

The Function of Music in Worship.

THERE are two commonly accepted uses of music in the worship of the Church. In one use it is the medium by which a congregation utters in fit order of words its speech to God or about God, while at the same time the utterance is enriched with emotional and spiritual quality. Whether the whole congregation sing, or the choir alone, or a solo voice, this enrichment of words by music is distinctive, and the purpose of the music is obvious. In the second use, as in the voluntaries, it is the medium by which, without words associated, some fit act of worship is made, or some help is given to the worshipper; but what act or what help? To these questions frequently neither organist nor minister nor congregation can give any but the vaguest answer. Why should voluntaries be played at all? That is a fundamental question, and till it be answered by organist and minister, and understood by the worshippers, guidance as to what should be played is impossible. And this leads to other questions pertinent. If there be a reason for playing these, why should the great bulk of the congregation leave the church during the first few bars of the closing voluntary and enter during the last half of the opening voluntary? Or is there some reason for playing these which is quite independent of the presence of the worshippers during the playing?

It would be a profitable thing for Kirk Sessions to give an evening to the consideration of such elementary questions as these. An attempt to answer them would be the first step towards the redemption of the voluntaries and towards bringing them into their rightful place in the worship of the Church. As it is, there is probably no act of worship on which the dead hand of unmeaning custom lies with so heavy a weight. The action of most congregations reveals that whatever they think of the purpose of the voluntary—if they think about it at all, which is doubtful,—they do not think it needs to be listened to, or that its purpose is hindered by the sound of trampling feet. Nor is this confined to the congregation: how many choirs or how many ministers are in

their place when the voluntary begins, or wait after the benediction till the voluntary closes? And why should they not?

On the answer to the question, what is the purpose of the voluntary, depends the answer to the subordinate question—what kinds of music are best to fulfil this purpose? To both questions the answers given by two distinguished Scottish organists may be condensed into a few sentences.

The first voluntary, one says, is to subdue the hearts of the people to holy awe and reverence, to the spirit of worship, and this can best be attained by music of a non-thematic kind with no melodic interest, nothing to attract the mind to the texture of the music, no progression of thought or theme, only the church filled with sound waves rising and falling and intermingling. The 'offering' voluntary is to come as a relief to the strain of devotion and exalted thought in the early part of the service, a 'rest moment' before going on to the second or concluding part of the service, and so its music should be bright, melodic, and very simple. The closing voluntary is an expression of triumph in the offering made, and a reaction from the hushed strain of worship, and should be a fanfare of sound, rejoicing, shouting, glorying in trumpet note and vehement expression.

The second organist agrees as to the purpose of the first voluntary, but holds that this is as well attained by melodic music and by music with word associations (such as organ transcriptions of some of the 'Messiah' music of Handel). He extends the 'rest moment' of the offering voluntary into a definite interlude between two periods of worship, where music such as the best operatic music, intended just to give pleasure, is fitting, though it have no Church associations. For the closing voluntary he uses always low tones and subdued effect, that no obvious or loud music may disturb the claims of God's message to possess the whole mind and heart.

It is by ministers and organists dealing with this matter in the thoughtful spirit which these two men show that the Church will arrive at a sound judgment on the matter. Whatever one thinks of the varying purposes detailed above, or of the means which each man takes to reach his goal and to lead the congregation with him, the first step is taken—a definite purpose is set down and a definite effort made to reach it. All sorts of in-

fluencing considerations will modify the result of the inquiry: the degree of musical education in the congregation, the nature of the building, the type of organ, the technical skill of the organist, the traditions of the Church, but a living answer will appear to devout inquiry and a richer offering of worship will follow. I personally disagree entirely with the view as to the 'offering' voluntary in the second instance, but it expresses a deliberate and reasoned purpose.

In all this inquiry into purpose and means it will be noticed that the fulfilment of the highest purpose holds within it the fulfilment of the many lower purposes. The voluntary covers or hushes the sound of the people's feet, and so conduces to quiet meditation and silent prayer. It helps people away from the distractions of recognising friends, noting new costumes and hats, watching the movements of others, &c., by capturing their attention and fixing it on a musical composition which stirs their emotions in some good way, or, on another level, attracts their intellectual attention. It provides a pleasant and spiritually healthy relief to these many, many people who have not yet learned how to spend even five minutes in private prayer and meditation in a church or in the company of others. It provides this same pleasant and spiritually helpful relief to others who come to church with minds too tired or distracted at that hour for quiet devotional approach to God. Just to listen to the music is a real help to such. In doing all or any of these common things, it opens a path to far higher ranges of action, where music is the very voice of God breathing upon men the Holy Spirit,

"Thy blessed unction from above
Is comfort, life, and fire of love."

In a high and worthy conception of it, the voluntary is the organist's individual act of worship, in which he offers to God Himself the best skill and fruit of the gift God has given him, and the best and most suitable music he can find or compose. And since in Protestant public worship the thought of the congregation as an offering priesthood is always dominant, the offering of music must be such as the congregation can in some real sense share. The ministrant at the organ offers not alone, but he offers his own worship enriched by sinking his individual self in the unity of the Body of Christ. He

offers the best and purest music he can find to draw *this special people*, whatever their ignorances and prejudices, into the secret of God's presence and to separation from the world. He will seek to tune their souls to the special message of each service, the joy of Christmas, the austerity of Lent, the glory of Easter, the white gift of Pentecost, the assurance of Immortality, the solemn triumph over Death, the call to Service, the whole glory and love and joy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The organist in his place is not ministering to the need or the taste of a few elect souls, the 'musical people' so-called; he stands with the minister as responsible for the whole flock of God, and ministering to all. This suggests some general considerations as to the music played. It must speak to the people's need; and as the greater part of each congregation is made up of people with less keen musical taste than the organist's, he must recognise, as must the minister, that his own judgment may not give the wisest guidance as to the music that best meets their need. He has not only seen the beauty of some special composition, but he has learned and studied its form and variety, and God has given him special powers of vision into it. And he has played it time after time till every note is familiar and dear. Then the congregation hears it once, and many are bored and wearied by the music that thrills him to the depths of the soul. They pay no heed to it themselves, and there are so many of them that they hinder others from quiet listening. Barbarians! "Exactly, barbarians!" the organist replies. "There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification. Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian." The congregation, to the organist, is full of such barbarians, who know not "the meaning of the voice." The apostle, however, does not end there, but goes on: "I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, *and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me*. Ever so, ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the Church." Would that these words were printed in letters of gold on every organ console. The organist is skilled in music, knowing its voice and accent, emotionally responsive to its appeal, trained to listen. So familiar is he with this language that often he does not realise that it is a 'tongue' to great part of the con-

gregation, and that they do not listen because they do not understand. Greek is the most beautiful language the world has known in flexibility, in colour, in grace, in delicacy of expression, and vigour of tone and rich variety of meaning, yet if one of our ministers were to preach in Greek, in these supremely beautiful words, he would at once become a "barbarian" to his congregation. As a matter of fact, many organists become barbarians in just that way through their ignorance of the congregational need and their choice of unsuitable music. The 'universal appeal' of music is a phrase with just the same limitations as the 'universal appeal' of language. And much of the talk about 'keeping up the standard of music' is just as nonsensical as it would be for the minister of a Scottish parish to talk of keeping up the standard of language by preaching in Greek. A man keeps up no standard by playing what to that congregation at that stage is unintelligible and foreign. It is "barbarian" music, even though it be the Gloria from the great Mass in B Minor, which God gave inspiration to John Sebastian Bach to compose. "Seek that ye may excel to the edifying, the building up, of the Church." Every organist should set himself to 'build up' his congregation, learning where it stands to-day, recognising the limitations that position imposes, and wisely, steadily, gradually leading them on to deeper appreciation. It is as harmful to intelligent worship continually to play 'over their heads' as to preach over their heads. It is worse to measure their need and their power to respond solely by their intellectual or musical ignorance and give them unworthy and tawdry preaching or playing, little themes dealt with in little ways. There is much simple music, as there are simple words, which is pure and noble and which carries powers of the Gospel. The great religious music, born in the sanctuary, is on the whole simpler than the adaptations which some speak of as 'simple music.' Even if it come with an austere voice to ears accustomed to sentimental or ranting music, these can bit by bit be trained to feel its message, and that training, as Plato says, "makes men better." Interpretation and repetition are both important elements in this "building up." To give ordinary people only the types of music which seem ideally best to the trained musician, who, in addition to his naturally superior taste, plays to himself any given piece a dozen times for the one time he lets the con-

gregation hear it, is not serving most wisely the ends of the Kingdom of God. To do its full work good music needs to be repeated again and again, and it will become dearer with familiarity. Much of the best music played in church is wasted because it is not played often enough for the people to know it.

If the organist be able, inviting the congregation to a choir practice or to a special congregational practice, to analyse and interpret one or two of his voluntaries to them, this will lead through a better apprehension of the outward form to a deeper reception of the inward message. Generally, all that can be done to help people to know and understand the music will help them to better worship through it.

There is a wise word in Plato's 'Republic' which is worth the attention, as are his many words about music, of those who are interested in Church worship. "Damon tells me, and I can quite believe him, that when modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the state always change with them."

" 'Then,' I said, 'our guardians must lay the foundations of their fortress in music.'

" 'Yes,' he said, 'the lawlessness of which you speak too easily creeps in.'

" 'Yes,' I replied, 'in the form of amusement, and at first sight it appears harmless.'

" 'Why, yes,' he said, 'and there is no harm, were it not that, little by little, this spirit of licence, finding a home, imperceptibly penetrates into manners and customs, whence issuing with greater force it invades contracts between man and man, and from contracts goes on to laws and constitutions, in utter recklessness, ending at last, Socrates, by an overthrow of all rights, private as well as public.' "

There is no doubt that the changes in the modes of Church music, as this or that mode rises or falls in popularity, are closely associated with changes in 'fundamental laws' of the estate of the Church. Whether one thinks of those as caused by the change in music, as Plato did, or themselves original and then productive of a change in music, the connection is obvious, and nowhere more so than in the hymns of the Church. Consider, for instance, the changes that took place in the tune 'Commandments' in its 1549 version and as it appears in the unrevised Church Hymnary. This comparison can approximately

be made by setting side by side Nos. 289 (old form) and 305 (later form) in the Revised Church Hymnary. Again one considers some of the popular mission hymns about the blood of Jesus, with rather rollicking chorus, side by side with such as 'Rockingham'—"When I survey the Wondrous Cross," or the 'Passion Choral'—"O Sacred Head." The music in the first comparison is reflecting or causing a modified idea, in these latter a quite different idea, of how God should be approached in adoring song. Such changes, or such differences, are inevitably associated with a change in the spirit of worship, which means a change in the view of God, which means a change in the way of life. The way in which we approach the Deity is dependent on our idea of the Nature of Deity. And conversely, when we make this approach first as unthinking children or ignorant believers, the way of our approach determines our idea of the Nature of Deity, and our view of life depends on that. Surely hymns of the Passion and the Cross sung to tunes which almost demand jauntiness of utterance, reflect or produce a different reasoning as to the nature and demands of the Saviour's Passion from that of hymns of a more austere and sober approach. "When modes of music change fundamental laws always change with them."

There is to-day a growing interest in congregational singing. Men are coming to feel more deeply that a 'well sung' congregation is not only musically different from a congregation where the singing is poor and thin, but spiritually different; that it knows more of the radiance of the Christian religion, and is more fitted for the adventurous ways of Christian living. In the desire to secure this it is well to remember that there is a kind of music used even in churches which softens the emotions and disturbs the sensuous nature, and swings open a door to temptation's appeal to the senses. It is often easy to sing, pleasant, almost intoxicating in its effect on the emotions, and one is inclined to use any music which will disturb the deadness of Church life, and soften hearts to a moving appeal, even if that softening open the door as well to lower appeals of the flesh. Many a mission deliberately uses this type of music, and wise and good men commend its use, themselves too pure-hearted to know the danger of its sensuous swing. Yet long study of its deeper effects has convinced one who also feels its

power deeply, that it is in the main a real hindrance to the true life of the soul. All the great enduring songs of the Church reflect "that glorious and fearful name, the Lord your God," and those which use the most passionate expressions of personal love for Christ and trust in God never obscure His majesty or dim the sense of awe. What Tagore writes of another unworthy influence is true also of this type of sensuous music, for which a place is asked and often given in the service of the Sanctuary.

" 'When it was day they came into my house and said, 'We shall only take the smallest room here.'

"They said, 'We shall help you in the worship of our God, and humbly accept only our own share of His grace,' and then they took their seat in a corner and they sat quiet and meek.

"But in the darkness of night I find they break into my sacred shrine, strong and turbulent, and snatch with unholy greed the offerings from God's altar."

So Whittier :—

And yet the past comes round again
And new doth old fulfil
In sensual transport wild as vain
We brew in many a Christian fane
The heathen Soma still.

Dear Lord and Father of mankind
Forgive our feverish ways.

There is music which is deeply moving to the emotions, and which yet opens only the upper windows of our nature. It strengthens against what is sensual, and breaks down coldness to the appeal of Christ. This is music which "discerns the spirits, whether they be of God," and all its currents move towards Him. In the search for it there is gladly to be admitted the responsive choice of an ordinary congregation, lest the desire for purity lead to insistence on an austerity and solemnity which are not the only Christian moods of approach to God. Christian congregations have sounder instincts in these matters than musicians always allow, and the real spiritual values of holy words and tunes are at least as wisely assessed by men and women in the pews, with their varied experiences of joy and sorrow, of youth and age, of victory and defeat, as by the occupant of the organ stool. When they sing what they find in their experience has brought them comfort and vision, there is a purifying influence at work which

will increasingly make the songs of the Church fit to awaken and to express the emotions of the human heart and to offer as a pure oblation to God. For a decisive principle in selection the words of Sir Henry Hadow are unsurpassed: "With such wealth of gems at our command—far greater than we can ever make use of,—why should we at any time make an offering to God of tinsel or coloured glass." And the report of the Archbishops' Committee on Music and Worship gives a regulative principle of supreme value: "The ultimate test of a hymn tune is not its capacity to satisfy a congregation, nor even its effectiveness as music, but rather the impression that it makes, and *its faithfulness as an expression of the Christian religion.*"

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