the long note is doubled and the rest is omitted.

Regardless of how the ends of the lines are notated, however, people will stop to take a breath at the end of each line. It's a fact of nature, Jim: an organ does not need to stop for breath, and a stringed instrument can fill the silence, but any wind instrument will need to stop for air. And this includes that noble Wind for which these melodies were conceived.

Jim advocates, in line with some of the publications he has cited, that the note which ends each line should be sung at exactly its length, and the rest should be omitted. It is true that this has often been done. It does not alter the essential nature of the melodies.

But making no break between any lines makes them harder to sing; after all, we've got to take a breath somewhere! Have mercy on us, Jim! Have you ever tried to sing Petra's *Coloring Song* giving each note its full value? The tune has no pause. Either you hack the ending notes short, or you collapse on the floor gasping for breath.

It's the same for the Genevan tunes with no phrase-end rests. If Jim wants to sing them without taking a breath, he can try. Goudimel will not hinder him. But unless he's auditioning for the next Superman, he will be hindered by the limitations God gave his lungs.

4. Goudimel's harmonies were not written for congregations.

True. At that time no harmonies were written for congregations. But Jim has not shown us why and how they would not work, and has even acknowledged that "sometimes they work just fine." There are CRE churches every Sunday using Goudimel's harmonies who will rise with me to challenge Jim's assertion.

Prove it.

5. Goudimel's harmonies are not the only ones. Others are available.

Here again, the instinctive response might seem cheeky.

Where?

For the revival of the Genevan Psalter to be effective in North America, we need a congregational

psalter in standard hymnal format.

Jim refers to the “fine, user-friendly English version of Goudimel's four-part settings published by Inheritance Publications.” I have commented before that this publication is unsuitable for congregational use. I would like to expand upon this point.

The Janssen's publication is very valuable, and it is certainly more 'user-friendly' than volume 9 of Goudimel's *Oeuvres Complètes*. But certain features take it out of the running:

- It is not a hymnal. At over 8½ x 11, it is much larger than the largest hymnal (in the US, hymnals come in 5½ x 8½ or 6 x 9; British hymnals are often 5 x 7).

- At \$60 including shipping, it is over 3 times the cost of a standard hymnal. Who would own more than one?

- Many of the tunes include several different harmonizations, under different verses of text.

This is useful for the accompanist, but confusing and unnecessary for the congregation.

So Jim has over a dozen publications including the complete or partial Genevan psalter, using other harmonies. How does that help the rest of us? By God's providence (via Duck Schuler) what's available to this point is Goudimel. If Jim wants the others to be put into use, let him send them out for publication.

This is not a rhetorical request, either. He should release some of those harmonies. (To be fair, he does offer one, but it is admittedly not set up for congregational singing.) There's nothing I'd like more than to include a PDF file of each possible harmony of each melody at the Resource Center. Send them up, brother. And if you want it done in a timely manner, send some money along as well. If I didn't have to earn a living I would typeset everything he has inside the next year.

Conclusion

Credit where it's due: the goals which I share with Jim, vigor and vitality in the Genevan singing, can be achieved with modal harmony, and with rests at the end of many lines. By all means, let's try these tunes with different harmonies, at different tempi, with different rhythms. Perish the thought of enthroning any of our options as the One Right Way. But Claude Goudimel's harmonies, using rests at the end of many lines, are compatible with our goals. Neither this harmony, nor the rests in many editions, need make this music dull, slow, or unnecessarily complex.

The reasons, I just gave. The demonstration is at www.genevanpsalter.com

Take a look.