

## Church Music

*What is 'Church Music'?*

'Church Music' I shall take to mean musical settings of the Christian liturgy: the Eucharist, the Daily Offices, and occasional services such as weddings and funerals. This excludes other music performed in churches, such as most congregational 'hymns'.

At the heart of the Christian liturgy is the Eucharist, 'commonly called the Mass' (1549 *Book of Common Prayer*). In addition, the Divine Office of the clergy was normally sung from the earliest time, as were the prayers and readings at baptisms, funerals and weddings. In the Anglican Reformation these services were translated into English and substantially revised for the new Prayer Book. And in 1550 the composer John Merbecke was commissioned to write the *Booke of Common Praier Noted*, with simple, unison settings of all parts of the liturgy normally sung by church choirs.

What were those parts? In the Mass, the so-called 'Ordinary' – *Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*, and the 'Proper' – excerpts from Scripture appropriate to season and day (Introit, Gradual, Offertory, Communion). These were originally sung congregationally on simple, 'plainsong' tones. But by the 16<sup>th</sup> Century elaborate, polyphonic settings for professional choirs had become common. Thus in churches with many 'clerkes' (priests, deacons and subdeacons) to form a choir, the lay congregation was silent.

In addition to the Mass, every cleric was obliged to use the 'Divine Office'. This was a daily recitation of the psalms at certain times of the day such that the entire Psalter was read in one week, together with hymns, a canticle and scripture readings. When the new English services were compiled for Anglican use the Divine Office was drastically revised. The seven daily services were reduced to two: 'Morning Prayer' which combined Matins and Lauds (and thus included both the canticles *Te Deum* and *Benedictus*); and 'Evening Prayer' which combined Vespers or 'Evensong' and Compline, (which thus included both the canticles *Magnificat* and *Nunc Dimittis*).

Together with the Ordinary and Proper of the Mass, these when sung constituted 'Church Music' in England in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. After some ups and downs the Mass was stripped of its Proper, and the Ordinary revised to reposition the *Gloria* and omit the *Agnus*. The definitive recension of *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662) codified these revisions.

### *Why 'Church Music'?*

Music is the way humans worship their god. In the Eastern Orthodox churches every word of the Divine Liturgy is sung except the sermon. Every word of the Jewish synagogue liturgy is sung. Chanting of public prayers is widespread in almost all other religions, including Buddhism -- and even in Islam despite formal prohibition in the Koran. In the Western Church what used to be called 'Solemn High Mass' -- in which almost everything audible is sung -- was the definitive form of our liturgy before the second Vatican Council.

Our intellectual lives depend on words, which alone can express our ideas. But music, which has been called 'the language of the emotions', says more than words. It can reach out to express adoration and worship, love, joy and peace. *Messiah* and Bach's Mass in B minor tell Christians more about their God than all the sermons ever preached.

It is precisely this that the English Puritans, who had tried to seize control of the Church (1549-1660), denied. Their religion, like that of the Koran, was purely intellectual. The words of Holy Scripture, and the words of their own sermons, were all that mattered. Richard Hooker

(1554-1600), lastingly influential theorist of the Elizabethan *via media*, defended the Anglican liturgy and its ceremonial practices at length against the Puritan attack. In particular, he upheld the importance of music as against the Puritans' rationalistic emphasis on words alone. For English Church music entered a Golden Age in Hooker's time. Thomas Tallis, William Byrd, Orlando Gibbons, Thomas Tompkins and many others composed music for the Anglican Rite in the grand European polyphonic manner, still sung today.

But when the Puritans came to power during the Civil War (1642-49), they banned all singing save unaccompanied metrical psalms, disbanded cathedral choirs and smashed cathedral organs. During the dictatorship of Oliver Cromwell all Anglican services and even Christmas carols were forbidden. When Crown, Parliament and Church were restored in 1660 there was much popular rejoicing: and liturgical music came back in triumph.

#### *Centrality of Music in the Anglican tradition.*

Unlike every other Christian church, the Anglican churches have no doctrine of their own. We care very little for doctrine: which leads some Christians to burn other Christians alive, and divides the church into warring sects. The Anglican tradition is based on worship, which unites all Christians in the Body of the Risen Christ. And this means that music, which is the idiom of worship, is central in the Anglican religion.

But because the ancient establishment of cathedral choirs was preserved at the Reformation, and because most parishes had only two 'clerkes', Anglican music has two styles. In cathedrals -- in England, the USA and many other countries -- Matins and Evensong was and is sung every day, and the Eucharist every Sunday and Holy Day. In many parish churches however, the effects of Puritanism lasted until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Matins, Litany and Ante-Communion were read by the incumbent and his (lay) clerk, the sermon was prominent, and two metrical psalms sung by all before and after the service, was the only music.

The Eighteenth Century was a low point in Anglican history. Though daily cathedral music continued, the musicians and their compositions were of poor quality, and the clergy

uninterested. Meanwhile the Wesley brothers, seeking to revive Christian life among the poor, produced superbly singable words and music for their open-air revival meetings, many of which survive in modern collections of congregational 'hymns' (Greek *hymnos* -- a song of praise.) *Gloria in Excelsis* and *Te Deum* are true hymns; and from mediaeval times strophic, rhyming verse has been sung in church: as in *Veni Creator* at our Ordinations. But the Methodist mutation was a new thing, which has permanently affected Anglican (and now Roman Catholic) worship. Though as late as the Victorian era some incumbents refused to allow 'Methodistical songs' in their churches, they are now a regular part of sung services even in cathedrals.

The Victorian 'Oxford Movement' (1830-60) transformed parish church music in England. Until the 1840s, non-liturgical choirs of men and boys sat in a high gallery at the back of the church and sang some parts of the service. Within a generation these galleries were removed; and the choir, now vested in surplices, sat in the chancel as before the Reformation. Though few parish churches have choir schools or professional singers, these volunteer choirs often achieve very high performance standards. In the 1990s the men and boys of All Saints' Church Winnipeg sang Vaughan Williams's unaccompanied 12-part *Mass in G Minor* at the Ascension Day Eucharist.

Since the 1940s, the ban on female voices has gradually been lifted, and most parish church choirs today include women and girls. In some cathedrals separate girls' choirs now exist. And in many Canadian cathedrals without an endowed choir school, services are now expertly sung by amateur, adult mixed choirs, as in the USA and some other countries.

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