Psalm 5 is a dialogue between two poles of the psalmist’s soul—on the one hand accusing others of wickedness and on the other claiming personal righteousness. One could even say that the tone of the psalmist sounds, in turn, vengeful and self-righteous. Of course, this needs to be heard in the context of the psalmist crying out to God for deliverance from enemies. Nonetheless, it makes the psalm a “hard sell” when used liturgically. Here, I’ve softened the tone of the psalm by matching it with a refrain that creates a context of a heartfelt plea for help.

Throughout history churches have chanted psalm texts interspersed with congregational refrains. Most use psalm tones for chanting the text, and recently this responsorial approach has been re-imagined as spoken text in many psalm settings from Sing! A New Creation! 1 In “Hear My Words, O Lord” I tried to strike a balance between these approaches. The text is spoken over music, tying together the refrain and text. I’ve divided the text between two narrators to bring out the conflicting points of view within the text. Simple dramatic instructions for the narrators as well as a change in musical accompaniment further highlight the text’s inherent change in mood.

Sing to God Our Strength (Psalm 81)

Psalm 81 is unusual in that it begins with a call to worship and then quickly moves to a monologue in which God speaks directly to God’s people, recounting divine works on their behalf and calling them back to faithfulness. This song began its life as a new setting of Psalm 81, “Sing a Psalm of Joy.” 2 I liked the text but didn’t feel that the metrical setting conveyed the change in voice clearly enough. However, by turning the “people’s” verse into a refrain, an effective call and response pattern was established in which God calls to God’s people and they respond in joy.

Deeper than the Sea (Psalm 36:5–9)

When we use words like psalmody and lectionary, it may unintentionally convey an underlying message about style. Those churches that use contemporary music styles may shy away from even discussing something like the use of a lectionary psalm because they may feel it obligates them to a particular music style. I don’t believe that is true. Though theology and aesthetics always affect each other, I think there are ways to achieve the liturgical goal of singing the psalms regardless of style. “Deeper than the Sea” sets a significant portion of Psalm 36 in a “praise and worship” musical style using the looser, more colloquial language typical of the genre. Especially interesting are the sacramental overtones that emerge when the psalm is sung in Christian worship.

I would be honored if readers found enough merit in my humble offerings to sing them in their own churches. My deeper hope is that these compositions stir interest in psalmody and provoke other composers and poets to apply their creative energies to writing new psalm songs.

Notes
1. Reformed Church in America and Calvin Institute, Sing! A New Creation! (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 2002).

Greg Scheer is minister of worship at Church of the Servant and music associate at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, both in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His music is available from Augsburg Fortress, Worship Today, Faith Alive and at www.gregscheer.com.
Rest in the Lord, My Soul

verse text by
Michael Morgan, 1999

except the House is Built by God

Psalm 127

music and refrain text by
Greg Scheer, 2006

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Hear My Words, O Lord

Psalm 5

words and music by
Greg Scheer

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Sing to God Our Strength
Psalm 81

words and music by
Greg Scheer

1. When your souls were bound, when the world enslaved you, I will free you.
2. Cast your ten thousand sins upon my voice, I will forever keep your hands safe.
3. Listen to my God, my voice, I will forever speak to you.
4. In my strong hand, I will forever hide you.

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Deeper than the Sea

based on
Psalm 36:5–9

words and music by
Greg Scheer

E E B A2 E B A2
Your merc-y Lord, stretches through the heav-

ens. Your faith-ful-ness is like the air we breathe. Your right-

eous, mighty as a moun-tain, and your jus-tice,

A2 E G A B B E A E

B E Fm E G# A6 A B E
Lord, flows deep-er than the sea.

E B D G A C E B E B
1. How pre-cious is your end-less love, O Lord, you give us shel-

ter:

E B D G A C E B
inside your shad-ow of your wings.

G D B A G D
Both great and small can our hearts with you joy, and as we drink from your Com-

fort,

G D B A G D
though our eyes may be filled with glo-

rious light.

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