

# BRIDGES

# ROBERT

A PRACTICAL  
DISCOURSE ON SOME  
PRINCIPLES OF  
HYMN-SINGING

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Principles of Hymn-Singing**

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## A Practical Discourse on Some Principles of Hymn-Singing

### A PRACTICAL DISCOURSE ON SOME PRINCIPLES OF HYMN-SINGING

What St. Augustin says of the emotion which he felt on hearing the music in the Portian basilica at Milan in the year 386 has always seemed to me a good illustration of the relativity of musical expression; I mean how much more its ethical significance depends on the musical experience of the hearer, than on any special accomplishment or intrinsic development of the art. Knowing of what kind that music must have been and how few resources of expression it can have had,—being rudimental in form, without suggestion of harmony, and in its performance unskilful, its probably nasal voice-production unmodified by any accompaniment,—one marvels at his description,

'What tears I shed at Thy hymns and canticles, how acutely was my soul stirred by the voices and sweet music of Thy Church! As those voices entered my ears, truth distilled in my heart, and thence divine affection welled up in a flood, in tears o'erflowing, and happy was I in those tears<sup>1</sup>.'

St. Augustin appears to have witnessed the beginnings of the great music of the Western Church. It was the year of his baptism when, he tells us, singing was introduced at Milan to cheer the Catholics who had shut themselves up in the basilica with their bishop, to defend him from the imperial violence:

'It was then instituted that psalms and hymns should be sung, after the manner of the Eastern Churches, lest the folk in the weariness of their grief should altogether lose heart: and from that day to this the custom has been retained; many, nay, nearly all Thy flocks, in all regions of the world, following the example<sup>2</sup>.'

What great emotional power St. Augustin attributed to ecclesiastical music, and of what importance he thought it, may be seen in the tenth book of the *Confessions*: he is there examining himself under the heads of the senses, and after the sense of smell, his chapter on the sense of hearing is as follows:

'The lust of the ears entangled and enslaved me more firmly, but Thou hast loosened and set me free. But even now I confess that I do yield a very little to the beauty of those sounds which are animated by Thy eloquence, when sung with a sweet and practised voice; not, indeed, so far that I am lamed and cannot fly off at pleasure<sup>3</sup>: and yield though I do, yet these sweet sounds, joined with the divine words which are their life, cannot be admitted to my heart save to a place of some dignity, and I hesitate to give them one as lofty as their claim<sup>4</sup>.

'For sometimes I seem to myself to be allowing them undue honour, when I feel that our minds are really moved to a warmer devotion and more ardent piety by the holy words themselves when they are so sung than when they are not so sung; and when I recognize that all the various moods of our spirit have their proper tones in speech and song, by which they are, through I know not what secret familiarity, excited. But the mere sensuous delight, to which it is not fitting to resign the mind to be enervated thereby, often deceives me, whenever (that is) the delight of the senses does not so

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<sup>1</sup> *Confess.* ix. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* ix. 7.

<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps rather a quality proper to the sensation.

<sup>4</sup> 'Et vix eis praebeo congruentem [locum].' which might only mean 'I cannot find the right place for them.'

accompany the reason as to be cheerfully in submission thereto, but, having been admitted only for reason's sake, then even attempts to go before and to lead. Thus I sin without knowing, but afterwards I know.

'Then awhile, from too immoderate caution against this deception, I err on the side of too great severity; and sometimes go so far as to wish that all the melody of the sweet chants which are used in the Davidian psalter were utterly banished from my ears, and from the ears of the Church; and that way seems to me safer which I remember often to have heard told of Athanasius, archbishop of Alexandria, that he would have the lector of the psalm intone it with but a slight modulation of voice, so as to be more like one reading than one singing. And yet, when I remember my tears, which I shed at the hearing of the song of Thy Church in the first days of my recovered faith, and that now I still feel the same emotion, and am moved not by the singing but by what is sung, when it is sung with a liquid voice and in the most fitting "modulation," then (I say) I acknowledge again the great utility of the institution.

'Thus I fluctuate between the peril of sensuous pleasure and the proof of wholesomeness, and am more inclined (though I would not offer an irrevocable judgement) to approve of the use of singing in the Church, that, by the pleasure of the ear, weaker minds may rise to the emotion of piety. Yet when it happens to me to be more moved by the music than by the words that are sung I confess that I have sinned (poenaliter peccare), and it is then that I would rather not hear the singer<sup>5</sup>.'

What would St. Augustin have said could he have heard Mozart's Requiem, or been present at some Roman Catholic cathedral where an eighteenth-century mass was performed, a woman hired from the Opera-House whooping the *Benedictus* from the western gallery?

It is possible that such music would not have had any ethical significance to him, bad or good. Augustin lived before what we reckon the very beginnings of modern music, with nothing to entice and delight his ears in the choir but the simplest ecclesiastical chant and hymn-tune sung in unison. We are accustomed to an almost over-elaborated art, which, having won powers of expression in all directions, has so squandered them that they are of little value: and we may confidently say that the emotional power of our church music is not so great as that described by him 1,500 years ago. In fact if we feel at all out of sympathy with Augustin's words, it is because he seems to over-estimate the danger of the emotion<sup>6</sup>.

There is something very strange and surprising in this state of things, this contrast between the primitive Church with its few simple melodies that ravished the educated hearer, and our own full-blown institution with its hymn-book of some 600 tunes, which when it is opened fills the sensitive worshipper with dismay, so that there are persons who would rather not go inside a church than subject themselves to the trial.

What is the matter? What is it that is wrong with our hymnody? Even where there is not such rooted disgust as I have implied, there is a growing conviction that some reform is needed in words or music, or both.

Assuming that the chief blame lies with the music (as, I think, might easily be proved), I propose to discuss the question of the music of our hymnody, and I shall proceed on the basis of St. Augustin's principles: I am sure that they would be endorsed by any pious church-goer who had considered the subject, and they may be fairly formulated thus, *The music must express the words or sense: it should not attract too much attention to itself: it should be dignified: and its reason and use is to heighten religious emotion.*

One point calls for distinction: Augustin speaks of his emotion on *hearing* the hymns and canticles; he writes as if he had had no more thought of taking part in the music himself, than we have of joining in the anthem at a cathedral; and this might lead to a misunderstanding; for there is no

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<sup>5</sup> *Confess.* x. 13.

<sup>6</sup> St. Augustin does not allow that a vague emotion can be religious; it must be directed. Few would agree to this.

doubt that these hymns were sung by the people: the story is that the very soldiers who were sent to blockade the basilica, happening to be themselves catholics, joined their voices in the stanzas which St. Ambrose had specially composed to disconcert the Arian enemy.

The ecstasy of listening to music, and the enthusiasm of a crowd who are all singing or shouting the same hymn or song are emotions of quite different nature and value. Now, neglecting the rare conditions under which these emotions may be combined, we shall, as we are speaking of hymns, be concerned chiefly with the latter kind, for all will agree that hymns are that part of the Church music in which it is most desirable that the congregation should join: and I believe that there would be less difference in practice if it were at all easy to obtain good congregational singing, or even anything that is worthy of the name. It seems perhaps a pity that nature should have arranged that where the people are musical (as Augustin appears to have been) they would rather listen, and where they are unmusical they would all rather sing.

Speaking therefore of congregational hymn-singing, and conceding, as I think we must, that the essential use of such music is to heighten emotion, then, this emotional quality being the *sine qua non* (the music being of no use without it), it follows that it is the primary consideration. If we are to have music at all, it must be such as will raise or heighten emotion; and to define this we must ask, *Whose emotion?* and *What kind of emotion?*

Let us take this latter question first, and inquire what emotions it is usual, proper, or possible to express by congregational singing of hymns. William Law, in his *Serious Call*, has an interesting, I may say amusing, chapter on the duty of all to sing, whether they have any turn or inclination for it or no. All should sing, he says, even though they dislike doing so; and I think that what he affirms of private devotion applies with greater force to public worship. It should satisfy the most ardent advocate of congregational singing, and it goes certainly to the root of the matter.

'It is so right and beneficial to devotion, has so much effect upon our hearts, that it may be insisted on as a common rule for all persons; ... for singing is as much the proper use of a psalm as devout supplication is the proper use of a form of prayer: and a psalm only read is very much like a prayer that is only looked over.... If you were to tell a person that has such a song, that he need not sing it, that it was sufficient to peruse it, he would wonder what you meant, ... as if you were to tell him that he should only look at his food, to see whether it was good, but need not eat it.... You will perhaps say that singing is a particular talent, that belongs only to particular people, and that you have neither voice nor ear for music.

'If you had said that singing is a general talent, and that people differ in that as they do in all other things, you had said something much truer.

'For how vastly people differ in the talent of thinking, which is not only common to all men, but seems to be the very essence of human nature: ... yet no one desires to be excused from thought because he has not this talent in any fine degree....

'If a person were to forbear praying because he had an odd tone in his voice, he would have as good an excuse as he that forbears from singing psalms because he has but little management of his voice....

'These songs make a sense (of) delight in God they awaken holy devotion: they teach how to ask: they kindle a holy flame....

'Singing is the natural effect of JOY in the heart, ... and it is also the natural means of raising EMOTIONS OF JOY in the mind: such JOY AND THANKFULNESS to God as is the highest perfection of a divine and holy life.'

Now though I cannot feel the force of all Law's arguments nor easily bring myself to believe that a person who dislikes singing, and has no ear for music, will readily find any comfortable assistance to his private devotion from making efforts to hit off the notes of the scale; yet I feel that Law's position is in the main sound, and that he has correctly specified the emotion most proper to that kind of uncultured singing which he describes: and though congregational psalm-singing necessarily

involves a greater musical capacity than that assumed in Law's extreme case, and may therefore have a wider field, yet we may begin by laying down that JOY, PRAISE, and THANKSGIVING give us the first main head of what is proper to be expressed, and we may extend this head by adding ADORATION and perhaps the involved emotions of AWE and PEACE and even the attitude of CONTEMPLATION.

In such a subject as the classification of emotions as they may be expressed by music of one kind or another, it is plainly impossible to make any definite tabulation with which all would agree. The very names of the emotions will, to different minds, call up different associations of feeling. If any agreement could be arrived at, it would be at the expense of distinction; and all that I can expect is to have my distinctions understood, and in the main agreed with. And as I am most ready to grant to the reader his right to a different opinion on any detail, I beg of him the same toleration, and that he will rather try to follow my meaning than dwell on discrepancies which may be due to a fault of expression, or to a difference of meaning which he and I may attach to the same word.

With this apology in preamble, I will attempt to make some classification of emotions as they seem to me to be the possible basis for musical expression in congregational singing.

We have already one class: I would add a second, to include all the hymns which exhibit the simple attitude of PRAYER.

A third class I would put under the head of FAITH. Examples of this class will no doubt often cross with those of the first class, but they will specify themselves as CELEBRATIONS of events of various COMMEMORATION, introducing a distinct form, namely NARRATION, which is a very proper and effective form for general praise.

Also this section will include all the hymns of BROTHERHOOD and FELLOWSHIP, and of SPIRITUAL CONFLICT, with the correlative *invitatory* and *exhortatory* songs, as modified by what will be said later.

Also, lastly, under this same head of Faith, the DOCTRINAL hymns, and professions of creed whether sectarian or otherwise, which, if the definition be taken widely, make a large and popular class, well exemplified by the German hymns of the Reformation, or by those of our Wesleyan revival; strong with the united feeling of a small body, asserting itself in the face of opposition: concerning which we will not speak further, except to recall the fact that this kind of enthusiasm was not absent from the causes which first introduced hymns into the Western Church.

I believe that this is a pretty full list of all the attitudes of mind that can be properly expressed by congregational singing; and if we turn to other emotions which are made the subject of church hymns, we shall, I think, see that they are all of them liable to suffer damage by being entrusted to the rough handling of general vociferation.

Such will be all hymns of DIVINE AFFECTION and YEARNING; all LAMENTS and CONSOLATIONS; all descriptions of spiritual conditions which imply personal experience and feeling, as ABASEMENT, HUMILIATION, CONTRITION, REPENTANCE, RESIGNATION, SELF-DEVOTION, CONVICTION, and SATISFACTION.

Here I feel that many readers will be inclined to dissent from what I say, and as I shall not again recur to Law, I should like, in order to show my meaning, to call up his extreme example of an unmusical person singing in private devotion. If one pictures such a case as he supposes, is it not clear, whether one imagines oneself the actor or the unwilling auditor, that while such an exhibition of joy might perhaps pass, yet a similar incompetent attempt to express any of the last-named emotions would be only ridiculous? But between this single worshipper and the congregation the incompetence seems to me only a question of degree; while in the far more considerable respect of the sincerity of the feeling in the hearts of those expressing it, Law's singer has every advantage; indeed no objection on this score can be raised to him. But now suppose for a moment that he has *not* the emotion at heart corresponding to his attempt at song, and I think the differentiation of motives for congregational singing will seem justifiable.

All these last-named emotions,—which I have taken from congregational hymn-books,—and I suppose there may be more of them,—call for delicacy of treatment. A Lamentation, for instance, which might seem at first sight as if it would gain force by volume, will, if it is realistic or clumsy, become unmanly, almost so as to be ridiculous, and certainly depressing to the spirit rather than purifying. In fact while many of the subjects require beautiful expression, they are also more properly used when offered as inspiring ideals; and to assume them to be of common attainment or experience is to degrade them from their supreme sanctity. But in thus ruling them unfit for general singing one must distinguish large miscellaneous congregations from small united bodies, in which a more intimate emotion may be natural: and as there is no exact line of distinction here, so there is no objection to the occasional and partial intrusion of some of these more intimate subjects into congregational hymns.

To this first question then, as to what emotions are fit to be expressed by congregational music, the answer appears to be that the more general the singing, the more general and simple should be the emotion and that the universally fitting themes are those of simple praise, prayer, or faith: and we might inquire whether one fault of our modern hymn-books may not be their attempt to supply congregational music to unfitting themes.

To the next question, *Whose emotion* is this congregational music to excite or heighten? the answer is plain: It is the average man, or one rather below the average, the uneducated, as St. Augustin says the weaker, mind and that in England is, at least artistically, a narrow mind and a vulgar being. And it may of course be alleged that the music in our hymn-books which is intolerable to the more sensitive minds was not put there for them, but would justify itself in its supposed fitness for the lower classes. 'What use,' the pastor would say to one who, on the ground of tradition advocated the employment of the old plain-song and the Ambrosian melodies, 'What use to seek to attract such people as those in my cure with the ancient outlandish and stiff melodies that pleased folk a thousand years ago, and which I cannot pretend to like myself?' Or if his friend is a modern musician, who is urging him to have nothing in his church but what would satisfy the highest artistic sense of the day, his answer is the same: he will tell you that it would be casting pearls before swine; and that unless the music is 'tuney' and 'catchy' the people will not take to it. And we cannot hastily dismiss these practical objections. The very Ambrosian music which is now so strange to modern ears was doubtless, when St. Ambrose introduced it, much akin to the secular music of the day, if it was not directly borrowed from it: and the history of hymn-music is a history of the adaptations of profane successes in the art to the uses of the Church. Nor do I see that it can ever be otherwise, for the highest music demands a supernatural material; so that it would seem an equal folly for musicians to neglect the unique opportunity which religion offers them, and for religion to refuse the best productions of human art. And we must also remember that the art of the time, whether it be bad or good, has a much more living relation to the generation which is producing it, and exerts a more powerful influence upon it, than the art of any time that is past and gone. It is the same in all aspects of life: it is the book of the day, the hero or statesman of the hour, the newest hope, the latest flash of scientific light, which attracts the people. And it must be, on the face of it, true that any artist who becomes widely popular must have hit off, 'I know not by what secret familiarity,' the exact fashion or caprice of the current taste of his own generation.

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