

The background of the cover is a deep blue with a complex, layered texture. It features faint, overlapping musical staves and scattered notes, some of which are highlighted with a lighter blue or white glow. The overall effect is artistic and thematic, suggesting a connection to music and church.

# JOYFUL NOISE?

the why, what and how  
of music in church

Tim Rishton

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Foreword by  
former Archbishop of Canterbury  
Most Revd Dr George Carey  
(Lord Carey of Clifton)

Illustrated by  
Bill Hindle

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JOYFUL NOISE?  
THE WHY, WHAT AND HOW OF MUSIC IN CHURCH  
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# Foreword

by former Archbishop of Canterbury  
Most Revd Dr George Carey  
(Lord Carey of Clifton)

Of all relationships within the church, that between incumbents and musicians seems to be the most delicate and problematic. Why should this be the case? How can music—one of God's great gifts—be a source of division and disagreement in Christian ministry?

In answer to this question, Dr Rishton looks closely at the different roles that music and the musician can play in the church and builds up a surprising picture of church music as a pastoral ministry. He charts some of the developments in different denominations that have led to the ambiguities of role that now result in difficult relationships. These principles find a practical expression in a detailed analysis of how the musician can inspire and communicate with a congregation.

However, this is not only a practical handbook for musicians: it is a challenge to us all to rethink our ideas about church music. It should be read not only by church organists and music group leaders but by clergy and church officials too because,

central to Dr. Rishton's vision, is that all those who have a leadership role in our churches will work together towards a common vision and purpose – the Kingdom of Christ.

George Carey  
December 2004



# Preface

What image does the term “music in church” conjure up?

- A person in a hat, playing an organ too slowly whilst the congregation tries to sing?
- A guitarist, singer and a drummer at the front of church?
- A world-famous choir broadcasting from a Cambridge chapel?

The problem with all these images is their superficiality. They say nothing about the music itself or about its purpose in a church, but focus purely on individual musicians and their performances.

What, then, if we consider:

- The cultural heritage of the church?
- The church’s role in contemporary artistic life?
- Great hymns and anthems?

These images are equally misleading. Although, like the types of performer listed above, they may accurately reflect an aspect of reality, they are all

concerned with external issues: with how the music of the church fits into and contributes to the principles and values of secular culture. Music, however, is not a decorative feature of a church service. It is not a commodity that we can import into the church and administer in appropriate doses. It is not a cultural tradition that the professional musician should be defending against those who would threaten it. Music is part of creation itself. As well as being heaven's language—a pure language without the restraints of words and grammar—it is both the people's expression of worship, praise and need and a pastoral response to these expressions. It is a form of building up and of outreach. It is a way of understanding and learning.

This book seeks to construct a vision of what church music can and should be, and to build systematically on this vision to determine what the church should do with (or sometimes to) its musicians. It looks at how we select music and assess its pastoral and theological impact. It looks at how we can apply these ideas in practice. When looking in detail at musical techniques the book focuses on instrumentalists as leaders—normally represented by the term “organist” even where the points made apply equally to music groups. The church choir—another significant and often-discussed aspect of contemporary

church music—is to be addressed in another book in this publisher's series and is therefore (with regret) disregarded in this one.

You, the reader, may be a church musician (organist or group leader) looking to develop or consolidate existing skills, you may be starting a certificate course in church music, or you may be a minister, ministerial student or church elder wishing to form a clearer and more informed opinion of church music and musicians.

I, the author, am aware that my own opinions and practices are apparent in what I have written. If you disagree with them or feel that they are unduly prescriptive, then the book has served its purpose of inviting questioning exploration. I have referred to musicians consistently as “he” and “him” not with sexist intent but in order to avoid cumbersome and artificial turns of phrase. Descriptions of “him”, of course, apply equally to “her”.

Many people have knowingly or unknowingly contributed to this book. My interest in this topic was awoken many years ago by Ian le Grice of the Temple Church in London—a teacher who conceals his most profound advice in seemingly throwaway comments that invite a lifetime's reflection. It has been developed by colleagues

and congregations in the assortment of churches in which I have served. Theologians and musicians who have helped me formulate these ideas have included Bjørn Rasmussen, Kjell Riise and Arne Dagsvik. Ingrid Melltorp, lecturer in church music in Sweden, helped me to track down the book by Hejschman (see bibliography). Alan Horsey (former Master of the Music at Bradford Cathedral) and my colleague, the organist and author Anthony Smith, both read my first draft and made helpful and encouraging suggestions. Ian Booth generously designed the cover. Bill Hindle's wonderful drawings provide more insights in a few pencil strokes than I can in many pages.

My wife, Tracy, has provided constant theological and practical insights as well as every conceivable kind of support.

# Chapter 1

## Church and music



Before we can examine our approach to church music, we must first ask why we should have it at all. Most churches hold the view that music has a significant and important function in the worship and life of the church, but it is rarely that we stop to attempt to define what this function is. Is music, in fact, “wallpaper” – a decorative feature that enhances our appreciation of the real substance of the worship and ministry of the

church? Is it the “warm-up” that puts us in the mood for worship? Is it a self-indulgent luxury – an artistic endeavour by which we surround ourselves with elegance and cultivated good taste? Is it a part of our cultural inheritance that is entrusted to us to preserve and protect? Is it a palatable substitute for spiritual engagement (“I would go out to proclaim the Gospel and feed the hungry, but we’ve got to get the Tallis right”)? In short, can we justify devoting time, effort and attention to music?

In order to properly answer this question, we must first understand what is church. Many people have a subconscious image of “church” as a building in which services are held with a priest and people. A moment’s reflection reminds us that the building is not really the point (“the church” in a community remains even if its building is destroyed): a church is a congregation, not a physical structure. Even this definition, however, may be missing the point because it implies a fixed membership meeting in a formalised way—an organisation rather than a purpose; a noun rather than a verb. Look at the centrality of the church to the ministry of Jesus. A pivotal event—possibly *the* pivotal event—of the

Gospel occurs at the point at which Jesus, having gathered and instructed his disciples, turns his face towards Jerusalem and sets in motion the great drama that is to culminate in his death and resurrection. This event was Peter's declaration of faith: "you are the Christ" and Jesus's reply: "on this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). The Greek word used here for church was *ἐκκλησία* (Latin, *ecclesia*). Whilst it is easy to overlay this word with our understanding of the word "ecclesiastical" and its associations with the church institution, *ἐκκλησία* simply meant a gathering or association. It could refer to a secular committee or simply to a crowd of people. In Jesus' description the term seems to imply something similar to "community of followers". Pentecost, the "baptism of the church", is no less charged with symbolic significance. The Holy Spirit enabled the Word of God to be understood in all languages – the exact antithesis of the events of Babel in which different languages had been introduced and which had led immediately to what we now term the "Old Covenant" in which only one group (the tribe of Abram) could understand the Word of God and therefore became the exclusive chosen people. So when Jesus tells his followers to go and "make disciples

of all nations" (Matthew 28:19), this most radical and breathtakingly un-Jewish concept proclaims his Resurrection to be the start of a new epoch with new rules, rolling back the whole history of the world since Adam: the dawning of the new age, the first act of new creation which foreshadows the resurrection of all believers and all creation renewed. The church of Jesus has a function in this post-Resurrection age: the task of creative participation in the outworking of God's plan (described theologically as "collaborative eschatology"). The church, in short, was not designed simply to sit back worshipfully and enjoy good services, but to engage creatively with society at all levels, socially, theologically, liturgically and artistically.

This is not the place to attempt a comprehensive theological definition of "church" (for which we can refer to the many attempts since the Council of Nicea), but if we accept the above argument that from its inception the church is intended to be a dynamic and creative body, can we then attribute to music any meaningful role? Biblical references to music abound and are too numerous and varied even to summarise properly here. Great events are marked by singing, from the

creation, when “the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:7) to the end of time, when “those who have the victory ... having harps of God ... sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb” (Revelation 15:2-3). Of course, the use of music in these contexts does not in itself constitute a rationale for using music in church. The Bible also refers to music being used for evil purposes from the earliest times, such as when Israel sang worship songs to idols whilst Moses was receiving the Commandments (Exodus 32:18) to the last days, when the sound of Babylon’s “harpists, musicians, flutists, and trumpeters shall not be heard in you anymore” (Revelation 18:22).<sup>1</sup>

What we do see in the Bible is the whole of creation (including all created beings) pouring out endless praise to the Creator. This takes place not just at the beginning and end of earthly time but eternally. Through worship the church on earth can transcend temporal limitations and become one with this endless praise; not escaping earth to participate in something reserved for a

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation is full of songs: see also 5:9-13, 7:12, 11:15, 1:17-18, 12:10-12, 15:3-4, 19:1-2, 19:6-8.

distant heaven but, as we have seen, as part of the essential reality and eternal purpose of creation itself.

The Bible describes the systematic and structured use of music in formal corporate and individual worship both in the Old Testament ordinances, where singers were “free from other duties; for they were employed in that work day and night” (1 Chronicles 9:33) and in the New Testament, where Paul writes: “be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” (Ephesians 5:18-19). The difference between Paul’s psalms, hymns and spiritual songs is unclear (as it is in the identical list in Colossians 3:16), but the coupling of these terms was not new (all three Greek terms are found, for instance, in the opening verse of Psalm 66). *Psalmos* can denote the OT book of Psalms<sup>2</sup> (the staple ingredient of synagogue worship) or more generally a hymn of praise.<sup>3</sup> *Hymnos* implies a song of praise to God and is a term

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Luke 20:42, Luke 24:44, Acts 1:20, Acts 13:33. For further information on this and notes 3, 4 and 5 see *NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words*

<sup>3</sup> As in 1 Cor 14:15 and 14:26, Romans 15:9; James 5:13

ubiquitous in the OT but less common in the NT.<sup>4</sup> Spiritual songs (*ōdē*) was a common OT term for a joyous song or a lament.<sup>5</sup> Although, as John Smith points out, “there is the strong likelihood that ... some of the nuances of meaning have been lost”,<sup>6</sup> the use of the three terms together is probably simply cumulative: it strengthens the implication that the spiritual life should be full of “singing and making melody ... to the Lord”. This Ephesians passage is unusual in attributing to music a creedal or pastoral role (“... to one another”) as well as the biblically more-usual role of expressing praise and worship to God. Jesus and his disciples celebrated Passover; “And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (Matthew 26:30). Paul and Silas spent time in jail “praying and singing hymns to God” (Acts 16:25).

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<sup>4</sup> *Hymnos* is found only in the Ephesians and Colossians passages referred to above; *hymneō* in Matt 26:30, Mark 14:26, Acts 16:25, Hebrews 2:12.

<sup>5</sup> In the NT the term is found in the Ephesians and Colossians passages referred to above and eight times in Revelation including the “song of Moses” in Revelation 15:2-3 referred to above.

<sup>6</sup> “Concordances for Singing-terms”, p.2

The Psalms, being particularly concerned with worship, command us to “sing to the Lord a new song! Sing to the Lord, all the earth” (Ps 96:1) and to “break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises. Sing to the Lord with the harp, With the harp and the sound of a psalm” (Ps 98:4-5). Conversely, being cut off from God is marked by the absence of music: “By the rivers of Babylon ... we hung our harps upon the willows ... How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?” (Ps 137:1-4). All these and other passages clearly portray music as a dynamic and integral part of worship—never as background decoration whilst worship is in progress.<sup>7</sup>

From an early stage, two strands of thought have developed in the Christian church. In one, music was important both as an indispensable expression of human praise and as a way for humans to be one with the angels and created universe in the everlasting song of praise. The other regarded music as an art to be carried out by a particular group for the edification of a passive congregation. This idea, which reached

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<sup>7</sup> “Liturgy, including liturgical singing, involved the entire congregation of the early church” (*NIV Theological Dictionary* p. 1380).

its apogee in the polyphonic masses of the Renaissance, seems to date back at least as far as the fourth century, the period in which the church was defining what it was and what it believed, when the Council of Laodicea appears to effectively prohibit the congregational practice of music by reserving liturgical singing for designated experts.<sup>8</sup>

On the face of it, the latter concept lacks an obvious biblical justification. After all, if music reflects and conveys the divine order; if it is all creation's natural and eternal response to God's glory, can it be right to cultivate and set aside a particular style of "church" music with a specialised manner of professional performance and to hold this up as an exclusive liturgical model? Attempting to construct a biblical "theology" of church music is, however, a difficult and dubious pastime because other than a few general instructions ("Sing a new song to the Lord, all you people") biblical references to

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<sup>8</sup> CANON XV. No others shall sing in the Church, save only the canonical singers, who go up into the ambo and sing from a book. (It is however possible that this Canon refers to the singing of the liturgy rather than to congregational hymn singing).

liturgical music are circumstantial and obviously relate to a particular context. Two arguments are often advanced in favour of specialist performance. Firstly, music is an “offering” of God’s gifts: we use craftsmen to produce the best human response to God’s love. Secondly, music is “holy space”: we need help to withdraw from the particular pressures of our society in order to re-focus on God.

The Reformed Church has promoted music as a medium of personal and corporate praise as well as stressing the effects of music in mutual encouragement (as implied by Ephesians 5:18-19 cited above) and its qualities as a tool for teaching and encouraging the people. The latter can be in the form of catechism (such as the hymns of the great Norwegian writer Petter Dass) or of preaching (as we see in some of Wesley’s great hymns). The late-18th and 19th-century tendency to professionalise music making in general was reflected in an increasing dichotomy between a homespun congregational singing in rural churches and a specialised church music for which the people were observers rather than participants.

In the present day we still see a division between the concept of a “professional” church music that is performed on behalf of a passive congregation (whose worship is aided by the beauty of the music to which they listen) and a “corporate” church music in which the congregation is itself helped and enabled to worship through participating in music. The “professional” church music is almost always characterised by the performance of composed music; often “classics” from another era.<sup>9</sup> That this gives a church service a strong framework of historical culture is by no means universally regarded as a problem. Pete Ward, in his hard-hitting criticism of the Church’s relationship with contemporary life, characteristically expresses this at its most extreme:<sup>10</sup>

Far from being a turn-off, for some people the weekly visit to church is attractive precisely because it offers a slice of living history. Worship has become part of the culture industry ... The music of the church choir and the organ has an aesthetic of high art. For those attending worship, keeping the heritage site going is much like any other historical preservation society ... The emphasis lies upon

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<sup>9</sup> A few churches employ professional composer-musicians developing contemporary styles.

<sup>10</sup> *Liquid Church*, p.27

preserving for future generations that with which we have been entrusted.

At the risk of generalisation we can classify present-day church music both in terms of ethos (performance and participation) and of style (traditional and contemporary). This sort of classification gives us four different categories:

- Performing classic traditional music (with a congregation that perhaps joins in unobtrusively – the “King’s College, Cambridge” model)
- Congregational singing of traditional hymns (the conservative parish church model)
- Worship band performing Christian rock (with a congregation keeping up – the “Spring Harvest” worship model)
- Congregational singing of modern worship songs (the community church model).

Within these four models there is a great diversity of sub-styles, but each relates to and more or less successfully meets the needs of its own situation and cultural context.

The division of ethos (performance versus participation) can to a large extent both be delineated and ultimately resolved in terms of excellence. There are two opposing views of excellence in church music.

The one view (which supports the “participational” ethos) holds that the root of the Christian faith is that God has come and sought us out, as we are. Worship is our response to this, and it is neither necessary nor proper that we should compete with each other to stage impressive performances that demonstrate our own accomplishments. Focussing on perfection disenfranchises people: if only the trained choir can sing “properly” then the congregation cannot join in, thus damaging the fellowship of the church. Focussing on technical accomplishment encourages a liturgical professionalism that can easily turn to Pharisee-like smugness. We should focus on God (the object of our worship), not on musical technique (the means of our worship). Our worship should be enabled by the Spirit rather than by skill.

The other view (which supports the “performance” ethos) emphasises that music is

part of our response to God's love. It is a "sacrifice" – something we offer to God – and as such should be the best we can offer. No effort should be spared; nothing slovenly or careless should be offered, just as only the finest materials were used to build the Temple. The alternative to seeking excellence is carelessness and lack of respect. Paul points out that: "there are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men ... All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines ... As it is, there are many parts, but one body." (1 Corinthians 12: 4-20). Paul is referring here to spiritual gifts, but there is precedent, at least in the Old Testament, for regarding artistic talent as a gift with spiritual implications. The first person mentioned in the Bible as being filled with the Holy Spirit was an artist, to whom was entrusted the expression of God in the Temple: "See, I have chosen Bezalel ... and I have filled him with the Spirit of God ... to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze" (Exodus 31:2-4). As such, it is right that those who have a musical gift should be given the role of exercising it within the

Church. Music and art are sources of inspiration that point towards God.

Both of these views contain elements of truth, but between the two lies a bottomless chasm into which falls a great deal of church music. Some churches with few musical resources strive to “improve” their music by hopelessly emulating the style of the cathedral,<sup>11</sup> while some other churches, deliberately turning their back on any form of musical preparation in order to “give free rein to the Spirit”, produce music so disorganised that it distracts people from their worship.<sup>12</sup>

How, then, can we reconcile excellence with inclusiveness? If we are to regard music as a sacrificial offering, let us consider Jesus’ teaching about offering.

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<sup>11</sup> A tendency that is by no means new: John Chetham’s *Book of Psalmody*, published in Sheffield in 1718, was intended, according to its author’s preface, “to better and improve this excellent and useful Part of our Service, to keep up an Uniformity in our Parish Churches, and bring them as much as may be, to imitate their Mother Churches the Cathedrals”.

<sup>12</sup> This remark is not a criticism of exercising spiritual gifts (such as improvising and singing in tongues) but of inadequate preparation for congregational hymn singing.

The teaching about the widow's mite (Mark 12:42) is a good starting point. The widow's offering was small and she may have regarded it as hardly worth bringing. It was, however, important to God: He was interested in it and valued it, not for its material worth but because it was whole-hearted. Similarly, the rich were criticised not for their wealth but for their relative lack of commitment. God is pleased when all our skill, care, effort and resources are put into church music, whatever the quantifiable result. We should never feel that the little we can do (whether in the field of church music or any else) is unimportant.

The latter point is unpacked further in another teaching: the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). Three servants were given unequal resources to look after. Two of the servants used these resources ("talents") to the best of their ability and developed what they were given. The results, of course, were unequal and from the perspective of human judgement the servant who had the most seems to have achieved the most glorious result, but both servants received exactly the same accolade: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things;

I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (verse 21). The third servant used no imagination and took no risks. He may have felt that the resources he was given were so derisory that to attempt to develop them invited failure and ridicule, but his inaction judged him as a "worthless servant".

When Paul writes that we should present ourselves as "a living sacrifice ... well pleasing to God" (Romans 12:1) he reminds us that in dedicating our God-given gifts to his praise, we are able to please him. We do not earn God's favour by our own skill in singing choruses, playing instruments or by the regularity with which we attend services, but like the good servants we can and must please him in our glad, obedient and wholehearted response to his grace.

Let us transfer the image of these three servants into a similar vision of three churches with unequal resources in terms of church musicians, congregational talent, instruments and other factors. The church with the greatest resources is able to use its music in a way that is fulfilling to the congregation, glorifies God and is a strong missionary statement to those outside the church.

The church with fewer resources can nevertheless work to the full potential of what it has been given and thereby please God as much as the first church by its wholehearted commitment. The only church to be condemned is the one that feels it has too little to be bothered with. God's judgement on churches is measured in terms of input rather than output.

Servants are people who have been appointed to do a job. In Christian circles we talk about a "calling" (or, if we are charismatic, an "anointing") to a particular ministry. Those who are called to a particular ministry may carry it out with small resources. Consider Jonah, a poorly-equipped prophet who with the greatest reluctance and bad grace stomped into the city of Ninevah, said just eight not very well-chosen words ("Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned" —Jonah 3:4) and stomped off again. As a result of this, an entire city was saved—not by the professionalism of one man, but by his (reluctant) obedience.

Viewed in this way, the pursuit of excellence in service is neither competitive nor individualistic. It does not stage a performance designed to

impress, but seeks rather to enable worship. As we see in chapters 7-9 of this book, worship can be disenabled by ambiguity, hesitancy, inadequate preparation or stylistic inappropriateness in the music. Excellence is contextual, not empirical.

A God-focus rather than performance-focus does not mean, for instance, that a poor church choir or music group should be tolerated out of “charity” for those who sing in it. On the contrary, the poor group may be distracting from the focus of worship by drawing attention to its own inadequacy. It may be appropriate to recruit new members or a new leader, or even to disband the group. Excellence can demand tough decisions; motive is the touchstone.

The second division to which we referred earlier is of style (traditional versus contemporary). What is the “right” sort of music? An old evangelical friend and colleague in Wales who I respect very greatly told me years ago that all rock music was satanic, that drums and rhythmic music were unspiritual. I also know some evangelical, mildly charismatic, theologians who would argue that the kind of church music

exemplified by *Hymns Ancient and Modern* is killing the church; that music must be in a modern rhythmic idiom if it is to reach hearts and minds in a modern world. There is some truth in both views, but both seem equally wrong.

Music is a language. Language is about two or more people communicating on the basis of a shared understanding. Understanding is not simply a matter of knowing what the words mean. In most countries, the words “seventeenth of May” mean no more than the day after the sixteenth of May. In Norway, however, merely mentioning the date summons a shared understanding and image of parades and church services, of party food, the year’s first ice cream, brass bands and community games. The seventeenth of May is Independence Day and it is celebrated in style. Language presupposes a common understanding: that its sounds and symbols appeal to a shared cultural and emotional experience. The crisis in the Tower of Babel narrative in Genesis 11 came when people stopped “speaking the same language” and therefore became split up, tribalised, ending God’s direct relationship with all people that characterised Genesis 1-11. The modern phrase:

“we just don’t speak the same language”, refers not to linguistics but to a far more fundamental lack of communication.

If we are to regard music (church music in particular) as a language then it has to operate within a framework of common experience. Naturally, that does not mean that everyone has to like exactly the same pieces of music. Music, in short, has to connect with people. Music communicates our innermost thoughts and feelings to God and to each other, and can communicate God’s meaning to us. Music in church should not be concerned with promoting or defending one particular artistic style or tradition. Everyone should be able to worship God in their own language; or, to put it another way, any church should be a place where its members will be able to recognise Christ’s call through the words and the patterns and styles of worship. Of course there is a danger in rooting our worship so firmly in our own interests and tastes that it merely confirms for us what we already are and shows us nothing of God’s greatness, but unless the language of worship is one with which we can interact then it will not be the basis of any kind of communication.

The well-known command, “sing a new song unto the Lord” invites the question, “why new songs?” Are new songs required in order to be fashionable, to prevent boredom or to ensure constant improvement? Leaving aside implications of improvisation, the point is surely that a song has to be new in order to communicate fully with people in its time. Perhaps it could be re-phrased as “sing a relevant song unto the Lord!”

A century and more ago, Christian missionaries travelled in obedience and faith to Africa. Their work was blessed and many of their achievements wonderful. But in one respect they really failed, which was in forcing the natives into a Western cultural strait jacket—not just in terms of clothing but also liturgically and musically, making them sing hymns in a musical idiom that meant absolutely nothing to them. This has left a legacy of confusion and resentment that still echoes.

The angels in John’s Revelation play harps, not because they are Welsh angels but because music is in a sense the very language of heaven itself. One of our great privileges is to be able to speak

and understand that language, and use it both to hear and express spiritual truths where words can not. Music transcends the limitations of earthly grammar and human emotion in a wonderful way.

If, then, music in worship is neither decorative “wallpaper” nor self-seeking performance, what role can it play in the church? Part of the difficulty in answering this question is the dichotomy between music as expression and music as tool. In the former, God is the audience; the congregation is both performer and instrument and the church musician is the enabler who unifies the congregation in the common purpose of expressing worship, hope and petition to God. Where music is a tool it is addressed to people and serves both a pastoral, missionary and theological function. Pastoral because, as we see in Chapters 4 and 5, the choice of music in services and funerals is a matter not so much of aesthetics as of pastoral response to the needs and preconceptions of the congregation. Music can also be a source of inspiration or an agent of liberation from the 21st-century requirement that everything can be logically expressed and explained. It can be a way of capturing the

attention of small children, for whom a homily may be meaningless, or of re-kindling awareness among age-related dementia patients for whom a long-remembered hymn tune evokes years of faith. Missionary because, as we see in Chapter 6 (Concerts) and elsewhere, it can be a means of outreach. Theological because, as we see in Chapter 8, the musician's primary function towards the congregation in relation to hymns is not one of playing notes but of communicating the theological insights of texts. It is a means of communicating teaching, comfort or joy to people. Some authors argue that sacred music is also sacramental in nature,<sup>13</sup> though this idea can be seen as blurring the definitions of sacramental and symbolic. Finally, music is a form of pilgrimage. The command to "sing a new song to the Lord" is not only one of the few biblical imperatives concerned with liturgy but also reminds us that while the Word is constant, our response to it must reflect who we are now, in our generation. As we move through life, as our ideas and society around us change, so too will the expression of our relationship with God change. Music moves with us in that pilgrimage.

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<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Begbie, "Music, mystery and sacrament"

Music is an active medium. When David plays the harp to help heal Saul he is not providing waiting-room muzak: he is articulating God's healing in a way that will reach Saul. It is not enough for us to say: "church music is something we have always done, so we must keep doing it better". We need a sense of purpose and expectation—and that requires a prophetic discernment of how, when and in what way music can be active at this very interface between God and people.

## Chapter 2

### Church and musician



In the previous chapter we concluded that music has a variety of real and active functions within the dynamic and purposeful body of the Christian church. If this is the case—if music is not merely to be part of the church's decoration but is to articulate God's message as distinctively and centrally as, for instance, preaching—then the task of identifying and presenting this message is one that demands a spiritual engagement that can

be termed “prophetic” — that is to say, discerning and communicating the mind and will of God. Who can be this prophet? Is it to be someone who is fluent in the language of music (a musician) or someone who is appointed to have spiritual authority (a priest)? Are church musicians necessary or desirable at all? Put in more everyday terms, who is responsible in an “average” parish or church for determining the pastoral and theological impact of music? The question is not a hypothetical one: it is the root of tension and conflict in many churches.

We have already seen that constructing a systematic biblical theology of church music is not a fruitful exercise. That Old Testament ordinances defined the work of the Temple musician as a full-time occupation (1 Chronicles 9:33) is not in itself an adequate justification for the 21st-century Christian church to do likewise. More interesting is that music was in the forefront of both physical and spiritual warfare (elements that sometimes seem synonymous in the Old Testament). Trumpets contributed to demolishing the walls at Jericho (Joshua 6). Singers were deployed before battle (2 Chronicles 20). Military bands are still a feature of army life, but the

modern church musician is not always seen as central to the church's spiritual warfare. What has led to this reduced role, and does it imply that musicians are unnecessary in today's church?

Music was a central element in the worship of the medieval church. It consisted of two distinct strands. Fundamental to medieval sacred music was singing. The singing was directed by the Cantor (or equivalent), who in the context of a European cathedral had the status of a senior canon and member of the Chapter. In so far as organs were used at all, their function was unclear. The celebrated organs in Benedictine monasteries may have been there as much to celebrate and lay Christian claim to the marvels of modern technology as to make music—and such music as was made may, like church bells, have had the function of “joyful noise” rather than congregational leadership.

Although organ music developed further during the later middle ages, its use seems to have remained separate from the singing and the organist had a soloistic rather than ministerial role. In some large towns, playing the church organ was a part of the civic musician's role. Not

until sometime after the Reformation do we find widespread evidence of the organ being used to accompany hymn singing. There was, in other words, a clear division between what may be termed the “Cantor” — an ordained liturgist/theologian who was also a musician — and the “Organist” — a professional musician who performed in church. This differentiated function of Cantor and Organist has remained in various guises to the present day. In European cathedrals from the Middle Ages to the Reformation the liturgical-theological musician was often styled “Precentor” — a term still in use in some churches. This post — in many medieval foundations the most important officer of the cathedral after the Dean — entailed the practical leadership of music and liturgy. The post of Precentor is still a feature of Church of England cathedrals but the increasing professionalism and full-time liturgical commitment of the cathedral organist or Director of Music sits uncomfortably with the traditional “Cantor — Organist” model. In other churches the role of “precentor” has largely been absorbed into the function of the minister or priest who usually has no training in this area and often feels ill-equipped to make judgements on it. This lack of clarity heightens the tension between music and

theology and serves a view of the musician as a secular outsider who is attempting to encroach on ministerial prerogative.

The relationship between clergy and musician is often described as delicate, cautious or downright confrontational. This is not a sign of Christian ministry properly exercised by either party. Conflict between pastoral ministers and musicians is usually rooted in a lack of understanding and appreciation of each other's role and skills. Much of this misunderstanding revolves around the relationship between the pastoral/ministerial cantor-theologian and the musical/professional organist-performer and is based on incorrect and often unvoiced assumptions about each other's understanding and intentions. The musician assumes that the minister is anxious to maintain control over all aspects of church life and that the minister has no understanding of the way that music helps a congregation relate to words and concepts. For this reason the musician does not attempt to discuss long-term strategies but merely sulks quietly because the minister does not invite the musician's opinions. The minister assumes (indeed, may even have been taught at

theological college) that the musician is only interested in music performance and would not be competent to consider the theological or pastoral implications of it. The minister does not air this view because it would seem confrontational but instead worries about how to keep the musician out of the way. Both parties try to put up with the situation in order to maintain a fragile and uneasy relationship, until harboured resentment eventually erupts into conflict.

It is often argued that ministers must control worship—that for the clergy to relinquish the detailed control of hymns and music would mean that this would cease to be under the guidance of the church's spiritual leaders. A church needs spiritual leadership. If an aspect of church life—music, youth work, finance or whatever—moves out of the church's spiritual control to operate an independent agenda, it ceases to serve the church and ultimately will damage the church's integrity. The argument is, however, flawed for two reasons. Firstly, it presupposes that the musician is purely a performer who has no independent interest, expertise nor calling in the pastoral, spiritual or theological aspects of music. In some

churches, sadly, this is an accurate assessment. The ideal situation, however, is encapsulated by the fitting if rather generalised term “ministry team” in which the spiritual leadership of the church is exercised corporately (under the overall direction of the pastor) by those with the appropriate gifts. In order to enable church music to fulfil the roles outlined in Chapter 1, the church musician should have an expertise in the language of church music and its pastoral, theological and liturgical role that far outweighs that of the clergy, and should have a spiritual commitment to match. Secondly, the pastor is not necessarily the best person to audit the church accounts or to plan the route for the youth club trip, any more than the pastor should be responsible for the detailed implementation of the church’s vision for music. This should be delegated to a musician who is under the church’s authority where the musician is patently best able to carry out the task.

Many conflicts will be avoided, and the ministry of the church will be greatly improved, if musician and minister are open with each other about their strengths, weaknesses and their thoughts about music’s possible role in the life of

the church. The musician or music-group leaders should attend the pastoral team meeting; if there is no such meeting, the musician and the minister should regularly meet to pray together and to discuss strategies. Hymns and songs should be chosen together (even though this may take longer and in the short term show no visible gain), with the minister explaining the theological content of the service, the minister and musician together finding possible hymns, and the musician explaining the musical implications of the choice. If both respect the other's expertise they will feel mutually affirmed and able to discuss each other's ministry without feeling threatened.

A good relationship between pastor and musician will be of limited use unless the musician also enjoys a good relationship with the congregation. There are two main aspects to this relationship.

The musician must be a part of the congregation—something that traditionally seems particularly difficult for organists. The organist who regards himself as a defender of the music and its instruments against the congregation has no part in the church and should be somewhere

else. The organist's function is to unify and enable the congregation, not to be a dictator. This presupposes an understanding of the congregation and a broad sympathy for its theological and stylistic identity. On a practical level, the organist should spend time talking with members of the congregation, for instance during coffee after a service or at church events that do not require music. Children who show an interest in the organ should be encouraged rather than discouraged, and should be allowed to try the instrument: it is from such small experiences that a future interest in church music or some other ministry may grow. Anyone interested in learning the organ should be given every encouragement and opportunity, including readily-available practice facilities. The church whose organist so jealously guards "his" instrument that he does not allow even his assistant organist (let alone the minister) access to it except by special arrangement should have dismissed its organist long ago.

The musician must communicate with the congregation and church council. If the congregation and the musician are not aware of and in sympathy with each other's aspirations,

vision and plans, neither will feel fulfilled by the other and the work of the church will not be as effective as it should. This means that the musician must be open to ideas whether channelled formally through the church council or committees or expressed in popular opinion. The musician should also ensure that the church council is given regular and clear information about music and opportunities to discuss it. Keeping music on the agenda in this way will strengthen people's understanding of its function and possibilities, and will improve the church's support for and appreciation of the work of the musician. Even in a secular context it is wise for an employee to ensure that his employer knows and understands the good work he is doing: in a church where all the members should be parts of a well-functioning body this is doubly important.

Although the churches of many Christian denominations are convinced of the value of music as an adjunct to services (without necessarily having considered its broader perspective) there is in many places a profound ambiguity about the role of the musician. A good example of this is the Anglican Church, in which the concept of music ministry has become largely

alien and the church (as opposed to cathedral) musician is a peripheral figure. Anglican ministry was recently defined as “the administration of the sacraments, pastoral care, teaching and preaching”, thereby excluding both outreach and worship from the formal ministry of the Church.<sup>14</sup> It is thus natural that music is regarded as “wallpaper” – something that beautifies the church and helps set the scene. This very Anglican view of the function of church music was outlined in the 1696 sermon to which we refer in Chapter 4 (pages 79-80), as to hide or cover over “little whispering Disturbances, through the Levity of some People, ... and the nauseous Rawkings, and unnecessary Coughing and Spitting, which are made by the People” .<sup>15</sup>

Section E of the “Canons” (rules) of the Church of England deals in turn with each of “the lay officers of the church”: sidesmen, church wardens, parish clerks, readers and lay workers. Musicians are not mentioned. The only mention

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<sup>14</sup> In a pamphlet entitled *Guide to selection and training for ministry in the Church of England* (no publication details given).

<sup>15</sup> John Newte, *The Lawfulness and use of Organs* (pages not numbered).

of church music in the Canons occurs near the end of section B ("Divine Service and the administration of the sacraments") where after the lengthy B19 ("Of the bidding prayer which may be used by a preacher before his sermon") we find a short and almost entirely negative description "of the musicians and music of the Church" (B20). Its sole purpose appears to be to restrict the influence or professional judgement of musicians within the church. The regulation quite properly reinforces the minister's overall authority for the church, but in its anxiety to suppress "all irreverence" it overtly divests the musician of any authority whatever:

In all churches and chapels ... the functions of appointing any organist, choirmaster (by whatever name called) or director of music, and of terminating the appointment of any organist, choirmaster or director of music, shall be exercisable by the minister with the agreement of the parochial church council, except that if the archdeacon of the archdeaconry in which the parish is situated, in the case of termination of an appointment, considers that the circumstances are such that the requirement as to the agreement of the parochial church council should be dispensed with, the archdeacon may direct accordingly.

Where there is an organist, choirmaster or director of music the minister shall pay due heed to his advice and assistance

in the choosing of chants, hymns, anthems and other settings, and in the ordering of the music of the church; but at all times the final responsibility and decision in these matters rests with the minister.

It is the duty of the minister to ensure that only such chants, hymns, anthems and other settings are chosen as are appropriate, both the words and the music, to the solemn act of worship and prayer in the House of God as well as to the congregation assembled for that purpose; and to banish all irreverence in the practice and in the performance of the same.

The Church of England is not alone in this respect. The Canons of the American Episcopal Church (ECUSA) are broadly similar :

#### CANON 5: Of the Music of the Church

Clergy responsible for music used in the Congregation.

It shall be the duty of every Member of the Clergy to see that music is used as an offering for the glory of God and as a help to the people in their worship in accordance with the Book of Common Prayer and as authorized by the rubrics or by the General Convention of this Church. To this end the Member of the Clergy shall have final authority in the administration of matters pertaining to music. In fulfilling this responsibility the Member of the Clergy shall seek assistance from persons skilled in music. Together they shall see that music is appropriate to the context in which it is used.

Denying the church musician's liturgical, pastoral and musical expertise has two consequences. It not only deprives the church of an important resource, but it also discourages the musician from attempting to develop further skills by study or reflection. Why should a music leader or organist commit their time and energy to thought, reflection and prayer about the congregation's needs, or indeed embark on a costly and time-consuming course, if the church they serve has no interest in their doing so?

We can contrast this view of the church musician with that of the Lutheran Church, in which the church musician has specific areas of responsibility. For instance, each parish or formal parish cluster in the (Lutheran) Church of Norway is required to employ a professional church musician if one is available. This will often be a full-time post. To qualify for "professional" (or "Cantor") status, the musician is expected to have studied church music, practical theology and liturgy in a university or conservatoire for five years (up to Master's degree level) and on appointment is dedicated or inducted by the Bishop as a music minister—a form of "ordination" that firmly positions the music

minister as a full and equal member of the ministry team, with the option to wear a clerical collar but not usually to preach or administer sacraments. His or her role in the team ministry of the parish is wide ranging but includes primary responsibility for all development, outreach and decisions regarding music in the services and in the parish in general. A division of responsibility is specified, in which the parish priest has final authority in questions regarding texts, while the music minister has final authority in matters of music. Similar conditions apply in other Scandinavian and some other European Lutheran churches. This clear expectation that the music minister will be engaged with the primary mission of the parish stands in sharp contrast to the negative picture painted by the Anglican Church.

It can be useful to compare the situation of a church musician with that of a politician. Not because both arrive in their respective posts amidst the joy and optimism of the people they are to serve before rapidly descending into unpopularity and contempt, but because both are required to serve the common good to the best of their personal abilities.

At a political election, the people choose the person who most closely reflects their common aims. The elected officer is thus duty-bound to realise these aims. The way in which the politician goes about this, however, is not regulated in close detail by the people: he or she has received a mandate to take every-day decisions and actions on their behalf. While the politician may be acting within the general framework of the people's will, situations can easily arise in which decisions that are taken may be unpopular. The politician may decide that private cars are damaging the environment and that the common good requires economic and practical measures to reduce car use. Individuals may regard this as unfair to their private needs. The politician may gain an understanding that third-world debt is building up a pressure of resentment that one day may result in terrorism, and that the common good is served by debt relief even though the short-term cost of this will inconvenience and anger the electorate. In other words, although the politician's actions may anger individuals, the politician is nevertheless carrying out a general mandate and serving the best interests of the people. In the same way, the church musician is employed to work in

accordance with the congregation's general wishes and long-term interests. This means that the musician must respect the congregation's own identity and traditions, whilst acting in a way that will serve the congregation's long-term goals even if this implies some actions or decisions that are not universally popular.

It is important that the new organist of a church, in close consultation with church council and minister, establishes from the outset a series of clear aims for the work ahead. The church council and the minister should be asked to describe the strengths and weaknesses of the present state of music in the church. The answers will probably be revealing: most will describe the congregation's singing as "weak" or "slow". This will enable a discussion about how to improve the singing over a period. The musician should avoid the temptation to propose ready-made solutions based on experiences elsewhere or to give the impression that the congregation holds "wrong" views. As an individual, the church musician is serving God. As a church musician or worship leader, he is serving the congregation that has called him, and his own vision has therefore to be subservient to that of the church.

A congregation will naturally seek the comfortable and familiar, and the musician is certainly in a position to advise the congregation about ways in which the church's vision can be refined, but it is not the musician's job to shock the congregation or to try to "wake them up" on his own authority. If the musician's views are not compatible with the general aims of the congregation, then this is a clear indication that a professional association is inappropriate.

Changes that are to be made should not be carried out in a confrontational manner. Where changes are being made for a musical reason, the first priority is usually to systematise music on the basis of existing tradition, before commencing a programme to develop music in an appropriate direction over a long period, maintaining a progress plan that is frequently assessed against the agreed goals. Of course, changes are sometimes made as part of, or as a result of, a general renewal within the congregation, in which the whole pattern of worship, ministry and church life are transformed within a relatively short period. In such a case, changes in the music need to keep pace with changes in the

congregation generally, indeed, will often be in the forefront of this process.

In some countries and some denominations there are two opposing views of whether church musicians should be paid. On the one hand, the church musician is a member of the congregation who is serving God and the congregation in line with his gifts. While the organist by virtue of his uniquely personal role undoubtedly is committed to attend services whether or not he otherwise would have done so, other groups such as church wardens, elders and non-stipendiary ministers are not remunerated for their equally time-consuming commitment. On the other hand, the church musician not only attends services but provides for the church the same professional service from which he earns his living, and which, with preparation and administration time during the week, will usually reduce his capacity to carry out his other employment. In other words, unlike church wardens and the like, the church musician's activity is part (or even the entirety) of his general professional work. An architect, teacher or lawyer appointed to a post that entailed carrying out their professional work for a church for two days a week would expect to

be paid; and most people would recognise that failing to pay them for such a large commitment would impair their ability to carry out their other work.

The view that while voluntary work is done without payment, the contracted provision of a professional service must be salaried is broadly accepted. The canons of the Catholic Church direct that the professional service of church organists and choral directors should be rewarded by a living wage that will “supply their necessities and those of their family”. The Lutheran church regards church music as a salaried ministerial calling, and many American churches of various denominations provide at least a part-time salary for their church musicians.

If an organist or music director is to be paid at all, a proper rate of pay should be agreed. To pay less than a living wage discredits the church as an employer and undervalues the work of the musician, as well as creating the potential for discontent. A wise procedure is to agree a notional value for a full-time salary. This is often based on the salary that the diocese or regional church authority would pay a full-time

professional worker. Calculate how many hours a week the musician works on average, including services, finding and putting away music, practicing for services, choir practices if appropriate, meetings with the clergy, organising and presenting concerts, school and institutional visits and study (such as attending courses)—remembering to take account of the extra workload in connection with Christmas and Easter. Take the average weekly workload as a proportion of a “full-time” 40-hour week and apply this proportion to the salary. A musician who works 4 hours a week (i.e. one service and one choir practice only, including practice, preparation and extra services at busy periods) works 10% of “full time” and therefore should be paid 10% of a full-time salary. The musician who works 10 hours a week (one or two Sunday services, choir practice, concerts, team meeting and several services at festivals) should receive 25% of a full-time salary.

If the musician does not wish to receive this stipend from the church it should nevertheless be drawn and returned as a gift. Apart from any tax advantages the church may receive from this, it

will also ensure that music provision remains as a registered item on the church budget.

From the principles laid out so far in this chapter and in the rest of this book emerges a picture of the church musician as not only a skilled performer and expert liturgist but also a trained theologian with the pastoral skills and spiritual commitment to work tirelessly through the week for the good of the congregation. Such a church musician is one of a rare species, and the church that has one is uncommonly blessed. What, then, of the church musicians that actually occupy organ benches and such places in ordinary churches?

There is a substantial group of agnostic organists—musicians who do not share the faith of the church but who enjoy church music as an art form, appreciate the social contact and professional challenges of directing congregational or choral music, regard a church post as a “part-time job”, or who simply wish to contribute to society in a way that they see as worthwhile. These musicians provide the church with a greatly valued resource of professional expertise. Their role is exactly that of the

traditional organist-musician-performer. What such musicians cannot and would not profess to provide is a prayerful Christian ministry in music. Without spiritual anointing the result of their work seems limited to the level of their own professional input—but God, of course, is able to use all things.

Another large and valued group is often termed “reluctant organists”. A typical “reluctant organist” is a long-standing faithful member of the congregation, with a good knowledge of its traditions and practices, who at some point has been asked to play the organ “temporarily—just to tide us over”. The temporary arrangement gradually becomes permanent and the reluctant organist struggles valiantly on. The basic techniques outlined in chapters 7 and 8 of this book have never been explained, which leaves the reluctant organist unable to make full use of the abilities he has. The dedication of these organists, and the stress involved in doing such a difficult job without training, is seldom properly acknowledged. Yet without the “reluctant organists” many churches would have no music. They enrich the lives of our churches beyond measure. It is often not realised that their work

could be made much easier by a little tuition – not lessons in solo performance on the instrument but tuition in the unique demands of playing for a congregation. Tuition of this sort is available in many countries through short courses and one-day workshops run by national and local bodies.

For various reasons, church musicians often fail to make churches aware of their own need for support and sustaining. While clergy participate as a matter of course in study days and retreats, the musician's need for this kind of renewal, study and stimulus is often forgotten.

Like a church pastor, the musician needs both professional stimulus and spiritual care. Carrying out the same function, playing the same music for the same congregation in the same surroundings week after week, deadens the musician both to an impartial assessment of his own standards and to the constant renewal of resources, styles and ideas outside his own congregation. There is an increasing interest in medium-level church music courses, such as the one-year certificate courses (approximately first year of degree level) that are now available in some countries, as well as in summer schools. Some professional church

musicians feel that their training and abilities—their potential contribution to the congregation—are underemployed. This can lead to resentment and depression. Spiritually, an organist is in a uniquely precarious position. Mere attendance at most or all of the church's services does not promote the organist's spiritual welfare—indeed, may actively damage it. During the sung parts of the service, the organist concentrates on the various challenges of leading the music. During the readings, prayers and sermon the organist finds the correct music and text for the next hymn, prepares the tempo, looks over the introduction and chooses the registration—while preparing to respond to the appropriate cue. Not only does this mean that the organist misses out on the content of the service but—even more seriously—this process engenders a feeling of controlled professionalism. The organist's attitude to the service becomes that of an air-traffic controller with all aspects of the service neatly plotted on the radar screen but no personal sense of journeying. Years of this gives the organist a feeling of dispassionate superiority, of being in control, which is entirely at odds with the Christian model of coming humbly in worship and prayer before the Creator. This is a

problem that can also affect pastors, church wardens and others with a demanding fixed role. The organist, however, has a second problem— isolation. The instrument is usually situated either in a dark alcove, on a gallery or, at least, discreetly behind a pillar. As the organist is playing whilst the congregation arrives and, after the service, whilst they depart, and is seated at the console throughout the service, the sense of being apart from the congregation is magnified. In those churches where the organist is expected to play throughout communion, thus excluding the possibility of joining the congregation around the Lord's Table, the sense of exclusion is complete. The organist exercises control over something in which he may not participate. It is not surprising that so many organists withdraw from an active expression of faith within the congregation: the wonder is that any retain a living personal faith at all.

## Chapter 3

### Church and instrument



For as long as congregational singing has had instrumental accompaniment, the organ has reigned supreme as the favoured accompanying instrument. Even before this time, organs were reported with breathless awe as one of the wonders of the ancient Benedictine communities and of the early medieval cathedrals (although in neither instance were they used to accompany singing). The organ had a central place in the Reformation's development of congregational singing but was one of the foremost targets of the seventeenth-century Puritans in Britain. Ubiquitous yet controversial, it has commanded attention in the church for centuries.

Apart from its historical associations with the church, the organ is the only single instrument capable of filling a large building with polyphonic sound. None of these arguments, however, establishes conclusively the organ's right to its near monopoly as a church instrument. Indeed, the organ has a number of disadvantages as a church instrument:

Firstly, it is difficult to play. The universal shortage of organists means that organs are often

played by people who are poorly equipped to do so.

Secondly, it is expensive to buy (an expense that can be regarded as out of all proportion to the other needs of the church and of world society) and requires regular maintenance.

Thirdly, some people regard organs and organ music as old-fashioned and culturally irrelevant, reinforcing the prejudice that church is not relevant to modern society.

Fourthly, some church organists become arrogant custodians of “their” instrument, frightening away anyone who might be interested in it, locking out potential students and exercising a dictatorial control over the music—something that is clearly inappropriate in the Christian church.

It is therefore important that churches consider carefully and impartially all the available options—and be willing to make changes if this is appropriate. Owning a pipe organ, for instance, may be a great financial and practical asset, but it

can also be a liability if its presence prevents a church from pursuing its spiritual vision.

### **Music group**

A popular and culturally-relevant alternative to the organ is the music group. Although it is often regarded as a “modern” phenomenon, it is by no means a new idea but has historical roots right back to ancient Jewish worship—far older, in fact, than the organ. Psalm 150 exhorts us to:

Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,  
praise him with the harp and lyre,  
praise him with tambourine and dancing,  
praise him with the strings and flute,  
praise him with the clash of cymbals,  
praise him with resounding cymbals.

This kind of praise—whether or not it was regarded by the psalmist as a literal representation of Temple worship—would not be out of place in the most “modern” and charismatic of worship settings!

It is natural and good to draw upon and develop the musical talents within a congregation, at the same time giving individuals a sense of purpose

and involvement within the church family. We are encouraged to think of the church family as a body and to make full use of the potential of all its different parts (1 Corinthians 12).

A music group is generally regarded as a good medium for communication with the congregation. This is for a number of reasons:

- The direct visual communication between musicians and congregation enables the musicians to give clear and unambiguous leadership in a way that is more difficult for an “invisible” organist.
- The music group enjoys a popular contemporary cultural resonance that a soloist (particularly organist or robed choir) does not command.
- A skilful group can produce a sound that is both supportive and rhythmically vital.
- Many contemporary choruses and worship songs are conceived in terms of a music group and are best represented in this way.
- The members of a group can share experiences, encourage one another and pray together: something that will preserve

and develop the spirituality of both musicians and music.

This last point is perhaps the most important. The ultimate function of music is worship (even the various “practical” functions already mentioned lead ultimately to this goal). The function of musicians is the ministry of leading and enabling worship. This cannot be divorced from the spiritual life of the musicians. A ministry exercised without prayer is merely a personal exercise of skill, and however good that skill may be it will not ultimately bear fruit. As we saw in the previous chapter, the church musician is called or anointed to that role and will function properly in it only through seeing and carrying out God’s will for that congregation.

To achieve good results, a music group needs strong leadership, talented musicians and a very great deal of preparation time. Just as an organist needs to respond carefully and prayerfully to every detail of the text and music in hymns and songs, the group needs to examine and agree on all these issues: an even more time-consuming process than for one person. The need for unanimity makes it more difficult (but far from

impossible) for a group to respond to spontaneity—whether a last-minute change of hymn or correcting an acoustic imbalance caused by an unexpected number of people attending a service. A good group will develop strategies for communication with each other whilst playing, as well as developing an instinctive collaborative sense.

Although in many respects the music group does solve some of the problems associated with the pipe organ (such as inflexibility and the high cost of building and maintaining an instrument), the same three problems that are attributed to organists are present, albeit in different guise:

- It is difficult to provide good music and leadership; hard to find enough skilled people who will commit to so much preparation time on a regular basis.
- Music groups are associated with a popular, contemporary, but far from universal culture: many people feel uncomfortable with this type of music in church.
- Some music groups become exclusive and ostentatious. The group that makes a fuss

of setting up stands and instruments during the service, that says “hello” into the microphones in “holy” voices, that sings solo-type songs with unpredictable repeats that hinder the congregation from joining in,<sup>16</sup> is exercising a musical hegemony at least as pronounced as that of the traditional organist and choir.

## Piano

The piano has a number of advantages over the organ. It is a more common instrument outside the church and it is easier to find competent pianists than organists. It has a more immediate expressive range than the organ and is an instrument with which more people are familiar. It is also much less expensive to buy and maintain.

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<sup>16</sup> Modern worship songs are not necessarily seeking to make a logical and progressive “argument”. As John Leach observes, “To sing a song from start to finish as if it were a hymn is to miss the point” (*Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, 11). Nevertheless, if the music group imposes complicated systems of repeats that the congregation cannot predict (as opposed to sensing and supporting the congregation’s corporate needs and intentions at any one time), then the group is disenfranchising the congregation.

Many (though by no means all) modern worship songs are conceived in percussive terms, for which the piano is more appropriate. Even for other congregational music the piano offers crisp and clearly-defined signals.

The piano's main disadvantage is the slenderness of its tone. Because the notes decay from the moment they are sounded, it is only the percussive impact that is potentially audible. Having no sustaining power, the piano is not well suited to supporting congregational singing.

### **Electronic organ or keyboard**

The electronic organ or keyboard was briefly regarded as a universal substitute for the pipe organ in churches. It has a number of advantages and in certain circumstances can be an appropriate instrument to buy.

Taking a short-term (20-30 year) view, electronic instruments are cheaper to buy and maintain than traditional ones. For a church building that is likely to be closed down or demolished in a number of years, or that suffers so badly from damp or fungal attack that major renovation is needed before valuable equipment can

responsibly be stored there, an electronic instrument is the most sensible option. Some churches that presently have no instrument at all argue that the large outlay required for a new pipe organ cannot be justified by the current congregation in the light of other calls on the church's budget, and that the decision should therefore be deferred to the next generation of worshippers and an electronic substitute bought to "fill the gap". For all the protestations of classical organists, electronic organs are generally fairly reliable and often exceed their expected life-span of 20 years or so. Electronic MIDI keyboards have a different function from that of electronic organs, and may be an appropriate instrument to use in the context of a music group.

Long-term economy may at times favour the electronic organ, though this is by no means usually the case. Even the smallest mechanical-action pipe organ costs substantially more than the cheapest electronic organs but it will have a life expectancy at least ten times as long—several hundred years. The electric- or pneumatic-action pipe organs built in the first half of the 20th century had a life-span that was shortened by the technology used, and many congregations that

have experienced these instruments have forgotten that more traditional organs built in the preceding four centuries are still in use. An advanced electronic organ that offers so-called “realistic” sound and probably a range of stops and equipment far in excess of the church’s needs will often cost almost as much as the smallest and simplest pipe organ. While salesmen will allege that the electronic substitute “offers far more” its advantages are a chimera, its advanced facilities are unnecessary and its cost taken over a long period may be greater than for a simple pipe organ.

Two powerful arguments are often advanced against the use of electronic organs in churches.

Firstly, the sound is not satisfactory in the long term. Modern digital organs (unlike their electric predecessors) make an excellent first impression. Most people—organists and others—are very impressed by their first encounter with an advanced digitally-sampled instrument. The sound resembles a recording of a large pipe organ, and the instrument offers a tempting array of stops. Within a short time of use, however, the sound usually palls and becomes wearisome.

However good the digital sampling, most electronic instruments have a flat, unyielding and unnaturally-perfect sound that gradually begins to offend the ear. Even the most advanced instruments that now artificially introduce “imperfection” or variation in order to make the sound tolerable, cannot resolve the fact that the sound is created by loudspeakers and lacks the enduring freshness of an acoustic instrument. At its best, the electronic or digital organ is only a recording played through speakers. This is why it can be difficult to distinguish between a recording of a pipe organ and a recording of an electronic organ—both are recordings: the difference is far more pronounced in a “live” situation. The difficulty here is not whether or not the electronic organ sounds like a pipe organ (which in itself is not a legitimate argument) but whether or not the electronic sound will continue to be acceptable to the ear.

Secondly, churches traditionally choose “real” objects rather than imitations. Plastic flowers on the altar save mess and expense but they are regarded as inadequate and unworthy of God’s house. The short-term disposable imitation is out

of keeping with the biblical concept of using fine and enduring materials for the Temple.

Most churches that have bought electronic organs have done so not out of choice but because of the potential cost of restoring the over-large pipe organs that they have inherited from a period in which church organs were not well designed. In many cases this decision has been made on faulty premises and has been regretted later.

### **What shall we do with this organ?**

It's a familiar scenario. The church has a 2-manual pipe organ, planned and built with a hint of grandeur at a time when the church was growing and designed to be maintained by a flourishing congregation with deep pockets. Now one of the manuals hardly works at all and the other has some irritating faults. The regular organ tuner has suggested repairs, and his firm has sent in a quote for a complete restoration of the action, repairs to the chests and cleaning and overhaul of the rest of the organ. The quote is far beyond the church's means. A firm selling electronic organs has offered an electronic instrument twice the size of the existing organ for half the cost of the projected

repair. The logic seems inescapable. There can only be one solution. Or can there?

In this example the church's decision making is being driven purely by competing sales pitches representing materialistic or commercial interests. It is vital that the church itself, assisted by a genuinely-impartial advisor, sets out its own needs clearly and finds the solution that properly meets these needs. This is not necessarily a solution that commercial companies will offer unprompted.

In our hypothetical example, much has changed since the pipe organ was originally installed. The congregation—whilst still active—is rather smaller than its predecessor. The organist—whilst perfectly competent—no longer demands an instrument that can accompany a complicated choral repertoire every Sunday. The sense of civic pride that inspired the grandeur of the original instrument is now being channelled in different directions. Why, then, should the congregation require an electronic organ with twice as many stops as the existing pipe organ? This is sheer consumerism: a company trying to sell a “bigger and better” gadget. Why, in fact, does the whole

of the over-large pipe organ need to be restored? It would be possible to thoroughly repair the one manual that more-or-less works (replacing the action if necessary) while simply boarding up the other manual. The church would thus have a fully-functional and reliable one-manual organ that would fulfil all the needs of the present generation—while retaining a larger instrument that could be fully restored at some time in the future if the needs and finances of the congregation make this appropriate. All this can be achieved for less than the cost of the over-sophisticated electronic organ which in any case would have a much shorter lifespan than the more-suitable and less-expensive repaired pipe organ.

This is not always the correct solution, but this example illustrates how important it is to step back from a crisis and to construct individual solutions based on the real and projected needs of a congregation. The many available options can broadly be grouped into five categories:

1. Defer any decision by patching up minor faults as they arise and only using reliable parts of the organ. This option is

frustrating for all involved (especially the musicians) and tends to create a feeling within the congregation that music is somehow connected with anxiety and uncertainty. This solution can, however, be appropriate for a pre-determined period such as to enable fund-raising or feasibility studies.

2. Put right part of the instrument (the solution proposed in our hypothetical study above). This may be one manual or even just three or four stops: whatever is necessary for the congregational music to function. This creates a valuable, serviceable and reliable small instrument whilst leaving all options open for a larger-scale restoration in the future.
3. Thoroughly repair or restore the whole instrument. This may involve replacing action, repairing leaks, cleaning mechanisms or correcting any other problems. In this way, a dysfunctional organ can be given a long new lease of life. This can be an expensive process, but it is very important to do such work thoroughly. While it can be sensible to replace the action to one manual whilst

leaving another manual for a later stage, it is very foolish to replace just one stage of the action (for instance from the keyboard to the touch box) while leaving another stage (for instance from touch box to chest) with the old action. If this is done it is likely that troubles will soon emerge in the old section of the action. People will naturally blame the work that has just been carried out and feel that they have wasted their money. They will then be unwilling to pay for another stage of restoration, which they will then see as “pouring good money after bad”. Where any major work is done, this work should always result at least in complete sections of the organ being entirely functional and reliable. Cosmetic changes designed to “improve” the character of an existing instrument are seldom successful. Adding a mixture stop to a dull organ will not brighten the overall sound: the instrument will simply sound like a dull organ and a mixture stop playing at the same time.

4. Rebuild the organ. This entails completely dismantling the organ and constructing a new instrument using some or all of the

materials from the old together with new parts as appropriate. This is an excellent course of action where an organ contains high-quality pipework, chests or other parts but is not advisable where the instrument as an entity is beyond restoration or is entirely unsuitable for the building. Although a very major project it can represent a considerable saving on ordering a completely-new instrument. It is reasonably easy to buy a redundant organ (a number of websites around the world list them) and to use this as the basis of a “new” organ.

5. Build a completely new organ. This is the solution longed for by many organists. Where successful it can provide a focus for congregational collaboration (designing, planning, fundraising), joy and inspiration in worship (provided there is no tendency to worship the organ) and the long-term security of an instrument that will continue to serve its function reliably for many generations to come – assuming that future generations will want it. Where things go wrong, the organ can be a cripplingly expensive and divisive source of

disappointment, embarrassment and  
recrimination.

In the late 1970s a well-known city-centre church was experiencing a profound revival which involved reordering both the fabric of the church and the patterns of worship. As part of this process, the controversial decision was made to remove the large pipe organ (which required costly renovation) and replace it with an electronic instrument. Whether or not this decision was correct musically it was important as a symbol that the spiritual life of the church did not depend on any artefact and that some worthwhile things had to be sacrificed in order to allow the church to grow. The loss of its cherished pipe organ did not prevent the church from flourishing and from being a great blessing both to its members and to the surrounding community. The church was wise, however, and did not destroy the old instrument. As soon as money was available, a new and smaller pipe organ was built out of the materials of the old – an instrument that will serve the church long into the future. Had the old organ been taken out and destroyed – sadly a common mistake – this solution would not have been possible.

A discussion of the principles of designing a new or rebuilt pipe organ is far beyond the scope of this book. Four general principles can be mentioned:

Firstly, pray about it. Building an organ in a church is a major decision for the congregation. It demands a wisdom and far-sightedness beyond our own resources. It is fundamental that the church acts in accordance with God's will!

Secondly, set out clearly the present and projected musical needs of the congregation and how the organ will serve these needs. Will the organ be used primarily for accompanying hymns, for playing together with other instrumentalists, for accompanying a choir or soloists, or does the church's ministry extend to public concerts?

Thirdly, there is a saying that if you want a definition of water, don't ask a fish. The church organist, the minister and the treasurer are all essential figures in determining the needs of the church, but by virtue of their respective functions none of them can have complete objectivity. All will be so involved in the daily management of their respective areas that it will be impossible to

view the situation from a sufficiently wide perspective. Similarly, an organ builder (or electronic organ salesman) has pre-determined ideals and standpoints. It is essential to appoint an advisor who is qualified, experienced and genuinely impartial and who can help the church to formulate its needs and ensure that these needs are properly met.

Finally, aim for quality rather than quantity. Future generations will not be grateful to inherit a grandiose but unreliable instrument that needs expensive repairs and frequent maintenance. It is generally (though not universally) accepted that quality and durability in an organ implies: (a) mechanical key and pedal action (b) the use of traditional materials such as solid timber and metal rather than MDF and plastic. To ensure that the organ can be heard perfectly without it having to be unnaturally large or loud it is usual to build the instrument in a self-contained organ case, the whole of which should where possible be within line of sight of all seats in the church. An organ built into an alcove or side chapel will be at an immediate disadvantage. Acoustically the ideal position for an organ is on a gallery (traditionally but not necessarily at the rear of the

church), but practical and liturgical considerations may make this undesirable.

Above all, we must never lose sight of the fact that we are building an organ in order to serve and worship God, not as a monument to ourselves and our generation.

Where a church has a pipe organ, this represents a large investment that should be properly maintained. The most important aspect of maintaining a pipe organ is not directly connected to the instrument itself—it is avoiding dramatic swings in temperature and humidity within the room in which it stands. This is not primarily to guard against out-of-tune pipes and minor faults (these are things that affect only our perception of the instrument's immediate usefulness, like a car running out of petrol or having a flat battery). A far more important reason for controlling the climate is in order to protect the instrument's structure. Failure to do this can result in warped wood and perished leather, resulting in air leaks and ill-fitting components that will be very expensive or even impossible to repair. The old-fashioned remedy of keeping a bucket of water inside the organ is

rather too crude (although it has saved a large number of instruments from drying out in centrally-heated churches): a proper humidifier should be regarded as essential equipment. Some studies have suggested that it may be economically sensible to maintain a low level of heating even in a church building that is unused during the week rather than to heat the building quickly from completely cold at the weekend. This is because most of the energy used in a vain attempt to very quickly warm up the fabric of the building (particularly stone walls) is immediately lost rather than retained as useful atmospheric warmth. Preventing the church from becoming extremely cold also helps protect the organ—and the organist's weekday practising!

Another important aspect of organ maintenance that is often overlooked is oiling the blower. The electric motor that operates the blowing mechanism is usually a solid, reliable and well-hidden piece of equipment. It is easily overlooked, but cannot be expected to function indefinitely without lubrication.

Tuning the organ is important, not so much for the sake of the instrument as of the hearer. In

most cases an organ is tuned once a year. This should be done at a time of year when the outside temperature and humidity is settled. Early summer is a favourite time: early spring and autumn are usually avoided because the weather is likely to be changeable.

## Chapter 4

### Services



There is a widely-circulated urban legend about "The Assistant Organist and the Roof Appeal". The church roof was leaking and unsafe, and the Rector decided to appeal to the congregation for funds to repair it. He was to make his appeal during the Sunday service, and he asked the assistant organist (who was playing that day) to

play some suitable music immediately after he had spoken. The Rector explained to the congregation the seriousness of the situation and concluded by asking anyone willing to contribute £250 to signal their intention by standing up during the music. The assistant organist promptly played the national anthem—and shortly afterwards was promoted to head organist.

One of my postgraduate church music students in Norway was an excellent concert organist from Eastern Europe. In one of our weekly service workshops the Gospel reading (and theme of the service) was Jesus walking on the water and calming the storm. For her voluntary at the end of the service the student chose to play a pleasant melody from a book of organ arrangements. What she alone did not realise was that the melody was that of a song, familiar to Norwegians both as the theme-tune to a “These you have loved”-type radio programme and as a ballad commonly sung in school music classes, entitled “Ut mot havet” (“Out to sea”). The song tells of a wife who waves farewell to her fisherman-husband as he sets sail, and wonders whether he will return safely or be drowned in the stormy sea. At one level the song was remarkably relevant — fishermen in a stormy

sea — but the effect was undeniably and unintentionally comical.

My first job was at a well-known university in the South of England, where one of my duties was to play the organ for degree ceremonies. In these ceremonies, graduating students entered the hall and processed in pairs up the aisle before receiving their certificates and leaving. When our long-serving and popular Academic Registrar, commonly known as Johnny, retired, some of his colleagues asked me to write some variations on the old song “When Johnny comes marching home again” to play at the end of the ceremony. When I did so, I encountered a furious reaction from students and their parents. I had completely forgotten that the tune “When Johnny comes marching home again” is even better known by its alternative text “The animals came in two by two”, which was taken to be an offensive reference to the students entering the hall in pairs. All these stories illustrate how important it is to be familiar not only with the music but also with its associations for the congregation.

On entering a church for a service, the first practical (as opposed to spiritual) impressions received by visitors or congregation members are:

- Physical—the design, décor and cleanliness of the building; its furnishings and books, temperature and lack of mustiness
- Human—the way they are received and welcomed
- Auditory—the music they hear.

All these impressions are received and collated before the minister has entered or said a word, and all have a substantial bearing on people's experience of the service.

The Revd John Newte, Rector of the English village of Tiverton, preached a sermon there in 1696 on the occasion of the dedication of a new organ.<sup>17</sup> He spoke of how organ music should be used in a service:

This sort of Musick, is either made just before the Service begins, which seems a very proper time for it, to engage the Congregation to a serious Thoughtfulness, and to a civil

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<sup>17</sup> See note 15, page 36

Deportment and Behaviour, when they are taking their Places, and about to enter upon the most Solemn Acts of religion in the Worship of God. Or it is also used at the end of the psalms, before the Lessons be read, to strike a reverential awe upon our Spirits, and to melt us into a fit Temper to receive the best impressions from the Word of God. And it is contrived as a new Ornament and Grace to carry us through the whole Service with Seriousness and Devout Attention, with Alacrity, Sobriety and Peace. Or lastly, it is used at the end of the whole, to take off some little whispering Disturbances, through the Levity of some People, ... and the nauseous Rawkings, and unnecessary Coughing and Spitting, which are made by the People.

Music, as we have seen, can also distract from or hinder worship. An anonymous commentator 16 years after Newte's sermon wrote in the British newspaper *The Spectator* under the pseudonym 'Physibulus':<sup>18</sup>

a great many of our Church-Musicians being related to the Theatre, they have ... introduc'd in their farewell Voluntaries a sort of Musick quite foreign to the design of Church-Services, to the great Prejudice of well-dispos'd People. Those fingering Gentlemen should be inform'd, that they ought to suit their Airs to the Place and Business; and that the Musician is oblig'd to keep to the Text as much as the Preacher. For want of this, I have found by Experience a great deal of Mischief: For when the Preacher

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<sup>18</sup> Friday 28 March 1712 (issue number 338).

has often, with great Piety and Art enough, handled his Subject, and the judicious Clark has with utmost Diligence cull'd out two Staves proper to the Discourse, and I have found in myself, and in the rest of the Pew, good Thoughts and Dispositions, they have been all in a Moment dissipated by a merry Jigg from the Organ-Loft.

It is easier to define an incorrectly-chosen voluntary than to provide a recipe for a correct choice of music. Music that will complement the service — that will draw a congregation in to worship at the start of a service or that will send people out with inspiration and grace at the end — will not always (indeed, not usually) be the music the playing of which the organist regards as a great technical accomplishment. Music should certainly be inspiring rather than trite, and congregations are usually receptive to a wider range of music than organists naturally regard as “safe”, but voluntaries should never become self-serving nor overshadow the service itself in intensity. Many organists choose to avoid playing infamous works such as Bach’s D-minor Toccata BWV 565 at services because such works feel too pretentious and seem deliberately to divert attention away from the service. Music should not, however, be half-hearted or apologetic — it should serve a specific purpose. It is not always

necessary to play lively or loud music at the end of a service: at evening or penitential services in particular a quiet or meditative piece can be more thought-provoking.

## **Settings**

Many churches sing the main congregational parts of the communion service: the *Kyrie* (Lord, have mercy), *Gloria* (Glory to God), *Sanctus* (Holy, holy, holy Lord), *Benedictus* (Blessed is he who comes), *Agnus Dei* (Jesus, Lamb of God), and so on. This is both a practical aid to memory and congregational involvement, and part of an ancient tradition.

This tradition has varied from purely choral (non-participational) to entirely congregational. Historic Catholic tradition frequently involved choirs or ensembles of soloists singing entire masses in polyphonic settings. The masses of Palestrina and many other great composers show how important this tradition has been in the church. Other types of music range from the 17th-century French organ mass (in which the precentor sings alternate lines of the liturgy and the organist plays solo music appropriate to the remaining lines) to the Northern Lutheran “hymn

mass" (in which the main parts of the mass were paraphrased and sung as congregational hymns).

So many service settings are published for use with modern liturgies that it would be pointless to attempt to survey them. The once-ubiquitous Merbecke setting now coexists with dozens of more recent productions in a melodious and contemporary idiom. The "20th-century light music group" was a pioneer in this process, and some of its ideas remain influential.

As would be expected, there is generally a great contrast in style between *Kyrie* and *Gloria* settings even though the two are normally adjacent in a service. The coupling of these two is not a liturgical coincidence, however: "Lord have mercy" is a personal cry for help and expression of our own helplessness, while "Glory to God in the highest" is the angels' song to the shepherds — a reply indicating that God has heard our prayer and sent a Saviour. *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* are joyful affirmations; their position as part of the preparation for communion should not be allowed to detract from this. *Agnus Dei*, however, is generally sung quietly and reflectively.

Large churches with an active choral tradition vary the service music regularly – either a different setting each week or at least alternative settings for penitential seasons and festivals. Churches with a smaller congregation, without a well-trained choir or with a high turnover of congregation, often choose to use the same setting for all services for the sake of security.

Many service settings provide music for the creed and the Lord's Prayer, though these are by no means universally used. Where these parts of the service are generally said, it may be useful to sing them from time to time in order to introduce variety. Variety is not sought for its own sake but in order to focus attention on the texts. People who drive daily to work often experience that they arrive at their destination without any specific recollection of that day's journey. A church service can be similar. Saying the creed in an identical manner each Sunday has a pedagogical point (reinforcing the learning of fundamental truths and providing a benchmark for orthodoxy) and promotes fellowship and unity, but can rapidly become a dry, automatic and almost unnoticed ritual. Occasionally singing rather than saying the said parts of the service (or

the reverse if appropriate) helps to refresh the experience and increase awareness.

The old Lutheran “hymn mass”, in which various parts of the service were paraphrased as congregational hymns, has already been mentioned. A number of modern hymns and choruses paraphrase the creed and the Lord’s Prayer and are useful for this purpose.

### **Communion**

During Communion there are three musical possibilities: a congregational hymn, solo or choral music or silence.

A congregational hymn can reinforce the feeling of fellowship. It is appropriate to focus attention on the church family which is engaged in a joint celebration of the Eucharist. Where the congregation goes to the altar or table, however, the practical difficulty in taking a hymn book to the communion rail as well as a feeling of conflict between private prayer and congregational participation can argue against singing a hymn.

Solo music — by the organist, a singer, a choir or worship group or an instrumentalist — can give

the congregation more freedom for private prayer while providing an appropriate focus. Where musicians are accompanying congregational singing or providing solo music during the communion it is important that they should not be prevented from taking part. As we saw in Chapter 2, an organist who sits alone, either on an organ gallery or out of sight in some gloomy corner, is physically and mentally separated from the congregation not only during the service but from before people arrive until after everyone has left. In addition, the organist must pay constant attention to the mechanics of the service, often using periods of prayers or readings to find and prepare for the next hymn. It is easy under these circumstances for an organist to become a disinterested professional rather than a part of the congregation. If the organist is also excluded from taking Communion together with the congregation there is little opportunity for the organist to participate on any personal level.

Silence is such a rare experience in 21st-century life that it can make a more profound and lasting statement than music. As a young child I was organist at the church in our small farming village high on the moors. My strongest recollection of

this is not of lively family services (although we had a dynamic vicar, a family man who enjoyed motor racing) but of long silences during Evening Prayer, broken only by the occasional call of a hungry cow in the adjacent farmyard. Silence can, however, make some people feel awkward and may discourage an uncertain member of the congregation from moving from their pew.

### **Solo/choir music**

Solo or choir music may be appropriate at various times during a service and may be inspired by a variety of motives.

Non-congregational music during the service may be creating an atmosphere generally conducive to continued concentration (as John Newte observed at the beginning of this chapter: "...before the Lessons be read, to strike a reverential awe upon our Spirits"). Some organists play "music for meditation" part-way through the service for this purpose. An instrumentalist or worship group can do the same, although it is then essential to avoid walking to the front of the church, setting up a music stand, arranging the music and tuning the instrument to the organ! If meditative music is

not to become exhibitionist, the instrumentalist must be ready and in position well in advance.

Instrumentalists can be used to great effect in conjunction with service music even when a fully-fledged music group is not used. A trumpet descant adds an extra dimension to a joyful hymn, or a flute can add colour and intensity to a service setting.

Music may relate specifically to a theme taken up in the service, either as a setting of a relevant bible or other text or because its general style and character builds upon that being established by the service.

Music can also be played or sung for the sake of participation. For instance, when Sunday-school children or a junior choir have prepared a song, this is likely to be included in a family service whether or not it is strictly relevant to the theme of the day. A service whose aim is to strengthen community links may well invite a local band to play simply in order to involve and motivate (and attract families to church!). Music is more often (and more appropriately) used in this way in the context of non-liturgical services. Each church

must make its own assessment of the balance between inclusiveness and liturgical integrity – what would seem perfectly natural and appropriate to one congregation would seem completely misplaced to another. It is important, however, that music during a service should not become a concert, where the focus is on the performance. Concerts have an important role in church (see chapter 6), but a service is not the place for this.

We see in chapters 7-8 that the organist's main function in relation to congregational singing is akin to that of a conductor. It is the organist who sets and communicates the tempo and who has sole responsibility for the rhythmic stability of the singing. Accompanying a soloist or choir, however, requires a different approach. The choir is likely to be led by a genuine conductor, and it is the conductor rather than the accompanist who is responsible for keeping the music together and for taking stylistic decisions regarding the performance. A soloist will also usually determine and set style and tempo, even if the accompanist is better qualified to do so. Some experienced church musicians find it difficult to relinquish control in this way.

In practice, the ability of soloists can be variable. Where, for instance, a relative or family friend volunteers to sing or play at a wedding or funeral, they may need the organist to take the lead and provide necessary support. Diplomacy, tact, good judgement and empathy are as important as musical skills in such a situation.

Learning to play a new organ work is a long and exacting process. Even a short piece may require weeks of study before every detail of articulation becomes part of the musical flow. To be asked to learn a 100-page vocal score before a choir performance a few weeks hence can therefore be an alarming prospect. Clearly, when accompanying the organist must aim for the same standard of excellence that is required by a solo performance; indeed, the organist's responsibility is greater because others are depending on his accuracy. The type of accuracy required, however, is different and the appropriate style of learning makes it possible to learn long works in a relatively short time. Detailed commentary on this process is beyond the scope of this book, but it should be remembered that the accompanying part of most vocal scores is a piano reduction from an orchestral score, made by an editor

without the authority of the composer. As piano arrangements seldom function well when played on the organ, the organist's aim should be to produce an accompaniment that as far as possible equates to the effect that would have been produced by the orchestra. Most organists therefore start to prepare a new work of this sort by listening many times to recordings and assimilating details as much by the ear as by the eye.

### **Choosing hymns**

Graham Kendrick recently observed: "It could be that the most influential theologian in your church is the person who chooses the songs".<sup>19</sup> Although this remark was intended in a negative context rather than as an affirmation of the theological importance of hymn choosing, there is an element of truth here. After all, a member of the congregation is far more likely to walk home humming the tune of one of the hymns (and thereby remembering the words) than reciting the main points of the day's sermon. This in no way undermines the value or importance of other forms of teaching in church, but reminds us that

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<sup>19</sup> In his article "God and Groove", p.13.

the way we learn and remember is not always the way we believe that teaching is carried out.

Few aspects of service planning make such a direct impact as choosing hymns—and few are surrounded by so many pitfalls. To take only musical problems in relation to traditional hymns, let us consider a hypothetical service on the theme of our response to God's creative and redemptive love, for which the following hymns have been chosen:

Eternal Father of the ceaseless round  
Great Son of God, you once at Calv'ry's Cross  
Dear Lord, to you again our gifts we bring (Offertory)  
O Thou, who at the Eucharist did pray (Communion)  
And now, o Father, mindful of the love

The problem is of course immediately apparent: all of the above hymns are usually sung to the same tune. Accomplishing such an absurd feat by chance is less likely than losing a chess game to "Fool's mate", but it is nevertheless very easy to make inappropriate choices. If all the hymns are in the same key, or all in triple time, or all in a luxuriously-harmonised Victorian idiom, the congregation may develop a sense of unease, without necessarily understanding why. If the

hymns texts all have the same metrical structure, are in a similar literary style, or in the same voice (such as all speaking God's voice or addressing issues from the perspective of "I" the individual worshipper) the focus of the service will similarly become unbalanced. It is undesirable for all the hymns to be extremely long (exhausting) or extremely short (frustrating). In other words, we seek variety in our choice of hymns not for its own sake, nor as a measure of our skill in hymnology, but simply in order that the hymns do not begin to obtrude and draw our attention away from the message they are offering.

The many considerations, both musical and textural, that should be varied within a service are nevertheless subordinated to the main aim – to choose hymns that will:

- enrich the spoken and unspoken
- enable congregational expression
- inspire worship and devotion
- teach Gospel truths in a memorable way
- build up the unity of the church.

A good selection of hymns will invariably leave a congregation feeling blessed, whatever the reaction to other aspects of the service. Before we

consider the characteristics of a “good selection”, it is necessary to define a “good hymn”.

A hymn consists both of text and melody. These two elements can function independently—a hymn text can be read as poetry or a hymn tune can be hummed. A good hymn, however, is more than the sum of its parts. The melody is not simply a peg on which the text is hung, not only a means of remembering the words. The melody and the text should enrich and enhance each other.

There is no single recipe for a “good hymn”. A good hymn will fulfil several of the criteria listed above, and will meet the congregation’s need at that particular time. The hymn may have a deeply-theological text, a sermon in its own right, which carefully expounds a scriptural principle, or it may simply highlight a single truth or provide a vehicle for worship. Its melody may be traditional, impressive, modern, simple or sophisticated, but it must be able to captivate and inspire the congregation. In the context of a service, a hymn is neither a literary nor an artistic exercise but a spiritual one. Scripture tells us to

identify spiritual gifts by their fruits—and this is a good measure of a hymn.

Each generation can and must build and draw upon the experiences and styles of its own culture to create hymns that are meaningful and have contemporary resonance—in other words, must constantly “sing a new song to the Lord”. Some of these hymns will live on to become the “classics” of future generations; others will be so tied to their own era that they will rapidly fall from use. Both types are valuable and are not to be despised.

It is essential to avoid the implication that a specific music style is a prerequisite for a genuine Christian faith. This may seem self-evident, but in reality we closely identify our worship with our music. Those who are accustomed to a very traditional repertoire of hymns and choral anthems may feel sufficiently uncomfortable with drums and guitars in worship as to regard them as unspiritual. Conversely, those for whom inspiration is found in Christian rock or in the worship bands at festivals and the like may regard the subdued singing of old-fashioned hymns as a perversion of genuine spiritual

engagement. Such judgements, however subconscious, effectively make the idiom more important than the message and exclude those who do not share our artistic tastes. As mentioned earlier (p.22) European hymns and service music were once “foisted” upon the African church as though missionaries regarded them as holy writ—even though this music failed to meet with the cultural context of the people or to express their worship. This musical imperialism is now declining and culturally-relevant music is emerging in many countries, from rhythmic vibrancy in Africa to Nordic folksongs in Scandinavia. We are challenged by the diversity of cultural styles in many countries today, which makes it difficult to find a common cultural association even within a single society. If we feel, however, that the missionaries were misguided in this respect we have to consider seriously whether we are in danger of riding roughshod over the cultural identity of our own congregations.

A good melody is one that will inspire the singing congregation. The distinction between (congregational) hymns and (solo) songs is of vital importance here. It is easy to be inspired by

the atmosphere and worship of a large Christian conference, and subsequently to wish to introduce into one's own congregation the wonderful songs heard there, without appreciating that their effect depended on the soloist's particular quality of voice, the rhythmic flexibility of the guitarists and the extraordinary skill of the professional percussionists—not to mention the atmosphere of the "crowd". In many cases, these very complicated songs will simply not be singable by an average church congregation, and this will strip the songs themselves of the effect they should be creating. Modern, rhythmic songs can function very well for congregational singing—it is in any event essential that our starting point should be today's expression of faith—but congregational songs must be composed for that purpose.

A familiar hymn is a powerful force. It is a common experience in residential homes for the elderly senile that patients who have retreated so far into their own worlds that they do not react to any form of conversation will suddenly smile and join in singing when they hear a long-loved hymn. Even those of us who are still young can be powerfully reminded of past experiences: we

may recall people or events that have shaped and defined our faith, or—as we experience at communion—we can be reminded that the problems and temptations we face today are merely a single point in a continuum stretching throughout our own past and future as well as through the whole of the church's history. While services must remain relevant to the present and the future rather than sentimentally looking back, it is clearly important to promote a sense of lifelong continuity in our journey of faith — an aspect that becomes steadily more important to the older Christian.

The importance and influence of the familiar in church music poses two dilemmas. Firstly, familiar hymn gives the congregation such a sense of pleasure, confidence and reassurance that it is tempting never to introduce new material, knowing that to do so will be challenging and potentially distracting. If we fall into this temptation, however, our experience and concept of hymns will steadily become more and more retrospective and divorced from contemporary relevance. We will also fail to lay the foundation for this and the next generation to benefit from the insights of the theology and

hymn writing of our time. Secondly, language that is familiar and natural to one generation becomes old-fashioned and unnatural to the next.

Good planning helps to resolve the first of these dilemmas. Elsewhere in this book we have discussed strategies for introducing new hymns to a congregation; when choosing hymns we should also refer to (without being slavishly ruled by) a strategy for updating our hymn repertoire. Maintaining a systematic record of when new hymns and songs are introduced enables us both to ensure that they are re-used and assimilated into the repertoire and at the same time provides a mechanism for ensuring a good balance between new and familiar material

The question of language is more complicated. As well as communicating directly with us, hymns—music and text together—have a power of association. We see this at its most obvious in Christmas carols where we sing often trite and unsound lyrics (“the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes”) simply out of enjoyment of tradition. A text written in an old-fashioned language may by association have a value and power for the older Christian far in excess of that which it

directly communicates. We need to be aware, however, that we are also creating new associations for a new generation, and this needs to be balanced with the old.

For this reason there is constant tension regarding the updating of hymn texts. The problem is not acute when using hymns for a service at a retirement home (where a conservative choice is natural) or, at the other end of the spectrum, for a school assembly (when it is natural to think to the future). In a mixed congregation, however, the competing needs of differing groups—not just age groups—need to be carefully considered. To baldly conclude, as one recent commentator has done, that because religious language is old fashioned, hymns should inevitably follow suit in order to teach people to cope with religious language, is bigoted nonsense that takes no account of the constant renewal both of biblical translation and of spiritual self-expression. Bertram Barnby wisely observes that not all archaic words are necessarily incomprehensible. He points out: “I have yet to meet a teenager who is puzzled by ... ‘Seek ye first the kingdom of God’” but that “words that have changed their meaning, on the other hand, can be misleading

and often harmful". He cites "awful" as an example of words that "damage the faith and should be changed. But let it be done by a poet".<sup>20</sup> To this, Karl Barth would doubtless have added that since one of the purposes of a hymn is theological proclamation, a theologian should also be involved in any revision of hymn texts.<sup>21</sup> In short, where language has changed so radically that people will fail to understand a hymn or that expressions in the text seem comical or ridiculous, then adjustments should be made. On the other hand, complicated grammar or imagery that requires some thought does not disqualify a hymn from being useful.

A few years ago, I had a discussion with a group of Norwegian teenagers, in which I asked them what they saw as the shortcomings of hymns in the Norwegian Church's hymn book, focussing particularly on a long and theologically-"heavy" hymn entitled "Kirken den er et gammelt hus", which dates from a Norwegian hymn tradition not dissimilar to Wesley. Surprisingly, their chief complaint was not that the language was

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<sup>20</sup> *In Concert Sing*, p.36

<sup>21</sup> A point Barth made in *Church Dogmatics*, p. 81

unapproachable (although this was mentioned as an issue) but that “old-fashioned” theology itself was too bound up with ecclesiastical ritual, liturgy and church matters rather than with the heart of the Christian Gospel. When we read through the hymn together, however, we found that its message was that church buildings, rituals, books and structures in themselves were without value—that the church was not the concrete trappings but the worshipping community of people saved only by the Cross. This was precisely the content that the teenagers had been wishing for, and they concluded that by looking beyond the difficult language of older hymns they could find a relevant message full of contemporary significance.

A traditional service in most denominations will consist of an alternation between individual hymns and spoken liturgy. It can be difficult to see how to fit a short chorus into a scheme of this sort. There is a powerful argument—even in traditional congregations—for the practice of singing a succession of choruses or worship songs in one or more of the customary “hymn slots”. The term “worship time” often used in this context is a poor one, implying as it does that the

rest of the service is not “worship”, but it does give us a sense of cumulative effect that is absent when we stand up, sing a hymn and sit down again.

Whether the hymns are chosen by the minister, the church musician or (as should be the case) both together (see Chapter 2), the first step in the process should always be the same. The first priority is not to read the set texts, nor to summarise the main points of the sermon, nor to look at themes relevant to the specific day in the church year. It is neither the preacher nor the lectionary to whom we ultimately look for inspiration, but the Holy Spirit. It would be a poor preacher who embarked on a sermon without first praying. If we have the remotest respect for the role of hymns in a service, then the process of choosing them must begin in the same way – pray!

Some hymns in a service, such as those adjacent to the readings and sermon, need always to be relevant to the theme of the service. “Relevance” is not simply a matter of choosing a hymn that paraphrases the day’s text (though this will sometimes be appropriate) or that contains some

of the key words or phrases. A relevant hymn will add an extra dimension to our understanding of the topic, or will demand a response to the issues raised. Ensuring relevance requires an understanding both of how the preacher will approach the topic and of how the congregation will react to it.

Other hymns in a service should not damage the unity of subject within the service. They may be directly relevant to the day's topic, or may take their theme from their position in the service. The opening hymn, for instance, (sung before the theme of the service has been established) may be a general call to lay aside worldly concerns and worship, or may remind the congregation of God's creation or continuing mercies. The communion hymn will often refer to communion rather than exclusively to the theme of the service (in order to stress constant renewal and timeless salvation), while the closing hymn must send out the congregation determined to put into practice the inspiration they have received.

Choosing hymns is often regarded as a time-consuming task that gets in the way of weightier matters. Kendrick, however, is right: it is a

theological and a musical exercise at the highest level, concerned both with the congregation's interaction with text and theology and with specifically musical aspects such as key, metre and harmony. Above all it is a spiritual exercise, built on prayer and the inspiration of the Spirit.

## Chapter 5

# Funerals and Weddings



"ALL RIGHT THEN. PLAY 'EM OUT TO THE DEPARTURE OF THE QUEEN OF SHEBA'"

A church in Sweden recently raised concerns that its organist had inadequate skills and qualifications to lead the music. After long discussion and deliberation, the organist was debarred from playing for anything other than funerals. A Norwegian newspaper commented wryly: "You would have thought that never was an organist nearer the gates of heaven than at a funeral".

If we take faith seriously, death is when human and creator meet face to face. At a funeral, we walk to the very boundary of our earthly existence and contemplate our own final journey there. When is there a greater need to express and to listen to that which cannot be put into easy words? When, in fact, is a good organist more necessary than at a funeral?

One of the most emotive issues in choosing music for funerals is that of standards of appropriateness. It is a common misconception that funerals are "private" events, where the wishes and tastes of the family or families most involved exclusively determine the choice of music. To some extent this is true: the musical tastes of the deceased and their family will often

be a very important consideration in the choice of funeral music. A request from the bereaved for a particular piece of music should not be refused without compelling reasons. In principle, however, funerals are primarily church services. The whole church, corporately and as individuals, is involved: worshipping the Lord "who gives and takes away"; mourning the loss of a friend or showing solidarity with the family; meeting and coming to terms with their own mortality; and focussing the minds of the living on their ultimate destiny.

There is great wisdom in the tradition that whole communities attend funerals. Apart from the immeasurable support that this gives to the bereaved, it builds up an experience even amongst those individuals who are not directly involved at the time that becomes valuable when they in turn are plunged into the crisis of bereavement and funeral.

Therefore, the norms of musical appropriateness may be considerably stretched but are not completely removed. A minister chooses and requests "Somewhere over the rainbow" as the closing music for a funeral. He regards this as a

pleasant piece of music, but we must query whether his theology really holds that the deceased is now “somewhere over the rainbow, way up high, in a land that I heard of once in a lullaby ... where troubles melt like lemon drops, away, above the chimney tops that’s where you’ll find me!”. As mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 4, the church musician has a duty to ensure that the music being played does not awaken associations that are incompatible with Christian belief.

Decisions regarding appropriateness are rarely straightforward and invariably involve difficult judgements. There are few constantly correct answers. Some negative associations may be short-lived. In Britain there was a period of some years when Bach’s “Air on a G string” could not appropriately be played in church because it had become so strongly associated with a popular brand of cigar for which it formed the background music of a long-running television advert. This association has gradually weakened since the advert was stopped, and playing this piece is now generally regarded as acceptable – although even now it could perhaps cause offence

to play it at the funeral of someone who had died from a smoking-related disease.

Choosing music to play before, during and after a funeral is an important and difficult job. A death—even when expected—leaves people shocked. The funeral congregation has assembled at short notice and people have had little time to come to terms with their emotions. The congregation, particularly the closest family and friends of the person who has died, is experiencing uncertainty, stress, emotional turbulence and a range of unexpected feelings ranging from anger to guilt. The family's first experience in the funeral—before the service begins—is to draw a quiet strength from the church building (representing continuity, tradition and endurance), the flowers and decorations (representing beauty), the congregation (representing solidarity, friendship and continuity) and from the music. Music is an excellent aid to comfort and peace of mind, and has a unique ability to identify, stabilise and channel the storms of emotions. What the organist plays at this point affects the family's state of mind both at the time and during the funeral itself. Speaking to the bereaved a few

months after a funeral, it is not uncommon that they will remember the music even if their memory of much of the funeral is blurred.

Although it is good to match musical style as much as possible to individual circumstances, some general principles are universal. It is evident that lively, dance-like music will not be regarded as appropriate for a funeral unless the family has specifically requested it (and perhaps not even then). Other pitfalls, however, are not so obvious. Music that is too “sad” should also be avoided—not because emotion should be discouraged in a funeral but because it is the organist’s task to allow people to explore and express their feelings rather than to dictate what these feelings should be. Music that is tonally unstable, with chromatic and enharmonic twists and turns, or that has dramatic contrasts of tempo and texture, is generally unhelpful because it can increase feelings of insecurity.

This does not mean that music at funerals should be bland, nor that the organist should attempt to dispel or neutralise people’s emotions. Music that is deliberately characterless is more irritating than comforting. 21st-century society tends to regard

emotion as a problem to be solved and its outpouring as distasteful and inappropriate. The psychologist Lars Danbolt writes:<sup>22</sup>

After a death, many of the bereaved are afraid of suffering. They wish the priest to make the funeral as short and simple as possible. The whole thing is done quietly and not publicised until afterwards. The coffin is camouflaged with flowers, and bright easy hymns that have no connection with the situation are chosen. With valium under the vest, hearts are chemically cleansed of any uncontrolled emotion. They have escaped.

Danbolt points out, however, that those who escape emotion in the funeral take far longer to come to terms with their loss than those who are helped to realise and express their sorrow.

“Good” funeral music should be simple, melodic and traditional—no-one wishes to be challenged by difficult cultural appreciation at a funeral. Music can be drawn from all periods and areas of repertoire. For instance the music of Händel and his English contemporaries (John Stanley, John Bennett and others) is widely used in many countries and admirably fills the criteria of calm,

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<sup>22</sup> *Sammen i sorgens landskap*, p.29 (translation by Tim Rishton)

simple, but interesting. Traditional folk songs and familiar hymns are also well received. Where a bereaved family expresses a wish it is often for well-known pieces that have been played at countless funerals. "Amazing Grace", Händel's Largo, "Jesu, joy of man's desiring" and the once-ubiquitous "Air on a G string" discussed above are typical examples. It seems that people in sorrow turn to tradition in their choice of music as in many other respects.

It is important for the organist to find out basic information about the deceased. The style of music will differ between a small child's funeral, that of a teenager and the funeral of an old lay preacher gone willingly to meet his maker after a lifetime's service.

The choice of stops during hymn playing in general is considered in Chapter 10. Funerals, however, pose a particular challenge to the organist in this respect. As already noted, the congregation may be insecure as well as distressed, and will need a measure of support from the organist. In modern Western culture we tend to regard quietness as a mark of respect at funerals – and this tendency is easily exaggerated.

People talk in hushed voices and walk carefully to cushion the sound of footsteps. The organist can feel that all the hymns should be played quietly—and probably more slowly than usual, as well. This is not the case. In all hymns a sufficiently solid 8' foundation is essential in order to support but not oppress the congregation (see p.217-18). Where the family has deliberately chosen a hymn that celebrates salvation and points triumphantly to eternal joy in heaven, it is pointless to weaken the impact of such a message by “toning it down”. This applies equally to hymns of praise such as “Thine be the glory” and to hymns that start reflectively but point the way to Resurrection glories. A typical example of the latter is “Abide with me; fast falls the eventide”, which concludes:

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;  
 Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.  
 Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;  
 In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

It is surely the organist's function to guide the congregation on this journey from the gathering darkness of the first verse into the glorious light

of Heaven and to ensure that arrival there is seen as something to be celebrated.

It is normal to play quiet music before a funeral; tempting to play something louder and more “final” at the end. This may be appropriate, but it should be remembered that the part of a funeral that is most stressful for the bereaved is the committal—so the “concluding” music is not in fact the end of the funeral but is played at the very time the family and congregation has the greatest need for comfort and support.

In common with funerals it is often thought that weddings are “private” events, where the choice of music is regulated entirely by the wishes and tastes of the families most closely involved. It is true that the musical tastes of the couple and their family will be a prime consideration. As in the case of funerals, a request for a particular piece of music should not be refused without compelling reasons. Weddings, however, are primarily church services and the choice of music should never compromise the faith that the church proclaims.

Some musicians maintain that Mendelssohn's ever-popular Wedding March should not be played at weddings because the piece was originally composed as incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play associated with the unreal and ephemeral. This may be the case, but an alternative perspective can be provided by asking whether or not the congregation is aware of or offended by this association. In this type of contextual decision, historical facts are balanced against present-day associations.

For many people there is a tension between tradition and individualism. On the one hand, couples may feel that they "are not properly married" unless they have processed down the aisle to Mendelssohn's ubiquitous music. Such associations need to be taken seriously. On the other hand, there is a popular feeling that the best-known wedding marches are trite and over-used. It is fashionable to look for music that will be more distinctive.

Some alternatives have in their turn become popular and well established, such as the Toccata from Widor's 5th Symphony and Händel's "Arrival of the Queen of Sheba" (which due to its

length is best used as a recessional rather than processional). There are many other alternatives, old and new. If the couple is to be able to make an informed choice it is important that the organist meets with them well before the wedding. Making choices of this sort has a great impact on the couple's perception of the service and of the church, and this in its turn spreads to the family and guests. That the organist takes time to meet them and takes their opinions seriously demonstrates in a practical way that the church's role in the wedding is not simply a half-hour ceremony. Once again, as in Chapter 2, we see that the musician's role within the ministry team of the church is far more extensive than merely turning up to play some hymns: it is concerned with pastoral care and outreach.

Those organists who are reluctant to play popular works at weddings because they are used too often should remember that although to them weddings may be a weekly event, for those who are getting married the experience is (hopefully) once in a lifetime.

## Chapter 6

### Concerts



The church is neither a concert hall nor a provider of public culture. There are nevertheless three very different reasons why concerts and cultural events in the church are regarded as a useful part of the church's ministry.

Firstly, they enrich the church by providing an alternative forum for the congregation to meet

and (in the words of the Anglican liturgy) “help build up our common life”.

Secondly, church members easily forget how difficult it is for someone who has never attended church to come in through the door for the first time. What is a place of security, friendship and spiritual support to the regular churchgoer is an alarmingly strange, unfamiliar and threatening place to someone who has never been into a church. A concert may be regarded as a safe environment which may be attended without fear of being regarded as having “got religion” – and a positive experience in this context may give someone the confidence to return to the church for a service.

Thirdly, the church is the only natural home for church music, which was written as a testament to God’s glory and is in itself an act of worship and a medium for witness. By no means all church music can now be used within the context of services, so concerts provide a contemporary means of reaching people through this music.

For those who accept the general principle of concerts as a form of outreach, a number of complex decisions remain.

Applause is regarded by some people as inappropriate in church; specific directions or a clear lead should be given as to whether applause is the normal practice in the individual church.

Should secular music be allowed, and should any particular boundaries be established in this respect? There is very little musical difference between the “sacred” and “secular” music of previous centuries—many composers including Bach and Händel added sacred words to their own secular music. Händel’s “Largo” is familiar and often used in church, even though it essentially is an aria with an overtly secular text (“*ombra mai fu*”). The church musician must be able to make an informed judgement about the history, intention and current associations of music. Medieval composers frequently used ribald secular melodies (such as the sexually-implicit popular song “*L’homme armée*”) to give popular resonance to mass settings. Should this music be accepted because it was composed as church music or rejected because of the origins of

its melodies (which may or may not be familiar to modern audiences)? Rowland Hill's famous statement in 1844 that "The devil should not have all the best tunes" reflects the need to use the best of music in all styles and media and the need for Christian composers to write music of the highest quality and appeal.

Should we charge for admission to a church concert? On the one hand, the concert is seen as a specific event and as a coherent tool for outreach. This type of event cannot be held without funding, and buying tickets to a concert is an accepted norm. Concerts are usually held at a time when people would not expect the church to be open for private prayer, so charging for admission is not depriving people of their normal access to God's house. On the other hand, Jesus taught strongly against the commercialisation of God's house, and it is not regarded as acceptable to deny anyone access to church or to a church event on financial grounds.

Whether or not a charge is made for admission to concerts, the general question of how they should be financed must be addressed. It is by no means inevitable that the income from ticket sales or

collection will cover the fees of professional performers, which means that many churches view the idea of hosting a concert as too much of a risk. The following suggestions demonstrate that this need not be the case.

If a church does decide to promote one or more concerts, it is important that the attempt should be wholehearted. A clearly over-cautious and unimaginative concert will not only be an unsatisfying experience but may reinforce a prejudiced view of the church as inadequate and out of touch—clearly counterproductive outreach! An amateur night providing a platform for local talent will be very successful if clearly announced as such, but where soloists, choirs or ensembles are brought in these must be of high quality. In order to reach a wide audience, concerts need to be properly organised and marketed.

Most local churches have too little money not earmarked for other projects to be able to invest greatly in music. A perceived inability to finance entire schemes may mean that a church invests nothing in its music outreach. A model that has proved very successful for highly-motivated and well organised churches is to view the church's

music and concert provision as an entity, setting up a foundation to oversee the financial and administrative aspects. This practice has a number of advantages, allowing a dedicated committee to focus on musical needs and resources and allowing outside bodies to donate funds specifically earmarked for the cultural work of the church. The foundation's committee should not consist primarily of musicians: it is more useful to recruit bankers, politicians, fund-raisers and creative thinkers.

Raising money for such a foundation and its work is never easy, but a guiding principle is to maintain a diversity of sources and not to waste any natural opportunities. The Norwegian saying that "many small drops of water make up a great estuary" encourages us to look even at the smallest possibilities so that together we may achieve great results.

Sources of finance fall into a number of categories.

The church council (however impoverished), can and should have a distinctive role in encouraging and coordinating voluntary help, including

producing and distributing publicity materials, finding private accommodation for visiting musicians and making refreshments. All these things are valuable, not only because they save costs but also because the church feels more directly involved in the concert.

It is useful to investigate whether funds may be available at district (circuit/deanery/diocesan) level. Money will very rarely be given for an individual event in one church but a good case can be made for funding a collaborative project between several churches, such as engaging a group to perform in a number of locations as well as visiting schools or community centres.

Engaging performers in collaboration with a local school or college will also allow educational authority funding to be introduced, and may enable applications to a wider range of local charitable trusts (see below).

Travel to an area is a considerable effort and expense for a professional musician or group, which means that a second or third concert nearby is almost always an attractive proposition. If a well-known musician, choir or ensemble is

due to give a concert in a nearby town it is usually worth contacting them: they may visit a small church the next day for a much lower fee. The perception that well-known musicians are in such heavy demand that they do not need to negotiate for engagements is rarely accurate: even the best-known artists are generally interested in additional work, despite a lower-than-usual fee.

Engaging performers from abroad is often regarded as far too ambitious and costly for a local church. This need not be the case. Not only will the exotic appeal of a foreign artist yield a larger audience (and thereby larger income and wider outreach); in addition, many good musicians are anxious to expand their careers into other countries and some, therefore, will perform for little more than the cost of travel. Even this cost may be paid or subsidised by grants from cultural agencies in the musician's own country, such as Germany's Goethe-Institut, France's Institut Français, the UK's British Council and the Austrian Cultural Forum.

Where the music or cultural programme offered by a church is sufficiently innovative and interesting, regional arts associations will wish to

be involved and may offer substantial financial help in return for collaboration.

Trusts are charitable bodies set up to promote the interests of sectors of the population, and which usually have clearly-defined criteria for giving grants. They normally operate by collaborating with and giving economic support to other bodies. Such trusts may serve a clearly-defined local area, a county or a whole country. The local library is usually a good source of information about trusts (apart from their local information files, most libraries stock published directories of trusts). Some bodies, such as the Rotary Club, are well known; many, however, are obscure. It is a characteristic of older trusts that they can neither be dissolved nor change their aims, so that in some cases little-known trusts have built up large sums of money due to lack of suitable applicants. Where a church's activities coincide with a trust's aims and criteria there should be no hesitation in applying for support. An application should carefully demonstrate its relevance to that particular trust's specific criteria in the same way as when applying for business sponsorship.

If we are to apply for business sponsorship we must first understand its principles. As church musicians we see our activity in a context of serving others: we do not operate for private gain. Business has one overriding purpose—to make profits. This is not a criticism of business: it is its proper purpose and definition. Every successful commercial business is committed to making a profit.

It is pointless to ask a business to subsidise or underwrite the routine expenses of any aspect of the church's activities. This is not the proper purpose of a company, and to do so would weaken the business.

There are two main reasons why companies give money. Some companies recognise a social responsibility to donate, for instance, 1% of profits to help build up the society on which they depend. Others feel that visibly doing good in society will improve people's perception of the business and therefore increase trade. A local shop that publicly supports and finances a community project can reasonably expect that the people who benefit will feel a loyalty to the shop that will result in increased custom.

If we are to ask for money from a business, we will need to sell our concept to its directors, and show that the money will either (a) benefit society in a way relevant to the company or (b) will benefit the company's own customers in a way that will increase their loyalty.

Every business receives requests for money, most of which it has to refuse. Most large companies have internal guidelines for dealing with sponsorship applications, which specify particular areas of priority. These guidelines enable the business to deal with applications more quickly and effectively, rejecting those that do not meet the stated criteria and only giving detailed consideration to those in which it is interested. These criteria are not usually secret: indeed, most companies are very happy to make them known in order to reduce the administrative burden of unsuccessful applications. A useful first step, therefore, is to compile a list of companies and identify from this the ones that are willing to give money to a relevant purpose.

It is perfectly ethical and proper to formulate an application in a way that demonstrates its relevance to the company's own criteria. Let us

suppose, for example, that sponsorship is being sought to enable a children's choir to hire a voice tutor to help prepare a programme of modern English songs. If a company supports youth projects, then this aspect of the work should be stressed. If a company specifies "educational projects for the under-18s", then the application should refer to the tutoring. If, however, the company gives grants to promote new music, then the focus of the application should be on the repertoire. Writing one standard application and duplicating it to a long list of companies is a waste of effort, postage and of the companies' time.

Effectiveness and efficiency are prized in business. Half-considered ideas or vague suggestions that will be time-consuming to investigate will not be considered. If, for instance, a company is being asked to pay to advertise in a brochure, the letter of application should specify:

- Exactly who is formally responsible for the brochure
- For what cause funds are being raised
- Why the business should support this cause

- How much public interest there will be in the project
- Exactly how much money is asked for (this figure cannot be increased later)
- How much advertising space the company is being offered
- Whether other businesses will also be advertising
- Where and how the brochure will be distributed, and how many copies
- How the brochure will be printed and on what quality of paper.

A comprehensive fund-raising programme should also include private donations (large and small) and small-scale fund-raising events. These may not contribute large sums of money but they are important in involving people in the project.

In considering all the ways by which concerts can be financed we should not forget that concerts do not have to cost anything. Cost-free concerts fall into two main categories:

- Groups or individuals who wish to perform and will do so without a fee. These may be local amateur choirs,

orchestras or other organisations seeking a venue or may be foreign groups or individuals travelling for pleasure, for the experience or to build up contacts for future commercial engagements.

- Professional groups or individuals willing to perform at their own economic risk in return for the ticket money. This means, of course, that the promoter will make no profit but it also ensures that there is no possibility of a financial loss, which may be a crucial factor in arranging the event.

Even though an ambitious musical or cultural programme may seem beyond the financial means of a small church, in reality almost nothing is impossible if all the above means are considered together. The greatest limitation is the time available for all the administrative work involved.

Having decided to hold a concert or series of concerts, a clear sense of purpose and a dispassionate analysis of quality and suitability is essential. Good intentions are not enough. The mere fact of being a church concert does not remove the necessity for it to be a good concert

and an enjoyable experience. Indeed, the necessity is even greater—a church concert is no mere artistic or commercial venture but is a form of outreach, representing the church. A boring concert creates an image of a boring church.

A number of questions must be asked and truthfully answered:

If you had no formal connection to it, would you be pleased to spend an evening out at this concert? Imagine yourself describing your impressions of it to a friend.

Is the church a comfortable and pleasant place to sit? Is it properly heated and does it have tolerable seating, or is it damp, mildewed and in need of decoration? We grow accustomed to a building and need to visualise it through the eyes of a stranger.

If there is a printed programme, is it imaginatively designed and well printed, or is it a badly-photocopied list?

Has the event been publicised convincingly and accurately? This implies identifying a target

audience and ensuring that publicity reaches and attracts them. Indiscriminately putting up posters is not enough.

Is the programme a cohesive whole (for instance, based around a particular theme) or merely a string of pieces?

The greatest enemy of the church concert is not lack of money, lack of resources or the competing attraction of television: it is a lack of clear vision.

## Chapter 7

### Hymn introduction



The first six chapters of this book have focussed on building up a picture of the function and position of music in the worshipping congregation. Music is part of the mystery of God's creation and as such eludes easy

definitions. Those who are providing it in the context of a church, however, must always remember that it is part of worship, and whether its purpose is to express the people's faith and feelings to God or to teach or encourage the congregation, its central characteristic is to communicate between God and humanity in a way that transcends language. This presupposes that the musician knows how to communicate both with God and with the congregation at that time, that the musician's view of his role is as mediator not maestro, and that the congregation is enabled to lay aside distraction and self-preoccupation in order to engage with the service.

The final four chapters will focus on specific means by which this aim can be achieved, beginning with the accompaniment of hymns.

To understand the purpose of the introduction to a hymn, it is helpful to think in terms of a conductor bringing in a choir. There are five things the choir needs to know:

- which piece is to be sung
- the tempo

- performance style (quiet/loud, legato/detached, lively/relaxed, etc)
- the key and starting note
- when to begin (together!)

All these questions must be answered before the choir can begin to sing. All involve judgements on the part of the conductor, and all require thorough and careful communication.

A church congregation is not, of course, a choir. No-one will judge the congregation on the musicality of its "performance" whilst singing hymns. Congregational singing is an expression of personal and corporate faith, hope, praise and worship. It is a time when the individual worshippers should be enabled to participate unselfconsciously in congregational expression.

Unselfconscious participation, however, demands confidence. Insecurity of any sort creates self-consciousness, which in turn diverts people's attention from their singing. No-one likes to feel a fool, so the natural reaction to uncertainty is to wait for others to begin. This not only leads to ragged and reluctant singing; it also distracts the

congregation from the meaning of the words that are being sung.

The five issues listed above are fundamental not only to choirs but also to security and confidence in congregational hymn singing. All need to be properly communicated to the congregation by the organist or musicians.<sup>23</sup> It is worth looking briefly at each of them in turn.

### **1. Which hymn?**

Although hymn numbers are usually announced or published, it is important that the congregation knows which melody is to be sung, and is familiar with it. The organist will need to make an informed judgement about whether or not the tune is familiar to the congregation. If so, the introduction should be sufficient to identify it. If not, the introduction needs to demonstrate the melody – often by playing over a whole verse. It is usually even better to prepare the congregation in advance by playing over the hymn (or even

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<sup>23</sup> For the sake of brevity, in this and the following chapters we will consistently use the term “organist” even though the remarks apply equally to other instrumentalists and groups.

holding a short congregational rehearsal) before the service starts.

## **2. Tempo**

The only way an organist can indicate the speed of the hymn is to ensure that the introduction is in precisely the desired tempo. This does not happen by chance. The organist will need to spend a few moments carefully considering the correct tempo for the hymn before embarking on the introduction. Only when completely certain of the correct tempo at which the congregation should sing the hymn is it acceptable to start the introduction. Beginning the introduction without first making a careful judgement of this sort will mislead the congregation and destroy confidence. The now rarely-heard practice of a rushed introduction followed by a leisurely hymn is utterly to be deplored. It also follows from this that on no account should the introduction end with a *rallentando*. The intended tempo must be maintained strictly throughout.

The choice of tempo is often a compromise. The organist must balance two factors which may be contradictory. One is the "ideal" tempo from a musical perspective, which will take into account

the melody, the harmony, the nature of the organ, the acoustics of the building and the number of people singing. The other is the expectations and customs of the congregation. However well founded the organist's choice of tempo may be, he will be doing both the congregation and himself a disservice by establishing a conflict of tempi — a conflict neither side can win.

The organist needs to understand and empathise with the congregation's predisposition and tradition regarding tempi. If it is clear from a musical point of view that this tradition is "wrong" — that is to say, if it is evidently hindering congregational participation and understanding of the music and is in conflict with good sense — the change should be achieved gradually. Congregational singing traditions are more usually too slow than too fast, though both problems are found.

### **3. Style and feeling**

As with the tempo, the only way to introduce the feeling or style of a hymn is through the introduction. It is clearly as inappropriate to play "Thine be the glory" in a quiet and legato manner as it is to play "There is a green hill far away" with

full organ and a lively articulation. While it is not necessary to use exactly the same registration for the introduction as for the first verse, it can often be appropriate to do so, and in any event there should not be too great a contrast between the two. The practice of always playing the introduction with quiet stops on another manual, irrespective of the style of the hymn, is clearly inappropriate. The introduction should inspire the congregation to start singing in an appropriate manner.

The mood of a hymn is communicated in very many ways, some so subtle that they evade description. If the organist is truly convinced of the style and feel of the hymn, however, the playing will reflect this.

While it is essential that the organist does not begin the introduction before being completely prepared (this preparation should be carried out before the hymn is announced although the congregation will not react adversely to a small pause if necessary) a subtle message can be conveyed by the length of time between the minister announcing the hymn and the start of the introduction. An introduction that begins

immediately, almost impetuously, suggests enthusiasm and vigour, suitable for such hymns as *Make way! Make way for Christ the King*. A longer pause at this point suggests a more thoughtful and reflective approach.

That a congregation will be influenced in this way is a fact that should also be taught to ministers. The minister who intones "The Lord is here" in a bored monotone will be assured that "His Spirit is with us" by a congregation sounding similarly unconcerned. Ideally, the minister saying these words should sound both interested and excited, and the speed of responses as well as a varied inflection will contribute to this. This can be a useful topic of diplomatic discussion between minister and musician.

#### **4. Tonality and starting note**

While individual members of the congregation would probably deny possessing any particular musicality, almost everyone who knows a hymn tune moderately well and who hears a introduction in the correct tonality will be able to find the starting note of a hymn—whether or not the introduction ends on exactly the same note as the tune begins.

A few hymns create a potential difficulty by modulating to a remote key at a point which otherwise would be suitable to end the introduction. A typical example of this is Herbert Howells' wonderful hymn tune "Michael" (*All my hope on God is founded*) where the only possible stopping point is in the third bar, which may be deemed too short to be a introduction. In this case, as in the great majority of such cases, the matter can be resolved by using the last two or three lines of the verse as the introduction. Some further problems with selecting a introduction will be dealt with later in this chapter.

It is entirely unnecessary – and utterly destructive in relation to points 2 and 5 – to give the congregation an additional "leading note" after the end of the introduction.

Transposing hymns (usually to a lower key) is an often-debated matter. Traditionalists argue that hymns sound better in their original keys and that congregations ought to be able to sing high notes. Transposition, according to this view, is equated with pandering to laziness and is counterproductive because by failing to train people to sing high notes we allow them to lose

the ability to do so. Pragmatists, on the other hand, argue that singing hymns is not primarily a matter of tradition or training in vocal technique but of enabling the congregation to sing together without the distraction of having to struggle with high notes. Irrespective of the view held, it is generally held to be most important to ensure that the opening hymn is at an acceptable pitch, allowing the congregation to “warm up” their voices and to gain in confidence.

## **5. Beginning together**

The final point, while often under-regarded, is in many respects the most important. To return to the analogy of the choir, even the most blasé singer pays the conductor some fleeting attention while the latter is bringing in the singers—because it is essential that everyone begins together. Although, as already discussed, the congregation is not giving a “performance” that requires unanimity, a secure expectation of when to come in is essential for confident congregational singing. If a group of people is assembled, fully informed about the first four criteria (what is to be sung, tempo, performance style and pitch) and told to begin singing without being counted in, nothing will happen. No-one

wants to start alone and look foolish, so no-one will begin.

A congregation which begins confidently will continue confidently, and will be able to focus on the hymn itself rather than on the individual's own insecurities. Where a congregation has been given a strong rhythmic impulse and an unambiguous lead in by the introduction, the whole of the hymn will usually be sung securely and well. It is therefore no exaggeration to claim that the transition between introduction and first verse is the moment which defines whether the organist will be successful or unsuccessful in leading the congregation.

How is this to be achieved, when the organist, unlike the conductor, cannot give a visual indication of the beat? We have already seen that the organist must clearly establish the tempo during the introduction. This creates a clear expectation that the beat will continue into the verse, and the organist must identify the point at which it is natural to start the verse. How many beats there should be between introduction and verse (and indeed subsequently between each verse) will depend on the speed of the hymn, the

acoustics of the building and the number of people singing, but it will, almost without exception, be one or two whole bars in triple time or a multiple of half bars in duple time.

For a straightforward example we can take the hymn tune "Marching" (*Father, hear the prayer we offer*):



If the tempo has been adequately established during the introduction, and the beat continued without *rallentando* or hesitation through the last bar and half bar's rest, the congregation will come in together.

The second—and equally essential—element that reinforces this signal is the short silence before the congregation comes in. This moment of silence reinforces the conviction that the verse is now to start. The ideal length for this silence is  $1\frac{1}{2}$  - 2 beats. If the silence is any longer the congregation will become confused; if it is any shorter the congregation will not have time to react. The final

chord of the introduction should therefore be held until  $1\frac{1}{2}$  - 2 beats before the verse is due to begin, irrespective of its notated value.

For instance, the hymn tune "Gelobt sei Gott" (*The strife is o'er, the battle won*):



Where a congregation has a different tradition (for instance a protracted "gathering note" at the start of the verse) it may seem arrogant for an organist to override this and unilaterally establish a new practice. In most respects it is important to take congregational tradition as the starting point for the organist's decisions, but in this instance there are good arguments for making a change. However ingrained a congregation's tradition may appear, experience confirms that it will not take more than two services for people to become accustomed to (and indeed to appreciate the security and regularity of) this method. It is also the one single element that will make the biggest difference to the congregation's singing.

Situations often arise in which it is difficult to determine whether or not to allow an extra half or whole bar.

For instance, "St Fulbert" (*Ye choirs of new Jerusalem*) can continue without extra beats:



or with the addition of half a bar:



Similarly, "St Peter" (*How sweet the name of Jesus sounds*) could be:



or



The necessity for such decisions means that it is essential to plan in advance in order not to be wavering on the last minute. It is also important to be consistent— whatever is done at the end of the introduction should also be done between each verse!

As this is a question of preparation, planning the number of beats between introduction and verse should be a part of the organist's practice. For all those organists who sit week after week practising the notes of hymns, it can seem odd to suggest that time should also be spent practising such mechanical and seemingly trivial aspects of the hymn. In many respects, however, this is a more important aspect of successful hymn playing than the notes themselves. It should go without saying that planning solutions to problems should be a central part of practising.

Another issue which should be addressed during the preparation and practice time is tempo. The tempo of a hymn is affected to some extent by factors which vary from service to service: the number of people in the congregation, the mood of the congregation on the particular day, etc., but when the organist is familiar in advance with the

church building, the instrument and not least the habits and expectations of the congregation, it should be perfectly possible to plan an appropriate tempo.

Musical considerations will normally dictate the ideal tempo fairly exactly. If the tempo is too fast, the congregation will be stressed and will find it difficult to fit in the words. If, however, the tempo is too slow, quite apart from the physical difficulty of singing long phrases, the music may give the impression of more beats in the bar (for instance 4 beats instead of 2 in  $2_2$ , or 3 beats in what should be a sprightly 1-in-a-bar triple time), and therefore perversely feel more hectic. That this should be planned during practice is evident: the tempo must be firmly established in the organist's mind before starting the introduction, and there too little time during a service to debate all the issues involved.

As a general rule, hymns in  $4_4$  time function best with a relaxed two beats in a bar; hymns in  $3_4$  time with one beat in a bar. An appropriate sense of flow should prevent the hymn either from feeling rushed or from plodding.

Yet another issue that should be prepared during practice time is the extent and content of the introduction. It has already been shown that it is essential to ensure that the introduction is able to convey all the five necessary signals.

In Britain, hymns are usually introduced by playing the first couple of lines of the melody. In most cases this procedure covers adequately all of the five necessary signals. The following exceptions should be noted:

- Where the melody does not have a melodically or tonally suitable stopping point we should ensure that we are not forced to continue the introduction to a tedious extent due to lack of foresight. We have already seen that the tune "Michael" (*All my hope on God is founded*) has no good stopping point between bar 3 and the end of the (very long) melody. The choruses *Let there be love shared among us* and *Be bold! Be strong!* are even more striking examples. In such a case it is often appropriate to play the last part of the melody instead of the first.

- Where the melody is likely to be unfamiliar to the congregation it is usual to play an entire verse (and preferably to hold a pre-service rehearsal as well).
- Where a melody has alternative versions (such as the third line of *Amazing Grace*) it is helpful to use the introduction to clarify which version will be used.
- Where a hymn has a composed introduction that is entirely familiar to the congregation (for instance "Jerusalem" (*And did those feet*)), then this should be used.

Introducing a hymn by means of the last part of a melody is usually a less satisfactory solution. It is a less effective means of reminding the congregation of the melody and fails to establish the opening tonality as convincingly. In a few instances it may misrepresent the beginning of the hymn. For instance, the melody "Christ arose" (*Low in the grave he lay*) is in two distinct halves - the first in a subdued chordal style ("low in the grave he lay") and the second in a rhythmic and faster-moving idiom ("up from the grave he arose"). Choosing the end of the second half as a introduction would misrepresent the style of the

opening and mislead the congregation into preparing for a lively start.

Some hymns are well served by a composite introduction consisting of the first and last line. Examples of this include *Blessed Assurance*:



and *Be still for the presence of the Lord*:



In the case of the chorus *Broken for me* this composite needs to incorporate the opening line and the final “coda”:



Some hymns and, in particular, modern choruses have pre-composed introductions that are not

universally known or are not ideal for congregational use. For instance, Graham Kendrick's well known and excellent *Led like a lamb* is preceded by four bars of chordal introduction. This is designed primarily for a music group that can give a visible lead to the congregation. In itself, this "introduction" gives few of the normally essential signals. In particular, it gives no indication of when to come in.

In some hymns and songs of this type the problem can be circumvented by combining a conventional introduction and the composed introduction: in other words, by playing the last line of the hymn followed by the composed introduction as an interlude, as in the following example (*Shine, Jesus, shine*):



In the case of *Led like a lamb*, however, this is not possible; nor is there any normal "stopping point" in the middle of the verse which would serve as the end of an introduction. Even the alternative—

to play the last line as introduction—is not recommended here because (a) it ends in a different key (C major against the opening A minor) (b) it is in a different style and (c) it is not melodically suitable as an introduction. In this instance it is probably best to use the composed introduction as it stands - practise first with the congregation if necessary! A small signal can be given to indicate when to come in, simply by replacing the last chord with a rest, as follows:



In short, preparation is necessary to ensure a introduction that combines reasonable brevity with complete and unequivocal information. As a final example of a hymn tune we take Gustav Holst's arrangement of the 16th-century melody *Personent Hodie*. The 2-bar printed introduction consists only of a descending scale:



The use of the scale is integral to the arrangement and adds character to the hymn, but is entirely inadequate as a congregational introduction. On the other hand, a straightforward introduction starting from the first bar of the hymn does not find a satisfactory stopping place for eight bars, the chorus does not provide a useful introduction and losing the descending scale is unfortunate. Under these circumstances we can propose a composite solution consisting of the two first bars of the verse followed by the two last bars of the chorus with the descending scale incorporated as follows:



It is worth noting that the British custom of a simple introduction is by no means universal. The Lutheran church, for instance, favours a

composed or improvised hymn prelude, based either on the melody as a whole or on a characteristic motif from it. This practice has advantages (for instance, the organist is given an opportunity to create something exciting and inspirational which captures and communicates the content and feel of the hymn and adds an extra dimension) and disadvantages (for instance it can easily become a boring or exaggerated object of exhibitionism). Some collections of "hymn preludes" have been published in Britain, although the practice is not very widespread. This practice is responsible for the composition of thousands of chorale preludes, especially in Germanic countries. Particularly familiar are those of J.S. Bach, although American and British organists are often puzzled as to their original purpose. Even today, most Lutheran organists maintain collections of chorale preludes to use as introductions to hymns. It is common practice amongst Lutheran organists taking up a new post to start to compile a comprehensive file or book of chorale preludes (perhaps self-composed) to serve for those hymns they are most likely to use, rather in the manner of Bach's *Orgelbüchlein*; like the latter, such projects are often left unfinished due to pressure of work.

To sum up: the introduction is the key to successful hymn playing. The organist should make a priority of preparing and practising the introduction so that it will give the five necessary signals to the congregation. It is not an exaggeration to state that no single aspect of hymn playing will affect the congregation's singing more than the organist's success or failure to impart information during the introduction.

## Chapter 8

### Playing the verses



In the previous chapter we saw that a successful introduction lays the foundation for congregational security in the hymn. If the five essential points have been adequately communicated the congregation will be able to sing confidently. If, on the other hand, these five signals have not been given clearly, it will be

almost impossible to regain the congregation's full confidence.

Once the congregation has begun to sing, the organist's main function remains that of "conductor". He is responsible for keeping the congregation together at a constant tempo, for bringing in the congregation together at the beginning of each successive verse, for supporting and encouraging the congregation, and for illuminating the content of the text.

These considerations may be divided into three sections: beat, text and style.

### **Beat**

Two of the five functions of the introduction concern beat (establishing tempo and bringing in the congregation together). During the hymn the beat remains the most important consideration.

In order to maintain momentum from verse to verse—and thereby free the congregation's concentration to focus on the content of the hymn—the transition from verse to verse should be exactly the same as from the introduction to the first verse. In this way, the congregation will

receive a constantly-renewed sense of the beat. As with the introduction, this means that there should be no *rallentando* in the last line, except, of course, if required in the last verse, where it can be useful to reinforce the sense of finality.

There are a number of hymns in which this is difficult. Some hymns contain a written-in *rallentando* or a note in the last line which is designed to be held longer than the notated beat. One example of this is "How great thou art" (*O Lord my God*), where tradition calls for an elongated high note and *rallentando* in the last couple of bars. Another example is the following line from *I serve a risen Saviour*:



Rather easier are hymns such as "Cwm Rhondda" (*Guide me, O thou Great Redeemer*) where a fermata is traditionally applied at the end of the penultimate line, and similarly "Miles Lane" (*All hail the power of Jesus' name*) (musical example on following page). Such tunes give an opportunity

for the beat to be re-established before the end of the verse.



If all else fails, the beat can be re-established artificially during the final chord by adding rhythmic notes with the left hand (or, where used, the pedals) as in following instance:



Other hymns have a change of metre, tempo or style in the second half that hinders continuity.

Such problems demand careful thought and planning. The solution given above will be helpful in a few cases; others simply demand creativity and confidence on the part of the organist.

Most organists experience the sensation, especially unsettling for the inexperienced, that the congregation seems to "drag". Irrespective of the tempo established by the organist, the congregation appears to want to sing more slowly. The unwary organist who attempts to follow the congregation will find himself playing progressively slower until the hymn finally staggers to a halt. For the most part, this effect is an illusion. When the organist plays a note, the pipes take a short but measurable time to produce the sound, which then travels along the church at a finite speed. People must register that they have heard the sound, respond to it, and the sound of their singing travel up the church to the organ. It is small wonder that the congregation often seems to the organist to be singing after the beat. The organist must remember at all costs not to follow the congregation, but to establish and maintain an appropriate beat. The basis for determining "appropriate" tempo and beat, balancing musical and technical considerations with the congregation's preconceptions, has already been discussed in the previous chapter.

Because some "reluctant" organists feel that their function is merely to accompany rather than to

lead the congregation, they are tempted to follow what they perceive to be the congregation's beat. The error in this way of thinking can clearly be seen - following the perceived beat does not constitute accompanying but is actually playing after the congregation sings. However modest the organist's aims it is essential that rhythmic leadership is offered from the organ.

There is of course a difficult balance here. While the organist must disregard the apparently-delayed beat of the congregation's singing, it is necessary to ensure that organ does not completely part company with the congregation. A general rule is that the perceived time lapse between organ and congregation remains constant. While it can be tempting for the organist to wear ear plugs to cut out the distraction of a congregation heard half a beat behind the organ, this, unfortunately, is not a responsible option.

Some other issues can affect the organist's perception of the congregation's singing. One of the most obvious of these is the studied individualism of one or more members of the congregation. If a person with a loud and penetrating voice is determined to sing in their

own individual way and at their own individual tempo, disregarding the rest of the congregation and the organ alike, this can be a disruptive influence and a serious distraction. Such an individual may be a member of the congregation, a church warden or other elder in the church, or even the minister. Some people are sufficiently approachable and open for the organist to have a tactful discussion with them ("you have a very strong voice - perhaps we can work together to get the congregation to sing in time ...") but where this is not possible the organist must simply ensure that the musical leadership from the organ is sufficiently unambiguous and powerful to outweigh (and hopefully isolate) the distraction.

Other influences include the congregation's mood, whether the congregation knows the hymn, acoustic oddities caused by the church's sound system, and, most obviously, the organist's own mood. This (particularly the last item) again underlines the importance of time spent in preparation working out a suitable tempo.

Understanding the causes of apparent congregational "drag" helps the organist to determine his role in leading and unifying the

singing, but does not remove the effects of the problem. We have seen that correct tempo and solid, well thought-out rhythmic preparation in the introduction is essential, but a number of techniques/skills will contribute to maintaining momentum.

A central issue is good articulation. At the simplest level, playing in a more detached manner generally strengthens the rhythmic clarity of the organ. If such emphasis is applied to each note, however, the result is obviously unmusical, and soon loses its effect. Carefully-shaded and varied articulation is an essential feature of good hymn-playing.

A good example of this is the normal practice of giving a slight lift to an upbeat. Where the upbeat is a low note leading to a high note on the first beat of the bar, particularly in more lyrical hymns such as "St Clement" (*The day thou gavest*) and "Crimond" (*The Lord's my shepherd*), the lift does not need to be as pronounced because the melody itself provides the accent.

Care should be taken not to shorten so many notes that the tune becomes disconnected: a

temptation in such tunes as "St. Gertrude" (*Onward, Christian Soldiers*).

The rhythm of a triple-time melody can be supported by putting a slight accent onto the first beat of each bar (slightly shortening the last beat of the bars), but any tendency for the hymn tune to become waltz-like should be firmly resisted. Some triple-time melodies, such as "Hyfrydol" (*I will sing the wondrous story*) naturally call for a legato style of playing. Here, a milder articulation will generally be effective.

The bass notes (whether played by the left hand or the pedals) are a useful and frequently under-exploited tool. If we consider how a Salvation Army band, for instance, copes with the extreme difficulties of keeping a large congregation together in the almost-impossible acoustics of an open-air meeting, we see that the bass and percussion instruments are used to reinforce the relationship between upbeat and main beat. The bass of the organ can be used for the same purpose. The pedals (with a 16' stop) are particularly useful in this regard and may be used selectively, not necessarily following every note

of the bass line in the generally "approved" manner. For instance the following passage:



can be given more impetus if played:



In hymns, as in any music, faithfulness to the intention of the composer is important. If we are to use music that another person has composed, it should only be with the greatest reluctance, reservation and care that we make changes to it. The four-part notation of most hymns, however, is intended for choral singing and generally bears no relationship to effective organ accompaniment. It is therefore perfectly justifiable to be selective and creative, for instance with the distribution of

notes between left hand and pedal (as in the example above), where this serves and supports the composer's intentions. This is quite different to making cavalier changes to the harmony or character of the hymn. It is crucial to be aware of the difference between on the one hand adapting ("re-orchestrating") for the organ in order to do justice to the hymn and to enable the congregation to sing it properly; and on the other hand changing the hymn in a way that alters the intention, harmony or feel of the composition. The former is generally permissible; the latter only in certain cases, some of which are outlined here.

One of the most important musical signals which controls the flow of a hymn is the harmonic rhythm - the rate at which the harmonies change. If the harmonies change at the same rate as the pulse of the music or where upbeats are required to propel the music along, the music will flow easily and effortlessly. If, however, there is a change of harmony for each note of the melody, the music will naturally drag because of the effort of hearing and understanding all the harmonic events. Where, despite every encouragement, a congregation is "dragging" sufficiently to create

confusion in the beat, the organist may regard it as the lesser of two evils to "thin out" or simplify the harmonies in order to reinforce the beat. In the following example from "Warrington" (We sing the praise of Him who died), elaborate harmonies:



may be simplified to:



Conversely, an effective way of preventing a congregation from rushing is to insert extra changes in the harmony. This may be a general complication of harmony throughout the hymn or

in a particular line which tends to rush, or may be at a point where a long note has a tendency to be unduly shortened. Graham Kendrick's *Led like a lamb* is rhythmically complicated and contains long notes in the 4 bars immediately before the chorus. The composer has wisely provided harmonic changes to support the beat here, but the organist may regard it as wise to fill out these harmonies even more in order to ensure that the congregation hears and follows this signal.

Some hymns, such as "Helmsley" (*Lo! He comes with clouds descending*) have a generally busy rhythm through the verse but long notes in the last line. Here, the congregation can be prevented from rushing by adding harmony notes in a crotchet rhythm. Obviously, if the congregation is singing in harmony, or if a choir is singing, care should be taken to ensure that added notes do not come in conflict with the harmony.

An insoluble problem for the church musician is that the "normal" tempo of congregational singing has undergone many changes over the centuries. Hymn singing in many countries from the seventeenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century, for instance, would now be regarded as

absurdly slow.<sup>24</sup> The original harmonisation of some hymns composed during this period was conceived with this type of tempo in mind, and is too detailed and cumbersome to succeed at a tempo which would be regarded as realistic by a modern congregation.

In such a case, it can be argued that to follow the composer's text exactly will not do justice to the intended effect, and that a re-harmonisation is therefore justified. A re-harmonisation of this sort will be the result of a conscious and well-argued decision on the part of the organist, rather than

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<sup>24</sup> English sources from Georgian times suggest that hymns were sung at a tempo of between 2 and 4 seconds per beat, while a Scottish writer in 1787 described a semibreve as "as long as one can conveniently sing without breathing" (see Nicholas Temperley, *The Music of the English Parish Church* vol. 1 page 92). A Swedish author wrote in 1842: "In ceremonial and joyful hymn tunes the notes should be held for 3 seconds, apart from the last note of the strophe, which should be held rather longer. In mournful and serious hymns, the notes should be held for 4 seconds, the last one somewhat longer" ("Koraltonerna böra i högtidliga och glada psalmer uthållas i 3 sekunder, utenom den sista tonen i varje strof, som bör uthållas något längre. I sorgliga och allvarsamma psalmer uthållas tonerna vardera 4 sekunder, den sista något längre") (Pehr Anton Hejschman, *Method för Choralång efter zifferor* – translation: Tim Rishton)

half-heartedly taking liberties with the composer's intentions.

That the whole of this chapter so far has been devoted to issues of rhythm and pulse is not a coincidence. Given a hypothetical choice between steady, well-planned and confident rhythmical playing with many wrong notes, or completely correct notes with hesitant and unpredictable rhythm and beat, there is no question that it is the former which would provide the best leadership for the congregation. The notes are important - but it is the rhythm and the pulse that matter the most. Practising the notes is useful but practising and preparing rhythmic leadership is all-important.

## **Text**

A hymn is a combination of two elements - music and words. Both elements may be appreciated separately, but the combination of the two is more than the sum of the parts. It is a common misconception - especially amongst non-organists - that the organist is only concerned with the music. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The organist's function and concern in relation to the words of a hymn falls into two areas: representing the character of the words and clarifying their meaning.

The general character of a text is reflected by the organist in several different ways. As already noted in Chapter 7, the difference between a penitential hymn and a hymn of praise will be expressed in articulation and general approach. Matters of general style will be discussed briefly later in this chapter, and registration will be dealt with in Chapter 10. These and other variables will be taken into account during a hymn, so that one verse will often be played differently from another where the text makes this appropriate.

Clarifying the meaning of the text is more complicated. A variety of hymn-playing machines is available and marketed as a panacea for churches without organists. These range from MIDI interfaces for electronic organs to straightforward CDs of popular hymns. In some churches, where the stark choice lies between unaccompanied singing or the use of one of these automated aids, it is hardly surprising that the latter is favoured. Using a device of this sort,

however, not only disregards the individuality of each congregation and building, but also (except in the case of the most advanced models) implies that each verse is similar. In a 5-verse hymn the same music is simply provided five times.

This is not a new idea. Long before the invention of MIDI, barrel organs were marketed with a choice of hymns to serve those congregations that had no access to an organist. During the eighteenth century the influential Doncaster church musician, author and organist Dr Edward Miller complained of a parish clerk who gave the organist "not the words, but only the name of the tune, and how often it was to be repeated. Strange absurdity! How could the organist, placed in this degrading situation, properly perform his part of the church service?".<sup>25</sup>

This tendency is not unique to English-speaking churches. The organ copy of the official hymn book for the Church of Norway was actually published without containing the texts of the hymns to which the tunes relate: an astonishing

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<sup>25</sup> Edward Miller, *The History and Antiquities of Doncaster*, p.88.

and crass omission. Some organs incorporate counting devices to help the organist know when the last verse has been reached, and even ministers—who might be expected to know better—do not generally receive any training in church music to help them understand these issues. It is not deliberate discourtesy or lack of consideration that makes a minister say—like Edward Miller’s parish clerk—“just play this tune four times”. Incredible as it may seem, the minister has simply never thought about the fact that the organist primarily is playing the words, not the melody.

At its simplest level, we see the musical problem of hymn texts unfold in such hymns as “Benson” (*God is working his purpose out*) and *I am the bread of life*, where the notes themselves change slightly from verse to verse:

*God is working his purpose out*, v.1



*God is working his purpose out*, v.2



*I am the bread of life, v. 3**I am the bread of life, v. 4*

Failure to play the appropriate notes for each verse will be the source of some muddle which will considerably distract the congregation's attention.

It can reasonably be argued that such hymns are in a minority. Almost every hymn, however, contains significant variation in the metrical structure from verse to verse. For a straightforward example of this we can look at the hymn, *Lord, for the years*. Compare the following extracts from verses 2, 3 and 4 respectively:

Speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze  
Teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us

Spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care:  
For young and old, for commonwealth and nation

Loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain,  
Hungry and helpless, lost indeed without you

Although the note values themselves remain the same from verse to verse, the points at which the congregation will need to breathe varies from verse to verse ("For young and old" is four syllables, whilst "Hungry and helpless" is five, for example).

This type of variation from verse to verse is found in a majority of hymns. To play each verse in the same way would clearly make nonsense of the words. Yet this is done each Sunday not only by automated hymn-players but also, unfortunately, by some unthinking organists.

Many hymns also incorporate an even more radical form of metrical variety from verse to verse, where the lines are not grammatically self contained but one line runs over into the next. A well-known example of this is "Crimond" (*The Lord's my shepherd*). This hymn contains a number of different line structures of the type already

described, for instance (from verses 1, 2 and 3 respectively):

in pas - tures green; He lead - eth me

with - in - the paths of right - eous - ness

for Thou art with me, and Thy rod

Not all of the lines make sense if taken separately. The first verse, for instance, reads:

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want;  
 He makes me down to lie  
 In pastures green; He leadeth me  
 The quiet waters by.

As the punctuation indicates, the meaning is:

The Lord's my shepherd,  
 I'll not want;  
 He makes me down to lie in pastures green;  
 He leadeth me the quiet waters by.

If the organist "plays the notes as written" rather than articulates the meaning of the words, he is not only failing to help the congregation but is actively making nonsense of the words.

This phenomenon is sufficiently common that several examples will occur during most services. It is generally associated with texts written in a traditional literary style, whether translated from another language (which often increases the complexity):

All praise and thanks to God  
The Father now be given.  
The Son, and him who reigns  
With them in highest heaven  
(*Now thank we all our God*, v.3)

or originally in English:

The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy, and shall break  
In blessings on your head.  
(*God moves in a mysterious way* v. 3).

Contemporary hymn and song writers generally compose self-contained lines except when they are writing in a consciously traditional idiom:

The Spirit comes to fill your mouth  
 With truth, his mighty sword.  
 (Kendrick, *All heaven waits*, v. 2)

Some hymns are so permeated by over-running lines of this sort that almost nothing remains of the regular poetic structure:

We are the Church; Christ bids us show  
 that in his Church all nations find  
 their hearth and home, where Christ restores  
 true peace, true love, to all mankind  
 (*Forth in the peace of Christ we go*, v.5)

No-one reading such texts aloud would destroy the sense and meaning by failing to take account of the punctuation and grammar. To do so when singing a hymn is to suggest that the words are irrelevant - an utter travesty of the hymn's intention. If we sing "Room to deny ourselves a road" in verse 4 of *New every morning is the love* we are creating a nonsense that takes all authority and inspiration away from the hymn. We are left with a familiar old tune, and nothing more.

Clearly, the organist's playing must not only faithfully mirror the text, but—like every other

aspect of hymn playing—must provide leadership to ensure that the congregation understands it. This will involve pre-empting problems by exaggerating articulation in order to draw attention not to the organist but to the text itself.

When we read a text out loud we divide it into grammatically-meaningful segments in two ways: by projecting a sense of direction within the phrases and by pausing, for instance at commas and full stops. In hymn playing (as in organ playing generally) the organist needs to do both of these things. An awareness of the text will lead naturally to the former. In other words, if the organist sings the text while playing it (initially a difficult knack to acquire but one which repays every effort a hundredfold) then the shape of the phrase will naturally emerge. Breaks marking the ends of phrases should never interfere with the rhythm (in other words, a break is always the result of shortening the last note of a phrase rather than of delaying the first note of a new one).

Breaks may be given whatever degree of emphasis is required by the text. An emphatic

break calls for both hands (and feet where appropriate) to be lifted together. A lesser break can be achieved by lifting the hands only while the pedal part remains legato, or a subtle break by lifting only the melody line without affecting the harmony parts. Examples of all these can be found in Josiah Conder's text *The Lord is King* (v.4):

(4 stars represent a most emphatic break, reducing to 1 star representing a subtle break).

He reigns! \*\*\*\* ye saints, \* exalt your strain,  
Your God is King, \*\*\* your Father reigns,  
And He is at the Father's side,  
The man of love, \*\* the crucified.

As well as lifting the hands, the disposition of the harmony can sometimes be used as a subtle means of emphasising a break.

Commas and other punctuation marks are a useful prompt but are by no means a complete nor a reliable source of guidance. Breaks are often required when no commas are present, as we see, for instance, in the following extract from Timothy Dudley-Smith's *Lord, for the years*:

1

Lord, for the years Your love has kept and guided  
Urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way ...

2

Lord, for that word, the word of life which fires us,  
Speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze.

The comma after the initial "Lord" in each verse should be disregarded here as there is little point breaking the legato between the first and second notes. On the other hand, a good break is needed after "speaks to our hearts" in the second verse (even though no punctuation is marked) because the line is too long to sing in one breath and the congregation would otherwise tend to breathe after "and" by analogy with the corresponding breath in the first verse.

The latter situation—a breath introduced where grammatically it is not necessary simply in order to prevent the congregation from breathing in a worse place and thereby misunderstanding the text—is common. An example of this can be found in the first verse of *O love that wilt not let me go*, where in the last two lines:

That in thine ocean depths its flow  
May richer, fuller, be

the congregation would be tempted to breathe at the end of the line (after "flow"), which would make the text much more difficult to understand. If a good breath is introduced after "depths" the congregation will easily be persuaded to sing through to the end of the following line. A similar situation is found in the second verse (but not the subsequent verses) of the same hymn:

That in thy sunshine's blaze its day  
May brighter, fairer be.

Again a marked break after "blaze" - not necessary in its own right - will help guide the congregation as to the meaning of the text as a whole. A prophylactic break of this sort should be exaggerated, clearly lifting both hands and feet.

In some cases, printed punctuation - while grammatically important - should be disregarded. We have already noted that a comma after the first syllable of a verse should usually not be marked:

Since, Lord, Thou dost defend  
 Us with Thy Spirit  
*(He who would valiant be, v.3)*

except where a break is needed to strengthen the continuity of a subsequent long text phrase:

Then, with my waking thoughts  
 Bright with Thy praise  
*(Nearer, my God, to Thee, v. 4).*

Caution should be applied when faced with lists:

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;  
 Sight, riches, healing of the mind,  
*(Just as I am, without one plea, v.4)*

Too rigorous a marking of such commas would lead to disjointed singing without making the meaning of the text any clearer.

Where a comma introduces a necessary break in the middle of a long continuing phrase, the break should not be so substantial that the continuity of the sentence is lost:

Not for the lip of praise alone,  
 nor e'en the praising heart,

I ask, but for a life made up  
of praise in every part.  
(*Fill Thou my life*, v.2)

In this example, the comma after "heart" should be altogether disregarded in order to emphasise the important break after "I ask".

It can be difficult to accommodate a break into a melodic line that is moving in short note values, as in the following example:



A possible solution to this is to make a pronounced break in the accompaniment (left hand/pedal) rather than in the melody (which in this case will also entail slightly simplifying the harmony for that verse).

These examples show that even observing the punctuation marks in the different verses - while important and worthwhile - is not enough. The organist should reflect carefully on each line of the text and prepare a considered response to it.

Once again, this challenges the traditional view that the organist's practice is primarily concerned with preparing the notes. We have seen that issues such as tempo, the number of beats between verses, the extent and nature of the introduction and even the minutiae of text in each verse are all issues of fundamental and inescapable importance: issues which should lay claim to a great deal of the organist's practice time.

## **Style**

Style may be regarded as a more esoteric issue than the others discussed in this chapter, but an understanding of style is essential in order to play a hymn with conviction, and informs decisions regarding tempo, articulation and registration. The differing styles of hymns represents a wide-ranging topic, embracing many aspects of hymnology, and is certainly beyond the scope of this small handbook. Rather than attempting a systematic description of the issues involved, we will therefore simply look briefly at four different hymns in order to understand why style is important.

"Old hundredth" (*All people that on earth do dwell*)

This sixteenth-century melody is one of our most enduring, familiar and versatile hymn tunes. It has been sung at a variety of tempi and with various rhythms, but modern congregations have in general fairly consistent expectations of it. It is a "traditional" hymn tune that evokes a solid, stately feeling. Chords should be played crisply and cleanly, and the regular rhythms reflected and reinforced by emphatic breaks at the ends of lines. The melody is generally notated in  $4_4$  or  $4_2$ , but as usual a slow 2-in-a-bar feel gives a better sense of direction.

In most hymn books the melody is accommodated into a strict  $4_2$  metre:



Most congregations, however, would feel it more natural to sing a breve on the last note of each line, thus:



Although this looks odd in our modern notation (not a problem in earlier centuries), such an arrangement makes more sense of the placing of strong beats and reflects more closely the probable practice of earlier times. Whichever option is chosen, it is important to make a definite and consistent choice. Fudging the issue by making a half-hearted or indeterminate pause after each line detracts from the firm rhythmic character of the hymn and creates an element of uncertainty.

This foursquare rhythmic style is not a historically-authentic copy of the way the hymn was sung at some defined period—hymn-singing, after all, is neither a "performance" nor a historical re-creation—it is a reflection of the style a contemporary congregation associates with this hymn tune. When a hymn resonates with the congregation's expectations of it, it will more readily inspire and will be a better vehicle for the content of the text.

**"Misericordia" (*Just as I am, without one plea*)**

This Victorian hymn tune is clearly conceived as a melody with (occasionally luscious) harmony added. In contrast to the "Old 100th" the

articulation of the melody requires separate attention from that of the accompaniment. The melody is eminently suited to playing on a solo stop in some verses. The hymn carefully avoids the definite cadences of the "Old 100th" — in fact there is not a single perfect cadence in the entire hymn. While undue sentimentality should be avoided, the hymn's characteristics argue for a generally quiet and gentle approach. The tempo should be unhurried but not plodding — a good rule is to take the hymn as slowly as possible without losing a 1-in-a-bar feel. If a separate accent is felt on each of the three beats in the bar, the flow of the hymn will be lost and it will turn into an endless dirge.

**"Come and see" (*We worship at your feet*)**

This beautiful Graham Kendrick hymn (a pearl of modern hymn writing) lays even greater emphasis on the melody. Unlike the two previous examples, the music is not written out in 4-part harmony suitable for choral singing, but rather as a single melody line with a versatile accompaniment suitable primarily for piano. Nothing in the accompaniment is patently unsuited to the organ, but small adaptations can be made to reflect the sustaining abilities and

other characteristics of the instrument. For instance, the accompaniment of the first bar:



sounds thin on the organ and would be better played:



The organist can usefully imagine the organ "singing" the melody against a subtle accompaniment.

**"Walk in the light"** (*The Spirit lives to set us free*) is a rumbustious hymn of celebration. Essentially chordal rather than melodic in nature, the music is not notated for 4-part choir. It calls for crisp,

rhythmic playing with clearly-defined phrases, but above all for a sense of excitement. Many modern worship songs are notated in absurdly complicated rhythms. The intention of this notation is not that the musician should slave for hours with a metronome, struggling to make sense of the senseless, but simply that the music should "swing". The best advice is to learn worship songs not from the notes but by ear from a recording or group; and to play them from memory, improvising the accompaniment.

"Walk in the light" does not suffer from notational excesses, but the few off-beat rhythms are intended simply to "loosen up" the style and add to its exciting character.

The organ does not have to play each note that is written. It is too easy for the accompaniment to become a lead weight to people's feet rather than a springboard to enable rhythmic singing.

## **Mistakes**

Many organists dread playing the wrong number of verses for a hymn. Play one verse too few and the organist must frantically re-focus and join in with the congregation's already faltering singing. Play one verse too many and the organist feels ridiculous.

These problems are rare indeed if the organist sings the words along with the congregation. It is of course essential that the organist has a copy of the same text that the congregation is singing from (be aware that a one-off hymn sheet produced for a wedding, funeral or even for a Sunday service may contain a different number or order of verses from those in the organist's hymn book). If the words are being projected by overhead or data projector, the organist must be given a printout of the text to be used -- and ideally ought to be able to see the projected image.

Errors can and do occur. Every organist, at one time or another, will find himself in an embarrassing position. The quick-thinking organist can usually rescue a difficult situation. Almost without exception, hymns begin either on

a tonic chord or as an upbeat to a tonic chord. The start of a superfluous verse can be turned into a two- or three-bar continuation with a final tonic cadence. This is not difficult, nor does it require skill in extemporising. Practise playing a few suitable chords after a selection of hymns. This should give the confidence necessary to turn disaster into a deliberate-sounding conclusion. If the congregation starts an extra verse, join in as soon as possible, just playing the melody part. Bring in the harmonies for the second line. This may give the impression of a deliberate "build-up".

When a situation does seem to be getting out of hand, the best policy is to stop. Some years ago the funeral of a former bishop was being held at a Welsh cathedral. The choirboys had been threatened and bribed to behave. When it was time to sing the hymn *Let saints on earth in concert sing*, the cathedral organist inadvertently played the tune "Old Hundredth". He realised his mistake at once, but a moment's calculation suggested that the tune was likely to fit.

"Let saints on earth in concert sing",  
sang the congregation;

“with those whose work is done—done—done!”

A tremor of anticipation ran through the choir, and giggles were hastily stifled. The organist weighed up the perils of continuing against the embarrassment of stopping. He decided to continue.

Verse 3 began:

“One army of the living God  
To his command we bow-wow-wow”.

All semblance of composure was lost. Wisdom is cheap with the benefit of hindsight, but this is an instance where the organist should have realised that the congregation’s experience of the hymn was more important than the loss of face involved in stopping and re-starting with the correct tune.

Sometimes mistakes are made by others. The wrong hymn number is announced, or a printed order of service (for instance at a funeral or wedding) contains a printing error such as a missing line of text that would cause confusion or disruption. Should the organist who notices a significant error of this sort stand up and disturb

the solemnity of the occasion by announcing that there is a problem and reading out the correct text? Certainly. A moment's disruption is far better than outright confusion.

A "service" means serving God. God does not worry about our mistakes. We are servants not masters. Musical perfection is a vehicle, not a goal.

Another situation in which the visiting organist can find himself at a loss is where the congregation begins to repeat a chorus or verse. This is often because of local tradition: the congregation has become accustomed to singing a certain chorus twice even though this is not in the hymn book. In some places, indeed, regularly in more charismatic congregations, this can be sufficiently spontaneous that an "on-the-spot" decision is taken to repeat part of the hymn. This is particularly common in Wales where the chorus or the second half of a hymn is often repeated if there is sufficient "hwyl" or exuberance in the congregation.

Plainly, the organist needs to understand the congregation as well as the hymn!

## Chapter 9

### Psalms and responses



#### **Psalms**

The psalms are the hymn book of the Old Testament and Early Church. They can be read in the same way as other scripture, but many of them were intended to be sung. Oddly enough, the inscription "To the choirmaster" found above

55 of the psalms and the various directions given about the tunes to which specific psalms relate, are not generally regarded as evidence of musical (much less congregational) performance. Various contemporary writings, however, make it clear that some of the psalms were sung by the Levites in the Temple, with instrumental accompaniments. Other psalms bear specific inscriptions stating when or why they were sung. Over half of the psalms are “lamentations” – a form defined in the *Mishnah* (the rabbinic formulation of the law and the role of the Temple) as “when all sing together”.<sup>26</sup>

Psalms were evidently sung in the Temple, though probably not in the Synagogue. Early Christian worship (the precise relationship of which to Jewish services is uncertain) included singing (see Chapter 1).

The Psalms, however, do not naturally fit into the metrical structures to which we are accustomed for hymn singing, which means that if they are to be sung they must either be completely re-cast

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<sup>26</sup> John Smith, “Which psalms were sung in the Temple?”, p.173

(like Psalm 23 in its various metrical guises such as “The Lord’s my Shepherd, I’ll not want”), arranged,<sup>27</sup> or chanted with a variable number of syllables on a reciting note.<sup>28</sup> Some people regard the latter practice as one of the glories of Anglican church music. For others it is a dry and uninteresting anachronism with no place in contemporary worship; “the most inaccessible, visitor-hostile form of music in existence”.<sup>29</sup> Without expressing any opinion on this debate, we will look at some of the practical issues regarding the organ accompaniment of congregationally-chanted psalms. The purpose of this is not to commend the practice of chanting psalms but to equip the organist who is confronted by them. Similarly, psalm texts are quoted from generally conservative translations in order to reflect the texts that most probably will be encountered in this connection.

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<sup>27</sup> Such as *Psalm Songs*, edited by David Ogden and Alan Smith (London: Cassell, 1998), which contains psalm settings in a variety of styles (upbeat, contemplative, blues etc). I am grateful to John Leach for drawing this collection to my attention.

<sup>28</sup> The Gelineau psalter offers a responsorial alternative which is beyond the scope of this book.

<sup>29</sup> John Leach, in a private email to the author (12 July 2005).

For chanted psalms, the introduction fulfils exactly the same five functions as it does for hymns:

- It identifies which chant is to be sung – and reminds the congregation of the melody
- It defines the tempo of the rhythmic part of the chant, and implies the tempo of the recitation (which generally will be about twice the speed of the rhythmic notes)
- It guides the style – loud or quiet, legato or strongly-articulated
- It establishes the key and the starting note
- It provides the rhythmic signal that allows the congregation to come in confidently together.

The whole of the chant (both halves if a double chant) is used as the introduction. It is played in strict time, without any tendency to *rallentando*, and in a registration roughly corresponding in brightness and volume to that intended for the beginning of the psalm.

The organist's leadership during the verses is especially critical because the chanting of psalms is relatively complicated for a congregation.

Indeed, some church musicians regard congregational participation as undesirable and prefer to restrict psalm singing to trained choirs. The only way that the organist can provide convincing leadership is by being able not just to follow but to pre-empt the text—in other words, to be able to sing the text confidently whilst playing. For many organists, this will mean learning the notes of the chant from memory so that attention can be focussed on the text.

The organist's playing will reflect the text in two ways. Firstly, the general effect of the text is reflected in the registration and style of playing. The level of detail with which this is done varies from organist to organist. Some use many changes of registration to depict every phrase of the text, as well as using special effects such as pressing several adjacent pedals to create a rumbling noise if the text mentions thunder. Needless to say, such techniques easily cross the border into excess and absurdity. A few judicious contrasts in registration go a long way. Secondly, as we have seen with hymns (see Chapter 8) the details of the words must be made clear by the manner in which the music is articulated.

Psalm chants are played essentially legato, with a clear lift of one or both hands (and pedals if appropriate) where the punctuation or sense of the text calls for this.

The opening of Psalm 26, here quoted from *The Revised Parish Psalter*, raises a number of issues.

Be thou my judge O Lord, \* for I have | walked |  
innocently:

And my trust hath been | steadfast | in the | Lord.

Examine me O | Lord and | prove me:

Try out my | heart | and my | mind.

For thy loving-kindness is ever be- | fore mine | eyes:

And | I will | walk in . thy | truth.

A significant break is usually marked in the psalter (in this instance with a \*) and requires a deliberate and clear articulation. Small breaks, indicated only by a comma in the text, can be marked by a slight interruption in the held note or the legato phrase, perhaps only with one hand:

Psalm 108 v. 1

My heart is fixed o God, my | heart is | fixed.

There are many places where, although nothing is indicated by the punctuation, a light break (right hand only) is advisable to help propel the rhythm forward. An example in the above verses of Psalm 26 is the phrase in the second half of verse 1:

"And my trust hath been | steadfast | in the | Lord.".

Neither the punctuation nor the meaning of the words implies a grammatical break in this sentence, but in order to prevent unnecessary dwelling on the word "been" the organist should replay the chant note (only with the right hand) on the word "hath" in order to provide the rhythmic impetus that will drive the congregation to sing "hath been steadfast".

A small break of this sort may also be useful to separate words that are difficult to sing in succession, such as the following from Psalm 27 v.6:

And set me up up- | on a | rock of | stone.

Lifting the hand after the first “up” will both provide rhythmic drive for “upon a rock” and will prevent a feeling of stammering.

There is some disagreement about how to treat a single-syllable word on a “long” chant note, as is the case with the “And” in the second half of Psalm 26 verse 3. Some organists choose to respect the notated rhythm:



even though this places undue emphasis on the word “And”, while most organists would wish to follow natural speech rhythm:



Opponents of the latter practice suggest that congregations are unable to cope with rhythmic nuances of this sort, although the personal experience of the present author does not support this view. It is in any event a question that must

be addressed, if only because in most psalters the situation occurs at the end of every psalm and canticle in the Gloria:

And | to the | Holy | Ghost.

The foreword to *The Revised Parish Psalter* sums up these considerations admirably:

Good chanting resembles good deliberate reading and reproduces the stresses and non-stresses of the words. This cannot be achieved by following signs; constant thought is needed to produce a sympathetic interpretation.

### **Choice of chants**

As all chants in principle can be used for any psalm it is not immediately obvious that some care should be taken to choose an appropriate one. There are at least three criteria for choice:

- The general character of the chant
- The contours of the melody
- Whether or not the congregation is familiar with it.

The general character of the psalm will be loosely reflected by that of the chant. Although there is a

common misconception that choosing appropriate chants is a mysterious alchemy that only the most experienced can attempt, this is often a straightforward matter of musical common sense. As an obvious illustration of this we can take two contrasting psalms:

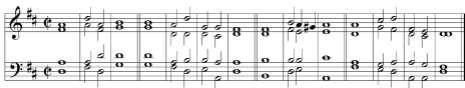
#### Psalm 149

Praise ye the Lord. O sing unto the Lord a new song:  
 Praise him in the assembly of his servants  
 Let Israel rejoice in him that made him,  
 and let the children of Zion be joyful in their King.  
 Let them praise his name in the dance

#### Psalm 69

Save me o God  
 For the waters are come up even unto my throat  
 I sink down into the deep mire where no ground is  
 I am come into deep waters, and the floods run over  
 me  
 I am weary with crying, my throat is dry;  
 My sight faileth me for waiting so long upon my God.

Given a choice of the following two chants, few people would be in any doubt as to which was appropriate to which psalm:



In this instance, the Purcell chant is clearly suitable for Psalm 69 and the Nares chant for Psalm 149.

Where a psalm contains contrasting sections (for instance, a number of verses asking for mercy followed by a verses praising God for his power) a melody of “neutral” character may be used, or a different chant may be used for the contrasting section. The latter solution is generally preferable except where this would confuse the congregation or would result in a rapid succession of changes of chant.

Single chants are generally used for shorter psalms and double chants for longer ones,

although there are of course exceptions to this rule.

The contours of the melody are more difficult to accommodate as the text changes from verse to verse. It is very rare to find a chant that perfectly fits all verses of a psalm. In most chants, the second minim in each bar does not leap upwards in relation to the first, as this can lead to an inappropriate emphasis:



Even though the precise details of the texts may prove difficult or impossible to accommodate to the contours of a melody, the amount of the melody's vertical movement will affect its general appropriateness. A psalm such as 122 ("I was glad when they said unto me: 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'") has a degree of dynamism that calls for a "striding" melody, whilst Psalm 131 ("O Lord, I am not haughty ... I have stilled and quieted my soul") calls for a melody with fewer leaps.

Although psalm chants are short and not difficult to learn, a small and uncertain congregation will certainly benefit from singing a familiar rather than unfamiliar chant. An uncertain organist will derive even more benefit from the comfort of a well-known chant: indeed, many organists memorise two contrasting chants in order to use them in “emergencies”. It is however important to build up a reasonable repertoire of chants so that the same ones are not in constant use.

### **Choice of edition and style of pointing**

Like the choice of chant, the choice of edition and pointing is often seen as an esoteric issue: a judgement too sophisticated to be made at local level. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is a fairly straightforward decision to be made, on the basis of which some psalters will clearly be seen to be more appropriate to a particular congregation than others.

Apart from the important issue of text and translation, the main difference between psalters—indeed, the only difference that we will focus on in this chapter—is the balance between predictability and appropriateness in relation to the pointing.

A single psalm chant of the customary type consists of two halves: in the first half a reciting note followed by three rhythmic notes, and in the second half a reciting note followed by five rhythmic notes. At its most systematic and predictable, the reciting note can be used for all but the last three and five syllables respectively. For instance, the first verse of Psalm 100 is largely uncomplicated:

O shout to the Lord in triumph | all the | earth:  
 Serve the Lord with gladness  
 And come before his | face with | songs of | joy.

Here, all but the last three syllables in the first half and five syllables in the second half are sung on the reciting note.

Verse 2, however, poses a greater challenge:

Know that the Lord he is God:  
 It is he that has made us and we are his  
 We are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

The first half can be sung with all but the last three syllables on the reciting note:

Know then that the Lord | he is | God

Or—rather better—placing the accents on “Lord” and “God”:

Know then that the | Lord . he is | God

The second half cannot with any integrity place the last five syllables on the last five notes, as this would produce an inappropriate accent:

... and the | sheep of | his pas- | ture.

The closest we can come to this without making nonsense of the text is the solution adopted by *The Cathedral Psalter*:

... and the | sheep of | his | pasture.

Slightly better is:

... and the | sheep | of his | pasture.

Better still is:

We are his | people . and the | sheep of . his | pasture.

This last solution places the musical accents on the most appropriate syllables—but requires the greatest awareness in order to sing it.

Matching the musical emphases to the grammatical ones clearly improves the psalm singing if viewed empirically, but at a risk of making the process less accessible to the congregation. Taken thus to its logical extreme, psalm singing requires careful preparation and rehearsal and is then regarded as best left to a choir. In many cathedrals and college chapels, it is made clear that the congregation may not join in singing the psalms, and that the choir sings them as a “performance” on behalf of the congregation, as we saw in Chapter 1.

At the other extreme, singing psalms can be made entirely simple and predictable so that the congregation can participate easily. This, however, is also achieved at a cost—if the meaning of the words is obscured by ill-judged emphases the congregational singing will become so mechanical and unthinking that the whole exercise becomes pointless.

A “good” psalter is therefore one that reflects the needs and abilities of the congregation or choir for which it is intended. As a general rule, older psalters such as *The Cathedral Psalter* tend towards the predictable and systematic principle, the newest psalters (such as the *ASB Psalter*) are more nuanced and challenging, while such as *The Revised Parish Psalter* steer a middle road. This chronological view is, of course, an oversimplification but can be regarded as a general trend.

## Responses

In those churches where congregational responses are sung—whether by choir or congregation—the musical techniques involved are similar to those of psalm singing. The text that is sung to a reciting note should flow in a relaxed but stylised speech rhythm, aided by judicious signals and corrections from the organist (for instance a light lift of the hands to emphasise the sense of the words).

The special feature of the responses is the dialogue between leader (priest/precentor/liturgist) and group (congregation/choir). As we saw in Chapter 7 (page 141) the dynamism of the

leader will be reflected in the response of the group. If the leader is hesitant, slow or unenthusiastic, the response will be similar. If the leader sings the words as though they are really meant and have an important significance, the response will reflect this. The organist cannot compensate for poor leadership from the liturgist.<sup>30</sup> The rhythm of statement—response—statement is naturally constant and should be reinforced by the organist.

Some ministers or leaders like to be accompanied, while others prefer the organ to remain silent except during the congregational responses. Where the leader is accompanied, this should be done in a subtle way. A subdued 8-foot stop should be used and notes held as much as possible rather than repeated. It is often useful to hold a 2- or 3-note chord in the tenor octave alone. Contrast with the accompaniment of the congregational response can be achieved by playing on a different manual, by changing registration (limit this to the addition and subtraction of one single stop such as a 4-foot

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<sup>30</sup> This can be a topic of diplomatic discussion between organist and minister: "how can we improve the congregation's confidence in the responses ...?"

Principal) and by the number of notes played (the thickness of the harmony) and the articulation. Responses never call for sophisticated registrations or effects and should always be played simply.

## Chapter 10

### Using the organ



## **Registration**

Every organ and every building is different. Every service has its own circumstances, its own congregation and its own needs. No book can give an exact prescription for the choice of stops, but some general principles can be outlined.

It is natural to imagine that registration—the art of selecting the most appropriate stops—is primarily concerned with the volume or the timbre (reeds/flutes) of the sound produced. Careful thought, however, suggests that the most important variable in terms of congregational accompaniment is brightness.

Let us consider the differing needs of a small and a large congregation. A small congregation may be attending a funeral or wedding—perhaps unfamiliar with the church—or may be a faithful few gathered for an unfashionable service. In either event the congregation is likely to need encouragement to sing. Each person will feel a measure of insecurity, of being unable to “hide in a crowd”, which may be compounded by being asked to sing in an unfamiliar place or under stressful circumstances such as at a funeral. If the organist plays very quietly, the congregation is

unlikely to sing at all because each individual will feel exposed. Surely, such a congregation needs support and encouragement from the organist. Conversely, if the organist plays too loudly, the congregation will feel that singing is needless. A large congregation, however, will generally have a greater corporate self-confidence and each individual will feel less exposed. The large congregation does not have the same need for encouragement, but the accompaniment needs to be substantial enough to maintain control. Does this mean that large and small congregations call for an identical registration? By no means.

The small congregation needs solid (but not overbearing) support at the pitch at which it is singing. In practical terms, this will generally mean an 8' Principal (Diapason) stop. It may be appropriate to add an 8' Flute or Dulciana to vary the tone, or even a quiet 4' Flute to add a little brightness, but more incisive upperwork (such as a 4' Principal, 2' or mutation stop) should be avoided, as should reed stops. When practising in an empty church the main 8' stop may seem too powerful for a small gathering. In practice, however, it is unlikely to be so. The congregation will feel its presence but the people's own singing

at the same pitch will mean that the organ will sound unobtrusive.

The challenge presented by the large congregation is to maintain leadership (meaning that the organ must be audible) without making the congregation feel that it is competing with a tidal wave of organ noise. The bright sound that this requires will generally be provided by a good 2' stop, usually backed up by a 4' Principal and perhaps a mutation stop such as a 2 2/3 or 1 1/3. Just as the piccolo can be heard over a full orchestra despite producing a relatively-modest volume of sound, these bright stops will be audible to those who are singing. A second reason for drawing such stops is that high-frequency sounds are less robust than lower sounds and are therefore more likely to be "swallowed up" by the bodies and clothing of the congregation. This is why the organ sounds duller when the church is full. This effect should be borne in mind when preparing registrations in an empty church.

Mixture stops add both brightness and complexity to the organ's sound. They can be useful where the organ otherwise would be

unable to keep the congregation together, or where a particularly striking sound is required. They should however be used sparingly to accompany singing because the complex composition of the mixture does not blend well with voices, nor is it regarded as particularly helpful to singers.

To sum up, the small congregation requires the supportive depth of sound offered by a good 8' foundation, while the large body of singers needs the penetrating brightness of good 4', 2' and other high-pitched stops.

Additional variety of sound can be provided by the range of stops available: flue stops of broad and narrow scale (respectively fluty or stringy sounds) and reed stops of various types. Within these broad guidelines there are many possible registrations, and the varied nature of the organ makes detailed commentary unnecessary and inappropriate.

As a general rule it is desirable to use as few stops as necessary to achieve the desired effect. It is rarely desirable to draw several flute stops of the same pitch, especially in the case of pitches of 4'

and above. Doing so reduces the clarity of the sound and emphasises any discrepancies in tuning. Good teaching on this has become widespread, leading to some organists being reluctant to draw two 8' stops together. Adding an 8' flute to an 8' principal can, however, make the sound rounder, fuller (and sometimes more prompt or regular) without an undue risk of sounding out of tune.

Some choruses and short hymns that state or explore a single idea remain on a single emotional level throughout. Most hymns, however, are not static in this way but use successive verses to explore their topic from different perspectives. If the music is to reflect the meaning of the text this implies that the organist should change the nature of the organ sound (change stops) as appropriate.

Three skills are required for this:

- Determining when to change stops
- Determining which stops to use
- Carrying out the action.

### When to change stops

The early editions of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* contained detailed volume directions for each verse of hymns. For instance, verse 3 of *Christian, doth thou see them* reads:

- |    |                                 |
|----|---------------------------------|
| p  | Christian, doth thou hear them, |
|    | How they speak thee fair?       |
| cr | "Always fast and vigil?         |
|    | Always watch and prayer?"       |
| ff | Christian, answer boldly,       |
|    | "While I breathe I pray."       |
| p  | Peace shall follow battle,      |
| f  | Night shall end in day.         |

If the organist were to follow these directions – as, indeed, practice at that time dictated – this would entail the almost acrobatic feat of constantly pushing and pulling stop jambs whilst preserving continuity. Watching the best organists of that generation, we could not but admire their skill, even while disparaging the results of it. A number of problems are associated with this approach:

The meaning or message of a hymn is usually conveyed cumulatively; in other words, the hymn

gradually builds up its argument. If our attention is drawn to the words of each individual phrase there is a danger of "not seeing the wood for the trees".

Frequent changes of timbre or volume on the organ serve to draw attention to the instrument in a way that is not the case with the piano or instrumental groups.

If constant registration changes are made to respond to small-scale nuances of meaning, then larger-scale contrasts in the text will require overbearing registrations which may not be suitable to sing to.

"Abide with me", was referred to in Chapter 5 (page 114) as a good example of a hymn that depicts a transformation, its argument progressing from darkness and gloom on earth into heavenly light.

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;  
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.  
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;  
Earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away;  
Change and decay in all around I see;  
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

I need Thy presence every passing hour.  
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power?  
Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?  
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;  
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.  
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?  
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;  
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.  
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;  
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

The first two verses describe the earthly condition, the third verse proposes a solution, the fourth celebrates the effectiveness of that solution and the fifth describes the transition into glory. If excessive changes in registration are made—as prescribed in the former edition of *Hymns Ancient*

*and Modern* – the overall logic of this argument is lost:

mf      Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;  
             The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.  
             When other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
 f        Help of the helpless, (p) O abide with me.

The changes in registration should reflect the overall structure of the hymn, from the restraint of the first verse to the penetrating brightness of the last.

A few hymns are constructed in such a way that each verse falls into two powerfully-contrasted halves.

Who is this so weak and helpless,  
 Child of lowly Hebrew maid,  
 Rudely in a stable sheltered,  
 coldly in a manger laid?  
 'Tis the Lord of all creation,  
 Who this wondrous path hath trod;  
 He is God from everlasting,  
 and to everlasting God.

Who is this, a Man of sorrows,  
 walking sadly life's hard way,

Homeless, weary, sighing, weeping,  
 over sin and Satan's sway?  
 'Tis our God, our glorious Saviour,  
 Who above the starry sky  
 Now for us a place prepareth,  
 where no tear can dim the eye.

etc.

William W. How

William Young Fullerton's *I cannot tell* is similar in this respect.

A hymn of this sort calls for a contrast in organ sound between the first and second halves of each verse. This is most readily achieved by alternating between two manuals.

There are, of course, a number of longer hymns that continue a single argument throughout, making contrasts in registration unnecessary, indeed counterproductive. It is difficult to identify individual verses in "Amazing Grace", for instance, that require contrasting registration.

### **Which stops should be chosen?**

We have already seen that brightness is at least as important as volume in choosing a suitable registration. If we are to give a good lead and inspire confidence we must maintain support for the congregation. If the organ is too quiet, the congregation will falter and impetus will be lost. Where the organ sound is to reflect a gentle, peaceful or restrained text, it is useful to take away the brightest (highest-pitched) stops first while maintaining a solid 8-foot foundation so far as this is possible.

When preparing registrations in an empty church it should be remembered that organ sound will be dulled substantially when a congregation is in the building.

### **How to change stops**

As with so many aspects of organ playing, careful planning is the key to successful stop changing. There are a number of practical principles:

Ensure the simplest possible succession of stops. It is not necessary to completely change registrations between each verse. This can, of course, be achieved with the aid of pistons and

other registration aids, although even with modern electronic capture systems it is difficult and time-consuming to set up every proposed stop change in advance of a service—and doing so limits the opportunity to respond creatively to the congregation's needs that day. It is always better to plan a simple scheme that can reliably be carried out rather than an over-ambitious one that may go wrong.

It is often possible to change manuals rather than altering the stops.

Do not plan to make more than one hand movement between each verse. In the tranquillity of a practice session it may be possible to draw out a stop on one side of the console and push in one on the other, but amidst the stress and distraction of a service this is a recipe for disaster. Construct a sequential plan that does not depend on more than one gesture at a time (i.e. pushing in or drawing out a single stop or two or three stops that can be drawn simultaneously).

It was mentioned near the beginning of this chapter that it is usually inadvisable to draw more than one 4' or 2' stop at the same time. This

rule, however, can be disregarded where necessary to achieve simplicity. For instance, if the planned registration for the first verse is an 8' Principal, 4' Octave and 2' Flute, and for the second verse is an 8' Principal and 4' Flute, then the 4' Flute should also be drawn during the first verse (even though this will entail the disadvantages of having two 4' stops sounding at the same time) in order that the stop change between the two verses can be achieved in a single hand movement (i.e. pushing in the 4' Octave and 2' Flute).

While playing the hymn, prepare for stop changes by looking for the relevant stop jambs and locating them visually before reaching out for them. As a rule, if stops are to be changed at the end of a verse, the organist should be looking at the relevant stop jamb before the final chord of the verse has been played.

Many organists find it helpful to incorporate the physical movement of drawing or pushing in the stop into the continued rhythm between the verses. In other words, the stop change is made "on the beat", reducing the danger of losing the

sense of rhythm due to having too many things to think about.

Maintaining a steady beat between the verses is essential (see Chapter 2) and must not be compromised by time taken to change stops. If there is any doubt whether a planned stop change can be accomplished in the time available, then it should be abandoned even if this results in a registration that is not ideal for the following verse. The organist should establish a clear sense of priorities in this respect, to avoid the unnecessary hesitation and stress of trying to take a difficult decision between verses.

Using different stops is, however, not the only means of varying the organ's sound—indeed, it is neither the simplest nor the most effective means. To demonstrate this point, select 8' and 4' principals on the main manual and couple a 16' pedal to it. Then, without changing the registration at all, play a 4-verse hymn as follows:

Verse 1: normally, using manuals and pedals  
 Verse 2: manuals only, thinning the  
 harmony where possible to 3-part texture

Verse 3: as verse 1, but with the melody line played as a “solo” one octave higher (this entails playing the tenor and alto parts with the left hand)

Verse 4: as verse 1, but with the right hand played one octave higher and with harmonies doubled up and thickened out where possible.

The hearer will almost certainly believe that four separate registrations were used, when in reality no stops were changed during the hymn. If so much variety can be obtained from one registration on one manual, how much more variety can be obtained by using two manuals?

“Trio” combinations—in which the hymn tune is played as a solo on one manual, accompanied on the other manual—can be used in several ways, although playing in this way is technically more challenging.

### **How and what to practise**

One of the commonest complaints made by organists is that “there’s never enough time to practise”. Many musicians struggle with their practice schedule, but organists have the particular problem of a constantly-changing

repertoire prepared at short notice on an instrument that is not situated at home. It is clearly important that the organist makes the best possible use of the practice time available.

What is generally called “practice” can be divided into two entirely separate functions: practice and learning. Practice consists of maintaining and developing technique and ensuring that performances reflect the organist’s carefully-considered intentions. Learning a piece of music is the process of assimilating or making sense of the notes and training the brain and fingers to play them accurately.

Learning can become a dispiriting process. Many people attempting to get to grips with a new piece of music flounder somewhere in the middle and eventually give up, with a consequent loss of confidence in their own abilities. The reason for this is more commonly poor learning techniques than an inability to play the notes.

Different people have different learning styles. Some need the discipline of a set period of “hard work”, while others function far better with just a few minutes at a time of actual learning,

interspersed with something entirely different. There is no right and wrong way, but each person needs to develop a method of learning that utilises natural strengths rather than fights against natural weaknesses.

There are only a few nearly-universal principles for learning music, three of which can be examined here.

Firstly, if learning is the process of formulating a vision—a goal or template for performance—then it is clear that this goal cannot be defined whilst struggling against the limitations of unwilling fingers and feet. The place to create this vision is more likely to be the kitchen table than the organ console. The sculptor creating a statue does not first reach for a chisel—the first stage is to examine the subject and form a vision or plan of how to turn the block of raw material into a good representation. Enthusiastically chiselling without a considered plan or prior concept is unlikely to result in a masterpiece. Attacking a piece of music without a concept of how it is to sound is unlikely to result in a good performance.

Secondly, when attempting to play difficult passages, first analyse the nature of a difficulty rather than simply trying repeatedly to overcome it. Problems are often solved by doing things in a different way. Repeated efforts to accomplish things in an inappropriate way serve only to reinforce the problem.

Thirdly, the familiar but ever-true advice to start at the end cannot be bettered. Learning a piece of music one phrase at a time, starting at the end of the piece and working backwards towards the beginning has many advantages. It builds confidence—it's always possible to play to the end of the piece without having to stop. It makes performances psychologically easier because the end of the piece (which often is the part with the greatest technical challenges) has always been practised more than the beginning, so that in performance the piece seems to get progressively easier, like swimming towards the shore rather than heading out into unfamiliar depths. It effectively eliminates "tricky passages" by preventing the temptation to blunder through difficult sections with the intention of returning to learn them properly afterwards. It promotes a

sense of direction because the organist at all times knows where a particular passage is heading.

This type of systematic approach saves time, reduces the impact of counter-productive learning habits and ensures a properly-considered response to the music.

Practising is no less difficult than learning. To its obvious functions—technical training to maximise the player's potential and the constant effort to match performance to vision—can be added a third: to be prepared for the practical, physical and musical challenges of services and other events.

Technical training encompasses a wide range of exercises. Not only do fingers need to be kept supple and accurate, but the body needs to be protected against stiffness, aches and repetitive strain injuries. An alarming number of organists suffer from chronic headaches brought on by tense neck and shoulder muscles, and from back problems caused by poor posture. All aspects of playing—even the most mundane things—need regular practice out of context in order to identify and deal with bad habits.

We saw in chapters 7 and 8 that issues such as the number of beats between verses, articulating the text in individual verses and the extent of the introduction all need careful preparation and rehearsal. Earlier in this chapter we considered the need to plan stop changes to enable satisfactory contrasts in registration without compromising the rhythm. These and other aspects demand at least as much practice as the notes themselves. Practising is concerned with reducing stress by being prepared. Routine problems—failing to navigate complicated service books, finding that the hymn text on the data projector differs from that in the organist's book, or finding that necessary stop changes are impracticable—are the commonest sources of stress and mishap in a service. Good preparation is vital and should be regarded as a part of practising.

Each person has an individual ideal routine and it is impossible to lay down universal rules. Most people respond best to a mixture of technical exercises, practising familiar music and learning new works within the same practice session. It is however sensible to take note of feelings. If frustration sets in because an individual goal

cannot be accomplished—a particular passage keeps going wrong or no obvious solution can be found to a problem, it is wise to move on to something else and return to the issue another day. Excessive focus on and repetition of errors serves only to reinforce them and can turn one day's aberration into a permanent neurosis!

## Conclusion

In the mid 1750s, the Revd William Hanbury succeeded in having an organ installed in the village church at Church Langton in Oxfordshire, despite the opposition of parishioners, led by the redoubtable local landlady Mrs Pickering. According to Hanbury's humorous and no doubt exaggerated account of the incident, the parishioners had little idea what was going on or even what an organ was:<sup>31</sup>

Various were the conjectures of the common people, and many curious reports of various kinds prevailed amongst them. Some said I was to set up the Pretender ... One party affirmed it was a scheme to raise the militia ... The Organ-pipes were really taken for firearms ... which occasioned its being credited by some, that Mrs Pickering's house was to be blown up.

Some 250 years later, two well-known Norwegian organists (who had quarrelled some years earlier about the editorship of a music journal) engaged in a public disagreement conducted through the letters page of a national newspaper. The one (Mr

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<sup>31</sup> Hanbury, *The History of the Rise and Progress*, p.65

X) wrote that the other (Mr Y) had refused to allow a visiting choir to sing a traditional children's song in Mr Y's church and that this kind of narrow-mindedness will reduce the appeal of music and isolate musicians. Mr Y replied that, on the contrary, music was thriving in his cathedral: there were plenty of members in the choirs and concerts were very well attended. It was the populist approach of Mr X that was damaging the reputation of church music. And so on. Two musicians so focussed on the apparatus, structures and visible results of their professional activity that both seem to have lost sight of the real question: how does God want this congregation today to worship through music, and how can the musician participate in and facilitate this process?

When music is controlled by an individual—be it pastor or musician—as a tool to support a private agenda, it ceases to be God's tool.

This book has argued that we can only build our detailed conclusions about how we perform church music—or indeed about what music we should have—upon a firm understanding of why we should have it at all. If, as we have seen, music

was a part of creation itself (Job 38:7) and is a common currency of heaven throughout all time, past present and future, then even our imperfect human experience of it is our most tangible means of communication with the heavenly worship.

How does this affect our approach to church music? Firstly, we should take it seriously. Music is neither entertainment nor a background sound to make a service more attractive. It is not even a means of inspiring us to worship—its very substance is prayer, worship and spiritual language. Modern Christians are preoccupied with expression through verbal language—itself a human construct—at the expense of the deeper and more immediate communication of music. Secondly, whilst we should take music seriously we should not take our personal artistic principles and pretensions too seriously. If music is to be a means of communication between God and humanity then it must be a fluid medium, reaching between a constant God and an ever-changing humanity. If we “freeze” church music by creating a fixed model of how it should be, then we are creating and bowing down to an idol. It may very well be that a Tallis motet or a

Kendrick chorus is the perfect means of communication in one place and at one time, and that our responsibility as a church musician is to ensure that its musical qualities make that communication possible, but this should not be taken as a static truth applicable yesterday and tomorrow in both one church and in another.

It is evident that spiritual discernment is as important to the church musician as musical technique. Both are essential—careless music is both unworthy service and a hindrance to the congregation—but technique can only be built upon the objective of what the music is to achieve in its particular time and place. That we have lost sight of the biblical concept of music as spiritual warfare (see Chapter 2) is in large measure because church musicians have built technique upon a foundation other than spiritual discernment. Maintaining a particular musical establishment based on specific techniques and repertoires has for many become an end in itself.

What can the Christian Church (irrespective of denomination) do to ensure that music plays its true role in the Church? We need to increase our expectations and demands of music. If both

congregation and preacher expect no more of the sermon than ten minutes of ecclesiastical-style platitudes in the midst of the service, then that is all that the sermon will achieve. Similarly, music will be limited by the low expectations of the congregation, minister and church musician. We also need to increase our expectations of and demands on the church musician. The pastor and the church musician must maintain a meaningful dialogue about music's role in worship—a dialogue that will involve a clear mutual respect and understanding of the other's insights, vision and expertise. Does the church musician have the expertise to articulate such a vision and the technique to put it into practice? If not (and very many church musicians, amateur and professional alike, lack one or both of these) they should be provided with suitable training. How often do churches send their musicians on music courses? Rarely. How often do churches send their musicians on theological courses? Almost never: a terrible indictment of churches' spiritual vision for music. Churches offer support at diocesan, regional or national level for preachers, theologians and priests. Do these church institutions offer comparable support for musicians? Do church dioceses or regional bodies

employ an officer responsible for developing the spiritual vision of its church musicians? Failing to do these things makes the church complicit in denying and hindering the effectiveness of what should be an important and central ministry.

The opening paragraph of the introduction asked what image or impression the term “church music” conjured up. The superficial images (the person struggling at an organ, the well-oiled professionalism of the cathedral-choir broadcast or even the cultural heritage of the well-known hymn or anthem) become self-fulfilling. The image becomes the goal. The prophetic vision is lost. Music is praised, admired and sidelined. We play the notes and miss the grace.

We face a choice. We can fulfil the plastic and static image of church music as a commodity. An electronic hymn “juke box” will do so effortlessly and inexpensively. A similar device can provide perfectly-crafted sermons and prayers at the touch of a button. Alternatively, we can take the more difficult road of looking honestly, objectively and above all prayerfully at the state of our church and at how music can bring God and people closer together. This may involve the

pain of change, but it will also involve the Church's realisation of its potential and responsibility in training and supporting musicians for a ministry whose real nature has become buried under the gradually-accumulated debris of tradition.

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