

1 The significance of parish church music

The higher developments of Christian art have generally been associated with great cathedrals, abbeys and royal chapels, rather than with the humbler churches of ordinary people. For this reason it is the former that have received the chief attention of critics and historians of the arts. But to the enquirer who is interested in religious art as a reflection of society, the local church, serving a small self-contained community, may be a more rewarding field of study.

Local churches, whether in town or village, are sensitive to social and economic changes and to movements of popular opinion; whereas they are remote from the influence of theological, aesthetic or political ideas that thrive in seats of government, learning, fashion, and commerce. Church authorities have usually failed to impose on local churches, for any length of time, the uniformity of worship that has often seemed to them desirable. Local customs have crept in, to provide forms of expression more spontaneous than those devised by a remote authority. For instance the rules for liturgical uniformity laid down by the Council of Trent, though strongly supported by powerful ecclesiastical and civil authorities, were widely ignored and departed from in many parts of the Catholic world. In France during the eighteenth century many dioceses published and used their own breviaries in open defiance of papal edict. Similarly, in Lutheran Germany at the same period a wide variety of local forms of worship was found. Some bodies, such as the Independents in England and New England, recognised this reality by making each congregation the supreme arbiter of its own practice.

The Church of England has often been contrasted with other protestant churches as a hierarchical and authoritarian body, with a fixed liturgy enforced by law. It is true that the form of worship has been laid down in minute detail by parliament ever since the Reformation; that this liturgy can be changed only by act of parliament, and in fact remained substantially the same for more than four hundred years apart from the interregnum of civil war and Commonwealth; and that any priest who departs significantly from the rubric can be, and has been, brought into line by episcopal reprimand, by court injunction, or in the case of persistent disobedience by deprivation of his office.

But closer study shows many cracks and holes in the monolith. The cathedrals, it is true, have preserved considerable continuity, though even there changes have not been unknown. But the cathedrals have been essentially aristocratic institutions, together with the royal and collegiate foundations which have shared their form of worship. Forming rather less than one per cent of the total number of Anglican places of worship, they have been insulated from the public, and indeed have had no clear social

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function since the Reformation severed them from foundations of learning and education. In periods of religious zeal they have been maintained for the greater glory of God, and their rich endowments have been used in part to develop a school of musical composition and performance whose excellence needs no emphasis here. At other times the cathedrals and their endowments have been used chiefly for the comfort of the aristocratic dignitaries who controlled them. But at no time have they been in any immediate way responsive to public opinion: except indeed during the Puritan ascendancy, when public opinion stopped the choral services in cathedrals altogether.

When we turn from the cathedrals to the parish churches, where the great majority of Anglicans have performed their daily, weekly or yearly devotions, we find a very different story. The variety of forms of worship and of their manner of performance has been enormous. If the same observer could have attended a Sunday morning service at St Olave, Hart Street (Samuel Pepys's church) in 1670 and at St Alban, Holborn in 1870, to mention only London churches, he would have found it hard to see much in common between the two experiences, so totally would they have differed in character, atmosphere, and apparent meaning. And yet both would have been subject to substantially the same laws and the same liturgy. How can this be explained?

First it must be said that legal control over Anglican worship is really much weaker than it appears. Difficult as it has been to effect any legal changes in the liturgy, it has been equally difficult to discipline illegal departures from it. The machinery of the ecclesiastical courts was cumbersome and expensive, and their power to enforce judgments was weak. Parish priests were secure in the lifetime enjoyment of their livings, which could only be taken from them for extreme cases of neglect or immorality. The bolder spirits among the clergy often found that they could get away with open disregard of the law: the authorised service was widely ignored by Puritans in the sixteenth century, by ritualists in the nineteenth, and by reformers in the twentieth. If the congregation approved or acquiesced, prosecution was unlikely. If public clamour was loud enough to lead to legal prosecution of the offender, he might still escape through ingenious argument before the court. Rarely has an incumbent been actually deprived of his living on grounds of illegal deviations from the liturgy. Many rubrics were so widely disregarded, over so long a period, that any attempt to enforce them would have been futile: the rubric directing the use of the Athanasian creed is but one example. Others have been open to varying interpretation, so that it has been possible to change their practical effect in response to movements in public opinion, conveniently avoiding any upheaval. This process is found to some degree in all legal systems, but it is specially characteristic of England, with its unwritten constitution, its common law, and its judge-made law which often modifies the effect of statutes in a way which was not intended by the legislators, but which reflects the prevailing ideas of the moment. An excellent example was the introduction of hymn singing into Anglican services. It was never authorised by parliament, and until the end of the eighteenth century was generally regarded as illegal. But as more and more

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Evangelical clergy introduced hymns with the approval of their congregations, the practice became respectable; and when in 1820 proceedings were actually taken against a clergyman for introducing hymns, the court declined to interfere. Since that time hymn singing has been an unquestioned part of Anglican worship, but it has never been thought necessary to authorise it by statute.

The reality would seem to be that the law protects the church from flagrant or eccentric deviations from the liturgy, but has only a mildly delaying effect on changes that are sanctioned by public opinion. And, if it has been hard to enforce the law against an unconventional parson, it has been next to impossible to control a wilful congregation, at least since the decline of royal power. In Elizabeth I's reign the archbishop's inspectors might succeed in intimidating a congregation, but after the Commonwealth a sturdy democratic spirit often asserted itself in public worship. It is difficult to stop a churchful of people from singing, and there are many instances of a congregation or even a small group of singers carrying the day against the wishes of their parson.

Thus actual departures from the liturgy, in the form of omissions and additions, have been frequent. But a far more significant kind of variety has been in those aspects of worship about which the rubric is silent or indeterminate. Chiefly this means the background against which the words of the liturgy are heard. There is immense scope for variety of expression in the visual background: the architecture of churches, their decoration, furnishing and lighting, the position and movements of the clergy and others taking part, their vestments, their gestures, the position of each member of the congregation with respect to the building and its other occupants – all these and other elements have their effect upon the total visual impression received by those taking part, and none of them is so closely defined by rubric that wide variation has not in practice been possible.

But an even greater source of variation is in the auditory context of the liturgy. Though the words themselves are laid down, it is not always certain whether they are to be said or sung and by whom. If they are said by the minister, his personal manner and emphasis will of course have its effect. If they are sung, the full resources of music, with all its power over the emotions of men, are admitted to the service. On the use and selection of music the rubric is silent. Nor does it either authorise or forbid the introduction of instrumental music before, after, or during the service.

Of all the factors in worship that are subject to any kind of control, music is the one that has had the greatest freedom and scope in the Church of England, and so music has been the leading element in the vast variety of character that Anglican services have assumed through the ages. It was said in 1824 that music is 'the characteristic difference between cathedrals and other churches' (*Quarterly* vi, 1824: 326), and the same might often be said in comparing one parochial service with another. Music, being almost entirely untrammelled by legal restrictions, has been in parish churches highly sensitive to popular opinion. In the seventeenth century, for instance, a characteristic style of singing developed entirely spontaneously by oral transmission from generation to generation, without effective

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interference by church authorities or professional musicians. In the eighteenth century parish choirs arose, at first in response to the wishes of church leaders, but they soon became more or less free of clerical control and developed a musical life of their own. In the nineteenth century, on the other hand, a strong impetus for reform gripped the nation, and the practices of the Church were overhauled along with almost everything else: musical changes were often carried through in this period against the wishes of local congregations. Once the people had become accustomed to the new Victorian tradition, however, they clung to it tenaciously, and we will find that it has survived even the radical reforms of recent times.

These conflicting currents can be linked to three distinct attitudes to the place of music in worship, which can be traced throughout the history of Christianity, and which vary with the theological principles held by different sects and parties. There have always been those who recognise the great emotional power of music to move men's spirits. Some have as a consequence come to mistrust this mysterious power and to exclude it altogether from worship, in spite of clear biblical injunctions to praise God with psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, and with instruments of music (e.g. Psalm 150:3–5; Colossians 3:16). This was the attitude of the Quakers, and, for a time, of the General Baptists, but it has never found appreciable support in the Church of England, except perhaps from the unmusical. Others, also acknowledging the emotional power of music, have been concerned to harness it for the good of men's souls. This view has been held by Lutherans, Puritans, Evangelicals, and Tractarians; it has led to a concern that music should be sung earnestly and spontaneously by the entire congregation, and that both the text sung and the music itself should be appropriate to the purpose – but of course, opinions have varied widely as to what music is appropriate. A third body of opinion denies the role of music as an actual vehicle of religious expression, but values it as an ornament in the offering to God, as a part of the 'beauty of holiness'. This was the prevailing view in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; it has often gained the support of the moderate churchman of no particular zeal or party, of those more or less agnostic or apathetic church members who value church as a political or social institution, and of those who want to relieve the tedium of the service with pleasant music. It has encouraged professionalism and has often led to the virtual silencing of the congregation. It produced both the tradition of the 'charity children' singing in the gallery of London churches in the Georgian era, and the surpliced choir of late Victorian times.

In the English parish church, the conflict between the second and third of these views remains unresolved. There has never been full agreement as to whether the primary goal is for the people to sing as well as they can, or for the music to be as good as possible. It will be found that this issue lies at the back of most of the conflicts and difficulties that have punctuated the history of parish church music. For the musical historian the resulting interactions between 'folk' and 'art' music make a fascinating study, which runs through the length of this book. At times the conflict has led to a compromise that satisfied nobody, but at other times it has led to a creative synthesis of lasting value, such as, for example, the Victorian hymn tune.

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One of the main tasks of this book will be to recover the folk traditions of English psalmody from the obscurity into which they have fallen. Some of the evidence about psalmody comes from those who have attacked or ridiculed it, but we will extract only the factual information such writings afford, declining to adopt the value judgments of those who have criticised one musical culture from the standpoint of another. But a richer source of information is the store of music that has survived from all periods, some of it in manuscript but a much greater proportion in print. Although the existence of this music has always been known, it has never been systematically studied for evidence of the processes of oral transmission of music. Most students of English folk music have concentrated their attention on the folk ballad. They have had to deal with a very large body of material, most of which is quite evidently of considerable antiquity; and yet they have found a relative dearth of early sources, and have had to rely largely on recently collected materials for the music of the ballads. In some cases hundreds of variant versions of a folk song have been gathered from different parts of the world, but the process by which the different versions have evolved from some unknown original has had to be filled in largely by speculation. In the case of psalm tunes the situation is quite otherwise. We have a body of musical material comparable in size, in popularity, and in importance to the ballads; the oral tradition is now practically dead, but we can study an enormous collection of historical sources, most of them precisely dated, extending over three and a half centuries. If we examine the sources with the understanding gained from the relevant external information, we can discover in them all the processes of evolution and transformation that have been observed in folk songs and ballads, and can moreover chart their historical course with some accuracy.

But we shall be equally concerned with the motives, the methods, and the achievements of those who have been concerned throughout history to 'improve' parish church music, by interfering with the tradition of popular psalmody. Their motives have been religious or aesthetic, or a combination of the two. The most effective weapon against any tradition of folk psalmody was an organ, as was fully realised by those who wished to reform church music: Dr Busby in 1820 said 'an instrument powerful enough to drown the voices of parish clerk, charity children, and congregation, is an inestimable blessing'. With an organ came an organist, whose training was inevitably based on the conventional art music of the time. It was an easy matter for him to impose his style on the singing of the congregation, to the satisfaction of the clergy and educated classes. In the Protestant churches of Germany, Holland and France, organs to accompany congregational singing were usual after about 1600, and hence no folk psalmody had a chance to evolve. But for long years most English parish churches lacked organs. They were discouraged in Elizabeth I's reign, destroyed in the civil war; and the process of regaining them after the Restoration took a full two centuries in country churches.

During all this time folk psalmody flourished in England – and also in Scotland and America, where the prejudice against organs was stronger still. This older form of Anglican folk psalmody may be said to have expired in about 1900, when the last surviving church bands were replaced

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by organs or harmoniums. It has probably not been heard by anyone now living, though some of its practices have survived in parts of the United States and Canada. Efforts to reform or eliminate popular kinds of church music can be traced from the very time at which congregational music was first introduced in the English church. They gained strong momentum as middle-class prosperity increased in the later eighteenth century, and were thoroughly successful by Victorian times, when many parish churches were virtually converted into cathedrals.

But of course 'folk' music need not be antiquated or rustic. As long as people base their singing on what they have heard as part of their cultural inheritance, not on what they consciously learn or read from notes, there is a folk music in existence; and this process must always be present to some extent in congregational singing. Victorian hymn tunes in their turn entered the folk domain. When, in recent times, 'pop' music was introduced into the Church, it was not an expression of popular culture but an interference with popular culture.

We find, then, in the musical history of the parish church, a constant interplay of forces, which in turn depended on larger movements in English society. The Anglican tradition itself has probably never held the affections of more than half the English people: from 1559 to 1689 (with one interruption) outward conformity to it was more or less imposed by law, but since that time toleration of dissent has permitted the growth of other churches. The Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Salvation Army, and many other dissenting bodies have harboured strong musical traditions of their own, any of which would be an interesting object of study. But they lack the interaction of authority and popular assertion, of landed aristocrat and rural labourer, of cultivated artist and untrained enthusiast, that is the special heritage of the Anglican parish church.

2 The Reformation era (1534–59)

Parish church music before the Reformation

Little is on record of the music at ordinary parish churches before the fifteenth century. The earliest country churches in England were minsters, from the time of conversion until the early tenth century. They were staffed by a community of parish clergy – priests, deacons, subdeacons, and clerks in minor orders. The head of the community was often called abbot (or abess), or provost; but the priests were not monks, and lived according to the rules of the Council of Aachen (816–17). Mass was sung, and two only of the offices – matins and vespers (Addleshaw: 5–13). Many of these minster churches survived until the Reformation.

Later parish churches had one priest only, who had to say mass and all eight offices – publicly if possible, as stated in the Canons of Edgar (1006–8). But matins and vespers remained the chief services, with the mass. In the absence of any endowments for music or any staff to assist the priest, there was no way for parish churches to share in the medieval development of sacred polyphony. As early as the fourth century, the Council of Laodicea had ruled that only the canonical singers were entitled to chant (Landon). Though parts of the chant had originally been sung by the people at large, the various accretions had placed it beyond the reach of any but skilled singers, while the Latin language made the congregational chanting of psalms and other non-recurrent texts impossible. The parish clerk chanted alternate verses of the psalms and responses, and read the epistle at mass (Atchley). The hymns at the daily offices were musically simpler and could possibly have been sung by the people: many of them were cast in the metres of popular song. But the office was not generally congregational. In all probability, the priest and clerk alone would read or chant the liturgy of mass and office in most churches before the later fifteenth century, and in smaller ones until the Reformation. Such pictorial evidence of choral singing as exists comes from royal, cathedral and monastic sources (Pl. 3; see Mc Kinnon).

During the hundred or so years before the Reformation, there was a general tendency throughout Europe for ever greater elaboration of liturgical music. Naturally, this was at its height in the great choral foundations, for which the most ambitious music was written, but it was also clearly evident in parish churches (Harrison: 197–201). A growing number of English churches, even quite small ones, were endowed with organs and chantries by devout and wealthy parishioners, especially in the more prosperous parts of the country, such as London, Kent, and East Anglia. The building of a rood-loft between the nave and chancel of a church (Pl. 1), which commonly took place during the fifteenth or early

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sixteenth century, had as its practical purpose the support of a great organ, which was used to accompany plainsong at the unison, and required much physical exertion to play. A secondary or portative organ was often placed in the lady chapel or other side chapel, with mechanical action and chromatic compass, capable of accompanying polyphony. In the 1540s small portable reed-organs (regals) also became popular. Some idea of the spread of parish church organs by the end of Henry VIII's reign can be gathered from the inventories that were made in the following reign as a prelude (in most cases) to the dismantling of the organs. In Kent, 16 parishes out of 136 for which inventories survive had organs: of these, six were in the cathedral cities of Canterbury and Rochester. In the East Riding of Yorkshire the proportion was 19 out of 207; in the city of Exeter, 5 out of 21 (Wallcott *et al.*; Page; Cresswell). Cox (:197–204) gives extensive extracts concerning organs from churchwardens' accounts of the first half of the sixteenth century.)

A growing source of support for music in parish churches was the endowment of chantries. Aristocrats and wealthy merchants would frequently make provision for masses to be sung for them after death. The chantry priests thus provided for, and other minor clergy attached to a parish church, would then augment their income by singing also in the general services of the church – and also playing the organ, copying music, teaching schoolchildren, and so on. In some parishes several chantry priests would be formed into a 'college'; several dozen of these collegiate parish churches existed at the time of the Reformation (Cook: 221–2 and *passim*). A few very large and wealthy foundations, such as that at Fotheringhay founded by the Dukes of York, were able to afford a fully-fledged choir. More often there were two or three chantry priests, who were able to sing some polyphony with the assistance of the parish clerk. Some parishes had song schools: at St Mary, Warwick, the master of the song school was expected to be present at Lady mass every day with two of his pupils (A. H. Thompson, 1942: 22). At the little village of Cotterstock a fourteenth-century foundation provided for two clerks with competent skill in reading and singing, and 'matins, vespers and the other hours' were to be 'solemnly sung in choir daily, with mass of the day and mass of our Lady at the high altar, and this distinctly and audibly with good psalmody and suitable pauses in the middle of each verse of the psalms' (:24).

In many places it was the chantry priests alone who made polyphony a possibility. The people of Doncaster told the church commissioners in Edward VI's reign that by reason of the chantry priests 'there is at daily matins, mass, and evensong [singing] by note' (Wood-Legh: 293) – that is, 'pricksong' or polyphony sung from part-books as distinct from improvised faburden.

In addition, vestries were beginning to be willing to pay for music out of the parish rates. Many church accounts show payments for music during this period. By about 1500 the richer churches were beginning to acquire a staff of full-time musicians, variously called 'clerks' or 'conducts', who worked under the parish clerk (Baillie, 1957: 45–51; Harrison: 197–201; Wood-Legh: 276). Thus a male choir could be formed, and in some churches there were also choirboys available, especially for Lady mass. In

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the larger churches, the chancel was extended and fitted with choir stalls (Pl. 2). Parish churches hired choirboys from cathedrals or other choral foundations to celebrate their patronal festivals and other special occasions. For processions outside the church, waits and minstrels were often added. But there is little likelihood that instruments other than organs accompanied singing in church, at least as a normal rule (McKinnon). No musical manuscript positively identified with a parish church from this period appears to have survived,* though some of the music in the manuscript Trent Codex 90 by English composers of the mid and later fifteenth century might well have been designed for parochial use (see ex. 1†).

Hugh Baillie has made a comprehensive study of the music at London churches before and after the Reformation. He has found records of elaborate polyphonic music (pricksong) on Sundays at some half-dozen parish churches which had musical establishments. The most ambitious of all, St Mary-at-Hill, had its own choir school, established in 1523 and possibly the first ever founded for a parish church: in Baillie's opinion there may have been daily polyphonic services at this church. Musicians connected with it included Thomas Tallis, William Mundy, Robert Okeland, Richard Winslate, and Philip ap Rhys (Baillie, 1957: 199–201; Baillie, 1955). At a further twenty churches there is some documentary evidence suggesting that polyphony was heard, at any rate on major feasts: Baillie estimates that nine out of ten London churches had polyphony on such occasions (1957: 206–20). As he points out, 'most of the surviving sacred music of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries . . . was either written for a special occasion or else for special services recurring throughout the year' (223–4). (For an anonymous *Salve festa dies* probably used for processions on major feasts at a parish church, see MS 25, fol. 120, partly transcribed Harrison: 405.)

What was the music like in more ordinary circumstances? In small country churches there may have been no music, or unadorned plainsong, but where any trained musicians at all were available, faburden was practised. This was a method of harmonising the simpler kinds of chant, especially psalm chants, by improvisation governed by certain rules. The basic pattern was for the chant (usually in the cantus or upper voice) to be followed a 6th below by the tenor, with a 7–6 suspension just before the cadence and an octave for the last note. In the fifteenth century a third (altus) part sang largely in strict parallel 4ths below the cantus. By the sixteenth century a free bass was usually added, and the altus, if present, also moved freely so as to amplify the harmony (Trumble: 41–65). Because faburden was improvised, few written examples have survived. In one *Magnificat* by the English composer, Christopher Anthony (ex. 1), the setting is mostly in simple three-part polyphony on the plainsong, such as might well have been sung at a parish church at vespers on one of the major feasts of the Virgin. Many of the verses are close to faburden in style. One

* A possible exception is the Pepys manuscript (MS 2a), emanating apparently from Kent and dating from the mid-fifteenth century. Charles, however (:70), considers that it was for the use of a school in which boys were taught by monks.

† For music examples see Volume 2.

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(verse 8) has a *contra* part in strict faburden. Instead of writing it out in full the scribe merely wrote '*per faulxbourdon*' (cited Harrison: 347).

Evidently the faburden was sung by the parish clerks, as the most skilled musicians available, while the rest of the choir sang the plainsong, supported at the unison by the organ when there was one. At Faversham in 1506, the clerks were required to 'set the choir' on an appropriate pitch for beginning the plainsong, then each was to sing his part in the faburden: 'and where plain song faileth one of them shall leave faburden and keep the plain song unto the time the choir be set again' (Legg, 1903: 76). The question that naturally arises is: who sang in this choir? Not, presumably, trained musicians, since these would not have needed the help of the clerks and would, indeed, have been doing something more difficult than singing plainsong. There is reason to believe that such parish choirs consisted at least partly of volunteers. Bishop Brooks's Injunctions to the clergy of Gloucester diocese in 1556 required 'that the churchwardens of every parish, where service was accustomed to be sung, shall exhort all such as can sing and have been accustomed to sing in the time of the schism, or before, and now withdraw themselves from the choir, to exercise themselves in singing and serving God there' (Frere & Kennedy: II, 405). Doubtless these voluntary choirs sang plainsong, with the clerks providing faburden (as at Faversham) where this was feasible. It is likely that the chancel stalls were reserved for minor clergy, including chantry priests and parish clerks, while lay singers occupied the rood-loft (Gasquet: 45; Addleshaw & Etchells: 16–17).

The formation of choirs in smaller parish churches created a demand for many copies of the liturgical music. A considerable number of liturgical books of the Sarum use were printed, both in England and abroad, between 1480 and 1547 (STC; Steele). Some were for monastic, but others no doubt for parochial use. The responses of the priest's chant were designated for choir, and printed monophonically; where skilled musicians were available they were sung in faburden (Fig. 1).

Participation by ordinary parishioners in the service of the church may well have been on the increase during the latter part of Henry VIII's reign, under the influence of Lutheran ideas which were fitfully encouraged by the king but were steadily gaining ground with the intellectual leaders of the time. Elaboration of choral polyphony had reached an extreme in the florid music sung during the first quarter of the sixteenth century. Shortly after visiting Cambridge, in 1516, Erasmus wrote in his commentary on the New Testament: 'Modern church music is so constructed that the congregation cannot hear one distinct word. The choristers themselves do not understand what they are singing, yet according to priests and monks it constitutes the whole of religion' (Froude: 115, quoted Doe: 85).

Such music was three times removed from the people: by the foreign language, by the elaboration that disguised the text, and by their own non-participation. Reformers wanted to remedy all these faults, with varying degrees of extremism. Luther, always a moderate, retained many features of the Latin service, including some of the popular office hymns, but he introduced German hymns alongside them. While retaining the polyphony of trained choirs, he encouraged at the same time a more homely type of