Church Music in the Pattern of Worship[1]

Everyone agrees that music has an important function to exercise in the worship of the Church. Not everyone has given serious thought to what that function is. Some ministers are content to leave the matter where it stands in the present usage of their congregations, happy if they can find a praise list that the congregation will approve, while leaving the choice of anthem, if any, wholly in the hands of the organist, merely slipping it into the convenient slot in the order of service " where the anthem goes." The result, if not an incongruity, may be a subtle incoherence.

The Fitness of Things

Clearly, everything in this august act of worship ought to be fitting. That is to say, it should *fit*.

(*a*) The words should be fitting. When one even of our classical laureates of hymnody could write :

> I'm only a miserable worm
> Blowing the gospel trumpet . . .

the impression is created that the humility is less obvious than the self-importance ; and, quite apart from the ludicrous incongruity of the images, the whole accords ill with that mingled awe and love which is reverence.

(*b*) The music should fit the words. Readers might care to experiment with a simple example, by trying over the hymn " Through the night of doubt and sorrow " first to Dykes' tune and then to Shaw's, deciding then which element in the hymn each tune emphasizes. My own verdict would be that Dykes' tune expresses the mood of doubt and sorrow, while Shaw's expresses the mood of " marching." Other things being equal, one's choice of tune will depend on the element in the thought of the hymn that one regards as significant.

(*c*) The music must be of a spiritual quality. It is not sufficient that it be musically respectable, but that it should satisfy the condition posited by Robert Bridges : [2]

[1] Based on a lecture delivered to a Conference of the Church Service Society at Newport, Fife, on 30th April, 1956.

[2] His spelling is retained.

> " if we consider and ask ourselves what sort of music we should wish to hear on entering a church, we should surely, in describing our ideal, say first of all that it must be something different from what is heard elsewhere: that it should be sacred music, devoted to its purpos, a music whose peace should still passion, whose dignity should stengthen our faith, whose unquestion'd beauty should find a home in our hearts, to cheer us in life and death; a music worthy of the fair temples in which we meet and of the holy words of our liturgy; a music whose expression of the mystery of things unseen never allow'd any trifling motiv to ruffle the sanctity of its reserve."
>
> " Now such a music our Church has got, and does not use; we are content to hav our hymn-manuals stuff'd with the sort of music which, merging the distinction between sacred and profane, seems design'd to make the worldly man feel at home, rather than to reveal to him something of the life beyond his knowledge . . ."

These words were written in 1899. Since then a notable and salutary revolution has taken place in the composition of our " hymn manuals," a revolution that owes not a little to the prophetic work of Bridges himself. Nevertheless, though it may be argued—and there is some force in the argument—that Bridges' *Yattendon Hymnal* pitched the key something too high for the use of ordinary people, and that art, if it is to be effective, must not be too far removed from the springs of common feeling, we may still admit that the selection of the music of worship cannot safely be left to the discretion (or lack of it) merely of those who " like a good sing ". (*Illustration*: compare such a hymn as *Revised Church Hymnary*, 234, 250, 191, or 168, with the cheaply superficial *Tynemouth*, 697).

(*d*) A fourth axiom, the one we are mainly concerned with here, is that the played or sung items shall fit into the pattern of the service.

There is, of course, an obvious sense in which a hymn or anthem may be well-placed or misplaced in the order of service. Wesley's own title for the hymn " Come Holy Ghost our hearts inspire " (R.C.H., 196), is " Before reading Holy Scripture ", and one cannot imagine the hymn in any other place than before lections or sermon. It is undesirable that the theme of the sermon should dominate the praise list, though it may very suitably find expression in the hymn that links lections and sermon, or in the hymn that immediately follows. In the same way, it is probably a positive disadvantage on an occasion of the Christian Year, such as Palm Sunday, to select hymns all of which are directly " office hymns ", so to speak. The clear general principle is that a hymn or anthem, if it is to be truly a part of the service, must be directly significant for *that part of the service at which it is sung.*

Ancient Uses and Modern Vagaries

Ancient uses acknowledge the principle of selecting a psalm because of its peculiar fitness for the office being observed. It was natural at morning worship to sing Psalm lxiii : " O God, Thou art my God, early will I seek Thee ", and at evening prayer, Psalm cxli : " Let my prayer be set forth before Thee as incense ; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice ". And, even after the Reformation, the communions that broadly maintained, though in the vernacular, the traditional liturgical forms, retained an inbred sense that what was sung should be directly related to its spoken context. The very rigidity of the so-called " cathedral service " and the use of an " office-hymn " at least kept the principle alive.

The Puritan freedom, on the other hand, produced effects which pose problems for us still. Where it did not actually shatter the liturgical pattern itself, it has often given scant courtesy to the principle that what was to be sung should be under the jurisdiction, not merely of the minister, but of the liturgical pattern. That such an abuse of freedom could readily lead to the travesty of worship, and sometimes did so, is apparent from the story of Charles I's encounter with a minister at Newcastle, at a time when the unhappy king's duplicity had finally embittered his friends in the North. The minister with an eye to the situation, had selected Psalm lii :

> Thy tongue mischievous calumnies
> deviseth subtilely,
> Like to a razor sharp to cut,
> working deceitfully. . . .
>
> So God shall thee destroy for aye,
> remove thee, pluck thee out
> Quite from thy house, out of the land
> of life he shall thee root. . . .

Before the psalm could be sung, however, Charles, having noted the drift of the words, called instead for Psalm lvi :

> Shew mercy, Lord, to me, for man
> would swallow me outright ;
> He me oppresseth, while he doth
> against me daily fight . . . .
>
> My wand'rings all what they have been
> thou know'st, their number took ;
> Into thy bottle put my tears :
> are they not in thy book ?

This battle of choices was controlled at least by a kind of rough logic, to which we might almost apply the Scripture :

" The Lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely : for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light " !

Where the pattern of worship does not control the selection of the music it will almost certainly come to be controlled by someone's whim or prejudice, that of the minister, the organist or the congregation ; and, if that preference be uninstructed, one idiom is likely to pervade the service, that which prevailed from the middle of the eighteenth century to the latter half of the nineteenth.

Does it greatly matter ? I believe it does. I believe it matters even profoundly, and for the following reasons.

Musical Catholicity

The first reason is that the nature of the liturgical pattern itself invites musical catholicity.

In the Reformed Churches the pattern, uncomplicated as it is, is yet profound in its content and complete in its scope. Whatever minor variations obtain in the different services of the *Book of Common Order* 1940, the scheme common to all is tripartite : (i) the humble approach to God in adoration, confession and prayer for the Holy Spirit, typified by the orientation of the prayer desk and the head bowed towards the sanctuary ; (ii) the Word of God in Scripture and sermon, typified by the direction in which the pulpit faces ; and (iii) what has been called the Liturgy of the Upper Room or the Communion (even though the sacramental elements are lacking), in which the response of the redeemed community to what God has done and has said in His Word takes shape in thanksgiving, intercession and offerings.

One has only to reflect on this shape and content of the service to recognize that every emotion is induced, and varying resources of language are called into play. Here are attitudes that are passive and those that are active. Here is the sense of the inconceivable holiness and of the intimately personal, sharply contrasted and intermingling. Here is militancy and humility, the joy of the redeemed and that compassion in intercession of which Alexander Whyte said that you must imagine yourself *to be* Christ before you can understand how to intercede. Perhaps, above all, if one would catch the mood of worship, one must study such things as the doxologies in the Book of the Revelation, for there is its essence. And if worship begins with adoration

and proceeds to the girding on of armour, clearly it demands catholicity in the music employed.

Dates are important in this respect, since each age is the victim of its own heresies of exclusion or over-emphasis. The Romantic Movement gathered way throughout the latter part of the eighteenth century. It is not fortuitous that this was the period of musical explosion in religious circles. It has been called " the century of divine songs ". It might more truly be called the century of religious emotion—in this sense (which will be clear to those who understand what a piece of music is saying) that in general the tunes expressed the emotion of the singer rather than the holiness of God, a subjective disturbance rather than an objective reality. More explicitly, what was expressed in much of this music was not a redeemed emotion, even while it was an emotion felt by the redeemed. Much of it, that is to say, was not really religious music at all.

If anyone questions this and believes the criticism to be over-drawn, let him play over *Tallis Canon* (*R.C.H.* 291) and then listen to what the eighteenth century did with the tune.(1) The result is still a good melody, because the bone-structure of the Tallis original is good, but it is now really no more than a charming dance-measure,.

Criticism of a different kind must be made of much of the nineteenth century church music. It is true that, after the subjective and emotional eighteenth century, the Tractarian Movement did much not only to recover the almost obliterated outlines of a doctrine of the Church but also indirectly to restore to the Church's music a dignity that sprang from a new reverence. Every movement, however, plays itself out in the end, if its idiom is allowed to stale through repetition. J. M. Synge said in explanation of twentieth century poetry : " Before verse can become human again it must become brutal. " Something similar has been said of an earlier movement : " Wordsworth felt it desirable to free the normal, cultivated language of poetry from associations which had become, through repetition, sterile in the imagination." This is exactly what happened to nineteenth century church music. To-day anyone with an elementary knowledge of harmony can sit down at the piano and write hymn tunes in the nineteenth century idiom by the score, but neither music not worship will now be enriched by the result. Hence the reaction that took shape in the

(1) *Vide, Miller Patrick, Four Centuries of Scottish Psalmody, p.* 186.

music of Parry and Stanford, with its electric effect on late Victorian congregations.

No-one with a sensitive understanding of these things can fail to appreciate that such composers as Palestrina, Tallis, Byrd and Merbecke are saying something in their music that has hardly been said since—outside of Bach and by him in a different way—except sporadically, and this until quite recent years. It is something that is integral to the pattern of worship and of the essence of its spirit.

Is the distinction not too fine-drawn ? I do not think so. Anyone with music in him can hear it if he will. The late Dr. Robert Bridges had rare perception in these matters. This is his judgment :

> " Turning now to the subject of ecclesiastical music, and comparing thus Palestrina with Beethoven and Mozart, is it not at once apparent that Palestrina has this distinct advantage, namely, that he seems not to interfere at all with, or add anything to, the sacred words ? His early musical art is impersonal, what the musicians call ' pure music ' ; and if he is setting the phrases of the Liturgy or Holy Scriptures, we are not aware of any adjunct ; it seems rather as if the sacred words had suddenly become musical. Not so with Mozart or Beethoven ; we may prefer their music, but it has interfered with the sacred words, it has, in fact, added a personality."

A personality obtruded between the worshipper and God ! But with Palestrina and his kind we are " not aware of any adjunct ; it seems rather as if the sacred words had suddenly become musical ". Admittedly such an ideal is not always attainable. Nevertheless it seems, to me at least, to establish the *norm* for the music of worship at its truest.

But then, will it work ? As has been said, any art, to be effective, must not be too far removed from the springs of common feeling. Even if we had the technical resources, would the people be helped, or would they not say : " This music is too highbrow for us " ? Very well, for purposes of discussion let us confine ourselves to the material in the *Revised Church Hymnary*. There is not a great deal of music in the book that an average congregation is incapable of singing, and there is much in it which has the qualities of which I have been speaking. Nevertheless an unforgivably large proportion of it is never used. Let us agree that it ought to be introduced to our people wisely, in a gradual and imaginative way. For this is the apparent dilemma, that we, if we have seen the light, want music that is fitted for worship ; while they, because they are children of the Romantic Movement born out of due season, want music that is

emotional and therefore popular. I come therefore to the second consideration. It is this :

The Pattern of Worship gives Emotion its True Place

The Anglican *Report of the Archbishops' Committee* (1951) entitled " Music in Church " warns that " we must beware of starving emotion ". The warning is a wise one. Certainly something is wrong when a congregation can sing through a service without the music inducing or expressing a flicker of emotion. None the less, if what we have already said is valid criticism, the solution cannot be to offer the people an exclusive diet of eighteenth and nineteenth century hymns, popular as these may be. For these alone can never be fully adequate for a worship, the characteristic notes of which are the *Sanctus*, the *Agnus Dei* and the *Te Deum*.

It is true, there will always be a demand on the part of some for what they call " a good sing ", and they will tell you of churches where " a good sing " is provided to their spiritual benefit. Largely this is a matter of tradition and association. Morever, it is very possible to confound the the experience of the Holy Spirit with the experience of one's own high spirits. I believe we must study the whole question much more closely than is normally done, if the lost gift of worship is to be recovered.

What is the inner truth of this demand for a good sing ? Frank Howes in his *Borderland of Music and Psychology* writes : " When one eats for the pleasure of eating, and not for the satisfaction of the appetite, he is a sensualist. So when one exercises his emotions for the pleasure of the emotion and not towards its legitimate end, he is a sentimentalist. If one is more in love with the pleasurable state of being in love than with his beloved, he is a sentimentalist ".(1)

Is it not possible, then, that those who vociferously demand a good sing are valuing the emotion for the sake of the emotion, and that their disappointment when they do not get it reveals, not the poverty of the praise list or even of their potential musical capacity, but of their devotional training ? In much the same way, the almost universal demand nowadays for music in four-part harmony is really the demand of a barely sanctified hedonism, and indicates that the musical emotion for its own sake has usurped the emotion of worship.

(1) Quoted in *The Manual of Church Praise*, p. 26.

What then is the solution? The solution is most certainly not to unload on unwilling congregations a cargo of austere hymns in an unfamiliar idiom. It lies instead in a careful attention to the liturgical pattern, always in such a way that people are led gradually into familiarity with the kind of music that will prove in the long run to be the most fitting vehicle of worship (and incidentally this will prove to offer music of greater variety in style and mood than what commonly serves to-day). It will be wise to remember what Ralph Vaughan Williams has incessantly insisted, that "art for art's sake has never flourished among the English-speaking nations. We are often called inartistic because our art is unconscious. Our drama and poetry have evolved by accident while we thought we were doing something else, and so it will be with our music".(1) Again: "unless we have learnt that art comes to the Englishman unconsciously we have got to learn the first thing about the spirit which has produced our great poetry, our great drama and our great pictures".(2)

I am sure, with Vaughan Williams, that no improvement in our church music will or can take place except on these lines. A more fitting music will become instinct in the minds of our people unconsciously, when the music is used in strict subservience to the pattern of worship. Music, the idiom of which is not at first familiar, will be felt to be significant when, and only when, it is given its proper setting. Illustrations of this abound, but one must serve. Thomas Tallis's *First Mode Melody* (*R.C.H.* 433), played by an amateurish performer on the piano (which is not its natural medium), is likely to provoke the opinion that it is insufferably dreary. Given by a devout and well-rehearsed choir in the deeply moving context of a Holy Week service and sung with that suggestion of rhythmic freedom with which Tallis conceived it, it is everybody's music; and yet the impression inspired is far less of the beauty of the music than of its *significance*. One may turn to Charles Wood's *The Passion of our Lord according to Saint Mark* in order to hear how Wood brings out the inexpressibly moving quality of Tallis's tune, first introducing a restrained counterpoint in the organ accompaniment and then superimposing upon the choir part an austerely beautiful commentary by a solo tenor voice. Here, as elsewhere, if it is the music that gives

(1) Percy M. Young, *Vaughan Williams*, p. 196.

(2) *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

the " *wings* of faith " to the service, it is the pattern of the service that gives the " breath of prayer " to the music.

It is, then, when the hymn is obviously misplaced and is chosen for no other reason than that it happens to have a superficial musical appeal, that the sensual kind of emotion assumes control, to the grave detriment of the spirit of worship.

The over-riding consideration of the structure of the service ensures that emotion will be given its true place and kept in its true place. It will be a by-product of worship. In the process, gradually and unconsciously, music that is fitting will come into its own. Here, too, as in other ways, the dominical promise will be made good : " Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness ; and all these things shall be added unto you ".

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