“Blest Pair Of Sirens”

Treasure No 11: "*Blest Pair of Sirens*" by V.M. Caird: An article from Bulletin No. 41, October 1947

By Mollie Caird

In a previous article in this journal I attempted to answer the question “What is a good hymn?” This time I propose to deal with the more practical side of the subject—to appeal for good hymns to be sung, and for bad ones to be relegated to oblivion, to implore all clergy and ministers, organists and choirmasters who have this cause at heart to wage an unceasing war until good hymns win the day.

Not the least of our difficulties nowadays is that a large proportion of the people in church refuse to sing at all, either good hymns or bad ; they stand up during the hymns and stare superciliously at their neighbours as if they considered their own silence more dignified than the plebian exercise of singing hymns. When challenged, these people usually blame their ill-fitting dentures, or explain that they cannot sing because they have such a bad voice. These excuses are quite unacceptable, If the veil on a hat interferes with singing it is better to leave the hat at home. It is better to put your teeth in your pocket and sing without them than not to sing at all. And it is better far to lift a raucous voice to God than to leave his praises unsung.

We’ll crowd thy gates with thankful songs,
High as the heavens our voices raise,
And earth, with her ten thousand tongues.
Shall fill thy courts with sounding praise

That is how we should feel when we go to church. For whether we sing well or ill, our earthly voices must fall short of heaven’s perfection; yet to God all our praises are acceptable, and he desires them all. Our task is to make the most of our inadequate instruments:

Thy humbler creation,
Though feeble their lays,
With true adoration
Shall lisp to thy praise.

If we can persuade all the congregation to sing, then perhaps we can persuade them to take notice of whether they are singing good hymns or bad.

There are two main reasons why bad hymns continue to be tolerated by those who arrange our services. The first—desperate cry or favourite excuse—is “that people *like* them.” Now this is no excuse at all; certainly if is not a Christian excuse. We may *like* getting drunk, but we do not

consider that is a reason for doing it; a jury will not acquit a man of bigamy on the grounds that he *likes* it. Indeed, as Christians we believe that to like doing bad things is worse than doing them. I believe Miss Dorothy Sayers is right when, in her book *The Mind of the Maker*, and in her essay "Towards a Christian Aesthetic," she suggests that good taste is really a moral question. If people like the good and beautiful and true in the field of behaviour, they will, with a little encouragement, like the good and beautiful and true in the field of art. That this is not an impossibility, witness the growing popularity among the general public of good British films as opposed to bad Hollywood ones, and the immediate and outstanding success of the B.B.C's Third Programme. Good people are eminently capable of discrimination, if they are given a chance to use it. A man with no pretensions to an artistic education will see that a Gothic cathedral is beautiful and the Central Hall round the corner is not. Surely, then, it is possible for him to do the same thing with hymns? Of course there are difficulties, and very real ones, it is not easy or kind to tell someone that her favourite hymn is trash. We all know what it is to have an affection for a hymn simply because it is familiar, because it is something that we learned in childhood; because we loved it then, we cannot see it now with impartial eyes; or even if we can realize its faults we are yet inclined to say, "Oh yes, I know it's bad, but I'm still very fond of it." Let us then not be harsh with people who have had the misfortune to be brought up almost entirely on bad hymns. It is useless to take the bad hymns from them without giving them more than enough good ones to take the place of the bad. The best approach seems to be gradually to replace bad with good, Sunday by Sunday, until the good hymns are becoming familiar, and, by their very beauty, ousting the bad from favour. It is a common fallacy that all "good" music is austere, academic, and difficult to grasp, and that only bad music is jolly. Let us teach our congregations some good tunes: LOBE DEN HERREN, LASST UNS ERFREUEN, or SINE NOMINE—how dreary will the bad music become in face of such celestial jollity as this! As for the words of hymns: we must always be ready, not to condemn wantonly and unreasonably, but to explain just why a particular hymn is bad—if we can put our finger on the fault and say that this line is meaningless, or that stanza unchristian, then people will be more ready to listen to us.

Meanwhile we hear the familiar cry: "Give me the *good old hymns*. I like the *good old hymns*!" But the strange thing is, that these "good old hymns" are in actual fact neither good nor old. It these people want something old they should look back two centuries to the age of the great hymn-writers—Watts, Wesley, Cowper, and Newton. There is goodness indeed! Or if they want something really antique, let them look at that noblest section of their hymn-book, the pages devoted to Christ's resurrection and exaltation. There they will find a predominance of the old and good; they wall see names and dates like these: St John of Damascus (750), Jean Tisserand (1494), and Venantius Fortunatus (530-609). Or for tunes let them look at the Christmas section, and they will read: Old English Carol, Ancient Plainsong, English Traditional Melody, A Spring Carol (fourteenth century), and *Este's Psalter* (1592).

Far be it from me to scorn the notable achievements of that great and illustrious age, the nineteenth century. It had its giants in almost every realm of science and culture. But there is no doubt that it was on the whole a decadent age in the field of art and music. Of course there were fine hymns and fine tunes written in the nineteenth century: magnificent tunes like MENDELSSOHN and HYFRYDOL, and for hymns, solitary masterpieces by authors who had no consistent standard of excellence. "Eternal Ruler of the ceaseless round" and "The Church's one foundation" are good examples. But it is nevertheless true to say that the greater part of the Victorian "good old hymns" are sickly and sentimental, and unworthy to be sung in church. It is fashionable nowadays to condemn any religious exercises that are "emotional," and even to condemn emotion itself. That is a mistake, for there are good emotions as well as bad; praying and praising are not purely intellectual functions, and our emotions arc bound to play their part. So when I speak of sentimental hymns and

tunes I do not mean simply those that awaken our emotions, I mean those that awaken wrong emotions, or more usually those that lull and soothe and drug virtuous emotion and powerful thought.

People like sentimental hymns because they make them *feel* nice ; they half-close their eyes, sway slightly to the music, and glow with the sheer physical pleasure of it. In other words, they like these hymns for the wrong reason. The reason for going to church is to offer to God a decent and acceptable sacrifice of praise, and *not* to enjoy a tingling feeling down the spine, which we could do equally well and more innocently on a dance floor. To indulge in personal pleasure is not our primary reason for going to church. I have a friend who was driving his car during that period of the war when petrol was issued only to drivers who used their cars for business purposes. One day a policeman stopped him and said, "Are you driving for business or pleasure?" "Both," said my friend. "Well, you can't," said the policeman, "you must be driving either for business or pleasure." "But," explained my friend, "I enjoy my work. The policeman remained unconvinced, and in a sense he was right. It is the same with going to church. When we go to church we are on business—we are about our Father's business—and any pleasure we derive from it is purely incidental. What we do in church is, in a very real sense, work, for it needs a real effort of will and mind and spirit if it is to be done properly. So the enjoyment we get out of our worship should not be the kind of enjoyment that we experience in our play and leisure, but that deeper and happier satisfaction which we derive from a job well done, together with, if our faith and hope be strong enough, some inkling of the joy that shall be ours if we are given the grace to hear those blessed words "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

I will not give specific examples of these sentimental and insipid hymns, because many otherwise good hymns have produced the same effect through being commonly sung to sentimental waltzes or foxtrots, whose rhythms pervert the natural metre and meaning of the words. But it might be useful to point out an illuminating fact about that section of many hymn-books which contains the so-called "Gospel" hymns. Almost all these hymns have swooningly sentimental tunes, and a very large number of them are concerned with the subject of rest—"Coming Home," "Rest beyond the River," "Hiding in Thee," "We have an Anchor," "Jesus I am Resting, Resting," and "Safe in the Arms of Jesus." Why such as these should have the monopoly of the epithet "Gospel" I do not know, but I do know that in these days when the slogan of the Church as well as of the nation ought to be "Work or Want," this kind of indolent escapism has no right to be popular among active Christians. These hymns may be justly loved by the aged, the saints who have run the straight race, and finished their course, and kept the faith; but the younger generations ought to be encouraged to sing great hymns more suited to their own needs and to the needs of the hour—

Awake our souls, away our fears,
Let every trembling thought be gone,
Awake and run the heavenly race.
And put a cheerful courage on.

The second reason why bad hymns are tolerated is given by those kind-hearted souls who say, "How can we condemn hymn-writers and composers who *meant well*? When people are so good and sincere in their intentions, who are we to say their work is bad?" This argument simply does not hold water. Suppose you have a little boy, five years old, who gets out his pencil and draws an elephant. You are justly pleased and proud. There is no doubt at all that the elephant is sincere: Landseer himself could not have drawn sincerer elephants than those of a serious-minded five-year-old. But that does not mean that you would frame the elephant and hang it as a perpetual ornament on the dining-room wall. Or again, you would not buy a badly designed house on the grounds that

the architect *meant* well. Then let us behave in the same say with our hymns. We have enough good hymns to choose from, in all conscience, without worrying about the badly executed and immature. The reward of the well-intentioned is not our concern, but God's, and he will reward them abundantly for their sincerity—perhaps even now many of them are enjoying the blessed privilege of singing the hymns of Wesley and Watts in the celestial choir.

But let us remember when we are arranging our services that only the best is good enough for God. The hymns that we sing are our sacrifice of praise, and we should see that our sacrifice is unblemished. In many ways we are often unable to give God the best. Our church may be poor and small, so that we know we are not dedicating to God the best of architecture and church furniture, but he knows that is no fault of ours. But all our churches have hymn-books, so ought we not to make up for our other limitations by singing the best hymns? If we do not do that it is our fault, for they arc there in the book for our choosing.

I have been speaking a great deal about bad hymns and, in order to be more explicit, I would like now to draw attention to a number of evils which are rife and which need correction. Some of them are perhaps small in themselves, but their cumulative effect can be quite disastrous.

First, then, there are nonconformist churches (I do not think the Anglicans would be guilty of this particular crime[1]) where the minister leaves the choice of hymns to the organist, and it is purely fortuitous whether they fit in with the theme of the service and sermon or not. In these circumstances the organist naturally tends to choose hymns with tunes which he likes, irrespective of whether the words are good. It is small wonder if the congregation, trying to make head or tail of a service of this kind, does not feel particularly encouraged to sing.

Secondly, among ministers who do choose their own hymns are those who do not keep a record of the hymns they are choosing each Sunday. Consequently they repeat their own favourites every few weeks without realizing it, thereby boring the congregation and completely neglecting the resources of the book, even to the extent of missing some of the great hymns that commemorate the festivals of the Church. Last Palm Sunday I attended services in two different churches, and at neither did we sing a single Palm Sunday hymn. "Ride on, ride on in majesty" is one of our most glorious hymns, set to WINCHESTER NEW, one of our grandest tunes, but on the one and only Sunday in the year when it is possible to sing it we neglected to do so.

Next comes a more serious evil: the cult of the unchristian hymn. I will not take time and space to define an unchristian hymn, but I will give one or two examples, and readers will probably be able to think of many others for themselves. A very popular hymn in western Canada (I do not know whether it is so popular in England, but I have heard it sung there) is called "I come to the garden alone." The stanzas describe and enlarge upon mystic meetings which the singer is supposed to have with Christ in the garden, and the refrain goes like this:

> *He walks with me, and he talks with me,*
> *And he tells me I am his own,*
> *And the joy we share as we tarry there*
> *None other has ever known.*

I often wonder whether the congregations who enjoy the sentimental luxury of this hymn would ever have the audacity to sing it again if they paused a few seconds to consider the meaning of the words they are singing. "None other has ever known"—in other words the singer is claiming a

[1] We are sorry to say that we know some parish churches where this happens. — Ed

complete monopoly of this personal intimacy with Jesus Christ. This is a blasphemy. Not only does it have the manner and all the tawdry airs and graces of any popular secular love-song, but the sentiment it expresses is strictly unchristian. Another example of a different kind is an equally popular hymn, "Faith of our fathers," wherein the singers arrogantly claim at the end of each arrogant stanza:

Faith of our fathers, holy; faith,
We will be true to thee till death.

How many of us, if we are thinking what we are singing, can dare to make such an assertion? How many of us can certainly say that, faced with dungeon, fire, or sword, we would have the courage to be martyrs? The name of Jesus is not mentioned once in the hymn, he who alone could give us the grace and strength to uphold our faith in the hour of need. Yet hundreds of people are glibly singing this hymn every Sunday. Let them rather sing:

Author of Faith, eternal Word,
Whose Spirit breaches the active flame;
Faith, like its Finisher and Lord,
Today, as yesterday, the same:

To Thee our humble hearts aspire,
And ask the gift unspeakable;
Increase in us the kindled fire,
In us the work of faith fulfil.

By faith we know Thee strong to save;
Save us, a present Saviour Thou!
Whate'er we hope, by faith we have.
Future and past subsisting now.

Yet another distressing evil is that so many hymns are either set to bad tunes, or set to good tunes and sung to bad. Good editors of hymn-books, much as they would like to, dare not ruthlessly leave out all the bad tunes lest those who have an affection for them put an embargo on the new book. But the editors do what they can, and some show us what is what by always putting the good tune first, when a hymn has two tunes set to it. And do we respond? No. We see "The Lord is King! Lift up thy voice" with two tunes above it. The first is DEUS TUORUM MILITUM, whose very name is like a roll of drums, like earth and heaven pulling out all their organ stops ready for a mighty peal in praise of God. But do we sing it? No. We stick to the second tune because we have heard it before, and we bleat that glorious and triumphant battlecry of our Christian faith to that contemplative little melody, WALTON. Or again, here is "Give me the wings of faith to rise," with two tunes set, one indifferent, the other bad. At the top, the editor has written in small but hopeful print: "BALLERMA, opposite, is commended for this hymn." Do we remember that he is an expert and take his advice? No. Drearily we moan that soaring song to BEATITUDO, and drag the wings of faith in the dirt. No wonder some of the congregations refuse to sing. Perhaps it is a vicious circle after all.[1]

Many of those "good old hymns" in the "Gospel Call" section have refrains, and I think it is safe to say that most hymns with refrains are bad hymns—that is to say, they are sentimental hymns with sentimental tunes which appeal to our wrong emotions. But far worse than singing hymns which are

[1] Mrs Caird here writes from her experience in Canada.

written with refrains is the habit of singing hymns *without* refrains to tunes *with* refrains, thus having to repeat quite arbitrarily any line or part of a line or phrase that happens to come at the appropriate place in the tune. A ludicrous example is the common habit among Methodists in the United States of singing "How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord " to the tune ADESTE FIDELES. Now that is a very beautiful tune, and belongs to the Latin hymn whose name it bears, and which has a simple refrain; but "How firm a foundation" was never meant to have a refrain, and being given one, loses in the singing most of its directness and power. Or again, Watts's beautiful little Christmas carol "Joy to the world" is a favourite in Canada, and in spite of the injunction that "The tune RICHMOND, opposite, is commended for this hymn," it is persistently sung to a tune called ANTIOCH, which demands that half a line in each stanza be repeated, in hurdy-gurdy rhythm, five times. Why do we tolerate this sort of thing? Would we tolerate it if the minister kept saying phrases of his sermon or of the Scriptures over and over again, or if he repeated a clause of the Lord's Prayer five times? Of course we would not. We would say he was a scoffer, and we would turn him out of our pulpit. Why then should we do it in our hymns? A hymn is not just a catchy tune out of a musical comedy. It is the congregation's expression of its faith and worship, and it should be sung straightforwardly with the dignity it deserves. One sound test of a good hymn is to consider whether we can imagine Christ's disciples and the members of the early Church singing it.

Lastly, there is that pathetic remark so often heard from ministers, "Yes, it's a nice hymn, but they don't know it." This simply means that the congregation does not know the tune that is set to the hymn in question. An obvious remedy, if the hymn is in some commonly used metre, is to find another good tune in the book which can be sung to it. That would do for an emergency, but there are many hymns like "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty," and "O Sacred Head, sore wounded," which have one great tune and one alone which belongs. Now this is where the choir comes in. Contrary to popular opinion nowadays, the job of the choir is *not* to perform for the benefit of the congregation, but to *lead the singing*, and that means, if necessary, teaching the congregation new tunes. There are many churches with enormous choirs which produce two anthems in one service. One anthem is quite enough for one service, and in those few minutes which would otherwise be occupied in singing an anthem the choir could be teaching the congregation a new hymn. There are also many churches where the choir is too small and ill-balanced to sing an anthem at all, and such choirs are always distressed at their own uselessness. In the same way, the small choirs could be well employed teaching new hymns to the congregation instead of singing an anthem. Good tunes are readily memorable; in three weeks a congregation can learn to sing a tune easily and well.

These, then, are the main evils which we have to redress, and let me emphasise again that the worst of them is the unchristian hymn, the hymn that is no hymn, but a sentimental secular ditty dressed up to look religious. Let us scorn it and boldly say with George Herbert:

I envy no man's nightingale or spring
Who plainly say, My God, My King.

In the second book of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* there is a description of a beautiful, but evil place, the Bower of Bliss. Amongst the other ornaments of that lovely garden is lustrous ivy which twines all over the ground, and which is made of real gold. But nobody knows it is golden ivy, for the gold is cunningly painted to look like real, green, natural ivy. Now the evil thing about the ivy is not that it is made of gold, for there would be no harm in that. No, the evil is that the golden ivy pretends to be real ivy, it masquerades as something it is not. There are many things like that, which are not evil in themselves, but which become evil when they put on a disguise. Let us not allow such things to enter our churches. I know more than one church who tried to save enough money to buy a stained

glass window; but finding the cost heavy and the waiting long they gave up, and had a picture painted on the window instead. It would have been better to have left the glass clear for the sun to shine through than that. Popular ballads and love-songs and jazz are all very well in their way. They are all right if we indulge in them in the right place and can watch what they are doing; but it would be better to have no hymns in our services at all than to be deceived by such as these, disguised and pious-looking, and masquerading as hymns. Of all that is done in church, hymn-singing belongs strictly and alone to the congregation. The minister leads the prayers, reads the Scriptures, and preaches the sermon. But the singing is the responsibility of the congregation; is it not then of outstanding importance how and what they sing? This is a time of crisis for the Church, especially in Europe and England; we have yet to see which way the tide will turn, and whether the western Church will enter an age of ineffectuality and shame, or of more abundant life. If, as we hope and pray, she means to choose life, that life must spring in every phase of her being. The Church needs great preachers and great workers, but I am convinced that her members need, too, to relearn the great hymns whereby they can strengthen their own faith and have something worthy to offer to others. At this time Christians are calling upon the Bible, upon the power of prayer, upon the word of the preacher to strengthen and uphold Church. I would add to these another apostrophe:

Blest pair of sirens, pledges of heaven's joy,
Sphere-born harmonious sisters, Voice and Verse,
Wed your divine sounds, and mixt power employ
Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce,
And to our high-raised fantasy present,
That undisturbed song of pure content
Aye sung before the sapphire-coloured throne
To him that sits thereon
With saintly shout, and solemn jubilee,
Where the bright seraphim in burning row
Their loud uplifted angel trumpets blow,
And the cherubic host in thousand choirs
Touch their immortal harps of golden wires,
With those just spirits that wear victorious palms,
Hymns devout and holy psalms
Singing everlastingly;
That we on earth with undiscording voice
May rightly answer that melodious noise;
As once we did, till disproportioned sin
Jarred against nature's chime, and with harsh din
Broke the fair music that all creatures made
To their great Lord, whose love their motion swayed
In perfect diapason, whilst they stood
In first obedience, and their state of good.
O may we soon again renew that song.
And keep in tune with heaven, till God e'er long
To his celestial consort us unite,
To live with him, and sing in endless morn of light.