Presbyterian Praise G D S Deans

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Graham Deans's book, which represent a very substantial amount of work, is a pleasure to handle. Its A4 ring-bound pages sit well at the piano or organ; the weight of the paper is good, though a non-shiny finish to the pages would have prevented light reflections from being troublesome; the texts are spaciously arranged to make for undemanding reading; and the music is clearly presented, well-spaced, easy to read, with the tune names and metres conveniently shown.

Commendable, too, is the effort that has been made to provide interest throughout the book. The richness of earlier great Scottish psalters is recalled as the 25 different metres are encountered - one psalter having as many as 32 metres - together with their specially-compiled doxologies where appropriate. And the inclusion of versions of certain great hymns, such as *Benedictus* and *Te Deum*, is a happy reminder that these early psalters also included a number of hymns. These 'family likenesses' with past psalters suggests that this book stands in a distinguished lineage; disappointingly, however, the promise of that lineage is not fulfilled.

In spite of the variety, and indeed wealth, of material, a sense of dissatisfaction prevails. It may well be true, as Deans suggests in his Foreword, that 'a great deal of its contents (*The Scottish Psalter* of 1650) sounds rather less than lyrical to contemporary worshippers', but this attempt at revision is not always the contemporary advance he hopes for. The 'Thou' form of addressing God is used in no fewer than 20 items, hymns as well as psalms, including Deans's own version of *Te Deum* [47] and his hymns for use after Holy Baptism [48] and for Advent [55]; and the upper-case 'Thou', with all the other appropriate pronouns for God similarly in upper-case, serve only to reinforce the old-fashioned feel of the book. There are even five texts which use 'ye' in addressing people in the plural! (see *O praise ye the Lord, all His saints* [43]). The texts themselves are peppered with inversions which would be quite at

home in the 1650 book (*In safety shall I wake and sleep/For God shall me sustain.* [3: 2]. *But know that for Himself alone/The Lord the good will choose;/And when I call upon His Name/My prayer He'll not refuse.* [4: 3]). The book opens with a version of Psalm 1, couched in a non-inclusive language which does nothing to achieve that contemporary colour which is part of the declared aim of the book.

Sometimes the language is infelicitous or simply obscure. What, for instance, are the *red-hot coals of broom* in verse 3 of no. 28? And, for all that it has four syllables and makes up the line, is *population* really the right word in the couplet in verse 2 of no. 34, *Now may* ***Israel's population****/Hope in God continually?* The last verse of no. 6 introduces a touch of bathos when it tells us, *And disreputable people/Seem to flourish everywhere;* and the second couplet in verse 2 of the same psalm is surely unsingable by any congregation, ancient or contemporary: *On the lips that vainly flatter/May the Lord in judgement rise;/****As for tongues made bold by boasting/God shall cut them down to size.*** Would it have been possible to find a happier way of speaking of God's choosing Jacob than *God* ***picks*** *Jacob as his own* [38:2]? Occasionally, echoes of earlier hymns may be heard. In verse 1 of no. 52, for instance, *Holy Spirit, ever-living,/Binding all the world in one* is more than reminiscent of Timothy Rees's *Holy Spirit, ever living;* and the lines from verse 2 of no. 54, *Although the news we bring/Seems quite beyond believing* are not a million miles from Percy Dearmer's *And though the news did seem/Too good for man's believing* in his *How great the harvest is.* It is not that these words and phrases, and others like them, are necessarily inept: it is that, individually and accumulatively, they stifle any enthusiasm for what is, after all, the writer's splendid intention of helping Christians everywhere to 'sing a new song to the Lord'.

The music in this book is also written by Graham Deans. He describes himself as being 'liturgically conservative' and his music is consistent with this image. But this music tends to re-affirm that kind of so-called Presbyterian music which many Presbyterians would be glad to leave behind (and in many case have left behind). However, Deans indicates that his music has met with a 'surprisingly positive reception' in his

own church, and it is clear that there and elsewhere there is a demand for his kind of music too.

The music consists of 53 hymn-type settings, mostly composed since 1994; and 13 by composers such as Bach, Beethoven, Stainer, not always, unfortunately, with their original harmony. The settings are for S.A.T.B., with a *faux-bourdon* for no. 5, *Fraserburgh,* and a descant for no. 44, *Merton*. The music is playable, though with some difficult keys, for example, B (5 sharps), C sharp (7 sharps).

Most of the music is set in either four crotchets, or four minims to the bar (the minim versions look rather dated today): a few tunes have three beats to the bar. Crotchets preponderate, with some quavers and a very few dotted rhythms. The resultant four-square style throughout the book is somewhat heavy and relentless. The melody range for each tune is usually an octave or less, and lies between middle C and the E a tenth above that. This combination of crotchet movement and modest range may make the music singable by congregations; but the melodies are not very memorable, travelling back and fore as they do without any obvious focal point or climax and with little sense of direction, as in *Auxilium in Augustiis*, no. 6 (i). The harmonies, too, tend to drift about, entering, leaving and re-entering the same key more than once within the piece, (see *Auxilium in Augustiis,* no. 6;); or taking up a new key and almost immediately quitting it again (as in no 51 *Noblehill* with three keys in the third line of the music). Several of the tunes are rather derivative (in *Glen Eldon*, no. 42, the end is like the end of *Theodora* ['Rest of the weary']; and in *Haylehead*, no. 54 (i), the end mirrors the (usually mis-sung) end of 'Jesus loves me'. The most musically interesting piece is *Fairmount*, no. 39 (ii), even though its tenor may be considered too high. *Kincardineshire*, no. 40, makes good use of an octave jump.

From a technical point of view, it is hard not to notice that there are some lapses in the chord grammar. For instance, it is better not to double the third of a chord. If, as occasionally happens, due to voice-leading, its use becomes unavoidable, then the two thirds should be in the outer parts of the chord, that is as far away from each other as possible, to

minimise the doubled effect; (see *St Cyrus*, no. 14, bar four, chord one, where it is incorrectly used). Another problem is that sometimes when one voice moves, the others fail to move with it, resulting in undesirable dissonances, as at no 43, *Methilhill*, where the alto needs to move too, or no. 45(i), *Exultet*, where alto and tenor need to move on *powers* in line one.

Choice of chord position is also important. For example in no. 50, line four at *all*, the chord should be in root position, because the E natural preceding it is functioning as a modulatory leading note, and hence needs to resolve upwards on to the new tonic. Sometimes there are problems with second inversion (six-four) chords, (chords which have the fifth of the root in the lowest part). These chords have their origins in counterpoint, the forerunner of harmony, where, because the interval of a fourth was regarded as a dissonance, and the sixth as only a partial consonance, a sixth chord with a fourth as its lowest interval was considered to be an unstable chord, requiring to be resolved in a particular way. The four forms of usage are cadential, non-cadential (appoggiatura), auxiliary and passing six-fours. No. 51, *Noblehill*, contains the word *endure*. To make the preceding passing six-four resolve correctly the bass note on *-dure* should be an A. In no. 40, *Kincardineshire*, in line two, beat three, the passing six-four chord is correct and works well. However, at the first syllable of *praises* in line three, the music would benefit from a six-four chord of A, (giving the C sharp to the altos instead of to the tenors), provided that the tenors were given an A instead of a D in the preceding chord. For the *es* of *praises*, the three lower notes of that six-four chord could be retained, but with the melody dropping to an F sharp; or the lower two notes could be retained, while the alto voice was given C sharp and D for *praises*. The bass line would be the better of rising instead of falling to an A at the end of that line. Mastering the four forms of six-four usage as well as all the other technicalities of chord grammar is not easy, but it does repay the effort.

Scotland has one of the largest heritages of traditional music in the Western World. There are at least 80,000 known fiddle tunes alone.

Pre- and immediately post-Reformation church music in Scotland, for example by Carver and Peebles, was rich and flowing, with vibrant harmonies and strong and varied rhythmical patterns. It seems a pity to perpetuate a conservatively retrograde style which is characteristic of 'Presbyterian music' at its most limited. Music needs to flow, to travel, to transmit energy if it is to be forward-looking, lyrical and memorable, and more representative of the age we now live in, and of the Church and the God we love and serve.

It is obvious that the cause of singing the Psalms is dear to Graham Deans, and he has made a brave attempt in this book to encourage others to join him in pursuit of that cause. But despite the breadth and range of the book, it seems likely that the opportunity to enrol new recruits has slipped through his grasp.

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