

A THOUSAND YEARS OF MUSIC IN THE MINSTER

By Paul Hale 13 April 1991

What role has music had in the church through the ages?

- 1 Better projection of the text in large buildings before the days of PA systems and elaboration of the text.
- 2 All Christian liturgies based on music - this goes back to Jewish Temple worship. In Orthodox churches all services still sung.

Earliest music: Plainsong - sung by men's voices only (monks and priests) unaccompanied. Written on a 4-line stave with square notes. 1248 Southwell Statutes say "clergy who are to sing should look at the order board for instructions and look over their parts beforehand and also sing without books".

1449: First mention of Rector Chori - one of the 16 Vicars Choral Schools: Two existed, grammar and song, as originally decreed by St. Augustine of Canterbury. Many song schools closed when secular minsters and cathedrals turned into monastic. Ours just kept going, using the music of the day for services.

Music in the later Middle Ages: Became more and more elaborate, and could be written in 2,3,4,5 or even more parts. Cult of Our Lady led to many services requiring boys' voices, and popular secular tunes often adapted.

C15th & 16th, boys needed to be really skilled to master late Renaissance music. Much of the most superb Anglican music dates from this period, composed by Gibbons, Morley, Tomkins, Weelkes, and above all Byrd (1543-1623). Byrd was organist at Lincoln and may have had a link with Southwell. A set of copies of his music was given to the Minster in 1607. Music was mostly copied by hand ("pricked"); Byrd and Gibbons took out patent for first music printing press but pricking remained the norm as printing so expensive. SATB parts copied separately and often not all survive so one part has to be reconstructed, also organ scores. Staves drawn by hand with a special pen and "C clefs" used as well as treble and bass clefs. By late C18th, printing became more usual; composers published collected editions of their own and others' works by subscription. "The Rev. the Chapter of Southwell" is listed in subscribers to Boyce's, Arnold's, Nares' and Wesley's collections of Cathedral Music (1 copy of each only!). Also books of words only printed for congregations.

Commonwealth & Restoration: Under Cromwell all church music banned. Organs smashed and choirs disbanded - complete break in tradition. 1660 on choirs re-started but all music had to be learnt from scratch so needed to be simpler and repertoire more restricted. Many verse anthems written for solo men's voices with boys singing only short

choruses e.g. by Purcell, Blow etc. Routine established of daily Mattins and Evensong sung by 12 choristers and 6 lay clerks (successors of Vicars Choral) under a Rector Chori.

C18th: Church and its music slid into dull and uninspired complacency with lay workers badly paid and treated, e.g. 1754 Samuel Wise appointed organist, rector chori, auditor and probationer singing man at a salary of £5 pa - though a bottle of wine was attached to the office of auditor! Choristers often badly behaved and not controlled: 1792 one was killed trying to climb out of the window next to the altar.

C19th: 1840 collegiate status removed by Eccl. Commissioners and revenues expropriated; but daily services appear to have continued.

1884 See of Southwell created and 1889 new organ installed in restored Minster. Two schools amalgamated as Minster Grammar School. Mattins and Evensong both still sung till after World War II; then Mattins had to be said as lay clerks needed to earn a living elsewhere.

The Organ

First recorded appointment of an organist, Lawrence Pepys, late C15th, so there must have been an organ from at least that date.

1699 William Popely (owner of Popely's Piece) organist, put in charge of repairs after great fire of 1711.

Organ never entirely satisfactory after that and is still not so today: 1933 rebuilt in two parts, half in nave; 1971 all squeezed into case which is much too small - doesn't work properly.

The Choir:

Education free, at Minster School, now a maintained comprehensive with junior dept. BUT boarding fees £3000 p.a. Boys come from all over U.K. including Scotland with fees often paid by local education authorities but present financial constraints forcing some, eg. Derbys. and Leics., to cease payment, making recruitment v. difficult; also increasingly hard to get lay clerks (men singers) as repertoire wide and difficult": needs men of professional background who haven't the spare time. Boys need adult standards of both behaviour and performance, and ability to organise their time as hours of duty long in addition to school work. Gives a good education in self-discipline! Cathedral choir schools are unique to England and are all private schools except Southwell. A Labour govt. might close them all - but their education spokesman was at one himself and might spare them.

Song School: now just the rehearsal room, in Great Hall building, formerly the bishop's private chapel.

Rector Chori: work developed greatly over the centuries and now includes a wide variety of responsibilities (see 'Leaves' for June 1991 when it comes out.)