

Frederic Woodman Root

Frederic W. Root (1846-1916) was a Christian Scientist, and I first got to know him as a composer. Between 1907 and 1913, he composed solo settings of 5 of Mrs. Eddy's poems: Christ My Refuge, Christmas Morn, Communion Hymn, Feed My Sheep and Love. I found no clue why he didn't write settings for Satisfied or Mother's Evening Prayer. The Trustees Under the Will of Mary Baker Eddy, acquired ownership of the copyright of his music in 1951, and they had a record made of those 5 compositions, plus settings of the last 2 poems by other composers. In fact 17 recordings of his music were published between 1910 and 1929, performed by individual vocalists and organ or orchestra. Of his compositions for solo voice, I believe there are only three others: "Angels," "Love Never Faileth" and "Fountain of Life." Root did, however, compose many other kinds of music: songs, cantatas, an operetta, among other works. With all this, it's surprising that not a single composition of his is in the Hymnal. Rather, there are two hymns which he arranged from pre-existing melodies. Let's sing one.

Hymn 327 (all verses)

Root was the son of George Frederick Root, who gained fame from the Civil War songs that he wrote: "Just Before the Battle, Mother," "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, the Boys Are Marching," and perhaps his most famous one, "The Battle Cry of Freedom." Interestingly, the father spelled his first name with a "k" at the end, and the son dropped it for his first name. Root's mother was a semi-professional vocalist. We don't know exactly how and when he became a Christian Scientist, but his understanding of Science and dedication to the movement are crystal clear from the lyrics he wrote. Let's sing one of our best-loved hymns that features his words.

Hymn 245 (verses 1 and 3)

Some of his most prized lyrics were those he wrote for what was perhaps Martin Luther's most famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Christian Scientists didn't want to miss being able to sing that hymn, and Root's rewording made it possible. Here's what the Hymnal Notes say about our Hymns 10 & 411: "The paraphrase used here, by Frederic W. Root, was made for the 1910 edition of the Hymnal. It interprets the symbolism of the original in a most impressive way. It roused much discussion, at first, but in time it came to be so highly valued, on both sides of the Atlantic, that there was a general demand to retain it in the revised Christian Science Hymnal."

Hymn 10 (first verse)

Root was a singer, composer, organist conductor, and conductor. But many would probably consider his greatest claim to fame as a voice teacher. He was a serious student of voice from an early age, and in his early 20s undertook a study tour of Europe. Over the course of his career he wrote 11 books on singing technique, and it was reported in 1887 that he had 400 voice students each year. Some of his books are currently available on Amazon, and I encountered a couple of doctoral dissertations, written in the past 5 years, that promoted his singing technique.

Hymn 329 (verses 1 and 3)

As a voice teacher, it's no surprise that he held some strong opinions, some of which we would find questionable. For example, in one of his public speeches he characterized what we now call African-American spirituals as "developed from the formless and untutored sounds of savage people... being

hardly developed to the point at which they might be called music." In 1912 he wrote a Sentinel article titled "Correct Hymn Singing" in which he urged congregations to not let the tempos of hymns drag. Before you start thinking ill of him, let's sing another hymn with his well-known words.

Hymn 293 (verses 1 and 3)

Clearly Root had a remarkable career, achieving success in many fields. For one more example, there was a note in the January 26, 1899 issue of the Christian Science Sentinel about the dedication of the church in Peoria, IL. The article notes that the organist for the dedication was "Mr. Frederic Root of Chicago... one of the best-known organists in the West." In a way all these accomplishments pale in comparison to the continuing blessing of his inspired poetry. In my research in JSH Online, I found dozens of articles and testimonies citing his hymn words as an inspiration and a factor in healing. So let's close with one more of those healing hymns, for which he was also probably the arranger.

Hymn 269 (all verses)