

CHURCH MUSIC SOCIETY
Shorter Papers No. 10

THE
MUSIC OF THE
PARISH CHURCH

by

A MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY OF THE
SACRED MISSION

Price 6d.

Published for the Church Music Society by

GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
LONDON

1948

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THE importance of music in the worship of the church has long been recognized, and those who know anything of the meaning of worship are agreed that the dedication of music to such a use demands of it the highest standard that can be attained. These claims, unfortunately, are not always justified in practice. It frequently happens that the music chosen for parish church choirs is either unsuitable in itself or is strictly beyond the choir's capacity. It is with the causes of this failure and its remedies that this article is concerned.

There are many things to be considered besides the quality of the music, including even the design and acoustics of the building in which it is proposed to use it. But the chief thing to be borne in mind is the peculiar character of English church services. They are not concerts, and they are not community singing. They are authoritative forms of corporate worship with a clear structure and balance, which is to be illustrated and enriched by music, and not overlaid by it or altered for it. The choice of music must therefore depend on a strict observance of liturgical principles.

The English Prayer Book has a distinctive liturgical character. It gives a form of the daily office which is meant to be a joint effort of priest and people and not, as is the case elsewhere in Christendom, of a choir of religious members perhaps assisted by a *schola cantica*. This fact provides musical opportunities, and imposes musical limitations. Again, it is distinctive of the Prayer Book that all the liturgical words are meant to be audible and intelligible to the whole congregation; there is a strong emphasis on edification as a means to good worship, not as a substitute for it as critics sometimes suggest.

No disparagement is here intended of that tradition in English music which is the legitimate heir of the medieval religious choir and *schola cantica*: I mean the tradition maintained in the old cathedrals, the royal peculiars, and in some colleges at

Oxford and Cambridge. Our English liturgy is also the successor of the medieval divine office, and it is worthily rendered in this way, provided that the chapter and choir are the main people to be considered. Again, I am not arguing that an ordinary lay congregation cannot worship at a full 'cathedral' service. It can be done by many people, as the eucharist can be devoutly attended by many people with a purely mental, and no vocal, participation. But neither of these things is primarily in the spirit of the Prayer Book liturgy, and they should not normally be required of parish church congregations. In this respect it seems that the old Camden Society was wrong, and all too successful, in recommending every parish church that could muster any sort of choir to model its procedure on cathedrals. Many of the things that do harm to 'music as worship' in parish churches come from following this bad advice. In another respect our cathedrals ought to be an example to parish churches, in so far as they set the standard of a clear, accurate, and rubrical rendering of the Prayer Book rite. But our concern here is with the parish churches themselves.

The Prayer Book services point to an open church, with the congregation a single worshipping unit in full view of the altar, pulpit, reading-desk, and lectern. The choir is not there as a corporation of clerics, but as a body of lay people who are to lead the congregation's singing. This is their chief function; if they also render music by themselves sometimes, it is important to know what parts of the liturgy they can fittingly monopolize. The best place for them is at the west end of the church, which they usually occupied until the Camdenians persuaded them that they were a minor order of clerics and ought to wear ecclesiastical dress and sit college-wise in a chancel, usually much too small for them, where their efforts give far less support to the congregation. The organ also was removed from its ideal place on the west wall, and put either in the chancel, helping the choir to separate the people from the altar, or in an organ chamber or old chantry chapel which reduced its tone. Even where there is no gallery, the choir may still be at the

west end or in the front rows of the nave. A further advantage in not dressing the choir as clerics is that women can be included without their being dressed as clerics too. Again, if the choir is at the back, it can fittingly and unobtrusively be conducted. At present, choirs often fight shy of trying any parts of the service unaccompanied, not from fear of dropping in pitch, but because they cannot keep together, and so are still less capable of helping the congregation to keep together.

There are several other general principles which follow from an attempt to express in music the distinctive character of Prayer Book worship. (a) We should, in general, have much more unison in proportion to harmony than we usually do. There is little gain in the choir singing in harmony those parts of the service in which the congregation join. You get neither the broad effect of unison nor the balanced effect of harmony. Individual verses of hymns may well be sung by the choir alone in harmony, if the congregation has been informed which these are to be. If choirmen are reluctant to sing in unison, tact may be needed, but there is no need to jettison the principle. (b) All congregational music, since it is to be sung in unison, should therefore be melodic, and never depend on its vertical harmonic structure. (c) It should not be pitched high. Our congregations may perhaps be mostly female, but women no longer young do not sound well on notes above E flat, any more than men do. We pitch our music too often to suit (or even to show off) well-trained choirboys' voices. (d) The congregational music should be such as will procure broad effects, and not involve sudden changes in time or tone. (e) It should be seldom changed. That which does not wear well should not be used. (f) It should be rendered less loudly than much of what we now hear. Congregational singing needs a restrained unanimity which is spoiled by shouting. (g) Lastly, we should not have music in every possible place of the liturgy, and responses at least may well be unaccompanied.

How are we to help the congregation to co-operate? Congregational practices, perhaps before Sunday evensong, are

quite practicable in many places. Even if only twenty people attend them they will make all the difference at the service because they will be distributed about the church. Unanimity of utterance can be greatly helped by the organist and choir if they will allow the natural pauses between verses which a body of untrained voices needs and will unconsciously adopt if they are allowed to do so. Perhaps the chief source of timidity in a singing congregation is uncertainty about what is going to happen next, a verse in descant or a verse by the choir alone in harmony, for which the congregation is unprepared. The solution is to warn the people beforehand in the parish magazine; this is better than prolonged announcements in church.

It is impossible here to discuss at length the suitability of plainsong for an ordinary parish church. Plainly, it conforms admirably to the principles we have listed; it is unisonal, purely melodic, moderate in pitch, does not depend on sudden effects, wears well, gives no scope for shouting, and is the better for being unaccompanied where this is practicable. But there is no doubt that we do not often hear it well done in parish churches. I suggest that one main reason for this is that where people are accustomed to singing most of the liturgical music in the modern idiom they cannot readily shake off its influence for occasional bits of plainsong. Where the psalms, canticles, and the ordinary of the eucharist are habitually sung to plainsong, provided of course that organist and choirmaster are instructive and sympathetic, an ordinary musical congregation can do it quite respectably. The difficulty is not due to the modal scales, nor to the absence of metrical bars. It comes from the necessity of subordinating the phrasing to the rhythm and sense of the words. This is shown by the fact that the psalms are the hardest part of the liturgy for a congregation to render well in plainsong.

Generally speaking, it will rarely be advisable to have plainsong chanting in ordinary parish churches, since few of them are prepared to have it exclusively and if they do not they cannot hope to do it really well. But where there is a school, or a

guild of young people who sing together regularly at worship, plainsong may well be used. For ordinary congregations, there are plenty of strong unison settings, not all modal, for the liturgical services; and for the psalms, one had better make a virtue of necessity and use anglican chants with one of the modern psalters pointed on trochaic or dactylic lines.

The psalms are not intended primarily for personal use. We recite them as members of the church: they express the aspiration and faith of the whole body of Christ, in relation to the manifold varieties of human experience from which they spring and which are all comprehended within their range. Furthermore, they are at one with all the other forms which comprise the corpus of the liturgical services and bear record with them to the saving work of God through Christ. It follows that the music used should provide both a fitting vehicle for that which is common to the whole church and also a worthy vesture for words which enshrine the mystery of our salvation. In accordance with these criteria, we must exclude from our services both that kind of music which merely expresses sensuous human emotion (e.g. sentimental vesper hymns), and also music which, though beautiful in itself, is not consonant with the spirit of the liturgy.

We are now in a position to indicate which parts of the services may be rendered by the choir alone. They are clearly those parts which lie outside everything that the Prayer Book has provided for corporate use. At morning and evening prayer, this seems to mean only the anthem after the third collect (and, as was mentioned earlier, occasional verses in a hymn). At the eucharist, it will mean the proper introit, gradual, and so on, if these are to be sung, and the *benedictus* and *agnus* later on. The creed and *gloria* should be congregational.

Hymn tunes should, of course, conform to the general principles listed earlier in the article, i.e. they should be melodic and reasonable in pitch. The problem of the old but indefensible favourites does not admit of any general solution, for

it depends too much on the particular congregation and the particular tune; but something may be said about the number and length of hymns. They are often, nowadays, too many and too long. This is due sometimes to the lack of other congregational music, so that the people have to make up by singing many hymns; or it may be due to an abhorrence of silence in church, almost parallel to nature's proverbial abhorrence of a vacuum. Corporate worship does not demand continuous corporate music. There should be no hymn in morning or evening prayer until we have prayed 'O Lord, open thou our lips', and none before the third collect except an office hymn with a definite relation to the proper of the day. At the eucharist, while we need not insist on making it a principle that hymns should never hold up proceedings at the altar, we should restrict them within reasonable limits, and on Sunday mornings many people have other duties to perform besides their worship. It may well be that by having five longish hymns we keep some people from coming to church at all, and at a time when they most want to come and we most want to see them there; for many worshippers rightly dislike to leave before the end of the service.

Everything I have said in this article is a variation on one theme: that if our church music is to be worship it must be integrated with the liturgical text by exemplifying its principles. Those principles are exacting, and require from everyone a sustained and active share in rendering the common liturgy. There is no place for an audience, for the whole action of the liturgy is that of the one worshipping body, the local gathering of the family of God. Against this neither organist nor choir have any separate rights, either on musical or any other grounds. They are there to take their specifically musical part in the one act of common worship.

E. C.