

The Place of the Church Organ

IN the 1946 *Annual* there appeared an interesting and informative article from the pen of Dr. Smart on *The Place for the Church Organ*, an article which could be of the greatest benefit to clergy, organists and architects on both sides of the Border, since the obsession of the chancel position persists with all the wonted obstinacy of an ephemeral "tradition." To at least one of the *Annual's* readers, Dr. Smart's article suggested the basis of another with the flatteringly imitative title of *The Place of the Church Organ*, this time using the word "place" in the sense of *locus standi*. There is certainly no justification for any member of our Society to dismiss the matter as too purely technical to concern any but the professional musician. While music is not at present deemed, as in the Platonic scheme, an indispensable part of a gentleman's education, and while there are in fact a few luckless men and women (though certainly fewer than is popularly supposed), who may be said to be musically ineducable, there is no shadow of an excuse today for any of our clergy to wash their hands of responsibility for the musical side of the services in which they bear any part. Even after the heavy demands of studies theoretically designed to ensure that pleasing state of "familiarity with the Holy Scriptures in the original tongues" which is so invariable a characteristic of our present-day parish ministers, and the scarcely less heavy expenditure of time necessary for the acquisition of that essential modern ability to talk airily and inaccurately in a jargon compounded of bowdlerized Freud and sanctified William James, our Divinity Halls remind their students that the ordinary folk who still attend services are liable to expect some kind of music at them, and, in order that the students may be armed in this respect also, make a hasty reference to the matter. The thought of a regular Lecturer in Church Music at a Scottish Divinity Hall being too absurd for mention, an extra-mural authority is permitted to take up a total of perhaps five hours out of the students' six years in order to do the subject generous justice. Thus fortified, the licenciate marches forth to do battle with his

organists. While this degree of musical education possibly leaves something to be desired by a Tovey or a Scholes, it should at least have warned the "unmusical" cleric that there are some generally recognized standards of good and bad in Church music, and that if he personally cannot tell a hawk from a handsaw in that direction, he can both seek and obtain reliable advice. That this recognition of personal limitations is not always forthcoming is regrettable, and it may be that in the future steps may be taken to protect the defenceless congregations from the worst follies of dictatorially-minded incompetents. Here, however, let it be said that all reasonable churchmen will agree that any serious thought upon modern worship must include a careful consideration of the part to be played by that important accessory—the organ.

It may be premised that organs are to communal worship what bishops are to the Church of England—perhaps not of its *esse*, but at least of its *bene esse*. Readers who are interested in fundamentals may be referred to Godfrey Sceats' *The Liturgical Use of the Organ*⁽¹⁾; here we concern ourselves merely with circumstances now obtaining within the Church of Scotland and other non-Anglican denominations. Assuming the existence of the instrument, what is to be its use?

Broadly speaking, its use is threefold: (1) to create or to intensify a favourable "atmosphere" for worship; (2) to lead the singing of the congregation; and (3) to accompany the singing of the choir.

Taking these functions in order, we observe that the first is discharged by means of organ music proper in the shape of voluntaries—preludes, offertories and postludes. (The "interlude," which gave so much scope for genius in extemporization, is now all but extinct; its resuscitation might be well worth while). Here at once we encounter sharply divergent views. One school maintains that all this music lies outwith the service, strictly so termed. To quote the Rev. John MacRae, M.A., in his chapter on "The Conduct of Worship,"⁽²⁾ "The Benediction should be the last word in the service—a rule infringed in many churches when the National Anthem is sung after the Benediction. The National Anthem is a prayer in the form of a hymn and should have a place in the service,

⁽¹⁾ Obtainable from the offices of *Musical Opinion*, 26-27 Hatton Garden, London, E.C. 1., at 4/4, post free.

⁽²⁾ *The Minister's Manual*, Blackwood, 1947; p. 74.

either at the beginning or just before the end. The singing of a Vesper Hymn by the choir at the close of Evening Service is subject to the same criticism ; its place is before, not after, the Benediction."

Mr MacRae might at first sight appear to be safeguarding himself by a literal interpretation of "word," but his second sentence clearly reveals that he regards anything later than the *Amen* to the Benediction as forming no part of the service. Presumably he would also maintain that the service does not begin until the officiating minister pronounces his first syllable. This is quite a general opinion, and it is not implied that Mr MacRae is being singular. On the contrary, we fully realize that considerable quibbling may now occur. It will speedily be seen, however, that Mr MacRae's implied definition of the extent of a "service" is too inelastic to escape the production of obvious absurdities. An organ voluntary played before the entry of the minister or after his exit would on this ruling be outwith the "service," while an organ voluntary played while the elders received the offering would by the same yardstick be a part of the "service." This is not at all helpful. Let us take another line.

Organ voluntaries are not essential to any service ; at times their omission may be advantageous (an experiment which is well worth a trial at Holy Communion, in Lent, Holy Week or other special occasions) : if they are inessential, they may, nevertheless, do much indeed to make or mar a service. A minister under whom the writer once had the honour to serve as organist expressed a certain satisfaction that he did *not* have to enter his pulpit to the Ballet Music from "Rosamunde" or leave it to the "War March of the Priests" (experiences actually vouchsafed him during my predecessor's term at the organ). A deputy organist once employed (but not re-employed) by the writer in another church considered that selections from Bizet's "L'Arlésienne" Suite and "Carmen" made excellent voluntaries. Possibly some members of almost any congregation would agree, but the better-informed would not, and it is reasonably certain that for some a service so garnished would be seriously impoverished, if not irreparably damaged. Here, then, the minister cannot be exonerated if he maintains that voluntaries are outwith the service and therefore none of his concern. He may not, indeed, *tell* his organist what is to be played, but he may sometimes be forced to exercise his right of veto.

These are certainly extreme, although historically actual, instances. At the other end of the scale, there are some churches so manifestly designed for worship that a sense of the numinous possesses the worshipper from the moment of his entry. Here the organist's task is relatively simple ; he has merely to attune his opening voluntary to the existing spiritual atmosphere. It may be said that minister and organist alike can never be sufficiently grateful for a beautiful church. It renders their work a joy instead of a labour, for any man of reasonable competence and moderate sensitivity finds that to intensify an existing devotional atmosphere is both uplifting and simple to achieve. On the other hand the minister and organist who must labour in an unchurchly barn, or tabernacle of " heritors' gothic," complete with red plush, smelly varnish and meaningless carving, know what labour truly means. They must, in motorists' parlance, " start from cold "—and an hour is sometimes barely enough to allot to this task. In such cases, the organist must shoulder the burden first, and to his technical qualifications must be added a considerable degree of spiritual insight if he is to prepare the congregation to lift up their hearts as the service begins. Without any opening voluntary, the minister would feel his work to be hard and slow of result ; essayed at the end of an unsuitable or badly-performed opening voluntary, it would be a labour of Hercules. When this is once realized, we shall hear no more of the stupid cry that voluntaries are of no account in worship, and we shall find that the value of the organ—as ally or foe—will no longer be questioned. It cannot be ignored.

The organist who is a master of his instrument and also a devout Churchman is fully aware of his great responsibilities and will efficiently deal with them. Less well-equipped players who are no less devout may seek guidance and will find it, for example, in William Swainson's superb article in our own Church's *Manual of Church Praise* (which, by the way, no minister or organist has any business to be without), or in the late Dr. Harvey Grace's inimitable work, *The Compleat Organist*⁽¹⁾. The inferior player who is also an inferior Churchman ought not to be appointed anywhere, and there is no more to be said on the subject than that.

What has been said of opening voluntaries applies equally, *mutatis mutandis*, to offertories and concluding

⁽¹⁾ *The Compleat Organist*, published by Grant Richards, 1922.

voluntaries. As long ago as the eighties of last century, John S. Curwen could write⁽¹⁾ :

"As regards the voluntaries, the vulgar notion is that the opening one should be as soft, and the closing one as loud, as possible. Some organists have such an unvarying habit of making a deafening noise as the congregation retire, that it is necessary to make for the door with all speed after the Benediction, lest one should get caught in the storm. Such a habit is in the worst taste. The only possible excuse for the voluntaries is that they assist the service. . . . The organist should rise to the spiritual importance of his duty, and seek to make his voluntaries harmonize with the spirit of the worshippers. It is quite true that, as a general rule, that spirit will be more jubilant at the close than at the beginning of the service, but often one finds the solemn and subdued tone of a sermon dissipated by a flippant and incongruous concluding voluntary. No doubt the majority of organists choose their pieces beforehand, without reference to the sermon, but it is highly desirable that all should have two or three pieces in different styles ready for use."

We may now turn to the second function of the organ in our worship—that of leading the singing of the congregation. This presupposes two postulates—first, that we are to have congregational singing, and second, that the instrument is capable of leading such singing. In the Church of Scotland the desirability of encouraging congregational singing may perhaps be assumed to be universally agreed upon, but a careful study of the conditions actually prevailing in some of our churches might induce dubiety. South of the Border, of course, the question was long and keenly debated over several centuries. In the decade which saw the Disruption in Scotland Jebb, discussing the services of the Church of England, quoted Keble to support his theory of a respectfully-silent congregation :

"We, the while, of meaner birth,
Who in that divinest spell
Dare not hope to join on earth,
Give us grace to listen well."

Samuel Sebastian Wesley also argued (in 1849) against the congregation's audible participation, "considering that persons who take part in and perform a public ceremony can never be so thoroughly imbued with its spirit as those who preserve a silent attention." This, if true, is a

⁽¹⁾ *Studies in Worship Music*, First Series, pp. 186-187.

depressing thought for clergy, choir and organists alike. At all events, it will probably be conceded by the vast majority of Scots that it is not only the privilege but also the duty of our congregations to lift up their voices as well as their hearts to the praise of God.

If we may regard this as granted, we then come to the question of the organ's part in leading that praise. I have purposely adhered to the expression "leading," for that is, quite bluntly, the organ's job—even if, in exceptionally favourable circumstances, the organ's leadership may sometimes be modelled upon that of the Duke of Plaza-Toro—from behind. It is true that the late Sir J. Frederick Bridge wrote a small treatise on *The Organ Accompaniment of the Choral Service*, but, as may readily be guessed, the "Choral Service" was that of the Church of England, and the bulk of the work of Anglican organists is, in fact, accompaniment. If any of our organists, however, imagine that they sit at their consoles to "accompany" congregational singing, *anathemata sint*: it is pure nonsense. Again we may hark back to the sound sense of Curwen:

"The real value of the organ, when properly used, is that it floods the building with sound, so that timid worshippers are encouraged to sing. They are encouraged because they do not hear their own voices, and because it is easier to sing when the way is smoothed by instrumental accompaniment. The musical effect, also, is improved by the organ; harsh and loud voices are levelled; the interstices, as it were, are filled up, and the congregational voice is rounded into harmonious unity."⁽¹⁾

It would be difficult to find the use of the organ in congregational praise better stated with or without equal brevity. Here, in a nutshell, is the difference between accompanying a soloist or a choir and leading a congregation—and here, apparently, we have a mystery wholly concealed from far too many otherwise competent organists. Given a good instrument properly sited, a competent organist can get any congregation to sing, whether he has the auxiliary force of a choir beside him or not. A player, be he never so highly-trained, be he never so well-endowed with a magnificent instrument and never so well abetted by an admirable choir, can equally certainly choke a congregation into a tradition of silence if he has never mastered the one thing needful for the main part of his duty.

(¹) Op. cit., p. 186.

In recent years, the writer worshipped on two successive Sundays in two Scottish parish churches. Both were beautifully-restored pre-Reformation buildings of an imposing size ; both were equipped with three-manual organs of generous specification by classic English builders ; both boasted mixed choirs of some thirty members ; both enjoyed the services of Scottish organists who were the holders of excellent diplomas. In the one church, a large congregation stood for all practical purposes silent at all the items of praise throughout the service, while the choir, clustered round the organ, monopolized the singing with reasonable competence but no remarkable effect. The organ accompaniment was what provincial newspapers unerringly label " discreet " ; nothing more lethal than a small open diapason was ever suffered to prowl around. In the other church, the congregational singing was inspiring and uplifting to a degree. The choir was excellent, but few of the worshippers would have found time to spare them a thought, any more than they would have given themselves to speculations on the exact composition of the mixture stops in the organ. Praise was clearly the duty of every worshipper, and none would dream of shirking. Most of the very considerable resources of the fine organ were used, always with perfect timing. Unaccompanied verses were frequently employed ; the pedal organ was not uncommonly silenced, to return with majestic effect ; free accompaniments of great contrapuntal skill were devised in perfect taste ; the solid dignity of the great diapason chorus, the brilliant crescendo of the Swell reeds, the restful flute tones of the Choir organ, the whole range of the Pedal organ from the ethereal purr of the 32-foot contra bourdon to the pulse-quickenning roll of the ophicleide, and, perhaps twice in the service, the culminating blaze of the Great reeds—nothing, if we except the vox humana and the tremulants, nothing in that organ failed to play its part. Which of these two organists, think ye, returned to his home justified ? The congregations could have told you.

Of course, a large organ, like a high-powered car, is always a potential danger to the community. A half-taught, over-confident and immature youth (*et ego autem peccavi*) can do almost as much damage with the one as with the other ; but we do not propose to abolish all cars or limit their engines to five horse-power on this account, nor should we be equally absurd over our organs. Let us

see that we obtain instruments adequate for their purpose, and that, once obtained, they fulfil that purpose.

What, indeed, is the use of installing a sixty-stop Willis or Harrison if your organist finds that eight at most will meet his simple needs? We do not labour to secure for our churches organs for recitals which may or may not be given. We put them there to lead the singing—and if the singing is to be a select affair confined to the choir, then we might as well economize a bit with a piano—or, like the B. B. C., starve ourselves in the midst of plenty with a continual feast of unaccompanied singing. Perhaps it is a case of "*redeunt astra*"; perhaps the battle for instrumental music has been fought again and lost; perhaps we are hastening back to the glorious reign of the precentor and his "lining-out." And perhaps not.

Lastly, we must devote a few words to the organ's third use in worship—the accompaniment of the choir. From what we have said on the burning topic of the organ in its main sphere, it will be gathered that few organists among us to-day are inclined to forget their responsibilities towards their choirs. One or two points, however, may still be worth noting.

If the organ is crammed into an inadequate chamber, if the console is not detached, and, above all, if the player is deeply interred in more or less ornamental woodwork several yards from his choir or the "speaking front" of his instrument, he is liable to accompany choir items too heavily. This ought to be obvious, and it has certainly been commented upon often enough, but it evidently has not penetrated to all quarters even now. There is only one reliable test, and that is for the organist to get a deputy to play for him at a choir practice, using various stop-combinations in order as previously instructed, while the regular organist moves to various parts of the church to listen, noting the results with care. It may be added here that if Dr. Smart's plea for the west gallery position of organ and choir were to prevail, this problem of blend and balance would become almost a thing of the past. The detached console may be of great help, but only if it be sufficiently detached. Many Scottish churches have organs either in the chancel or behind a central pulpit with a detached and reversed console about a yard from the case, often still under the overhang of the pipe-front. This simply nullifies the whole merit of the detached console. In present conditions, when electric action is no longer a

temperamental toy, consoles can be removed to a considerable distance from the casework (the main organ at the west end of Westminster Cathedral, for example, can be controlled from the apse console at the extreme east end of that vast building, although in this very extreme case the fact that electrical transmission is much speedier than sound itself is a slightly disturbing factor), and there is no necessity whatsoever for conventionalization of the actual site. The organ console *per se* has no liturgical or architectural significance, and it certainly need not be in a central position at the congregational side of the "choir platform" whenever it is found in a non-cruciform building. There is, of course, *something* to be said for this position; it puts the organist and choir into a relationship analogous to that of conductor and orchestra, and it gives the organist some communication with the congregation: but this very analogy reveals its weakness, for if the organist be likened to an orchestral conductor, his orchestra does *not* consist merely of the choir. An orchestral conductor does not conduct with the greater part of his orchestra behind his back. Again, however handsome a piece of furniture an organ console may be, it has simply no business to be sticking up between the bulk of the congregation and the Holy Table. Sinking it a foot or so is no remedy. A much better site for the console would be at least a dozen pews back from the choir, towards the centre of the "area," or else at right angles to the "pulpit end" and fairly well back in the building on one side, if overhanging galleries did not blanket sound unduly. The first method the writer has never seen adopted; the second may be seen in use in, for example, Greyfriars' Church, Edinburgh.

With the console properly placed, the organist would be largely safeguarded from degenerating—for it is a degeneration—either into a solo player or a mere accompanist: he would have it continually before his notice whether the congregation was singing satisfactorily or not. It is simply not credible that a competent musician, to say nothing of a zealous churchman, could rest content with things once he really heard for himself what goes on—or, more accurately, doesn't—in far too many parish churches when the congregation is supposed to be singing. And let no semi-musical minister console himself with the reflection that the writer is just one of those cranks, preoccupied with non-essentials. One experience of worship in a church where congregational singing is what it should be would put

an end to that attitude. The voice of the organ is a most valuable ingredient in church praise, but it could be dispensed with. The same applies to any and every choir. But there is no substitute in heaven or earth for the voice of the congregation.

"Omnis Spiritus Laudet Dominum. Alleluia."

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