

Address by Mr. Christopher Dearnley

THE NEED FOR A REFORMED APPROACH TO CHURCH MUSIC

THE first Occasional Paper of the Church Music Society reproduced Fuller Maitland's address to this meeting fifty-eight years ago, and bore the heading 'The need for reform in church music'. I apologise for plagiarising this in my own title, but this seems the simplest way of pointing out a change of emphasis, and the new tasks that today face this and similar bodies.

The Church Music Society would not be making an idle boast if it declared that its stated aim was now well on the way to being realised—the encouragement of 'the study and practice of the best church music in this country'. Admittedly this gives no ground for complacency, and there will never be an end to this task; but we have left behind the conditions described early in the nineteenth century by Samuel Wesley, when he wrote of 'the irreverent and indecorous musical weekday performances in our Cathedrals: the harmless Chords of Messrs. King and Kent in constant request all over England in the Cathedrals while Purcell's immortal Service in B flat is very rarely performed'. Or, of the parish church service—'often considered by the Vicar or Rector an expensive noise, who assumes *supreme* authority over the Organist exacting from him passive *obedience* and *non-resistance*'. The continuance of this state of affairs into the present century led to the formation of this Society, giving a platform for reformers to shame us into action with strictures such as Fuller Maitland's: 'Many cathedrals have practically lowered their standards to a point far beneath what they are technically competent to perform, and sing trash excusable only in a village choir'.

A contemporary survey would show the advances that have been made since these comments were voiced. Harmless chords and inexcusable trash are out. Standards may not always be high, and service lists (though featuring Purcell in B flat) often fail adequately to represent contemporary music, but the fact is that there are choirs now whose performances have quality. By quality I do not just mean technical excellence. The odds against achieving this are often heavily weighed; we are all aware of the problems created by inadequate skill, frustrating circumstances, lack of financial stimulus and so on. Yet despite, or in spite of, this there is an enthusiasm and loyalty amongst organists and singers that underpins all their work, and gives it a quality which is precious and immeasurable.

This development is directly related to the efforts of those who have fought for improved standards of music in church. A musician's enthusiasm is rendered impotent by turgid, hack writing, but is stimulated by 'the best music of all styles, old and new'. To sing such needs a basic musical ability; to sing it in the setting for which it was designed (as a part of the regular *Opus Dei*) can turn even the most hardened heathen Christian.

But this power of music, good music that is, somehow embarrasses those who before might hardly have noticed it if it had not been well done. It seems that the more successful the efforts are to raise standards of performance, the more vociferous are the critics of music in church. Like small children let loose in a garden of flowers, they want to make each bloom their own by handling and mauling the tender petals or, if told not to touch, perversely trample on the lot out of pique. Sixty-two years ago the urgent and primary objective of this Society was to cut out the undergrowth and make the wilderness blossom; now there is a real danger that the improvements will have been made too late unless we can teach the children to appreciate the delicacy and beauty of every flower. They can be let loose in the vegetable garden (and helpers here are desperately needed) but the roses and the dahlias must be tended by the experts so that all may benefit.

In other words we can no longer counteract philistinism, ignorance and insensitivity with only a corpus of better music, more expertly performed, building up what is usually called 'the heritage of English cathedral music'. We need to adopt a positive approach; not a negative rejection of all the changes and developments in church life and practice, but a forwarding of a deeper understanding of music's place in changing circumstances.

We can learn from the experiences of previous ages. The dissolution of the musical establishments in the court chapels of European potentates in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provides a salutary lesson. The first performances of sacred music by composers such as Couperin, Bach, Haydn, and Mozart were given by choirs and orchestras that no longer survive. Their purpose became too much linked with the glorification of the prince that paid the tune. Their function as a part of the full activity of the church was either not grasped, or was not sufficiently forcibly expressed.

The Chapel Royal in this country once held as pre-eminent a position as its counterparts in Europe. What is known as the 'golden age' of English church music is in fact the period when the Chapel Royal reached its highest peak of achievement, and it is only in recent years that cathedrals have made their own the music that was

written expressly (if not exclusively) for the courts of Queen Elizabeth and the Stuart monarchs. The Chapel Royal declined, but cathedral choirs have survived (more perhaps by accident than design) to sing its music. We cannot, however, continue to rely on a native disinclination to change. We must seize the opportunities offered by the continued existence of cathedral choirs, and promote the essential rôle they have to play in the life of the church as a whole. The pessimists will say that it is already too late. Personally I disagree; but they can only be confounded if we direct our entire attention to making the best use of the facilities we still possess for making expert music in church, and above all to gaining, and propagating, a full awareness of music's indispensable function.

The first thing to do is to get away from ideas that no longer help, such as the one that music is an *ornament* to worship. I hate to contradict the distinguished speaker at last year's A.G.M., but I cannot accept that the purpose of music in church is to 'enhance the act of worship'. Much damage has been done by making worship one thing and music another, added like pepper and salt to taste, a relationship summarised in the glibly used phrase, 'music in worship'. The two are inseparable, and the concept is better served by altering a single letter so as to say, 'music *is* worship'.

The justification of cathedral music on the grounds of nothing but the best will do for God is now considered obsolete. True or not, modern trends are that we must offer everything to God, not just the best but the indifferent, even the worst. Admittedly this can lead us into dangerous complacency, into running the risk of thinking we can stand before God 'just as I am without one plea', and then finding ourselves cast out of His presence because we have not put on a wedding garment. To correct this we must emphasise the necessity for endeavour, the value in itself of struggle against imperfections, and apply it to our work as musicians in the church. The task of organist and choir should be compared for instance with that of an executive staff in a commercial concern, whose ideals are efficiency and professional competence, led imaginatively by the managing director into a competitive position.

Complementary to the fact that music is a worshipful activity is the essential accessory of congregational participation. I must tread like Agag here, or else I shall be misunderstood. 'Congregational participation' is another loosely used term redolent of hysterical hymn singing or pop masses. The distinction is made between music which is worn like lip-stick and eyeshadow (as in cathedrals) and music which is devoured, digested or regurgitated (as in parish churches)—or, as it was put more elegantly last year, 'which allows and encourages every member of the congregation to take a fully

active part in the service'. There is indeed much variety in the expression of worship (and long may this be so) and what is appropriate in one church where there is a fully professional musical establishment is not necessarily so in another where the choir and organist are incompetent. But in both cathedral and parish churches, wherever music is sung, the music is an integral part of the activity of prayer, and furthermore the congregation participate fully in both.

Confusion arises over the interpretation of 'participate'. Actually singing or saying out loud is not the only form of taking part in a service. When I participate in a conversation I do not (or try not) talk all the time; I also listen. To be a fully active traveller on a journey from Manchester to London, I do not feel obliged to drive the train. The move towards encouraging a congregation to join in vocally more and more of the liturgy can destroy much of what a service sets out to do. We do not presume to go to the Lord's table trusting in our own righteousness, but we dare to croak together the Prayer of Humble Access. Peter when he had seen the glory of Christ transfigured 'wist not what to say'. We, lacking his awe, not only think we know what to say, but are prepared to banter it out loud in a most undignified and unhumble manner. Because we must affirm our *personal* belief (as though that were important in a communal activity) and because we mistakenly think this personal expression becomes corporate if we all say it together, we jettison a sung Creed by a trained choir. The choir do not necessarily wish to sing the Creed, that is they do not think they are better equipped morally than the man in the pew, but they recognise they have the skills to do it in a way which is dignified and meaningful. There is no reason to make the process of prayer more difficult than it is; when the Creed or Gloria is skilfully and beautifully sung, we are freer to concentrate on the significance of the words, to really pray them, than when we have to join in the confused mumble of a congregation saying, or worse still singing, those words.

Chatter has its place in public worship. But a mature, adult congregation should talk less and listen more than children in a Sunday School. Admittedly a parish church service has to embrace all, the wise and the foolish, but a cathedral service should presuppose a certain level of intelligence and sensitivity. The expression of communal prayer should develop from chattering together towards meaningful silence, from the intrusion of self to being taken up with others into communion with God.

The Anglican Church loses much by not giving space for silence in its liturgy, but maybe silence can only be used creatively by the mystic in his cell, or in 'private' prayer. In any case the church in her wisdom has always placed music in this middle state between

chatter and silence. Pure silence is rare. When confronted with it in a service, lacking the skills of meditation, we would probably go to sleep. But music is ordered silence, the art that creates sound out of a vacuum, organised and meaningful sound out of the disharmony of the noise perpetually around us.

Meaningful is the important word here. We are all aware of diverse levels of communication. From the simple message of a TV ad. to the complex significance of a great work of literature, from talk amongst acquaintances to the wordless and profound understanding between lovers. Standing in the middle of these extremes are various formalised expressions—the handshake, the conventions of polite conversation, the patterned framework of a deep and lasting relationship. But of all the codes it is music that can be most comprehensive in embracing the familiarity of small talk and the exploration of thought *and* feeling. If there is anything that should distinguish music in church from music anywhere else, it is not so much a peculiar style, as this unity holding in perfect balance the claims of our mind and our emotions.

Prayer likewise, on the level that most of us can hope to reach, should hold this balance. Further than this, prayer is a kind of loving which demands a formal expression. Some form of ritual language is necessary. We cannot all at once converse with God in complete silence; but neither do we have to rely on words as the sole means of communication. This should not be difficult. After all a baby gets on very well with its mother for the first year or two of its life without being able to speak a single sentence. That music can best provide this ritual language I am in no doubt. Not only does it hold the gap between chatter and silence, not only does it balance mind and emotion, but it expresses at the same time the most primitive and yet the most sophisticated of our urges and aspirations.

The church, in its desire to reform itself, to speak afresh to twentieth-century man, would be foolish to dispense with anything so useful as music, and not to make the best use of the means it has at its disposal in the trained choirs that have survived so far. If these choirs sing with skill and enthusiasm that music which most clearly speaks of God they can transform our egotistical worship. Their music can express personal experience in an impersonal format, it can resolve the tension of feeling and intellect, and it can delineate the sense of mystery that is often a neglected element in our forms of public worship.

To do this music must have a less restricted part to play. It must become not merely music in worship, but be recognised as a valid

part of the whole activity of prayer. It must be used imaginatively both within and outside set forms of service; we cannot afford to let music be strait-jacketed by the parochialism of some liturgical trends.

The struggle to give music its due place in church is a continuing one, and we shall always be countered by those who prefer to have no ears to hear. That particular problem was put neatly by Robert Bridges when he said: 'It seems perhaps a pity that nature should have arranged that where the people are musical they would rather listen, and where they are unmusical they would all rather sing'. The Church Music Society can now turn its attention to showing to all, including those described by Bridges, the logic and reason that underlies its objective of encouraging 'the study and practice of the best church music in this country'.