

Local Church Music Festivals

A GENERATION or two ago local Choir Unions enjoyed a modestly vigorous usefulness. The complexity of modern social life appears to have spelt the death-blow of this kind of musical unit. The purpose of the present article is not to propose anything in the way of such a permanent organization but to suggest that a useful surrogate for the defunct Choir Unions may be found in the occasional organization of a local Service or Festival of Church Music. This may be held on a Sunday evening, a weeknight, or it may, more ambitiously, cover a weekend.

Why Church Music Festivals ?

That the existing condition of the Church's musical health requires resolute action will be gainsaid by none. The picture, while very far from being wholly sombre, nevertheless reveals sombre aspects. It is in fact an ambiguous one.

On the one hand, many of us have lived through a generation of revolutionary improvement in the Church's cultural standards. If it were possible to compare the praise lists of thirty years ago with those generally selected to-day, it would be apparent that standards of taste have suffered a revolutionary change for the better almost without our being aware of it. It is true that there are still stubborn conservatives in congregations and in some choirs, and it is true that ministers still exist who week by week ring the changes on a pitifully limited selection of their own favourite hymns. But these are diminished companies. A revolutionary improvement has come about, and the fact ought to be gratefully recognized.

On the other hand, contemporaneous with this improvement and for reasons not directly connected with it, the technical apparatus for the conduct of the Church's praise has deteriorated catastrophically.

This also has happened so imperceptibly that relatively few people are aware that the Church now faces something of the nature of a crisis. While the technical virtuosity of the modern concert platform has its counterpart in the cathedrals and the greater churches here and there, the incredibly debased level of organ technique and choral

understanding now presents the churches with the formidable task of creating, out of almost nothing, a completely new generation of church musicians, both on the organ stools and in the choirs. Whatever be the cause of this decline, whether it be inadequate salaries, the appeal of more attractive musical opportunities or a decline in religious conviction and churchmanship, the fact is there to be faced.

Local festivals of church music are far from offering the solution of a problem which it will take a generation at least to solve. Yet, wisely conceived and keenly carried out, it may serve to create some awareness of the prevalent musical poverty, and to indicate the largely unsuspected riches waiting to be exploited in the interests of the Church's worship. In an age which, in the broader fields of music, is distinguished by technical accomplishment of so notable an order, it cannot be held that the requisite talents do not exist. It is equally incontrovertible that they are not being drawn into Christ's service.

Let us recognize once and for all that the post of a church organist and choirmaster does not and cannot appear either exhilarating or worthwhile to the average young musician of to-day because, as things are, *there is no field* for worthy ambition. There is instead an average certainty of personal frustration and musical boredom. When we have faced this fact and its implications, we have begun to take the measure of the problem we face.

The occasional local festival service will not solve the problem; but it will not have failed if it serves to make the calling of church music an open and exciting question once more.

Where to Start?

In some cases useful one-day or week-end festivals have been organized by an appointed member or committee of a Presbytery in collaboration with the General Assembly's Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion. This method has the very great advantage that the church *ethos* marks and controls the festival.

In other cases action has been taken independently by some musically experienced minister and organist in collaboration with the Director of Music of the local Education Authority. One advantage of this method in rural areas is that it is able to make use of lively groups of singers who are already to some extent rehearsed in the elements of choral work. As many of the participants are likely to be members of somewhat desultory church choirs,

the hope is that the musical life of the congregations may receive a healthy stimulus. It is incomparably more important that local choirmasters should by whatever means come to see their task in new and provocative terms.

Some Guiding Principles.

The method of organizing a festival of church music will vary according to local circumstances. Where advice is sought the General Assembly's Committee is always willing to make its specialized resources available either for advice or practical leadership.

Whatever is attempted, certain guiding principles follow from the fact that the festival is for *church* music.

(a) The desirable *locus* is wherever possible a church. Anyone who has heard such a work as William Byrd's *Ave Verum* sung first, say, in the Usher Hall, and then in a church, knows the force of this principle. Church music was written for church and even artistically it loses something if it is transplanted.

(b) Church music is music put to the service of the liturgy. At its highest it was so conceived and written. If it was this that determined its form and mood and meaning, it follows that the music loses much when it is wrested to the alien use of entertainment.

From this point of view Handel's oratorios are not strictly speaking church music, though it is true that individual numbers can be tamed and reformed by the liturgical setting. Where the dramatic element so overlays the devotional that disbelief can without discomfort enjoy the action in a concert hall, the *norm* is evidently not that of music for church.

In contrast, J. S. Bach's *Passion According to Saint Matthew* is more tensely charged with high drama than Handel's *Messiah*, yet the listener is less conscious of the dramatic than of the devotional element. The *norm* is therefore clearly that of church music.

The festival, then, if it is to be genuinely a church music festival, will observe the general principle that this music is the servant of the liturgy, in a broad sense of that word. It will be not primarily a recital but essentially an act of worship.

Within this strict limitation, there is unlimited scope for development. The festival may take the form of a choral service of traditional shape, with brief but comprehensive prayers and lections, though with a great part

of the action expressed in terms of music. Services as varied in style and as far separated in period as those of Merbecke and those of Stanford may be laid under tribute, implemented by anthems and by the great hymns of congregational praise and adoration. Or the festival may develop some selected theme such as "From Easter to Ascension" or "The life and passion of our Lord", in the manner, for instance, of the widely known Service of Nine Lessons for Christmas Eve, though preferably with a more attenuated corpus of lessons.

Whatever be attempted, the principle broadly remains. Experience further supports it. Church music given for entertainment may sometimes fail even to entertain. Beautifully and reverently offered, it can never fail as worship.

(c) A third principle for such a festival is that of catholicity, the awareness of "one generation crying to another".

In terms of music this means that the whole range of musical resource in this particular field should be regarded as available. The literature is there. It is more than compendious. But it is little known.

In this realm as in others ignorance is responsible for suspicion. Lacking experience, people cannot and ought not to trust their own judgment. Therefore unless adequate guidance be offered they will choose the way of suspicious conservatism. A festival may perform at least one service of inestimable value if it helps to make more familiar the fascinating variety and volume of the Church's music.

It is perfectly possible to arrange a service which achieves at once artistic unity, musical variety, and devotional completeness. If items are selected from each of the great ages of musical invention, the diversity of musical resource and devotional mood will satisfy as well as surprise. Gregorian chant, plainsong, the polyphonic freshness of Tudor composers such as Tallis, Byrd and Farrant, the Genevan Reformation pieces of Louis Bourgeois, the not unknown work of Bach, S. S. Wesley and Stanford, and the stimulating idioms of such modern composers as Vaughan Williams and Herbert Howells together offer an embarrassment of riches which the average church has not begun to exploit for the uses of worship.

There is a spiritual interest to be served in such fresh essays. If heresy be, as it has been defined, the overstatement of some neglected truth to the relative exclusion

of the rest of truth, then the particular emphasis of each particular age partakes of the savour of heresy, since each generation tends to stress that aspect of Christian interest which is congenial to its particular social condition and aspiration. Its music will tend to share this disability. Each age, therefore, requires the correction of the ages. To recognize this fact is to acknowledge the wisdom of being truly catholic in the music as well as in the language of worship.

In such a festival as is envisaged there will be heard the sound of "one generation crying to another".

(d) Fourthly, it will be wise always to aim at simplicity, if such a festival is to be popular, as it ought to be.

While it is true that there is much in this voluminous library of greatness that is not easily accessible to the common ear and understanding where people have been too long inured only to the measured beat of the more familiar metrical psalms and hymn tunes, it is also true that our people are more capable of enjoying a fresh taste in musical diet than they are generally credited with or given the opportunity of showing. For significant evidence—of an unusually striking kind—readers of this *Annual* may profitably refer back to the article "Why Not Plainsong?" in the 1953 issue, by the Rev. Fred. Robertson. Most congregations, if given enthusiastic and judicious assistance, will quickly learn to participate intelligently and even with delight in such items in the *Revised Church Hymnary* as *Veni Creator* (182), *Verbum Supernum* (188), *Pange Lingua* (108), *Corde Natus* (60), to name the more obvious examples, and may be induced to go on from there to *Adore Te* (319), *Christe Redemptor Omnium* (421), and *O Lux Beata Trinitas* (4)—the last a most lovely evening hymn for choir or congregation.

Such a joint choir as is available in almost every district ought not to find beyond their capacity such things as Farrant's *Hide not Thou thy face*, Stanford's *Magnificat in B flat* or some of the less troublesome anthems of Vaughan Williams and Herbert Howells.

The real clue to success will lie with the choirmaster. Something in the way of occasional short schools for choirmasters is one of our immediate urgencies. A condensed text-book is already at hand in the prefaces to the *Church Anthem Book*, the *Church Hymnary* and the *Prose Psalter*. Amateur choirmasters who, in theory and practice, have discovered, for example, the exquisite loveliness that can be

created by a balanced choir, however small, *singing-in* in the manner discussed in the preface to the *Anthem Book*, have already begun to taste the excitement of a new musical experience.

Considerable size in a festival choir is not of paramount importance. A selected choir of thirty voices is as capable of producing effective music as the often-billed "massed choir." It is moreover less likely to daunt the resolve of the average chorister or hearer by leaving him with the impression that while it was all very stimulating, it was too remote from the realities of the local parish choir. The aim of a district festival ought to be to show what can with proper direction and enthusiasm become the norm of church music in every parish than can muster, say, twelve or fourteen reasonably serviceable and enthusiastic voices.

A Contemporary Caveat.

We are entered, if not into a time of religious revival, at least on a period when American revivalism has been making the headlines. Where the result is a genuine refreshment of the religious life of congregations and parishes, there is occasion only for thankfulness to God. Nevertheless it must be said that the music of American revivalism is not the music of the Church's worship, and is quite unworthy of that service.

Music is a language, and anyone who understands it is aware of the psychological analysis that might be made of so-called revival songs. The present writer has no wish to enter that field. Let it simply be said that these songs are designed for one end and one end only. The needs of the Church in its normal worship are wider in scope. For the service of the best only the best will serve. Let it be "that part of the best . . . which can be 'understood of the people' and, on occasion, that finger's-breadth above such understanding as will bit by bit lift them into that region where, by music, out of three sounds there be framed 'not a fourth sound, but a star'."

THOMAS H. KEIR.