

MUSIC AND WORSHIP¹

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

IT has been said more than once that 'Music hath charms'. But it can hardly be said that this charm is encountered as often as it ought to be at Mass or Benediction in our parish churches up and down the country. There is a considerable lack of charm in much of the music connected with the worship of God amongst us. On the other hand, we have to remind ourselves that God has no ear for music. He is not disturbed by the second-rate music or the flat notes of the parish choir or the congregational hymns, though he would be disturbed, if we could talk of God in such a way, by any lack of harmony to be found in their hearts. The harmonies most acceptable to God are those of heart and mind running through the congregation of worshippers; and it is likely that beneath the lack of good music there will lie some very beautiful harmonies indeed.

At the same time, although a flat note may not cause much discomfiture to God, it must be remembered that he has made all things harmoniously, everything in the vast depths of the universe in tune with everything else. Not only are all things in harmony with God as proceeding from his infinite wisdom, but as a consequence all the infinite variety of things throughout time and space are in harmony with one another, so that the movements of the eternal spheres with the hymn proper to themselves influence the character and the movement of the men who walk this planet—at least according to the teaching of St Thomas. There is, therefore, or at least should be, a harmony, a right relation between the different realities which go to make up every creature, however small, and this relation is the outward sign which expresses the divine harmony inherent in all that the Creator has made. Things were made to worship God, and worship consists in manifesting the marvellous relations that exist in the one and the many, the union and the variety, the *uni-verse*. This unity has to be expressed because in the centre of the universe stands man with his mind and heart, which cannot exist harmoniously unless reaching consciously back to the Creator, knowing and loving God in himself and in his works.

¹ The substance of an address to the Newman Association of Exeter and Plymouth, June 1956.

The mind and the heart must needs express themselves, for that is their nature and it was for this that they were made.

But all this pleasing harmony in creation is not something static, centred round the unmoved Creator. The relationships between everything from the atom to the largest sun exist among an ever moving, and ever developing, and ever changing host of individual things. The beauty expressed in worship is the beauty of soldiers on the march, or trooping the colours, not that of a brigade standing stiffly to attention. God has made things to dance in solemn rhythms as the heavenly spheres revolve round one another and the heart pulses the blood through the veins or the breath expands and contracts the lungs. The harmony inherent in creation is a rhythmical harmony, and the worship that expresses it before the face of God is one that announces the ebb and flow of the tides as well as the ebb and flow of the life of man.

Worship then is inextricably bound up with art, for art is the making of things in which these relations of harmony and skilful rhythm find their reality outside man. It is only necessary to glance at the history of all the arts to realize that in fact from the most primitive times worship has been inextricably bound up with these skills of man's spirit. Culture has always meant the cultivating of God or the gods—with perhaps the exception of a few decadent eras as is our own. And among these arts music has played the most important and central part in divine worship. For one thing it is the most delicate of man's creations, more spiritual than the others, more closely allied to man's spirit and God's. Sculpture, painting and architecture are concerned with a material element that can be handled, moulded by the finger or the chisel, and man's work is stamped with its rhythms and relationships on the stone, on the paint, on the clay. Even words tend to express meanings and ideas that of themselves incline to the cold permanence of the eternal verities, though on occasion they merge into the art of sound rhythm rather than of sense. Music on the other hand, concerned essentially with the rhythms and relations of sound, does not handle concrete materials in the same way. It is always on the move, like a vast cavalcade passing the saluting base, seen in its parts as it moves by, but never seen as a static whole. Its successive nature draws it deeper into the spirit of man, where alone it can be appreciated. Its sounds do not

describe scenes nor speak of ideas and meanings; they express mysterious symbols, not clear sense. So that the material of music has a sacramental character of its own, signing the sacred sign in the mysterious realms of sound.

We must beware, of course, the temptation of claiming too much for our special subject. But this art of which we speak includes almost every aspect of man's life, especially where that life approaches the divine. When a man is exultant his first desire is to sing and dance, and if his jubilant mood is concerned with some divine triumph he will dance before the Lord like David before the ark of the covenant. When a man is sad or fearful, when he has lost a dear one, he will chant his dirges to God who threatens or castigates his people. When a man is in love he sings his feeling to his beloved, and when he is in love with God he makes love songs like St John of the Cross in his divine verses of the love of God. All his moods of joy and sorrow he expresses instinctively by music. And all his experiences, his histories and mysterious relationships with the gods he expresses in long sagas which can only be successfully handed on from generation to generation to the accompaniment of the harp. Caedmon only became the great bard when he had received his gift of music from our Lady, and all the early religions, particularly in this country, handed down their teaching and tenets through their poets who sang to them.

If I may be permitted an aside here, I would like to suggest that the mechanization of our music, which is canned or boxed on such a vast scale as to dampen any enthusiasm for personal prowess in its gentle art, is at least a sign if not a cause of the irreligious spirit of today. We fail to make music in our churches because we lack the natural basis of religion in our life. It has been killed in us by the radio and the gramophone. The fact that my grandmother always sang the hymns with her wireless of a Sunday evening shows, I think, a piety characteristic of her years, but also a bankruptcy of the natural spirit of religion. If we want to find the element of religion in the great majority of our own people today we must look into our dance-halls, where at least there is some sort of musical life, however debased, and in their devotion to rhythm and song they are worshipping some hidden spirit—though it would be difficult to give their god a name.

This religious element in music is to be seen more clearly in the mathematical basis of harmony. Great mathematicians have often been good musicians. St Augustine had a gift for numbers, so that we are not surprised to find him producing a special opus on music, and I have known lecturers in mathematics who were accomplished in the Fugues of Bach. The importance of obedience to rule, obedience to measure, and the exactitude of harmony in any form of music makes it the natural vehicle of religion which is a virtue based on exact observance of rubric and law. Worship as an act of religion is concerned with paying God his due, and that is done by observing his laws, the laws of creation which, as we have seen, are instinct with rhythm and melody. Hence every religion, from the most primitive times, has developed its worship in terms of precise and often complicated rules of procedure. David's dance before the ark sounds like an unrehearsed exhibition of *jeu d'esprit*; but more than likely it followed a very precise pattern which he had learnt, as he had learnt his harping, with hard practice and assiduous application. The laws of melody and rhythm are exceedingly exact and follow the most precise mathematical principles; so that those who worship God truly by musical expression must do so with a careful obedience to these laws which are inherent in his creation. The apparently confused shuffling of the primitives in their religious dances is found on examination to follow a complicated rhythm often too intricate for the average European to appreciate. That is why the music of the English Sunday Benedictions fails, as music, to be true worship. None of the worshippers has taken the trouble to learn the rules of music, nor to spend time and pains in acquiring the habit by diligent practice. The blackbird chants his varied and beautiful hymn of praise by instinct, following without thought his blackbird nature given him by God. But man has been given intelligence so that he must chant intelligently, giving thought and care to the production of his sounds and rhythms. He must learn obedience to the principles in nature which make it move towards God in the rise and fall of the seasons, the ebb and flow of the tides, the regular breathing and pulse of life, the birth, maturing and death of men and all living creatures.

In short, the art of music which calls into activity intelligence, will, memory, and the feelings of man is the main vehicle of

worship. It expresses the first movement of man to God. Song came before prose. Men sang and danced in God's presence before they analysed their relations with him into reasoned prayers. And it was also the first channel of expression for God's approach to man. He spoke to them in the verses of the prophets, and religious traditions came down to us through the song of the bards; long before divine truth was formulated into precise dogmas with their undercurrent of human reason.

What I have said of the need for the use of human intelligence and application is not meant to imply the reduction of everything to the clear-cut formulae of abstract truth expressed by subject, predicate and object. By song man can seize a mood or a feeling for God, he can grasp a momentary vision of the divine being which is more profound and more real than clear definition. Definition must certainly follow. He must subject his visions and his feeling to the millstones of his mind. But the grain of wheat differs from the more easily digested flour that pours from his mills. The grain has the seed of life and can grow up into the delicate blade of corn and mature into the ear with its further multiple grains each with another seed of life. The song of man captures a moment of reality—and each moment is divine as it proceeds from the supreme and infinite reality of God—without petrifying it into the dead rock of human eternity. It remains alive because every time that it is reproduced it lives with its rhythms and harmonics. There is an analogy here with the Word made flesh, once and for all, in the womb of the Virgin, and yet again every time the words of consecration are repeated over the bread and wine, when the Word is present with the living pulse of body, blood, soul and divinity.

But, the modern prosaic man may argue, all this is primitive mumbo-jumbo. The ancients had to chant their worship and their religion because they had not learned logic. Philosophy, the supreme human science, was only developed when man had developed to greater mental stature; and reason was eventually able to take the chair left vacant since the fall of man. The bards and prophets were necessary before men had learned to write and before the printing press was invented. Now all that is past. We have progressed and become more reasonable, we can use our minds to greater advantage than ever before. We have at last emerged into a rational and scientific age when we can

express ourselves, not in the almost animal refrains of voice and string, so closely allied to the eerie hoot of the owl or the shrill cry of the fox carried far on the evening breeze. Now that we have emerged into the maturity of our intellect we should not cling as reactionaries to the methods of the past. Let us speak to God, let us say what we have to say to him reasonably, expressing ourselves according to our rational nature. God who is pure intellect will surely appreciate our 'reasonable service' more than our more instinctual expressions of reverence, awe, or love by song and dance. Similarly, God can now speak to us according to our reason. After two thousand years of man's intelligence working upon the revealed teachings of the Word we can understand more deeply the nature of God and of his dealings with mankind. Moreover, he has left an authoritative teaching Church with an infallible master at its head to expound to us in rational terms the deposit of faith, and after all these years we have accumulated a whole series of rationally expressed dogmas. No one has attempted to chant the many anathemas of the Council of Trent, nor do we anticipate that Edmund Rubbra will produce a Cantata from the words of the papal definition of the Assumption. We have advanced in our worship and religion from the stage when music was a necessary and inseparable element in divine service.

Historically, of course, there is truth in this point of view. Music has indeed diminished in importance, together with all the arts, in the worship of God. In the individual's approach to the Almighty there has always existed a certain amount of reasoned prayer. In our Roman Missal we still retain the prayers of St Ambrose as well as those of St Thomas Aquinas, and we are naturally surprised when we hit upon the rhythm of the limerick in the latter's prayer after the celebration of the divine mysteries. But since the later middle ages the development of reasoned prayers as a part of public worship proceeded apace. The Mass was not only preceded and concluded by a series of 'Acts' expressed in logical and argued form, but the passion for argument and rational exposition led to prayers that commented on the sacred action of the Eucharist throughout the entire ceremony. Today the prayers that are read out during a children's Mass leave one with the impression that Almighty God is a little hazy about the arrangements he made for the celebration of the Paschal Feast, and needs

to be reminded. The need for arguing out the bases of religion that came with the Reformation left its mark upon our Christian worship. In my youth I was given a fairly considerable volume of devotions for Holy Communion which might have been subtitled 'Arguments with the Almighty concerning the Gift of His Body'.

Originally the Liturgy was always musical, sung almost in entirety. Even the Canon of the Mass was chanted from the initial *Sursum Corda* to the final *Amen* before the *Pater Noster* in the same formal song that we have retained for the Preface and a few other blessings such as that of the Paschal Candle. It was a solemn chant that held the whole congregation spellbound—not another sound or movement in the church. As David had sung his Psalms to the accompaniment of the stringed instrument, so the Church continued to sing seven times a day for many centuries. And even though she seems to have abandoned many of the instruments mentioned by the Psalmist—the timbrel, the cymbals and trumpets as well as the harp and the psaltery—she substituted for them other accompaniments which developed eventually into the organ. We have to turn to the Eastern Churches to discover the remnants of the musical nature of the Liturgy. There the celebrant still chants solemnly the words of consecration—which is perhaps the most moving ceremony in the whole of Christian worship. And there are still some rites in which the 'Low' said Mass does not exist, so that even where there is only a celebrant with a server or two the Liturgy must be chanted.

But in the West the said Mass was introduced for the sake of convenience, and possibly because Western Man was already becoming rather wedded to the reasonable service in which feelings count for little. Now the spoken Liturgy and the 'recited' Office is by far the most common form of worship, and it was till lately an unusual event for anyone but the celebrant to communicate at the High Mass.

It may be that the tidy Roman mind of the exceptionally liturgical Pope, Gregory the Great, started by accident the decline of music in Western worship. Perhaps he was already too 'rational' in his approach to God. But his chant was so restrained, was so 'plain', that it ruled out of divine worship a great deal of the musical capacities of Christian man, so that his ingenuity in the art was easily diverted to the market-place. It was the same with

dance and drama. The dramatic element in the Liturgy and the solemn dance that was inherent in the Mysteries had become perhaps too boisterous and distracting, so that the miracle play had to leave the Easter sepulchre of the Church for the streets and halls of the city. It has been shown, I believe by Dr Egon Wellesz, that before the time of St Gregory the Eastern and the Western church music were closely allied and showed their direct descent from the primitive Jewish music in line with the descent of the whole Liturgy from the worship of the Temple and Synagogue. But the reforms of the Pope were perhaps too strict, too Roman, and too rational for the musical life of the people to find its entire fulfilment within the liturgical setting of the worship of God. It seems too that the friars assisted in this musical decline, and perhaps particularly the Dominican friars. They were always on the move, arguing and reasoning here, there and everywhere. St Dominic, certainly, insisted on singing his Mass wherever he happened to find himself of a morning—if it was at all possible. But he encouraged his brethren to sing their office *breviter, et succincte*, with perhaps little regard for the niceties of the art of music, in reaction against the prolonged chanting of the monks of his day, when the perfection of Gregorian had already succumbed to its inherent weakness of too great a simplicity and purity. The brethren were provided with a Breviary which included in a single omnibus volume all the books of the divine Office and a handy Missal which did the same with the books of the various ministers of the Mass. Soon they were travelling from place to place saying their Office and their Mass, when outside their convents, in all sorts of unexpected places.

Later in this country persecution prevented the faithful who retained their heroic allegiance to the Mass from raising their voices in praise of God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The sound of chanting might so easily have fallen on the ears of the wily pursuivants and the throats that gave voice would soon have succumbed to the noose prepared for stamping out the old religion from the country. It was inevitable in such heroic times that worship should have become isolated and individualistic, each worshipper quietly attentive to his or her manual of devotions, while the priest in some remote chapel or attic whispered the sacred prayers from his portable missal with the least possible demonstration or action. The spirit of individualism

was in the air during these penal times and the impossibility of worshipping with song and organ greatly promoted this individualism in the prayer of the religious heroes of the age. If you are prevented from joining your voice with the voices of the other members of the congregation and with the minister at the altar, communal worship becomes very difficult. True, the hearts of all present are intent upon the same action, the re-enacting of the work of our redemption; they make the same offering, mind and heart united 'through Christ our Lord' in approaching the Father. But mind and heart require to be given a common vehicle of expression. Without the union of sound and gesture these hearts can remain strangely remote from one another, as can be seen if we glance at the variety of Christian sects who, we presume, worship the same God and retain a strong personal devotion to our Lord. At best it leaves the hearts of the faithful frustrated and unfulfilled, as the hearts of two lovers separated and unable to communicate with one another. Their love retains its strength of union, yet until they can embrace once again and tell each other of their love their unity remains unachieved. Without the unifying force of the musical instinct the rhythm of each worshipper can remain out of time with the others; the inner song of his heart may yet be out of tune with the others. So it was that the Christian Liturgy ceased to be primarily musical and at the same time became predominantly individualistic.

For man is not a pure spirit; he does not consist of mind and will detached from the rest of creation. He is an extremely complex being; I suppose the most complex being that God has created. His complexity of spirit and matter makes it impossible for him to raise mind and heart to God without raising his whole being, and with him the beings around him. His mind and heart are metaphysically united to his body with all its faculties, feelings, emotions, and its whole flowing and ebbing way of life. His mind and heart and physique are also inextricably bound up with ties of blood, culture, and plain and simple sustenance, with the society in which he finds himself. So it is impossible for him to be purely and simply rational in his life and worship. His intelligence should hold supreme control, but not at the expense of the rest of his nature. He must sing as well as think, he must dance as well as exercise his logic, or he will die. He must communicate with his fellows as well with God, and he does so not

merely by giving thought but by feeding with them and feeling for them. His arts are the best vehicles for this communion, because in his art man's intelligence controls and disposes all his other faculties. Art unifies a man's being, since it gives his intelligent soul the opportunity of drawing all the other faculties of his psychological make-up into a harmonious activity, in which they can play their respective parts without running riot and destroying the rhythm and tune of his completeness. Similarly art gives man the opportunity of communicating with his fellow men in the most human way. It draws others to him and draws him towards them. It is all this artistic element in our religion and worship that we have neglected for so long, and so allowed ourselves to be driven into ourselves while yet possessing the spark of divine life, the power of which could transform the whole world if only we would not prevent it by our lack of communion whole and entire.

In this work of communion with God and man the art of music holds a special place. It assists in a special way in breaking down the barriers between mind and spirit, and between man and man. In other words, music possesses a peculiar power of purification. When Saul was troubled with an evil spirit David was sent for to play and sing before him. Saul, torn in two by the powers within him, was restored to wholeness and composure by the sweet harmonies of the Psalmist. Similarly, when a mood of depression descends upon us we usually try to expel the evil spirit by singing to ourselves or perhaps by listening to some music that stirs us. A great deal of research has gone in recent years to the business of 'painting-therapy' for the psychologically mal-adjusted. I am not aware that so much interest has been paid to what might be called 'music-therapy'; this would surely repay similar research and practice. It is time too that we paid more attention to this Old Testament psychiatrist who cured Saul. For the Psalms contain the expression of every mood of man, and if we learnt to sing the Psalms once again, how refreshed in spirit we should be, how purified from all our evil moods, how drawn to God and to our fellows. Today our nerves are increasingly jarred, our energies more effectively dissipated, our lives more consistently disintegrated than heretofore. Here in the religious songs that we have inherited lies the purifying remedy that will gather nerves, energies and personalities together.