

AUTHOR'S NOTE TO SECOND EDITION

ALTHOUGH some portions of this paper have special reference to difficulties brought about by the war, there seems to be no need for the removal or modification of such passages. The difficulties are of a type that constantly recur from a variety of causes, and the general principles I have ventured to lay down are not affected.

It should be added that since the paper was written the supply of such music as faux-bourbons, good simple settings of the Office of Holy Communion, and organ voluntaries based on hymn-tunes, &c., has been considerably increased—so much so that a list here is impracticable. The bulk of such music is published by Messrs. Novello & Co., The Faith Press, and Messrs. Curwen.

September 1922

NOTE TO THIRD EDITION

THE appearance of this paper in its third edition would have given the author great satisfaction. His death, which caused deep sorrow in the musical world, took place soon after he had promised to make some slight revising of its pages which should bring them more exactly into line with present conditions.

There is to-day a firm and steady demand for a reprint of a pamphlet which has proved useful to many organists and such of the clergy as have the future of Church Music at heart.

It is felt that the few alterations needed for this re-issue—offered in grateful remembrance of the author—would have met with his entire and cordial approval.

August 1944

MUSIC IN PARISH CHURCHES

A Plea for the Simple

I

CATHEDRALS and collegiate churches on the one hand and village churches on the other have their musical course defined—at least, in a general sense. The former inherit certain traditions from which (apparently) only very slight departures are possible; the latter, owing chiefly to poverty of vocal material and the cost of maintaining a 'whole-time' trained musician, are compelled to keep to simple musical paths, the chief point on which they are likely to need guidance being the choice of the right kind of simple work. Between these two extremes are to be found churches with choirs of almost every conceivable degree of efficiency. Perhaps the class most largely represented is that of the average town parish church with fair to good choir (chiefly or entirely voluntary), no lack of useful voices, a capable organist and choirmaster, and a choir fund able to maintain a steadily growing library.

What should be the musical policy of such a church?

With skilfully directed enthusiasm and hard work the singers can always give creditable and often excellent performances of any church music save the most difficult. They are not bound, like the cathedral choir, by tradition; or handicapped, like the village choir, by lack of ability. Any check on their exuberance must be more or less voluntary.

Many things hitherto regarded as excellent are now weighed and found wanting; others require modification to suit the present abnormal conditions. As it is certain that normal conditions will not return for a long time (in some respects never), and as there is a general disposition to regard the conduct of our church services as being among the things that must be overhauled, it may be profitable to consider the future of choirs of this class.

Let us try to put fairly the case for and against elaborate service-music in parish churches, adding a few suggestions that

may perhaps be useful in helping clergy, organists, and choirs to shed the drawbacks and retain the advantages.

Here are the most commonly used arguments in favour:

- (a) It is an artistic offering, and should be the result of the choir's utmost efforts.
- (b) It interests the choir, and so is an inducement to regular attendance at practice; also, it improves their technique.
- (c) It edifies, interests, and attracts the musical members of the congregation.
- (d) It is an embellishment of the church and its services, and is therefore on much the same footing as fine architecture, pictures, and embroidery.

There is a good deal to be said for each of these contentions, but perhaps rather less than appears at first sight.

In (a) we have a principle to which nobody can take exception. Unfortunately, the practical working of it is too often based on the assumption that the outcome of a choir's utmost efforts must necessarily be elaborate. This is a fallacy. Anybody but the merest dabbler knows that the vital and finished singing of simple music (especially unaccompanied) is one of the most searching of tests. Choirs can far more easily splash round a difficult work and give a performance that may be interesting and exciting—especially to themselves. So we find that the study of simpler music¹ frequently involves far more pains.

Add to this the self-sacrifice in working hard at such music and singing it well, knowing that the less musical members of the flock will complain that the result is not to be compared with a neighbouring choir's performance of music, the attractions of which lie on the surface, and we see that the offering is costly *because* of (not despite) its simplicity.

(b) This is a matter of expediency. By all means let choir-masters see that men who give up an evening a week to attend choir-practice shall be set interesting and congenial tasks. But let us at the same time beware of some dangers.

Attempts to make choir-practice attractive almost invariably take one of two forms—the use of (1) music the attractions of which lie on the surface, or (2) music which yields the maximum

¹ The right kind of simplicity is, of course, assumed, e.g. that of S. S. Wesley in F or Ouseley's 'How goodly are thy tents'—which are not banal.

of effect with the minimum of trouble—in short, 'showy' music.

In 1914 the Bishop of Wakefield's Committee on Church Choirs issued a report based on information supplied by incumbents and choirmasters. This interesting booklet¹ should be read by clergy and organists throughout the country. Here is a quotation bearing on the point we are considering: 'In some choirs there appears to be a difficulty in getting the adults to practise the psalms and hymns on the ground that they know them quite well already. . . . Certain lukewarmness seems to prevail as regards the rehearsal of such things as the Responses and the Litany, which, according to the replies sent in, appear to be practised only "when necessary", or "occasionally", or "never".'

What choirmaster does not know that 'certain lukewarmness'? It is one of the results of using anthems and similar attractions as a bait wherewith to draw the choirman to practice. There is nothing to be said against such a plan if, having got him there, you can inculcate a taste for such honest fare as simple and essential parts of the service done well, details looked after, and so on. But how if it ends in his acquiring a morbid appetite for bait only?

Too frequently the outcome of this policy is that choirmen in effect not only choose the music but decide what shall be practised. This is not an over-statement: honest inquiry into the reasons for the popularity of much shoddy church music and the shelving of the good and simple, with the neglect to practise psalms and hymns and other routine work, will in almost every case produce evidence that the root of the evil is the absurd consideration paid to the preferences and aversions of the choir. A choirman whose presence or absence depends on his interest in the music chosen should be got rid of speedily, no matter how good a singer he may be. This is necessary not only on disciplinary grounds. Allowed to remain, he is bound to influence the choirmaster's choice of music—very much for the worse, too, for the taste of such a one is usually on a level with his sense of duty.

(c) It is too readily taken for granted that people who are keen musicians therefore enjoy an elaborate service. Even

¹ W. H. Milnes, Wakefield. 1d.; by post 2d. A long article on the Report appeared in *The Musical Times* of January 1915.

where the music is of the best, both in choice and performance, musical people are not necessarily edified. Often they find such a service a distraction and hindrance, rather than a help, to devotion. And the more they enjoy it, the greater the risk of the musical part of the service becoming an end and not a means. We hear much of the danger of choirs developing into mere concert-parties. It is a real danger, but we must not overlook another just as real, and one affecting a much larger number of people: our congregations may easily become mere audiences.

It would be safer to assume that musical people were interested in florid services if the examples chosen were uniformly good. Choirmasters who wish to appeal to cultivated ears must give them something more suitable than indifferent adaptations of the more trivial 'sacred' music of the Viennese School, or feeble native productions that would never have seen the light had there been no Gounod.

(d) Church music is certainly an embellishment, but it differs from others in an important respect. We are not bound to look at pictures; it is not difficult to ignore floral or other decorations; we may even contrive to close our eyes to architectural beauties or deficiencies: but the music we cannot escape. The 'embellishment' argument is best answered by a question: Have we a better right to compel a congregation to listen to long-drawn, elaborate service-music than we have to insist on their looking at the cunning carving of a lectern or screen, or at pictures or church embroidery? All these things are good, but they are unessentials that may be enjoyed or ignored as the individual desires.

Bearing in mind the fact that only the deaf may escape the service-music, ought we not to make the norm simple rather than complex, even if we occasionally lose a fine singer, or a man in the pew thirsting for cheap Sunday concerts?

II

LET us digress here, and briefly consider the question of simple music in relation to the needs of to-day.

If the difficulties under which choirs are now working were likely to end with the war, there would be little need to touch

on them. But it is evident that many—if not most—churches will be faced for years with the need of rigid economy, and the choir fund is hardly likely to be overlooked when retrenchments are in the air. We may expect, too, that in the unprecedented social and industrial upheaval caused by the return to civil life of millions of men now in the armed forces, choral societies in general and church choirs in particular will find some difficulty in resuming pre-war routine. Further, there is likely to be a demand for a much more congregational type of service than has been usual in most parishes.

Ought we not to begin adapting ourselves to these new conditions? The question, of course, should not be necessary. Choirmasters should long since have begun to cut their coat according to their cloth. But many seem to be attempting to continue a fully choral service with a far from full choral force. The writer has heard, and heard of, choirs consisting of trebles and one other part wrestling with services and anthems written in four-part harmony. Hymn-tunes and Anglican chants are maltreated in the same way. This kind of thing is indefensible. We may be sure that the offending choirmaster would not dream of giving a choral concert with such sketchy effects. But here again we have another dismal proof that what is much too bad for the Parish Hall (admission 6d.) is good enough for the Parish Church (admission free).

The gaps in our choir-stalls to-day are honourable: choir-masters may well glory in their reduced forces. But they should realize that in fairness to the absent ones, to the congregation, and (not least, if they value their musical reputations) to themselves, they should 'carry on' by adopting not a lower standard of performance but a different and more suitable type of service.

Putting aside Merbecke and plainsong services, which at once occur to us as meeting the needs of depleted choirs, there is plenty of church music suitable for unison singing. Its use should encourage the congregation to lift up its voice.

There has long been too wide a gulf between the nave and the choir-stalls. Most of the difficulties of a choir will disappear when the members can be got to realize that they are primarily part of the congregation, with the further responsibility of being church workers, sitting apart, not because they do not belong to the flock, but merely in order that they may take their part

in the service the more satisfactorily. If for any good reason—such as loss of voice or late arrival—a member is unable to be in his usual place on Sunday, he should be found in the nave.

There will be less 'tyranny of the choir', slackness, and indifferent behaviour in our choir-stalls when they are reserved for such as are churchmen first and choirmen after. It will help to a realization of responsibilities all round if by the use of music sung by the people we can develop the idea of a congregation extending into the chancel and a choir into the nave. The resultant family feeling will be a welcome change from the present too common arrangement of a choral society (to become a member of which a man *may* be a Christian, but *must* be a singer) and a rather critical audience.

III

RETURNING to our main argument, let us now see how far the excellent objects aimed at by the use of elaborate service-music may be obtained by other means.

(a) As was said above, the good performance of simple music of the best class calls for a choir's utmost pains. But this does not imply that the more difficult kinds should not be attempted. There can be no question, however, that a choir constantly singing works either slightly beyond or only just within its powers is almost certain to end in being content with a 'near enough' standard of achievement. The use of simple music on (say) alternate Sundays would reduce this danger. Such a service beautifully sung would lead to both choir and congregation being dissatisfied with merely approximate renderings of more difficult music. Moreover, the constant use of the elaborate is apt to destroy a taste for the simple. It is a pity that we so often forget that in a psychological as well as a physical sense, a dislike of simple fare is a morbid sign.

(b) That the interest and technique of the choir must be maintained goes without saying. But need this be done solely by means of music sung during the service? An extension of the choir's activities in the direction of cantatas or oratorio selections for occasional performance apart from services would conduce to more interesting and varied work than the constant round of service settings, most of them very much alike in

character, and often of no great intrinsic value. The educational results of such an extension are obvious. A choir that had really mastered a Bach cantata, for example, would soon have no use for showy or trivial music.

Other ways in which a good choir may be profitably employed suggest themselves. Organ recitals gain by the inclusion of a little vocal relief. At present this usually consists of a solo, either a hackneyed oratorio air or some such song as Gounod's 'There is a green hill'. Why should not the vocal relief take the form of an item (unaccompanied, if possible) by the choir? Better still, why not sometimes reverse the process and give a choir recital with relief provided by the organ?

All sorts of interesting and profitable schemes are possible. We might have 'An hour with Purcell', or with Byrd, Gibbons, Stanford, or any other of our Church composers. An interesting programme might be made up of hymns sung by choir and people, interspersed with organ pieces based on the tunes. There is now a good store of modern English organ-music written round native hymn-melodies.¹ It would gain greatly by performance in such circumstances. Or we might take a German choral and show it under various guises.

Here is a suggestion for such a programme:

PART I

Tune: 'Vom Himmel hoch.'

1. Hymn No. 57, A. & M. (17, E. H.).

SUNG BY CHOIR AND PEOPLE.

2. Two organ preludes on the tune . . . Bach (or Reger, Karg-Elert, Piutti, Pachelbel, &c.).

3. No. 9 or 23 (or both) from *The Christmas Oratorio*.

THE CHOIR.

PART II

Tune: 'O Haupt voll Blut.'

4. Hymn No. 111, A. & M. (102, E. H.).

CHOIR AND PEOPLE.

¹ e.g. by Parry, J. E. West (Novello), Charles Wood, C. H. Kitson, Stanford (Stainer & Bell), Harold Darke, George Oldroyd, and many others.

5. Two organ preludes on the tune.
6. Chorus (one of the versions in *St. Matthew's Passion*, unaccompanied, or an extract from one of the four cantatas in which Bach uses the tune).

THE CHOIR.

7. Final chorus from *The Christmas Oratorio*.

Bach's cantatas are still available and in many cases the choruses are to be had separately. A large number of these consist of highly developed treatments of tunes familiar to English churchpeople, and would have much of the appeal of an Air with variations.

Many French carols are well known in England, and an enjoyable recital might be made up of half a dozen sung by the choir, with a few of the many charming little organ arrangements of them written by César Franck, Chauvet, Guilmant, Boëllmann, and others. Then there are plenty of small sacred choral works that cannot well be sung during a service, and yet call for performance in church in order to make their full effect. There are, for example, some fine sacred part-songs by Rheinberger and Brahms, a splendid set of Bible Songs (for bass or baritone solo, chorus, and organ) by Stanford¹—it would be easy to name many scores of suitable works. The possibilities, educational and delightful, of a monthly recital by choir, organ (and people, occasionally) are practically boundless. Here is a field presenting ample opportunities for the most ambitious of choirs, besides being a real feast for such of the congregation as choose to attend.

Such as choose to attend. . . . The point is worth thinking about for a moment. Organ-recitals are excellent functions, an admirable feature being the ease with which they may be avoided by those not interested. We should all rebel if our organists insisted on giving a recital, however excellent, during every service. Yet the majority of town parish church congregations are compelled to stand and listen while the organist and choir join forces in a long musical setting of the Nicene Creed. Merbecke's setting can be sung in two and a half minutes—practically the same time as is necessary for a deliberate recitation. Any musical setting that takes longer can be justified only

¹ Stainer & Bell.

on the ground of its superlative excellence. How many of the most widely used can pass this test?

(c) Elaborate service-music may claim to be considered seriously as an embellishment on the same footing as fine carving, pictures, or architecture, only when it is fine music. Too often its decorative analogy would be a fretwork lectern, or a pokerwork pulpit, or a screen of deal painted with red, white, and blue stripes and festooned with artificial flowers. In view of the quality of at least a third of the most popular services and anthems, the less their advocates insist on the decorative value of such music the better.

Finally, we should make much of such staple fare as hymns and chants. Is there, for example, no middle course between an Anglican chant and Stanford in A for the Evening canticles? Settings like Goss (in E), Kitson (in F), Walmisley (in C), Arnold (in A) provide the Choir with music that will keep them busy and interested.

Much may be done to improve our hymn-singing by the use of faux-bourbons (the choir providing an accompaniment to the *canto fermo* of the people); by treble descants when four-part harmony is not possible; by special treatment of refrains; by alternation of unaccompanied vocal harmony with unison and free organ part; and (a point too often overlooked) by a greater variety of pace, in accordance with the character of the hymn and the type of melody. The common practice of uniformly quick hymn-singing is intended to produce brightness, but generally ends in monotony of a particularly irritating kind. The simplest of services will never lack musical interest and dignity if it includes three or four good strong hymns, sung with expression broad and general rather than particular, and with variety of treatment. Of course, all this development of the simple and congregational element need not debar a choir from the use of fine anthems, or from suitable music at the offertory. Such efforts would gain by contrast with the broad effects of the rest of the service.

This paper may conclude by answering a reader who says: 'Most choirs and a large proportion of congregations are quite satisfied with things as they are. What do we gain by simplifying matters?' For the benefit of any who may have read so far without seeing these advantages, they may be briefly summarized:

1. Choirs will gain technically through the improved standard of performance brought about by frequent use of music well within their powers, and by being able to devote more time to the preparation of elaborate work for festivals. Also they will be able to widen their horizon by the study of music for use apart from services.

2. Services will be considerably shortened without loss of essentials, and those of the congregation who have no liking for lengthy musical settings will not be compelled to listen to them.

3. An impetus will be given to congregational singing. A Choral Celebration sung by choir and people at least once a month could easily be made a regular feature. Plainsong is best for this purpose, but suitable modern settings may be had, and more would be forthcoming on increased demand.

4. The frequent absence of definite musical attractions would speedily sift both choir and congregation, and we should see (perhaps with surprise) how many came for the music and how many for devotion.

5. While in the long run choirs would gain musically, they would also gain morally from the self-denial brought about by the study of music giving them fewer opportunities for display. At present their work usually costs them nothing beyond the time spent at practice. When they also have to sink their preferences, take great pains to achieve results of a type likely to call forth scanty approval from the crowd, and eschew some delicacies in favour of fare wholesome, but at first forbiddingly plain, they may indeed claim that they are not offering that which costs them nothing.

As for the contention that a good proportion of our congregations are satisfied with things as they are, we may be sure that if churches had been provided a generation ago with pulpits, lecterns, and screens of the kind mentioned above, a surprisingly large number of church-goers of to-day would be quite satisfied with such furniture—indeed, not a few would object to good woodwork as being not 'bright' enough.

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MUSIC IN PARISH CHURCHES

A Plea for the Simple

BY

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