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# SONG-SCHOOLS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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## SONG SCHOOLS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

There are probably many who will remember how, in the tenth book of the Confessions, St. Augustine describes what in his own experience he conceived to be the advantages and the dangers of Church music. There were moments in which he felt the allurements of sense get the better of him against his will, when the object of the melody was driven out of his mind by its mere beauty, and its inner meaning forgotten in pleasure at its formal perfection. He says:

Very often, I would gladly have every tune of those sweet songs in which the Psalms of David abound removed from my hearing and from that of the Church itself, and often it seems to me that it would be safer to adopt the practice which, as I remember frequently to have heard, was that of Athanasius, who made the reader of the psalm use so slight an intonation of voice that he seemed to be speaking rather than singing. And yet, when I think upon the tears that I shed in the early stages of my recovery of faith, at the songs of Thy Church, O Lord my God, and now that my emotion springs, not from the mere chanting, but from those things that are chanted, when they are sung by clear voices and to most appropriate modulation, I return to recognise the great usefulness of such an institution. Thus do I waver between the risk that lies in carnal pleasure and the advantage which I have experienced to spiritual health.<sup>1</sup>

It is fortunate that the great influence of Augustine did not communicate scruples which must have raised apprehensions in the music-loving members of the Church of Hippo to the Church at large, and that the

<sup>1</sup> Aug., Conf. x, 33.



Church has taken for granted that what is sung with the breath of life is sung with the understanding also.

At any rate, in that educational system which the Church inherited from the Roman empire, music retained its place among the seven liberal arts, closely allied to the study of metre and involving, in its widest sense, the recognition of the power of harmony in all things earthly and heavenly, in the celestial spheres, in the movement of the seasons, in the parts of the human body. It needs more technical knowledge than I possess to translate adequately passages in which the power of music was defined and described by the numerous writers of treatises on the subject during the earlier part of the middle ages, and it is enough to say that the foundation of the whole study lay in vocal music, the art of song, the understanding of the principles—

How not one voice alone, but voices blent  
Compose each tune, match sounds in sweet concent,  
Discern unlike from like, foes from allied,  
Mingle in unison, in parts divide;  
How music changes garb with change of key,  
Tears follow laughter, mirth sobriety,  
Now discord reigns, now grief's melodious wail,  
Now lively jest sports in chromatic scale.<sup>2</sup>

In words such as these, and in many more, does Alain de Lille, late in the twelfth century, illustrate the range of the power of song and its effect on the mediæval mind. And, with all the stress laid upon the three elementary sciences at the root of education, grammar, rhetoric and dialectic, and with the relegation of music to a further

<sup>2</sup> Alanus de Insulis, *Anticlaudianus*, dist. iii, c.v. (*Satir. Poets XII cent.* [Rolls Ser.] ii, 324.)

stage in the mediæval curriculum, nevertheless the teaching of song for use in the services of the Church was an imperative necessity which could not be deferred till a later date, but took its place on the threshold of the gateway to the arts and sciences which was open to the young pupil.

Thus it was, to speak particularly of our own country, that, within the century after the coming of Augustine, the Church, in organising education, felt the need of masters in song to instruct the young. Part of the work of the follower of Paulinus in the North of England, James the Deacon, whose activity survived the fall of the power of Edwin and his master's flight to the south, was the teaching of ecclesiastical chanting to his disciples; and when Wilfrid, later in the century, sought, as Bede says, "to deliver to the churches of the English" in those parts "the catholic manner of life," he brought from Kent to Northumbria a master of singing, Stephanus Eddius, his future biographer. About the same time, Archbishop Theodore, in the course of his fruitful career of administrator and organiser, appointed to the see of Rochester Putta, who, with other accomplishments, was eminent in the art of chanting in church, which he had learned at Canterbury from the disciples of St. Gregory the Great.<sup>3</sup>

The most instructive document which we possess of English origin upon the teaching provided in early mediæval schools is the well known poem of Alcuin upon the prelates and saints of the Church of York.<sup>4</sup> There may possibly be some rhetorical exaggeration in

<sup>3</sup> Bede, *Hist. Eccles.* ii, 20; iv, 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Historians Ch. York* (Rolls Ser.) p. i, 349-398.



the attribution of almost universal learning to Egbert, master of the school of York and afterwards archbishop; but in those days encyclopædic knowledge, as in the case of the Venerable Bede, was not beyond the grasp of individuals. On the subject of musical teaching at York Alcuin is somewhat indefinite. "Some," he says, "Egbert taught to sing together in Aeonian song, while others learned to play upon the flute of Castaly and to speed over the ridges of Parnassus on lyric feet." But these words apply to verse rather than to song; and, when he comes to enumerate the chief authors represented in the school library—a most interesting list—he makes no mention of any books on the art of music. Alcuin himself, educated in the school, became its master. He left York for the wider sphere of the Frankish kingdom and the court of Charlemagne, where he exercised his command of scholarship and his gift for administration in the oversight of the palace school and its kindred institutions throughout the realm. Experience probably had shown him that, in the combination of a great variety of subjects in a single school, some branches of learning stood a good chance of being neglected. In 796 he wrote a letter to the Archbishop of York, his old pupil Eanbald, recommending the separation of three classes of study under separate masters, the school of book-learning or grammar, the school of song and the school of writing.<sup>5</sup>

I do not say that this distinction, after Alcuin's day, was uniformly observed, and there are far more references in mediæval literature and official documents to grammar-schools than to schools "where children lerned hir antiphoner." But in important centres, where "quires and places where they sing" played a large part in life,

<sup>5</sup> Leach, *Educational Charters and Documents*, 1911, pp. 18, 19.

such separate schools were established. At Durham the grammar and song schools were under separate masters who, however, were united as chaplains of a chantry in the cathedral church and dwelt together in the same house;<sup>6</sup> while on the other hand at Northallerton, a dependency of the prior and convent of Durham, grammar and song were taught by one master.<sup>7</sup> The case of Northallerton must have been that of many small towns and it is possible that in such places the teaching of song was overshadowed by that of grammar. Nor of writing-schools do we hear very much, though it is obvious that the mediæval clerk had plenty of opportunities for acquiring excellent penmanship and practising the various current fashions. It is interesting, however, to see that, nearly seven centuries after the death of Alcuin, an archbishop of York, whether consciously or not, followed his advice. In 1483 Thomas Scott of Rotherham, promoted from the see of Lincoln to that of York in 1480, founded Jesus College in his native town as a habitation for the chantry priests of the parish church, otherwise exposed to the temptation of living in lodgings and idling in the town. But, first and foremost, the college was to be a place of study, and its corporation was to consist of a provost skilled in theology, and three fellows, a grammar-master, a song-master, who was to bear rule over six choristers or children of the chapel, and a writing-master, knowledgeable and skilled in the art of writing and of casting up accounts. Rotherham's provisions for it, moreover, witness to his conviction of the attractive power of song as an aid to religion. "Considering that many parishioners belong to that same

<sup>6</sup> See *Vic. County Hist. Durham* i, 371, 372.

<sup>7</sup> Leach, *op. cit.*, pp. 342, 343.



church and a great many people from the hills"—mountain men, as they say in Ireland—"flock together thereunto, in order that they may love Christ's religion the better, and the more often visit, pay honour and cleave in affection to His church, we have thought fit to establish for ever a second master learned in song, and six choristers or boys of the chapel, that divine service may be celebrated there with the greatest dignity."<sup>s</sup>

The office which Alcuin held at York was that which became generally known as the office of Scholasticus. As such, he no doubt had his place in the cathedral chapter as it was then constituted. Of that constitution, however, all that can be said is that the clergy of the cathedral church were attached to the archbishop's household and that no distinction had yet arisen between the archbishop and chapter. Indeed, it was not until the Norman Conquest that, at York and in the other churches of secular clergy, the chapter took that definite form with which we are still familiar. That form is usually said to have been borrowed from the practice of the churches of Normandy, as was natural, and, so far as each chapter consisted of a body of canons with certain 'dignities' at its head whose offices in the church were clearly defined, it certainly followed what had become the ordinary practice on the Continent. But the arrangements in the churches of Normandy itself were by no means uniform, nor were the number and nature of the dignities in each church altogether identical. And I may say at once that the practically uniform and clear-cut arrangement of the four dignities of Dean, Precentor, Treasurer and Chancellor, with their stalls at the four corners of the choir, may be regarded as a specially

<sup>s</sup> Leach, *op. cit.*, pp. 424, 425.

English development which has possibly been read too freely backwards in the desire to discover for it a precisely Norman origin. Nor did the four come into existence all at once. Their introduction was gradual, and it was some time before the fixed titles by which they afterwards became known were applied to some of them. Two of these dignities stood in a special relation to educational duties, and it is with them alone that I need deal.

It is unnecessary for me to say much about the Chancellor. In him, from the first assumption of his title in England, were vested the responsibilities inherited from the Scholasticus. In a certain number of churches in northern France, at Amiens and Noyon, for instance, and in Normandy at Bayeux, the dignities of Chancellor and Scholasticus were distinct from each other. Where, as at Chartres and Paris, the Chancellor was definitely head of the Cathedral school, the Scholasticus was not a dignity; and where, again, as at Laon, an important cathedral school existed with a Scholasticus at its head, neither he nor a Chancellor were found among the dignities. And if we can equate the Chancellor at Tours with the Scholasticus at Angers, such an equation is neither constant nor common.<sup>9</sup> In England, however, the Chancellor, whose primary business was that of secretary to the Chapter, conducting its official

<sup>9</sup> The constitutions of French cathedral chapters, as recorded in *Gallia Christiana* and the issues of the pre-Revolutionary *La France ecclésiastique*, refer of course to their contemporary state. That state, however, had undergone practically no alteration since the period when such chapters assumed definite form, at latest in the course of the twelfth century, and the constitution of the cathedrals of dioceses founded since then had shown no tendency to introduce novelties. For the mediæval constitution of French chapters see *Recueil des historiens de la France: Pouillés* vols I-VII, 1903, etc., vol. II of which deals with the province of Rouen.



correspondence and responsible for the keeping of the common seal, was also the Scholasticus of the church, the lettered member of the body who was charged with its educational work. In the well known document which purports to be, and no doubt represents the tenor of St. Osmund's institution of the chapter of Salisbury, the Chancellor's duty is to govern the schools and correct the books, i.e. the service-books of the church. Osmund also refers to an officer called the Archiscola, that is to say the head of the school, who at first sight seems to be subsidiary to the Chancellor. But, when we read that his duty is not only to hear lessons read and determine their length, which might well be committed to a deputy or second in command, but to carry the seal of the church and compose its charters and letters, duties which were the *raison d'être* of the Chancellor's being, it becomes clear that Chancellor and Archiscola are one and the same person. In addition to which he is required to note down the readers' names upon the board on which they were inscribed in order for the daily lessons in church, "and," it is added, "it is the Chanter's duty to do the like for the singers."<sup>10</sup>

As the fields of activity of the cathedral dignities become more clearly defined, we see that the Chancellor combines in his person three offices which on the Continent were habitually kept distinct. He is secretary to the Chapter, Scholasticus or schoolmaster, and Theologus, the theological lecturer who is responsible for sermons, either by himself or by deputies. Further, he is not

<sup>10</sup> See Wordsworth and Maclean, *Statutes of Salisbury Cath.* 1915, pp. 28-32. It may be noted, however, that at St. Paul's the duty of keeping the list of readers and seeing that each knew when and how to perform his task was attributed to the schoolmaster appointed by the Chancellor (Dugdale, *Hist. St. Paul's*, 2nd ed. 1716, app., p. 29.)

merely one of the clergy of the church: he is also a diocesan official. We must not confound him, of course, with the diocesan Chancellor of our own day, the Official Principal or Commissary General who is the bishop's delegate in the Consistory Court; nor, although his position may have been founded in the first place upon the rank which he occupied in the bishop's household, did he continue to serve church and bishop together. The bishop's domestic Chancellor, when we begin to distinguish him, is an entirely different person. It is mainly as Scholasticus that the work of our Chancellor spreads from the cathedral church to the rest of the diocese. Thus the Black Book of Lincoln, in its chapter on the office of Chancellor, lays down in detail those points which, in St. Osmund's ordinance, are prescribed for the Chancellor or Archiscola at Old Sarum, with initial emphasis on what was not included in that document, his duties as Theologus. At the end of the chapter come these clauses: "It is part of his dignity that no one may lecture without his licence in the city of Lincoln, and that he has at his free disposal the appointment to all the schools in the county of Lincoln, except those that exist on the prebendal estates."<sup>11</sup> These last, of course, like the famous grammar-school at Louth, were in the gift of the individual canons of Lincoln to whose several prebends they belonged. In this passage, only schools in Lincolnshire are mentioned, but in some cases the educational jurisdiction of the Chancellor had some theoretical importance beyond the limits of the county. When, within that vast diocese, the University of Oxford came into being, Lincoln was too far away for the Chancellor of the church to claim an *ex officio* relation to it like that which

<sup>11</sup> Bradshaw and Wordsworth, *Lincoln Cath. Statutes* i, 285.



the Chancellor of Nôtre-Dame held in the University of Paris. But the office of Chancellor at Oxford came into existence under the eye of the bishop of Lincoln, with local duties such as at Lincoln were exercised by the Chancellor; and in such relations lies the origin of the office of Chancellor in our Universities.<sup>12</sup>

But our main interest lies in the dignity of Chanter or Precentor. To him, in the Black Book of Lincoln, is assigned the conduct of the choir school. "The office of the Chanter is to rule the choir *in elevacione et depressione cantus*," (that is, in setting the pitch of the singing), "to note the singers in order on the board, and to him belongs the teaching and discipline of the boys and their appointment and admission as members of the choir. Moreover on greater double feasts he is bound to be present to rule the choir on the rulers' bench. He must be in choir at mass with the other rulers and call to him such of them as he sees fit. He should also on every double feast give the rulers of the choir instruction how to begin the psalms. Every chant which is to be begun by the bishop he is bound in his own person to announce to the bishop. He must also mend the song-books of the church when they are broken and rebind, when they are in need of it, those that are bound; and, if new books of the kind require to be written, they shall be written under his charge and as he appoints, the cost being met" (out of the common fund) "by the provost of the canons. And, whenever a discord or mistake occurs in chanting or

<sup>12</sup> On the office of Chancellor in Universities see Rashdall, *Univ. of Europe in the Middle Ages*, ed. Powicke and Emden, passim, especially ii, 114, where the distance of Oxford from Lincoln is shown to be the 'determining factor' in the growth of its independence, differentiating it from the normal French university. For the significance of the control of the capitular chancellor in France see *ibid.* iii, 278-282.

psalm-singing, it lies within the Chanter's province to see it amended.<sup>13</sup>

We may compare this with the description of the office of Chanter at St. Paul's. "The chanter is he who bears rule over song in the church of St. Paul. His office is to inspect chanting and singers; to see that all in choir sing together in regular time and tune, to appoint to each singer what he shall sing in his time and place, and to see that different and appropriate chants be kept to suit the variety of days and feasts; to start the antiphon to the Magnificat and Benedictus on major feasts; also to begin processional chants and the sequences and the Gloria in excelsis; to give his key to the canon who is celebrating mass at the altar; to see what boys may be introduced into the choir and to admit such as have the gift of singing. It also belongs to his office, when copes are worn in choir, to allot them to their wearers in order of rank. He shall leave all corrective action, however, to the Dean and Chapter, and shall also submit himself to their judgment, which he must recognise that he is obliged to obey in all things that appertain to his office."<sup>14</sup>

At Lincoln, St. Paul's and elsewhere the Chanter had his deputy, the Subchanter or Succentor, charged in the Chanter's absence with the execution of the duties that usually fell to his principal. At York there were two Succentors, the Succentor major and the Succentor of the vicars, who was head of the college of Vicars Choral, the second of whom was charged especially with oversight of the choir-boys, hearing them sing and chastising them when necessary. Further, just as the Chancellor had the mastership of the grammar-school in his collation, so at

<sup>13</sup> Bradshaw and Wordsworth, *op. cit.* i, 283, 284.

<sup>14</sup> Dugdale, *op. cit.* app. pp. 28, 29.



York and in other similar churches the Chanter, and in his absence his deputy, had the collation of the mastership of the choir-school. "The Chanter," so runs the statute of St. Paul's "appoints the master of the song-school, whose office is to instruct those who cannot sing, to teach the boys diligently and be to them a master, not only of song, but of good manners."<sup>15</sup>

Before I go on to speak of the Vicars Choral and the Choristers, I should perhaps emphasise the importance of the Chanter in the constitution of the cathedral church. In English churches he is always, after the Dean, the second dignity. While in theory all the four dignities were bound to constant residence, none of them had so large and responsible a part in the conduct of divine worship as the Precentor. Abroad, where the titles of the head of chapter and other dignities varied considerably, the least variable was the title of Chanter. Indeed, in four churches, three Breton and one Norman, Dol, St.-Pol-de-Léon, Tréguier and Coutances, the Chanter was actually head of chapter and perhaps it was the influence of this phenomenon, originating in a district predominately Celtic, that is seen in the collegiate churches of Crediton and Glasney, in the diocese of Exeter, and, as late as the fourteenth century in the church of Ottery St. Mary. Again in the chapter of St. Davids, the Precentor seems to have taken, as time went on, the foremost place which originally had belonged to the Archdeacon; while, in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the collegiate chapters of Abergwili and Llanddewi-Brefi, in the same diocese, were presided over by Precentors.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* app. p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> For the Breton and Norman instances, see *Gallia Christiana*, etc. as in note above. For the others, see the printed episcopal registers of dio.

As regards the responsibility of the Chanter for the song-school, I may note two interesting facts. The first of these again concerns a peculiarity of certain continental churches. The greater number of the cathedral churches of Provence, in the ecclesiastical provinces of Aix, Arles and Embrun, including the late mediæval province of Avignon, had four dignities, Provost, Archdeacon, Sacrist and Capischolus. The same four occur in one church of the province of Narbonne, Uzès, close to the border of Languedoc and Provence.<sup>17</sup> Of these, the Provost corresponded to the Dean in our churches, the Sacrist to the Treasurer, while the Capischolus, in the absence both of Chancellor and of Precentor, was presumably responsible for the grammar and song-schools. There is, however, a certain amount of evidence which connects him specially with the song-school, and, although his position among the dignities was lower than that usually accorded to the Precentor, his place in the church probably was more closely akin to that of the generally ubiquitous Precentor than to the more elastic office of Scholasticus or Chancellor.<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, the earlier versions of cathedral statutes do not precisely indicate the relation of the Chanter to the song-schools of the diocese. At York the statute runs: "To him appertains the collation of the schools of song; and cases relating to those schools should be debated and decided before him; but it shall be the business of the dean and chapter to carry into effect his sentences after

Exeter (ed. Hingeston-Randolph) and dio. St. Davids (Cymmrodorion Soc.) and such general authorities as *Monasticon Anglicanum*, Jones and Freeman's work on the Cath. Ch. of St. Davids, and Dalton's *Colleg. Ch. of Ottery St. Mary* deal with two of the churches named.

<sup>17</sup> See *Gallia Christiana*, etc., as above.

<sup>18</sup> See citations in Ducange, s.v. Capischolus.



they have received his report.<sup>19</sup> Here it is quite possible that the plural "schools" refers simply to the school connected with the cathedral church. But at Lincoln, where the statute in the Black Book is silent, the *Novum Registrum* which Bishop Alnwick issued, with infinite care, in 1439, after his award as arbitrator in the quarrel between the Dean and the Chapter, gives very precise information. The Precentor has to present a master of the song-school to the Dean and Chapter for admission. This master should be expert, not only in song, but in grammar, for some grammar at any rate should be learned by the choristers, though in less abundant doses than in the grammar-school; and, if his grammar is insufficient, they should have a special grammar-master as well. "The Precentor," continues the text, "shall also appoint and prefer the song-master in the city and those in the county of Lincoln, excepting only schools on prebendal estates and those which certain curates hold for their own parishioners in their own parishes, or which are held by the parish clerks of the same, for we will not that such persons be hindered by the Precentor from educating and instructing the small boys of their parishes in song."<sup>20</sup> This probably was a ratification of existing custom and no new arrangement; and the light which it throws on the existence of village schools of song, or rather, on the place of song in the elementary curriculum of village schools, is of great value.

Within the last few years the colleges of Vicars Choral, those interesting and highly picturesque survivals of an elder day, have lost their corporate status and separate endowments; and I have no doubt that most of us, con-

<sup>19</sup> Bradshaw and Wordsworth, *op. cit.* ii, 95.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* ii (iii), 299.

templating the buildings that housed their members, as at Wells or Hereford, are tempted to regret, or even question, the necessity for their dissolution. But such colleges were and had long been but shadows of their former selves. I need hardly say that the Vicars Choral were originally the mainstay of the cathedral services. Corresponding in number to the canons of the church, each was presented by his principal to the Dean and Chapter for admission. While the residentiary canons were few and tended to grow fewer in the course of time<sup>21</sup> the vicars were always on the spot. If we have ever formed a picture to ourselves of a mediæval cathedral choir at work, we have been mistaken if we imagine its stalls full of canons, all chanting the offices with devotional fervour. We should probably find, save on important festivals, a minimum even of the few residentiaries present. The choir would be composed of a certain number of Vicars Choral, taking their turns for attendance in rotation, the hebdomadary or vicar for the week being responsible for the main conduct of the service. There would, of course, be the choristers, and in the later part of the middle ages there was a growing tendency to employ lay clerks, singing men with a special talent for their work. But, in the beginning the vicars were all persons in Holy Orders, priests, deacons or subdeacons. When a prebend in a cathedral church, as at Salisbury, is called a priest, deacon or subdeacon prebend,

<sup>21</sup> The special privilege of residence was a share in the annual revenues derived from the common property of the cathedral chapter. While any canon might qualify for residence, the restrictions with which the preliminary conditions of 'protesting residence' were surrounded made it impossible for all but a limited number to reside; and, as time went on, it was obviously to the advantage of residents to keep this number down to a minimum, which at York in the time of Henry VIII was reduced to only one.



it is because its holder, the prebendary, was expected to provide a priest, deacon or subdeacon, as the case might be, to double and deputise for him in choir.<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to say how far admission to a vicarage in choir depended upon the candidate's musical gifts, but we may conclude that the examination by which the vicar was admitted to his year of probation included some kind of a voice-test. The important point, however, which determined his ultimate acceptance as a perpetual vicar was his knowledge of the church service and his ability to recite the Psalter and the Antiphoner by heart.<sup>23</sup> At Salisbury, the lengthy statute relating to the Vicars Choral has much to say about their character and conduct, but nothing about their powers of song. That they fell short of an ideal devotion to duty at Salisbury from time to time is quite clear, and in that respect Salisbury was not unique; but when in 1268 Dean Robert Wykehampton lamented their negligence in coming to the daily mass of our Lady in the Trinity chapel, for their services at which each received a penny a day, it is to be hoped that, even if they spurned that inducement, they were not incapable of rendering those jubilant hymns with resonant vocal modulations which, according to the Dean, were customary everywhere else.<sup>24</sup>

The story of the choir-school at Salisbury and of the chorister-boys who dealt in the close under the supervision of the custos has been written in recent years by Mrs.

<sup>22</sup> Thus at Salisbury the number of priest-prebends was 22, of deacon-prebends 18, and of subdeacon-prebends 12.

<sup>23</sup> Wordsworth & Maclean, *op. cit.*, p. 213. At Hereford the vicars were given a year and a day in which to learn the Psalter, Antiphoner and Hymnary by heart (Bradshaw & Wordsworth, *op. cit.*, ii, 72).

<sup>24</sup> Wordsworth & Maclean, *op. cit.*, p. 250.

Robertson.<sup>25</sup> The status of these boys in secular churches was very similar to that of the boys who were educated in the almonries of monasteries to sing in the conventual choir and to serve at the altars of the church. Here at Salisbury it is evident that the choice of choristers and their admission by the Precentor depended upon their gifts of voice. Their number is not fixed, but it was directed that natives of the diocese should have the preference, provided that they were suitable; but boys from outside the diocese were not excluded, if they showed special excellence in music, combined with high character. The statute concerning the choristers at Salisbury gives special prominence to the annual election of the Boy Bishop, but leaves unmentioned other matters of more importance, and mediæval statutes generally are in the habit of passing over the inferior members of the choir rather lightly. At Hereford, where duties which primarily should have been among those of the Precentor were delegated to the Succentor, he appears to have had control of the clerks of the first form, as the choristers are called—that is, the occupants of the lowest row of seats in choir—and these boys, who were boarded by the canons, were liable to corporal punishment from him, though he could not expel one from the choir without his canon's consent.<sup>26</sup>

In dealing with any aspect of mediæval education, we have to keep two points in mind. First, there is the control over education exercised by the Church, which is obvious. The second, however, is sometimes overlooked, and even now there are probably many people who think that education was in the hands of the religious orders.

<sup>25</sup> D. H. Robertson, *Sarum Close*, London, 1938.

<sup>26</sup> Bradshaw and Wordsworth, *op. cit.*, ii, 76.



As a matter of fact, it was very much the business of the secular clergy, and it is, in the special case of song, from the practice of the great secular foundations that we can learn most about its organisation and methods. Nevertheless, if I have spoken at some length of such churches as York and Salisbury and Lincoln, counterparts in England of the ordinary type of cathedral foundation on the Continent, I must not forget to pay some tribute to monastic influence. It was from the monasteries of Gaul and Central Europe, founded upon their practice and the personal experience of their authors, that those treatises on the theory of music and harmony came of which so many were produced from the eighth century onwards. In England the learning of Bede included a knowledge of music: of foreign writers I need mention only Rémy, the monk of St.-Germain at Auxerre, Notker the Stammerer, from the great monastery of St. Gall, the chronicler Regino of Prüm, Hermannus Contractus of Reichenau, a prolific writer on scientific subjects, and the famous abbots, Odo of Cluny and William of Hirschau, to all of whom such treatises are attributed.<sup>27</sup> We have only to remember the liturgical zeal of Cluny and the splendour of the vast basilica which was consecrated in 1095, the love of music and musical instruments displayed in the carving of the capitals, now in the Musée Oclier at Cluny, which probably crowned the tall columns encircling the apse, to realise the diligence with which the study of sacred song was pursued there. In every monastery the music was placed under the charge of a monk with the title of precentor, who very generally combined with his office that of *armarius* or librarian. Such a monk was Osbern, the chanter of Canterbury

and biographer of Dunstan, of whom William of Malmesbury says that in the art of writing he was second to none in his day, but in music was assuredly without controversy first of all.<sup>28</sup> Too many ideal and sentimental pictures of the life of mediæval monasteries have been painted in the past; but, with the memory of Osbern before us, it needs no great stress of imagination to see the accomplished music master directing the *maîtrise* of the cathedral church, with his pupils gathered round him in the choir, as we can still see the modern choristers grouped round their master in continental churches to render anthems on great festivals or the choruses of the Palm Sunday Passion music.

At the same time, whatever advantages monasteries might possess as places where music might be studied intensively with the greatest profit, the ordinary person approached it through the schools kept, often in parish churches, by secular clerks. It is only here and there that we have a glimpse of such schools, but we have enough to show us that the song-school was a well-known feature in mediæval life. At Warwick the Dean and Canons of St. Mary's were patrons of the local schools of grammar and song. In 1316 the masters of both schools were at variance over their pupils. The small boys of the song-school were instructed there in elementary grammar, the grammar of Donatus, which the grammar-school master regarded as an encroachment on his province. To settle this dispute the chapter decreed that the grammar master henceforward should have, hold and instruct the Donatists and scholars in grammar and dialectic, while the music-master should have those who were learning their letters, and teach them the psalter,

<sup>27</sup> All these texts and others are printed in Migne's *Patrol. Latina*.

<sup>28</sup> Will. Malmes. *Gesta Regum* (Rolls Ser.) i, 166.



music and song. We do not know how the grammar-master appeared in church; but the master of the song-school was expected to be present at the Lady mass in the Lady Chapel every day with two of his pupils, while on greater double feasts he was to wear a silken cope in choir and fill the office of a precentor<sup>29</sup>—an interesting detail, for here the precentor is not a canon or dignitary, but simply the head of the choral staff, just as he was in a monastery or in one of the colleges of chantry priests which became so common in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, just, too, as we know him in cathedrals of the new foundation whose constitution more nearly resembled that of a chantry college than of the great secular churches.

From the statutes of such colleges of chantry priests we can occasionally gain some idea of what was thought necessary in a parish church in the way of song. We must not expect too much, for only the larger establishments, like the college which the Dukes of York founded at Fotheringhay, could afford a choir apart from that which the priests, with the parish clerk and perhaps a few "little clergeons" from the village supplied. In the parish church at Sibthorpe, a few miles from Newark-on-Trent, one Thomas Sibthorpe, who for many years had been a clerk in the royal service, founded a college of seven priests, with a warden at their head, in 1342. Sibthorpe was then, as now, a small village, peaceful and remote. The church, rebuilt largely at Sibthorpe's expense, still remains, though deprived of the aisles in which were the altars of St. Mary and St. Anne, special objects of his devotion and care. The statutes which he issued for the college, among elaborate provisions for the maintenance

<sup>29</sup> Leach, *op. cit.*, pp. 275, 276.

of church services and of lights at the altars, contain the direction for the choice by the warden of a clerk sufficiently instructed in reading and song. In addition to his duties of serving the altars, looking after the lamps and lights, waiting on the chaplains at table, ringing the bells for every service from dawn to dusk, and sleeping in the church, he was required every day, whenever he could find time for it, to teach the small boys of the parish and any others who wanted to learn their letters for a reasonable sum to be agreed upon between him and the several parents. This must have formed a welcome addition to the 13s. 4d. which he received yearly, with his board, from the warden and chaplains. Whether, like Chaucer's parish clerk, he was an instrumentalist, playing airs on the fiddle and singing a tenor to them, we are not told; but I have no doubt that he did his best to communicate his skill in song to his young pupils, and that in church he was a strong and sonorous support to the chaplains. And it would be with his advice that the warden and chaplains would find a poor young clerk of the parish who sang a good treble and could be maintained by them in food and raiment until his voice broke and they could find another to take his place.<sup>30</sup>

This, of course, does not imply a very exacting standard, but the warden and chaplains were doing their best with what in a small country village may have been poor material. At the almost contemporary college in the church of Cotterstock, in the valley of the Nene, near Oundle, the founder's statutes prescribed two clerks with competent skill in reading and singing, to be chosen by the provost and fellows.<sup>31</sup> Here no educational con-

<sup>30</sup> The statutes of the college of Sibthorpe are contained in the register of Archbishop Zouche at York, ff. 98b-103.

<sup>31</sup> These statutes are in Lincoln Epis. Reg. vi, ff. 60-63.



ditions are laid down, nor is anything said about a treble voice in choir. But we know that at Cotterstock matins, vespers and the other hours were solemnly sung in choir daily, with mass of the day and mass of our Lady at the high altar, and this distinctly and audibly with good psalmody and suitable pauses in the middle of each verse of the psalms. Much the same directions were given at Sibthorpe, where the warden, chaplains and clerks, rising in winter about dawn at latest and about sunrise in summer, came into church clad in surplices and black almuces and solemnly chanted matins and prime by note. Mass of the day and the Lady mass, as at Cotterstock, were both sung, as were vespers and compline. And we have in both churches the picture, before the ending of the day, when compline was over and the great bell, heard far over the quiet countryside, rang three times in the tower of the college church, of its household kneeling in choir, while the chaplain for the week recited the final collect, praying the Virgin-born for purity of heart and body and for the increase of devotion in their house, "so that the glory of the Son may wax greater in this place to the Mother's praise, and that we, following the Lamb without spot, may with joy behold Thee the Son with Thy Mother in our true native land."

This at any rate is what the statutes tell us, and we must take the intention for the deed, though, in the ordinary course of human affairs, performance may often have fallen short of promise. In the most important churches, we know, where there was a large staff of Vicars Choral, that slackness in divine worship, during the later middle ages, was constantly apparent. When Bishop Alnwick made his visitation of Lincoln cathedral in 1437, he heard many complaints of the behaviour of the

ministers of the choir, the vicars and the "poor clerks," that is to say the lay clerks or clerks in minor orders who were in the second form, the row of seats above the choir-boys. They left their seats during the hours, and even when mass was going on, wandering in the church and outside it and chattering with lay-folk, going out after the invitatory at matins and not returning until it was time for the Benedictus at lauds, and in the meantime leaving the psalms and antiphons to two or three vicars on either side of the choir.<sup>32</sup> This was by no means unique or even striking as an example of negligence and irreverence. More than two centuries earlier the Dean and Chapter of Salisbury, remarking that disorderly gestures, movements and leapings were signs of a levity of mind inconsistent with that dignity which Vicars Choral should preserve, blamed their perpetual restlessness in choir, running hither and thither, going out and returning without any obvious reason.<sup>33</sup> I need not observe that to the mediæval mind our strict notions of reverence in church were alien in a day when the line of demarcation between the sacred and profane was very thinly drawn. Such observances as the pageant of the Boy Bishop of Salisbury, the revelry, with games and shouting, in the choir at Lincoln, and what seems the solemn mummary of the feast of the Ass at Beauvais to commemorate the Flight into Egypt, admitted elements of license into the church of which many of its younger ministers would be ready to take advantage on other occasions.<sup>34</sup> What Alnwick found at Lincoln was to be found in many other

<sup>32</sup> The text of the visitation return is printed ap. Bradshaw & Wordsworth, *op. cit.* ii (iii), 366 sqq. See pp. 376, 383, etc.

<sup>33</sup> Wordsworth & Maclean, *op. cit.* p. 224.

<sup>34</sup> For the Feast of Fools and the Boy Bishop see the instances copiously cited by Chambers, *The Mediæval Stage*, vol. i, chh. xiv, xv.



places: it repeated itself for instance at Southwell Minster, at the collegiate church founded by the house of Lancaster in the Newark at Leicester and in numerous other churches where we might have expected the standard of worship to correspond more nearly to our own ideals.<sup>35</sup>

We have seen how, at Sibthorpe and Cotterstock, stress was laid on the pause in the middle of each verse of the psalms, which so effectively brings out the parallelism of meaning between its two halves. The tendency, not extinct to-day, to omit the breathing-space and to run one verse into the next, is by no means of modern growth. As long ago as 1280, John of Wheldrake, prior of Warton in the East Riding, bequeathed a sum of money to the sub-prior and convent with which they could buy themselves a pittance of spices—preserved ginger and such delicacies—for the chief festivals, on condition that they preserved the proper pauses in the psalms.<sup>36</sup> The ideal was to sing the psalms *pausatim et tractim*, with pauses and *rallentando*, not *transcurrendo vel transiliendo*, hurrying or overlapping verses in a competition between the two sides of the choir. Here again, in monasteries and secular churches alike, visitors had occasion to condemn the contrary practice. The very first injunction which, in 1526, the abbot of Waverley issued to the abbot and convent of the daughter house of Thame, is highly interesting in this respect. The monks are to chant the office with sincere devotion, slowly, distinctly and properly, and better than usual, according to the form prescribed in the Tonale of St. Bernard and the rule

<sup>35</sup> See Leach, *Vis. and Mem. Southwell* (Camden Soc.); Thompson, *Hist. Newark Hosp. and College*.

<sup>36</sup> *Reg. of Abp. Wickwane* (Surtees Soc.), p. 91.

observed at Cîteaux, without overlapping or syncopation or any other form of hindrance. Further, secular and lay singers, men and boys, are to be excluded from choir in time of service, while that divided form of song, in English pricksong, with playing of organs by such seculars and the accompanying circumstances of sitting in mixed groups, talking and disorderly behaviour in general, is strictly forbidden. Permission, however, is given to the monks, provided that no seculars are admitted, to use "some plain-chant melody" on Sundays and saints' days at mass and vespers, with organ-playing by one of the brethren, or even by some secular of good report, on condition that they are not too intimate with him. Similar music is also allowed at the daily mass of our Lady.<sup>37</sup>

This attempt to revive Cistercian ideals of ecclesiastical music in an abbey which had become notorious for its slackness of discipline probably produced no very lasting effect, and, had the "playing of the merry organs, sweet singing in the quere" with the help of lay-folk been the only shortcomings of the monks of Thame, they would have been venial and harmless. There can be no question, however, that this mingling of seculars with religious in the monastic choir was dangerous, and, where part-singing in church was concerned, there can be no doubt that the musicians of the Reformation period effected as desirable a revolution in our own churches as their contemporary Palestrina effected in the interests of the Counter-Reformation. And I doubt whether at Thame in 1526 the musical standard was high, or whether some passer-by during hours of divine service would have lingered to listen to the 'clear voice of the cloistered ones' chanting the particular praise of God appropriate to the season.

<sup>37</sup> See the text printed Eng. *Hist. Rev.* iii. 712-13.



I have already said a great deal without, however, saying much that will be new to any of you. Let me conclude with an illustration of a *contretemps* that might well happen in a choir of mediæval singers. It comes from that remarkable collection of pious anecdotes compiled in the thirteenth century by the Cistercian Caesarius of Heisterbach, which brings us often into the choirs of the churches of the order. The discord and confusion which occasionally would happen in the best regulated churches were ascribed by Caesarius to the intervention of demons, who were constantly striving to attack monks on their weak side, or flitting about the choir in crowds, visible only to those who had won by earnest prayer the doubtful privilege of seeing them, and endeavouring by confusing the singers to interrupt such psalms as *Domine quid multiplicati sunt*. It happened one night at matins in the choir of Himmerod that, when the hebdomadary had chanted the antiphon to the invitatory and the monk next to him had begun the psalm in a moderate key, the elder monks duly took up the strain as set by him. Now, there was a silly young monk, almost at the bottom of the choir, who felt annoyed that the psalm had been begun so low, and so raised the key by a fifth—in fact, like Chaucer's parish clerk, he sang a "quynyble." In spite of the efforts of the subprior, he would not stop but successfully overtopped the rest, and was imitated by some of those on the other side of choir, so that the psalm was abandoned in disorder. What discipline he underwent for his presumption we are not told, for Caesarius is careful to point out that all this was the work of a demon, who, finding profitable material for his use on both sides of the choir, leaped from one to the other between the verses.<sup>38</sup> But the moral is that God is better

<sup>38</sup> Caes. Heist. *Dialogus Miraculorum*, ed. Strange, i, 284.

pleased with a chant in an unambitious key, accompanied by devotion of spirit, than by voices raised loudly to heaven in a spirit of arrogance. And with this I think, so far as human beings may venture such a statement, we shall all agree, as furnishing a most suitable preparative to those *ineffabiles jubili*—that one and unending triumph-song which it is our hope to share with the heavenly host.