



Easter Joy

Treasure No 40: Easter Joy by Alan Luff: An article from Bulletin, 134

Easter is the greatest of the Church's festivals. Yet there is and long has been, it would seem, a shortage of good music of all kinds for Easter. It is not at first clear why this should be so. There is a great wealth of penitential music and music on the Passion—hymns, motets, anthems, the great Passion settings, to say nothing of a number of widely sung and equally widely reviled cantatas.

Can it simply be a matter of space to be filled, with forty days of Lenten penitence and seven days of Holy Week, followed by Easter Day and its octave? This hardly accounts for the shortage. The Church traditionally keeps forty days of Easter up to the Ascension: then at Ascensiontide, with only ten days in which to use it, there is so much material that the problem in any one year is to use a representative selection. We must look further for a reason.

One reason for the shortage is surely that to which Vaughan Williams draws our attention in his essay on Beethoven's Choral Symphony:

It is admittedly harder to write good music which is joyful than that which is sad. It is comparatively easy to be mildly dismal with success.

This is part then of a larger problem of the human spirit, of which no doubt the psychologists in their various schools are aware and to which they give answers. It is parallel with the experience of the singer, who so often finds himself singing of lost love, whether in a serious or 'pop' style. It was an achievement of the Beatles that they celebrated, at least in their early days, the finding of happiness:

*You know she loves you,
And you know that can't be bad.*

This tendency to be better at being mournful is a feature of church life that must be worrying in a period when the most creative musicians are not on the whole involved with the church. Those most likely to write music for our choirs are thus those most

likely to be best at being ‘mildly dismal’. Fortunately, in the field in which readers of this Bulletin are most concerned we can take heart from the fact that the finest congregational music has rarely been produced by those foremost in the larger world of music making. It requires different gifts and a different kind of involvement in music, although even here Vaughan Williams’ strictures may well apply.

A second reason for the shortage of Easter music must be the problem of texts. There is no problem in finding a penitential text. There are, to start with, the penitential psalms: the Passion narratives are full and coherent. For another joyful season, Ascensiontide, there are the Royal Psalms, and all the symbolism of ascent and kingship to be drawn on. At Easter the New Testament texts themselves give problems. The prototype of them all is the Easter narrative in St Mark. Controversy continues on whether that is cut off intentionally or by accident at chapter 16 verse 8, but it provides a poor text with which to express the joy of the Resurrection, ending as it does ‘for they were afraid’ (RSV).

The other gospels do give more and fuller stories, but even these tend in the nature of things to express more of the wonder and bewilderment of the disciples than their eventual faith in the Risen Lord. None of them can be reckoned as complete, nor can they be worked into a good harmony to give a dramatic text of great compelling power. Thus, as with the Ascension, one must look to the Old Testament for poetic expression, and this time we are led not to the expression of general themes of ascent and kingship, but to a particular historical event, itself not without its own difficulties, that is the deliverance from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea. While typologically this is highly satisfactory, it needs continual explanation: there is little direct impact. Thus to many it can seem to be either bewildering, artificial or done to death. Outside of the Gospels, of course, the New Testament is full of the Easter faith, but hardly poetically expressed; and thus we are led to a third reason for the shortage of Easter texts.

We are, in English, short of seasonal liturgical texts. It is, ironically, at this one point that the *Book of Common Prayer* reverses its own tendency by providing for Easter Day the Easter Anthems to be sung as an invitation to worship in place of the Venite at Matins. The texts are plucked raw, and bleeding a little at the edges, from St Paul’s Epistles, yet they are a sign of what might have been possible but was never developed. Much of this may well be due to the Prayer Book compilers’ unwillingness to alter scripture—hence the rather unfinished state of the Easter Anthems as a text for singing. The Antiphons and graduals and the like, of which the English were deprived at the Reformation, though taken from scripture are moulded and adapted for the use of the season.

Thus we need, if we are to fill this huge gap in our repertoire, to do two things. First we must again search the scriptures for those texts that might, if adapted and brought together (on the model of the Easter Anthems themselves) provide us with Easter texts. The modern translations of the Bible have made this more possible as an undertaking in various ways. The poetical content of some parts of the Bible is clearly recognized.

Then, we are no longer so familiar with one form of the text that we are affronted by the changes that must be made if we are to adapt these texts to build up new canticles. Secondly, our hymn writers must take the Easter faith, their own, nurtured on the New Testament, and new-mint it in verses for us to sing.

All this arises from the recent publication by the RSCM of their *Carols for Easter*. Clearly intended for choirs, it does contain items that have their origins in congregational worship. It is a slim volume of only 12 pieces: 'This is the day' is a short anonymous anthem from about 1600; there is one piece from Brahms' *Marienleben*; there is one Negro Spiritual. I would rule out G. K. Bell's 'Christ is the King' as belonging properly to the Ascension. The remaining eight are all from sources of congregational music: J. M. Neale provides the words of three (Thou hallowed chosen morn of praise; 'Tis the day of Resurrection; Let the song be begun). G. R. Woodward another three (Christ the Lord hath risen; Rejoice, ye heavens and all therein; Magdalen, cease from sobs and sighs) and the list is completed with another *Christ ist erstanden* (Weisse-Winkworth, Christ the Lord is risen again) and Dearmer's *A brighter dawn is breaking*. Thus three are from Greek sources, a reminder of what all the hymn books show, that this is the tradition which has served us best with Easter praise. Musically, of this eight, four are from Uerman sources (two in J. S. Bach harmonizations), two are French, one Italian, and one from *Piae Cantiones*.

No new ground is broken here. In fairness to the RSCM it may be that this was not their intention. But it is their usual practice to mix new with old, and it may well be that they do not yet find, despite the highly interesting sections for Easter in *New Catholic Hymnal* and *Praise the Lord*, that there is as yet anything new that they wish to use.

I have tried to show that there are genuine problems in the way of providing a full repertoire for Easter. It could be that the Hymn Society is able to fill many of the gaps by working informally by mutual encouragement (and mutual irritation, as one finds another's contribution inadequate, and is moved to produce his own pearl). Certainly competitions do not seem to produce really usable hymns. It is probably more a matter of being aware of a need and allowing the memory of Easter together with one's own reading to spur one to put pen to paper, hoping from the failures and near misses to build up a new corpus of Easter praise. There is no greater cause for singing than this.

(*Carols for Easter* is available from the RSCM at 84p: 50% discount for affiliated choirs.)

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