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# CHURCH MUSIC TO-DAY

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## CHURCH MUSIC TO-DAY

THE last paper that was read to this society was Professor Hamilton Thompson's learned account of the song schools in the Middle Ages, and I hope it may seem not unsuitable to add now some general observations, drawn from practical experience, upon church music and song schools as they are to-day in the fifth year of a world war. Upon the special difficulties of the time it is unnecessary to dwell: many of you are men responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of famous choirs, and are only too well aware of the problems that constantly arise. Some of these, we may hope, are temporary and should disappear automatically with the end of the war. Far more serious, far more threatening, and not merely a passing result of war-time conditions, is the general lack of creativeness and vitality that is affecting the art of church music as a whole.

It was evident long before the war that in our choice of music and our method of presenting it we were living too largely upon the past. In recent years, naturally enough, this lack of initiative has become even more noticeable. If public thanksgivings were called for to-morrow they would be either congregational services, with hymns as their main musical feature, or they would be 'cathedral' ones with music by Handel, Stanford, Parry, Charles Wood, and perhaps Vaughan Williams. The great English music of the past would be thought too austere and 'academic' for such a popular occasion: and we have not written ourselves, generally speaking, the sort of music that our colleagues wish to perform upon great days. On the whole the general aspect of our service-lists dates from the later years of the Victorian revival, and, although the amount of Tudor and Restoration music in our repertory is larger than it was, this is not an achievement for which the younger generation of church musicians can claim the chief credit. The research that made these performances possible, called for more than a century ago by Crotch in one of his professorial lectures, was begun



in the middle of the last century and carried to fruition by scholars happily still active to-day, who were already working in this field when some of us were the smallest of junior choristers.

A light upon the position of contemporary church music was given by recent experiences of the B.B.C. in planning a series of broadcasts entitled 'Church Music of To-day'. Great difficulty was found in compiling at all a set of programmes that were in any real sense contemporary: much had to be included that had been written a generation earlier. One composer, in introducing a set of his recent anthems, made what was in effect an apology for the circumstance that a present-day composer should be writing church music at all. That there is a marked hesitation among young musicians is undeniable: and it is regrettable; for many who have been unwilling to write in these small forms where they might have done first-rate work have spent their energies on the symphony and the tone-poem only to find out for themselves when it was too late, or to be told by others, that they lack the necessary stamina for such great enterprises.

It is true, no doubt, that our medium is a difficult one to handle. The combination of organ with small choir seems to be a force too large for the miniature and not big enough for a full-scale choral work. Moreover, the music of to-day depends to a considerable extent for its characteristic effects upon idioms that are foreign to the style of church music, or impossible to achieve in it for technical reasons. Modern harmony relies greatly upon the fact that in writing for orchestra or pianoforte it is easy to emphasize certain notes in a texture and at the same time to throw others into a background of colour. With the organ this is difficult or impossible, and organ music is therefore apt to sound either harsh, or else, if discord is consciously avoided, insipid and lifeless.

Technical skill, however, is a quality in which modern composers are not deficient, and the difficulty of a medium is, in fact, likely to stimulate rather than deter if the project is one that interests. Benjamin Britten has shown in 'Rejoice in the Lamb' how simply the effect of originality is achieved

by one who has the gift for it. There must be some other reason for any lack of creativeness, and for the general weakness of contemporary music in cathedral and parish church alike. If you look at the music lying on the desks of the village choir and organ you will find a sorry mixture. Best among it will almost certainly be the choir-books issued for festivals by the various Diocesan Choral Unions which flourished so bravely a generation or two ago, and were still active in some places up to the outbreak of war. Side by side with these in some places will be the publications of the R.S.C.M., whose work in this aspect is largely based upon experience gained in diocesan festival work. Here again, in fact, we are still drawing upon the vitality of the Victorian effort in church music.

What had that age to draw upon which we lack? Why were they more vigorous and creative than we are? They had, we may say, circumstances that were easier: more wealth, more leisure, more security. But it was not these alone. Perhaps their secret was their self-confidence. If we study their work we find that these musicians whose taste seems to us sometimes deplorable were men of great practical skill and vigour, handling with almost careless confidence a tradition which they had inherited without any break of continuity, and in which they believed without question. Their music, even when undistinguished or even vulgar, was effective and unselfconscious: it sounded well, and expressed quite adequately the feelings and aspirations of the time. And they were many-sided men. Barnby's church music was perhaps not good, yet he was a pioneer in the performance of Bach's great choral works. Stainer has been held up to ridicule by those who perhaps never knew that his work on Dufay shows him to have been a musician of unusual enlightenment. And the energy of their practical life is shown by the tenacity with which their institutions and arrangements have survived. That these are breaking down to-day is due to the fact that we no longer have energy to maintain them, partly because we are only half convinced of the value of what they stand for. This hesitation is part of that general lack of confidence which is

at present noticeable in church life of all kinds: in cathedral circles it results in an inability to come to any decision about the place of cathedrals in the scheme of worship, and in a nervous anxiety to please everybody. In church music as a whole it shows in a lamentable mixing of styles and confusion of aims: we see at the same time sacrifices of standard in things that matter, together with obstinate and sometimes ill-informed efforts to retain things that have long ceased to have any real *raison d'être*. These are signs of weakness.

What should be the direction of our efforts after the war? We should aim, I suggest, at maintaining the cathedral tradition fully in places where there is a good tradition, with equipment for it to be kept at a high level of efficiency. We should modify old forms freely, but with a sense of fitness, in places where changed conditions have made new needs. We should encourage new enterprise wherever there are artists, poets, and musicians qualified to direct such undertakings in places where they are suitable.

It is unnecessary in this gathering to defend the cathedral system, but an advocate may be permitted to say that one of the most effective ways to weaken it is to fight for its maintenance in places where the services are not and cannot, for practical reasons, be kept at a proper level of dignity. In some cases, quite apart from the war, there is not enough money for an adequate number of lay-clerks to be employed, and a suitable age fixed for retirement on pension.

Lack of rehearsal time often makes existing performances uncertain and rough, and seriously hampers any attempt to enlarge the repertory. My colleagues who are responsible for the music of cathedrals where a full programme of services is maintained will know that two or three times the amount of full rehearsal would not really be enough for the music that has to be provided at Christmas, Holy Week, and Easter. This is an increasingly serious matter in times when public taste, debased as it is in some respects, is superficially more sensitive to technical deficiencies in performance than it was before the days of broadcasting. In some fields that used to be worked almost entirely by church musicians the efforts of

secular practitioners have resulted in an altogether more critical approach. Take, for example, the Restoration anthem. In many cases we are still working from inaccurate or badly edited texts: few cathedrals, if any, outside London, have large enough choirs for the contrasts between solo, verse, and full chorus to be effectively represented. We have no provision for the employment of strings, trumpets, and drums such as would give brilliance to these works on great occasions.

The provision of better conditions is largely but not entirely a matter of money. Some authorities have been too ready to say, with Caliban's friend in *The Tempest*, that 'this will prove a brave kingdom to me, where I shall have my music for nothing'. Even in cases where adequate provision was made generations ago the depreciation of money values has often brought about a starvation of the music department that was never foreseen. It is not too much to say that if new resources are not provided the tradition cannot be kept alive. We ought, therefore, in duty, to press for the recognition of the musical aspect of the church's work and opportunity in any post-war reconsideration of endowments. The greater cathedrals, and those in larger cities, ought to be enabled to maintain daily choral services all the year round, and given the equipment for these to be kept at the highest level of effectiveness without an unnatural strain being put upon those responsible for them. The expense would not be as large as might be supposed; but it must be admitted that any appeal for re-endowment on a large scale would be hampered by the fact that the Church of England has not in recent years shown officially enough care for music or any other of the arts for its claims to command attention among those who might help by benefactions or by devoting their lives to its service. In almost every case that one has been aware of (apart from one or two notable exceptions) effort appears to have been devoted to curtailment and reduction rather than to creation and extension, and this unenterprising spirit seems to have operated with increased effect in recent years.

The beauty of cathedral services depends so much upon the boys that a word or two about present-day tendencies in



choir-schools will not be out of place at this point. A very definite change of character is to be noticed in some such schools, and should not pass without comment. A choir-school used to be thought of as a special kind of school designed to give education to boys whose time was partly allotted to singing duties. It was a choir-boys' school into whose life a few non-choir-boys might be fitted, and some would say that in its combination of apprenticeship to the craft of music with ordinary literary education it offered, under an efficient master, an education of a specially valuable type. To-day in many cases there seems to be a strong desire to shake off the old choir-school tradition and to claim that the schools are ordinary preparatory schools, providing a limited number of choral scholarships out of the subsidy that the Chapter Funds afford. This tendency has great dangers. One of the best headmasters I ever knew used to say that choristers could only be well educated and properly cared for in schools where the whole curriculum was planned round their singing duties: meal-times, class-times, and games-hours had to be different from those of ordinary schools. It will be readily understood that in larger schools where the choir-boys form a small minority and the claims of day-boys are a principal concern, such plans are difficult to make; the obligations of the choir-boys may become a nuisance to the staff; and a strain may be put upon boys who have to meet the obligations of the chorister as well as those of a curriculum designed to suit the day-boys. In cases where this strain has been felt it seems to have been assumed that choir duties must give way, rather than any part, however unessential, of the school activities. In one case, fortunately not of a school with which I have had any personal connexion, the choir-boys were regularly given to understand that they were a general nuisance to the community, an inferior class of boy to the non-choir, and a thoroughly unwelcome minority in the school whose principal *raison d'être* was their welfare. It could not be suggested that such a state of affairs is common, or that there are not schools where the interests of the boys and of the cathedral music are both well served: but it would

be unwise to forget the unfortunate results that have often been experienced in the past in schools where the choristers formed only a small minority.

Still more serious is the constant pressure towards a reduction of the leaving age. Boys who are talented often get scholarships or small bursaries to public schools, whose masters are naturally anxious to fill up their houses, and to get the boys as early as possible; they sometimes make an immediate entry a condition of the award. Music masters want the boys as long as possible before their voices break; and pressure, which becomes irresistible when it is represented rightly or wrongly that the boy's interests are at stake, is put upon the choir-master to release the boys, irrespective of any agreement that may have been made, just as they are reaching an age of usefulness and dependability. Any hesitation on the choir-master's part is liable to be regarded as a selfish disregard of the boy's welfare, even in cases where the choir-master himself has done much to secure the boy's scholarship, and is giving a specialist training to a boy, who has already decided to become a professional musician, at least as thorough as any that he is likely to get in a public school. In some cases this tendency has already reached a point at which it affects seriously the efficiency of the choir: and it may at any time become necessary to warn Deans and Chapters that the expense of maintaining a school is no longer justified by the musical return. I understand that the basis adopted for recommendation by the Choir-schools Association includes the demand that there shall not be more than six week-day services, that practice shall be limited to six hours a week, and that the age of leaving shall be the end of the school year before a boy reaches his fourteenth birthday. This may often mean that boys will leave at just over thirteen: and it is not too much to say that a rigid application of these principles would make the maintenance of a full cathedral programme, as we know it to-day, quite impossible.

What is to be done in those cathedrals where there is no provisions for services of traditional character to be maintained, and no way of providing it, or where some special

local circumstances make it desirable for an alternative kind of service to be substituted? Satisfying as the form of Mattins is to many of those who have been brought up in its company, it is not the only possible service, and we may sometimes be inclined to defend it with unnecessary zeal. It is, if we take the historical view, a new creation, one brought about by changes of the harshest kind, in which much that was beautiful was sacrificed. Think of what was lost when the sequences and antiphons were rejected. Even from a staunch Anglican like Bridges a sharp cry of protest was wrung when he translated some of these for his anthology *The Spirit of Man*.

In some churches where the Choral Eucharist is felt to be the natural form of worship these anthems may perhaps be restored to their original settings. But the attempt to educate congregations to this level has not yet everywhere succeeded, and there are many churches where the full musical treatment of the Eucharist is too hard a task to be attempted. In these cases, if Mattins is not preferred, contemporary effort might make of this material, combined with something of what is new, forms of service that would give new reality to worship; and I cannot believe that church musicians would be false to their traditions if in some circumstances they encouraged such modifications as are generally desired, are guided by sound liturgical principles, and are carried out with a sense of style. They would be open to far more weighty criticism if in holding closely to what their predecessors had achieved they failed to make any effective contribution of their own to the needs of their generation. There is certainly danger in thoughtless and irresponsible change, and in the confusion of styles that results when the general character of a congregation and the natural traditions of its worship are disregarded in the attempt to satisfy a merely temporary or partisan desire for novelty and variety. But a church that claims to be catholic must make room for many kinds of service: it must include the choir service and the congregational one; it must provide for the gathering in a university church, in a metropolitan cathedral, in a dockland

mission hall, and a village harvest festival. To provide at this moment some first-rate congregational services and music would be a fine thing for any musician to do. Not a great deal has recently been attempted in this way, apart from the provision of a few fine hymns, although it would be wrong to forget the work of the R.S.C.M. and the earlier attempts of Mr. Royle Shore, which had considerable influence in their day and should not pass without recognition. Nothing, as a beginning, would contribute more to the general welfare of public worship than the acceptance by the Church of England as a whole, and the enforced use, of an agreed system of pointing for the *Te Deum* and those canticles that are sung Sunday by Sunday in churches of all sorts. But even this is proving difficult.

It may seem unreal and fanciful to suggest that a sure way of helping music in parish churches is to keep that in cathedrals at a high level of excellence: but this is in sober fact the truth, first because anything that approaches perfection in an art, however limited its sphere of influence may seem to be, does in fact and in time affect the whole life of that art; and secondly because the cathedrals have proved themselves in the past to be valuable training grounds from which people could carry good traditions of craftsmanship into whatever work they had to do. It is true that we do not want parish churches, and still less village ones, to copy what is suitable only in cathedrals; there has been too much of that already; but what a musician will learn from the daily routine of a well-ordered cathedral is not so much a particular form of service; still less is it mere musical technique, which in some of its branches (though not all) can be better got in a great central school of music, as a general sense of style, some feeling for liturgical principles, a sense of craftsmanship in church music, and a standard of fitness: these qualities will serve him well, whatever may be the particular problems in church music that he has to solve. It seems to me that, given the right sort of direction, conditions should be allowed and expected to vary widely in churches of different character, so that each may find for itself the sort of music that springs



naturally from its ordinary life, and suits the character of its worship. However much we may personally prefer the choir of men and boys, there are many places where a choir of men and women would be easier to obtain and more efficient. In some few churches a piano or small string band might find a place instead of an organ or in addition to it. After all, the organ and the harmonium and the surpliced choir are very recent innovations in English parish life.

In conclusion I wish to suggest that quite apart from the regular day-to-day services there is room for many special efforts of music, and for a wider practice of our art as a normal activity of church life. What variety of achievement might be possible if imagination and technical skill were at a high level of creativeness in every part of the country instead of in a few centralized and self-conscious groups only. Great efforts of social work are being made in many directions at this moment: youth movements, community centres, welfare clubs, and social organizations of all sorts are active: in some parishes there is a meeting of one or other of such bodies every night, and an increasing use of music is being made in their schemes of work. To much of this effort the parish church might well be a home, and the church musician a guide. In few cases, however, is there the real collaboration that might do so much to strengthen these efforts. The benefit would be felt on both sides. From the Christian tradition might be learnt the lessons of permanence and personal responsibility upon which the value of the craftsman's work so much depends; and back to the church and its arts would flow the vitality that lies among the masses of ordinary people. It was Creighton who in showing the medieval city to his pupils used to make a lesson of history out of the fact that the monastery and the baronial castle had fallen into decay, whilst the parish church has survived. 'The monasteries were an episode: so were the friars. The parish went on.' And there is much in this truism that is important for musicians everywhere.

Far-reaching changes are being forced upon the Church of England at this very moment by world forces which can-

not be resisted. But this is no reason for despair: we have to adapt ourselves, and the ability to do this is the test of our fitness to survive. Forms of worship that we have inherited are not sacrosanct. They were made by those who strongly desired to worship, out of the material that was at hand. Unless the desire to worship has gone from us we can do the same in our generation without relying too much upon the past.

Our art, our tradition of church music, will survive and develop, so long as it satisfies some spiritual need of the great body of Christian people; but it can only find the vitality that will enable it to supply this need in the spiritual life of the community itself. Great art, however subtle may seem the final refinement and distinction of its style, has its roots deep down in the soil of the ordinary man's life. The artist depends upon the community from which he grows, even and perhaps most of all when he rebels against it most violently: and this is why the great periods of art are the periods when faith in life is firm enough among the community as a whole for the artist to have a dependable sense of purpose and direction, and to be able to say in moments of doubt and uncertainty: 'The Lord hath need of it.' The fact of the matter is that we are all feeling the need of some great renewal of spiritual force such as would reanimate every part of our lives. The consciousness of this want is the reason for the feeling of malaise, the lack of self-confidence, that hampers our efforts. If we experienced a revival of this kind in the church it would certainly express itself in music as well as in other ways, and would ensure the conservation of our great traditions of the past by using them as the basis of new achievements in the present. In church music as in other arts it is the contemporary that really matters: an art that is not creative is not living: to study the achievements of the past is the lot of the scholar and the historian: the work of the artist is to create new beauty every day. We should therefore make it our business to produce something of our own, even if our work proves in the end nothing more pretentious than that impossibly rare achievement, a new and original Anglican Chant.