



The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter – March 2010

Sing a New Song to the Lord

T MAY seem odd reading about Church Music in the rich months when we contemplate the Passion and celebrate the Resurrection of Christ. And yet this is the season of the year which has most engaged serious composers and when musicians have to rehearse hardest: think of the number of musical items sung during the Easter Triduum, from Maundy Thursday to Easter Day, much of it without instrumental accompaniment. In churches where music is simple and resources modest, there are particular challenges and opportunities at this time of year. An able cantor singing alone and facilitating congregational participation can produce results as arresting and beautiful as anything in a cathedral or monastery.

The Anglo-catholic tradition had a finely developed musical tradition before the liturgical upheaval of the 1970s and some of that, like those rows of sturdy terrace houses pulled down about the same time, now seems to have been better than what has replaced it. And yet, since 1970, there have been a burst of hymns and worship songs, one or two durable mass settings, and a number of new ways of doing church music. Some, at least, of this will last a while longer.

Many churches have maintained the robed choir. Often this is no longer a way of engaging the children of the parish in the worship of the church but an adult activity. It is important to realise that adult activities do not in themselves win admiration and sympathy from onlookers. Bells have to be rung properly and music has to be performed well if they are to earn a place in people's affection and attention. Other churches have more informal arrangements: music groups, cantors, choirs singing without uniform from the back or side of the church. Again, the kind of tolerance people show for little children reading unintelligibly or singing out of tune is not readily extended to adults messing up in these areas.

We are at another time of upheaval. Just like the 1970s, new liturgical texts are emerging, a new faithfulness to original texts is demanded, and a new respect for traditional music and words increasingly fashionable. This is a very good time for each congregation to talk and think about music and, indeed, about the whole way we approach the celebration of the liturgy. As Bishop John Richards, the first Bishop of Ebbsfleet, used to say, 'what we need are centres of excellence'. Not centres of virtuoso performance or elaborate settings but a rethink of what can be done really well. There indeed is a challenge as Holy Week and the Easter Triduum approach.

May God bless you as you walk in the way of the cross and discover it to be the way of life and peace.

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