

Choral Association

Author(s): J. Powell Metcalfe

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## THE MUSICAL TIMES

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

JANUARY I, 1880.

## CHORAL ASSOCIATION.

By J. POWELL METCALFE.

"DOES the result pay for the toil and bother? Is the game worth the candle?" Such thought must ever and anon be thrusting itself on the mind of him who undertakes the work of improving choirs by association. At the outset then it will be well to take stock of the real and substantial benefits that accrue from Choral Association; benefits no less real and substantial because gradual in development. But first let us be quite sure that we set before us the improvement of our choirs for the better rendering of their home services as the first and chief, if not the only, end and aim of our Association.

Once for all let us accept the truth that the rightful aim of Choral Association can never be display—in church or out of church; its purpose cannot be to give opportunity to this or that choir to show off its cassocks and surplices, or what it may fancy is its superior skill. Nor even can it be for the general display of a grand service, though it may tend to show life and movement in the church; nor, again, can its aim be to supply occasion for pleasant outings to choirs and their hangers-on, and so to act as bait to catch new members that will assuredly turn out more for show than use.

No—let us repeat it—the rightful aim of Choral Association is the improvement of choirs. And in many ways does it tend to bring about this improvement.

It is the most potent and at the same time the least painful specific against that darling vice of choirs, conceit. It strikes at the very root of that too common choral fallacy, that all that is right, and good, and true is summed up in the little phrase, "what we do." It shows other choirs existing as choirs with other uses, which said uses—some of them—may possibly in time turn out worthy of adoption.

Then, "as iron sharpeneth iron," so does association brace up the flagging choir. "The men won't come to practice!" This is the cry of every choir-leader: but they will come to practice if they have got the festival book in hand with its new tunes and anthem that will "want a deal of getting-up," especially if their neighbours from B., and C., and D., are coming the week after next to meet the precentor with A. itself, and the choir of B. has been hard at work weeks ago, and it won't do to be behind B.—that it won't. And then should the choir of A. or B., or C. or D., be a really good choir, what an advantage will this united rehearsal be to the others. The best choir-master breathing can never give so useful a lesson as can the better choir to the worse, by the mere act of singing together with it; and well indeed would it be if better choirs would realise their power for good and improve their talent to their neighbour's benefit, instead of meanly holding aloof from contact, practically mistrusting their own power in fear of being mistaught by the worse.

But not one word let us say against the better choir; for, truth to say, experience teaches that it is the better choir that as a rule is the readiest to associate. It might almost be said that such readiness to associate is of itself proof of proficiency; for strange as it may seem, it is the case, that those who would in reality gain the most by association are just those who most obstinately hold back from all united choral action.

The great mass of the non-associating is made up of choirs under the sole direction of the school-master, and choirs where the ladies of the parsonage hold rule.

In the first case it is usually the total ignorance of music on the part of all the inmates of the parsonage that throws the reins of government into the hands of the schoolmaster, and he—not unnaturally and, from his point of view, most wisely—is unwilling to submit his qualifications to hold those reins to the test of association. In his own little village choir he is the cream of cream; he has certain reasons, no doubt exceedingly good, for thinking it within the range of possibility that, if mixed up with others, he might not rise, creamwise, to the surface; and so no association for him or the choir he reigns over. In the second case the good parson is, and never tires of telling you that he is, fully satisfied with the church-music supplied through the instrumentality of his wife or daughters. There is certainly something touching in the husband or father feeling, and owning to feel, that all music in his church must thus begin and end with his dear wife or daughters; but it is to be feared that some of the coarser and more matter-of-fact of the world will pronounce it somewhat hard on those who worship in that church. Perhaps it is not quite fair, after all, to lay the whole blame in every case on the husband or father. Let it be at once most heartily acknowledged that for earnest self-sacrificing choral work that knows no halting or weariness, for watchful tact and purpose that draws forth all true work from others, the Christian lady stands alone. Let it be acknowledged with deepest satisfaction how great is the number of such ladies who are at work with our choirs actuated by the highest and purest motives, thankfully accepting the aid and help of the sympathy association can alone supply. Grant all this, and we must ungallantly ask it, to be also granted, that for solid uncompromising opposition to all improvement by association or otherwise, without a rival, sometimes stands the lady who looks after her own choir. Every suggestion of change—improvement must not be hinted at—in the order established by her is met with a kindly smile of pity, as if there were some divine strain of melody, that she knew of and you did not, lying hid beneath the uncouth sounds she permits to pass under the name of choir-singing. Be on your guard; you must not interfere by the most distant suggestion, or you will lose all her goodwill and respect.

Yet one word more before we proceed to detail. Let us distinctly set before us that true Choral Association seeks to do its work by its own powers. It does not, rather it need not necessarily by any means, undertake to supply teaching to choirs. Its special object is, not itself to teach, but to foster and help, and give interest and heart, to home-teaching. No doubt most choral unions do make the supply of lessons by accredited choir-masters a part of their system; and, so doing, involve themselves in endless difficulties, and troubles, and expenses, which do not necessarily belong to the work.

There can, of course, be not one word to say against a certain number of choirs agreeing to employ the services of one teacher. Nor can it be otherwise than well that a choral union should be able to recommend a trustworthy choir-master to any choir that finds its home-teaching power unequal to the task of preparation for the forthcoming festival; but this should be considered rather as outside the province of the Union. What is wanted is not direct teaching, but the communication of the one way, one *tempo*, one style, that will be used at the contemplated service by the proposed conductor of that

service; and one way, one *tempo*, one style, all must acknowledge must prevail in any associated service. And this may be best effected thus. As soon as the book is in hand, let the home choir-teachers meet the conductor at convenient time and place, and under him get up the service in the one uniform way to be adopted. Let this then be passed on to the several choirs by their teacher thus instructed; and as the festival day draws on, the conductor will rehearse the choirs in groups of not less than three, and so ensure that the needful uniformity is duly imparted. If the conductor duly comprehends the hot coals he will have to tread amongst, he will never cease to reiterate, "I do not come to teach, I come to convey the use of the festival day; for that service alone am I preparing you, so do not let me interfere or influence your usual style."

Now this conductor—let us give him the more dignified title of precentor—this precentor must be the heart of the whole work, whether the union be large or small. There is no fact that experience more clearly demonstrates than this, that the only form of government that will keep Choral Associations alive, when the first blush of novelty is passed, is the autocratic. As far at least as the music goes the precentor must be irresponsible dictator: he must appoint the music to be sung, left to himself to take counsel whence he may think fit; he must decide the way in which it shall be sung—if wise in his generation, adjusting to a certain extent to the more general use of the district. To place such matters in the hands of a committee is simply to court deadlock, and to set a trap for dissension and angry feeling.

It is a real work that has to be done, a work that the ordinary committee opinion-giving will only clog and hinder. Let those who would really help the cause at once accept the fact that criticism and barren opinion will only do harm, and let them set themselves to find some special and clearly defined part of the work into which they may throw their energy and heart and so help to the successful whole.

And now to the question of direct organisation. "Let us appoint a comprehensive committee, set down a good list of vice-patrons, name our various secretaries, advertise for one or more choirmasters, offering good salaries, give them a roving commission to teach choirs, and—after the first flash of novelty, die out." No, indeed, real work that will stand is not to be done with such airy generality as this. True choral organisation has no such Minerva birth, at any rate; like most other things it can only have a small beginning. The writer of this paper has often and often again received letters from various quarters far and near running thus: "Two or three of us are desirous of improving the choirs of our neighbourhood by starting a Choral Union; can you give us any suggestions to aid us in the work?"

Here, in the desire of two or three earnest men, is the true unit of choral organisation—small truly, but of right purpose—that may ultimately leaven a whole diocese. Let me, by answering my correspondents, show how this leavening may come about.

The first step will be to decide upon the precentor. It may happen that the services of an amateur, lay or clerical, of acknowledged competency, and with time and inclination for the work, may be had. For very many reasons such amateur is the fittest for the post; and his fitness is increased fourfold if he be blessed with a wife who can aid him at his visit with her voice or at the keys.

One of these reasons is the very reason that will make the home choirmaster of any of the associated choirs the least fit for the office. One home choirmaster will most assuredly kick at a brother home

choirmaster being, as he will consider it, placed over him; the amateur especially, if accompanied by his wife, will stand distinct and separate, and outside these jealousies.

If the services of an amateur cannot be secured, then let a choirman be engaged from the choir of the cathedral or other church where the service is of acknowledged excellence; and let him be given to understand that he will be expected to sing with the choirs when he meets them, not merely criticise—least of all, take the accompanist's place.

One advantage of having the amateur as precentor is that he will, if he be of the right stuff, undertake all correspondence and manage all the business. If a choirman be appointed, it will be necessary to have a secretary for this work—an incumbent of a small cure, or other unpaid worker with time and inclination; and it will be for him to arrange and attend in person, to strengthen the precentor's hands, all the meetings of home choir-teachers and rehearsals of associated choirs, and to take the general management of all matters non-musical connected with festival services.

It would be found very advisable—rather, it may be said, necessary—that the secretary should also be treasurer, and have the management and control of all money matters connected with the work. It will be found in practice that to divide the offices will double rather than halve the work.

And this brings us to that most important matter, the funds. The absolute necessity for economy cannot be too strongly impressed upon those who undertake the management of choral unions.

Even for home operations there are very few choirs that do not know the pinchings of want: impecuniosity is apparently their normal condition. It is difficult enough to raise the money, except from the parson's own pocket, for the music and books necessary for current use, so that substantial subscriptions from choirs associating must not be thought of; and it will be found in practice that it is most difficult to enforce even a light subscription from every choir—indeed, the collecting of choir subscriptions is the most annoying and unpleasant duty that falls to the choral-worker's lot.

Nor can the general subscription list be regarded as a reliable, or even legitimate, source of revenue. It must be borne in mind that every subscription must come out of some parish or other. That parish, doubtless, would be only too glad of the £1 towards its own choir expenses, especially towards the expenses of the coming festival day, if it be associated; and it will assuredly look upon the treasurer running off with that £1 with much the same feeling as the keeper views the dirty shooting-coat with swollen pockets disappearing at the other side of the squire's covert. Instead of subscriptions—that is, as a regular system—it would be well to rely for needful income upon (1) the collections after festival services, (2) the money made by the sale of the service-book to the congregation, and (3) the profit on the books and music supplied to the associated choirs; and with strict economy the funds thus raised will be found sufficient. And one grand—nay, the grand—cause of useless expense will be at once cut off if the professional precentor be paid, not by salary, but by the lesson, and that lesson alone given by arrangement with the secretary, who will thus be enabled to adjust the money so spent to the probable receipts. Let the terms be liberal as the duties required may well demand; but let the price of the lesson, be what it may, be considered to cover all expenses whatsoever.

Let us here have a few words on the precentor's special duties. Now though, as we have said before,



it is no place of his directly to interfere with home uses, it is his place—his special place—to set himself stoutly to work to combat what may be termed home faults and home vices, those faults and vices that seem to come naturally of those needful never-ceasing home practices, namely, slovenly inarticulate utterance, not unfrequently in oft-recurring sentences, total omission of words, even the substitution of meaningless sounds for the words, want of attack, falsely made or utterly unmade notes, and consequent out-of-tune or no tune at all. Such faults and vices as these it is the mission of the precentor to root out, and for the rooting out of which he will plot and plan in all his work: and so the tunes he will set will be of the great Gibbons and Lawes strain, or the noble old German choral school; not all ancient or foreign surely, for there are composers living amongst us now who have given us models of the people's hymn-tune as true and real as the world has to show—great, earnest men's tunes, of that tone of thoughtfulness and purpose that seems to command irresistibly the true, round, positive note-by-note delivery and the massive deliberate *tempo* that Germany seems never to have lost to her great people's hymns, and that we held to so firmly in those days when three thousand voices would pour forth their metrical Psalm in one of our great traditional C. M. "Church tunes" at the preaching at "Paule's Cross," or when in York Minster that "vast, conchording unity of the whole congregational chorus came thundering in even as it made the very ground shake," to the "unutterable ravishing delight of the soul" of quaint old Thomas Mace, the lutenist.

Unison-singing will be a trusty and well-used weapon in the precentor's hands. A large proportion, if not all the verses, of the Psalms he will have chanted in unison, with varied accompaniments, looking also for the variety which is so absolutely needful in good rendering of the Psalms to *p.* and *f.*, and the alternation of the upper and lower registers separately. He will also employ a unison service of the style of which we may feel with deep satisfaction we now have many perfect models by our leading church composers—a style, though doubtless the style for smaller churches, yet that seems specially adapted for the singing of united choirs.

To the anthem will the precentor look to give him occasion for somewhat advanced teaching, and with this view will it be selected. Though well within their powers, it will yet be amply sufficient to interest and draw out the careful attention of the better singers. Nor will the precentor shrink from forbidding choirs, beyond whose power he knows the anthem to be, to attempt to join in singing it; and for the double reason will he so exercise his authority—to prevent harm to the worse choir by encouraging slovenly imperfectness, and to prevent harm to the better choir by allowing their truer efforts to be thwarted and their ears misled by the discordant attempts of those who are floundering out of their depth.

As the Psalms and service will be made occasion for leading the singers to feel the charm of eloquent declamation, so may the anthem be the means of showing the delights of the pure, well-balanced vocal chord; and the wise precentor will not lose the opportunity of pointing out how all this depends upon true production of note, the proper taking of the breath, and such other matters as make up what alone can be called singing.

There yet remain parts of the service which, although, alas! in many a church they may be heard muttered or gabbled as though the words were utterly meaningless, or, at least, in no way whatever con-

cerned those whose mouths they pass, will meet from the true precentor that reverent attention and due care which surely the most casual thought must declare they deserve—Confession, Lord's Prayer, Creed, Preces, Amen. These will all be duly rehearsed, and the three former got up in their proper phrases in deliberate utterance, whether used with or without accompaniment; and the precentor will even not think it too trivial to point out that a thinking man will make a difference in his "Amen," according as it sums up his creed, his prayer, or his thanksgiving.

(To be continued.)

## THE GREAT COMPOSERS, SKETCHED BY THEMSELVES.

By JOSEPH BENNETT.

No. VI.—MENDELSSOHN (continued from page 638).

In 1837 Mendelssohn experienced what he called a "great and happy change"—that is to say, he took to himself a wife; and the assumption of new responsibilities by no means tended to check the growing seriousness with which he regarded his mission and his art. Some part of the autumn of this year he spent in England, having come over to attend the performance of "St. Paul" at a Birmingham festival. He was fêted incessantly, of course; for his charming music and scarcely less charming personality had made him a great favourite; but it is curious to observe from expressions, the genuineness of which we may not doubt, how distasteful was all this homage. He tells his mother, in a letter written soon after returning to Leipzig, that he had not "one single moment of real heartfelt enjoyment" in England; but something hereanent may be laid to the account of separation from a newly married wife. In other part the fact should be attributed to the disgust of a sensitive nature at witnessing the English treatment of Neukomm. This composer, as every reader knows, was once reckoned a great man amongst us, and held in special honour at Birmingham; but with the rising of Mendelssohn's star that of Neukomm set in clouds and darkness. The younger musician observed this, and seems to have read the lesson well. "You know," he writes, "how highly they honoured, and really overvalued him (Neukomm) formerly, and how much all his works were prized and sought after here, so that the musicians used to call him the 'King of Brummagem'; whereas on this occasion they neglected him shamefully, giving only one short composition\* of his the first morning (the worst of all), and the public receiving him without the slightest attention. This is really disgraceful in men who, three years ago, knew nothing better nor higher than Neukomm's music. The only thing he can be reproached with is, that three years since he wrote an Oratorio for the Musical Festival, where effect was chiefly studied. The huge organ, the choruses, the solo instruments,—all were introduced on purpose to please the audience. People soon find this out, and it never answers; but that they should treat him with such ingratitude in return is a fresh proof of how little their favour may be relied on, and what the fruits of it are when sought after." Mendelssohn had met Neukomm not long before on a Rhine steamer, and then could only say of him to Hiller: "(He was) as polite and unapproachable as ever," but now a generous sympathy made him add: "I found him, as usual, most amiable, and as kind as ever, and I might well take example from him in a hundred

\* This was his "Himmel-Fahrt," of which a critic said in the *Musical World*: "It reminds us of Jack Rag and his celebrated aphorism, 'There is nothing stirring but stagnation.'"