

Some Thoughts on the Why, When, and How of Congregational Singing.

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THERE are three standpoints from which the question of congregational singing may well be viewed with both interest and instruction. The history of the people's part in the music of worship may be traced back to its earliest days, and its rise and decline at various periods discussed. Such a consideration cannot be otherwise than helpful, as a means of encouragement in those matters which are right and of correction where we may go astray. Of similar benefit is the consideration of the practices of the whole of Christendom, or of some branch of it, at various times and in various circumstances, for by this we are assisted in the fixing of a standard for our own practice.

As the author of the following notes is one who for many years has been engaged in the work of controlling and guiding the music of the public services which, by the direction of the Book of Common Prayer, we sing week by week throughout the year, and the notes were prepared for the assistance and instruction of various parochial bodies, he has confined himself to the directions of that book and the issues raised by such directions. From such standpoint he has endeavoured to answer, in a simple and intelligible manner, the questions with regard to congregational singing—Why? When? and How?

I.

Music, just the same as all other æsthetic or artistic adjuncts to worship, has three main objects or reasons for its employment. The first and greatest of these objects, which also includes all others, is that of the honour and glory of God.

When we employ this art in the exercise of our worship, we must employ it as an integral part of such worship—as a giving to God something without which the offering of the whole man,

of ourselves, our souls and bodies, would be incomplete. Man is endowed with certain talents, each in a greater or lesser degree, and a certain portion of those talents, or of the result of those talents, must be offered just the same as we offer a proportion of our money, our goods, and our time. There are few, if any, who have no musical ability of some kind, and consequently the use of a certain part of that ability becomes a necessary part of the worship which the majority have to offer.

The second object of the employment of music and other arts in our worship is that of assisting the devotion of the worshipper; of arousing his emotions and preparing them to receive impressions from higher sources. Music, if properly used, is one of the greatest aids to devotion.

Of no less importance is the third of these objects, which is that of the attraction of those who would otherwise not be drawn to take part in the worship of their Creator, or to listen to His Holy Word.

In different times, places, and circumstances, the method of putting into effect these three functions, of carrying out these objects, must of necessity vary very greatly. We cannot now use the same worship music as was used in the days of King David, nor even such as was used in the early days of the Christian Era; neither can we use it in the same manner. It is all but impossible that we in the Western Church should use the same music as do our brethren in the East, though with the growing similarity in many respects of the people of the East and West, it is possible the day is not far distant when we shall be able to do so. At present, however, our ideas, our senses and temperaments, our training, our very feeling for sound values and effects, as well as all the circumstances of our lives, are entirely different; and so are, and must be, our artistic and devotional methods.

Even in the same country and the same district circumstances may be so varied as to preclude any attempt at uniformity, even if such uniformity were desirable. The church set to minister to the needs of a poor parish, with an inconsiderable endowment,

cannot possibly have the musical part of its services conducted in the same manner as can the rich cathedral where all are anxious to assist. Nor does it seem to me at all desirable that uniformity in this matter should exist.

There is nothing more absurd—and therefore, more irreverent—than the attempts which are made at some churches, where exists the least opportunity of doing so, to emulate the places where opportunity and wealth lie side by side, and where simplicity such as is required in small churches would, as a rule, be ineffective and in meagre contrast to the surroundings of a large or ornate building. The objects for which music is introduced into our worship can best be achieved by adapting it to the circumstances of each individual place. What would in one place be a worthy offering, an aid to devotion, or a means of evangelizing those who do not hold the Faith, would possibly in another place be exactly the reverse.

There is a story, told, I think, by Longfellow, of a certain monastery where dwelt pious monks, whose singing was very bad, but who sang with such heartfelt fervour that the Angels thronged around each night, waiting to carry to the Throne of Grace the precious offering of humble hearts. One day, however, a monk from a distant brotherhood visited them, whose fame as a singer had reached from one end to the other of Christendom. When evening came the monks sat round and listened, thinking all the time that never before had *Magnificat* sounded so sweet in their monastery. But the Angels wept that night for the absence of any offering to carry to Heaven.

The moral of the story, of course, is that however good our music may be as an artistic achievement, as worship it is valueless without the heart. It does not by any means imply that bad singing, or bad art of any kind, is more acceptable than is good. On the contrary, it cannot by any be considered so acceptable, for we must not dare to offer to God anything but the best of all we have. But it does mean that whatever we offer must be our own, and must be the result of our own personal efforts.

It thus happens that the manner and extent of congregational singing must, and will, be different in every different church—cathedral, parish church, or mission room. There are, nevertheless, certain general principles which apply to all cases ; and there are also certain general rules which should be observed by all, if congregational singing is to be what it ought to be. Certain responsibilities also rest upon each individual member of every congregation in this matter as in every other matter. Everything must be done decently and in order, even to our singing, and this cannot be done without each following certain rules and accepting certain responsibilities.

And the first of these responsibilities is to sing.

I have said that it is our duty to offer as part of our worship a certain proportion of the product of our talents ; and as the ability to produce and to appreciate music is a very valuable talent, it must be included in our worship if such worship is to be complete. Of course, I do not say that music should form part of every act of worship, any more than the offering of money or goods forms part of every act of worship. It must, however, form part of the system of our worship, and be used frequently and regularly. With rare exceptions we can all make some sort of musical sound with our voices, and can join with others in singing a tune ; and having this ability we are responsible for its use.

The second of our responsibilities is to sing with intelligence.

Now, to sing with intelligence, it is requisite we should have some knowledge of when and how to sing, and when and how not to sing, and it frequently happens that the latter knowledge is of greater importance than is the former. We all know the kind of person who boasts that he (or she) cannot sing, but can make a joyful noise. Since we have given up to a large extent the frivolous and often irreverent custom of using Bible phrases on every possible occasion, which was so very prevalent not many years ago, the boast may be expressed in somewhat different terms ; but the intention is the same. Such a one is a

concrete example of how not to sing, either in church or out of it. It is quite possible to be selfish even in our devotions, and those who disturb the devotion of others unnecessarily by singing in a way that is objectionable to their next neighbours are indulging in such a form of selfishness.

But, says the humbler one who is afflicted by the possession of vocal organs whose sound is hoarse and harsh, what am I to do? You say it is my duty to sing in certain parts of the service, and yet I must not disturb the devotions of even my nearest neighbour, who is probably a person of æsthetic taste and keen ears. What am I to do? The only person who is not distressed at hearing my voice is its owner. The position is certainly not an easy one, and each case can best be settled better on its own merits than by any general rule. We may however, see how far general considerations will carry us.

First of all we may note that while we must not be selfish in singing to the disturbance of others, there is no reason why we should pander to the selfishness of those who consider they have higher or better tastes than others. If they are taking a proper part in the worship they will not easily be disturbed.

In order to give no offence to the weaker brethren in this respect, however, we may make some difference when we know they are near.

If those who are troubled with disagreeable voices make it a rule always to sing quietly, taking care to control their feelings, and also taking care to sing only at such times as the bulk of the congregation is singing, they will, I venture to say, disturb no one.

It may be remembered, too, that a rough or harsh voice, when joined with many others, often loses much of its unpleasant character, and rather adds to the quality of the general tone. The richness of tone which we often hear produced from large bodies of voices is partly due to the unevenness of certain kinds of voices. This may be seen by reference to the organ. On the organ are a certain number of stops upon which we depend for obtaining various effects or brilliance or weight.

If one of these stops alone is drawn, the sound produced is harsh and unpleasant in the extreme, and it is only when combined with the others that any good effect is obtained. So is it, too, with many voices. Often the voice, which alone is quite painful to listen to, when combined with other voices produces a not unpleasant effect.

In extreme cases the self-restraint required to be exercised by those who have disagreeable voices, or an incapacity for singing in tune, may be an exercise which will be beneficial to the person who, for the sake of others, refrains from audible worship. Such a case would, of course, be one of the rare exceptions which prove the rule that all must sing.

All this relates to the general principles of congregational singing; and we must now turn to the directions of the Book of Common Prayer.

II.

There are occasions when the whole congregation must refrain from singing, even when the service is being sung, and is in the main a congregational one. Service books, and particularly our own Book of Common Prayer, are somewhat inexplicit on this subject, which gives those who wish to do so an opportunity of demanding what they imagine to be their right to take an audible part in whatever is directed to be said or sung.

In Morning and Evening Prayer the people are directed four times to join in the saying or singing of the service—that is, in the Confession, the Creed, and twice in the Lord's Prayer. In the Order for Holy Communion the responses to the Commandments are marked to be said by the people, and after this there is nothing but the "Amens" until we come to the "Our Father" after the Communion. From this it may be inferred that the intention of the compilers was that the congregation should not join in the other parts, or else that the question should be left to the discretion of the one who is responsible for the conduct of the services. The latter is the usually accepted

inference, and is the one that appears to be productive of most good.

All responsibility for the arrangement and conduct of the services usually rests upon the incumbent, and so long as they are carried out in a lawful and decent manner it is our duty to conform to the arrangements made by him. A wise pastor will maintain a mean position between the too ornate and the too meagre. His congregations will have the opportunity of joining in the services sometimes with their voices, while they and the official musicians of the Church will not be refused opportunities of offering the higher and more precious gifts of finished artwork. Where an elaborate form of service music prevails it may be taken that the congregation not only may, but, as a rule, should, join in singing the psalms and hymns, the responses, and sometimes the canticles.

The members of the congregation have no more *right* to join in anthems and set services than they have the right to assist in painting and renovating the pictures in the church, or building the organ, or decorating the chancel or the altar. If they are invited to do so, it is well and good they should do what they can. If they ask and obtain permission to do so, equally well and good. But except in those places where they are directed by the Prayer-Book to take part, they are entirely under the direction of the incumbent or other minister in charge.

In this way we may even be using another gift—that of hearing—in our worship.

If we can by the intelligent use of the faculty of hearing—that is, by listening to the music in which we cannot take part—be made to realize something more of our responsibilities, something we have not realized, or not so fully realized, before of the beauty of holiness and the ugliness and ingratitude of sin, the use of that faculty will not have been in vain.

But it must be remembered that the faculty of listening requires more effort and more training for its proper and beneficial exercise than does any other of our faculties. If

we do not by our own attention and care meet half-way the efforts of those who take an active part in such music, all their efforts will, so far as we are concerned, be lost. Among musicians of to-day the art of listening is receiving very considerable attention ; it might well receive more from the average half-musical Christian.

With regard to the practical side of the question, where the congregation are actually singing, we have already seen the need of self-restraint on the part of those who suffer (or make others suffer) from their own unpleasant voices. The same self-restraint is necessary for all, including those who have sweet and powerful voices, though of course in a different degree, and possibly in a different manner. Anything which tends to make a person noticeable is always undesirable, and may result in self-consciousness and irreverence. Fortunately this fault is not so common with those who possess fine voices, as they usually have other opportunities of exhibiting them, and reserve themselves for more appropriate occasions. But nevertheless it is a danger.

Another very desirable qualification for congregational singing is a knowledge by each member of his or her part. By this it is not meant that we are to constitute ourselves into a kind of unbalanced choir, and each decide whether we have soprano, contralto, tenor, or bass voices, and try and sing those parts accordingly. On the contrary, the proper part for the whole of the congregation is, with very few exceptions, the melody. And we can and ought to make it part of the regular preparation for our Sunday worship, as far as circumstances will permit of it, to learn the hymns as well as the psalms in which we are to take part. If the necessary time can be found for the purpose, it is a good thing to learn both words and music. By this means we grasp much better the message which they convey, or enter more fully into the meaning and intent of the words which by singing we make our own.

But whether we do this or not, in most cases we can learn the tunes, and thus join in the first verse as well as in the

subsequent ones. To help in this matter, the custom of having occasional congregational practices and rehearsals is a good one, and is the cause of a much greater interest and appreciation of the musical side of the services by those not officially concerned.

The habit of taking to church a book containing the tunes is not, in my opinion, a good or wise one. There is a danger in this of finding, to one's discomfort and annoyance, that the tune at which we are looking is totally different from the one that is being sung. Very few tune-books meet all circumstances, and there is nothing more unpleasant than to be singing the tenor of one tune while your neighbour is singing the treble of another! I have known such a thing happen, with an effect that is better imagined than described. To those who have only a small knowledge of music, too, the use of music notes may easily be a distraction from the sense of the words, in which case the employment of music would defeat its own ends. It therefore seems far better to learn as much as possible at home, and merely carry a small book of words as a precaution against lapses of memory.

It is not easy, for those who have heard it, to forget the striking effect of the singing of the several thousand people who attend the People's Mass at Cologne Cathedral every Sunday morning. For an hour or more, except at the moment of Consecration, this immense congregation sings hymns, all in unison, and without books or papers. The hymns, of course, are all familiar to those who attend this service regularly, and are probably learnt simply by ear and by frequent repetition, so that it matters little to them what hymn-book or edition is used by the organist and choir.

Such a state of affairs is, perhaps, neither obtainable nor desirable in the ordinary English parish church, but it is the outward expression of the right spirit of congregational singing. Personally, I think we should do much better if we got nearer to this method than we usually do in England.

Sometimes a very fine effect is produced by a large pro-

portion of the congregation being able to sing the lower parts—*i.e.*, the harmonies. Generally, it is not fine; it is execrable! Most offensive is the custom, now happily dying out, but only a few years ago a very common one, of singing a kind of impromptu “seconds,” which fits the tune and its harmonies or not merely by chance. I have heard this done with a tune which itself was very simple, but of which the harmonies were very elaborate and expressive. The effect was so atrocious as to drive all other ideas from me for some time. What it would be to those unaccustomed to hearing bad music is a matter one does not care to imagine. It certainly would not aid their devotion.

If those who find the melody above or below the range of their voices know the part which is more within such range, there is little harm done by their singing it—if it is sung unobtrusively. If they do not know the part, let them be content to sing such portion of the tune as they can, or join in with their heart while letting their lips remain silent.

One difficulty which occurs sometimes arises from the fact that the melody which the congregation should sing is not always in the treble part. The difficulty is accentuated by the great demand for soprano voices which exists to-day. In the days when women’s voices were unheard in church choirs, and the boys were outnumbered by the men, it was customary to place the chief melody in the tenor. We find this arrangement now in what are known as the “Festal Responses” as they appear in most books of music to the Church services as a whole. In these, while the treble voices of the choir are singing a fine merry tune, the tenors and the congregation should be singing the more sober melody which is also usually sung on other occasions.

This arrangement of parts is very often used in Gregorian or plainsong settings of hymns and canticles, both elaborate and simple. Many arrangements of the canticles to Gregorian tunes have the melody of the chant appearing in a different voice for each verse. In such cases the congregation should stick to the

chant melody, and leave the varied harmonies and decorative parts to the choir and the organ. The effect where this is done is, as a rule, very dignified and impressive, and the untrained singer has no difficulty in singing the simple tune allotted to him.

III.

And here I should like to put in a plea on behalf of plainsong, or, as it is sometimes called, "plainchant."

Because for certain parts of the service we revert to the freer, unmeasured music of old times, there is no necessity to discard entirely the music of our own time. In fact, much modern music is in reality plainsong, with aids to its performance in the shape of bars and time-signatures. Plainsong, in its broadest sense, is that type of music which is controlled by the sense of the words.

Oh yes, I know there are some who will cry out, "What about the modes—those old-fashioned scales which generally start on any note except *doh*, and finish anywhere but where we expect them to finish? And what about the terrible misaccentuation we constantly hear when plainsong is used to English words?"

Well, modal music is certainly something different from what we are, most of us, accustomed to. But modal music is not necessarily plainsong, nor is plainsong necessarily modal. Some of the most modern music, and some that is most rigid in its rhythm, is modal; while the essence of plainsong is its freedom of rhythm. Certainly, however, much of the finest plainsong music we have is modal—and grand music some of it is! To hear it sung as it should be sung is almost certain to result in a conversion to its methods, while for prose words its freedom is a great gain.

With regard to the question of misaccentuation, this arises usually from the fact that the reintroduction of plainsong, after its almost entire disuse for a couple of centuries, has been left mainly to faddists who have learnt the rules, but have never grasped the main principle that it is the words which must

govern the accent of the music, and not the music the accent of the words.

In a language such as Latin, to which practically all the ancient plainsong of the Western Church was originally fitted, it was easy to make rules as to the regular recurrence of accents. When we adapt it to an irregular language such as English, we have to a great extent to discard the hard-and-fast rules, and simply to use the most common-sense method which the circumstances suggest. In the matter of plainsong hymn tunes, however, accents are comparatively easy to deal with, as the metrical accents are the same as in English verse. Such tunes as "The Royal Banners forward go," "Blessed City, Heavenly Salem," "Jesu, the very thought is sweet," "All hail, adored Trinity," are absolutely suited to English words and to congregational use, and are popular wherever they are sung. Besides these there are many others equally well-suited, which grow in popularity as they become better known.

As a matter of fact, all expressive singing, and especially that of prose words, is to some extent based upon the principles of plainsong, and frequently the question lies simply between whether we are to have music avowedly adopted to freedom of accent, or that which measures each syllable and phrase as it is sung.

In prescribing music to be used to the services of the Book of Common Prayer, the compilers provided adaptations of the ancient plainsong only. Whether this fact makes illegal any other form is best left for discussion by liturgiologists. If it does so it is sincerely to be hoped that the law will soon be altered.

The question of hearty singing is a burning one between musicians and those who do not claim this title. A little discretion and tact will usually quickly settle it, for it will usually be found that all earnest people are really more nearly agreed than they imagine.

We often hear the remark that "the singing was so hearty"; or that it was not hearty enough, or it was too hearty; or some similar use of the expression "hearty singing." Such a use

of the term is a very bad one, and altogether wrong and inappropriate. Singing cannot be too hearty! But it can be, and often is, too lusty!

Hearty singing is singing that comes from the heart, and if our singing does not come from the heart it is better left out of our worship altogether.

There are two kinds of singing which may be contrasted with this, and which frequently, though quite wrongly, are commended.

One, which is the common failing of choral—that is, choir—music of a high artistic development, is the cold correct style which suggests the flawless but lifeless marble. The other, which generally occurs where large congregations meet to enjoy taking a part in the singing, is the loud and lusty style which comes from excited nerves and mere animal enjoyment. Both may be the result of a good original intention which has become warped in its application; but both are bad—which is the worse it would be impossible to say.

It is not only possible, but it is the only right way, to sing the fifty-first psalm, or the hymn “Lord, in this Thy mercy’s day,” or “By the Cross her station keeping,” heartily; yet there is nothing in any of these which we should sing in anything but a quiet tone of voice and a sober manner.

Some hymn-books provide marks of expression, which, if used in a reasonable way, are excellent helps in grasping the meaning of the words and putting it into sound. Of course such marks as these have to be read with discretion. One very popular hymn-book had been ridiculed among musical folk for its many marks. These, when taken in a strict literal sense, make the singing sound very absurd; when read in a broad general way, and as suggestions rather than as directions, they can be made a great aid to good and expressive singing. As an example we may assume that the marks *F* (*forte* = loud) and *P* (*piano* = soft) follow each other rapidly in a single stanza. Sudden changes from soft to loud and from loud to soft would be both difficult and ineffective; but a gentle undulation of tone

from a little louder to a little softer, and *vice versâ*, makes the singing as expressive as the spoken word, and often more so. Where no such marks are inserted, the words and our own feelings must be the guide, and we shall not go far wrong if only we use our good sense and self-control.

The evangelizing power of music is not unrecognized, though that of congregational singing is perhaps not so well realized as it should be. In many cases it is much greater than that of choral or solo singing, or other kinds of music, and there are not a few instances where it has proved even greater than that of the spoken word, and of other forms of preaching and teaching.

Among some religious bodies fine singing and good instrumental music are made much of as a means to attract those who would not be drawn in by higher principles. This system is not without its good qualities, and we cannot afford to despise it. There is no doubt, however, that most of those who try to perform their religious duties vicariously, or who are content to spend their week-ends in idleness or secular work, are more attracted by good congregational singing than by any mere æsthetic attraction. Moreover, they are much more likely to be impressed by the meaning of words which they themselves sing, than by any words sung by others on their behalf—even assuming they can hear the words in the latter case, which cannot always be done.

Therefore, for this reason, as well as for the more personal ones, it behoves us to make the congregational singing as good as possible by singing, whenever proper occasions arise, with intelligence and devotion, and by encouraging and helping others to do the same.

In these ways shall we not only be learning to take part in the great heavenly and eternal song, but shall be joining here with the saints and holy angels in their worship, and doing something, small though it be, to obtain an answer to the prayer which we offer at our Lord's behest: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."