

Arthur Hunt
ADDRESS ON

"SINGING THE PSALMS"

by

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*Kind welcome
Dr. Johnson
Report*

read at the

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THE SINGING OF THE PSALMS

THIS afternoon I have the privilege of giving you a short address—all too short it must be—on the singing of the Psalms. Perhaps the title is a little wide, for I hardly propose to touch on the aesthetics of psalm singing or the necessary technique wherewith to secure it. Rather must my address be limited to seeing what the preliminary conditions must be before adequate treatment can be attempted. The right relationship between the words and the notes is essential to the whole matter, and this relationship has, as far as I am aware, never been properly established.

Recently, the Archbishop's report on Church Music has stressed the desirability of a common usage in regard to Psalm singing. Such usage is entirely absent at the present moment and has indeed never existed. In the English Church there is nothing like the uniformity which is operative in the Roman Church.

To gain such uniformity, we shall have to start from an entirely new angle, that of the words, which should, of course, be the main concern of Psalm singing. It would be an impiety to think otherwise. A chant, or, in the older phraseology, a psalm tone, is, or should be, schemed to safeguard the verbal content, and, in fact, the ancient Psalm tones, with their reciting note flowering into the medial and final cadences, embody a method of setting which is final in its beauty, variety and superb economy. Slight divergencies are possible, and are indeed proposed here, but unless the form and spirit of Plain Song are retained any fundamental change, such as we find in Anglican Chant, can only result in an inferior product. For a long time there have been murmurs of discontent as to the unsatisfactory nature of our Psalm singing. Many are aware that something is very wrong, but so far have been uncertain of the way in which it can be put right. They may therefore wish to join me in my present protest, and welcome the analysis, perhaps also the solution, that is advanced.

I am stressing the word *new* in what I am about to propose to you, for, in truth, it is absolutely new. For some curious reason no such approach has been made before, though it is so simple and rational that anyone might have discovered it. I believe that it may fulfil the element of progress which so many at the moment seem to desire, though I am aware that progress may be a two-edged sword, and that there is a great deal of truth in Dr. Johnson's remark that when we think we are making progress we often only change one form of stupidity for another.

Possibly some valuable element in our present system of pointing may have to go, if we apply the new idea that I am advocating, but frankly I do not see that any essential element will be lost. On the contrary, it seems to me that all will be gain.

What we are concerned about is the retention of the verbal beauty of the Psalms for, without it, the beauty of their message must suffer. The form of the expression cannot be divorced from the expression itself: both are part and parcel of one another.

The awkwardness of the verbal setting in every printed Psalter is fully patent to those who have an ear for the character of the English language. What we have to listen to and take part in hurts our feelings of rightness, and no effort can be too drastic which can redress the balance between words and music, so that the words regain their full authority, and the music is but subsidiary to them.

To come to closer grips with the subject. When I was in Devon a few weeks ago, I had a conversation with the rector of the church in a certain town. He was enthusiastic over his choir and the way he was introducing speech-rhythm into the psalmody.

"We are getting at it now," he said, "for the first time." It was cruel of me to damp his ardour, but I had to say, "My dear friend, you have never heard Psalm singing in speech-rhythm, and you never will hear it under present circumstances." After which I explained why, as best I could, though the matter was too complicated to dispose of quickly.

A second short conversation with a member of the choir of another parish church illuminated the situation in a remarkable though quite unintentional way. The lady to whom I was talking was almost untutored musically, and I thought her reaction to psalm singing would perhaps be of the greater interest on this account. So I asked her whether she found such singing difficult. She said she did. When I questioned the cause, she replied that she could never "get the words into the notes."

The first of these two little conversations represented what the rector well understood to be desirable; the second what prevented its realisation, for it went to the root of the problem at once. It is the herding of words into bars, trying to cram a quart of syllables into a pint-pot of the music, that is the crux of the matter.

What has happened in the past is that all pointing has tried to combine two entirely contradictory principles: those of a free accent in the words with a fixed accent in the music. It cannot be done, except by distorting the words to such a degree that their natural rhythm is lost. One cannot have it both ways. If the musical accent prevail, the words are travestied; if the verbal accent, there can be no fixed accent in the music or any treatment

which suggests the use of constant barring. Decent accommodation of words and tune is impossible if both are to have an independent life, i.e. to be autonomous in form. Partnership can then be effected only by violence, not by agreement.

*The fixed musical accent of Anglican chant, and even the fixed accent of Gregorian chant (though it is modified by the addition of extra notes) are therefore wrong: absolutely incompatible with the free accent of the verbal text. The upshot of the matter is that the words must be allowed to pursue their own course with irregular accent: notes, rhythmically, being entirely free to follow suit. The notes should thus be considered purely as vocal inflexion, having no rhythmic life of their own till it has been imposed upon them by the words: a process vastly different to that in use. It is simply commonsense.

If it be asked why such an obvious and logical solution has never before been adopted, or even envisaged, I think the answer would have to be that the music, and not the words, has always taken first place in men's minds, and, from that point of view, a regular accent seems natural and necessary to it: perhaps, also, there has been a mistaken idea that music with a fixed accent establishes itself more readily than a continually changing, vague sequence of notes, and is therefore easier to repeat. So it is, if that were the only consideration. But it is not. If the words are irregular in accent, why should not the music be? Repetition, of course, is essential to a Psalm tune—the ear cannot be assailed with fresh music at every verse—but it can be sufficiently achieved by using the same notes, i.e. the same pitch scheme. This is enough to place us on familiar ground throughout; more is not needed. And, as regards the practical side, experience (not merely theory) shows that notes can be adapted to words quite easily, indeed, more easily (as might be expected) when they are free of predetermined accent: so that one can say unhesitatingly that such adaptation is not only best for chanting, but represents a system from which all ambiguity—and consequently, all vagaries of application—have been removed. Further, at long last, the words can now be given their proper significance. Psalmody, of course, only affects the quasi-recitative delivery of the Psalms. Extended complex setting, as in anthems, etc., is a different matter. There, the bias towards music must prevail, and, to a large extent, detract from the importance of the words in a structural sense; defining their spirit more searchingly, but at the expense of their form.

It is now necessary to have a clear understanding of the difference between verbal and musical rhythm. The progress of words and of music is by no means of a similar kind. Though there is order in the sequence of syllables, it is not a mathematical order. Doubtless, there is some similarity in the length of such syllables, but their movement does not depend upon a perfectly proportioned projection such as we find in music.

The rhythm of speech has a special subtlety: it is utterly dependent on the sense of the words and the impulse arising therefrom. Strictly speaking, no proportionate element enters into this rhythm. It is, as I have said, a rhythm of sense not of sound *per se*. The quality of beautiful speech lies largely in what *seems* to be an even spacing of syllables combined with a perfection of flow such as only fine speech exhibits. There are, of course, modifications—the stressing of important words by various means, chiefly of vowel prolongation; the change that takes place in such rhythm when passionate utterance is involved. Verbal rhythm will then approximate more to musical rhythm in its assertive quality, but, by and large, verbal rhythm has a peculiar life of its own which cannot be put into the strait jacket of musical rhythm.

Archbishop Cranmer's revolutionary principle of one note to a syllable should, of course, be followed in psalmody, but it cannot be too strongly insisted that there can be no rigid interpretation of note value in regard to it. The flexibility of speech—derived from its continuous change of vowel and consonant and the easing influence of diphthongs—prevents that. Each syllable should have the irregularity of nature which never produces an exact replica of any of her creations. This precious element of an inexactness, in which, however, a norm is still recognisable, must be jealously retained in chanting, and nothing like an *a tempo* treatment allowed to take its place either in the cadences or on the reciting notes, though there is not the same danger of this in the latter, since these notes are not separately indicated. Because of the irregularity which we have been considering, speech rhythm is thus quite a different thing from musical rhythm which is, and must be, based upon exact mathematical proportion, two crotchets to a minim, etc. It will be seen at once that this conflicts with freedom of speech. The whole imposing structure of music (the physical shape)—its time, pitch-system, and even the quality of its tone—is built upon or is reducible to scientific precision; with speech, we are in a different world, that of nature, not of art. To bring exact proportions into psalmody is to do what is foreign to the nature of speech, making music the mistress instead of the handmaiden. Hence, the abominations—I do not think it is too strong a term—of our present practice of psalmody, at any rate to the ear of those who are sensitive to the glory of speech, which reaches such superb utterance in the psalms.

Musical rhythms force accents to the front which have no counterpart in verbal rhythm. A few illustrations as to this will follow later. No real fusion of verbal and musical rhythm is possible, as I have already indicated, if both are to be allowed their natural movement, and, let it be said at once, musical rhythm must go. A non-accented, non-committed negative series of notes will alone serve our purpose as a vehicle for the ideal singing of speech. Notes involving exact time divisions, such as P P P or

P P P , which is the stock in trade of cadence manipulators, cannot be allowed.

But we are not yet at the end of the matter; something further has to be dealt with. We have so far considered only the individual progress of syllables and the freedom which must go with them. Their organisation into groups is now essential. For it is only then that phrasing starts and ideas become manifest. All relationships of words or notes begin with elementary groupings of twos and threes. If it is metrical grouping, it will be in a regular series of such denominations: if free grouping, the sequence of twos and threes will be irregular. This constitutes the difference between metrical poetry and free prose. The rhythm of the psalms is of the latter kind, twos following threes, or vice versa, according to the thought expressed. It is this sort of movement which must be preserved in Psalmody, but has never been taken into account. All Anglican Psalters have consistently done their best to deny its existence. Worthwhile individual attempts* to come to grips with the true situation have been made, but they could only be partially successful as long as existing chants with their metrical lay-out were used, and a sort of tinkering process applied to them. Fundamentally they were bound to fail till the desired treatment had its counterpart in clear principles and exact notation—as exact as that of the system it would supersede. Otherwise the problem was not susceptible of a solution which would serve everyone, and be communicable.

This must conclude our theoretical discussion, which will certainly not carry much weight until it has been translated into actual psalmody which can satisfy both singer and listener.

It will be impossible for me to deal fully with chants, either melodically or harmonically, as an aspect of the subject, in their own right. This would need another lecture. All that is necessary at the moment is to take the rhythmic formula which has been adopted in the single Anglican chant, and, with a simple melody,

* I am assured by Dr. Allt that some years before I had formulated my own ideas he was implementing them with his choir at St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh. The credit of being first in this field must therefore go to him. Others may also have arrived at the same solution, and I should be very glad to know of it, particularly if it has appeared in print or writing. But I think it should be repeated that—as with our Devonian friend (v. p. 2)—speaking the words well as a preliminary to saying them does not guarantee that the principles here enunciated will be applied. They cannot be on the basis of barred Anglican Chant. One test is whether the last syllable of the words has, in every case, been made to coincide with the last note in the cadence. If it has, it might be fairly safe to assume that the method employed was as given here. As I have said, I should much like further evidence of previous attempts on similar lines, as in face of it, some of the phraseology of this paper might have to be altered. I might add that authorities like Dr. Stanley Roper and Dr. J. H. Arnold did not know of any such attempts.

shew how it should be combined with the words according to the system which we have outlined.

Taking Psalm 121, "I will lift up mine eyes," the result would be as follows:—

Ps. 121

1. I will lift up mine eyes un-to the hills:
 2. My help cometh even from the Lord:
 3. He will not suffer thy foot to be mov-ed:
 4. Behold | he that keepeth Is-ra-el
 5. The Lord himself is thy keep-er:
 6. So that the sun shall not burn thee by day:
 7. The Lord shall preserve thee from all e-vil:
 8. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy com-ing in:

(d) from whence com-eth my help.
 (d) who hath made heaven and earth.
 and he that keep-eth thee will not sleep.
 shall nei-ther slum-ber nor sleep.
 the Lord is thy defence up-on thy right hand.
 nei-ther the moon by night.
 yea | it is even he that shall keep thy soul.
 from this time forth for ev-er-more.

There may occasionally be a difference of opinion as to which word of the text should be chiefly stressed, that is to say, the groupings of duples and triples may be subject to slight variation, but this will seldom arise, as it is generally quite clear where the stresses lie. Obviously, in singing, the groupings must not be treated roughly. One should feel their presence unconsciously, rather than be made aware of them. They but follow the laws of good elocution, which resolve themselves, for the most part, into good punctuation and good sense. Even if this form of chanting is not done to perfection—and there is room for much studied beauty in its delivery—it will still bear the hall-mark of natural speech. The great difference of the foregoing with present methods is best shewn by comparison. The first verse of the Psalm that

we have just heard, followed by the same verse sung to the well-known chant by E. J. Hopkins, will make the matter abundantly clear.

Ps. 121

I will lift up mine eyes un-to the hills: from whence cometh my help.

Note how the Anglican cadence suddenly imposes a new style of instrumental movement upon what may have been a quite satisfactory treatment of the words on the reciting note. It so obviously breaks into a musical measure (in which the accents on the first beat of the bar take charge of the rhythm) that the result of the whole entirely lacks unity, or such spiritual connection as should be apparent if unity it to be achieved.

Three further examples of current Anglican pointing, followed by the modification I would propose, will perhaps be sufficient to elucidate the matter this afternoon.

Ps. 103

* 1. And for- | get not | all his | be- ne- fits. ||
 2. And healeth | all | thine in- | i- qui- ties. ||
 3. (Ps. 62) My soul truly | wait-eth | still upon | God. ||

* *Conventional (wrong) treatment*

† And forget not all his be- ne- fits.
 And healeth all thine in- i- qui- ties.
 My soul truly wait-eth still up-on God.

† *Right treatment*

In the foregoing, the triples in themselves provide an easement to the monotony of duple groupings, which would, of course,

underline the square rhythm that we should be anxious to avoid. The result of the insertion of these triples is to give a gracious, instead of an angular, movement to the phrasing. This is particularly noticeable in ex. (c), where, to begin with, the rhythm of the words is not very felicitous. A further feature in the cadences of the recommended versions is that the syllables are therein "contained" by the notes which, as it were, press backwards. In the Anglican versions the syllables spill forwards, emptying themselves like a load of bricks on the last note.

As far as I can see, there is nothing to commend the Anglican chant as a truly artistic production. It is false in style, false in accent, false in rhythm. Unless "the tune's the thing," unashamedly enjoyed in whatever guise, there is no excuse for mutilating splendid Biblical words in order to make them fit it. For, in truth, the Anglican words we know have no valid relation to the spoken word except on the reciting note, which can scarcely be called part of the tune.

On the other hand, these are the advantages of the system I propose (though, of course, the right sort of melody is imperative for it):

1. It is simple to adjust; one has only to count the number of notes in the cadence and fit them to the same number of syllables in the words; count the syllables back, in fact.
2. It removes ambiguity; only one solution is possible; searching for the right pointing is at an end.
3. The cadence is a continuation of the reciting note; no change of style occurs when the cadence comes, except for a very slightly slower treatment of the words. With previous systems there are almost two distinct styles in dealing with a chant, (a) a verbal, too often a conversational style for the reciting note, (b) an instrumental style for the cadence: hence a complete lack of uniformity.
4. It makes use of triples (but not in the sense of three notes in the time of two) presenting a fusion of twos and threes in the same way as prose, of which it is the perfect counterpart rhythmically.
5. The same series of notes (in the cadence) serves for different accenting; nothing is fixed or stereotyped—all is fluid; new rhythmic forms arise with almost every verse; the music is as free as the words themselves.
6. It therefore teaches the singer how to accent freely; how to put an accent on any note, after the manner of mediaeval polyphony.
7. The application of one unit note to a syllable in the cadence tends to dignified delivery, but by no means hinders fluency or movement.

8. It is very easy to put into practice; people quickly learn the system. In short, it works, giving the completely satisfactory solution, and it can be used with any Psalter or Anglican Chant; even with neumatic chant, in which case the neum would be treated as a single note, one syllable being given to it.

Truly a formidable list!

Finally, may I ask you to consider well whether my somewhat unusual statements can be opposed or reasonably countered. For it is an important matter that we are discussing. Also, before passing judgment, I would ask you to experiment on the lines that I have ventured to indicate. A strong position does not suffer by being severely tested. Rather does it gain, for this alone will prove it tenable.

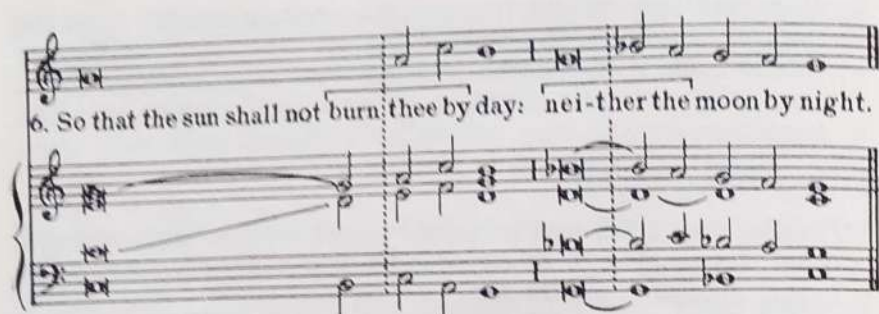
Reforms are never easy. Vested interests, financial difficulties, inertia, etc., stand in their way; and there is a nostalgic pull towards the past which understandably carries great weight. But none of these things must be allowed to prevail if advance is clearly indicated, and change is seen to be good. Probably trials will, and should be, made in a small way at first. It will quickly appear whether extension is desirable.

Addition to the foregoing paper in lieu of personal discussion

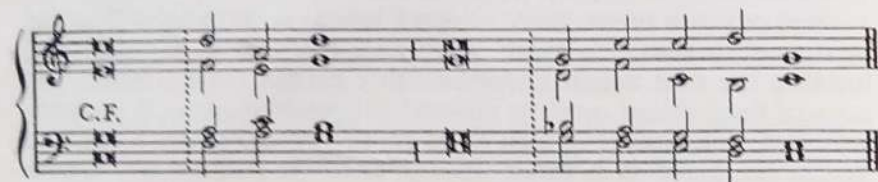
Unfortunately, owing to illness, I could not be present at the meeting and had to ask Dr. Greenhouse Allt to read this paper for me. He very kindly did so and I here gratefully acknowledge his help, also that of Mr. John Davies, who so admirably sang the necessary examples. I understand that a discussion followed Dr. Allt's reading and that two special points were raised:

- (1) As to whether the sort of tune used on page 6 was open to harmonisation, and
- (2) Whether the notes did not imply accent in their own right which might run counter to the accent of the words; whether, in short, the freedom claimed for the method advocated were really possible.

As to (1) perhaps the best reply is to give a couple of harmonisations to show what can be done. They have, of course, a modal flavour, but that is not necessarily to their disadvantage. It must be admitted, however, that any harmony, to a certain extent, clogs the flow of the melody, and that unaccompanied unison chanting makes for the greatest perfection in delivery; also the better the tune, the less does it call for accompaniment. But some accompaniment, harmonic or otherwise, is almost bound to be wanted, if only to support the voices; also to afford the element of contrast. This might be an organ accompaniment to v. 6 of the foregoing Ps. 121:



The bass (and harmony) should as far as possible change with the verbal stresses. Or, if a note-for-note harmony is desired, this (with the tune in the tenor) might serve:



But I prefer that the tune should be in the bass, as it allows all the congregation to sing it without distortion of the harmony.

Here are two further examples of such an arrangement:

Ps. 137

Sorrowfully

† It will be seen that only the four last notes of the phrase are used here. According to our principle it must be so when necessary.

I have written in all the verses of this Psalm to show how unison and harmony can be treated. Such alternation is perhaps the best way of singing the Psalms, but many other ways are possible. After the organ has given the first three notes, a solo voice (with the intonation for v. 1 only) sings as far as the *, then the men (or all voices) come in. V. 2 can be taken in harmony, then unison and harmony alternate. The congregation could join in from v. 2 onwards, and the organ could support throughout, if necessary.

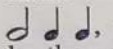
Another chant to be treated as above might be:

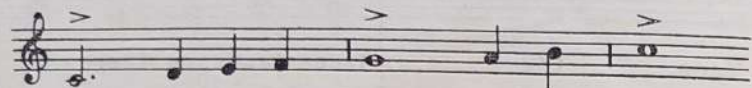
Ps. 148

** Joyfully*

*Or transpose down to ease pitch.

As to (2) the second point p.9: it is seldom, if there is a moving bass, that the accent of the music tends to clash with that of the words. To begin with (as we have said) we should deal with a

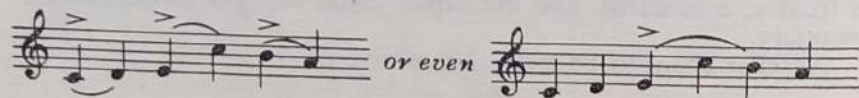
negative series of notes, entirely free of accent. Such a series must be of notes equal in value—all minims or crotchets, etc. That is the main condition. If longer notes are interspersed, attention is immediately drawn to them. Thus, in a rhythmic motif such as , the minim will stand out: that is to say, it will usually be the equivalent of, or subject to, an accent in its own right. With such a series as this:



the long notes would certainly bear a stress, and, if words were put to it, it would be at these points that the verbal accents must occur, as they do in current Anglican practice. It is always the irregular and unusual in music that demands to be driven home. A note may thus stand out by reason of its length, and also its pitch. Notes moving by conjunct motion do not disturb our sense of the expected. If, however, a larger interval suddenly appears, such as:



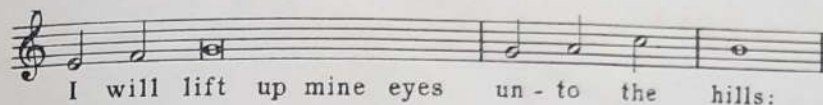
the natural grouping of the notes would seem to imply accents on their first notes, i.e. an accent of pitch. Such accents are likely, but not inevitable. The notes might be phrased:



and no objection could be made. In short, contrasts of pitch do not seem to have much influence on accent, which remains much as we (or the words) choose to determine it. Length of note plays a far more important part than pitch in imposing stress, and is perhaps the chief cause for our criticism of Anglican practice.

That the highest note of a phrase should invariably bear an accent, or invite a crescendo towards it is a fallacy that should be exposed. Indeed it is scarcely too much to say that, if light performance is aimed at, a phrase should become softer as it rises, and not louder. However it must not be taken as an invariable rule. The sense of the passage decides. The principle is especially applicable to Plain Song, when anything like heavy weather at the top of phrases usually betokens rough practitioners. A useful analogy here is that of a throw of any sort which gradually expends its energy on its upward course.

It comes to this, then: an inflected series of equal notes is largely ambiguous in meaning, just as is a series of words, till we have given "point" to them. Provided equal notes are not already committed to regular barring—that is to say are unfettered by any fixed accent—they will adjust themselves to whatever accent the words may dictate. In itself there is nothing wrong in barring, if, in the case of the Psalms, we allow irregular barring. Thus if we bar the first strain of v. 1 of Ps. 121 in this way:



it may even help right performance. But this barring or accent must not be predetermined. Such indication of the accent is good—the bracket for the triple groupings used on p.6 serves the same purpose, for it supposes a stress on the first note of such groups. The fault must always lie, when, as in Anglican chant, the bar has no relevance to the real structure of the words, and is at cross purposes with it. Nothing but confusion can arise from such a situation, to which hundreds, almost thousands of different Psalters bear witness. It is my hope that a Psalter on the principles I have outlined may soon be made available.

I might add that 'speech rhythm' pointing, as at present practised, entirely distorts the melody, for the verbal accents are still fitted to the first note of the bar. Thus, even more syllables may have to be packed into a bar—needing more repeated notes in the process—than was required by the older conventional method. In any case it spoils the melody. One has only to put the result into notation to see what a mess it makes of the melody—a different mess with almost every verse. Consistency, regularity, simplicity go by the board; natural shape is lost. We should agree to the change that is here proposed not only because it guarantees the integrity of the words, but—and this is also of great importance—of the melody, with any other treatment the necessary principle of 'one syllable to one note' cannot be maintained, and the dignity of the melody disappears.

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