

Music in the History of the Western Church

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Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902

CHAPTER XI

CONGREGATIONAL SONG IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA

The revised liturgy and musical service of the Church of England had not been long in operation when they encountered adversaries far more bitter and formidable than the Catholics. The Puritans, who strove to effect a radical overturning in ecclesiastical affairs, to reduce worship to a prosaic simplicity, and also to set up a more democratic form of church government, violently assailed the established Church as half papist. The contest between the antagonistic principles, Ritualism vs. Puritanism, Anglicanism vs. Presbyterianism, broke out under Elizabeth, but was repressed by her strong hand only to increase under the weaker James I., and to culminate with the overthrow of Charles I. and the temporary triumph of Puritanism.

The antipathy of the Puritan party to everything formal, ceremonial, and artistic in worship was powerfully promoted, if not originally instigated by John Calvin, the chief fountain-head of the Puritan doctrine and polity. The extraordinary personal ascendancy of Calvin was shown not only in the adoption of his theological system by so large a section of the Protestant world, but also in the fact that his opinions concerning the ideal and method of public worship were treated with almost equal reverence, and in many localities have held sway down to the present time. Conscious, perhaps to excess, of certain harmful tendencies in ritualism, he proclaimed that everything formal and artistic in worship was an offence to God; he clung to this belief with characteristic tenacity and enforced it upon all the congregations under his rule. Instruments of music and trained choirs were to him abomination, and the only musical observance permitted in the sanctuary was the singing by the congregation of metrical translations of the psalms.

The Geneva psalter had a very singular origin. In 1538 Clement Marot, a notable poet at the court of Francis I. of France, began for his amusement to make translations of the psalms into French verse, and had them set to popular tunes. Marot was not exactly in the odor of sanctity. The popularization of the Hebrew lyrics was a somewhat remarkable whim on the part of a writer in whose poetry is reflected the levity of his time much more than its virtues. As Van Laun says, he was 'at once a pedant and a vagabond, a scholar and a merry-andrew. He translated the penitential psalms and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; he wrote the praises of St. Christina and sang the triumphs of Cupid.' His psalms attained extraordinary favor at the dissolute court. Each of the royal family and the courtiers chose a psalm. Prince Henry, who was fond of hunting, selected "Like as the hart desireth the water brooks." The king's mistress, Diana of Poitiers, chose the 130th psalm, "Out of the depths have I cried to thee, O Lord." This fashion was, however, short-lived, for the theological doctors of the Sorbonne, those keen heresy hunters, became suspicious that there was some mysterious connection between Marot's psalms and the detestable Protestant doctrines, and in 1543 the unfortunate poet fled for safety to Calvin's religious commonwealth at Geneva. Calvin had already the year before adopted thirty-five of Marot's psalms for the use of his congregation. Marot, after his arrival at Geneva, translated twenty more, which were characteristically dedicated to the ladies of France. Marot died in 1544, and the task of translating the remaining psalms was committed by Calvin to Theodore de Beza (or Bèze), a man of a different stamp from Marot, who had become a convert to the reformed doctrines and had been appointed professor of Greek in the new university at Lusanne. In the year 1552 Beza's work was finished, and the Geneva psalter, now complete, was set to old French tunes which were taken, like many of the German chorals, from popular secular songs. The attribution of certain of these melodies, adopted into modern hymn-books, to Guillaume Franc and Louis Bourgeois is entirely unauthorized. The most celebrated of these anonymous tunes is the doxology in long metre, known in England and America as the Old Hundredth, although it is set in the Marot-Beza psalter not to the 100th psalm but to the 134th. These psalms were at first sung in unison, unharmonized, but between 1562 and 1565 the melodies were set in four-part counterpoint, the melody in the tenor according to the custom of the day. This was the work of Claude Goudimel, a Netherlander, one of the foremost musicians of his time, who, coming under suspicion of sympathy with the Huguenot party, perished in the massacre on St. Bartholomew's night in 1572.

A visitor to Geneva in 1557 wrote as follows: "A most interesting sight is offered in the city on the

week days, when the hour for the sermon approaches. As soon as the first sound of the bell is heard all shops are closed, all conversation ceases, all business is broken off, and from all sides the people hasten into the nearest meeting-house. There each one draws from his pocket a small book which contains the psalms with notes, and out of full hearts, in the native speech, the congregation sings before and after the sermon. Everyone testifies to me how great consolation and edification is derived from this custom.”

Such was the origin of the Calvinistic psalmody, which holds so prominent a place in the history of religious culture, not from any artistic value in its products, but as the chosen and exclusive form of praise employed for the greater part of two centuries by the Reformed Churches of Switzerland, France, and the Netherlands, and the Puritan congregations of England, Scotland, and America. On the poetic side it sufficed for Calvin, for he said that the psalms are the anatomy of the human heart, a mirror in which every pious mood of the soul is reflected.

It is a somewhat singular anomaly that the large liberty given to the Lutheran Christians to express their religious convictions and impulses in hymns of their own spontaneous production or choosing was denied to the followers of Calvin. Our magnificent heritage of English hymns was not founded amid the Reformation struggles, and thus we have no lyrics freighted with the priceless historic associations which consecrate in the mind of a German the songs of a Luther and a Gerhardt. Efficacious as the Calvinistic psalmody has been in many respects, the repression of a free poetic impulse in the Protestant Churches of Great Britain and America for so long a period undoubtedly tended to narrow the religious sympathies, and must be given a certain share of responsibility for the hardness of temper fostered by the Calvinistic system. The reason given for the prohibition, viz., that only “inspired” words should be used in the service of praise, betrayed a strange obtuseness to the most urgent demands of the Christian heart in forbidding the very mention of Christ and the Gospel message in the song of his Church. In spite of this almost unaccountable self-denial, if such it was, we may, in the light of subsequent history, ascribe an appropriateness to the metrical versions of the psalms of which even Calvin could hardly have been aware. It was given to Calvinism to furnish a militia which, actuated by a different principle than the Lutheran repugnance to physical resistance, could meet political Catholicism in the open field and maintain its rights amid the shock of arms. In this fleshly warfare it doubtless drew much of its martial courage from those psalms which were ascribed to a bard who was himself a military chieftain and an avenger of blood upon his enemies.

The unemotional unison tunes to which these rhymed psalms were set also satisfied the stern demand of those rigid zealots, who looked upon every appeal to the æsthetic sensibility in worship as an enticement to compromise with popery. Before condemning such a position as this we should take into account the natural effect upon a conscientious and high-spirited people of the fierce persecution to which they were subjected, and the hatred which they would inevitably feel toward everything associated with what was to them corruption and tyranny.

We must, therefore, recognize certain conditions of the time working in alliance with the authority of Calvin to bring into vogue a conception and method of public worship absolutely in contradiction to the almost universal usage of mankind, and nullifying the general conviction, we might almost say the instinct, in favor of the employment in devotion of those artistic agencies by which the religious emotion is ordinarily so strongly moved. For the first time in the history of the Christian Church, at any rate for the first time upon a conspicuous or extensive scale, we find a party of religionists abjuring on conscientious grounds all employment of art in the sanctuary. Beginning in an inevitable and salutary reaction against the excessive development of the sensuous and formal, the hostility to everything that may excite the spirit to a spontaneous joy in beautiful shape and color and sound was exalted into a universally binding principle. With no reverence for the conception of historic development and Christian tradition, the supposed simplicity of the apostolic practice was assumed to be a constraining law upon all later generations. The Scriptures were taken not only as a rule of faith and conduct, but also as a law of universal obligation in the matter of church government and discipline. The expulsion of organs and the prohibition of choirs was in no way due to a hostility to music in itself, but was simply a detail of that sweeping revolution which, in the attempt to level all artificial distinctions and restore the offices of worship to a simplicity such that they could be understood and administered by the common people, abolished the good of the ancient system together with the bad, and stripped religion of those fair adornments which have been found in the long run efficient to bring her into sympathy with the inherent human demand for beauty and order.

With regard to the matter of art and established form in public worship Calvinism was at one with itself, whether in Geneva or Great Britain. A large number of active Protestants had fled from England at

the beginning of the persecution of Mary, and had taken refuge at Geneva. Here they came under the direct influence of Calvin, and imbibed his principles in fullest measure. At the death of Mary these exiles returned, many of them to become leaders in that section of the Protestant party which clamored for a complete eradication of ancient habits and observances. No inspiration was really needed from Calvin, for his democratic and anti-ritualistic views were in complete accord with the temper of English Puritanism. The attack was delivered all along the line, and not the least violent was the outcry against the liturgic music of the established Church. The notion held by the Puritans concerning a proper worship music was that of plain unison psalmody. They vigorously denounced what was known as "curious music," by which was meant scientific, artistic music, and also the practice of antiphonal chanting and the use of organs. Just why organs were looked upon with especial detestation is not obvious. They had played but a very incidental part in the Catholic service, and it would seem that their efficiency as an aid to psalm singing should have commended them to Puritan favor. But such was not the case. Even early in Elizabeth's reign, among certain articles tending to the further alteration of the liturgy which were presented to the lower house of Convocation, was one requiring the removal of organs from the churches, which was lost by only a single vote. It was a considerable time, however, before the opposition again mustered such force. Elizabeth never wavered in her determination to maintain the solemn musical service of her church. Even this was severe enough as compared with its later expansion, for the multiplication of harmonized chants and florid anthems belongs to a later date, and the ancient Plain song still included a large part of the service. Neither was Puritanism in the early stages of the movement by any means an uncompromising enemy to the graces of art and culture. The Renaissance delight in what is fair and joyous, its satisfaction in the good things of this world, lingered long even in Puritan households.