



How Choirs Contribute to the Singing and Interpretation of Hymns

Short Guide No 28: How Choirs Contribute to the Singing and Interpretation of Hymns

'Sing, choirs of angels'; 'Sing, sing, ye heavenly choir'; 'How shall I keep from singing?'

Choirs, harmonious and heavenly

Hymns are eminently flexible and can be sung by individuals or by larger groups of people making up a congregation. What, then, is the role of a choir in the singing of hymns? Choirs are organised to function in a disciplined manner, usually under the direction of one person. There is scope for individual interpretation, but this must be blended with the other voices, thus making for harmony which is 'in tune with heaven', an echo of the singing of the angels. When choirs sing hymns they offer a distinctive contribution to worship.

Choirs enhance congregational singing

A choir provides a secure and balanced volume of sound and (normally!) sings throughout a hymn, whereas individual members of a congregation have the option to join in as the mood takes them. Not all worshippers have strong voices and not all will wish to be involved in the singing, although many will probably be happy to be carried along by others. When a choir gives a strong lead it removes some of the tension which can be felt in situations where worshippers feel uncomfortable about active participation. Funerals, baptisms and weddings are times when a capable and sympathetic choral presence is a great reassurance.

Introducing new material

New hymns and songs are a means of enhancing worship and making it more relevant by introducing contemporary language and subject matter. Choirs can take the lead in introducing new material to a congregation.

Hymns and meditation

Depending on the particular liturgical tradition, a choral rendition of a hymn can be inspiring at quiet moments in a service, for instance, during the distribution of communion. Hymns which do not feature in the regular congregational diet are a rich source of material. The choir has a real opportunity here to interpret the text and, with clarity of diction and a sensitive interpretation, the choir's 'performance' has the potential to enhance the worship.

Harmonies

Choirs come in all shapes and sizes, and the vocal range of individual voices - soprano (treble), alto, tenor and bass - has to be accommodated. This means that hymns are often scored for these musical resources. Hymns do not have to be sung in four parts - indeed, many hymns and worship songs are written for unison singing with organ, piano or keyboard accompaniment - but members of a choir do appreciate being given the opportunity to sing in harmony, and this is where 'full music edition' hymn books are useful. Sometimes the singers are given music with scope for contrapuntal display, as in those old West Gallery tunes with imitative entries in all the voices, which must have been fun to sing! ('O come, let us adore him' gives a flavour of this style.) David Willcocks understood full well how choirs can contribute to expressive and varied hymn singing, and in *Hymns for Choirs* (OUP, 1976) he provided imaginative harmonisations for mixed voices and organ.

Descants

Descants are by far the most effective musical elaboration a choir can make to hymn singing. What is more exhilarating than a soaring melodic line, enhancing the last verse of a hymn! Indeed, one collection of descants is entitled *Hit the Roof* (Kevin Mayhew, 1990). Descants come in many forms and, rather like extensions to a building, some integrate seamlessly whereas others are flamboyantly individualistic. The simplest are often the most effective, e.g. Thomas Armstrong's 'O holy Child of Bethlehem' or Maurice Bevan's 'If our love were but more simple' for CORVEDALE ('There's a wideness in God's mercy'). *The Oxford Book of Descants* (ed. Julian Elloway, OUP, 2012) is a comprehensive collection which includes several old favourites as well as arrangements of more recent hymns and songs. There is plenty in this volume to enrich the musical offerings of any choir, and of course descants can be performed by instruments as well as voices.

Some practical considerations

For the greatest effect, choirs have not only to be audible, but ideally, visible. There is no one way of facilitating this. Individual layouts in churches vary, as do the numbers in any particular choir. Choirs need to be able to see music copies of the hymns they are singing. Screens and service papers may be very practical for congregational use, but they do not necessarily help the musicians. In addition, choir members learn so much from the information in a hymn book: melody, harmony and chords; texts; liturgical and thematic ordering; scripture references; background information about texts and tunes etc.

Hymn as anthems

- The hymn anthem is a hybrid genre, half-hymn and half-anthem. It provides a great opportunity for a choir to give a fresh interpretation to words which may well be very familiar. There are thousands of hymn anthems, ranging from stalwarts such as Ley's 'The strife is o'er' to Harry Bramma's arrangement of the worship song, 'Here is bread, here is wine', in the RSCM's *Worship in Song* (ed. William Llewellyn, 1997). *The Novello Book of Hymns* (ed. David Hill, Novello & Co., 2016) is a versatile collection of arrangements of 50 hymns which work as easy anthems for use in church and school services.
- In North America the genre of the 'hymn concertato' has become very popular, with choir-only stanzas alternating with sections for the congregation.
- In a different category are those anthems in which existing hymn texts are set to newly composed music. John Rutter's 'All things bright and beautiful', Howard Goodall's 'Love divine' and Philip Wilby's 'When I survey the wondrous cross' are three such examples.
- Hymns also feature in longer compositions, notably Lutheran Passions and cantatas, and in popular works such as Stainer's *The Crucifixion* and Maunder's *Olivet to Calvary*. Hymns and spirituals are essential components of Britten's *Noye's Fludde* and Tippett's *A Child of our Time*.

Choirs, hymns and recordings

Nowadays, it seems that there is hardly a choir which has not made recordings of hymns and carols. With the ubiquitous nature of modern media we are probably able to hear more hymn singing than ever before, from gospel hymns to '100 Favourite Hymns'. We can simulate the experience of being present in a cathedral, church, chapel or recording studio as we listen to hymns on our phones or in the car. Hymns appear on YouTube, CDs, DVDs, radio and TV. Hymn singing knows no national boundaries and standards of hymn singing have never been higher. Listen, for instance, to the CD of 20 hymn arrangements in *Hymns from King's* (Kings College Cambridge, 2016), which has an accompanying book by Stephen Cleobury (Edition Peters, 2002).

But here is the challenge: how can we help 'listeners' to become 'worshippers'?

Hymns and the future of choral singing

Restrictions on actual singing during the coronavirus pandemic brought the role of choirs into sharp focus. While desperately missing live music-making, we were massively appreciative of recorded singing. During the 2020 lockdown the Choral Scholars of St Martin-in-the Fields, London, recorded music individually in their own homes, for use in digital church services - just one instance of technology being harnessed by church musicians and worship leaders. But we must remember that all recorded singing was originally live! Our hymnody owes so much to a vibrant choral tradition in which choirs play a significant part, and we should never take it for granted.

So, hymn lovers, to ensure that 'sweet singing in the choir' continues to permeate our worship:

- *show your appreciation of your choir, not just at Christmas*
- *give your choir practical support and, where appropriate, financial assistance*
- *encourage your choir to explore new dimensions of sacred song*
- *make the most of technology to enhance the experience of live choral singing.*

Ian Sharp - October 2020 - © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland

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For anyone who enjoys, sings, plays, chooses, introduces, studies, teaches or writes hymns ...

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