

# WOMEN IN VICTORIAN CHURCH MUSIC: THEIR SOCIAL, LITURGICAL, AND PERFORMING ROLES IN ANGLICANISM

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## INTRODUCTION

MUSICAL outlets for English women in the medieval Church were generally restricted to convents, where they sang plain-song.<sup>1</sup> Even female participation in liturgical plays like the Easter drama (with solo parts for the Marys at the Sepulchre) was normally not allowed.<sup>2</sup> Singing in cathedral, collegiate, and major parish churches was limited to men and boys; in cathedral and collegiate foundations, only male singers could fulfil the statutory requirements of membership.<sup>3</sup> The Henrician dissolution of religious houses thus put an effective musical damper on women in English church music for several years. (Abolition of chantry foundations in major parish churches, incidentally, caused the disbanding of most of the small parochial male choirs.)<sup>4</sup>

With the introduction in 1559 of the congregational singing of metrical psalms, women found a new liturgical role.<sup>5</sup> There is, however, no evidence to suggest that they sang in liturgical choirs or played musical instruments in services until after the Restoration.

From the late seventeenth century, female participation in parochial choirs was increasingly taken for granted. In 1672, for instance, John Playford intimated that the three printed vocal parts in his settings of metrical psalms might be sung either by men or by 'boys or women'.<sup>6</sup> Other compilers of contemporary metrical psalm books, as Nicholas Temperley notes, likewise recognized that parochial choir singers might be male or female.<sup>7</sup>

Parish choirs after the Restoration were of two principal types. Many in towns were made up of so-called 'charity children', in other words, girls

<sup>1</sup> S. Drinker, *Music and Women: the Story of Women in their Relation to Music* (New York, 1948), pp. 187, 192.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> F. Ll. Harrison, *Music in Medieval Britain* (Buren, 1958), pp. 1, 39.

<sup>4</sup> N. Temperley, *The Music of the English Parish Church*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1979), 1, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 132, 147.

and boys from charity schools, who wore very distinctive costumes. Country churches, on the other hand, frequently maintained groups of male and female singers and instrumentalists in the west gallery. Such groups were often called Old Church Bands or West Gallery Minstrels, and were eventually immortalized by Thomas Hardy in *Under the Greenwood Tree*.

Turning to the nineteenth century, documentation of women's roles in church music grows more plentiful, particularly towards 1900. The major proportion of this documentation takes the form of articles and letters in ecclesiastical and musical journals. Treatises on choir training by people like George Fleming and Frederick Helmore also provide valuable information, as do memoirs by general musicians like Frederick Crowest. J. S. Curwen's accounts of contemporary church musical practice in his two *Studies in Church Music* constitute further rich sources, likewise Henry Fisher's description of *The Musical Profession* and Charles Mackeson's annual *Guide to the Churches of London and its Suburbs*. Much material from these sources is presented and evaluated from different perspectives by three late twentieth-century writers: Bernarr Rainbow in *The Choral Revival in the Anglican Church 1839-1872* (London, 1970); Nicholas Temperley in *The Music of the English Parish Church* (Cambridge, 1979); and the current author in his 1985 Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 'Trends and aims in Anglican Church music 1870-1906 in relation to developments in churchmanship'.

By far the most important roles which women played in Anglican church music in the nineteenth century lay in the parochial sphere. The greater portion of this paper (section I) will therefore be devoted to their function there. Shorter sections (II and III) will describe their peripheral contribution to music in cathedral and collegiate foundations, and the limited influence of convents in Anglican music. Section IV will relate late Victorian trends to those in the twentieth century.

#### I. WOMEN IN PARISH MUSIC

Increased attention to women in nineteenth-century Anglican parochial music was matched by changes in the roles they played. A study of their changing status reveals two distinct patterns: one for choir singers and players of melody instruments, another for organists. In the pattern outlines given below, the letter 'A' will be used to indicate periods when women were playing a relatively important role; the letter 'B', for years when they were in decline.

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Developments among singers and instrumentalists followed an 'A-B-A' pattern. The first 'A' covers the period up to the beginning of the Victorian era. Then, women were continuing to function as they had for many decades before 1800. In numerous rural churches, as already mentioned, they sang and played melody instruments alongside men in west galleries in the Old Church Bands. In town churches, girls often numerically matched boys in the groups of charity children.

The 'B' section of this pattern takes in the early and middle Victorian years. Church Bands were being abolished because their male and female personnel made rustic sounds, flirted with each other during services, and otherwise prevented a devotional atmosphere.<sup>8</sup> Charity children were no longer regarded as tolerable, as they by all accounts shrieked.<sup>9</sup>

The new type of choir which replaced the older groups from about 1840 was made up of surpliced men and boys. Since the Reformation, surpliced male singers had almost exclusively been confined to cathedral and collegiate foundations.

The move towards establishing surpliced choirs was spearheaded by High-Church clergy, both Tractarian and moderate, who were supporting the principle of these choirs for two reasons. First, such clergy wanted to raise the tone of previously cold and slovenly services, and they believed surpliced males sitting in chancel stalls were essential to achieving this aim. The proximity of these males to similarly attired clergy and acolytes would strengthen the impression that the choir was participating integrally in the work of the sanctuary. Boys were, according to their theories, unemotional<sup>10</sup> and angelic both in vocal sound and demeanour, and thus represented an ideal of liturgical austerity.<sup>11</sup> To Tractarian clergy at least, men and boys were also supposedly the most fit to encourage congregations to sing the austere music of plainsong hymns, responses, psalms, and canticles.

Secondly, High Churchmen thought surpliced choirs served a social function in church life. These choirs acted as a draw-card to boys and young men—an increasingly difficult group to attract to church.<sup>12</sup> Boys

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>9</sup> B. Rainbow, *The Choral Revival in the Anglican Church 1839–1872* (London, 1970), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> F. Helmore, *Church Choirs, containing Directions for the Formation, Management and Instruction of Cathedral, Collegiate and Parochial Choirs Being the result of 22 years' experience in Choir Training* (London and Stratford-on-Avon, 1865), p. 58.

<sup>11</sup> 'Ladies' Surpliced Choirs', *The Musical Times*, 30 (1 Sept. 1889), p. 526.

<sup>12</sup> 'The social aspect of the church choir', *The Choir and Musical Record*, 16 (4 Oct. 1873), p. 207.

might be interested in filling a gap in their schooling, as music normally bypassed them, while almost forcing itself on girls.<sup>13</sup> It was also generally felt that young men ought to be interested in self-improvement.

In the 1840s and 1850s, surpliced choirs multiplied rapidly in Tractarian and moderately High-Church parishes. Subsequently, they began to feature in middle-ground and Evangelical churches. By about 1870, 21 per cent of greater London churches<sup>14</sup> and 50 per cent of Birmingham churches had them.<sup>15</sup> By 1884, the London figure was 57 per cent.<sup>16</sup> By 1900, most town churches of any importance maintained them. Although a variety of other types of choir continued to exist,<sup>17</sup> these never challenged surpliced men and boys in respectability. Such other types included:

choirs partly paid and partly voluntary; mixed choirs, that is choirs with male and female voices . . . partly dressed choirs, wherein two rows of bright little boys in surplices are supported in their musical exertions by older folks of both sexes in ordinary clothing; choirs wherein boys' voices are regarded as intolerable, especially where the vicar's family happens to be a large one . . . consisting chiefly of girls; choirs with all boys and no men or women; choirs whose ranks are recruited through the advertisement columns of newspapers; and those less fortunate choral bodies which secure no greater talent than is afforded by the neighbouring national school, the Sunday-school and the parochial young men's club and institute. . . .<sup>18</sup>

The years from about 1885 constitute the final 'A' section of the 'A-B-A' pattern. Although women were not restored to the roughly equal importance with men which they had had before the Victorian era, they were to a limited extent enjoying a return to favour, both in theory and practice. In the choral sphere, influential writers were calling for women's restoration to prominence for three reasons, all of which represented a change from idealistic to practical views on the subject rather than a direct endorsement of the principles of female emancipation. First, High and moderately High Churchmen were finally admitting that congregational

<sup>13</sup> B. Rainbow, 'Music in Education', in N. Temperley, ed., *Music in Britain. The Romantic Age* (London, 1981), p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> C. Mackeson, *A Guide to the Churches of London and its Suburbs for 1884* (London, 1884), p. 171.

<sup>15</sup> Temperley, *Music of the English Parish Church*, 1, p. 279.

<sup>16</sup> Mackeson, p. 171.

<sup>17</sup> F. Crowest, *Phases of Musical England* (London, 1881), pp. 80-1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

singing was getting worse and that women's voices were in fact better for leading congregations than boys' relatively thin voices. These churchmen stopped insisting that liturgical functions like this could only be performed by males. In defence of this volte-face, they noted that St Paul's restrictions on women concerned their *speaking* in church, not their *singing*. They also pointed out that many English and Continental Roman Catholics ignored Cardinal Manning and the Pope and used ladies' choirs at the front of the nave, or mixed choirs in west galleries, in place of, or in addition to, male choirs in chancels. Before the mid-1880s, there were no surpliced women in Anglican churches. From that time, however, a few Anglican parishes began to put surplices on them, in Melbourne, Australia, in 1886, then in Birmingham (St Luke's Church), and Skelton-in-Cleveland.<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, professional musicians like J. S. Curwen increased their calls for women's voices on musical grounds,<sup>20</sup> and High-Church clergy either stopped arguing or began to echo the same sentiments. Musicians observed that most boys actually produced coarse, not pure, tones, and that women's voices were more refined and capable of wider expression. This tied in with the desire of late Victorian musicians for more elaborate eighteenth- and nineteenth-century repertoire in services, particularly oratorio movements. Influential High Churchmen discarded the notion that plainsong was austere and therefore best sung by male voices. Frequent late-century High-Church reviews praised the Nottingham Ladies' Plainsong Choir<sup>21</sup> and similar groups for their warm and expressive performances.

Finally, boys became increasingly difficult to recruit and keep.<sup>22</sup> Demand for them grew keener as large, surpliced choirs multiplied, and secular education—evening classes, homework, and so forth—claimed

<sup>19</sup> For congregational singing, see W. Hillsman, 'Trends and aims in Anglican church music in relation to developments in churchmanship' (Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1985), pp. 209–10; for other information in this paragraph, see 'F.R.C.O.', 'Female Singers in Church', *The Organist and Choirmaster*, 8 (15 Oct. 1900), p. 128; J. S. Curwen, *Studies in Worship Music (First Series) Chiefly as Regards Congregational Singing*, 2nd edn (London, [1888]), p. 318; E. Blenkinsopp, 'Women Choristers', *The Church Times*, 24 (8 Oct. 1886), p. 758; 'Church News. Women in surplices', *The Church Times*, 25 (23 Sept. 1887), p. 750; 'An Angelic Choir', *The Church Times*, 27 (30 Aug. 1889), pp. 781–2.

<sup>20</sup> J. S. Curwen, *Studies in Worship Music (First Series) Chiefly as Regards Congregational Singing* (London, [1880]), p. 316.

<sup>21</sup> 'Plainsong in the Midlands', *The Organist and Choirmaster*, 6 (15 June 1898), p. 262.

<sup>22</sup> 'F.R.C.O.', 'Female Singers in Church Choirs', *The Organist and Choirmaster*, 8 (15 Oct. 1900), p. 128.

greater priority on their time than formerly.<sup>23</sup> Informed opinion thus came to hold that mixed choirs would help the cause of parochial church music far more than male choirs.<sup>24</sup> In practice, however, as already indicated, mixed groups did not present a serious challenge to male choirs in important town churches before the turn of the century.

In the realm of melody instruments, the return of women may well have begun later than the mid-1880s. Although the occasional use of balanced orchestras to accompany elaborate masses, canticles, and oratorio movements was becoming fashionable in services from about 1870,<sup>25</sup> this cannot be taken as proof that women's instrumental activity in churches was restored at the same time as men's. Unlike the Old Church Bands—which included dated instruments like the serpent—the more up-to-date late Victorian church ensembles were modelled on contemporary concert orchestras. Before 1891, it is unclear whether English versions of the latter included women.<sup>26</sup>

As documentation from that date confirms that women in the concert world were beginning to appear in basically male orchestras and to form orchestras of their own, it is possible that they simultaneously began to play in church orchestras. However, the earliest concrete evidence I have seen for women playing in an orchestra which sometimes functioned liturgically dates from the late 1890s. Then, the newly-appointed organist of York Minster, T. Tertius Noble, founded the group in question—the York Symphony Orchestra. According to reports in a York Minster Scrapbook, Noble was aided 'no doubt through the Ladies of York rallying round'. The leader of the Orchestra was the 'able' Miss Knocker.<sup>27</sup>

The changing status of women as Anglican organists (who also frequently functioned as choir directors) followed more or less the reverse pattern of women as singers and melody-instrument players, in other words, a design of 'B-A-B'. In the first 'B' period, that is, before about 1830, their status remained the same as it had been before 1800. There is little evidence to suggest that they functioned as organists except when men were not available, which meant primarily in country areas.<sup>28</sup> During

<sup>23</sup> G. Fleming, *A Treatise on the Training of Boys' Voices, with Examples and Exercises and Chapters on Choir-Organization, Compiled for the use of Choirmasters* (London, [1904]), p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> 'Plainsong in the Midlands', *The Church Times*, 38 (8 Oct. 1897), p. 406.

<sup>25</sup> W. Hillsmann, 'Orchestras in Anglican Services 1870-1901', *The Musical Times*, 129 (1 Jan. 1988), pp. 45-8.

<sup>26</sup> P. Scholes, *The Mirror of Music 1844-1944. A Century of Musical Life in Britain as reflected in the pages of the Musical Times*, 2 vols (London, 1947), 2, p. 731.

<sup>27</sup> York, York Minster Library, MS Add. 157/2, Scrapbook, 1859-1908 (1899), p. 4166.

<sup>28</sup> Temperley, *Music of the English Parish Church*, 1, p. 234; Scholes, 2, p. 729.

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the 'A' period, from the 1830s to the early 1860s, this situation changed. Some women of note were appointed to London churches: Miss Stirling (famous for her Bach performances) to All Saints, Poplar; Ann Mounsey (a pupil of Samuel Wesley and Thomas Attwood) to St Vedast, Foster Lane; Elizabeth Mounsey to St Peter's, Cornhill (after competition with other candidates and on the basis of testimonials from Samuel Wesley and Vincent Novello); Ellen Day (who had performed as a pianist before Queen Victoria, Mendelssohn, Liszt, and Chopin) to St Matthew's, Westminster; Eliza Wesley (daughter of Samuel and sister of S. S. Wesley) to St Mary Pattens; Ann Stainer (sister of Sir John Stainer) to Magdalen Hospital Chapel, Streatham; and Mrs Buckley (daughter of the composer J. L. Dussek) to Kensington Parish Church.<sup>29</sup>

Some of these women continued in their posts well beyond the mid-1860s. However, the second 'B' period for women organists may with good reason be said to have begun then, as the appointment after that time of noteworthy women to important Anglican posts virtually ceased.<sup>30</sup> The growth of musical professionalism and the influence of the Oxford Movement took their toll. In 1888, Henry Fisher drew attention to the fact that women had fewer qualifications than men and started teaching music at an earlier age.<sup>31</sup> The former deficiency no doubt seemed grave to progressive Victorians, who became increasingly obsessed with all kinds of diplomas. A writer in *The Musical Times* in 1872 raised his professional nose as well, saying that he did

... not wish to ignore the hearty and painstaking labours of the Rector's wife or the Squire's lady in many of our country parishes, where no music could be had, were it not for their zeal and devotion, but to deprecate female interference in towns where professional aid renders it unnecessary. The result of female control is usually to make a service a thing of shreds and patches, a Joseph's coat in bad condition; ... a bit of mawkishness in the shape of a hymn-tune, and probably some other trash that has been heard at a 'correct' church ... these would-be directresses of choirs have never undertaken any course of musical study calculated to form a pure taste, but are necessarily thrown back upon their own prejudices. ...<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 729–30.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 729–31.

<sup>31</sup> H. Fisher, *The Musical Profession* (London, 1888), p. 336.

<sup>32</sup> 'SCRUTATOR', 'Organists' Stipends, Grievances, and Appointments', *The Musical Times*, 15 (1 Oct. 1872), pp. 638–9.

Women were relegated to low-paid posts and, if unmarried and middle class, forced to eke out a living at jobs like school-teaching or tutoring in private homes. Their salaries in High and fairly High churches were kept down by clergy who often split the duties of choirmaster and organist if no male organist was available, as it was easier to find a man who could plausibly function just as choirmaster. Such clergy thus came closer to their goal of seeing only surpliced males perform as 'ministers of the sanctuary'.

An apparent example of clergy seeking to realize this goal is recorded in the mid-1870s in the staunchly Evangelical periodical *The Rock*. Speaking of St Giles, Cambridge, a writer says:

... it is suspected that this want of musical power is not the *real* reason why now, after seventeen years, the lady organist is to be removed. ... The haters of Romish forms, of whom I am one, think that the reason is that a *male organist* is wanted. You can't ask a woman to come to church in a surplice; you may get plenty of men to put on garments not distinguished from petticoats; but a lady in a surplice won't do, it suggests 'le costume de nuit,' so, as the organist [probably meaning Director of Music, assuming that an Assistant Organist would be playing the processional hymn or voluntary] ought to be in the procession, and all in the procession must wear a surplice, why we must have a male organist, and some plausible excuse must be found or made to get rid of this female organist.<sup>33</sup>

This writer had good reason to suspect a Ritualistic plot, as St Giles had since the 1860s been shedding its Evangelical image. The apparent lack of Evangelical prejudice against women organists is further demonstrated by the higher proportion of advertisements in *The Rock* than in the High-Church *Church Times* by female organists seeking employment.

## II. WOMEN'S PERIPHERAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO CATHEDRAL MUSIC

Although some periodical articles, particularly in the late nineteenth century, called for the introduction of women to cathedral choirs, membership of those choirs remained all male. Only on some special occasions did women sing with them. The most famous liturgical example of this was the Coronation of Queen Victoria, when 'some forty female

<sup>33</sup> 'GILES', 'Male v. Female Organists', *The Rock*, no 570 (16 June 1876), p. 486.

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voices formed part of the choristers'.<sup>34</sup> More typically, however, women were employed as soloists in concerts sung by choral foundation choirs, for example, in the Three Choirs Festival.

Of the cathedral voluntary choirs which sprang up after mid-century to relieve the foundation choir for certain services, apparently only one—that at St Paul's—contained women. Those women were, however, replaced with boys by John Stainer shortly after he became organist in 1872,<sup>35</sup> and the St Paul's Voluntary Choir fell into line with similar groups.

Cathedral music was nevertheless very much indebted to the gentler sex because of the invaluable work done over a period of about fifty years by one Low Churchwoman, Maria Hackett (1783–1874). She tirelessly made annual visits to several cathedrals, ascertained and documented the great need of improvement in the living and educational conditions of the choirboys, wrote strong letters to deans and chapters demanding changes, and published her experiences in several books and pamphlets which exposed great discrepancies between cathedral statutes and cathedral practice. The chapters she attacked tried to ignore her, but her persistence eventually proved to be one of the prime causes of the change for the better of their attitudes to the condition of choirboys. Shortly after her death, the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's agreed to allow a tablet citing her great influence to be placed in a conspicuous part of the St Paul's crypt by a great number of cathedral choristers from various parts of England.<sup>36</sup>

### III. THE LIMITED INFLUENCE OF ANGLICAN CONVENT MUSIC

In contrast to the significant role which Anglican convents played in ecclesiastical developments of the Victorian age, they exerted very little musical influence. One reason for this is that Anglican nuns shunned publicity, particularly about their regular services. Only annual festivals like St Margaret's Day at East Grinstead were reported in the press.<sup>37</sup> Convents no doubt wanted to avoid incurring more episcopal displeasure than they as a matter of course received. Secondly, in practice they remained aloof from the music of the neighbouring parishes they regularly visited. Thirdly, they generally did not provide performance

<sup>34</sup> Scholes, 1, p. 539.

<sup>35</sup> G. L. Prestige, *St. Paul's in its Glory: A Candid History of the Cathedral 1831–1911* (London, 1955), p. 154.

<sup>36</sup> Scholes, 1, p. 530.

<sup>37</sup> Hillsman, 'Trends and aims', pp. 355, 356, 362.

models which were copied by the outside world.<sup>38</sup> Evidence in fact suggests rather the reverse. The Revd Dr G. H. Palmer, an Anglican priest, choir trainer, and musical scholar, exerted influence on music at Wantage. Another priest visited Clewer to try to help it improve its musical performance standards.<sup>39</sup> The only community in the very late nineteenth century which actually had any musical influence was Wantage. Through its plainsong publications from St Mary's Press, it promoted the Solesmes Abbey's plainsong editorial methods, and to some extent its performance style.<sup>40</sup>

#### IV. THE RELATION OF LATE VICTORIAN TRENDS TO THOSE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Several of the trends in late Victorian Anglican music mentioned in this paper have been reversed by the twentieth century. The limited influence of the Wantage community has grown weaker, due to the decline of plainsong in general use. Women are no longer being expelled from cathedral voluntary choirs, they are being actively recruited, as boys have been retreating to the foundation choirs. Opportunities for women to play melody instruments in services have in general declined, except in those Evangelical churches which have recently been supporting orchestras.

Other trends, however, have either stabilized or been intensifying. As organists, women have continued to hold less important posts than men. But as parochial choir singers, women and girls have been playing an increasingly important role.

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<sup>38</sup> Hillsman, 'Trends and aims', p. 362.

<sup>39</sup> For Palmer, see Hillsman, p. 361; for Clewer: Windsor, Community of St John the Baptist, House of Mercy, Clewer, 'Note book . . . Annals C.S.J.B. 1873-1888', entry for 12 Oct. 1874.

<sup>40</sup> For editorial method, see A. F. Norton, 'The consolidation and expansion of the Community of St. Mary the Virgin, Wantage, 1857-1907', 2 vols (London M.Phil. thesis, 1978), 2, p. 260; and *The Psalms of David Pointed to the Eight Gregorian Tones as given in the Sarum Tonale*. By the Rev. G. H. Palmer (Wantage, 1894), Introduction, p. i; for interpretation: *The Cowley Evangelist* [journal of the Society of St John the Evangelist], (March 1896), p. 55.