Music in the Service of the Church

In the world of art as a whole we grow accustomed in our day to a fair amount of iconoclasm : it is not surprising if we feel some of the effects of it in the realm of Church Music. Certainly there is a growing dissatisfaction with a great deal that is sung and heard in our churches. In such a large volume of music an occasional touch of perfunctoriness might be excused ; but the tiresome sense of routine which the music of some of our hymns and anthems and organ contributions infuses into our worship is quite unacceptable. It is from this growing dissatisfaction that there has sprung in these last years the desire to have a new *Hymnary*, and with that there goes an attendant crop of deep and searching questions about the whole nature of the role of music in the service of the Church. It is some of these we must now consider.

Scripture says : " The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light " ; their wisdom concerning music is perhaps a useful starting point for our study. From the ancient world come curious tales which obviously represent a suspicion in men's minds that music can be a dangerous commodity. There are first of all the stories of the Sirens. They had in olden days the fabulous reputation of being able to lure men to their destruction by their song. The nimble-witted Odysseus, apprised of this by Circe, stopped the ears of his companions with wax and caused himself to be tied to the mast of the ship as they sailed past the Sirens' island. Their next most distinguished targets were the Argonauts ; here again however they were foiled, this time by Orpheus who surpassed them in song and brought his brave but susceptible crew safely to port. It is only in Plato's *Republic* that the Sirens achieve respectability, though even he cannot disguise his suspicion of them. It is sombrely significant, moreover, that their more earth-bound cousin in the Old Testament, Jubal, " the father of all such as handle the harp and organ," appears to conceive his art against a background of murder and as a respite and escape from strife and vengeance (Gen. IV : 19ff.). History shows from that day on just how wide open music is to all sorts of abuse as charm and magic. Quite recently a speech made by Mr Kruschev was reported in which he made a distinction

between music which is useful for the Communist cause, and music which is harmful.

It will be very surprising if the devil does not know the Sirens' power for ill and does not use this power, even the power of seemingly respectable platonic tunes, to promote his own evil designs in the Church. In one of the *Screwtape Letters* Screwtape addresses his nephew on the subject of prayer, and commends Coleridge's protestation that he did not pray " with moving lips and bended knees " but merely " composed his spirit to love " and indulged " a sense of supplication." " That is exactly the sort of prayer we want," writes Wormwood ; and how many petitionary hymns can you think of where the composer and the organist following faithfully in his footsteps fall over backward so to compose our spirits to love and indulge a sense of supplication that the words of the hymn, which may say something very real and wholesome, are completely smothered or sentimentalized into insipidity ! Take another example : Gerhard Kappner, writing in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* a year or two ago, reported a public discussion between T. S. Eliot and Manfred Hausmann (a poet) in Hermannsburg, in which discussion Hausmann felt compelled to express his misgivings as to the "preaching" qualities of Bach's St Matthew Passion. " If I were the devil, and so had his power to hinder man's approach to God I would write a St Matthew Passion. Just imagine : your brother has been killed in some concentration camp under terrible circumstances ; and now comes a friend and tells you of your brother's agony in an aria with orchestral accompaniment. What would you say to that ? Could you really take the man seriously ? Would not everything in you revolt against such a report ? But if the aria was so wonderful and the music so glorious that you forgot the horror of the crime, if the art so hid the reality that it almost ceased to be true, what kind of role of deceit would art be playing then ? And this is exactly what Bach did in the St Matthew Passion. Just look at the people who attend a performance of the St Matthew Passion ! Are they listening to an account of the Passion ? Not at all ; they are listening to art. Bach certainly did not intend this but he brought it about. The devil is very cunning. He prefers to use unsuspecting souls to gain his end. Every word of the gospel, not only the words of the Passion, is too serious to be rendered innocuous through the medium of art. There is no justification for art in this context." We may not agree in detail with this outlook (truth to tell I should have thought

that a more serious criticism of the Passion was that it overdid the tragedy of it and left us weeping without giving us a hint of its victory). We may not agree in detail with Hausmann, and yet I imagine we would all grant that he is touching on a danger which is very real.

To say all this is not to say there is no place for music, this dangerous commodity, in the service of the Church.

" For well we know this weary soilèd earth
Is yet Thine own by right of its new birth,
Since that great Cross upreared on Calvary
Redeemed it from its fault and shame to Thee."

Music, which is of the earth, is redeemed.

Of course and of course a Christian can make music and in a manner of speaking his music can be a "pledge of heaven's joy," as Milton says. A Christian of all people is most entitled to make music, to sing and play because he knows what the non-Christian cannot know—that the world through Christ is saved.

All Creation praises its Creator, everything from shining stars to fruit trees and cedars. It will be strange if the Church and the Christian within the Church has no song to match this beauty of praise that ascends to God from the Creation of which we are crown, ideally seven whole days, not one in seven. This is music's highest good, at which, when it knows where it is going, it aims ; but on the one day in seven and for the one hour perhaps of that day and for the hymnary which God's people will use in that one hour how much music do we require and of what sort ? And, not forgetting the sin and wiles that music is still heir to, it has to be said that this is a very serious question. In a time of such bankruptcy of the hearing of the Word of God the function of music and poetry in worship must be most rigorously reviewed and the job of compiling a new hymnary must be approached with the utmost caution.

We must now speak therefore of music in the service of the Church, music in the service at 11 a.m. for example, and first we require to look at the nature of that service. It is very important to realize that the congregation is not a group of Christian individuals, holy idealists perhaps met to to hear a " pep talk " and have community singing until the " pep talk " comes along. They are in fact a gathering of God's people ; they are there because He has called them there, and their actions are in fact reactions to God's action. They are there on the Lord's day, and the Lord, as He promised, is in the midst.

Suppose we stop there for a moment in our description of the facts of worship ; are there not already certain things we must say about music, certain things demanded by these facts. Take first the fact that this is the Lord's day—the day our Lord Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Does not this mean that, even when it must be sombre and sin-laden, the basic and characteristic song of the Church is a a song of praise and thanksgiving ? The music of the Church should still allow as it were for overtones of jubilation.

That music is singularly appropriate in this context of worship cannot be doubted. More than any of the arts man might employ in his reaction to God's action, arts such as architecture, painting and sculpture, music fits in worship because unlike others it is not complete when the artist, in this case the composer, has accomplished it :

> " Bright is the ring of words
> When the right man rings them,
> Fair the fall of songs
> When the singer sings them." (1)

Music provides a happy correspondence between the action of God in worship and the action of man. For each time the song is sung new life is given to dead notes : it is in a sense a new creation.

Again, however, we can be more precise. Are we not bound to say that because this gathering is called by God and because there takes place at a church service something which does not take place anywhere else in our lives ; because Christ is present in a particular way music which corresponds will inevitably be to some extent assimilated, will be not necessarily a special kind of music to match this special kind of event, but will at any rate be capable of becoming special.

Now there is a debate currently furious in some sections of the Church concerning music for the church service. There are those who maintain that the Church must make use of popular music in its worship if it is really to be the Church of our day and if it is ever to recover from what is considered the terrible misfortune of being considered by large numbers of young people impossibly " square ." The easiest answer to the demands for popular music in its extreme form is of course that it is impossible to identify popular music because it changes so rapidly. The song that reaches the giddy height of the top of the popularity scale today may be forgotten in a matter of months. If it takes

(1) *Robert Louis Stevenson.*

five years at least to prepare a new hymnary how can the Church possibly avoid archaising. Today's most popular melody and others in its style will be hopelessly out of date when they appear in a new hymnary. The more serious difficulty is to know whether the popular music, when it does settle for any length of time, is valued as an art form, or whether it is a very junior partner in a large and at times ludicrous combine of personality-cult and commercialism. In other words would the music of certain popular young men from Liverpool be half so popular with our young people if it hadn't been sold to them, as the jazz critic said the other day in the *Scotsman*, " with a ' beat ' label, a nursery accent and hair all over your eyes." It was interesting to learn also from Italy about the San Remo Festival, where in the Casino every year in February, a jury drawn from the audience chooses the most popular song of the year. The songs are sung by Italy's most popular stars. But when the procedure was altered on one occasion and the general public was given a chance to vote on the songs themselves the result proved that the public is really rather slow to appreciate what its taste is going to be. It was proved in fact that the public voted for the singers, the personalities, rather than for the songs at San Remo. What is the popular music today ?

Suppose, however, those people are right who claim that there is a basic musical idiom of fairly widespread currency to be found not so much on Merseyside as in the light music tradition that has been with us for a much longer time and is heard at its best in the great American " musicals ". It is in trying to answer those people that we really reach any kind of clarity in our thinking about the role of music in the Church today. Already music is being written for the Church in this idiom and there will be a demand for more, especially for more for a new *Hymn Book*. It is to be hoped the demand will not be taken too seriously by those responsible.

The question we must consider is whether this type of music permits of being assimilated to the special nature of worship. And surely the answer is that modern music of which we have been speaking has about it such an air of particularity, it is so much of our time and place as to be impatient of being readily assimilated to the special nature of worship. Jesus said to the woman of Samaria : " The hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father . . . . . the hour cometh and now is when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth." I think that means today ye shall

worship neither in the manner of Merseyside nor of Manhatten, neither in the manner of Broadway nor of London's West End ; the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth. I am not alone in feeling when I hear some of these modern hymn tunes that the music has taken over, and so far from the music serving the Church the Church is serving the music. At the church service, we said, something happens which does not happen on the other six days of the week : but this popular music happens all the time for many people, seven whole days. It is too mundane to enjoy any kind of correspondence with this mystery of worship in which we Christians step forth deliberately out of the secularity in which we are most of the time submerged. It is too profane in even the most innocent sense of that word to be readily serviceable in the area of the sacred. This is " mundane " and " profane " to such a degree that, as Joseph Gelineau says, you have to " exorcise " it before you can " consecrate " it ; and that, in our culture, would be a long and difficult enterprise.

The most serious objection to the idiom of the " musical " as an idiom for the modern hymnary is that, as the name suggests, it is too *musical.* This is a fault which it shares with other types of music that we use in the Church, both what we call " good " music and " bad " music. There is too much of the art of music in it. Almost everyone can say of this music that it is pleasant ; many may find it absolutely beautiful, or thrilling, or captivating. More sophisticated people may reserve these adjectives for more sophisticated music. It may all be too musical. It may attract so much attention to itself as music—beautiful, thrilling or captivating music—as to beguile man and make it really more difficult for him to see or to expect to see that beauty, that glory, of which we must now speak, which is one and indeed the chief of the characteristics of this special thing " true worship ".

We speak of the beauty of God, the glory of God. It is the glory of God that sparks off our glorification so that in a sense our glorification is always God's self-glorification. God's glory is not a cold, static glory, distant and joyless ; it is a warm, vibrant, contagious thing. The moment our eyes are opened to it our whole selves are possessed by it and given a share in it—in its joy obviously, or you have to re-write half the Bible. " My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour." " Rejoice in the Lord alway . . . ." : " let all those that put their trust in Thee rejoice : let them ever shout for joy." Even the most

sorrow-laden passages of the Psalms are time and again infused with the thrill and throb of an exultant gratitude to God ; and where there is no sorrow, where as in the Psalms towards the end of the book all reserve is thrown aside and the writer exults unashamedly in his God, you will remember the mighty chorus he builds up of angels and archangels, sun, moon and stars, mountains and cedars, kings of all peoples, young men and maidens, old men and children. There is no religion in the world that has anything like the songs of Christendom—no Creed under the sun that sounds so consistently the note of praise.

There is a beauty in God, the beauty of grace and truth, and grace and truth come down and come into the Church. Joy overflows from God into His Church and makes us rejoice. God is light and the radiance of light and the light shines. The beauty and glory and joy and light of God is the beauty, glory, joy and light of His love, of His whole being and of His works, of what He is and does in Christ. All this is not confined to worship, but it is obviously present in the context of worship in a special way, overflowing into the whole of worship, the preaching of the Word, the confession of faith of His people in whatever way they may make it in prayer and praise. Our worship does not cease to be a creaturely activity. It does not cease to have all kinds of weaknesses and doubtful characteristics ; but it has also at the same time a share in the true glory of God, which is not ashamed to dwell in it and shine through it. Then the music which will render the most appropriate service in the Church is the music which is so to speak transparent, which lets the light and beauty of God shine through, music which does not just sing itself, but permits of being interpreted in ever new ways by the Choirmaster under whom we do our best singing—Jesus Christ. When under His direction and as He teaches us the meaning of the words we sing, praise really flames up on the altar of our hearts, and voices really vie with the angels', and " the singers are as one, to make one sound to be heard in praising and thanking the Lord . . . . then the house of God is filled with a cloud . . . . for the glory of the Lord has filled the house of God."

The quality of transparency is not really hard to identify. It is present in much of the music in the repertoire of the Church, in plainsong, of course, but not only in plainsong. It is present in many polyphonic works which, cunningly disguising their artistry, appear limpid and effortless. It is present in much of the music of the Reformation which we sing today. But lest you begin to associate it solely with

spare music let me hasten to add that it is often present in Stanford and the like. It is certainly there in Britten. It is often not there in hymn tunes of one hundred years ago or thereby in our hymnary—they are " clouded " by sentimentality or by harmonies that are dull and have to be repeated in a tiresome fashion for several verses on end. It is probably not there in anything so immediately satisfying and attractive as " musical " ; it is certainly not there in anything so noisily boring as " pop ." It may well be there in classical jazz. It may also be found in idioms yet unknown.

It is fascinating and reassuring to find this quality of transparency being demanded of art in general, indeed being hailed as the true goal of all art and its greatest splendour, by a distinguished art historian and critic of our day, Georges Duthuit. Some of the things he says may help to illustrate our thesis : " I am no longer interested in anything approaching genius. What I ask of art is something far greater than dazzling virtuosity. I want art to help us to communion with the things of this world . . . . and perhaps even to suggest the existence of a transcendent principle which is revealed through things but which is also above all things." He says of the art of classical Greece : " Bound by the exclusive perfection of its own shape, each figure cries out to be considered separately to have us stand squarely before it." The Byzantine work of art, by contrast, as he points out, does not boast a proud and self-sufficient beauty. It takes account of external light, of the space within which it is inscribed, of the eye of the beholder. "A thousand times over I prefer Santa Sophia to the Sistine Chapel," is one of the more startling statements in his book. Now Santa Sophia, in Constantinople, is a great church where the immense gold of a noble vault diffuses the light in a way that is splendidly brilliant, almost dazzling. It is made to let the light of the sun filter through, earthly light and heavenly light. When art grows illustrative it tends to draw us to itself exclusively. In the same way Duthuit prefers Rubens, Vermeer and Velasquez to Leonardo da Vinci, because with them objects acquire a sort of transparency that lets through the light of the world. The luminous painting of Manet, Matisse, some of Constable where he reconquers natural space—all of these Duthuit feels are the great artists fulfilling art's true function, not making a cult out of art, rather constraining art to join the worship of that which surpasses it.

If we return to add to our factual statements concerning worship we have now to proceed to speak of the Word in

worship. It is in fact as the Word is proclaimed to us and as Christ thereafter instructs us as to how to make our response to the Word in confession, and prayer and praise, that we glorify God and share in his self-glorification. Therefore music will be the servant of the words of proclamation, confession, prayer and praise. This is one aspect of its transparency. The response of the people to the Word of God in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs is also the Word of God spoken by the people one to another, as the *Colossians* passage tells us : " Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom : teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Music will dedicate itself to making more eloquent and meaningful some at least of the words that are uttered in the course of worship. And to those who object that this is a far too utilitarian role for such a noble art to play the retort must surely be that it is not so much the dignity of the task that ennobles the servant as the dignity of the Lord the servant serves. The Bible is quite clear on this point, that the world has got its values wrong and that the only truly free man is the man who is utterly and wholly the servant, the slave of God. In the service of the Word music has complete freedom to use all its techniques, provided only that *they do serve* ; and there are more techniques in music's repertoire than are represented in the present *Church Hymnary*. For example, there are simple techniques from the past, antiphonal singing, responsorial singing, which take note of the fact that the people can learn a line and contribute their one line at intervals as part of a whole, or they can imitate a line perhaps more easily than they can learn a whole melody. There are techniques from the present and there will doubtless be more in the future. Christ is, however, Lord in His own Church. The Word must take precedence over everything else. And if you protest that there are surely great songs where the greatness is all in the music and the words are negligible, the answer is: " There are, but in the Church such negligible words have no place in the first instance ! " Worship is no context for casual speaking—which means, of course, that we have to be as rigorous in our examination of words for a new hymnary as we have in our examination of music.

All this concern that music should serve the Word does not exclude the acknowledgement that music can itself be the response to the Word and therefore in a sense the Word to others, but this is true mainly for musicians and music-

lovers. For the others it is a speaking with tongues, which does not " edify," and is not therefore appropriate for public worship. This is more for the family prayers of music-lovers, so to speak, which should be held in church at an hour other than the hour for public worship.

There is one last point which must be made. The Church can never forget the provisional nature of all that it does. There is a music of angels and of the company of men made perfect in supra-temporal eternal worship, to which we seek to conform, and the perfection of their music constantly displays the inadequacy of ours. We do our best to keep in tune with heaven, but always our echoes are fragmentary. It will therefore behove music, as it will behove all of us, to be a little humble about the distance that lies between here and yonder ; at least humble enough to ask questions about the Hymnary every thirty years, and about our own worship Sunday by Sunday.

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