

Why not Plainsong ?

An Innovation ?

" DOESN'T anybody in your congregation object to such an innovation ? " said one minister to another. The two had come to town for the Presbytery meeting, and were discussing church music over a cup of coffee. The previous Sunday morning they had exchanged duties, and the questioner had heard in his neighbour's church the congregation singing the *Benedictus* to " Tone iii, 2nd Ending." (*Church Hymnary* 714). The former minister did not, as a rule, object to things just because they were new, but he was over-fearful of any music that might be labelled " high church " or " highbrow." Without waiting for an answer to his question he went on, " I'm afraid my people stick to the old tunes."

" Such as ? "

" Such as *Beatitudo* and *St Agnes, Durham*."

" Seeing that church music has such a long history, do you not realise that those tunes can hardly be called old tunes ? Some would even call them 19th century *innovations*, and representative of the weakest period of Anglican hymnody. Why not share the thrill of learning and singing the best music, not only of the Reformation period, but also from the ancient Church, including that used by S. Ninian, S. Columba, and the whole Celtic Church of our forefathers ? When referring to ancient church music, I mean, of course, that highly developed art form known under the generic name of ' plainsong.' "

Exit Our Only Tenor

We had struggled hard in our little church to build up a choir. Every Saturday night they would faithfully come to practice, some travelling miles along rough country roads. When our only tenor left the district it looked as if our choir was finished. Then in our necessity (almost our despair) we found we had been neglecting a gold mine, as it were, at our back door, namely *unison singing*. Here we steadily set to work with the following results :—

1. In choir and congregational singing the quality of the voices improved. The wobbly sopranos, for instance, learned to produce a more steady tone which blended with the general tone, while the altos and basses, who had been tempted to force some of their notes in order to balance the harmony, now began to sing with purer tone.

2. In the church services we now frequently alternated verses of hymns between trebles and men's voices. This gave freshness and the charm of contrast, especially in the longer hymns.

3. Negatively, we found ourselves avoiding more and more the weaker tunes of about a hundred years ago.

4. Positively, our greatest discovery of all was *plainsong as a living musical idiom, eminently suitable for Reformed worship*.

What is Plainsong?

Instead of trying to answer this question with a long historical musical treatise, let me tell you how one very ordinary student (later a very ordinary country minister) made some discoveries.

When a young student at the Teachers' Training College, he had been taught by the music lecturer that there are two types of musical scale, or two "modes," with the tones and half tones grouped differently in each. The old form of the minor mode could be shown by playing on the piano from A to A' (lah to lah'), using only the white notes; but of course, he told us, all that was obsolete now. His view was that we simply *had* to sharpen the seventh note of the scale every time, and make other changes in the minor (or lah) mode. He admitted that there had been other modes, such as that from D to D' (ray to ray') without using the black keys of the piano, and so on; but all this, we were assured, was of antiquarian interest only. Like most teachers and professors firmly grounded on the accepted text books set for examinations, this teacher was, it must be confessed, already twenty or thirty years behind the times from one point of view, or about 800 or 900 years from another.

One Sunday our young student heard a church choir singing something different from the usual weak type of "anthem." *The choir actually sang in unison*, not because they did not have the balance of the four parts (this was a big church with a well equipped choir) but because they sang something strong enough in its own right to be worth

singing in unison ! It was *Corde Natus ex Parentis*, many years later to be included in C. H. (60). This foretaste of great possibilities in unison music was followed later by his hearing some of the more ancient plainsong hymns such as *Pange Lingua* and *Veni Creator*. So there began to open up for him a wealth of music, much of it long forgotten or ignored, and now in our own time being more and more widely restored, not only in church music, but also in folk songs and other secular music. When the student became a country minister he had to work for a while with a hymnary which ignored plainsong. I have described how, not having the balance of four parts, our choir turned to unison singing. It was about this time that the *Church Hymnary (Revised)* was published, so that now we had plenty of material on which to work. Gradually the congregation was drawn into learning more and more modal music such as Celtic tunes, and tunes to ancient Latin hymns,¹ as well as such rugged and vigorous psalm tunes as *Martyrs*. Many began to admit that these were more in accord with genuine Calvinistic worship than were the weak tunes and enervating harmonies which became increasingly characteristic of the late 18th and 19th centuries.

Prose Psalms and Canticles

It was in the prose psalms and canticles² that we found available for our use the simplest yet most expressive, the most beautiful yet most austere form of music, in fact that which properly goes under the name of plainsong, plainchant, or the Gregorian chant. Fortunately we had an organist who recognised a musical idiom outside the range of Dominant Seventh chords and similar devices of modern harmony. He was quite happy to encourage plainsong unaccompanied, or to play a quiet accompaniment that did not spoil the rhythm and the essentially vocal character of the music. First our choirmaster, mainly from books, learned the "rules of the game." They are simple, but a knowledge of them is essential. The choir was taught by vocal patterning, and not from the organ. This in itself was a fine discipline. It was not long before we had the

¹ *Note on Plainsong Hymns in C. H.*: In most of these (e.g., 182) the accompaniments are far too heavy for the onward-pressing melody, and should be rewritten with fewer chords and more passing notes, as in *The English Hymnal* (1933) and *A Plainsong Hymnbook* (1932). Such hymns are also very effective when sung unaccompanied.

² C. H., 714, 715, 716, 718.

congregation (or most of them) joining in. In our little wooden church we had no galleries or transepts, and having put the choir into the two back pews, we found that the congregation (sitting immediately in front of the choir) learned new music much more quickly than if they had been scattered here and there in a big church building with the choir in front. Our object was not mere novelty in experimenting with our rediscovered musical idiom. In addition to our use of the canticles, we had faced the fact that only a very small proportion of the *Scottish Metrical Psalter* of 1650 is being used to-day in public worship. While there are gems in the latter version which will be treasured as long as our English speech endures, we must admit that some of the versification is pedestrian, and that many of the lines are unintelligible to the average worshipper of to-day. To help, therefore, to restore to its rightful place in the service the Book of Psalms as a whole, Presbyterian churches in different parts of the world, while retaining what is best in the Metrical Psalms, have re-introduced the saying aloud by minister and congregation, at each service, a psalm or psalms from the Authorized Version of the Bible. In an endeavour to enhance this part of the service some Presbyterian choirs have been using what are called the Anglican chants, and for this purpose *The Scottish Psalter*, 1929 (*Prose*) has been prepared. The Anglican chants, however, are more suitable for professional choirs than for congregations; they are more complex and more difficult of execution than the unison plainsong "tones."

We Learned by Our Mistakes

At first we used *The Book of Psalms, Pointed in Accordance with the Twelve Ancient Tones*. This book, originally prepared for the Catholic Apostolic Church, follows the Authorized Version, and we discovered later that it was recommended in a pamphlet published by the Church of Scotland, *A Course of Reading for the Church Organist*. This same *Book of Psalms* also has been drawn upon for the small selection of Gregorian settings which forms the appendix to *The Scottish Psalter*, 1929 (*Prose*).

The research of half a century or more, however, into the ancient style of plainchant points clearly to certain defects in the *Book of Psalms, Pointed in Accordance with the Ancient Twelve Tones*. The accepted standard to-day, the fruit of long and careful study of ancient music at its

best, is found in *A Manual of Plainsong for Divine Service*, as edited by H. B. Briggs and W. H. Frere, revised by J. H. Arnold (Novello, 1951), which was reviewed in the last number of the *Annual*. For those churches in Scotland where the English Prayer Book version of the psalms may be used, this book cannot be too highly commended. The Church of Scotland stresses the congregation's part in the service, as does the Church of England, but the full use of this excellent book would involve supplying the congregation with copies of the English Prayer Book psalms, or, indeed, with *A Manual of Plainsong*. In most of our churches in Scotland, Bibles (Authorized Version) are in the pews, so that if we wished to sing the prose psalms in a way in which all could join, it would appear that we must use the ordinary Bible version. In accordance with the principles underlying Dr J. H. Arnold's recent edition of *A Manual of Plainsong*, the present writer is now engaged in adapting a number of psalms in the Authorized Version. Enquiries from ministers or choirmasters who are interested in this project would be welcomed.¹

Is Plainsong Contrary to Scottish Traditions ?

In answer to this question allow me to quote from an address given by Mr R. H. Clifford Smith, a former organist of Glasgow Cathedral, to the Scottish Ecclesiological Society (Transactions, 1931). "It is to be noted that prose psalms are rapidly becoming a feature of the Scottish services." Mr Smith then speaks of the limitations of the Anglican chants, and goes on,

"The Gregorian system of prose-chanting gives free play to the word-rhythm, a Gregorian chant being merely a formula of notes designed to carry the words of a verse of a psalm, which words are left completely free to express themselves both rhythmically and from the point of sentiment. I would urge that, if the inclusion of the prose psalms in the services of the Scottish Church is to become general, the musicians and other authorities would be well advised to consider the adoption of the Gregorian system of chanting, instead of a method which has nothing whatever that can be considered Scottish in its character, and which is tending to be superseded, even in the land of its birth. I am inclined to think there is something that might be considered

¹ Address : Bridgend Manse, Mid Calder.

Scottish in the character of the Gregorian chants, and anyhow they have an historical claim upon the country, for once they were used in every church in the land. And in this very building, the Cathedral Church of S. Mungo, Glasgow, the old Gregorian chants were oft to be heard echoing down the aisles and in the vaults, and those were days long before the age of Anglican chants, or even of the Metrical Psalms. The Gregorian chants, then, have a claim upon us both historically and from the point of view of practical considerations, and in adopting them for its prose psalms the Scottish Church would be adding something of real value to its house, and would, at the same time, be falling into line with the most enlightened modern thought."

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