

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor:

While admitting that the latest version of the Church Hymnary marks certain advances, notably in the provision of many chant-settings, I am afraid I cannot regard the book as in general an improvement upon its predecessors. In particular, I deplore the whole idea of its inclusion of a selection of metrical psalms: this is just what was done in the 1916 Book of Praise in Canada, and in practice I found this highly unsatisfactory. It meant, in fact, that the complete Metrical Psalter inevitably disappeared, to the infinite loss of the Church. I am well acquainted with the argument that the Metrical Psalter was being inadequately used, and that the inclusion of a portion of it in a hymnal would at least preserve some of it. This argument I found to be fallacious, and in my years in Canada I frequently had to resort to making manuscript copies of both words and tunes from the Psalter and providing the choir with them for use in services (the congregation mostly had the words of the metrical psalms bound up with their Bibles). I looked forward to being rid of this task on my return to the ministry in Scotland! I think it was just about fifty years ago that Sir Richard R. Terry, then the leading musician in the Roman Catholic Church in Britain, remarked caustically that 'Scotland has now completely forgotten its priceless heritage of psalm-tunes'. The process has certainly not decelerated since then, but as long as we had the Metrical Psalter and the hymnary both in our hands there was little excuse for it. When I was in a very remote rural charge (you can't get much remoter than Shetland!) I drew up a list of metrical psalm portions and tunes which we worked through year after year: there were over a hundred portions and over seventy different tunes.

I quote now from your Editorial. 'CH 3' (doesn't this sound discouragingly like a chemical formula?) 'has got rid of a lot of junk, but far too much of its content is blessed with those Victorian (and earlier) picture images which reflect an outworn theology'. I am grateful for the interpolation of 'and earlier'; some of the imagery which many people equate with 'Victorianism' was flourishing in the seventeenth century (see Samuel Rutherford) and even the Middle Ages. But the patronizing attitude towards 'Victorianism' is curiously persistent in many quarters, and it is more than time that it was seriously investigated. It is a truism that no generation seems capable of honestly evaluating its immediate

predecessor (J. S. Bach's successor at Leipzig promptly bundled all Bach's music into a cupboard and let the dust settle on it), but we are by now more than a generation away from Victorianism and should have sobered up a little by this time. It might be noted that outside Church music circles serious musicians have for some time past begun to put the brakes on the once prevalent tendency to denigrate 'Victorianism': a brief study of the concert programmes broadcast by the BBC today will reveal, for instance, a considerable amount of Mendelssohn's output, and Mendelssohn a generation ago was steadily denigrated as the arch-Victorian of music. If he is not yet elevated to the Bach-Brahms-Beethoven platform, he is at least recognized as a supremely brilliant craftsman. This is precisely what could be said of many of the best-known Victorian Church composers; they seemed to know infallibly what was singable and effective. There is even a certain consolation for ordinary mortals in the curious fact that the hymn-tunes which have stood up best in constant repetition have practically never been written by the 'big men' of music. Stainer, Goss, Barnby, Sullivan, Smart, Elvey, Hopkins, Wesley – yes, and even Dykes – had an astonishingly sure touch when it came to 'practical' hymn-tunes. They did have some very good successors – Stanford, Parry, Wood and Vaughan Williams, for instance – but relatively few, and it cannot be said that the twentieth century has been a particularly successful period for hymn-tunes. I am sorry to say that 'CH 3' seems to me to have an alarmingly high proportion of tunes by modern composers which are next door to unsingable. I particularly single out the contributions from Kenneth Leighton. Occasionally Leighton does write a reasonably attractive melody, but when this happens he is overcome with remorse and promptly adds a harmonic structure to obliterate this miscalculation. His finest hour is possibly exemplified at Hymn 672, when he carefully unsettles the singers by launching them into action with a C major chord planted spectacularly on a bass D (he is kind enough not to re-inflict this on them when he provides a verse to be sung in harmony; for this relief much thanks, but it is rather late). Rimmer at 576(ii) follows the Leighton practice of presenting us with what seems to be an exercise in modulation into unexpected keys; an ordinary hymn-tune simply does not have enough length to allow for this sort of thing, which might be tolerable in a fairly lengthy anthem. Martin Dalby at 149 is tarred with the same 'trendy' brush. It may, of course, be argued that inclusion of specimens of this school of composition would make the hymnary 'contemporary' or even 'relevant'. But realistically considered this is not a recommendation in a hymnary. The trends in relatively 'serious' music are nowadays moving almost as fast as they do in the 'pop' world, where a 'golden oldie' may be

possibly five years old. It has been calculated that the effective life of a hymnary is about thirty years (the Scottish Church had hymnaries published in 1870, 1899 and 1927), although the intervention of wars, etc., sometimes lengthened this interval. At least we may presume that a hymnary should hold out for at least that time. What is spikily modish in 1970 will in all probability be sadly *démodé* before 1990. Tunes like 'St. Gertrude', 'Eventide', 'Hollingside', 'Gerontius' and even 'Repton' were not notably *avant-garde* when they were written, but they are still very much in demand to-day because, not to put too fine a point on it, no satisfactory alternatives for the words with which they are so firmly associated have ever been produced. *Verb. sap.!*

I certainly welcome the generous inclusion of Anglican chant settings for psalms, etc., and should like to think that it may possibly induce more choirs and congregations to embark on their use, but I am not too optimistic. Again, the objection I raised with regard to included 'selections' from the metrical psalter obtains; the Scottish Prose Psalter of 1929 is an admirable compilation, and I fear that the competition from 'CH 3' may simply mean that it will go out of publication rather more speedily. Its sales have been pathetic enough.

It is now probably too late to make any effective protest against the stupid practice (far from purely Scottish) of dropping sung Amens after hymns. The argument that some hymns do not require it is extremely feeble; I should be very interested to see a list of all those hymns. Personally, I could not muster half a dozen from the whole book: the vast majority positively scream for it, and even 'CH 3' is forced to print some. I used to attend services in the Anglican Cathedral in St. John's, Newfoundland, even when I was not personally involved at the console; they used Amens to the hymns there until about the end of 1973, when it was decided to 'fall into line with modern practice' and omit them. At all services thereafter, I found that reaching the end of a hymn and then abruptly subsiding without an Amen gave me the same uncomfortable sensation as I should receive were I to be a passenger in a bus, the driver of which invariably drove at high speed and jammed on the brakes at every stop, instead of coming to a smooth, graduated halt. I have so far failed to discover exactly which panjandrum in the musical world issued this *ex cathedra* decree on Amens! Of course you may retort that if I happen to be a clergyman conducting regular services in one church I can order the Amens to be sung, even if they are not printed. Well, I always do.

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To the Editor

The review *Brief Comments on the Divine Service* 1972 (Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 14) asserts with pontifical certainty but un-pontifical fallibility: 'The general practice of opening the Service with a Metrical Psalm or a Hymn, retained in Order One, should be discouraged.' The reason given is that the Psalm was not part of the morning service properly so called but part of the Reader's Service. There is a specious correctness in this if one takes a short view of liturgical history. It must, however, be remembered that the Little Entry of the Bible is accompanied by Psalms in the Orthodox Liturgy. Duchesne (p. 190) insists that the Introit of the Roman Mass was at one time a Psalm for the entry of the Holy Book. The volume was carried in *Psallentibus clericis*. It would be good if we could find evidence that the entry of the Book, accompanied by praise, was one of the 'quaint customs' which shocked Queen Margaret in her ignorance of eastern ways. It is at any rate quite clear that this custom is a good old custom preserved in our Church. It is something that we probably owe to our Celtic and Eastern origins. It is older than Calvin's use.

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