

## THE SHAKING OF THE MUSICAL FOUNDATIONS

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I TALK of foundations being shaken : and to be sure I there utter a platitude—a platitude that has been dignified by the status of a book-title by Paul Tillich. But I take the phrase not from him but from the place where he found it : a passage in Hebrews, where it is written that the purpose of the shaking of all things is to demonstrate what is fit to survive, according to the Lord's will and according to His truth. My approach to the astounding things that are happening in Church music today is governed chiefly by hope, not by fear. The ground of that hope, and my reasons for believing the area of fear to be much smaller than the area of hope, I will try to explain as we go along.

I owe part of what musical education I have to a musician now fifteen years dead, but to me of blessed memory—Alexander Brent Smith, who after leaving the school where he was my housemaster as well as my music master returned to his native west country and became an honoured and creative President of the Gloucester Music Society. I should enjoy nothing more, if I had the time and the opportunity, than to go through (were I permitted) the mountain of manuscript which he left but which never got published, and remind a frantic age of the wealth of sheer Schubertian and Brahmsian beauty that lies entirely hidden wherever that pile of paper now is : several concertos, a symphony at least, any number of songs, light operas, and odd bits of occasional Church music and plenty of chamber music lie there. When I was what we now call a teenager I found it bewitching—and it was not difficult to detect, when some attractive but unfamiliar sound was coming from the organ before Evensong, that this was the working-out of some new movement that 'Brent', an organist who hated the organ, an abominable fiddler who loved the violin, was gestating. Well—there is some research waiting to be done there, but I must tell you why I mention this man in whose veins the blood of Elgar assuredly ran, mingled with that of Sir Arthur Sullivan at his healthiest. He was a composer whose music, in the 'thirties and 'forties of this century, nobody seemed to want : it made concessions neither to the then nascent cult of educated vulgarity nor to any kind of musical radicalism. It was judged anachronistic.

But among many things which I remember his saying, there is this : 'Just remember, Routley, that all this Bartok and Schönberg is damned rot. There's one concord in music, and it's this'—here he played a common chord in C major—'and people who say anything else are talking damned rot.' I remember he said that phrase twice : it was still something portentous to hear your



housemaster swear, even though he were a musician commenting on other musicians.

That was in 1933. I lost sight of him the following year, and met him again only once thereafter—as it turned out, only a few months before he died in 1950. Those days, 1933 and thereabouts, were days in which it was still possible to dismiss *avant-garde* music (of which Schönberg was, of course, the symbol) as rubbish. Such a man as my teacher did so not primarily because he thought anything he was unaccustomed to was unpleasant, but because he positively believed that music was a gracious and ennobling influence: that the composer's duty was to comfort the world not to judge it: to improve it, not to reflect its folly; to deal with tragedy if he would, but not with squalor. Now that I am remembering this episode, I recall that he added Berg's *Wozzeck* to his *index expurgatorius*. He saw some kinds of music as simply not worth a young man's time, because he knew what was beautiful, and he judged this ugly. Making music of that sort was like making a chair with two legs instead of four, or trying to connect an electric shaver to a gas pipe: it was irrational, and it had no hope of doing what music was there to do. Elgar knew what music was there for, Parry knew, Walford Davies knew, Arthur Sullivan and Edward German knew, and I think he would have admitted that Vaughan Williams knew. I came to wonder, as soon as his successor began to rule, and to expunge from our chapel lists everything written after the Restoration, whether he thought that Palestrina knew: and there perhaps was the chink in the armour.

All this may be partly autobiography and partly my shamelessly seizing an opportunity of doing some small honour to a musician whose memory still fascinates me, and who perhaps was known to some of the seniors among yourselves, although nobody mentions his name now. But it is partly also parable; I think we find it fair to say that nowadays we really cannot tell our pupils what Brent Smith told me. Something has been so radically shaken that our attitudes need to be much more watchful, much less self-confident, than his was. But I for one am far from believing that we need hold that all the landmarks are gone.

It is not that the landmarks are gone. It is rather that we are travelling with unexampled speed, and that we have to have much quicker sight in order to follow the map, and relate it with the new landmarks, than was required formerly of us. My own view is that the Church musicians are offering a very good showing. Only people who have no idea of what is actually being done can say that the Church is seriously lagging behind, or that it is adopting a philistine attitude. None the less, some of us have less confidence than others in the authenticity of our visions, and I suppose it is primarily to those that I am speaking now.

One or two landmarks have been passed and are now behind us: that is obvious. One of these is the doctrine that the artist is there primarily to speak to society from a lofty and prophetic position. My old teacher's view—shared by most of his kind, surely—was that the artist was there to be a kindly prophet. He really believed, and some of us abandon the belief, if at all, with great reluctance, that the artist dealt in uplifting things: that beauty improved the beholder.

We have to recognise that this is a doctrine of only local, or temporary, importance. At any rate, as it is usually stated, it is a doctrine which can only be provisional. It is a landmark near home which one passes fairly early in the journey. And its limitation is imposed on it by the fact that it has implications that restrict it to a certain social view of things. One of its implications is, for example, that it is *better*, it is more edifying or improving, to listen to serious music than to popular music: that it is creditable to go to Beethoven, less creditable to go to 'My Fair Lady', less creditable again to go to the Rolling Stones. I myself ask nobody to remove that landmark, because it represents a very important statement which we need not stop making, even though we have to add many others to it. But in the traditional English attitude to music there is an undoubted hierarchy of values—chamber music at the top, then opera, then symphonies, then concertos, then Johann Strauss: within chamber music, late Beethoven at the top, then Mozart and the rest of Beethoven, then the piano-combinations: within symphonies, at the top the current classical or romantic chart-maker (Mahler, I think, at the moment), then Brahms and Mozart, then the lesser Beethoven, then the Seventh and the Fifth: among concertos, Brahms at the top, Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky No. 1 lower down—and so on. The charts thus formed represent the degree of edification which promoters of music expect listeners to be looking for, and to be prepared to come and get. The works near the bottom of the top-grade chart will draw the largest numbers of music-lovers, who desire just so much, but no more, edification. The works near the top have to be carefully timed and presented, or the resistance to their intellectual demands may be greater than the desire to be edified. All this is the folklore of the moderately serious-minded section of our society.

But here is the point: it is easy to understand the superiority which the traditional music-lover feels in himself, in being a lover of this kind of music and a gentle despiser of that which is 'popular'. It may not be quite so easy to see the connection between this and the same music-lover's attitude to Messiaen's *Oiseaux Exotiques* the same music-lover's attitude to Messiaen's concert programme. But in a way his indignation at the Messiaen is something like his attitude to pop.



and even more like his attitude to jazz. *Oiseaux Exotiques* may be incomprehensible—but it is not only the comprehensibility of Brahms the Second, or of Elgar's 'Cello Concerto that engages his loyalty. What really upsets him is that Messiaen seems to be making a statement about beauty which contradicts the statements he was brought up on and has always accepted. 'There's just one concord in music.' Quite so: and we know what that concord is for. But Messiaen in his later work has no use for it: he does not seem to want to say that kind of thing. The twelve-tone composers had no use for it. Presumably the electronic composers have no use for it. And it is, says the music-lover, distressing to see a decent orchestra making an exhibition of itself by performing what affronts one's sense of beauty.

It is equally distressing to learn that the authors, whoever they were, of Gregorian plainsong had no use for our 'one concord' either: that their ideas of cadence and finality were not those of Haydn. It is similarly distressing to learn that other whole categories concerning music are being denied by musicians now, or have been denied by them in the distant past. The tradition that music should be performed by fundamentalist virtuosos who must interpret with profundity and execute with brilliance a text from which no deviation may be made, and must be listened to with profound and silent attention by their audience, is denied by the whole world of jazz, which not only plays the devil with the 'one concord', but insists on improvisation, deals in existential rather than dogmatic music, and excites a kind of physical audience-participation that looks to the traditional music-lover like chewing gum in church.

I have gone into all this elsewhere,\* and do not wish to labour it now: but the conclusion I am leading to is this—that any musician has got to decide basically whether he is going to live in this world we now have, or whether he is in the main going to reject it.

Our own society is not now ruled by those who hold doctrines that lead to the old doctrine of classical and romantic music. It is not now held by the influential people in our society that beauty is ennobling, that the artist is a refiner of leisure. I am not saying that these propositions are untrue: I am saying that the people who hold them are not held in unquestioned respect. The reversal of the social hierarchy of the nineteenth century, the irruption into our society of strident and often learned representatives of races we thought of only yesterday as ignorant and subject, the profound effects of two world wars in loosening every bond that used to hold the different generations together have produced problems for every conscience whose solution has already eaten up so much nervous energy that many of us have hardly the nerve to face any construc-

tive application of the experiences we are having. That I take to be the most dangerous thing about our present situation, and therefore (as in my position I am bound to do) I see it is the greatest need that the Church is called to meet.

Now one way of putting this is simply to say that there is in Church music a 'New Morality' abroad which is arousing a good deal of resentment, a good deal of opposition, and a good deal of thoughtless enthusiasm. In commenting on it, I proceed from a primary proposition which I must make clear to you. I believe that the process by which the Church is being stripped of all its mystique, and being compelled to appear in working clothes rather than in lawn sleeves in its work in the world, not only is beneficial to the Church, but can already be seen to be beneficial. You have only to go and live in Scotland to realise how persistent is the English anti-clerical spirit. In Scotland it has not yet really got going: it is having its creative energy drawn off by eccentrics like Hugh McDiarmid, who every so often throw at the Church such wild and beautifully expressed insults as to strengthen, rather than to loosen, its hold on the people's imagination. I can forgive him anything, even his hatred and contempt for the English, for calling us the other day 'this superannuated cult'. But in England society is insisting on treating the Church as an institution that can be talked to, thrown bricks at if you like, but at least talked to: people do not now believe that it is entitled to a sort of *a priori* respect, to a certain deportment and accent of reverence in those who talk to it. And I do not regard the contempt of Miss Brigid Brophy as the most significant thing that anti-clericalism has brought. What I do regard as significant, and what not everybody seems to have noticed, is that since the Church and its representatives are being treated as 'people like anybody else', subject to the same demands for proving their case, the same penalties for carelessness and pride for anybody else, it is quite naturally beginning to be thought of as an institution which any kind of responsible artist can serve. The withdrawal of public reverence may lessen the comfort and grace of life, but it can, if the opportunity be taken, make for freedom of conversation.

As long as the Church drones on in the customary E minor with its ghastly parody of Tallis's responses, it may well be disregarded by anybody who has an ear to hear. But why is it that it is capable nowadays of catching the imagination of artists of so different a calibre from those who served it, here and abroad, in the nineteenth century? Why is it possible for people who profess either no Christian belief or versions of it which bear little relation to the Church's formal teaching to be attracted by the opportunity for writing for it, composing for it, building for it? Has not the door

\**Is Jazz Music Christian?*—Epworth Press, 1965.



which has opened to let in all this east wind of controversy and criticism and even spite, also let in a significant number of people whose imagination has been caught by what they see? Or are we entirely deluded about the significance of Britten's lengthening list of Church works, of Tippett's Magnificat, of Krenek's *Spiritus Intelligentiae Sanctus*? Are these people writing for the Church only because, and when, the Church pays them to do it? I am not yet convinced that we are deluded. I believe that the Church is beginning to appear human in the eyes of society, after a long period in which it appeared to be something mysterious, sacred, and aesthetically inhibiting.

Now if you remove the bishop's gaiters and apron and dress him in an ordinary business suit, and find him intelligent, kind and ready to talk, you will probably forget yourself in his presence: you may become careless and slangy and foolish, and there may be moments when you, or people who know about you, will be sorry to have lost the old idea that in the presence of such a person you ought to try to be at your best, even if your best is not what you naturally are. But whether in the end your restored confidence leaves you better or worse off in your ability to get something of what the bishop is there to say to you, what you cannot deny is that as a person you have initially got closer to him than you otherwise would have done. And what you also will find is that if the bishop does get through to you, you will take far more real notice of him than you would have done if you accepted what he said just because he was a person to be addressed as 'My Lord'.

The New Morality in Church music specifically has made its initial statements in a way that is now familiar to everybody. The earliest and most controversial of these has now passed into history: yet Geoffrey Beaumont's gesture remains obstinately alive in some quarters. I have said so much about this in other places\* that it seems otiose to try and add anything here. Yet I will, because this swift journey in which we are all engaged continues to bring into sight new conformations of scenery which provoke new judgments, or new modifications of the old ones.

The neo-pop style of hymn tune writing and liturgical music is saying: 'It's all right: God agrees with you really.' Dr. Herbert Howells in a broadcast in 1960 found two words to describe what was then still a new development about which everybody was talking. In an unforgettably gentle and devastating phrase he said that it was the best example he had yet found of the meaning of the word 'profane': and he later described it as having the defect of being altogether 'consenting'. 'Profane' it is, in having no connection with that which really is within the holiest place in the Temple:

\**Twentieth Century Church Music*, Jenkins, 1964.

'consenting' in its quite open implication that in church, anything will do. The whole *corpus* of Weinberger music—including Beaumont, Appleford, and Malcolm Williamson—is dangerously near the edge of profanity and consentingness. Not all Williamson—especially not 'Procession of Palms', 'Ye choirs of New Jerusalem' and 'Angels from the realms of glory'—and perhaps not Beaumont's 150th Psalm: but all the rest, in production and idiom, defies what I believe to be a citadel that Church musicians must hold: the notion that if you really did meet God you would not be meeting an affable person smoking a cigarette, but such a perfection of goodness that would make you feel dirty and grub-like before it took you by the hand and commanded you to stand on your feet that it might speak with you. *Where you have a vision*—this is a cardinal rule—you must not abandon it in the name of practicality or religious affability. And a vision such as the Scriptures give us of Almighty God is something we must continue to try to share, and not allow to be replaced by anybody's more comfortable sketch.

The alarming thing, however, is nowadays that this vision is being granted (as it seems to me anyhow) to all kinds of unofficial people. If we ever believed that churchgoers of the ordinary kind stood a better chance of catching sight of it than people who held unorthodox beliefs or who rejected orthodox religious habits, we have received a rude shock. It would be wholly invidious to particularise here: but surely you have noticed how often, when some gesture in music is made that seems to have this authentic note of alarm, authority and newness, it is made by somebody whose orthodoxy in terms of belief and churchgoing habits is entirely questionable. That is a foundation that has been severely shaken. It is the difference between our age and that of the Victorians, anyhow. We do not know anything about the personal beliefs of Palestrina and Byrd, and I have little doubt that we should get some rude shocks if we were ever told about them: but it is obvious—I have already drawn your attention to it—that a great deal of creative Church music is being written from a position which is not nearer to the centre than the outer court of the temple, at any rate as an orthodox Pharisee would see it. We are saying that this is healthy, and is producing better music than came from our nineteenth century organ lofts; but if we believe that Church music is indivisible from an orthodox establishment within the Church, we are indeed in for a shaking. It simply is not true: taking the longest view I doubt whether it ever really was true.

I have referred to one aspect of the New Morality in Church music. Of course, there are others. What about Frederick Rimmer's anthem, 'Sing we merrily', which was bravely sung at the opening service of the Edinburgh Festival last year? That piece is largely



built up on what we can now call an old-fashioned twelve-tone row. The organ fanfare at the beginning announced it, and the vocal parts work it out. The piece is not without sounds that the unsophisticated ear takes to be concords: and the total effect is magnificently evocative of the barbaric ecstasy of primitive Old Testament prophecy such as Psalm 81 is concerned with. The congregation at the Festival service, being very largely official and representative of the city and the Church in Scotland rather than of the arts, did not greatly care for it. But I think most people here would agree that it sounds, if one will listen with patience, the authentic note. What are you to say about Michael Tippett's Magnificat, with its persistent eruptions of solo 'trompeta réal'? That it does not sound like Stanford, or even like Howells: that it does not represent a pastoral and serene picture of our Lady's heavenly song, but rather an invasion of the New Testament by the wild and primitive tribal ethos of I Samuel, need not cause us to dismiss it as an impossible interpretation of the Song, as any student of the Bible text will be able to confirm. That it does not sound like the usual noise made in an English Cathedral is of no consequence at all. And I go further: even if Mr. Tippett came and told me that he did not think it barbaric and fierce, but that this was to him the obvious thing to do when you were asked to write a Magnificat for St. John's, Cambridge, where they have indeed got a 'trompeta réal'. I should not be unduly disturbed. What it says to the Church at this stage is undoubtedly, 'There are things in the Magnificat that you have not seen: consider them'.

Ah! We have stumbled on a most important point. We are being served at present by a number of artists who, from the inner or the outer courts of the temple, are saying, 'There are things you have not seen: consider them'. By re-polarising our sight, as it were, they are enabling us to go on seeing other things of the same kind for ourselves. If we want to know what is the difference between these and the Weinberger quasi-pop school, perhaps this helps us to recognise and distinguish: these are saying, 'There are things you have not seen': the others are saying, 'Forget what you have seen'. That second thing is what you must not say to an artist, or to a preacher, or to a scientist, or to anybody who has anything to do with truth. The missionary, who is the artist (I see no distinction), has to be an excellent linguist, in translating his vision into public terms: he must know all he can know about communication, which means knowing all he can know about enjoying people's company and respecting their personalities and in general loving them: but he must not be disobedient to his vision.

In another place I have made a brief comment on the New Morality as we normally understand it in everyday life.\* I wish to

apply it to our own field now. Take the specific case of what we are to say to our young people about marriage and so forth. We are being told that we must not frighten them or threaten them or make them feel guilty or clutter them up with taboos. With the outwardness of all this I personally could not agree more. But there is one thing which we ought to frighten them about: there is one thing with which we ought to threaten them. That is the loss of the vision they have. You can set aside as much pharisaic legalism as you like: but what we must warn our young people against is letting themselves slip into a belief that there is no such thing as a happy marriage. Let them believe that, and they will go off and do all the things that spoil a happy marriage because they have stopped believing there is anything to spoil. At an innocent stage they all believed that such a thing was possible: the evidences to the contrary must not be allowed to divert them from that belief. That way you will get a freedom which is also the service of a God-given vision. Fear nothing but the loss of the fear of God: and if you have any intimation at all of glory, that is a gift of God.

In exactly the same way, even in times like these when we are tempted to believe there is no such thing as beauty, faith demands one thing: loyalty to the vision we have. This is unorthodox, un-professional stuff, I know. Schools and schisms develop in the musical world at least as freely as in that of theology: young people are invited to serve one idol or another, so that they are unable to believe that beauty has any form not authenticated by this or that musical fashion in which they are being brought up. Critics must earn their bread, and they must be men of saintly integrity if they are not to fall into the habit of equating references to musical fashions with moral judgments, and saying that if a piece of music is progressive it is all right (or all wrong), and if the reverse, all wrong (or all right). But it is the vision that counts.

Of course, a man's vision develops. That means that at any given stage it is incomplete. But there is one elementary canon by which its authenticity as a Christian vision can be measured. If there is something in it that says 'No' as well as something that says 'Yes', it may well be authentic: if it is only 'Yes', it cannot be. The Gospel is that which says 'Come unto me', but which when a man hears he may say 'Depart from me', or 'Torment me not' or 'What have I to do with thee, thou Son of God?'

The real artist is always being corrected by new visions: is always blushing for what he composed years ago. The stress and pressure of this rebuke makes the stresses and pressures of the human judgments of his contemporaries almost appear negligible. Yet they are not negligible because he is trying to say things to

\*The Man for Others—Peter Smith, 1964



people : he is not whistling in the dark. Some artists produce what contains more rebuke than comfort : a proportion, it may turn out, too high to make their music viable in such a rough environment as the Church provides, or should provide. Some produce more comfort than rebuke—too much comfort, maybe, to be in tune with the tensions of contemporary life. He may be disobedient : he may be rejected. But the artist's first duty is to the vision, as any man's is. If he once begins to say, 'The vision isn't there : I will just write what people seem to want', he is lost.

If this is true, then our business as Church musicians is, I suppose, the delicate and strenuous task of matching compassion with vision : of passing on through our music as we compose it or perform it the judgment and the invitation of God with such well-proportioned skill that men neither praise us too much nor confuse God's judgment with our own contemptuous attitude. It is possible to compose a cantata, or to play a hymn tune for a congregation, in such a way that the hearers are primarily conscious of our contempt for their unsophistication; or again to do either thing in such a way as to advertise the fact that we have listened to nobody, and learnt nothing, and had no new vision, for twenty-five years. Either course misses the chief opportunity we are offered. But if there is anything unshaken, when the foundations are shaken all around us, it must be our conviction that the people of God in the Church are best served with an art that reflects, through our own compassionate care, the eternal paradoxes of God's ultimate remoteness and his nearness, of his judgment and his invitation, of his 'No' and his 'Yes', of the Passion and of the Resurrection. Nobody may write for the Church what he knows to be bad or second-rate because he feels that nothing better will have any appeal. Nobody may choose from the repertory that in which he has no confidence because he is playing for peace and safety. But nobody need equate second-ratedness and badness with any school, any period, or any style; nor need he feel that music which questions all the accepted musical moralities will, if it be sincere and convinced music, shake any foundation whose shaking the Church cannot afford. For one practising Church musician it will be a matter of playing 'Abide with me' at Evensong or 'New every morning' at Matins in such a way that all who sing it will see in the familiar the eternally new : for another it will be a matter of composing a Mass which his congregation can sing with zest and reverence and a new sense of the contemporary presence of the Lord in their midst. In such cases, the Church musician is among the prophets : but without a vision, the prophets become the most devastating and depressing of bores.