

The Anthem : Its Function and Its History

"IN Quires and Places where they sing, here followeth the Anthem" (Book of Common Prayer 1662). These simple words opened the way for a stream of artistry in words and music which has ever since immeasurably enriched the worship of the Church.

Henry VIII. had broken with Rome and despoiled the monasteries, incidentally with fearful consequences to the priceless treasures of their musical libraries. Learned men were labouring to provide the English Church with a Service Book in the language of the people, and for that purpose were drawing largely on the ancient Latin Offices—the order of Morning Prayer being compiled from the Offices of Matins, Lauds and Prime, and Evening Prayer from those of Vespers and Compline.

In 1549 was issued the First Prayer Book of Edward VI., to be followed quickly by the publication in 1550 of the first musical edition, "The Booke of Common Praier Noted," the work of John Merbecke. The music was plainsong throughout and made no use of harmony or polyphony. In fact, the first collection of polyphonic music does not appear to have been published until 1560, after the Reformation, and was revised and re-issued in 1565, with the title: "Mornyng and Evenyng Praier and Communion, set forthe in foure Parties, to be sung in Churches, both for Men and Children, with dyvers other Godly Praiers and Anthems of sundry men's doyngs."

The first official mention of the word Anthem occurs in the Rubric from the Prayer Book of 1662 quoted above, but it is clear that long before that time it had become customary to introduce an anthem into the service. Indeed, at one time two appear to have been included, one being sung after the sermon, for Pepys says: "The sermon done, a good Anthem followed." The Book of Common Prayer, however, provided for one only, to be sung at the conclusion of the Office and before the Prayers for Church and State, which were added for the first time in 1662. This has remained the practice up to the present time.

The word "Anthem" derives most probably from the Old English "Antefn" and the Greek "Antiphon." The

Antiphon was a plainsong setting of a scriptural text, sung in the Roman Church before and after psalms, the meaning and interpretation of which it was its function to underline. Musically, the Anglican Anthem is a direct descendent of the Latin Motet from which at first it differed little in style, except that the words of the text were in English instead of Latin. Its position in the service was authorised by the Rubric, though its words did not form part of the Liturgy.

The singing of an anthem, of course, presupposes the existence of a choir, and it was therefore only in the services of Cathedral and Collegiate churches, with their long choral traditions and facilities for the training of choristers, that it was in those days to be heard. It was thus force of circumstances which led to the emergence of the two types of service which arose in England then and have existed side by side until modern times—the full cathedral service, with the choral settings of the canticles, responses and psalms, and with the anthem sung in the proper place; and the simpler parish church service where, until comparatively recent times, there was no choir, and the only music was sung by the congregation, consisting at first only of metrical psalms, and later, of course, of hymns as well.

The method of approach and the appeal of these two types of service are altogether different. In the cathedral service the Liturgy is enshrined in beautiful and fitting musical settings, sung in surroundings of the greatest dignity and loveliness. The worshipper has but to sink himself into the spiritual atmosphere of such a service to be lifted directly into the heavenly places of the spirit. Anyone who has attended Evensong in one of the great cathedrals, such as Gloucester or Durham or York Minster, will know the spiritual value and inspiration of such a service. In the parish church service, which is much more widely known and therefore calls for less comment, the music is sung by the worshippers themselves, and performs the different function of serving as a vehicle for the corporate expression of their feelings of worship. That music should be used for this purpose occasions no surprise, for of all the arts it offers the closest and most personal means of human expression. Thus, in the one form of service music heard *evokes in us* the spirit of worship; in the other *we give expression* to our spiritual feelings and thoughts in the music which we ourselves sing. The value of each form is beyond question, and opportunities for the enjoyment

of both are necessary and ought to be provided in every place of worship.

The anthem, then, took its place in the worship of the cathedrals, and with the development of music took to itself new means of expression and new methods of appeal. In its early forms it was "a capella," that is, it had no accompaniment by any instrument. William Byrd, born about 1538, was among the first to introduce accompaniment for stringed instruments (viols), and experimented also with the introduction of solo voices in his anthems and services. These two developments, of using passages for solo voices and quartets or trios of solo singers in contrast with the full choir, and their accompaniment by strings or organ, were brought to perfection in the work of Henry Purcell, organist of Westminster Abbey, who died in 1695. He was the last of the long line of church music composers reaching back to Merbecke one hundred years earlier. It had been a "golden age" in church as in secular music. What a stream of artistry was poured into the music of the Church by these composers of Tudor and early Restoration days! The works of Thomas Tallis, Christopher Tye, Richard Farrant, William Byrd, Thomas Morley, Thomas Tomkins, Orlando Gibbons, Thomas Weelkes, and John Blow are prominent in musical history. At no time before or since has England taken the lead in musical progress as she unmistakably did in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. By their genius and devotion these men breathed a new spirit into church music, and in their incomparable compositions they developed and perfected a technique of writing which has never been surpassed.

It was in the nature of things that such a peak in artistic achievement should have been followed by a period of less brilliance. Unfortunately this was so in English church music to a distressing degree, for after the death of Purcell a decline set in extending over two hundred years, which were to prove a period of generally competent mediocrity. There were plenty of imitators of past glories, as there always are, but the sap of originality seemed to recede and growth became thin and weakly. There are always exceptions to lighten the greyness of such times, and William Croft, Maurice Greene, Handel, Boyce, Attwood, Dr Crotch and Samuel Sebastian Wesley, to mention only a few, stand head and shoulders above the rest as men who contributed something new and splendid to Church music.

Thomas Attwood, it may be noted, was a pupil of Mozart, through whose influence a greater warmth of feeling and dramatic expression began to be admitted to the music of the Church, the development of which was quite naturally following the course of development of the art as a whole. In the anthems of Samuel Sebastian Wesley, who died in 1876, there is sweetness of melody and harmony combined with real dignity and fitness of expression, a delicate balance which the Victorian generation of composers that followed failed signally to maintain. Circumstances perhaps were against them. Two factors certainly must be taken into account: the powerful influence of Mendelssohn, who was as popular an idol in this country as he was on the Continent; and the introduction into the parish churches of England and Scotland of choirs who should sing by themselves, as in the cathedrals. This latter phenomenon created a sudden and enormous demand for church music, and for anthems in particular, which should be easier of performance and on a smaller scale than the resources of a cathedral choir of trained voices made possible. A crowd of composers rushed into print in these Victorian years. Many of them were first-class musicians of taste and technical ability. Few of them, however, had that spark of creative genius which would have raised their work above the level of the ordinary. Most of them were strongly under the influence of Mendelssohn, whose facile style exposed his music to a greater host of would-be imitators than that perhaps of any other notable composer. The results to Church music were calamitous, and we are still suffering from them to-day. Goss, Walmisley (the least of the offenders), Smart, MacFarren, Elvey, Stainer, Sullivan, Barnby—these were the leaders of the church composers of the Victorian era. For the remainder one has only to refer to the back page of one of Novello's anthems of the period to see a host of names of men whose zeal outran their taste and discretion, and who "allowed mere sentimentality to masquerade as high devotional feeling." Their anthems and hymn tunes demonstrate all too clearly how mere prettiness and sentimental treatment of a theme can deface the dignity and purity of the worship of the House of God.

Fortunately, there is a brightening of the scene at the turn of the century, with Parry and Stanford labouring to lift the level of writing out of the rut of the commonplace to a plane which would be worthy of the dignity of its

high purpose. The lead which they gave has since been splendidly followed, and in the anthems and services of Charles Wood, Holst, Walford Davies, Dr Ernest Bullock, Armstrong Gibbs, Herbert Howells, John Ireland, Vaughan Williams and many others, we have a wealth of splendid church music which, keeping abreast of contemporary idioms and tendencies, gives to its texts settings which are fitting in every way to enhance and take their place in Divine worship.

It may well be remarked that no mention has so far been made of the name of Johann Sebastian Bach, the greatest composer of music for the Church. It should be remembered, however, that the anthem, which is the very limited scope of this article, has remained an entirely national art-form, and is unknown outside the English-speaking world. Bach's vast and noble contribution to sacred music was made in other fields no less valuable and notable. To-day we may well include the Motets and other sacred compositions of the European composers in our services, but they are not anthems as such, although they are often closely allied in their treatment of the texts.

The introduction of choirs and anthems into the services of the Churches of Scotland and England during the nineteenth century was a convincing demonstration of the need in any service of worship for a period of contemplation and spiritual devotion, a time when the worshipper, in response to the stimulus of that inspiration of the spirit which is the essential of all true art, is lifted into the realms of the infinite and the sublime. This power of stimulation is shared, of course, by all the arts in varying degrees. Music, however, exerts its influence to this end more readily than most of them ; more so than architecture, however dignified and noble, or painting or colour, however beautiful, though these most certainly do serve to deepen and enhance our enjoyment of such moments in worship. Congregational singing, or any form of word-speaking, cannot help us here. It is true that congregational singing is the unsurpassed medium for the corporate expression of religious emotion ; but it cannot give that essentially " private " and personal sense of withdrawal and contemplation which is the proper function of " music heard." The one is a means of giving out, the other of absorbing ; and the two are complementary. Both, let it be stressed again, are highly desirable in any complete form of public worship. It is superfluous to add that in either case the music chosen

must be of the best and the most fitting, if it is to serve faithfully the high purpose which inspired its creation.

The inclusion of the anthem and of other choral settings into our services has the support of tradition. Long years of patient trial and experience have bequeathed to us a great store of good music, the reverent performance of which has fully demonstrated its effectiveness in increasing the devotional value of our services—a God-given inheritance whose advantages we neglect to our immeasurable loss.

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