

## ELIZABETHAN CHURCH MUSIC

### A SHORT INQUIRY INTO THE REASONS FOR ITS PRESENT UNPOPULARITY AND NEGLECT

THE improvement of the present state of English Church music is an object close to the hearts of many friends of the Church and many lovers of music alike. But it is a crusade beset with difficulties so great that, as will be admitted by all who have enlisted under its banner, its ultimate success, or even its recovery of any appreciable lost ground, seems doubtful almost to the point of impossibility and despair. To such a degraded level has the normal Church music fallen that it is already an actual problem whether an intelligent lover of good music can be at the same time a regular church attendant. A recent and authoritative writer, who is dealing with the question of hymns alone, says:

It seems to me that the clergy are the responsible people. If they say that the hymns (words and music) which keep me away from church draw others thither, and excite useful religious emotions, then they must take the responsibility wholly on themselves. . . . All I can urge is that they should have at least one service a week where people like myself can attend without being offended or moved to laughter.

The condition described would be sad and discouraging enough if we were, as a nation, fighting that uphill battle in which man strives to set up an ideal where none has been set up before. The struggle towards the light is

always, at all events in its earlier stages, a struggle in the dark, where the enemy bewilders with many a mirage. But if we as a nation have one fact in our musical history which we might blazon on our banners in the gate, it is the certainty that our Church music touched at one period the high-water mark of all Church music. The greatest lover of Palestrina will admit the force of the objection to his music that, *qua* Church music, it suffered from its recognizable kinship to the secular music of the period. Judged as music it is perfect with a perfection almost unearthly, as a few, favoured of the gods, well know; but judged as Church music it always suggests the doubt whether, with the notes alone in front of him, any expert could give a convincing reason why the words should not have been secular. The greatest lover of Plainsong, again, even remembering the little aspen thrill with which he has listened to *Jesu dulcis memoria*, or the quickening of heart-beat which has followed *Vexilla Regis*, is still haunted, if he is a complete musician, by the doubt whether the heavenly gift of harmony should be ostracized in favour of melody alone and unadorned. For Plainsong melodies must, if we are to taste their full untampered beauty, be sung unharmonized. And few will deny that music in the mere melodic stage—however perfect such melody may be—offers us a cruder and less complex form of Art than does Polyphony: nor can it be reasonably claimed that we should confine Church music to two dimensions, now that we have discovered a third.

If then, having once grasped the highest, we have fallen so low, can any reason be suggested for the fall, beyond the mere subterfuge of the perversity and vulgarity of average human nature? If the work of Tallis, Byrd, Farrant, and Gibbons is not only unequalled in appropriateness but is also in itself astonishingly

beautiful, how has it come about that we no longer hear it in our churches, and that even in our cathedrals, where by force of tradition a fraction of it still survives on sufferance, it is usually relegated, on the ground of dullness and monotony, to the seasons of Lent and Advent? To this question two cogent answers can be given, two crucial reasons standing out from a host of subsidiary causes. First, the music itself is not in modern idiom. This fact admits of no palliation, and no lover of the music would wish to palliate it. If we turn our attention to the words of the Church service, whether of the Liturgy or the Bible itself, we recognize that it is not, and never was, in the idiom of spoken English, and that, judged as literary English, it is not in modern idiom. Yet is there any sane man on this side of the Atlantic who would seriously suggest bringing it up to date? Almost every one would gladly admit the best modern instances, such as the prayers of R. L. Stevenson, provided they can prove lineal descent in style; but all would claim that the utmost caution should be exercised to keep undefiled that stream of English which is the glory and inspiration of our language. So should it be with our music. Almost every one would gladly admit the cream of the work of those in the great succession. A repertoire which excludes the name of S. S. Wesley is unthinkable. But while authority has restrained sacrilegious hands from tampering with the liturgy, there has never been any restriction placed on the quality of Church music. The result has been natural and inevitable. Music cannot, like words, be restated in any way that will preserve the original content; and so the music which, did the Church know it, is as bright and unchallenged a jewel as the liturgy, has been gradually and quietly shelved.

The second reason, however, contains the germ of the whole difficulty. If the music had continued to appeal as beautiful to any large section of church-goers it would never have been superseded. Why did it fail? Or, remembering that the failure has occurred in comparatively recent times, the more practical question is, Why does such music fail to appeal to ordinary modern ears? Many excuses of a subsidiary, though hardly exculpatory, nature may, of course, be offered. We live too fast nowadays to keep our emotions perpetually under restraint; the glamour of Wagner and Tchaikovsky has made us unsusceptible to lower tones; and so on and so forth. But one outstanding reason remains to which, even amongst experts, due importance has never been given: the true mode of performance is universally disregarded. It may be objected—and, indeed, such an objection is usual—that we cannot at this date reconstruct with any certainty a contemporary performance of old music, and it may be admitted that, in certain respects, there is some truth in the contention. There are some, for instance, who say that the modern pitch is so much lower than the old that we should now sing the music of that period at least a minor third higher; whereas others hold that the modern pitch is higher, and that the old music was really sung by men's voices. Again, want of practice in unaccompanied singing has, it is said, almost destroyed our power of singing with the just intonation which in those days was universal. Such doubt might, with some show of plausibility, lead a purist to demand that we should leave Elizabethan music severely alone. But if it is granted that this is out of the question, and that we must continue to perform such music to the best of our ability, then it is certain that we can, without any very deep search into the past, collate a few undeniable

historical facts that will prove the error of our present methods of performance.

In early times—say about the year 1500—if we had attended a cathedral service and afterwards had listened to the naïve dance music of a village green, we should have been struck by two essential differences—differences so great that the two kinds of music would have seemed to have little or nothing in common. While the popular music was struggling unerringly, though unconsciously, towards the melodic and harmonic resources of the modern major scale, the Church<sup>1</sup> music was, with almost unruffled calm, using a set of keys or modes which vetoed development in that direction. Further, while the necessities of dancing were helping popular music to evolve systems of rhythm as fixed as the metrical systems of poetry, the only rhythmical consideration in Church music was the natural fall of the accent in the unmetrical sentences of prose to which the music was sung. As to the question of scale it may be true that in time the more austere modes of Church music lost the sympathy of those impregnated with the major scale of daily life; though it is a little difficult to see why, if this is the case, men have always been able to use conversational English for daily life without losing sense of the greater beauty of the more austere English of the Bible. However that may be, there are quite certainly in modern composition signs that composers now realize the rich opportunities presented to them by these very modes which for so long lay discarded and unworked.

But it is over the question of rhythm that we have gone astray in interpretation. The secular rhythm was, as

<sup>1</sup> 'Church music' is used as a convenient term, including all music written by composers of learning. Hence the remarks apply to music of the madrigal type.



dance music must be, periodic. The Church music was not only free, but its writers so shrank from periodic rhythm, as symbolic of something unreligious and vulgar, that when the accent of the words tended to make a musical phrase periodic then the composers tried, by a dozen demonstrable devices, to eradicate the evil. Nowadays the dam between these two styles has, to man's irreparable loss, been pierced, with the natural result that the torrent has overwhelmed the stream; and our contemporary Church music is, for the most part, as disastrously metrical as a music-hall chorus. So embedded, indeed, is this periodic feeling in all modern musicians that the old music, when it is sung, is distorted by regularity of accent into a sad and ludicrous travesty. One example will suffice. Orlando Gibbons, who never used 'bars' in his music, trusting to the accent being placed by the intelligent singer on the notes which fell to accented syllables of the words, composed an anthem 'Hosanna to the Son of David'—an anthem which remains so admittedly a miracle that it is probably sung occasionally in every cathedral in England. Any child will know, naturally, that the accent in the sentence quoted falls on the second, sixth, and eighth syllables; any musician, looking at the unbarred notes, would see that Gibbons intended the accent to fall on the second, sixth, and eighth notes. It is a matter of controversy whether the original words of this anthem were English or Latin, but the question does not concern us here; for the argument as to accent would be unimpaired if the true text should prove to be 'Osanna in excelsis Deo'. Music, however, is now sung from 'barred' copies, and the bars happen to fall, in this opening phrase, before the fourth and eighth notes; and the incredible result is that in almost every cathedral in the land the accent is put on

syllables one, four, and eight, making nonsense of the words and irretrievably ruining a fine musical phrase. So unable are our modern singers to realize that the bar is inserted by editors into old music merely as an accommodation to the eye, and not as suggesting an accent on each first beat, that they infuse into this old music a regularly recurrent rhythm which is the one outstanding feature the composers intended to eliminate. So much did these composers feel the danger of allowing their music to fall into the vice of periods that, in places where they wrote simple four-part harmony and the words showed a tendency to develop a swing, they resorted to almost uncouth devices to avoid such a flaw.

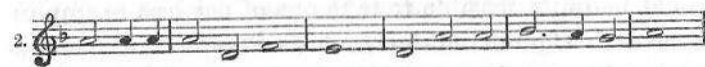
From this great school there emerged a definite and persisting ecclesiastical style, altering, developing, and absorbing such good points in secular music as seemed worthy of assimilation; and that style can be traced, in a discouragingly thin line, down to the present day. It would be quite feasible to take one of our best examples of modern Church music—such as Stanford in A—and to trace its genealogy from Elizabethan times; and there would be no bend sinister in its coat of arms. Equally feasible would it be to take an average modern specimen and to show that it displayed every characteristic deliberately shunned by the true ecclesiastical tradition. But that would involve turning what was intended for an uncontroversial survey of historical facts into a jeremiad.

A few examples are given, from the better-known anthems, to make clear the above remarks as to accent. It may help the ordinary reader to grasp the full meaning of what is said about 'periodic rhythm' if it is pointed out that the general use of the word is not satisfactory. Many people regard a tune as rhythmical or not accord-

ing as they can, or cannot, recognize a regularly recurring accent, as in a march or a waltz. This is 'periodic rhythm', and is in reality rather metre than rhythm in its truest and subtlest sense, which is the sense in which we should speak of the rhythm of the opening phrase of the Parsifal Prelude, or of the soprano solo 'Ye now are sorrowful' from Brahms's Requiem.

In the following extracts the first version is, in each case, barred as in the usual editions, the second version is an attempt to suggest the accent on the first beat of each bar; the point being that even good singers are likely to phrase and accent (for example) no. 7 awkwardly, whereas any error of the kind in no. 8 is almost impossible.

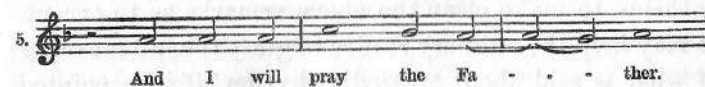
From 'Call to remembrance' (FARRANT).



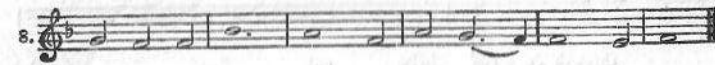
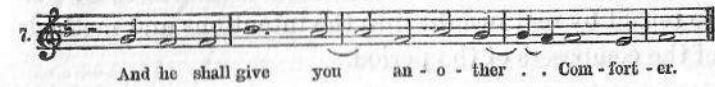
From the same.



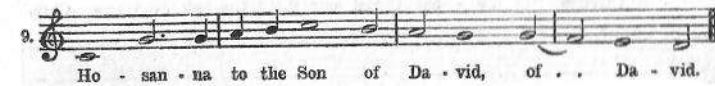
From 'If ye love me' (TALLIS).



From the same.



From 'Hosanna' (GIBBONS).



From 'Almighty and Everlasting God' (GIBBONS).



As an example of the desire to kill the tendency of the treble and bass to establish a periodic rhythm of 'two-in-a-bar', the ending of the same anthem is typical. If any student would copy out this passage, placing the bars of

the alto and tenor so as to secure the true accent, he will be repaid by real insight into the intentions and methods of the composers of the period.

through Je - sus Christ our Lord, through  
 through Je - sus Christ our Lord, through Je - sus Christ  
 through Je - sus Christ, through  
 through Je - sus Christ, through Je - sus Christ our

Je - sus Christ our Lord. A - - - men.  
 . . our Lord. A - - - men, A - - - men.  
 . . Je - sus Christ our Lord. . . . A - men.  
 Lord, through Je - sus Christ our Lord. A - - - men.

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