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Church Music Society

# MUSIC IN LARGER COUNTRY AND IN SMALLER TOWN CHURCHES

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BY  
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## Music in Larger Country and in Smaller Town Churches

THE first object of any enrichment of the Church's worship, such as music, must of course be to do something, however small, to the praise and honour of God. About that aspect of the matter nothing more need here be said. The intention of this paper is to suggest how our music may be made more helpful to the worshippers taking part in the Church's services.

Two points often are overlooked. Boldness, vigour, and heartiness are apt to be the only ends we set before ourselves in the ordering of our Church music. These are all very well in their way; but we must also remember the need of devotion and solemnity in worship. If the latter are to be attained, there must also be found in our music elements of sweetness and reticence and humbleness. Again, the educative aspect of Church music is often forgotten. An immense work could be done by our choirmasters and choirs in the way of teaching congregations to appreciate



what is noble and strong and clean in the way of music.

In truth we want to overhaul most of our present methods and aims. We are like well-to-do people who have inherited a house that is little suited to their present requirements, but who, from sheer want of initiative, go on contentedly putting up with its inconveniences, when with a little effort valuable improvements might be made. A tradition has of late been handed down in the Anglican Communion that every parish church with any pretensions to importance should offer all the components of a full cathedral service. Even if this were not an impossibility, it may further be questioned whether our cathedrals at present deserve to be held up for imitation in this matter, whether they present us with the sort of music that is devotional and artistic in the best sense. Again, we are obsessed by the idea that a true standard of Church song has been set by the *Cathedral Prayer Book*, the tunes found in the 1889 edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, and the kind of compositions that are not unfairly represented by Stainer's *Crucifixion*. These forms of art may be good or bad in themselves. That is a matter of opinion. But they must be judged solely on their merits; we are in no way bound to go on using them, if we can find something better.

Once more, a real artistic mistake is made when, in planning out the music of a Church service, the whole is considered rather as a choir performance than as a

united action in which the part to be taken by the congregation is provided for not less than that of the choir. The result from a listener's position down in the church becomes entirely unsatisfactory. The congregation have a right to join in certain parts of the service, and they will do so. If their efforts are provided for and organized, the entire effect of the singing will be massive and dignified. Otherwise there will be a sense of something scrappy and intrusive; when, for instance, the people take part in the Responses and the Psalms.

It may be well to consider, quite briefly, some of the various parts of our service.

Throughout the *Responses*, what sounds best in the church is an even, unisonous tone produced by the congregation, with some harmonized backing by the choir. Obviously this result can best be reached when the so-called 'Ferial' forms are *always* employed. To have men's voices in the church attempting to sing the treble part of Tallis's Festal harmonies has an intolerably bad effect. And it is no good to say that these amateur singers ought to be doing something else. You have to think of what will actually occur; not, like the proverbially bad carpenter, to find fault with your tools.

In the *Psalms*, also, when Anglican chants are employed, there is constantly a fatal want of correspondence between what the choir are after and the efforts of the congregation. The men down in the church find themselves ignored. For what can they



do when chants are used that run up to E or F, and have reciting notes on D? In this part of the service there ought to be a good deal of unison singing. The choir-master makes a profound mistake if he only thinks about what will show off the voices of the choir-boys. Let him sometimes go to the end of the nave and study the whole ensemble from a larger point of view. He will find, when chants that have a strong melody and a reasonable compass are employed, how really fine the large body of tone thus produced can be. It is also much to be wished that the selection of Psalms now authorized for use at Sunday services in some dioceses could be taken advantage of more generally. Choirs and congregations would so be enabled to become really familiarized with a part of the office that under present conditions changes too often for the practical objects of singing.

The *Canticles*, at any rate on Festivals, may often be left to the choir; but at ordinary times, when they are sung to chants, it may be well to mark out their prominence by adopting a slower pace for them than is customary for the Psalms. 'Walmisley in D Minor' would seem to be the outstanding model of what is best for the Evening Canticles. Excellent settings have been produced by Stanford, Harwood, Noble, and others. But it is lamentable how often one is oppressed in our churches by the weak melancholy of a setting of the Magnificat like those of Bunnett. And there are still feebler imitations of this weariful form of writing which are pushed upon choirs as

'having been sold by thousands.' Here is a part of our service which ought to be full of joyous strength, and the effect of either services, or chants, pervaded with a die-away sentimentality is quite lamentable.

*Anthems* as a rule should be short, and whenever they can be sung without accompaniment a welcome relief will be afforded to effect of constant organ-tone throughout the whole of a service. When anthems are prolonged and when perhaps only the first sentence of what has to be sung is announced to the listeners, one wonders that congregations do not rise in revolt. It is indeed an extraordinary trial of patience to stand through a musical composition of perhaps three lengthy movements, when the performance is mediocre, the music somewhat conventional and thin, and when you have only the vaguest idea of what it is all about. And yet a concise little setting like the familiar one of 'Lord, for Thy tender mercies' sake' might form a refreshing break in the midst of Mattins or Evensong.

The question as to what music should be provided for the Choral *Eucharist* is to many of us possessed of supreme importance; yet it is one of great difficulty and it really demands a separate pamphlet. All one can say is that in this, as in other parts of our service, it is well for many reasons to enlist the co-operation of the congregation. In some churches you hear elaborate Masses attempted by inefficient choirs. The intention is good, but the artistic result is quite deplorable. Again, when feeble harmonized settings, like 'Woodward in E Flat,' are employed, the music-



lover says to himself, 'Must not the Church be growing effete when her people enjoy such sorry stuff?' One solution of the problem is that the ancient plainsong settings of the Credo and the Gloria in Excelsis, or those by Merbecke, should be sung every Sunday by choir and congregation, of course in unison; while other parts of the office, such as the Sanctus, are rendered by the choir in the strongest and simplest music that can be obtained. In this case, when 'Merbecke' is sung, one of the most recently published arrangements should be used. The setting in the *Cathedral Prayer Book* is altogether wrong, in the way that it tries to cramp the old, free melody into formal groups of 'bars.' Here the matter must be left, though much might be said about the incongruity of the pretty 'Kyries,' Amens, and so on, that often break fatally into the seriousness of this grandest act of worship.

A successful experiment has been carried out in certain churches, where, for various reasons, it is deemed inexpedient to interfere with the customary 11 a.m. Mattins led by a surpliced choir. At some such hour as 10 a.m. the Eucharist is sung *by members of the congregation only*. Plainsong or Merbecke's setting should then be used. Congregational practises must of course be arranged, and it is most desirable that some person should supervise this 'people's song' who has had practical experience in the right way of rendering it. An organist is required who will be content to take a back place. It will also be a great

gain if the *English Hymnal* can then be used. Given these favourable conditions, such a service may be as beautiful as devotional. Certainly it would appeal to the musician—unless there lies at the back of his mind some rooted conviction that nothing can be right which lies outside conventional Anglican traditions in regard to Church music.

In regard to *Hymns*, the first thing to be insisted upon is that the basis of their adequate rendering must be singing in unison. Here, all the editions of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, even the latest Appendix, are calculated to lead us astray. Many of the melodies run too high for men's voices; and constantly the impression is produced that other vocal parts must be added, if the tune is to have any real significance. In this connection, let any one consider the effect of tunes like those by Dykes for 'Eternal Father' and for 'Lord of Glory' when the treble part alone is sung. The result is curiously poverty-stricken and meaningless—something like that of a bird denuded of its feathers! Lest any one should feel that over-much stress is here being laid, even in connection with hymn-tunes, on the fundamental importance of insisting upon melody rather than harmony, it may be well to quote what has recently been said by one who is a considerable authority on musical matters—Dr. Buck. Speaking on the advantages of unison singing, he said that 'First, it was a well-known fact that voices of no value individually sounded well when a large number joined in unison. The vocal



faults of the person were of little or no consequence when that person became merely one of a crowd. Secondly, this excellent result could be obtained with the minimum of time and trouble (no small consideration in these busy days), so that instead of spending a good deal of pains in obtaining little more than a travesty of part-singing, we got with very little effort a fine and stirring musical effect. Thirdly, the pitch being necessarily low, the congregation was able to join in with ease. Fourthly, unison singing was an unfailing test of the value of the music. Only a melody of robust type could survive the ordeal. Weak tunes that were able to make a fair show when regarded as sacred part-songs were soon "combed-out" when sung by a large body of voices and put on their trial as melodies. He believed that the fine musical effect of unison singing was not sufficiently realized in this country. By all means let us enjoy beautiful part-singing, but let us also realize that this could be obtained only from material and training that were not available in a very large number of places. The people in these less-favoured spots have a fine thing at hand in unison singing, and should make the most of it.

Here it is necessary to insist that if our hymn-singing is to take on a more solid and impressive character, we must try by degrees to improve the character of the music that we employ. Let us get rid at once of the mistaken notion that every hymn must be sung to the tune affixed to it in a particular book.

If, for instance, in a church where the older edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* is in use, copies of the *English Hymnal* were to be provided for the organist and the choir, then many useful departures might gradually be made. Try, for instance, some of the many L.M. or C.M. tunes taken from old French or from English folk-song sources: such as Nos. 18, 181, 597, 186, 611, 638. A welcome bit of freshness will be introduced into your Church music, and, before long, the people will get hold of something they will learn to love much more than some of the weak compositions now in use, of which many of us are so weary.

Finally, let no one imagine what has here been said is prompted by any sort of clerical desire to clip the wings of aspiring musicians and to hinder their desire to do something distinguished and progressive in their art. On the contrary, every endeavour of choirmasters, organists, and choirs to give of their best for the service of God's House is worthy of high praise. Only, as regards the majority of English churches, it cannot be said that, in the opinion of competent and up-to-date musicians, the results achieved have been commensurate with the labour expended. Fragmentary suggestions have therefore been made as to the directions in which we might try to move forward, if our Church music is to become in a truer sense artistic, and at the same time more genuinely devotional.