

An Analysis of 'Amazing Grace'

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Amazing Grace: What is the main reason for this song's incredible success?

Abstract:

Amazing Grace is one of the most performed, recorded, and recognizable songs ever written. For over two hundred years the song has evolved along with human society, so much so that it has become a symbol of identification for some cultures. On first inspection, however, it is difficult to pinpoint why this song achieved considerable popularity, as similar songs from its time were lost to obscurity. The analysis that follows investigates recordings of Amazing Grace by the 'Sacred Harp Singing Society', 'Naturally 7', and 'Victor Wooten', in an effort to determine *why* this song became the cultural icon that it did.

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Introduction:

Very few would dispute that 'Amazing Grace' is one of the most successful and powerful songs ever conceived. The song's immeasurable popularity has seen it evolve through a plethora of musical styles and connect with a diversity of human cultures over a period of nearly 24 decades. Yenika-Agbaw describes the song as "a cultural artifact loaded with a history of greed, oppression, and hope" (2006, Web), while vocal ensemble 'Naturally 7' put it very simply, saying that Amazing Grace is "the most famous song in the world". The purpose of this essay is to evaluate why this song has become so successful through an investigation of the song's musical, psychoacoustic, and contextual properties. Three recordings of Amazing Grace will be analyzed, and the extrapolated information will be used to pragmatically compare the recordings against each other.

The investigation technique used here partly consists of what Dunbar-Hall describes as 'analytical semiotics', the purpose of which is, "to arrive at a statement of the meaning of a piece of music as music [...] through structuralist processes of segmentation of material, tabulation, and interpretation of data" (1991, p. 128). While this is a valid means for methodologically examining this song, it inherently ignores the cultural significance and audience reception of the work. Dunbar-Hall titles this "esthetic level" analysis - a process which is ignored in analytical semiotics because it is seen to be a non-neutral criterion in which to judge the work. I have chosen to adopt a combination of analytical semiotics and esthetic level inquiry here, as both of these techniques are pertinent to determining the success of a musically *and* culturally important song such as Amazing Grace.

The Background Behind Amazing Grace:

As one might expect, Amazing Grace has a colorful history that holds with it information that could identify why the song became successful. Amazing Grace was first a poem written by former slave trader 'John Newton' in 1772 (Turner, 2002, p. 212). The words of the poem tell the story of Newton being confronted by a severe storm during a slave trading expedition in 1748, where he prayed for the Lord's mercy and survived (Rogers, 2006, Web). This event changed Newton's perspectives on life and

religion, as indicated by the phrase, “Was blind, but now am free.” While the story of Newton’s drastic career change may seem like a ‘unique’ feature of the song - and perhaps a reason for its success - Basker notes that, “There [were] at least six white poets who [were] themselves former slavetraders” (2003, p. 29) from the same era as John Newton, none of whom published poems as successful as *Amazing Grace*.

It was not until 1835 that Newton’s poem was coupled with the melody that is associated with the song today. The imposed melody was an existing tune to the traditional song, ‘New Britain’ (which was reportedly based on folk songs, ‘Gallahar’ and ‘St, Mary’ (Turner, 2006, p. 119)) and was introduced by American composer and arranger ‘William Walker’. Prior to this, there were over twenty musical settings of the poem, but none of these rivaled the popularity gained by the ‘New Britain’ melody that accompanies the modern version of the song (See appendix figure 1). This concept of *Amazing Grace* as an ‘evolving entity’ exists for many aspects of this song, making concrete musical observations difficult to discern.

Musical Analysis:

The closer one inspects the melodic and chordal elements within *Amazing Grace*, the more apparent it becomes that terms such as ‘simple’, and ‘generic’ describe the musical elements of the song quite aptly. As is common in a majority of church hymns, the song is (traditionally) in a major key. The ‘New Britain’ melody is often put to I, IV, and V chords (See appendix figure 2) in one of the most familiar progressions of Western music (commonplace in blues, church music, and many forms popular music). That said, the melody lends itself well to a number of reharmonizations that can be chosen according to the mood that the artist wishes to portray. Many artists have re-written the melody somewhat over time granting them many possibilities to alter the chordal structure of the song as they wish. This chordal simplicity as well as inconsistency seen here may suggest that the progressions of the song are not the fundamental reason for the song’s success.

Similarly to the chordal components of the song, it is very difficult to determine any characteristics in the melody that justify the immense popularity of *Amazing Grace*. The melody is concentrated around scale degrees that reflect the major triad, with 2nd and 6th degrees used sparingly as passing notes.

The song consists entirely of intervals less than a perfect 4th in size, making the song well suited to the human voice. The repeated minor thirds at the height of the melody accompany the gloomy lyrics 'I once was lost' quite appropriately, suggesting that the contours of the melody could be described as 'effective' - although by no means are they 'groundbreaking'. Rhythmically, Amazing Grace is also very basic, being made up of only quavers, crotchets and minims. Its $\frac{3}{4}$ time signature was commonplace in compositions from its era, providing little evidence as to why this song became a Western phenomenon while similar hymns remained in the confines of the church. Finally, there appears to be no obvious connection with any of the above elements to the Golden Ratio, again leaving us with no conclusive analytical evidence regarding Amazing Grace's success.

The observations made above are succinctly demonstrated in the three recordings of Amazing Grace that I have chosen to analyze. Rather than identifying how these examples 'fit the mould' of the song though, it is intriguing to examine how these recordings differ from each other musically, and why this might be the case. For instance, it can be heard that the rhythm as described by the score (appendix figure 1) is strictly adhered to in the Sacred Harp Society version, while the Naturally 7 recording has a freer – at times indistinguishable – time feel. Further, the melody in the Sacred Harp Society example repeats itself as per the score, while the Naturally 7 example (like many modern appropriations of the song) holds the final note of each phrase (bars 7 and 14) for an extra three beats, thereby lengthening the song from 14 to 16 bars. Instances of the re-composing of this song are likely to be evidence that musical elements are probably *not* the essence of Amazing Grace, and are not the main reason for the songs success.

Psychoacoustic Analysis:

In this section, I will be discussing psychoacoustic observations that can be made in recordings of Amazing Grace, and how these can be analyzed to answer the question of Amazing Grace's success. So far, it has been determined that none of the musical components of the song are particularly innovative, and the song has been re-written in so many ways that a penultimate version of the song is quite elusive. While the musical analysis of the song was of little assistance in this case, psychoacoustic

investigation with the inclusion of esthetic analysis provides a far more appropriate means of determining the success of this particular song.

Although the lyrics of Amazing Grace are quite personal, the themes of community and congregation are portrayed in the psychoacoustic properties of all the recordings under investigation here. In the Sacred Harp Singing Society recording, casual conversation can be heard as the song is announced and the group prepares to sing. The signified of this is a sense of equality between the announcer and choir, a remark that is validated by Turner's statement, "In true democratic spirit, the participants would sit around a hollowed square or circle so that no individual or group was more important than any other" (2002, p. 117). The shape note singing heard in the first verse as well as the A Cappella setting also signifies the 'community' theme present in this recording. In this case the people are the instruments, and this is likely to be a contributing factor to the songs success.

The 'people as instruments' concept is also illustrated in the Naturally 7 example of Amazing Grace, where the sounds of a church organ, as well as brass instruments are mimicked in the A Cappella arrangement. The 'congregation' and 'community' themes are psychoacoustically presented here in quite interesting forms. Signifiers including a solo voice in front of a choir, an embellished 'improvised' style melody, and a powerful key change are genre synecdoches for gospel and soul music. These genres present connotations of tight-knit African American communities who are empowered through playing music in groups. *People* are the important element that carries the success of these genres and therefore this recording of Amazing Grace.

The same theme can be identified in the Victor Wooten example of Amazing Grace, albeit in a fairly obscure way. The Wooten recording has no vocals, and no traditional 'group of performers', but it can be heard that the audience is very involved in the song by either clapping or vocalising their enjoyment of the performance. In a sense, Wooten is using Amazing Grace as a vessel to purvey his virtuosic talents to the audience, which increases the songs popularity and expands the 'community' of people who are connected to the song in some way. Since the invention of recording technology, a number of other 'big name' artists (including Elvis Presley) have covered

this song, which has helped the song outgrow the boundaries of the church (the 'congregation' community) and expand into the 'commercial' community.

Discussion – Why is Amazing Grace Successful?

Common elements can be identified between the Sacred Harp Singing Society, Naturally 7, and Victor Wooten recordings of Amazing Grace when viewing these paradigmatically. In the Sacred Harp Singing Society example, the song promotes close ties with religion, and the ideals of freedom and opportunity connect closely with morals of the democratic society. The Naturally 7 example connotes themes of racial equality, and empowerment of people through partaking in music as a group. Finally, the Victor Wooten recording illustrates how the song has been adopted as a means of expressing musicianship to the mainstream audience. While themes of racial equality, religion, and musical expression prevail through these examples, each of these elements can be related back to the concept of 'people as instruments', and it is my belief that the success of the song can be attributed to this notion.

To elaborate, what makes this song unique is the way that the song has connected with a wide cross-section of humans over many time periods, and more importantly, the fact that *people* have been the main means of the songs evolution, reinvention, and promotion through time. The distinction between the performer and the audience has been blurred in the case of this song, as the creation of the song has often been a matter of community engagement. Further, the advertising and distribution of the song has been virtually 'invisible' throughout the songs history. This is because the artists and communities who partake in the creation of the song have become the promoters and the methods of the songs dissemination. This has created an environment for Amazing Grace to spread on a far greater scale than conventional advertising could allow, and is likely to continue in contributing to the popularity of Amazing Grace for some time.

Conclusion:

Based on the above analysis, it is my opinion that the main reason Amazing Grace is successful is because its existence has been integrated with community engagement. It appears that musical elements within the song have little to do with the songs success, apart from any connections they hold with the theme of 'community'. I believe that rather than forming a basis for the songs success, the musical constituents of the song have acted mainly as a 'medium' in which human expression and community engagement have been able to occur through time. While the proposed solutions to this analysis may appear to be *side-effects* to the success of the song at first, I believe that the connection between community and Amazing Grace has existed since the songs inception in the church, and hence, these elements were pioneering in the songs success.

Appendix:

Figure 1.

Amazing Grace

John Newton, 1779 *arr. Edwin O. Excell (1851-1921), alt.*

1. A - maz - ing grace! how sweet the sound that
2. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and
3. Thro' man - y dan - gers, toils and snares I
4. When we've been there ten thou - sand years, bright

saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but
grace my fears re - lieved; How pre - cious did that
have al - read - y come; 'Tis grace hath brought me
shin - ing as the sun, We've no less days to

now am found, Was blind but now I see.
grace ap - pear the hour I first be - lieved!
safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.
sing God's praise than when we first be - gun.

Source:

(No author). *Amazing Grace*. Retrieved 25th October, 2011, from

<http://www.biblestudy.org/basicart/amazing-grace-free-sheet-music.html>.

Figure 2.

Popular Chord Combinations:

(Each chord represents one bar of the 16 bar version of the melody)

	I I V I	I I V V	I I V I	I V I I
or	I I vi I	I I I I	I I V I	I vi I I
or	I I IV M7 I	I I V V	I I vi I	vi V I I

Etc...

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