Welsh Hymns and Hymn-Singing

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Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 60, No. 920 (Oct. 1, 1919), pp. 536-538

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3701761>

Accessed: 02-01-2016 06:57 UTC

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emphatically a tardy resurrection.' John Taverner is another name high in the list of English talent, and although its bearer could not hope for favourable comparison with Tye at his best, his genius was still sufficiently great to merit recognition to-day. Indeed, Foxe tells us that when imprisoned at Oxford for alleged heresy, he escaped death on account of his music. The same authority adds that 'this Taverner repented him very much that he had made songes to Popishe ditties in the tyme of his blindenes.' While speaking of narrow escapes from the stake, we may mention that of John Merbecke, whose 'premature reforming zeal,' to use Burney's words, 'nearly made a martyr of him. . . . He had, indeed, the honour of being condemned to the stake, but was pardoned.' It should be mentioned, however, that this pardon again must have been on account of his excellence as a musician, since such powerful personages as Sir Humphrey Fostfr and the Bishop of Winchester interceded for him. Then there were John Sheppard, whose three-part 'Stev'n first after Christ for Gods worde his blood spent' is described by Ambros as 'nothing less than a master-work'; the early John Dygon, who graduated as a B. Mus. in April, 1512, and whose motet 'Ad lapidis positionem' is printed by Hawkins; John Thorne of York, though late in the period, whose three-part motet 'Stella Coeli' is well worthy of notice, the conduct of the several parts being very dignified and full of vigour, the harmony excellent, and the imitation interesting (Ambros), Grove mentioning two more MSS. of his; and Edmund Turges, represented in the Fayrfax MS., and not even mentioned in Grove. Another early figure was William of Newark, Master of the boys of the Chapel; and still another was William Cornysh, whose son William was advanced enough to use the 'chord of the sharp seventh of a key, with a false fifth' (Burney).

Hugh Aston was a very eminent figure early in this half-century, and one of the most celebrated of pre-Reformation composers. A hornpipe of his, contained in the Royal MSS. App. 58 (British Museum) is, as Henry Davey remarks, 'an extraordinary piece of keyboard execution,' and its composer is claimed by this historian 'as the inventor of instrumental composition.' The Bodleian Library and that of the Music School (Oxford), Peterhouse Library (Cambridge), and the British Museum all possess specimens of his work. Robert Fayrfax was another famous writer of the period, but since I have dealt with him already in three articles contributed to *Musical News* (January 20, February 3 and 10, 1917), I shall do no more than refer the possibly interested reader to them. I think the names already mentioned will be sufficient to impress the student with the high importance of this period, to the history of English music. Nor does this list by any means complete the tale. But two minor lights might be mentioned, since they had to do with the controversies surrounding Henry's matrimonial affairs. The first is Mark Smeaton, groom of the chamber to Anne Bullen, and a musician high in Court favour. He was accused of misconduct with the Queen, and he ultimately confessed, though Anne strenuously denied it. That some understanding existed between the two can hardly be doubted when we consider some of the contemporary correspondence; but that he deserved the hanging he received, is quite open to question. The other was Thomas Abel, who instructed Queen Catherine in music. This meddlesome musician was injudicious enough to perpetrate a treatise entitled 'De non dissolvendo Henrici et Catharinae Matrimonio,' and came to an untimely end by hanging and quartering in 1540. The moral whereof is, that it was good for cobblers to stick to their lasts in the first half of the 16th century.

Before leaving the subject, I should like to draw attention to three volumes which illustrate, each in a different way, the music of the period. The books I am referring to are the MS. above mentioned (Royal MSS. 58), Rastell's 'Interlude of the four Elements' (1510), and a song-book published by Wynkyn de Worde, in London, in 1530. The first of these three contains what is the first music actually composed expressly for instruments, and not simply arranged vocal pieces. As such it is of great interest and value to the musical historian. The 'Interlude' illustrates one of the uses to which music was put secularly. It describes various natural phenomena in verses spoken by different allegorical characters. Towards the end is the direction, 'Then the dauncers without the hall sing this wyse and they within answer'; after which follows music to the text 'Tyme to pass with goodly sport, etc.'—obviously a popular song at the period. Wynkyn de Worde's publication arrived on the scene at a time when country and king were busy with religious controversy. Yet these things did not seem to affect the general public much, if such a collection of secular songs could find use and customers. In the book, of which the Bass part is in the British Museum (K.k.1.), 'ar conteynynd XX songes IX of IIII partes and XI of three partes.' The composers included are Cornysh, Pygot, Taverner, Fayrfax, Cowper, and Jones. There appears to be no other copy, or other part, of this work known.

The first half of the 16th century is important, therefore, for several reasons, and political and religious causes often had great effects. Church music was passing through one of its trying times, and methods were considerably changed in the fifty years under review. During the period, too, we find the King composing genial music; we see composers rising who could brave comparison with their Continental *compères*; we notice the writing of original instrumental music, and the publication of the first book in England to consist exclusively of music. This was the critical time when music was kicking off its ancient swaddling-clothes, and was becoming the sturdy youth that reached such noble manhood at the close of the Elizabethan era.

WELSH HYMNS AND HYMN-SINGING.

By WILLIAM CHILD.

The Hymn Festivals that have been held in England during the past few years have been well worth while. They have undoubtedly improved congregational singing in the districts in which they took place by drawing attention to, and rehearsing, many new and neglected old tunes of the best type. But their indirect influence has been even greater. They have not only brought the question of popular hymnody well to the fore, and kept it there; they have reminded church-goers generally that the hymn-tune is not a part-song for the choir, but a song for the people, with the result that much of the old congregational diffidence is gone. Many organists and choirs now take a sympathetic view of the subject, so that the prospects of co-operation between the trained singers and the untrained crowd were never so bright as to-day. The Hymn Festival was an English adaptation of a peculiarly Welsh institution, but it can never flourish so vigorously as its original, because it will necessarily lack the note of frank emotion that distinguishes the Welsh gatherings. Moreover, fond as the English are of hymns, comparatively few of their favourites appeal to them on the national side. The old Welsh tunes have a good deal of the character of folk-song, and the

intense racial feeling of the Welsh finds almost as much outlet in 'Caerlleon' or 'Joanna' as in 'Men of Harlech.' English people are fond of 'St. Anne,' or 'Ravenscroft,' because of long association, with little or no recognition of the fact that they are as characteristically English as any music we have produced.

The 'Cymanfa Ganu,' or the Psalmody Festival, was made a part of the Eisteddfod only as recently as 1916. The suggestion came from Mr. Lloyd George, —surely the first British Prime Minister to take any practical interest in popular music. At Corwen the hymn-singing was the final event of the Eisteddfod. Two sessions were held, from 1.30 to 4.30, and from 5.30 to 9. Could we collect eight thousand English people for such a purpose twice on a hot summer's day? The gathering was supposed to be grouped according to voices, but the arrangements broke down, and although some hundreds of tenors and basses were in their proper places the majority of those present never got sorted out. I am inclined to think this was a gain. The effect of such a mass singing in harmony would have lost in blend had there been too rigid a classification. The accompaniment was provided by the band of the Welsh Guards and a local orchestra. Mr. Emyln Evans conducted, and had his huge force remarkably well in hand throughout. The book contained thirty hymns, tonic sol-fa and staff editions being provided. The festival partook somewhat of the nature of a practice, as some of the tunes were new. I gathered from Mr. Evans that the book forms a kind of supplementary hymnal for the ensuing year, and is widely circulated throughout the country. The 'Cymanfa Ganu' has thus great educational responsibilities. The singing was overwhelming in its volume and fervour—so much so, that although I had heard glowing accounts of Welsh hymn-singing, I felt inclined to say with the Queen of Sheba, 'The half was not told me.'

There was little or no attempt at light and shade—a surprise in view of the violent dynamic contrasts in other Welsh singing. Moreover, the Festival book, like the Welsh hymnals generally, was plentifully sprinkled with expression marks. It would have been thrilling to hear a *pianissimo* from such a crowd, and I am sure it could have been got. What was needed was not sudden contrast in power, but the variety obtained by an occasional hymn sung softly or *mezzo-forte* throughout. There are many hymns which call for such treatment. The singing at Corwen was too continuously full-voiced.

To the visitor, the habit of singing the final portion of a verse over and over again was somewhat trying. There was apparently no method in this repetition. The conductor seemed suddenly to make up his mind, and took the crowd with him. As the structure of most Welsh tunes involves a good deal of repetition, the result led to monotony.

The band played the tunes over very woodenly, and it was fortunate that their accompaniments were audible only rarely. I was surprised at the ineffectiveness of even a good band for this purpose. There was a lack of foundation and sustained power, the bass being especially weak and tubby. One longed for the roll of an organ, with a big pedal and fine diapasons.

In my article on the Eisteddfod I mentioned the curious lack of appreciation of the beauty of unaccompanied singing. The same lack was apparent here. The band was of little practical use save for 'giving out' the tune, and if most of the singing had been unaccompanied, with the players joining in an occasional unison verse, they would have worked less with better results. Perhaps, too, the committee might consider the advisability of interpolating a good

instrumental item halfway through each session. It would give voices and ears a much-needed rest, and the band would welcome the task as more congenial than playing hymn tunes.

The 'Cymanfa Ganu' is a wonderfully impressive affair, despite some details that strike the visitor unfavourably. He may have his doubts, for example, as to the advisability—even the decency—of making such promiscuous use of hymns in which the note of personal and intimate religious feeling is uppermost. Especially does this question arise when hymns are introduced to soothe the crowd, or to beguile the tedium of waiting. I understand that they are used thus even before political meetings and football matches! Of course, if the assembled politicians and sportsmen feel impelled to sing to the praise and glory of God on such occasions, so much the better. But without being uncharitable, I could not avoid an impression that the music, and the sheer physical joy of singing, were the prime considerations at the Eisteddfod.

This danger is apparently exercising some native leaders of thought. Thus, an outspoken article in the *Welsh Outlook* for August says:

The parasitic 'Cymanfa Ganu' must be subjected to an effective surgical operation, relieving the body Eisteddfodic for all time from an alien cankerous growth which threatens to sap its vitality. Those who witnessed the scenes at Birkenhead, and still more emphatically at Neath, cannot fail to have realised that the 'Cymanfa Ganu' was held not so much to the glory of God as to the glorification of man.

Even on the educational side the Festival leaves much to be desired. As a means of popularising good new tunes such a gathering is of immense value. But how if the tunes be bad? The 1919 book contains some very weak numbers, and I blushed to find that the weakest was an English tune, a miserable specimen of one of our worst types. I quote its opening phrases, so that I may not be suspected of exaggeration:

EX. 1. 'St. Catherine.'

J. G. WALTON, 1821—.

It is good for the Welsh to borrow music from their neighbours, but it is bad when they lay hands on the worst. I note, too, on the part of some of the Welsh hymn composers of to-day, a regrettable tendency to adopt an idiom that we in England are rapidly outgrowing, e.g.:

EX. 2. 'Milwaukee.'

D. PROTHEROE, Mus. Doc.

Wales had far better stick to a handful of the best of her old tunes than adopt such enervating strains as this. Unfortunately, I gathered from conversations at Corwen that there is a tendency to discard the old

in favour of the new—especially when the new is down to the above sample. Can the Welsh Folk-song Society do nothing to save the situation? It will be disastrous if future Psalmody Festival books are allowed to go further on the downward path. The evil wrought by so widely circulated a collection containing even a moderate percentage of feeble tunes is incalculable.

In regard to the older tunes, and indeed Welsh tunes generally, there is a tendency to overrate them. The very best, such as 'Ymdaith Mwngc' (E.H. 203), Prichard's 'Hyfrydol' (E.H. 301), 'Bangor,' or 'Merionydd,' are everything that a popular melody should be, but a good many that are better known in England have some obvious faults. 'Aberystwyth,' for example, has a poor melodic line for its first four phrases, and is saved only by the fine rise just before the end. Three of its four opening phrases end with :

and the other adds little variety by ending on the dominant of E. Sung to a long hymn, this opening becomes wearisome. Even a rolling performance of the tune by one of the biggest crowds at the Eisteddfod did not alter my conviction that it is overrated, and good in only one half.

The construction of the average eight-line Welsh tune—a b a b c d a b—tends to monotony. The frequent use of melodic passages founded on the common chord sometimes gives an impression of marking time rather than of sweeping progress, e.g. :

Ex. 4. 'Joanna.'

and this, from 'Elliot,' a tune by John Ellis, 1750-1834 :

Ex. 5.

The oldest tunes are none the worse for a decidedly secular folk-song flavour, and in several 'The Miller of the Dee' seems to be in the background :

Ex. 6. 'Gweddli.'

The minor key is rather too much in evidence, and (at all events to the reserved Sax n) there seems to be too frequent leaning towards the lachrymose.

I have often heard English people discuss the harmony sung by a Welsh crowd. Credulous laymen tell us that the harmony is improvised : unbelievers say that it consists of what is known in England as 'singing seconds'—that is, thirds. The improvisation theory may be knocked on the head by the simple experiment of playing a well-known air and asking

three musicians to extemporise the under parts. I have assisted at such a demonstration, and have seen the credulous laymen easily convinced that each of the parts so supplied may be excellent in itself, but not calculated to go well in harness. I have always fancied the 'singing seconds' theory was near the mark, but I now see that the great majority of these Welsh singers know the published harmony of their tunes, and sing it from memory. After all, this would not be an astonishing feat, even with a race less musical than the Welsh. Compared with the English and German their standard hymn tunes are few in number. There is, so far as I can gather, but one harmonization in regular use, and this is very simple. With the large mixed choirs at Welsh churches, and the constant repetition involved by the small repertory, it is not surprising that such a large proportion of the population should be able to sing hymns in harmony on the smallest provocation. Moreover, as we have seen, with the Welsh the hymn tune often takes a place that in England is filled by the popular song and chorus. For example, one day a char-a-banc passed me, filled with young fellows singing 'Tôn-y-Botel' in four-part harmony with delightful effect. A similar party of young Englishmen would have given us something very different, both in matter and manner.

At the Psalmody Festival the crowd were all singing from music-books. Neither on this nor on any other occasion did I hear any singing of 'seconds.' A few men sang the melody an octave lower—never a bad effect when the mass of harmony is big, and excellent in this case, as the hymns were always pitched high.

In England we have lately been preaching the virtues of unison singing, and certainly the method is infinitely preferable to the go-as-you-please mixture of unison, improvised harmony, and 'seconds' we have tolerated for so long. But I fancy that the Welsh Psalmody Festival, and Welsh hymn-singing generally, would convince us that the ideal is congregational harmony, with a moderate use of unison. I am yet to be persuaded that an average English congregation cannot be taught to sing simple part-music. All they need is a copy of the music, periodical practices, and encouragement. The handful who are unable to do more than follow the tune should be told to stick to it. The men who double the melody in the octave below have been laughed at too often. What organist does not value his 16-ft. diapason on the Great? When he has a few in trousers he ought to be thankful.

Occasional Notes.

Miss Dorothy Howell, whose symphonic poem, 'Lamia,' met with such emphatic success on its production at the Promenade Concerts on September 10 and 13, is a native of Birmingham. Miss Howell's musical gifts are an inheritance from both her parents. Her father is an amateur pianist of taste and ability, and, through her mother, she is descended from Alfred Feeny, who was editor and musical critic of the *Birmingham Daily Post* in the days when the Birmingham Musical Festival was an event of the first importance in the musical life of England. Miss Howell, who has just attained her majority, has been writing music since she reached the age of nine. Her systematic study, however, may be said to date from September, 1913, when she came to London and entered the Royal Academy of Music. Her teachers there were Mr. Percy Waller, pianoforte (and during Mr. Waller's absence on active service, Mr. Tobias Matthay), Miss Gladys Chester, violin, and Mr. J. B. McEwen, composition.