

THE MUSIC OF THE CHURCH.

BY ALBERT MITCHELL, Member of House of Laymen for
Province of Canterbury.

THE Report of the Archbishop's Second Commission of Inquiry (on the Public Worship of the Church) contained a chapter devoted to "Church Music," which had to be passed over in treatment of the rest of the Report on March last. But the subject is of too much importance to be ignored; and it will not suffer by having separate treatment.

It appears from the Report that a large number of the replies received by the Archbishop's Committee to their inquiries related to the use of music. And the Committee are of opinion that "much confusion prevails" upon the subject.

I

The Committee lay down a principle that "No treatment of the question of Church Music will be of the slightest use unless it accepts . . . as fundamental the 'distinction between' music in which the part of the congregation is only to listen" and "music in which the congregation should be expected to take a vocal part."

Perhaps this may be so, but to an old-fashioned churchman the suggestion that any music in the Church services is simply to be listened to is sufficiently startling to suggest a doubt as to whether the Committee have faced the previous question of the function of Music in Church, or have themselves succeeded in escaping from the "confusion" to which they refer. If music is worship, then it is addressed to God; if music is addressed to the congregation, then it is not worship. It cannot seriously be suggested that the congregation is to "listen" to worship by the choir. Yet it is difficult to escape from the feeling that throughout that part of the Report which is headed "*Music in which the congregation takes part by listening only*," the writers are hampered by an unwillingness to admit, even to themselves, that the real purpose of much of the music of this class is not worship at all, but the giving of pleasure to the congregation or the singers, or at least some of them. Is this right or wrong? If it is right, then all talk of the congregation "taking

part by listening " is unnecessary ; if it is wrong, then such talk is puerile. If on the other hand such music is an act of worship, or praise to God, then the part of the congregation is very much more than mere listening. But then, such a conception straightway rules out the greater part of the musical actions sought to be included under this head. The Committee suggest that great musical works should be produced at special services, not at those in the regular course, and that choral societies should be formed to help. This is admirable, and there is no doubt that such musical work would be of tremendous value to the Church on its social side and would be a valuable training ground, the results of which would be felt in time in the worship of the Church. Only—it is not itself worship. Let us once get clear in our minds the distinction between music used for the edification and the pleasure of the singers, and those who are to listen to them ; and music deliberately offered as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God ; and then it is quite easy to see when and where the place of each falls. But " confusion " will continue so long as musicians and music lovers persist in pretending that they are offering service to God when they are simply " enjoying themselves." We do not pretend that we are worshipping if we sit through the whole of " The Messiah " at the Handel Festival. Why should we call it worship when we sit through " Selections from St. Paul " in St. Paul's Cathedral, on the Festival of the Conversion of St. Paul ? On the other hand we may quite well be worshipping when we stand reverently while the Cathedral choir sings " Unto us a Child is Born " on Christmas Day ; but, if so, we are doing something more than listening. Subject to these protests, we can heartily concur in the Committee's plea for a higher standard in the use of such music at special gatherings or festivals ; but we object to such gatherings being treated as Church services, or made a substitute for direct worship.

II.

We pass with pleasure to the second part of the Report, "*Congregational music, in which the congregation takes an active part.*" The Committee definitely take their stand in favour of the " splendid tunes of healthier type " than the " prevailing type of music represented by the names Barnby and Dykes," although they admit that the latter is not " all bad." But they note " that the number

of well-known tunes and the range of musical knowledge of congregations are rapidly contracting," and "it becomes increasingly difficult to find hymn tunes which an average congregation will know." We wonder how much of this is due to the crowding out of home hymn-singing, at family worship, and on Sunday evenings! May it not be that the decay of family worship has not a little to do with the growing "tameness" of public worship? After all, there must be some answering sympathy between the home and the Church, if there is to be life at Church. One of the surest and truest methods of bringing new life into Church music would be to encourage the people to practise chants and tunes at home. But this requires, first, that the people should be guided and encouraged to provide themselves with chant books and tune books; secondly, that organists and choirmasters should resist the mischievous temptation to take their chants and tunes from other books than those that are in the hands of the people; and, thirdly, that the reference to the chants and tunes should be as carefully announced and advertised as the numbers of the psalms and hymns. When we consider the contemptuous indifference shown towards the congregations in the matter of helping them to follow the music, the wonder is that our Church music is not worse than it is. The new movement to revive family worship should certainly take cognizance of the value of family praise.

The Committee recommend congregational "hymn sing-songs" of the army type. That is worth thinking about; but the parson must not be too much in evidence. Get the right conductor, and leave him in control. The clergyman will be best occupied in singing somewhere in a back row. Such "sing-songs" (but with a more permanently respectable name) should be worked with a double aim: to assist family praise as well as Church praise. A judicious and tactful conductor will easily manage that by suggesting "Try that over again at home before next week." The Committee are quite right in suggesting that there is no difficulty in using such gatherings to teach new tunes of a higher standard and quality. Anyone with a decent voice, and some love of music, will soon under expert guidance learn to appreciate a good tune. It is often to be remarked that the congregation catches on to a new tune more quickly than the choir. We are inclined to regard this idea of the Committee as one of the most valuable parts of the chapter.

III.

The Report then passes to the question of the position of the organist, which it suggests to be at present in a very unsatisfactory state. "In many places he is an untrained musician with a taste for music, who takes an organist's place on general principles of philanthropy or as a private hobby. Such a man is very often quite unfitted to guide the musical policy of a church. But the Committee urge that where the place is filled by a trained musician, he is "much more likely to deal rightly with the problem of Church music than the clergyman, unless he also is a trained musician." They suggest (surely the hand of the writer is evident!) that the clergy "without any adequate knowledge" are much worse than "incompetent organists." Of course, to the onlooker it is evident that there is a previous question. What is the relation, as regards spiritual sympathy, of parson, people, and organist. There are points of principle that emerge. The Committee lack the courage, or the will, to say what an Evangelical critic must say. In no matter more than that of Church music is it of greater importance to apply the principle "Spiritual men for Spiritual work." Better a devout, Evangelical, second-class organist than a non-spiritual genius. But get the Evangelical genius if you can.

The next point taken is the value and present state of choirs. The Committee manifest an uneasy feeling that growth of congregational effectiveness in musical matters might throw choirs out of work! But they deprecate such a trend; and think that "a choir of men and boys properly trained and looked after by clergymen and organists" (and, of course, "surpliced"!) is "an instrument which ought not to be neglected or hastily thrown aside": but here it leaves the matter in somewhat indeterminate condition with a reiteration that "The cure for present inefficiency seems to the Committee to lie rather in the quickening of the musical energies of the congregation." The fact of course is that discipline and reverence are the first requisites for a good choir; and these qualities do not seem to be promoted by the position of privileged isolation in the chancel. Perhaps if the choir were taught to regard themselves as belonging to the congregation, the difficulty might be surmounted. And if the choir were large enough to admit of half the members taking their turn

to sit in the ordinary seats there would be some gain. But no true music lover will dispute the value of a good choir; and if a definition of a good choir is wanted we will cite the organist of Westminster Abbey (Mr. S. H. Nicholson, *Church Music*, Faith Press, p. 50). "With the best choirs and organists . . . their aim lies not so much in the direction of performing a great deal of music, as of concentrating their attention on doing a little very well. . . . A choir can find all its legitimate aspirations realized in the effort to give a perfect rendering of simple things; and the truest criterion of a good choir is not how it sings an anthem, but how it sings the psalms, and the plain parts of the service which are repeated every Sunday."

The Report goes on to recommend a Church Music Committee, of office holders and elected members, to secure to the congregation "more practical control of and responsibility for the music!"

But we fear such a remedy *might* be worse than the disease! The Committee indeed considers it "possible that, at first, especially in the present chaotic condition of musical taste, such a committee would not work smoothly." Admirably phrased! Still the Committee are sanguine enough to believe that eventually it would "secure co-operation in a definite musical policy."

The next point of the Report is best stated verbatim: "The third point is not perhaps exclusively musical and concerns the clergy. It is felt that intoning and the singing of the *preces* is often undertaken indiscreetly and unsuccessfully by many clergy, who seem quite unable to do more than make a curious, unnatural, throaty sound upon notes of uncertain pitch. Here it can only be repeated that every religious utterance should be natural, reverent and entirely audible throughout the church; and it is clearly better to use the speaking voice naturally than to sing defectively and unnaturally." *Verbum sapientis!*

IV.

The Committee regard the question of the chanting of the psalms as "a problem," "chiefly because it is so hard to sing them well, whether to Anglican or Gregorian chants." But they express the opinion that "whether they be sung or said . . . far greater attention should be paid to the words themselves," and they rightly

protest against "the finely varied speech-rhythms in the Prayer Book version" being "hustled or attenuated or otherwise distorted." We should like here to call attention to the virtues of the Paragraph Psalter, originally compiled by Bishop Westcott (the later edition is by Dr. Mann, of King's), which is a great help to the intelligent rendering of the psalms, with its pointing and interpretative headings. Another valuable book is *The Psalter of the Church*, by Canon Carleton, of St. Patrick's; but this has no pointing, and is for help in reading and study only. But to revert to our Report: we are not quite clear whether the deprecation of "the mumbling habit of congregational response" is directed to the semi-monotone reply verse to verse, when the psalms are read, or refers to the timid attempts to keep up with break-neck singing. Both clergymen and choirs are over-prone to "gabble," in the people's parts, at a pace that no ordinary person has breath to equal; and this is noticeable equally in recitation on a note and in the natural voice. The people's parts should always be taken, whether in reading or in singing, more slowly than the priest's parts. We cordially agree with the view that it is better to "speak" the psalms "heartily" . . . "than to sing them badly." But nevertheless the chanting of the psalms is very popular in town churches. The suggestion that the "revival of the responsorial manner . . . would greatly help to make the psalms vital" is valuable; but we wholly demur to a suggestion to substitute a metrical psalm "where sung psalms are too difficult." Far better to *read* the proper psalms.

The Committee avoid any discussion of the rival merits of Anglican chants and Plain chant (usually called Gregorian, although Plain chant includes pre-Gregorian models). Perhaps they are wise. The Anglican chant is deeply rooted in popular affection, and seems to fit the Prayer Book Psalter. But it is not well adapted to *Te Deum* or to the Gospel canticles; and there is room for a little elasticity at that place in the service. Few that have heard *Magnificat* properly sung to *Tonus Peregrinus* in free rhythm will ever desire another setting, unless, perhaps, it be one of Farrant's, or Walmisley in *D minor*. Certainly it betokens lack alike of historical sense and spiritual insight to sing *Magnificat* in loud major key. To turn on the loud pedal, or boisterous choruses of tenors and basses, in accentuation of the wondering meditations of the gentle Hebrew maiden is something worse than a ludicrous absurdity.

V.

In the concluding lines of the Report there is sensible and useful reminder of the necessity of lower pitch in music. It is well known to all students that sixteenth century music was much lower in pitch than modern music ; and the old tunes and music have been raised in pitch for modern use with disastrous result. The Committee rightly warn the reader that " men singers are apt to be discouraged by any note above D." They go on to express regret at " the disuse of women singers in choirs ; " but hasten to suggest " that a mixed choir should not sit in the chancel, but in the west end of the church." But, surely, that involves a west gallery ; for it would be absurd to place a choir in the back seats on the floor ! Regret is also expressed at the " disappearance of local orchestras, especially in villages." And, finally, the Committee recommend a " Diocesan Diploma " for Church music ; and commend the subject of Church music to the Royal College of Organists and other institutions. And in their summary the Committee again specially emphasize the need of " a higher standard of musical education in the clergy and of a fuller training for Church choirmasters in the requirements of their profession." Both of these points deserve the emphasis, especially the former. A serious study of the principles of Church music, ability to read music, and some knowledge of the history of the Church chant, ought to be insisted upon, before ordination, in the case of all candidates for the ministry. You cannot give a man the power to sing, but you can teach him the right scaffolding to use ; so that if and when a man finds his musical soul he will not be at the mercy of a dumb spirit, but may sing both with the spirit and with the understanding. And if he learns his own limitations he is the more likely to seek competent guidance.

ALBERT MITCHELL.

