



ST GEORGE'S LECTURES

17 - Choral Music: The Case for Excellence

No 17 - © Peter Phillips 2009

Choral Music: The Case for Excellence

Peter Phillips MA (Oxon)

Founder and Director of the Tallis Scholars

Director of Music at Merton College, Oxford

Publisher of the Musical Times

Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres

Shakespeare wrote in *The Merchant of Venice*:

*The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils,
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus:
Let no such man be trusted.*

Like me, the Dean of Perth carries the name of a great Renaissance polyphonist. Our prototypes would never have met, since Sheppard was two generations older than Philips, but at least we can make up for lost time; and I think the coincidence in itself entitles the two of us to plan meetings like this, partly because our name-sakes lived and died in the service of bringing beauty to religious worship, and partly because we would like to do the same ourselves. I say this despite having myself decided to take the easy route, and perform sacred music outside religious services. Not for me personally the endless debate about whether church services should be taken up at such length, or at all, with music, what kind of music is appropriate, how high the standard of performance should be, whether the church should pay to maintain such standards, and so on and on. Life on the concert platform is a vulnerable activity, certainly, but at least one is one's own master. The problem for musicians employed by the church is that the church itself is not stable in its attitude to these things. A highly qualified church musician may find that one priest does not think like another, and may be quite suddenly, if not out of a job, then working in conditions which make his calling impossible.

Since I am speaking as a lover of sacred music from outside the liturgy, perhaps it will be thought that I am not really involved in what I am about to say. In fact this debate means a lot to me, both as a member of the congregation at



ST GEORGE'S LECTURES

17 - Choral Music: The Case for Excellence

the Chapel Royal in London, where my son is a chorister, and in the wider cultural context of my country. After all, just about every singer I have worked with has come through some branch of the Anglican choral tradition, the women as much as the men. The constant threat to the good performance of good music in church services from people who seem to want us to worship out of doors in the pouring rain in our egalitarian wellies, so that we can have a more transcending experience of God, anger me for their astonishing arrogance towards a heritage it has taken 2000 years and the greatest minds to build up. But in any context highly motivated dogmatists are always dangerous people, capable of great damage; and they need principled rebuttal.

The argument about whether elaborate ritual of any kind should be tolerated in worship is an old one. You may think that the Anglican church in Australia just now has a bad attack of it, but the pros and cons were just as hotly debated during the Reformation and Counter-reformation, and indeed before that in Erasmus (d.1536), in John Wycliffe's Lollard movement of the 14th century and subsequently in the teaching of Jan Hus (d.1415). That it has come back so regularly over the centuries suggests that it touches on something fundamental in human nature, something which cannot be resolved once and for all.

Some people like ceremony and grandeur, like to lose themselves in delicious complication and find inspiration in workings which are larger than they are. Paradoxically in a way, these people, who relish a kind of mystical abstraction, also seem to prefer formal liturgies and rituals, perhaps feeling the need of vessels to contain something which otherwise would be too formless. At the other end of the spectrum are those who want everything of importance explained, made touchable, solid, in the past at least afraid that hidden away in the long words and learned formulations of organised religion there would be things designed to get the better of them, resulting in a kind of robbery of the truth of what Christ actually said and did as a man. In this way of thinking ignorance of the most tangible available meaning of the central religious texts was held to deprive people of their chance of salvation. So it was high stakes. Paradoxically again, people who want every meaning made plain, prefer informality in their worship, as if the Word is enough and ritual an obfuscation.

Perhaps, as with our sexuality, there is something of both these points of view in everyone's make-up and therefore we can understand something of both. Obviously I tend towards the former approach, but much as I dislike the false intimacy imposed by the kiss of peace, or the forced conviviality of much low-church worship, the principle of involving everybody in a communal activity is a properly democratic one, and to be encouraged. The desire to try to explain everything, to speak in plain terms, must be at least in part a reaction by ordinary people to the instinct of every government there has ever been – from medieval monarchy to John Howard and Tony Blair – to conceal what they are really up to. When a 16th century priest stood with his back to the congregation and mumbled the essential words of the Mass in a language few understood, it must have had a similarly glazing effect as Blair addressing us on Weapons of Mass Destruction, except that the priest wouldn't have sounded so compellingly sure of himself. When that 16th century congregation – or a congregation of black African slaves in the 19th century – were given the opportunity to work with the preacher to get at the truth of things, I'm not surprised they all jumped at it. And I'm not surprised that that reaction persists today: more than ever we are educated to want to pin things down, cut the crap as the jargon has it, and turn every situation to our advantage. It goes without saying that this is not possible with God.



ST GEORGE'S LECTURES

17 - Choral Music: The Case for Excellence

The need to 'get back to basics', as Blair's predecessor John Major once put it, has motivated reformers throughout history. It is related to the fear about politicians. The argument runs: originally there was a pure, clearly stated truth, which misguided people, for their own selfish ends, have perverted. The villain of this story is always the Papacy, which is habitually cast as having been grasping and unscrupulous in building up its own position. In the words of the Preface to the 1559 Prayer Book: 'There was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so sure established, which in continuance of time hath not been corrupted, as (among many things) it may plainly appear by the common prayers in the Church, commonly called divine service....' The thrust is always to get back to how it was in Jesus's lifetime, before the days of a formalised, ritualised, institutionalised, financed church with its hierarchies, big buildings, beautiful vestments, elaborate liturgies and trained choirs. The hope is that simplicity will yield up the truth.

Put into effect in its most relentless, puritanical form, this way of thinking presupposes the elimination of just about everything the church has built up since the earliest days of its existence. If you should complain that such behaviour is boorish and ignorant, let alone short on understanding of Christian teaching, you will be hit with the charge of elitism. That's the one which reformers think can't be answered, since anyone can see that ordinary people are excluded from worship which takes place in a foreign language and/or involves sophisticated art-forms, like polyphony, performed by highly-trained specialist musicians. Since literally everyone seems to agree that music of some kind is a desirable adjunct to worship, then, the argument runs, obviously the music should be of the people, simple, catchy, to words which everyone can easily identify with, accompanied on the people's instrument: the guitar. For the most extreme evangelicals it will not be far off the ultimate ideal – spontaneous, communal song.

If this is so obvious, why is it that over time even the most determinedly puritanical churches have either lost their congregations, or have felt it necessary to move back towards some kind of formality and, in music, some kind of training? At the Reformation – which is my area of academic interest – every church involved in reforming – which of course included the Catholics – eventually drew back from total informality. The Catholics at the Council of Trent thought to abolish polyphony and go back to plainchant: in the event they asked Palestrina to write a showpiece – the *Missa Papae Marcelli* – which is both a masterpiece and a complex work of art, and called the hunt off. The Anglicans at their most extreme moment closed down the choir-schools, thereby causing pieces like Tallis's 'If ye love me' to be written, but very soon had refounded them, which ushered in the age of Byrd and Gibbons.

The Lutherans were led by a man who was said to have a sweet tenor voice and wrote *Ein feste Burg* amongst other things, saying he didn't see why the devil should have all the best tunes. The Calvinists published their Geneva Psalter; the Anabaptists vanished. It is true that, in a world which has also embraced communism, more trenchant attempts have been made in the last decades to get back to basics in religion: Vatican II put the final nail in the coffin of the Italian liturgical choirs, which were anyway in terrible disarray at the time, and spawned the vogue for folk masses which have so debased Catholic worship in so many people's opinion that the current pope, a man of musical sensibility, stating that he can't bear such low standards any more, has started to undo the processes which led to them. The Anglican cathedrals in England have never wavered in their commitment to good church music, no matter how red or low the priest in charge, in reaction to which charismatic and pentecostal off-shoots have formed. Few of these are prepared to have a liturgy, but many of them find they cannot do without trained musicians to lead the singing. One of the most successful is based in Kensington Temple, where for many years the musician in charge was



ST GEORGE'S LECTURES

17 - Choral Music: The Case for Excellence

my sister, Vanessa, playing miked piano and backed by a band. Not a robed choir singing polyphony, certainly, but her musicians were trained: she learnt to transpose any tune at sight and the band learnt to harmonise it in any key. The Salvation Army is famous for their bands. Meanwhile the other Nonconformist churches are not the force they once were, not in the UK anyway. None of this, Gregorian chant, Tallis's 'If ye love me', folk masses or band music, would have been familiar to Jesus and his disciples, but who's to say they wouldn't have liked it, or indeed who's to say that they didn't have music and singing of their own?

The charge of elitism is worth a closer look, since it underlies much of the contemporary rejection of organised religion. It is a concept which has communist revolutionary undertones: the rich and educated classes are enjoying expensive and/or highly wrought things which we, the ordinary people, do not understand and which are used in some insidious way to keep us in our place. Smash them up and we will be free, in the Christian case free to worship in the simple way of the apostles. In the 16th century this way of thinking may have had some force, but keeping strictly to today, how accurate is it? The rich and educated people I meet around London by and large haven't a clue what polyphony is, presumably because their expensive educations were devoted to other topics, like business studies. Many useful things weren't taught at my school, which to me now can make them seem desirable and unattainable, like for instance an understanding of the international banking system, cookery, and carpentry. Anyone who can make a chair which doesn't collapse, let alone a highly worked cabinet, is part of an elite I feel excluded from. I might be able to acquire the necessary skills just as a carpenter might be taught to write polyphony or sing the solos in church, but I don't have the time now, and neither do they. To do any of these things well you need an initial aptitude or reason for taking it up in the first place – like your father did it before you and showed the way, and then a lifetime of practice – Jesus or Joseph could have told you this about carpentry. They were skilled in something most people cannot do.

The people who would by-pass the entire tradition of Christian worship rarely admit that they are afraid of the unknown, of the necessary vaguenesses of the unstated things in religion. In the background for them is still the elitist argument, prominent at the time of the Reformation, but now frankly looking a bit tired. Nowadays the wreckers need something more up-beat, more absolute, more transcendent to take with them into battle, which comes over as a kind of God-fix. Here is the thinking of the Dean of Sydney, on the unsatisfactory influence of the Old Testament on the possibilities inherent in the New: 'Old Testament categories, language, concepts and practices were rather uncritically imported into Christian church practice. There was also influence from the prevailing Greek thought forms of the day. The shift that took place in church life was from that of the fellowship model to that of the liturgical model. We can trace a direct line from Clement and Cyprian and all the rest to the ongoing practice of Catholicism and High Anglicanism today. It's an alternative gospel which we must not get tired of opposing. Little wonder that evangelicals have often been considered deficient in their worship, rightly wary of mysticism in all its forms, having stripped away the gaudy baubles of sacramentalism, with all its theatre and colour and movement. Using the language and categories of worship in church is untenable. We desperately want our church meetings to be occasions of transcendence, of epiphany. It's no accident that feelings of epiphany (transcendence) occur when certain human activities are undertaken, especially music, symbolic acts, drama, certain architecture. And these things induce feelings of transcendence regardless of the content or even the religious context. We need to help people see that nice feelings are nice. They're desirable. But they don't represent contact with God.'



ST GEORGE'S LECTURES

17 - Choral Music: The Case for Excellence

At first one notices the casual dismissal of accredited wisdom: the Church Fathers are lumped together as 'all the rest'; Greek thought in its entirety is mocked; Catholicism and High Anglicanism are held to be the same; mysticism is rejected. But the idea that music, especially music, doesn't represent contact with God is so extreme a statement that it quite takes one's breath away. If Phillip Jensen had said that *congregational* singing was what was wanted, and trained choirs singing by themselves was not, I would at least have understood him, since the Bible constantly refers to singing in worship, presumably by everybody present; but he makes bold to reject the evidence of the New Testament as much as the Old in the matter of singing to God. Everywhere you look in the Bible people are singing.

The Psalms set the scene magnificently:

Psalm 95, the Venite: O come let us sing unto the Lord.

Psalm 47: O sing unto God with the voice of melody...O sing praises, sing praises unto our God.

Psalm 66, the Jubilate Deo: O be joyful unto the Lord, all ye lands. Sing praises unto the honour of his name.

Psalm 149: O sing unto the Lord a new song, let the congregation of saints praise him.

And, to put it the other way, Psalm 137: How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

And the NT? Here is St Paul in 1 Corinthians 14: 'I will sing with the spirit and with the understanding also'.

One suspects that from time immemorial singing and worship had gone hand in hand, from Druidical drones to the oldest plainchant melodies, which are said to descend from Pharaonic temple worship. The Jews certainly had a method of chanting from early on, 20 of their psalms not only referring to singing as a desirable activity, but superscribed with the word Alleluia, to be sung as a response between priest and people in the Temple of Jerusalem. The early Christians quickly picked up on this possibility of antiphonal chanting, as the sermons of St Augustine of Hippo (who died in 430) make clear. There is anyway very early manuscript evidence for the first Christian rites: a *capitulare evangeliorum* has survived from the time of Bishop Fortunatianus around 350; and particularly and most delightfully a reference by St Jerome to a body of clerics known as the *Chorus beatorum* that surrounded Bishop Valerianus in the 370s and 380s. Every religion has encouraged singing: surely Jesus and the Apostles would have sung together. By the law of averages, some of them must have had serviceable singing voices, perhaps Jesus himself did. Joy in religion has always been synonymous with singing out loud. To describe this as being nothing more than 'nice' is, as I say, breathtaking.

But the issue for us, as for most reformers from the Renaissance onwards, is how good, how specialist, to allow the singing to be. When the psalmist exhorts his people to praise the Lord with every means at their disposal, does he sanction, even indirectly, the choir of Westminster Abbey singing polyphony at High Mass? Does he say 'praise the Lord as well as you possibly can', because He deserves it, and anyway you yourselves will be the more uplifted by it; or is he saying you've all got to join in otherwise it doesn't count, and anyway if you don't join in you'll not be able to come as near to God as He would like? In modern terms, then, is it to be congregational music, perhaps chant, sung by everybody; or the robed choir singing composed music of genuine complexity; or the folk-singer with her guitar and tambourine? To put it another way: does God deserve the best, and if achieving that best means sometimes leaving people out of the singing, are they being insultingly excluded, or is it possible that they too are able to



ST GEORGE'S LECTURES

17 - Choral Music: The Case for Excellence

converse with God through what they hear, even though they are vocally silent? The audiences of the Tallis Scholars, world-wide and often from outside the Christian tradition, know the answer to that one.

Throughout the Christian tradition, however, thoughtful commentators have suggested that artistic excellence is desirable, or at the very least imply that the opposite will not do:

Martin Luther wrote: The Kingdom of Christ 'is a hearing kingdom, not a seeing kingdom: for the eyes do not lead and guide us to where we know and find Christ, but rather the ears do this'.

Thomas Aquinas: 'The exultation of the mind derives from things eternal bursting forth in sound'.

Joseph Addison: 'Music – the greatest good that mortals know, and all of heaven we have below'.

Thomas Morley wrote in his *Plain and Easy Introduction to Practical Music*: music in divine service is able 'to draw the hearer, as it were, in chains of gold by the ears to the consideration of holy things'.

The 12th century Abbot Suger, abbot of the royal monastery of St Denis near Paris, argued that we could only come to understand absolute beauty, which is God, through the effect of precious and beautiful things on our senses. Kenneth Clark, who quotes this in his survey of the western tradition, *Civilisation*, goes on to say that the 12th century was the age which gave European civilisation its impetus, specifically through a belief that God may be approached through beauty. This doctrine seems to say: the more beautiful the artistic endeavour on one's senses, the nearer one may approach to God. That, surely, is a justification for straining every nerve to sing to God as well as one possibly can. And the corollary must hold: bad singing must surely diminish a sense of God.

Why is this vision of cultivated beauty so difficult for some people? Because it isn't active or muscular enough? Because it seems effete, even? But it comes as no surprise to discover that the rejection of something so inoffensive leads to distortion. By what right does a priest say to a believer who is blessed with musicianship, 'We don't want your talent; it is of no use to us. Take your voice to the opera house; take your instrument to the conservatoire; but if you want to worship with us you must narrow your expertise to the level of the lowest achiever here, otherwise they will feel excluded'? But why is the singing voice considered to be so much more elitist than the good speaking voice, the pride of so many priests; or the knack of leadership in a community, also a matter of pride to priests, not to mention the work of the carpenter who made the altar?

Why is it, in fact, that music, especially music, is always the first art to be branded? I think the answer may be because music, above every other means of human communication, is capable of expressing the inexpressible and to those who must have everything laid out in black and white, this is worrying. There is something extreme about the finest music, especially polyphony. It tears into people in a way they cannot resist. For the ninth century Arab theorist Hrabanus Maurus, *Sine musica nulla disciplina potest esse perfecta; nihil enim est sine illa*: 'Without music no discipline can be perfect, nothing can exist without it. For the world itself is composed of the harmony of sounds, and heaven itself moves according to the motions of this harmony.' For through the mystical beauty of the harmony of the spheres, music comes close to God; the closest which we will ever get, *pace* Shakespeare who wrote in *The Merchant of Venice* that we will remain unable to hear such harmony 'whilst this muddy vesture of decay doth grossly close it in'. (Methinks, in passing, that Shakespeare didn't listen to enough Byrd and Tallis, even though they



ST GEORGE'S LECTURES

17 - Choral Music: The Case for Excellence

were his contemporaries. The idea of the harmony of the spheres, so unbelievably beautiful, always brings tears to my eyes, not least because some polyphony, the sort that goes round and round, seems almost to depict it.)

People who are forever trying to root difficult concepts in the earth, dig them in, make them solid and fixed, instinctively look downwards for their explanations in life, to where Hades was always supposed to have been located, to the traditional imperium of Lucifer. Sacred music, as listeners to the Tallis Scholars never tire of telling me, takes them out of themselves and lets their spirits soar upwards into a world of mystical regeneration. Heaven traditionally is that way, as much for the listeners as for the singers.

