Plainsong: Some Pros and Cons

Author(s): Harvey Grace

Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 56, No. 867 (May 1, 1915), pp. 296-298

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

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/909838>

Accessed: 26-12-2015 06:03 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Musical Times Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

(Continued from page 288.)

truth. As has been said, music itself is but a small part of the total output of controlled activities called out in this stirring time. But it is no small thing for a great art that new urgency has come into it. New audiences have come into being, and as my friends of the choir could tell you, they are distinguished for sincerity. Soldiers will tell musicians when they have had enough. They will take a moving part in the concert. They will even do us the invaluable service of starting a tune of their own, if our utterance interests them less than theirs. If only such sincerity pervaded the output of our post-European-War art, there would then be no more blasé affectation. Creative energy would work in composer, player, and listener alike in such strength and breezy sincerity that we shall write the common chord anew and aright, because we love it anew and aright. There is certainly hope that one of the incidental joys resultant upon and evoked by a great sorrow and anxiety will be, that the much-desired national art will now become naturally emergent and understood. We shall speak our own language, to the joy of England, and, let us hope, to the enrichment and gratification of her Allies and her enemies alike.

PLAINSONG: SOME PROS AND CONS.*

BY HARVEY GRACE.

Although plainsong is steadily advancing in favour, and is being studied more generally and sympathetically than ever before, it still labours under some disabilities. To many it smells of Popery, and is promptly damned on that account alone. Samuel Sebastian Wesley's amusing letter to an inquiring pupil is significant:

'Your question about Gregorian Tones has caused me much pain. I thought I had made a better musician of you. I am sorry for this. I beg to assure you that I am a Musician, a Protestant, and Yours truly,
S. S. WESLEY.'

Bearing in mind the prevailing ignorance on the subject at that time, we need not attach much importance to Wesley's objections on musical grounds. Given our opportunities of studying and hearing plainchant, a man with Wesley's sense of the strong and dignified in Church music would assuredly have been speedily converted. I fancy the really important word in the letter is 'Protestant.' We must remember, too, that the most earnest plainsong revivalists then were parsons and ecclesiastically-minded laymen with more zeal than knowledge. I seem to have read somewhere of a vicar who was so fond of the psalm tones that he conversed with his wife in inflections, and held a Gregorian festival off his own bat with a choral force consisting of the cook, a couple of servant girls, and a boy in buttons. Advocacy of this kind could hardly do other than prejudice the professional musician unfavourably. To-day, happily, we find many of our leading musicians both in and out of the Church interested in the revival of this old music, and composers of various schools are showing themselves fully alive to the charm of its modal and rhythmical characteristics. Apart from the 'Protestant' objection, perhaps the cause of plainsong now suffers most from some of its devotees' insistence on its antiquarian and historical side. They forget that antiquaries and trained musicians form but a very insignificant proportion of our congregations. What the man in the pew needs is not lectures on the origin and antiquity of plainsong so much as demonstrations of its fitness for regular use in our services. He is apt to point out that there is no virtue in mere age, else a shop egg would be esteemed a delicacy. But if you begin by convincing him by the evidence of his ears that this old music is pre-eminently fitted for a particular purpose, and then point out that, in addition to this fitness, it has the added weight that comes from generations of use, you will be in a fair way to making a convert.

A short time ago I met an old friend who had stood by my side and sung Anglican chants when we were boys together. He has remained faithful to that type of Church music ever since, it being the only kind with which he is familiar. He was bitterly bemoaning the fact that he and his fellows were threatened with plainsong. He had

protested in the manly and effective way adopted by choir-men when faced with the uncongenial,—that is to say, he had handed in his resignation. He opened his mind to me very fully. Briefly put, here is his case, and it may be taken as typical: Plainsong is (a) monotonous; (b) dull; (c) ugly; (d) not music at all, but crude and barbarous attempts at music; (e) its revival is putting back the hands of the clock; (f) it is uninteresting to the choir.

When people say that plainsong is monotonous they generally refer to its use in chanting the Psalms, so we will consider it in that connection.

In the first place, have we not rather misled people by speaking of *singing* the Psalms? If we remember that chanting is merely reading with inflections, we shall have a much clearer idea as to the method of performance: more important still, we shall make no mistake as to the kind of variety to be aimed at, which is rhythmical rather than tonal.

There are three ways of reading the Psalms: (a) the go-as-you-please method, with each reader a law to himself as regards pitch, accent, and inflection; (b) the monotone; (c) a mixture of monotone and inflection—the latter now being reduced to a system instead of being improvised by the individual. This third method is known as chanting, or singing, and the farther we get away from the ideas suggested by these terms, and the more we regard the process as organized and inflected reading, the nearer we shall approach a rendering worthy of some of the finest prose in our language.

It is obvious that the most satisfactory formulæ for use as inflections will be those that approach most nearly to the involuntary cadences used by the average speaker. Take the simplest form of plainsong, the versicles and responses, as examples. It will be noticed how inevitable and natural these are. I have on several occasions found their naturalness proved in a most convincing fashion. I have heard children in schools recite the Creed. Nominally, they monotoned it; actually, in course of time, they had unanimously adopted a system of rising and falling accents almost exactly on the lines of the responses.

The same kind of thing is to be found in some of the old street cries. We have all heard a hawk apparently breaking forth into ecclesiastical song, when he was really only crying his wares, and adopting such inflections as would make his call more arresting. The plainsong Psalm tones possess just this easy naturalness.

It is of course a truism that any musical phrase that has to be repeated many times *must* be simple. It may be taken as axiomatic that the more striking the phrase, whether as to melody, harmony, or rhythm, the less well does it bear repetition. In chanting the Psalms we are faced with the fact that the musical setting has to be provided for any number of verses from four to seventy-six. With a plainsong tone, the melodic simplicity, the absence of fixed harmony, the fact of the last note frequently suggesting a half-close rather than a cadence, and the freedom of rhythm enable us to go through a long Psalm with no sense of monotony. As to rhythm, in a Psalm of thirty verses you will find hardly two with a similar scheme, whereas with an Anglican chant you will hear this rhythm thirty times:

Moreover, the latter has a definite musical form, fixed harmony, and often a striking progression that, pleasing for a few verses, ends in becoming wearisome. Take for example the well-known chant of Wesley,—one of the most beautiful ever written:

Ex. 1.

This little piece of music contains as much charm as could well be packed into such a small compass. But its most effective point,—bar 4—when it had been recited on

* The substance of a lecture delivered before the Church Music Society on March 20.

for many verses would become a burden to all but the most unmusical listener.

Dvorák, Sir Charles V. Stanford tells us, was driven nearly crazy by his first experience of Anglican chanting, which he described as a barbarous repetition of a poor tune. As a matter of fact, even a good tune cannot survive the ordeal of some dozens of *da capo*. Perhaps the real trouble, however, is the insistence on one little rhythmic formula. Heroic efforts are sometimes made to sing it with the freedom of good plainsong chanting. Sometimes a fair measure of success is attained, though the fact of the choir singing in harmony makes complete success impossible. Moreover, there is one step towards freedom that cannot be taken in Anglican chanting, and that is the elision of the reciting note to meet the case of a very short half-verse. In adapting a plainsong tone, a *note* only is removed: in adopting an Anglican chant a *chord* has to come out, and this is possible only when the harmony happens to allow of such a proceeding.

If, for example, we wish to elide the reciting chord in the second half of the Wesley chant, we have this progression left:

Such short half-verses as 'O, Lord,' 'Beasts and all cattle,' 'Mountains and all hills,' 'Shall serve me,' 'Thy salvation,' 'For who doth hear,' and many others, can only be rendered with correct accentuation by shortening the chant accordingly. You will find very few Anglican chants that will admit of this cutting of the coat according to the cloth, hence such commonly-heard absurdities as 'Thy-y-y salvation,' 'Beasts and aw-awl cattle' (or 'beasts and all cattle'), 'Sha-a-all ser-erve me,' &c.

But perhaps the most unkind blow at the Anglican chant is dealt it in the house of its friends, who are always crying out for new ones. Plainsongites are content with their mere handful of convenient and time-honoured inflections. They would decline without thanks the offer of a Ninth Tone, even as they have no use for new settings of the responses or 'Sursum corda.' But your Anglican chanter is like the daughter of the horseleech, ever crying out for more. You may provide a choir with the best collection yet published, but that will not serve for long. Inquire a year later, and you will find the choirmaster has started compiling a MS. book, with some tasty 'little things of his own,' or the vicar's wife's, or of some amateurs in the congregation. It is a solemn thought that long after you and I have resolved our final discord, composers at present in their nurses' arms, bald and toothless, with no language but a cry and no action but a stagger and a clutch, will still be writing Anglican chants.

After all, there need never be any shortage. When the supply of original ideas gives out (and there are signs that the day is fast approaching) there is the whole of musical literature at our disposal for adaptation, after the manner of the notorious perversion of the slow movement of Beethoven's 'Pathetic Sonata.'

I have no wish to belittle the merits of our national chant, considered as music. It is astonishing how much beauty some composers have managed to include in such a small compass. In many cases we may fitly apply the poet's words, and call it 'a box where sweets compacted lie.' But while these pleasing musical miniatures may be sung with delightful effect to metrical verse, they are too formal for use with prose, and hopeless anachronisms when allied with the rugged prose-poetry of the Psalms. Even so would a suit of broadcloth and a silk hat become King Lear or Macbeth.

Now we come to the second objection: that plainsong is dull. I should be claiming too much if I said that there was *no* dull plainsong. I am bound to say, however, that I know very little that deserves to be so called. But after all, modern Church music is not *always* palpitating with life and interest. Even Peerybingle in *B7* has his dull moments!

Still, because some modern music is dull we do not therefore condemn the whole of it. Plainsong suffers from various other kinds of injustice. For example, if a choir sings a service by Peerybingle very badly, the indignant amateur in the pew does not blame Peerybingle. He blames the choir and sympathises with the composer. But if the same choir sings plainsong badly, the blame usually falls on the music and the sympathy goes to the choir.

The best answer to the charge of dullness is the fact that the ancient melodies to such hymns as 'Sing, my tongue,' 'The Royal Banners,' 'Blessed city,' 'The Lamb's high banquet,' &c., are now widely sung and appreciated. The one charge that cannot be brought against such vigorous tunes is surely that of dullness. There are scores of fine plainsong tunes that only need to be well known to be equally popular.

Then it is sometimes said that plainsong is ugly. Here of course we can see the reason for the complaint. The idiom of plainsong is unfamiliar, and we know that what is odd generally strikes us as being ugly. This objection usually dies a natural death on the music becoming familiar. There is however a vast quantity of plainsong that is quite tuneful, even at first hearing. An unbiased study of the publications of the Plainsong and Mediæval Music Society will bring to light page after page of smooth, tuneful strains, so vocal that they almost sing themselves. The Introits for the year, the Ordinary of the Mass, and the various Sequences are now available for use in the English Church, and are a rich mine of pure melody that, adequately rendered, makes an instant appeal to all save those who have no ear for anything but violent and highly-coloured music.

Now I come to one of the commonest of all arguments against plainsong—that it is not music at all, but an early, crude, and barbarous attempt at music. It is an astonishing thing that you may hear this kind of remark made by people who have received quite a good musical education. They imagine the case to be something like this: In the dark ages, when harmony was not discovered, and when there were no instruments, a few decrepit anchorites tried to write tunes. They hadn't our beautiful modern major and minor scales, and the luxury of numerous sharps and flats was also denied them. They had no nicely ruled music paper—indeed, they had for a long time no recognised system of notation. With such disadvantages they could hardly be very successful in their attempts at composition. They did their best according to their lights, but their lights were decidedly poor.

This objection is based on the fallacy that plainsong left off when harmonized and measured music began. As a matter of fact plainsong was being composed as recently as the 17th century; indeed, it would be possible to go on composing it now, but the results would probably be unsatisfactory. We are now so obsessed with harmonic considerations, and our sense of rhythm is so much influenced by the regular accent of measured music, that we are unable to approach the question of pure melody with sufficient detachment.

What our opponents do not seem to realise is that in the history of an art, though the general progress is slow, certain forms may reach perfection in very early days. At a time when practically all music was vocal and one-dimensional nothing was more natural than that the composition of melody should quickly attain a high degree of excellence. Exactly the reverse is the case to-day, when, music having progressed enormously in such matters as harmony, thematic development, and instrumental colour, composers are becoming less and less inclined (or able) to write a decent melody of any length. A case analogous to that of plainchant is of course folk-song. Nobody, even the most modern of moderns, denies the charm of our old popular melodies. When we realise the antiquity of some of the most beautiful of these, we need not be surprised to find the same tuneful qualities in plainsong, much of which was contemporary, or very little earlier, in date. If we regard plainchant as a kind of sacred folk-song, we shall perhaps approach it in the right spirit.

Then we are told that in using plainsong we are putting back the hands of the clock. Are we to apply that argument generally in musical matters? If we are to leave plainsong on the shelf because the art has made progress since it was composed, then Bach and Beethoven must go there as well. Where are we to draw the line? If we carry out the theory to its logical (and decidedly bitter) conclusion, we shall hear

no music to-day but that of Schönberg & Co. The fact is that plainsong, like any other music, must be judged purely on its merits, and its practicability for use to-day. If it is good, it is in spite of, not because of, its age. Works of art, whether literary, pictorial, or musical, on which Time has laid his cold hand in vain, and which still have a message for us, we call classical. Hitherto the term has been used only in connection with the works of the great masters. It may quite well be applied to the best examples of plainsong and its lay-sister, folk-song.

The last objection may be dismissed in few words. We are told that plainsong should not be used because it is uninteresting to the choir. The obvious answer, of course, is that the object of Church music is far other than to provide choirs with pleasant Sunday mornings and evenings. It will be wise, however, to recognise that men and boys giving up a good deal of their spare time for choir work should not be expected to confine their efforts entirely to plainsong. By all means let them devote their skill in part-singing to the best anthems and cantatas, and perform them at organ recitals or on some other special occasions. There is no reason why they should not sing a good piece of modern music at the offertory. Then there are plenty of excellent faux-bourdon treatments of plainsong which are delightful to listen to, and very engrossing to the singers. Even good hymn-singing will give the best of choirs plenty of work.

Moreover, the use of other music is a necessity for vocal reasons. The very thing that makes psalmodic and hymnodic plainsong so excellent for congregational singing—its moderate compass—unfits it for sole use where trebles are concerned, since it employs only the lower and middle registers. The average boy is a soprano, and to give him no opportunities for using the best part of his voice is to deny ourselves one of the most delightful of vocal effects. On the other hand, it must be said that the use of plainsong, where the middle notes are properly produced, develops and makes effective a part of his voice that is only too often either coarse or inaudible.

On the whole, the prospects of plainsong revival were never so promising as to-day, in spite of old prejudices and misconceptions. Among the latter, by the way, one of the most fatal is to be found in the often heard remark 'Gregorians sound very fine when sung by a large number of voices.' It would be as illuminating to say that they sound fine when sung by people with one leg longer than the other, or by a choir with red hair. The remark applies no more to plainsong than to any kind of music. This insistence on mere weight loses sight of the fact that one of its chief charms is its elasticity. The old idea that demonstrations of plainsong could be made only with vast, unwieldy choirs led to the rigid and crude performances that naturally brought the music into disrepute. So far from plainsong requiring great choral forces for its rendering, it may claim to be the one kind of Church music that is effective 'where two or three are gathered together.' Modern hymn-tunes and chants, deprived of their harmonic interest, too often have little enough left. For Guild offices and occasions when no choir or organ is available, plainsong,—being pure melody, simple, and of moderate compass,—is the music *par excellence*. It may be sung effectively by any number of people, from two upwards.

What the cause needs now is demonstrations (especially by small choirs), and congregational practices. Given these, this old music may again become (as it is already in many parishes) the people's song. We have not outgrown it any more than we have outgrown a fine old Norman or Gothic church. And just as we think of the walls of these venerable sanctuaries as being steeped with the prayer and praise of generations of worshippers, and respect them accordingly, so the old melodies used as a medium for this prayer and praise must have a special claim on us that no other music, however beautiful, can put forward.

The open competition for Mr. Clifton Cooke's £100 Vocal Scholarship and extra cash prize offered by Messrs. J. B. Cramer & Co., will take place at 20, Bloomsbury Street, W.C., on Saturday, May 8. Entries close May 4. Mr. Claude Landi and Mr. Clifton Cooke will adjudicate.

London Concerts.

ROYAL CHORAL SOCIETY.

The performance of 'Messiah' on Good Friday drew a vast audience. Following the excellent precedent of recent concerts, it was held in the afternoon, and thus suburban folk were attracted. The soloists were Miss Ruth Vincent, Madame Kirkby Lunn, Mr. John Coates, and Mr. Harry Dearth. Sir Frederick Bridge conducted.

ROYAL PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY.

The last concert of the season was given at Queen's Hall on April 13. Debussy's 'La Demoiselle élue' and Stravinsky's 'L'Oiseau de Feu' were the attractive items. In the former work, Madame Marie Anne Weber-Delacre (from Brussels) and Miss Dilys Jones were the very competent soloists, but the choir of ladies was not wholly satisfactory. A Symphony of Mozart's in C (not the great 'Jupiter') the Epilogue from Delius's opera 'Koanga,' McEwen's Ballad for orchestra, 'Grey Galloway,' and Berlioz's Overture 'Le Carnaval Romain' were the other items.

QUEEN'S HALL ORCHESTRA.

On Good Friday the 'Parsifal' music provided an all-sufficient programme. Miss Carrie Tubb and Mr. Robert Radford were the soloists. A concert was given on April 10 for the benefit of the Endowment Fund, and drew a large audience. Mackenzie's Overture 'Britannia' opened the programme. Beethoven's Symphonies in A and in C minor were finely played, and Master Solomon gave a brilliant performance of Schumann's Pianoforte concerto in A minor. The extra Symphony Concert given on April 17 was made specially interesting by reason of the programme including an orchestral version scored by Sir Henry Wood of Moussorgsky's 'Pictures from an Exhibition.' These ingenious little pieces afforded ample scope for effective orchestration such as Sir Henry Wood was fully competent to undertake. It may be said that in some numbers sonority is gained at the expense of beauty, but on the whole the newly clothed work was very successful. Madame Clara Butt sang Gluck's famous 'Che Faro' and some of Elgar's 'Sea-Pictures' with impressive effect. Tchaikovsky's fifth Symphony was also played. Sir Henry Wood conducted on all of the above occasions.

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA.

At the concert given on April 12 much interest was felt in the appearance of Mr. Sammons to play Beethoven's Violin concerto. His great reputation led the audience to expect a fine performance, and they were not disappointed. Although at the start Mr. Sammons seemed out of sorts, and his E string was troubling him, he played with rare delicacy and finish. The slow movement especially was beautifully played. Mendelssohn's 'Italian' Symphony was welcome to the audience, and Tchaikovsky's F minor Symphony was another success. M. Savonov conducted.

ROYAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC.

At the Students' Chamber Concert at the Royal Academy of Music on March 24, a varied and interesting programme included Bach's Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue, a movement from Beethoven's F minor Quartet, the Andante and Scherzo from Brahms's Pianoforte quintet, Albanesi's Suite of old dances, and songs by Stanford and Vaughan Williams.

TRINITY COLLEGE OF MUSIC.

This educational institution is pursuing its activities successfully in spite of the War. On March 26 the prizes and certificates were presented to the students of the London Centre. The director of examinations, Dr. Pearce, was optimistic. He mentioned that the students had presented a motor ambulance for the use of the wounded. An orchestral concert was given at Queen's Hall on April 8, when the orchestra, under Mr. Sachse, played Smetana's