

PROLOGUE

In 1989, the Baird Trustees invited me to deliver the Baird Lectures of 1990 on the subject of church music.

These lectures are given every five years, by notable ministers of the Church of Scotland. Although I am a minister of the Kirk, I have not counted myself a notable one, least of all in comparison with giants of communication like the late Professor William Barclay, who gave famous Baird Lectures in the '60s.

However, it was difficult not to be intrigued by the terms of this invitation. They were that in recognition of Glasgow's Year of Culture this lecture series should have a theme relating to the arts, resolved in favour of church music; and that they should be delivered in Glasgow. In view of my career in religious broadcasting, it was thought by the Trust and myself that I would make use of audio-visual aids. Further consideration led to a different conclusion. The Hutcheson Hall, where five of the six lectures were given, is an elegant protected building in the Merchant City, with a fine resident piano, and it seemed more in keeping with that environment that if I had anything to say, I should say it, and if there was music to be heard, I should play it. The sixth lecture was given in Renfield St. Stephen's Church, where I was able to use the pipe organ.

The lectures which form the body of this book are about music in its widest sweep and as such are intended for the general reader.

When they were delivered, an hour's speech at the lectern was followed by half an hour at the piano, of playing, talking, even on occasion a burst of not very charismatic song. The audience seemed to feel that these musical demonstrations were helpful in unpacking the preceding rhetoric. Later, with the help of a resourceful *ad hoc* choir I was able to develop these demonstrations on four Radio Scotland programmes in July 1991.

In adapting the material for publication there was no obvious way of transplanting musical exposition into a verbal text, yet it

seemed desirable to adopt some alternative device for earthing anecdotes and showing that my broad conclusions might relate to the everyday world of church music. This prologue is that device. In what follows I venture to encapsulate some practical proposals which are developed at more logical length in the final chapters. This summary can be skipped by readers unscathed by responsibility for the musical *minutiae* of worship. People interested merely in music, God, and life can tune in at Chapter One.

I am indebted to the Baird Trust for their trust and support. The fact that I think the subject is important will, I trust, leak out in these pages. To do justice to it is another matter. What I have sought is at least to offer some reassurance to those who provide or participate in church music in any form. The devotional and musical treasures of the past are still there to be enjoyed, and that is what, above all, we should be doing: enjoying them.

PRACTICAL SUMMARY

What I tried to do in my safaris around the piano at the end of each lecture was to connect general insights about music with specific points about church music, and in particular, about hymns. For example, one conductor's interpretation of Brahms' Third Symphony related to one organist's way of dealing with an Easter hymn. It had been referred to in the lecture, but the penny dropped, I guess, when I was able to draw the comparison at the piano. Similarly, with 'Waltzing Matilda'. That old tune, mutated in the film 'On The Beach' from Antipodean cheeriness to Elgarian *nobilimente*, came into focus when I was able to show how equivalent chord structures in certain Victorian hymns could benefit from equally robust treatment. I further suggested that the show-bizzy, almost operatic nature of such hymns could justify plundering the now obsolete Revised Church Hymnary for 19th Century tunes rejected by the Editors of CH3.

Are such ideas a little recondite for application at the parish coal-face? Quite the reverse.

In my time with the BBC, one question was put to me repeatedly by organists and clergy. Haunted by the judgement that they were failing to provide adequate music in worship, they would ask the devastatingly simple question: how can we improve

the singing? This *cri de coeur* impresses in its heartfelt directness more than the more highfalutin' form one has encountered: how, in this day and age, are we to save the Church's song?

However the question is put, it is a simple challenge. Is there a simple answer? Yes, there is. The singing can be improved by means which are spectacularly simple. So simple, in fact, that when I unpacked them in the free-for-all session which concluded the lecture series, there ensued a mildly rowdy debate (good humoured, I hasten to add) between those who thought I was up a creek of startling naivety without a paddle, and those who felt I was the first person to offer them an inexpensive but useable outboard motor to tackle the choppy waters they found themselves in Sunday by Sunday. If I disclose that members of the first group tended to come from churches with well organised choirs, and those of the second category from parishes in less good musical order, that may only serve to underline the relevance of the proposals I now make. Most of these ideas, I promise, are entirely practical. And none of them need cost a penny.

TEN GOLDEN RULES

1 Lower the pitch of most items of congregational praise. And really lower it. If half the choir doesn't raise an eyebrow and a prominent chorister doesn't threaten to resign, you may have not lowered it enough. It'll work? Yes.

- (a) Most of the men in the congregation will love it.
- (b) Some of them may even start singing.
- (c) Some hitherto quiescent women in the pews may join in.
- (d) Hey presto - in a month, the congregational singing will be twice as good.
- (e) When it is seen to work, the choir will come round.

All at no financial cost whatsoever.

2 Vary speeds of hymns. Vary them dramatically. Take some much slower, others much faster. Trial and error will tell which. At a stroke, this will waken everyone up and give new life to old words and tunes. Nothing is so deadening as a regular brisk *cha cha cha*, or a uniform weary slog.

3 Try at least some hymns, psalms, and songs entirely in unison. Unison in the last verse only is often effective as a climactic opportunity for the organist to splice the mainbrace and vary the harmonies, but why should the poor old congregation not be allowed to let go until the end? Why shouldn't it have the 'lift' of the choir and contraltos singing out the tune before the final verse - by which time it is often too late to flog the dead hymnological horse?

4 Vary the loudness of accompaniments. Vary it dramatically. Many organists, sometimes from the spiritually worthy motive of not unduly intruding, keep to a safe middle range of noise level. This becomes as deadeningly predictable as unvarying speeds. Try some verses (even some entire hymns) very quiet indeed. Not dully quiet. Dramatically, excitingly, atmospherically quiet. Some unaccompanied. But take others at full throttle, storming heaven, or hell, or wherever the hymn is at.

I'm reluctant to add this, in case it re-introduces a note of dull caution, but of course one does this intelligently, on the basis of what the words and the tune suggest; and in the context of the whole drift of the worship on the day. Thoughtful consideration of deep mysteries requires radically different treatment from the lively declamation of robust challenges, or a burst of joy.

5 Vary forces and resources. Don't rely on the organ (if you have one). Try out piano, Yamaha, trumpet, tambourine, bagpipes, guitars - whatever is around. Few towns, villages, or city communities lack somebody who blows, scrapes, scratches, or hits things which make sounds. Clergy, organists, choir masters, leaders of worship, should feel free to use them experimentally. That sounds exploitative: should feel free to enter into lively dialogue with them as to how they might contribute support, atmosphere, excitement.

6 That extends to the choir. The choir needn't be stuck in its conventional role of wrapping hymns up in four-part cellophane. Its jobs include:

(a) Leading congregational singing. That's number one priority. Try placing the choir in different areas of the church building. And vary the menu. Give them opportunities to sing in unison; in groups; in procession; in solos and duets. Or sometimes, just disperse them in the pews.

(b) An occasional spectacular anthem, rehearsed over four weeks till it can be performed with blistering ferocity or melting smoothness, is a hundred times more valuable than one galloped through on thin ice every Sunday. An anthem should be for the congregation a treat, not something to be tholed. Why not periodic services of praise (on top of Christmas and Easter) where the choir (and other musical groups) unashamedly show off what they can do? Nothing wrong with that. It may be showing off God too.

(c) Demonstrating new hymns. This is often done nowadays, and if it is introduced properly, explained fully, handled with a light, yet business-like touch, and followed through by incorporation in the worship, it can pay big dividends all round.

7 Do not be embarrassed to be out of step with what seems to be the fashion. Don't worry about good taste; some may think you old-fashioned, others may think you not old-fashioned enough. Variety is best here, too. There are many acceptable styles. But whatever style you choose, feel free to let it rip. Be confident. I keep saying: be dramatic. What I mean is: take emotional risks. A wrong note doesn't matter. A wrong mood does. A chilly, dull, safe, middle of the road caution is, in terms of worship, always a wrong mood - so, sometimes, is a relentlessly cheery one. What is each service trying to achieve? What is the underlying script?

8 Do not be afraid of the old chestnuts. In particular, why not heave the great Victorian hymns out of the cobwebbed cupboard? Let them rip, too. Raid the old Revised Church Hymnary and any other book old or new that comes to hand. Flowers bloom in odd corners.

9 Organists and clergy: talk to each other. Even better: listen to each other. Best of all, plan with each other. Miraculously, the cooperative contagion might spread, and you would find that you could enlist other groups, church organisations, kirk sessions, the congregation itself, in thinking through ideas. None of this costs money.

10 Feel free. Experiment. Try things. Step off the cliff. Enjoy it!

These suggestions apply to traditional and new music equally. But the point I feel needs making is that while contemporary hymns, songs, and arrangements are seen as inherently experimental, a no less fresh approach is required to animate the 'old' music. It may be objected that all this seems absurdly simple. It is, it is. Yet I wager only one in ten leaders of church worship - in pulpit, or organ stool, or conducting a choir - would have the nerve to implement it. That figure will surely improve as the new lively Music Committee of the General Assembly Panel on Worship expands its missionary work; but that sometimes involves a surrender to new material which not all congregations are ready or suited for. What I am suggesting is that at no financial cost or change of musical tradition, singing in worship can be revolutionised virtually overnight. So why may it not be? Because of a lack of underlying confidence in the expression of emotion. As I say later on, we Scots carry our feelings deep, and often deeply locked up. We do not trust ourselves to be vulnerable. And there is perhaps a more basic lack: a loss of belief in the immensity of what we are doing in worship. It is to that underlying loss of nerve, as I perceive it, that these lectures were in the first place directed. Yes, there are practical implications. But the fundamental question is one of belief. Is God really in music? If so, how does that affect, not only the nitty-gritty practicalities of public rituals, but the depths of our living?