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POINTS OF VIEW

By
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POINTS OF VIEW¹

I

THE vigorous criticism directed during recent years against the services of the Church and Church musicians has been enlivening in its effect. The musicians, at all events, have thought more candidly, and have weighed in the balance many old ideas and customs. Yet it is doubtful whether any general success in recognizing foundation causes of failure has been achieved. The average organist is still tempted to take as his model the services to be heard in a neighbouring cathedral; the reforming clergyman seeks salvation in shorter sermons and a costly new organ; and it is possible that both might, with advantage, direct more attention to the needs of congregations and the means which already lie at hand to satisfy them.

Let us look at the people of the Church in groups—the organists together with their choirs, the congregations, and the clergy—and consider whether they are in danger of remaining rather distinctly three bodies in their approach to the services of the Church, instead of merging as they lose themselves in the one great purpose—the Worship of God.

Relations between choirs and congregations are not always harmonious, each being prone at times, perhaps, to consider the other a nuisance. Friction between the clergy and their organists and choirs is not unknown.

¹ The author of this pamphlet writes from the experience of a professional singer who was member of different congregations, and from further experience gained, as a clergyman's wife, by working as organist and choirmistress of her husband's church.

Now the organist, unless he is a quite genuine artist, requires considerable grace of character if he is to fill his position adequately—for his chief duty is the accompanist's. He may be a brilliant player of solos, but unless he realizes that he is at the organ to accompany and supplement the singing of choir and congregation, his technical attainments, being sufficient, would find a happier home on the cinema organ. (Readers of musical criticism in the Press, and observers of the habits of great soloists, cannot fail to notice the respect and admiration nowadays paid to the good accompanist.)

Dr. Buck writes: 'It is a curious fact, but one admitted on all sides, that an organ-player of fine attainments as a soloist is often (and sometimes *because* of these attainments) a very poor accompanist. The Vicars of England are gradually awaking to this fact; and some already, erring on the other side, are refusing to entertain testimonials which refer too pointedly to the applicant's abilities as a solo-player. It is obviously a pity that this paradox should exist. Musical intelligence is the great factor in making a good organist, and a little more of this same quality is the only thing necessary for producing good accompanists.'

The proper relation of the organist to his choir and the service serves admirably as an illustration of the position which music itself should rightly take in the Christian Church. Music should serve religion. The firmer the organist's grasp of this truth, the greater will be his protection against many excesses—excesses in the proportion of sound produced by choir and organist, excesses in the quantity of music forthcoming from them.

But, apart from all other reasons, music, for its own sake, should not dominate religious services. We have

all met those unintelligent users of the Radio who hear all music that is to be heard, exercising no choice, being surfeited with music, so that gradually any critical faculty they originally may have possessed is lost. In the same way we hear music in some churches—hearing so much of it, with no refreshing silence, no pauses, no consciousness of a building-up to any climax, of any particular point of grandeur and impressiveness—a musical jumble lacking unity and design.

The artist dislikes such excess. Wastefulness and extravagance offend him. The religious man dislikes it because the atmosphere becomes too disturbed to be worshipful.

It would be possible to give many examples of economy in the workmanship of the great classic masters, and even, though with greatly increased instrumental facilities, of many modern composers. It would be possible to bring illustrations from literature; but most people will agree that the principle of economy is sound, and that it is practised by the creative and performing musician of any merit. This does not imply a lack of fine effects. Rather does it ensure them.

To quote Dr. Buck again: 'Make the most of your organ (however small it may be) by using every stop *alone* that can so be used.'

Further—'A golden rule might well be placed on every organ desk—"never use two stops where *one* will do".'

In speaking of the use of the Full Swell he says—'*Sparingly* used it produces a fine effect; but it is safe to say that in nine services out of ten it is so overdone that it is degraded into a trick of the trade. In the same way the pedals are used *too much*; the pedals gain more than half their nobility of effect from being *sparingly* used.'

In the Psalms, Dr. Buck suggests, nearly half the verses

might well be played without pedals. Many organists know and have proved the value of this practice.

'On the same principle use the couplers *discreetly*.' Speaking of the swell to great he says, 'The wise man only pulls it out *now and then* for a definite purpose.' Again—'Loudness is a question of degree. If the organ were half the size, the organist would have to be content with the reduced volume, and the listeners would probably prefer it.'

He suggests that the congregation should grow used to certain degrees of forte and fortissimo, and that all the time the organist should have in reserve 'a power of sound which will make a real climax overwhelming'. (*The italics in these quotations are placed there by the writer of these pages.*)

No doubt these ideas are already familiar and acceptable to many; but Dr. Buck, with whom any modern writer on the organ would agree, is here quoted because his valuable advice on these practical details serves also to illustrate a principle.

Truly, many have cheapened music by giving too much of it. The custom of playing voluntaries before the beginning of the service appears to be dying, however—one omen of a more becoming restraint.

(One obliging organist abandoned this altogether on receiving a complaint from a visiting member of the congregation that the single five-minutes bell had not been in the key of the piece played that evening. Few organists are burdened with such sensitive listeners.)

In favour of the discontinuance of this practice, it might be remarked that a well-played voluntary should be respected. It is no compliment to the music or the player to treat it as an accompaniment to incoming or outgoing footsteps. Further, granted that the congrega-

tion is well instructed in behaviour, there is no finer introduction to a service than silence. The effect of the music when it comes is considerably heightened thereby. Again, there happen to be some people who like to pray and meditate in quiet on entering a church; and these deserve first consideration.

Few of the clergy or organists could even imagine the entrance of the choir unaccompanied by music—in the same way it is difficult to achieve the exit of a handful of Sunday-school children without 'musical honours'—but even here, the writer suggests, silence, because of its solemnity, is a better preparation for the service with the music to come.

Practices which are guided by ideas of appropriateness and suitability become artistic as a natural result.

Take, for example, the use of the Pause—a valuable help to the full appreciation of music, and at the same time welcome to worshippers. A Pause allows thought, and prevents that dreadful feeling that one is working against time. Too well we know the clergyman who can hardly wait for the people to kneel, so urgent is he that no time be lost in beginning the General Confession. How decorous is a Pause here, till all are quietly kneeling. Too well we know the organist who plunges into the next tune almost before 'Here endeth the first Lesson' has left the reader's mouth, and yet Pauses after each Lesson are wonderfully impressive.

And who can measure the power in that stillness which inevitably should follow the pronouncement of the Blessing?

II

A correspondent to the *Musical Times* ('Cathedral Organist') wrote:

'The Church organist is more than half a hero. His responsibility is second only to that of the parson.'

That is quite true. It might also be true to say that his power is probably greater. If the parson can preach, and sing just tolerably his allotted portions, the atmosphere of the service rests chiefly with the organist and with the choir, which, usually, the organist has trained.

Now the choir is a privileged body—not privileged, however, as some choristers understand privilege. It is not privileged to scrutinize the congregation with steady gaze during the non-musical parts of the service. This example of bad manners and irreverence is all too common. Nor is it privileged to pass the service papers and cough-drops up and down the stalls, nor to consider the sermon as something to which no respect need be paid. Their privileges are of a higher order. Theirs is the opportunity to sing for the edification of all 'who have ears to hear', to help and encourage the singing of the congregation, to strike the note of reverence, setting up a standard of right behaviour. (One might speculate on the feelings of some choristers if as little respect were paid to their singing as they have paid to many a sermon.)

But here again the personality of the organist is felt, for one rarely sees irreverent choristers when a clear lead to the contrary is given them by their choirmaster. Many choristers would probably see things in their right perspective if they were taught from the first that indifferent and irreverent behaviour, the temptation to which they can resist, is something far worse than a musical

break-down, which, naturally, would be unintentional. Incidentally a few aids to order might here be mentioned. It is helpful to make a practice of finding as far as possible the places in the choristers' books, thus avoiding much shuffling and turning of leaves at the beginning of the service. The passing up and down of service papers is prevented if every two choristers are supplied with one. Also, some organists, where the position of the organ permits, have found it an excellent practice to sit with the choristers during the sermon, thus making themselves one with the choir and congregation. The foolish idea that he must scamper back on scenting the approaching end of the sermon to play the Amen after the Ascription, might be abandoned for the more sensible one of using the spoken voice for that ill-used word.

That the choir is not a performing, but a worshipping, body in the fullest sense, is the view-point from which we should like to regard them. Whether they so regard themselves is another matter.

III

It is possible that the long-suffering congregation is all too frequently forgotten. It merits more consideration in several directions.

Take tempi, for instance. Is it a large congregation?—if so, it will move rather slowly, with less elasticity than a small body of singers.

We have all heard that unhappy struggle for supremacy when the organist tries to force the pace.

Hear Vaughan Williams speak: 'The present custom in English churches is to sing hymns much too fast. It is distressing to hear "Nun Danket" or "St. Anne" raced through at about twice the proper speed.' 'Another painful experience', he continues, 'is to hear an organist trying

to play through a Common Metre or Long Metre tune in absolutely strict time, regardless of the slight pauses which the congregation, with unconscious artistic insight, are inclined to make at the end of every line.' Later, 'All hymn-tunes should be sung more or less freely; at all events a stiff clock-work rendering should be avoided.' Again, we know that children naturally sing faster than their elders. The writer's experience of them is that, unconduted, they will keep pretty well to the time they find comfortable. The tug of war between different tempi is something to avoid, however, chiefly as endangering the sense of worship. From the congregation's point of view there is, alas, considerable room for improvement in the treatment of the Psalms, the Te Deum, and Canticles. Here the congregation too often is left stranded to listen helplessly to much senseless gabbling—words sung at a pace with which they are quite unable to cope.

The words of the Psalmists may be sacrificed to a mistaken notion that speed can destroy monotony—while the reverse is true. Only a loving care for the poetry of the Psalms can mitigate the monotony of the Anglican chant.

Then as to pitch. It is an astonishment to many practised singers to find how much higher everything feels to be when sung congregationally. Some choirmasters object to low-pitched hymns, but Vaughan Williams answers them thus: 'The choir have their opportunity elsewhere, but in the hymn they must give way to the congregation, and it is a great mistake to suppose that the result will be inartistic. A large body of voices singing together makes a distinctly artistic effect, though that of each individual voice might be the opposite.' Again, perhaps few clergy or organists realize how disturbing to a congregation—unfortunately most people accept disturbances without questioning the reasonableness of them

—is the sung 'Amen' to the spoken prayer. It is in any case illogical, and so ugly in effect, one might think that alone would prove its unsuitability. The united voices of a congregation, with its wonderful blend of various pitches, when speaking in prayer is quite beautiful—as beautiful as the soft buzzing of bees. Any violent disturbance of it, like the sudden intrusion of voices singing, perhaps with accompanying chords on the organ, is not beautiful. But worse than that—the abrupt contrast in sound is disturbing to the prayerful mind.

The subject of the intrusion of music during the most solemn moment of the service of Holy Communion—that of Communion itself—is a delicate one. It may be that the more sensitive and musical the communicant, the greater the distraction caused. To others, music may serve here to create an atmosphere, but whether its use may be justified on this score is questionable.

IV

The clergy have numbered in their ranks some accomplished musicians. The majority, however, possess little knowledge of music, and are therefore frequently timid to speak on matters musical; but the importance of close co-operation between the clergyman and his organist cannot be too strongly urged. While acknowledging the strained patience to which many a musician who works with an unmusicianly parson may be subject, it is obvious that the patience of a clergyman is often as cruelly tried by the lack of judgement shown by his organist. One cannot withhold sympathy from the clergyman who has put much thought into a sermon, whose words are practically wiped out by a frivolous voluntary.

One famous organist said: 'Few people object to any one playing the *Tannhäuser* Overture, or the Preludes to *Tristan* or *Die Meistersinger* on the organ; but many protest against the deplorable want of taste which can think such pieces, with their inevitable associations of sensuality, passion, and humour, suitable for church Voluntaries.'

Though the clergyman may not be able to talk learnedly with his organist, his taste is not so much at fault as is frequently supposed. Over-picturesque treatment of accompaniments to the Psalms is offensive to many who perhaps could not explain convincingly why it is disliked. A certain voluntary may often strike the preacher as being entirely wrong, but it is difficult even for a musician of fine feeling to explain, lucidly, why, of two pieces which may have no secular association, one may be suitable and the other not. Such things are felt more quickly than they can be explained. It is, however, a terrible indictment of an organist's taste when a clergyman can say that he frequently feels the devil enter with the concluding voluntary! Though the clergyman may bestir himself to provide an expensive modern instrument, which for its own sake may be desirable, it is so much labour and money thrown away where judgement is lacking in the player.

In conclusion, it will be noticed that criticism and suggestions have been made chiefly concerning practices in the services of Morning and Evening Prayer, since these services are still most generally attended, and because opportunities for inconsistent and insincere methods are probably most plentiful in them. But since Worship is a reality, it is clear that whatever is unreal and artificial must be withdrawn, wherever it may be.

It is equally clear that where reform is needed it must be accomplished kindly. Sudden changes in a service are inconsiderate to an established congregation, and are likely to arouse that opposition which makes improvement so difficult. The adoption of a new Hymn Book, for instance, should not involve the rejection of all old friends, who, after all, may be worth preserving; and the destruction of false gods should be a more or less silent process, accomplished by the erection of others more admirable.

It has been found possible in many places by gradual eliminations and gradual additions completely to transform a service within two or three years. Sincerity should be the guide. Sincerity will show that music should be used as a definite act of worship, as when we sing our Psalms, anthems, and hymns. Sincerity will suggest that a fine hymn should not suffer the distraction caused by an accompanying collection of coins. It will convince us that prayer, and the recital of one's faith, require more concentration than is possible if the organist uses them as subjects for improvisation. Sincerity will bring us to the realization that it is an abasement of music to use it to fill up odd moments where silence seems awkward to the trivial-minded.

Is our work artistic?—then it will assist Worship.

Is our aim to assist Worship?—then our work will be artistic.

The quotations from Dr. Vaughan Williams may be found in the Preface to the English Hymnal; those from Dr. Buck in the chapters 'Hints on Solo-playing' and 'Accompaniment' in his book 'Organ Playing'.

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