

Church Music Society

*The Singing of the Psalms and
Canticles to Anglican Chants*

For Small Town and Village Choirs

No. 6

BY

A. HASTINGS KELK, M.A.

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THE SINGING OF THE PSALMS AND CANTICLES TO ANGLICAN CHANTS FOR SMALL TOWN AND VILLAGE CHOIRS

PART I. HOW TO SING THE PSALMS

‘Be filled with the Spirit, speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your hearts to the Lord.’

‘I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the understanding also.’

Introductory

ONE of the main objects of the Services of Matins and Evensong is to set forth the praise of God, and the chief channels for the expression of praise are the Psalter and Canticles.

The Revised Use of the Psalter. For those who attend the Daily Offices the division of the Psalter into 60 portions, two for each day of the month, is an excellent arrangement. In these days, however, the number of people who go to church every day of the week is very small, so that only the Sunday Psalms are heard by the majority. It is true that the result of the varying number of days in each month is that all the Psalms occur on a Sunday once in every year, most of them twice, and some of them three times; but there is no order in their occurrence, and it sometimes happens that the Psalms on a particular Sunday are quite inappropriate. For instance, the 51st or 88th Psalm may fall on the first Sunday after Easter, or the Psalms for the 30th Evening during Lent. In view of this the authorities

of the Church have recently suggested as an alternative use Proper Psalms for every Sunday, avoiding those which are unsuited to the character of the season, and going through the Psalter on an intelligible system. Though this arrangement is to remain quite voluntary, it is to be hoped that it will be generally adopted as more suited than the old system to the needs of to-day.

Importance of Good Chanting. Both Psalms and Canticles are intended to be sung, and their rendering is the most important part of the work of the choir in Matins and Evensong. However perfectly Anthems and Services are rendered, no choir can be considered efficient unless the chanting is well done. It is probably the most difficult part of the Service, and yet it is the part to which the least attention is paid, being often treated as if it needed no practice. Failure in chanting arises mainly from three causes: (1) a faulty system of pointing, (2) failure to understand the system in use, and (3) carelessness in performance.

The Writer's Aim. The aim of the present pamphlet is not to weigh the merits of the different existing systems of pointing, nor to bring forward a new system (though in the opinion of the writer there is ample room for reform), but rather to make suggestions as to the best way of carrying out existing systems, and to give hints as to their possible improvement in certain particulars.

The writer has in mind mainly the needs of small town or village choirs, though much that is said will apply equally to choirs of larger size and higher musical attainments.

Nothing is here said as to the respective merits of Gregorian and Anglican chants, but the pamphlet is written for those who use the latter.

I. Pointing

There are various systems of pointing the Psalms for singing to Anglican Chants, and most of these are open to

criticism. But under a good choirmaster, who thoroughly understands the true principles of chanting, and is ready to spend time and trouble, they can be made to serve till a better is forthcoming.

Freedom of Rhythm. At the outset it must be remembered that the chanting of the Psalms is a convention. This is true to a certain extent of all vocal music, but especially when the words have to be moulded into a fixed musical form. Nearly all modern hymn-tunes, for instance, are in strict 2, 3, or 4 time, with regularly recurring accents. In few cases, however, does the verbal accent coincide with the musical beat in every line of a hymn. To take a familiar hymn, 'O God, our help in ages past'. Here there are three places where a divorce of accents occurs:—'Under the shadow of Thy throne'—'Short as the watch which ends the night'—'Dies at the opening day.' In the first of these, some editions have substituted the word 'beneath' to make the accents coincide. In the Psalms, when sung to Anglican chants, this irregularity is greatly increased by the fact that the words are in free rhythm with no regularly recurring accents, while the melody, after the recitation in each half-verse, is barred for singing in strict time with regular accents. Thus there must inevitably be many cases where the accents fall unsatisfactorily; the number of syllables to a note being also variable. It should be the aim of good chanting to make these unsatisfactory features as little apparent as possible.

The prevailing system of pointing by means of perpendicular lines corresponding to the bars of the music is apt to cause a squareness and stiffness which is unsuited to the rhythm of the words. This fault is aggravated by the direction in some Psalters that all except the recitation should be sung in strict time.

The issuing with authority of the alternative 'Order how the Psalter is appointed to be read' will no doubt be used as an occasion for the publication of new Pointed Psalters, and it is much to be wished that in

such Psalters bars will be abolished, and a system of marking the accents more suggestive of free rhythm be adopted. One might even go further and suggest that a chant-book should be issued with accents instead of bars.

But it must be remembered that no system can be satisfactory unless it is intelligently interpreted by the choir-master, and unless his instructions are carefully followed by the choir. Much too depends on the organ accompaniment. Whatever system is used the object of the singers should be to get as near to a *free rhythm* as the Anglican form of chant will allow.

The First Accent. There are various ways of marking the first accent in each half of the verse, where the metrical portion of the chant is supposed to begin. This is usually done either (1) by an accent (^ or /), (2) by the use of thicker type, (3) by superimposed notes indicating the distribution of the semibreve over the various syllables, or (4) by prosody marks (- and ∪) indicating a long or short syllable. Of these (2) is the most satisfactory, as it most easily catches the eye; (3) is much too stiff and mechanical; and both (3) and (4) are apt to be misleading unless very carefully interpreted.

The first accent should not be over-emphasized, and should be approached with the utmost possible smoothness. It sometimes falls on a syllable which is not of very great importance and would in reading be quite unaccented. In these cases it should be passed over as lightly as possible, as nearly like reading as the music will allow. When it falls on such a word as 'and' or 'for', and no other words follow before the second accent, the note should be much shorter than the two beats of the printed music—about the length of a crotchet—and should be sung without any accent. Where there are three or four syllables assigned to this note they should be sung smoothly and evenly, and with a certain relaxation of the time. These are details which require much practice, but the smoothness and ease of rhythm thus gained is well worth the trouble.

Subsidiary Accents. It sometimes inevitably happens that the second accent in the first half of the verse, and the second or third in the second half, must fall on a syllable which in reading would be unaccented. This syllable should always be sung as lightly as possible to make the verse run smoothly and to preserve the natural rhythm of the words. The rhythm will vary considerably in different verses, the chief accent falling now on one bar and now on another, as the sense of the words suggests.

Final Accent. When, as frequently happens according to the pointing of many Psalters, more than one syllable falls to the last note of the chant, these should be sung smoothly and evenly to avoid an unseemly clatter at the end of the verse. Practically this smoothness will be attained by a slight dwelling on the first syllable. Such words as 'tabernacle', 'testimonies', &c., when they fall on the last note, require very great care, and the note must be prolonged beyond the orthodox two beats. In the Psalter edited by Baker and Monk, and in another by A. H. Brown, this difficulty is avoided by dividing all concluding words of more than one syllable between the last two bars, giving only one syllable to the last note. But this creates another difficulty, either making the concluding accent fall on a syllable which requires no accent, or throwing it back on to the preceding bar, thus making a feminine ending, which if it occurs often in the Psalm has a weak effect. These concluding polysyllables will always be more or less unsatisfactory in Anglican chanting, but if care be taken, and free rhythm be aimed at rather than singing in strict time, their unsatisfactory character will be minimized. In one or two cases a wise choir-master will probably take the liberty of altering the existing pointing. For instance, in Psalm 119, v. 24, the pointing of some Psalters, '-ánd | -- | my | counsellors', is as unsatisfactory as it could be. Pointed thus: 'and | my | counsel | lers', and sung: 'ánd mÿ counsellors', it would be far less displeasing.

Enunciation, Pronunciation, Stops, &c. It is absolutely essential to good chanting that every syllable be clearly enunciated. Vocal music is intended to bring out, not to obscure, the meaning of the words to which it is set. This purpose is entirely defeated if the words are not distinctly audible. If every syllable in the recitation is clear and deliberate the rest of the verse will probably take care of itself. The common tendency to sing the Psalms too fast is a frequent cause of indistinctness of utterance. This is especially the case when there is a long recitation on the first note.

As the language of the Psalter is more or less archaic, and as singing should be more exact than reading, the final *-ed* should almost always be sung as a separate syllable. But in such words as *trembled* the modern pronunciation would seem preferable to *trem-bled*, and in certain cases euphony would suggest a relaxation of the principle. The word *mischievous* should be marked with an accent on the first syllable to avoid the vulgar pronunciation *mischiévous*. In such a word as *communing* or a name like *Zabulon*, about the pronunciation of which doctors differ, the choirmaster, perhaps with the advice of the incumbent, should decide whether the accent be on the first or second syllable.

The marking of stops should be as in good reading. That all may do this alike, stops which are not to be observed ought to be erased, or some mark inserted to show which are to be observed.

II. Choice of Chants

Another point of the utmost importance is the selection of chants.

Melody. In the first place these should be melodious, and should not depend on the harmony for their effect. Accidentals should be avoided as much as possible, particularly on the reciting note. The melody should be worthy of its sacred purpose, and should not be light and

jingling, or sentimental. This latter does not mean that it should not be expressive.

Compass. If the people are expected to sing, the compass should not be great and the reciting note should not be high. This may rule out some favourite chants, but many chants which are quite unfit for congregational singing as they stand, may be brought within the compass of average voices by transposing to a lower key, especially if sung in unison. It is well perhaps to remember that the compass of voices varies in different places. For instance, in the West Riding of Yorkshire and in many parts of Wales an average congregation can sing with comfort at least a tone higher than in many other parts of the country.

Suitability to Sentiment and Structure. The chants should also be carefully chosen to suit the character and structure of the Psalm. In this Chant Books are not always successful, the question of structure being in many cases practically ignored. But if we are to sing with the understanding as well as with the spirit, reason seems to suggest that both the sentiment and the structure of the Psalms should be taken into account. This has been very carefully worked out in Dr. Westcott's Paragraph Psalter.

Changes of Chant. Not only should Psalms of a sad and penitential character be sung to different chants from those used for Psalms of joy and praise, but also a manifest change of sentiment in the course of a Psalm is best marked by a change of chant. Where the change of sentiment lasts only for a verse or two, unless it be at the end of a Psalm, a change is not advisable. Also in cases where the alternations between joy and sorrow, praise and prayer, are frequent, a chant should be chosen which is not too characteristic of either sentiment. Many small choirs are afraid of changes, lest some one should forget, and continue to sing the same chant as before. This caution is wise, and certainly small choirs of untrained singers should not attempt too many changes.

But if the second chant follows easily and naturally after the first in a related key, if every Psalter be clearly marked wherever a change is to be made, and if the Psalms be thoroughly well practised beforehand, there are few choirs which could not make the changes quite satisfactorily. The change should be marked by a brief dwelling on the last note and a very slight pause before the new chant is begun, because the change marks a distinct period in the Psalm and the beginning of a new paragraph. One frequently hears the first chord of the new chant struck almost before the old one is finished. This at once shows that the organist lacks confidence in his choir, which again probably means insufficient rehearsal and neglect of marking the books.

Structure of the Psalms. Changes of chant are effective not only in Psalms where joy is succeeded by penitence, or prayer by praise, but also where the Psalm is clearly divided into paragraphs. For such changes Dr. Westcott's Paragraph Psalter may be taken as a guide; though the paragraphs are so numerous that only the most important can be taken into account. Among the longer Psalms, Nos. 18 and 68 may be mentioned as instances where changes of chant help to bring out the meaning. The former requires three chants, changing at vv. 16 and 31, while the latter requires one chant for the first eighteen verses, a second to the end of v. 31, and a return to the first for the last four verses and the Gloria. Among the shorter Psalms, No. 27 is divided into two paragraphs at v. 8, while the meaning of Psalm 45 is greatly helped by a change at v. 11. In Psalm 147, where there is a threefold call to praise, the structure seems to suggest three single chants, the changes being made at vv. 7 and 12; and if vv. 1, 7, and 12 are sung full and in unison, the rest being in harmony, the effect is still more striking. In any case, in singing such a Psalm, even if the chant be not changed, the three verses mentioned should be sung full and in unison, with a brief pause before 7 and 12.

Single and Double Chants. Dr. Westcott in his Paragraph Psalter makes it quite clear that only certain Psalms are suitable for double chants. There are a few Psalms where the verses run entirely in pairs. These are better sung to double chants than to single. In other Psalms the sequence of pairs is broken in one or more places. If a double chant be used for these, the verse which breaks the sequence should be sung to the second half of the chant, or the two-verse structure will be broken for the rest of the Psalm. But if this occurs more than once in a short Psalm, the repetition of the second half becomes irritating, and in such cases it is better to use a single chant. In some cases this difficulty can be overcome by combining two verses in one, or dividing one verse into two. Sometimes the Bible version supports this alteration. If a new pointed Psalter is issued one would like to see this indicated in certain cases. It has already been done in the Cathedral Paragraph and the Ripon Psalters, and more frequently—too frequently for practical purposes—in Dr. Westcott's Psalter.

There are three Psalms, Nos. 2, 76, and 137, where the verses run in threes, and a few others where the threefold structure runs through part of the Psalm. In these cases some Psalters suggest triple chants. In the writer's opinion they are much better sung to single chants, as the triple form is unsatisfactory in practice.

III. *Methods of Chanting*

Antiphonal Singing. An important feature of Hebrew poetry is its parallelism. This sometimes takes the form of a repetition of a statement or sentiment in different words, and at other times of contrasted statements. To bring out this parallelism the Psalms should where possible be sung antiphonally. The most usual method is for one side of the choir (Decani) to take the odd verses, and the other (Cantoris) the even. In a large

number of Psalms, however, the parallelism is between the half verses. In some Psalters it is suggested that certain Psalms be sung in this way. But it needs a choir of considerable excellence to do this effectively. Few village choirs are large enough to sing antiphonally either in the whole verse or half verse method, and in any case this is usually ignored by the congregation. A much more effective method of antiphonal singing is for the trebles and men's voices to sing the alternate verses or half verses, both of course singing in unison. Or, where the people are able to sing, the choir may sing one verse, either in harmony or unison, and the congregation the next in unison.

Unison Singing. In many village choirs it is impossible to get a good balance of parts, in fact there are many where one part is entirely missing. In such cases it is much better to sing the Psalms entirely in unison. This, however, is a change which is sometimes very difficult to introduce, as many men who either can, or think they can, sing the tenor or bass part feel almost insulted if asked to sing the melody, often making the excuse that unison singing injures the voice. This prejudice is unreasonable, but if it cannot be overcome by reasoning or tact, it is probably better to give way to it, as it is not worth while to offend an old and regular member of the choir. The offended member may even go so far as to leave the choir and give up coming to church, and, especially in the country where there is only one church within reach, we cannot afford to risk this for the sake of a change however desirable in the abstract.

Treatment of Refrains and Special Verses. Where the Psalms are sung in harmony it adds greatly to the effect, and helps to bring out the meaning, if certain verses are sung in unison. This applies especially to recurring refrains, such as are found in Psalms 46, 57, 80, 107, &c. In Psalms 42 and 43 (which are really one Psalm) the first verse of the refrain may well be sung by the men's

voices in unison, and the second by the trebles only. Special verses of praise, as in Psalm 145, are effectively emphasized by being sung in unison by all the voices. Where the Psalms are sung in unison by choice, relief is given by singing certain verses in harmony if a reasonable balance of parts can be obtained.

Expression. Marks of expression should be very sparingly used. Common sense will suggest that penitential Psalms shall be sung more softly than Psalms of praise. The same will apply to different portions of the same Psalm. Also special verses of praise will naturally be sung more loudly than the rest. These changes from loud to soft and vice versa should, however, not be too frequent, as the congregation will find them difficult to follow. A judicious organist will be able to control this if he carefully studies the Psalm beforehand and keeps the meaning of the words well in mind when he is playing. Too few dynamic changes are infinitely better than too many.

IV. *The Gloria Patri*

It should always be remembered that the Gloria Patri is the most important part of the whole Psalm, for it lifts the Psalm from a Jewish poem to a Christian hymn. One often hears the Gloria rushed at a tremendous pace, making it quite impossible to enunciate the shorter syllables, and depriving it of all its solemn meaning. To mark the dignity and solemnity of this great Act of Praise it would seem best to make a slight pause before the Gloria, and in most cases, except at the end of a slow minor Psalm, it is more impressive if sung at a slightly slower pace than the Psalm itself. Every syllable should of course be clearly pronounced. It is also very effective to sing the Gloria in unison when the Psalm is sung in harmony, and vice versa. As a rule, if the Psalm is sung to a minor chant, it is better to change to the major for the Gloria. There is no need for a long-drawn-out *rallentando* at the end of the Gloria. If the whole of the

Gloria is sung slowly and majestically, this will be quite out of place.

PART II. HOW TO SING THE CANTICLES

The Service of Praise in Matins and Evensong reaches its climax in the four great Canticles. They stand higher even than the Psalms, as they are definitely Christian Hymns.

Settings and Chants. 'In Quires and Places where they sing' the Canticles are usually sung to special settings commonly called 'Services'. In Cathedrals, and in a few Parish Churches where traditionally the music is of a Cathedral type, this is an excellent practice, for such settings, if carefully chosen, well bring out the meaning. Many of these are elaborate and difficult, and where the singing is of a congregational character it is probably much better to sing them to chants, or to simple settings in which the people can join.

The remarks made above about chanting the Psalms apply equally to the Canticles.

It is usually advisable to observe the continuity of the Service by singing the Canticles to chants in the same keys as those used for the Psalms, or in keys closely related to them.

I. *The Venite*

The Venite, which is rather an Invitatory Psalm than a Canticle, should be treated as a Psalm, and is best sung to a single chant in a key related to the chants of the Psalms which follow.

The last four verses are scheduled for omission by the Prayer Book Revisers. This is of course only permissive, and if the verses are retained, the manifest change of sentiment should be marked by a slight pause; or there might be a change of chant, returning to the first chant for the Gloria.

Antiphons. A valuable enrichment suggested by the

Revisers is a series of Antiphons for the different seasons to be sung before and after the Venite, for which suitable music will in due course be provided.

II. *The Te Deum*

Much should be made of that glorious and ancient Hymn of the Church, the Te Deum.

Structure. Unfortunately many Psalters have wrongly divided this Hymn. The right arrangement, as all scholars agree, is that found in the Accession Service drawn up for the Accession of King Edward VII, and adopted in the alternative Prayer Book. The first 13 verses are a Hymn of Praise to the Holy Trinity; vv. 14-21 a Hymn to Christ, being a short Creed of Redemption, beginning with Praise and ending with Prayer; vv. 22-end are a set of Versicles and Responses probably added at a later date. An adequate setting would treat this last section differently from the rest to bring out the difference of structure. But this point was usually ignored by earlier composers.

Arrangement of Verses. The fact that some of the verses are very short makes the Te Deum difficult to sing to ordinary chants, the frequent grouping of three or four notes on one syllable being unsuited to the Anglican form of chant. To meet this difficulty a shorter form of chant has been devised. But this form is too short to be interesting musically and appears to be very little used. A better plan would be to re-arrange the verses, making one verse of reasonable length out of two short ones. Long use has, however, made us accustomed to the present arrangement, and it will probably continue to be used.

Settings. There are many fine settings of the Te Deum, many of which are too elaborate for small choirs and unsuited for congregational singing; but a number of suitable unison or semi-unison settings have been published in recent years which are within the range of smaller choirs. The ancient Ambrosian chant is simple

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and effective. It should of course be sung in unison, though where it is possible faux-bourbons used for certain verses help to brighten it.

Chants. As the verses are arranged in our Prayer Book, the Te Deum goes fairly well to Anglican chants, with the exception of the difficulty caused by short verses. The verses run mainly in pairs, so that double chants in related keys are quite appropriate, though it is probably better to sing the third part to a single chant to bring out the difference of structure. Yet even here a responsive double chant will not be amiss. In the first part, if a double chant is used, it is better to sing the second half of the chant to verse 13, rather than to verse 9, as is commonly done; the four exponents of praise—the Apostles, the Prophets, the Martyrs, and the Church on earth—being thus associated together in one Communion of Saints, and the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity kept in closer unity.

Some chant books give a very meagre supply of chants, which soon become hackneyed. But an intelligent organist should be able to make other suitable selections from existing chants. The first chant should be strong and dignified, the second more expressive, and the third quiet and reflective. The third part would appropriately be sung antiphonally, between trebles and men's voices, or between choir and congregation; or where the Priest can sing, he might take the Versicle, and the choir and congregation the Response. Owing to the shortness of the verses some of the chants with a rather higher reciting note might be available for this Hymn.

III. *The Benedicite*

Traditional Use. In the first Reformed Prayer Book it was directed that during Lent the Benedicite should be sung instead of the Te Deum. This custom is widely adopted, though there is no rubric on the subject in the present Prayer Book. It is also frequently used in Advent, and on the three Sundays

preceding Lent. Such a use of the Hymn seems fitting, as the Benedicite, though a Hymn of Praise, does not reach nearly such a high note of praise as the Te Deum, being not a Christian but a late Jewish Hymn—a Hymn of Nature not of Redemption. The supreme Christian joy of Christmas and Easter is thus well emphasized by a return to the Te Deum.

Rhythm and Structure. The rhythm of the Benedicite seems to call for a chant of a type different from those used for the Psalms. The structure of the Hymn is best brought out by the use of three chants, changes being made at verses 18 and 26, or perhaps better, 27. The first part is the praise of various forces of nature; the second of the earth and things upon it, animate and inanimate; the third of the people of God.

There is no reason why a change of rhythm should be made at the Gloria, though the chant may have to be shortened.

IV. *The Gospel Canticles*

The three Gospel Canticles, the only Hymns from the New Testament in Matins and Evensong, should probably never be set aside for the Psalms given as alternatives in our Prayer Book, except when the Rubric requires it. In the old Service Books these Gospel Hymns were used every day, and it seems a pity to break such a long tradition. The Psalms provided as substitutes have no very special fitness, and as they are sung in the ordinary course of the Psalms, there appears to be no reason for ousting the Gospel Canticles in their favour. The only rubric governing their use is that the Jubilate should be used when the Benedictus occurs in the Lesson or the Holy Gospel. This rubric, however, is marked for omission in the alternative Prayer Book.

i. *Benedictus.* This Canticle does not seem to have inspired many of our English composers, the Jubilate being much more frequently set. It is probably best sung to a double chant.

ii. *Magnificat*. There are many fine settings of the *Magnificat*, the greatest of the Christian Hymns. Some of those more recently issued are suitable for occasional use in small churches. If sung to a chant the structure of the Hymn requires a single chant of a joyful and dignified character. There is scope for unisonal and responsive singing in verses 6, 7, and 8.

iii. *Nunc Dimittis*. An evil tradition has arisen of using doleful minor chants for the *Nunc Dimittis*, thus turning into a dirge this exquisite Hymn of Thanksgiving. It needs a single chant expressing a chastened joyfulness. It should begin softly, but should gradually swell to a joyful *forte*, culminating in a triumphant Gloria.

The chanting of this Canticle would be much improved if it were divided into three verses instead of four, combining verses 2 and 3. This would avoid the awkward accentuation of v. 2, and would preserve the parallelism.

It seems to add to the dignity of these three great Canticles if they are chanted slightly more slowly than the Psalms. But the very slow dragging out of the *Nunc Dimittis* which is sometimes heard tends rather to maudlin sentiment than to dignity.

V. *The Alternative Canticles*

The Psalms provided as substitutes for the three chief Canticles, unless sung to special settings, should, when used, be treated as ordinary Psalms.

VI. *Easter Anthem*

The Anthem provided as a substitute for the Venite on Easter Day should be sung to a single chant, but the division into paragraphs should be marked by a slight pause. By tradition this Anthem has become associated with Pelham Humphrey's Grand Chant. When this is used it should be transposed to B flat or A, as the constant repetition of the two notes B and C becomes

very wearisome for the voices. It may equally well be sung to any chant of a simple and dignified character. A simple congregational setting would be useful.

VII. *Quicumque Vult*

The use of the Hymn of St. Athanasius, or the Athanasian Creed, as it is sometimes called, is practically eliminated in the alternative Prayer Book. When it is used in small churches it is much better said in the natural voice. If it is sung to the traditional chant, it should be in unison with varied harmonies on the organ.

CONCLUSION

If such principles as these be applied to the singing of the Psalms and Canticles, they become full of interest, free from all monotony, a joy and inspiration to all who take part, and a fitting Act of Worship to the Holy Trinity.