

Chanting the Psalms.

THE Psalms have always held an important place in the worship of the Scottish kirk. In their metrical form, adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1650, they have endeared themselves to the people, and many generations of continuous use have made them an integral part of Scottish thought and speech. Indeed Scotsmen are more familiar with the rugged lines in the metrical Psalms than with the dignified prose in the Authorised Version of the Bible.

Worshippers on the other side of the Border are better acquainted with the words of the Psalter in the translation of Miles Coverdale found in the Book of Common Prayer, than in any versification. When the Prayer Book was issued in 1662 it was not deemed expedient to print the Psalms in the language of the Authorized Version of 1611. Its promoters felt that to do so would be to imperil the popular acceptance of the new liturgy, so deeply had the familiar version entrenched itself in the hearts of the clergy and the people. The rubrics of successive Prayer Books had, for more than one hundred years, enjoined the daily repetition of the Psalms in their order, so that the whole Psalter might be recited or sung in the course of a month, and, owing to the scarceness of printed books, it was nothing extraordinary to find many of the common people who had committed the Psalter to memory.

In pre-Reformation days the Psalms were sung from the Vulgate to Gregorian tones, as they are to this day in the Roman Catholic Church. An attempt has recently been made to establish that Coverdale, when translating the Psalms into English, endeavoured to preserve the rhythm of the Latin, so that in their English form they could be chanted to the Gregorian tones.

In practice, however, the Gregorian tones not being so familiar to the people as they were to the clergy, the Psalms were read antiphonally verse about by the minister on the one hand, and the people on the other. This is still done in English cathedrals during the choir holidays when the service is 'plain,' and it is a feature characteristic

of the 'low' churches. It is, however, an unsatisfactory and ugly rendering; for were not the Psalms in their employment in public worship intended to be sung rather than to be read? They are constructed with a musical purpose, and they abound with references to singing and to instruments of music. Despite the metrical versions of Sternhold and Hopkins, of Tate and Brady, and of many others, the prose of the Book of Common Prayer has persisted, and will persist, for even in the Revised Prayer Book of 1928 no attempt has been made to innovate on the familiar words to which the English people have been so long accustomed, while scarcely a dozen of the metrical Psalms can be found within the boards of the hymn-books now in use in Anglican churches.

In the seventeenth century what is known as the Anglican chant came into existence, and almost entirely superseded the Gregorian chant. There is nothing cognate to it in any but the English church. It consists in what is known as the 'single chant' of a short melody, usually of ten notes, the first and fifth being 'reciting notes,' and unlike the Gregorian chant, which is for unison singing, it is sung in four-part harmony. Flintoft, in the eighteenth century, is credited with having introduced the double chant which enabled the singers to render two verses of the Psalm with one chant, thereby introducing variety and, in the case of a long Psalm, lessening any tendency to monotony.

As a rule the Anglican chant was fairly well suited for giving the Psalms a reverent and dignified rendering, in a manner which enabled the congregation to participate, but the recitation of three or more Psalms in a single service led in many churches to a tendency to hurry in order to reduce as much as possible the time occupied in singing, and eventually in the cathedrals and larger churches the Psalms were sung at a pace which made it quite impossible for the ordinary worshipper to take part. The method of pointing, by which words and syllables and particularly prepositions and conjunctions were accented irrespective of their importance, often succeeded in distorting the sense of the Psalm. The accelerated recitation of the words too often degenerated into an indistinct gabble, which consisted in crushing upon the reciting note as many syllables as could possibly be uttered, so that the mind became more

occupied with the chant than with the sacred text. Composers were also to blame, as they had treated the chant as a musical composition to which words had to be fitted, instead of a piece of music which must bend to fit every verbal rhythm of which the English language is capable.

These evils have been so long rampant that it is not to be wondered at that in recent years the minds of those interested in the worthy rendering of church music have been exercised in devising a change for the better. Many have turned their attention to the Gregorian chant, which has the advantage of being barless and without accent, and is admirably adapted to the musical rendering of prose texts. Several Psalters printed for Gregorian chanting are published, the chief of which are 'The Manual of Plainsong,' by Briggs and Frere (Novello); 'The Simple Psalter,' Hudson (Faith Press); and 'The English Psalter,' Tremenheere (Faith Press); and there is a Psalter in the Authorised Version, with Gregorian tones, in use in the Catholic Apostolic Church. But beautiful as Gregorian chanting is, it is strange that it does not seem to have made a popular appeal.

Like the prose Psalms themselves, Anglican chants are dear to the English people, and it is in relation to the Anglican chant that the remedy must be found. The publication in recent years of several Psalters, with revised pointing,¹ has not only demonstrated the felt need of a remedy, but has indicated the direction in which it may be sought. In these Psalters an attempt has been made to introduce into the text signs which will enable the singers to chant the words in accordance with the natural speech-rhythms of each verse, and the direction is given that the Psalms should be rendered at the pace and with the emphasis of good reading. One of the Psalters proclaims the new chanting as 'good reading set to music.'

In pointing the Authorised Version of the Psalms in the 'Scottish Psalter, 1929,' the Editorial Committee have had the advantage of the experiments of which the Anglican Psalters referred to are the fruit, and of the experience in S. Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh, where

¹ 'The English Psalter,' Macpherson, Bairston and Buck (Novello); 'The Psalter Newly Pointed' (S.P.C.K.); 'The Welwyn Psalter,' Hardcastle (Curwen); 'The Parish Psalter,' Nicholson (Faith Press); 'The Oxford Psalter,' Ley, Roper and Hylton Stewart (Oxford University Press).

the new pointing has been in use for over two years. That these experiments have been justified is fully established by the success achieved. Scottish listeners at the wireless are becoming more familiar with the Anglican service, and in many churches from which services are broadcast the new chanting can be heard. Occasionally one may hear it during the Epilogue on Sunday evenings from the London studio of the B.B.C. where the 'English Psalter' is used. Those who possess gramophones may hear very satisfactory renderings of several Psalms from records (5428 and 9502) published by the Columbia Company.¹ In listening to the new chanting one is impressed by the clearness with which the words come through, so that the ear can follow them without book. From the singer's point of view, after a few minutes' acquaintance with the directions, the chanting of the Psalms yields peculiar pleasure, and it is believed that it will be found to be easier to chant in the new method than in the old. This gives one the hope that, in course of time, chanting will become more congregational than it is at present.

It has always been a matter of wonder to the writer how in the village churches in England the people take part so heartily in the chanting of Psalms, even with the old system. Why this cannot be done in Scotland is a mystery. For is it not a thing to be greatly desired, and worth while trying to do? The few Scottish churches which already chant the Psalms, some of them remarkably well, show that it can be done. Surely it is better to sing a complete Psalm than a portion so often limited to sixteen or twenty lines of the metrical version. And surely in singing the prose version there is an advantage in using a rendering more faithful to the original thought of the Psalmists, than the metrical versions in which the sense and substance of the original are too often distorted to adjust them to the frame of the verse form.

The publication of the section of the 'Scottish Psalter' containing the prose Psalms comes, then, as a challenge to the Scottish people, which it is hoped will be widely taken up. If the churches of Scotland are to chant the

¹ The Columbia Company have recently published a record of Psalm 46 to Plainsong Tone 5, and Psalm 91 to Goss's chant in A, the pointing of the latter as in 'The Parish Psalter.' D.B. 17.—This is a most instructive record sung by the choir of St Nicolas College, Chislehurst, where Dr Sydney Nicholson, the late organist of Westminster Abbey, is carrying on most valuable work for the betterment of Church Music.

Psalms to a greater extent than in the past, it will be necessary not only for choirs and congregations to practise with earnestness, but also that chanting be taught in Sunday schools and in day schools as well. The inclusion of a number of prose Psalms in the Abridgment of the 'Scottish Psalter' for use in schools will, it is hoped, contribute to this result. It is perhaps going to be an advantage that Scottish congregations have been hitherto to a large extent unfamiliar with chanting, as they will start the new method without any prejudices to be overcome. At first choirs may find chanting a welcome alternative to the anthem. The Psalms were written for antiphonal singing, and great variety may be introduced into their rendering by a little ingenuity. Where a choir is divided into two portions it is easy to arrange for each side singing alternative verses. An effective arrangement also is the distribution of the verses between the men's and women's voices, each part singing in unison, with the full choir interposing in harmony from time to time. Some verses, too, may be sung unaccompanied, others with the organ. The sense of the Psalms will suggest other suitable arrangements.

It will also be found a most profitable exercise to chant the prose Psalms in the home at family worship. The provision of fixed chants in the 'Scottish Psalter' will make this much easier.

It is to be hoped that the new 'Scottish Psalter' will stimulate a fresh interest in these wonderful songs of the ages, and that men may be led to a determination to sing them intelligently and not mechanically, meditating on their meaning so that they will sing them not only 'with the spirit,' but 'with the understanding also.'

W. M. PAGE.
