

QUO VADIS?

That old time religion - or a new song to the Lord, or both?

An Address by Dr Simon Lindley, Honorary Secretary, to the Church Music Society delivered on Saturday 25th September 2004 in the Prince of Wales Hall, The Royal Hospital Chelsea.

Those who ask questions do so, presumably, in the expectation of an answer. Some grammatical constructions even involve the anticipation of a reply in the positive or negative. If there were a simple way forward from the crossroads of the contemporary dilemma facing conventional church musicians everywhere, things would be so very much the easier. The fact that we are still seeking solutions to really significant equations after almost forty years of continuous liturgical change speaks for itself.

The Royal School of Church Music's comprehensive resource material for *Common Worship* goes a long way towards the provision of quality settings of standard liturgical texts. Issues from other rather smaller publishing concerns provide further important material. And yet, the general standard of parochial music too often levels out from a seemingly insatiable desire to group around the lowest common denominator - to sacrifice standard on the altar of accessibility.

The performance and maintenance of church music is expensive of effort as well as resource. It requires an unfashionable level of commitment and an increasing diversity of specific gifts. Much of the pyramid-like structure of earlier generations has been swept away - presumptions such as a chorister recruit's familiarity even with basic hymnody and parochial repertoire can no longer be sustained. That is the down side.

The reverse of that particular coin is that standards at the highest level remain immensely encouraging and, if we're honest, frustratingly elusive for many of us for most of the time. Tastes have become more catholic in the best sense, and it is certain that, at least within the Anglican Communion, liturgy is ceasing to be a 'party' issue allied or not to this or that particular 'wing'. Observances of feasts and

solemnities now belong to all, even if the material for them is scattered abroad among a confusingly kaleidoscopic series of worship publications.

Despite the fanfares heralding the publication of *Common Worship* in 2000, a considerable amount of what for many might be termed normal curricular material is still awaited. Also, it is odd that, despite their many virtues (not least being the assembly of memorably apposite Collects), the compilers of *Common Worship* saw fit to ignore what many felt to be arguably the best individual component within the *Alternative Service Book* - its modern language psalter - and produce yet another version of the texts in contemporary language.

All involved in the church music of the present day, of whatever tradition or denomination, will readily testify that there are no easy fixes to the current state of flux.

The causes of this shifting ground for musicians are all around us at parish level - a presumption that involvement in worship is, for preference, a matter of total participation for everyone present seems set to sweep away centuries of contemplative worship, perhaps for ever.

The 'feel-good' factor rules far too many church music roosts. The spirit of creativity informing style in recent repertoire, whether congregational or choral, seems dominated by music of the 'easy listening' kind with melodic emphasis on grateful lines underpinned by a comfortably predictable harmonic language - very often the effect is that of a spiritual and creative fabric treated with a well-known brand of conditioner.

A disgraceful paucity of material involving choirs as well as congregations of average attainment or even comparatively modest resources does nothing to further the cause of fine church music in an environment that often seems to encourage not even mediocre output let alone musical utterance of real quality. Very few composers have striven to address this repertoire famine; thankfully, those who have - here creative artists of the calibre of Noel Rawsthorne and Anthony Caesar spring readily to mind - have been eminently successful in achieving a significant aim in combining musical resource of parish pew as well as choir stall.

Those enterprising Victorian parish priests who served as the first compilers of the most successful hymnal of all time had wonderfully caught the mood of the moment in respect both of title and components. *Hymns Ancient and Modern* said it all. Yet time has shown that not even they, or the fervent leaders of the hymnological counter-reformation embodied in *The English Hymnal* forty five years after the first edition of *A&M*, ever provided fully what people wanted, needed, or liked. The prototype *English Hymnal* was, however, distinguished by the inclusion of material delightfully designated 'not for ordinary use' and even some frankly markedly Evangelical input. For the more traditional Anglo-Catholic of latter years, the *English Catholic Hymn Book* and, particularly, the *Mirfield Mission Hymn Book* proved heady mixers within the hymnal cocktail.

The great diversity of musical influences on the Anglican church music scene is one of its greatest riches. Hymnody from Latin and Greek originals, unaccompanied choral music from the Orthodox traditions, strongly virile harmony of Lutheran chorales, folksong and plainchant all vied for attention alongside the choral products of the Victorian, Edwardian and mid 20th century eras. With the notable exception of folk of the calibre of Martin Shaw - still a grossly under-rated figure - few composers actually wrote music for ordinary people to sing.

Congregational music has, of course, to be thoroughly practical, serviceable and durable. It often has to endure rendition week in week out, year in year out. Choral repertoire is altogether a different animal, though as with communal output, the simplest expression often serves best. Fine melodies can be ruined by over-fussy harmonies that often negate the powerful potential of verbal texts.

Lively music is not invariably uplifting, though it certainly has the capacity to be so. Catchy rhythmic devices can become ends in themselves, as the late Gordon Reynolds memorably pointed out in *The Cassock Pocket Book*. The most important harmonic aspect of music designed for congregational singing is the adequate preparing and underpinning in advance of upcoming melodic shape and the intervals contained within phrases.

Patchwork elements in contemporary liturgy seem to have everything going for them in terms of flexibility until one comes to realise the real value of a firm framework within which to work. Strict interpretation of the guidelines in *Common Worship* can give the enterprising liturgical free thinker more or less complete *carte blanche* to devise whatever pattern of worship whenever he or she feels moves to do so. The musical input then becomes somewhat akin to an overstocked spice rack in the kitchen and the very flexibility thus encouraged is in real danger of throwing the liturgical baby out with the proverbial bathwater.

In terms of educational output, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that numbers of former university organ scholars actually subsequently engaged within the church music sphere has probably never been lower. By contrast, continental opera houses and British musical theatre are heavily stocked with such talent and there is increasing professional involvement by UK trained musicians in the work of the Episcopal Church of the United States of America. This is, emphatically, *not* just a matter of financial incentive - though British church musicians remain grossly underpaid, notwithstanding the important guidelines and indefatigable work done in this field by officials of the Royal School of Church Music and the Incorporated Society of Musicians.

British Organists and Choir Directors rarely undertake such work as their sole source of livelihood. This is at once a great strength as well as a weakness. Time to plan, time to consult, and - most important of all - time to give oneself space to gain vision are all at a premium. Legislation in respect of working with young people and increasing involvement in practical music from instrumentalists as well as choralists are but two areas of real challenge facing many church musicians and may well be proved to have become something of an impediment to career recruitment. There must be many who have come to feel that training as an arranger, or in the management of computer software would have been every bit as useful as learning to play the organ.

In many ways, liturgy is itself a basic response to a human need. To some extent, worship can take place within almost any environment; however, its observance in chapel, church or cathedral enhances human existence, and affirms the spiritual within us all.

Styles of music and ecclesiastical apparel go back many centuries. Vestments take us visually back to the common dress of Roman occupied Palestine. Unaccompanied chant places us, mentally, inside the precursors of today's 'bare ruined choirs' - in the great churches of the monastic heartland of Medieval Europe. A lively revivalist tune from the late 18th or early 19th centuries - especially when allied to the invigorating verbiage of a hymnographer of the calibre of Charles Wesley - reminds us of the great meetings for worship in the open air that were so crucial a part of the Evangelical revival: truly was Methodism *born in song*. The vigorous polyphonic sections of some of the most popular early hymn tunes link the worshipping community with those cradles of contemporary choralism, the early and mid 19th century choral society or choral union.

Chant and revival hymnody are both direct modes of expression - *sui generis* - and more than capable of standing alone. The same integrity and honesty of purpose is found within early settings of the English liturgy by Tallis, Byrd, Farrant, Gibbons and others as much as in the passionate, sometimes even torrid, fervour of the counterpoint of the Spaniard Victoria. Even English music of the high Victorian era, once so despised for its sub-Mendelssohnian sentiment, is now valued for itself.

Interestingly, the individual compositional styles of composers of today have often involved re-visiting the influences of the past and stamping them firmly with the mark of the present - Judith Bingham, Andrew Carter, Francis Grier, Jonathan Harvey, John Rutter, John Tavener and others have all participated in such synergy and enriched the contemporary repertoire vastly as a consequence.

Antiphony - between solo/solo group and main chorus, among upper and lower voices - plays a major part in much of this stylistic development. Use of modal, or quasi modal harmony and of rhythmic ostinato patterns provides something of the insistent nature of the litanies of olden time. The significant virtue of diatonic stability within the chosen tonal centre is a further factor in cementing the fabric of contemporary choralism.

So far, so good. But the average worshipping parishioner comes across such modes of expression only in a collegiate chapel, cathedral or greater church - or, worse still, through the means of broadcast and recording. The inherent worth of most music sung in our parishes is disappointingly dismal. The critics of yore were wont to warn against aping the cathedrals by attempting repertoire more suited to the professional rather than the volunteer choir. Indeed, the very earliest work of this Society focused particularly on the dangers of such a course of action. However well-intentioned this aping was, there was - invariably and undeniably - at least the ever present tendency of striving towards the possibly unattainable. But strive we did, not merely downsize everything into a melting pot of mediocrity.

A hugely significant area in the alchemy of ancient and modern is, of course, to be found in one of sacred choral music's most substantial growth areas - the Carol - and it is perhaps possible that in the vital contributions composers and arrangers make to the development of an attractive, indeed compelling, musical and verbal style that some positive encouragement may be found.

The quality of so many contemporary carols warms the heart. A unique contribution has been that of King's College Cambridge, where the tradition of commissioning a new Carol every year for the broadcast Festival of Nine Lessons is now into its third operational decade. There is some evidence to suggest that other choral foundations are following this important lead.

Significant anniversaries of the Church Music Society have been marked by music especially composed. No record exists of what, if anything was done in 1931 for the Silver Jubilee, but 1956 was notable for the emergence of Herbert Howells' expansive Evening Canticles in B minor and 1981 for Jonathan Harvey's setting of *The Tree* for upper voices.

A policy decision for the centenary under the leadership of our current incumbent chairman has been to commission from leading composer Judith Bingham a short anthem for SATB and organ capable of performance by a parochial choir. This exciting project is now well under way. Like recent issues under the direction of the Society's indefatigable Honorary General Editor, Miss Bingham's work is deliberately aimed to stimulate and encourage interest from and in church and chapel choirs and what they sing. The Society's commitment to more elaborate music for our choral foundations continues unabated, but it has been felt that the centenary needed marking with repertoire for our parochial, rather than cathedral or collegiate, colleagues.

The Society's most recent anthology, *The Restoration Anthem*, is the most substantive issue since the *Purcell Series* of exactly a decade ago. The rich treasury of repertoire from the 17th, and indeed the 18th, century demands the best of scholarship to yield its true glory; this has been and continues to be a major and ongoing concern. Despite all this, let us lose no chance to bring our material to the notice of all choirs - the possibilities of *Pavarotti in the Parishes* and *Caesar in the Choir stalls* are not to be missed.