

'WAYS OF SINGING THE PSALMS'

After the Annual Business Meeting on 21st May there was a goodly gathering of members of the Society and friends, in the Kirk of the Greyfriars, to take part in a workshop on psalm singing, led by Michael Chibbett and the church choir.

Mr Chibbett's purpose was to encourage ministers and organists to experiment with psalm singing outside the familiar metrical settings. He introduced his musical examples in the course of a detailed and learned talk about church singing from the beginning of Christianity. The choir illustrated how Christian chant grew out of Jewish chant by singing a traditional cantillation, in Hebrew, of verses from Exodus, and Mr Chibbett showed (on the organ) how there is a link between ancient Yemenite chant formulae and the Gregorian melodies still used in psalm singing today. These melodies survived the growing elaboration and monastic professionalism of church music in the middle ages, and he warmly commended the plainchant settings in CH 3. They are singable by everyone, he said, flexible in adaptation to the varied accents of the text, easy to understand, never too high or too low, and they enable a congregation to sing quite long psalm passages without tiring. There is no ground for denominational prejudice against this style of singing, since it goes back to the earliest days of the church. We proved these claims by singing Psalm 42 as set to the Third Gregorian Tone at CH 3, 231.

Mr Chibbett next turned to metrical psalmody, developed by the reformers to put the word of God into the mouths of the congregation. Martyrs is notable as a Scottish tune in a Gregorian mode; the choir demonstrated it (to Psalm 43) in a version with the melody in the tenor. From that to 'tunes in reports', settings in which the voices imitate each other in the style of a madrigal, and we all sang Psalm 137 as set by Andro Blackhall (1537-1609) - the audience taking the melody and the choir weaving counterpoint around it. Some of the grandest Reformation melodies were written for the double common metre. Psalm 137 has dropped out of CH 3, though it is in RCH (643), but Psalm 107 (140) and Old 44th (311) ought to be better known.

A discussion of the practice of having tunes lined out by a precentor led to a demonstration of the Gaelic style of singing. This, Mr Chibbett said, seems to have originated in the north east and to be a throw-back to the elaborate cantillation used before the Reformation. The choir was led by Mr Roderick Macdonald of the Greyfriars Gaelic congregation in Psalm 40 set to Kilmarnock. They sang in English, which may have been incorrect, but made it easier to perceive that the precentor's part is to set the pitch and that the wayward and mixed strands of melody to which the choir sang the psalm line by line were indeed a version of Kilmarnock.

In England as in Scotland the reformers wrote metrical psalms for congregations, but cathedrals and other choral foundations adapted plainchant to English words. Gradually the plainchant was harmonised until it was transformed into Anglican chant after the Restoration. It remained a cathedral speciality for a long time, and the first pointed psalter was printed as late as 1837. Mr Chibbett invited us all to sing Psalm 98 to Crotch in A (349) to show that there are no insuperable difficulties in this style of singing. He went on to observe that Anglican chanting can be applied to modern English. (There was a setting of the Highway Code that gave a lot of pleasure some years ago.) We were invited to chant a modern version of Psalm 85. This was quite manageable, but it hardly proved Mr Chibbett's point as its language was very traditional. Moreover, the translation did not add to our understanding of the psalm, since it did not bring out its dialectic (which may be followed in Moffatt's Bible) any more pointedly than the A.V.

Finally Mr Chibbett spoke about new ways of singing the psalms which have been devised in recent years. First we were led by the choir in singing the Gelineau version of Psalm 130 (67). This method asks the congregation to sing only a simple refrain and does not require more than a soloist or a small group of singers for the verses. Many of the Gelineau pieces are attractive music and throw fresh light on the psalm texts. But they are usually printed with the crotchet as the unit of time in the refrain and

the semibreve as the unit in the verses. This dichotomy is confusing, and if it is not properly understood the verses and refrains do not form a rhythmical sequence. The result may be lugubrious. This pitfall would be avoided if these psalms were printed with the minim as the unit in both refrain and verses. Mr Chibbett also introduced us to the chant invented by John Currie for CH 3 (Ps 95 H 21). On singing this, we found it melodious and quite simple. But it looks hard and very few people have tried it. The others are missing something worthwhile. Mr Chibbett did not mention the setting invented by Dom Gregory Murray, of which there are several examples in the New English Hymnal. It is a sort of mixture of Anglican and Gelineau chanting, and is worth knowing. The only example in CH 3 is the beautiful setting of the Reproaches (240).

The lecture-recital ended with the anthem 'Like as the hart' by Herbert Howells. Anglican anthems represent a most musical tradition of psalm singing, and this contribution by the choir was warmly appreciated.

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