

# 'A living ganglion of irreconcilable antagonisms' – Church Music today?

IT MAY APPEAR somewhat extreme to begin an article on contemporary Church Music with a quotation from H.M.S. Pinafore. But I can assure you, as Director of the Royal School of Church Music, I am often made aware of the most horrendous disputes and on many occasions I am asked to arbitrate between clergy and organists or choirs and church councils. Frequently I long for the pre-war years when the R.S.C.M., founded in 1927, was in its infancy. In those days church music was more predictable. Of course there were different types of churches, but for most of them, music was accompanied by the pipe organ, traditional hymns were common to all denominations and the majority of churches had a choir which contributed anthems and settings.

Such uniformity is now a thing of the past. The church music world is one of great variety and sometimes heated controversy. Is the organ to be pipe or electronic? Is the style of music to be fiercely traditional or happy-clappy? Are choirs a thing of the past? Should the accompaniment be on the organ or are instruments permissible? Is the service to be from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer or the 1980 Alternative Services Book? And how much music should be included? Indeed, should it be taken seriously at all! I heard of one priest recently who said to his organist that music was unimportant and that it was only included to keep the congregation happy!

Yes, we live in passionate times. Life is not comfortable for the church musician. But we should take heart. History teaches us that periods of turbulence are often those of the greatest creativity. Amidst all the antagonisms, people in our churches are talking and thinking a great deal about the role of music in worship. The response to the Report to the Archbishops, 'In tune with Heaven', has been most encouraging and hardly a week goes by when I am not asked to speak about it at a Deanery Synod or a Study Day in a Cathedral or Theological College.

Much new life is abroad. In our cathedrals and great churches, standards of singing have never been better; a much greater variety of music is sung. For instance, in recent years much music from the European tradition has been brought in, whether the great polyphonic masses of the 16th century or the orchestral masses of Haydn and Mozart. Nor are our cathedrals afraid of social change. It is now becoming

By Liveryman Harry Bramma



clear that greater opportunities must be given to girls without in any way detracting from our internationally acclaimed tradition of boys choirs. Salisbury Cathedral in setting up a girls' choir has led the way and has laid down guidelines by wisely, in my view, maintaining two distinct choirs, one for boys and one for girls.

In our Anglican Parish Churches and those of other denominations, the picture is not always so rosy. There is evidence however that things are settling down and that a reconciliation is taking place between the partisans of different styles. It would be tragic if choral singing disappeared from the local churches. But it is equally clear that if choirs are to continue, they must sing appropriate music to a good standard. They must in fact be able to communicate. Whatever one's views about more evangelical forms of music, it is certain that classical musicians must learn from this tradition, how to get across to the worshippers. Many evangelical churches in all denominations are growing simply because the worship is vibrant with music which speaks directly to the heart. Yes, it is difficult to reconcile tastes in music, between those who are habitually tuned into Radio 1 and those who prefer Classic FM or Radio 3. We must continue to try.

We can take heart that such tensions are nothing new. In the middle of the last century, reforming Tractarian parsons systematically removed the

Gallery Musicians from the west end of our churches, and put the more proper surpliced choir in the Chancel singing from Hymns Ancient and Modern, the Old Cathedral Psalter and anthems by Stainer and Goss. The fact that today we witness the re-emergence of the popular tradition, demonstrates that our Victorian ancestors failed to stifle those who appreciated a more folk-orientated style.

In my work as Director of the R.S.C.M, I often feel discouraged by conflict in church music circles. Most of the time, however, I can discern the light flickering at the end of the tunnel. The R.S.C.M. itself is going through a period of great change. We shall shortly have to move to a new home. This will be expensive and is going to mean an appeal for funds to maintain and develop our work into the next century. I am, however, much encouraged by the enthusiasm of those who make music in churches – and by the still very considerable numbers of people who sing and play. Quite often on a Saturday I find myself in a cathedral conducting a massed choir of anything from 400 to 1,000 voices. Church music is still very much alive in many places.

We must all work to rid ourselves of 'irreconcilable antagonisms'. I much hope the R.S.C.M. will be equal to all the challenges to provide resources, training, advice and encouragement in the coming years.

I would like to end by expressing publicly the thanks of the R.S.C.M. to the Company for so generously supporting our fund-raising Royal Gala in the Guildhall last November. We were much heartened by this wonderful gesture of support. I personally am grateful that the Company is prepared, amongst its many activities, to take Church Music seriously. This tradition is worth supporting – for its spiritual impact yes, – but also for the immense influence that Church Music has had on the cultural life of our nation. Many date their musical awakening to the day they joined the Church Choir. Let us all make sure that these opportunities continue to be available to our young people and that for the sake of young and old music in churches continues to flourish and to develop.

## BLUE NOTE

Music Report  
from the Surrey Herald & News.  
"The Concert  
Comprises Mozart's Immoral  
Clarinet Concerto K.622"