

AN  
EARNEST APPEAL  
FOR  
THE REVIVAL  
OF THE  
ANCIENT PLAIN SONG  
BY  
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## PREFATORY NOTE

THROUGH the kindness of Mrs. Pugin, the devoted widow of the great and gifted architect, it is permitted to reprint this paper, which first saw the light in 1850, and which is not without interest at the present moment. The medieval revival was not confined, in Pugin's scheme, to architecture; it was to affect all the arts that had an ecclesiastical function, and notably Church Music.

The pamphlet may be left to speak for itself. Those who know Pugin's style of writing will not need to be told that he never watered down his statements. Had he lived in these days, he would undoubtedly have been among the most fervent advocates of the restored Plainsong. By reprinting this "Appeal" I hope to make his influence once more active in favour of the Ritual Music of Holy Church.

The tender aspiration with which Pugin closes this paper seems to blend in striking harmony with the "Motu proprio" on Church Music of His Holiness Pope Pius X across the space of half a century.

Becket.  
July 7, 1905

**AN EARNEST APPEAL**  
FOR THE REVIVAL OF ANCIENT PLAIN SONG

WHEN chancel screens were first attacked, about three years since, I at once denounced the writer of the article as one who was opposed to the very principles of Christian Architecture, and, I then stated my firm belief, that the objection to screens was merely raised as a test of public opinion, and in order to ascertain how far the party, (of which the writer was an organ) might proceed in their opposition to the whole system on which the revival of true Ecclesiastical Architecture was based.

But, although I foresaw the evil tendency of their opinions, yet, I must confess, I was not prepared for the extent to which they have been carried in so short a period. At first the screens alone were objectionable, the architecture itself was praised as beautiful and appropriate, but now we are told that it is utterly unsuited to Catholic worship; that our finest Cathedrals, those most noble evidences of the piety of our forefathers, are only fit for demolition, and that, in fine, the buildings we should erect for divine worship should be as similar as possible to dissenting conventicles in their arrangement, only rather more offensive than their meager prototypes, by the meretricious decoration of their interiors. Now, monstrous as these suggestions must appear to Catholic-minded men, they become light when

compared to the changes that are proposed in the divine service itself, and which have been lately put forth in a publication which is the recognised organ of the party from whom this miserable system of modern degeneracy emanates. It is, indeed, seriously proposed to change the whole nature of the divine services of the Catholic Church, under the specious pretext of rendering them more popular and adapting them to the spirit of the age: and what is scarcely credible this change is advocated not merely for the services of a peculiar order or body, but for the Parochial Churches of the whole country. (*See the Rambler of 1850*)

Now, however we may deplore the wretched taste and principle which regulates the services of some religious bodies, yet as long as they are confined within the walls of their own institutions, and are not censured by the ecclesiastical authorities, we may view them in silent sorrow. No Catholic is compelled to assist at their maimed rites or to enter their conventicle-looking chapels, if any among the faithful are so debased as to prefer the trumpery display of a toy-shop and the vocal entertainment of a concert-room to a more solemn service, why we only pity and pray for them. But when we find that an attempt is made to thrust this parody of a Catholic service into the Parochial Churches of this country, *where we are all bound to worship*, it is time that every man who has a heart in the Catholic cause should testify his unbounded horror of so unhallowed an attempt

to change the ancient offices. What! Shall the song of Simeon, the hymn of Saint Ambrose, the canticle of our Blessed Lady herself, give place to the doggerel rhymes and poetical effusions of a few individuals whose tendencies and principles should have led them down to Geneva, but who appear to have mistaken their road and found their way into the Catholic Church, only to create divisions among the faithful, and to use the ancient liturgy as a mere vehicle for the display of their Methodism. I do not hesitate to say, that the Book of Common Prayer, bare as it is in comparison with the ancient office from which it is taken, is yet a far more Catholic service, and more in accordance with the ancient traditions than what is now proposed as the beau ideal of a popular service. On the same principle of lowering the divine service to the debased spirit of the age, some moral essays and family tales, embodying amusing anecdotes, should be substituted in lieu of the old lessons taken from Holy Writ, which are certainly quite out of date, and far more suited to the ambons of the Basilicas, and the rood lofts of the pointed churches, than for the assembly rooms for 19<sup>th</sup> century Christians. England can never be Catholicised by the destruction of her cathedrals, the conversion of the liturgy into a song-book, and the erection of churches, whose appearance is something between a dancing-room and a mechanic's institute, and I do greatly mistake the souls of Englishmen, if this miserable system is

ever permitted to take root in this land; for, although some weak persons may be led away by novelties, yet there is a general feeling of solid devotion, and a growing appreciation of the glories of Catholic antiquity that will effectually preserve us from the encroachment of modern innovations. And, although there is every reasonable hope, that in due time this country will again receive Catholic truth in all its fulness, yet such a result can only be accomplished by our rising to the high standard of ancient excellence and solemnity, and not by lowering the externals of religion to the worldly spirit of this degenerate age.

But as good frequently grow out of evil, it is most earnestly to be hoped, that this monstrous proposal of substituting vernacular compositions for the Church Offices, will be the means of awakening the ecclesiastical authorities to the absolute necessity of restoring the ancient Chant in all its purity, and I most gladly embrace this occasion for urging this all important subject.

The very fact of such a proposal being made is an evidence that there is something very rotten in our present system; for, although the remedy suggested is far worse than the disease, yet that a disease does exist, and to a very great extent, no man who reflects on the subject can deny. There does exist *a want of reality* in the present services of the Churches, as they are performed in this and many other countries, and from what does it proceed, but the *corrupt and artificial state of*

*ecclesiastical music.* Owing to the complicated nature of modern figured compositions, both the clergy and the people have been precluded from taking any real part in the service of Almighty God. They are reduced to the position of listeners instead of worshippers; so that, in lieu of the grand and edifying spectacle of priests and people uniting in one great act of adoration and praise, the service is transformed to a set of hired musicians, frequently heretics and infidels who perform in a gallery, while the congregation are either amused or wearied, and the clergy who are present generally take advantage of those interminable fugues to say their own office, which has no reference whatever to the great act of sacrifice at which they are ostensibly assisting. Thus the unity of this, the most majestic, the most solemn act of Christian worship, is destroyed, and in many places, it has degenerated into a mere musical entertainment for the audience, and at which they assist with no more devotion, than in a common theatre. Let no one think this picture is overdrawn. In one of the most Catholic cities of Flanders, Sunday after Sunday, an orchestra is set up in the nave, round which a full band arranges itself, and during the whole Mass—Kyrie, epistle, gospel, creed, offertory, and horrible to relate, even the consecration and elevation—do these men blow forth profane airs, taken from popular operas, while the Church is filled with irreverent listeners of their symphonies, and no man reverencing the

Lord's Body. Now, this is not a solitary example by any means. Scarcely is there a great Church in Europe which is not profaned by these miserable parodies of Divine Service; and what is most distressing, the greater the feast, the greater the abomination. I have been assured by a dignitary of the French Church, who abode at some time with the Franciscans of Assisi, that their daily offices were most solemnly sung; but the feast of St. Francis arriving, the Church was inundated with fiddlers from all parts of the neighbouring country, and this most glorious church converted into a perfect *salle d'opéra*. But I build not only on the testimony of others, I have been frequently grieved to the heart at what I have been compelled to hear and witness. No later than the Sunday in the octave of the last *Corpus Domini*, I was present at the High Mass in Antwerp Cathedral, whose choir and stalls were filled with lay spectators, two cantors standing among the crowd, who appeared to be only there for the purpose of displaying their copes, while the service was shouted and fiddled from a gallery at the end of the nave, an unintelligible mass of confused and irreverent sounds.

Were it not tedious, I could multiply examples without number of this miserable system which has completely cut off the people from taking part in the most solemn act of Christian worship, and degraded it in appearance to the level of pageant. It is impossible for men to sing this



modern music, and worship at the same time, they are there as *performers*, and to these hirelings are the praises of Almighty God transferred, while the clergy and people look on in dumb show.

Formerly such persons as now constitute the choir were unknown. The service was sung in Parochial Churches, between the clerks and devout laymen (*ministri*), who assisted them in the chancel, and the people in the body of the church, who responded in unison. This grand and overpowering effect of the people answering the priest is yet to be heard in parts of Germany. At Minden the *Habemus ad Dominum* rose from more than two thousand voices of faithful worshippers. What a difference from the vicarious reply of three or four professionals, thrusting their heads from out of their curtained gallery in the intervals of their private conversation, and whose hearts, instead of being raised up, were probably groveling in the contemplation of a pull at a wine bottle between the acts of the performance, for it must be distinctly understood that all persons who sing in galleries are performers by position. Nutshells, orange peel, and biscuit bags, abound in organ lofts and singing galleries, and those who are acquainted with the practical working of these places must be aware, that they are a constant source of scandal and irreverence.

Now, when we contrast the Catholic arrangement in a chancel to their miserable expedient of a gallery, we shall at once perceive the

infinite wisdom and beauty of the former. All are habited in vestments, whose colour reminds them of the purity of heart and intention, with which they should celebrate the praises of Almighty God. They stand within the sacred enclosure set apart for sacrifice; the very place tends to preserve a recollection of the Divine presence, and to keep the singers in a devout posture. The distinct and graduated Chaunt offers no impediment to the perfect union of the heart and mind with the words as they are sung; and in lieu of a more empty and vain display of vocal eccentricities, we have a solemn, heartfelt, and, we may trust, an acceptable service to the honour of Almighty God.

Now, it cannot be too earnestly impressed on the minds of all, that these arrangements for the Church service were universal throughout Christendom. It is no new scheme or system, proposed for trial; it is simply carrying out the practices of the Church for certainly more than fourteen centuries. Not only were the cathedral and collegiate churches provided with stalls and seats, and ample space for the ceremonies of the choir, but every parish church, and even chapel, had its due proportion of chancel, where the divine praises were always sung; and from the Basilica of St. Clement's, down to the humblest church of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, we shall find the same traditional arrangement. Singing galleries are modern abominations, and no good will ever be effected in Church music, until they are utterly destroyed, and

the service sung in its legitimate and ancient position—the choir or chancel. While these galleries are suffered to remain, the erection of pointed churches is a mere sham. In vain the long succession of clustered pillars; in vain the carved screen and gilded rood; the soul of the whole thing is wanting; it is the system of a modern chapel worked in the shell of an old church. Who, then, will be asked, are those who sit robed in surplices in the stalled seats? Only privileged persons, perhaps subscribers, who go in for a show, like supernumeraries on the stage; lay figures as the “Ecclesiologist,” most wittily termed them, and but dumb dogs into the bargain.

A greater sham than this cannot be seen. And was it for this that the long chancel was stalled and screened? That the cunning work was carved and the gold laid on—merely for the accommodation of some good easy men, who take no part in the solemnity, nor contribute one note to the divine praise! Surely not; it is the greatest possible perversion of a chancel; a scandal, and a shame. What could be more painful than to read the account of the new church recently consecrated at Sheffield, where the architect had really produced an edifice quite in the old spirit; and instead of the solemn Chaunt of the dedication rising from its chancel we are sickened by a long eulogy on the quaverings of female singers. St. John’s, Salford, is even a more melancholy example; a great cruciform church, with an ample choir, and yet fitted up as if

for the followers of John Knox; a most disheartening spectacle.

While this wretched system of gallery singing, with Mozart's and Haydn's music, was carried on in the room-like chapels of the last century, it was in character with the edifices; but when the English Catholic body was awakened, or appeared to be awakened, to a sense of better things, and churches arose whose form and arrangement told somewhat of more ancient and better times, then, indeed, we might have hoped and expected, that with the shell they would have revived the *soul*; that they would have cast off for ever the worldly efforts of modern men, who merely make use of the sacred liturgy as a vehicle, for a display of their professional skill; and have returned to that simple and divine song, which was created, like the architecture, by the influence of the Christian faith, and which assimilates and harmonises with its lofty vaults and lengthened aisles; without this the service and the fabric will be at utter variance, a most humiliating spectacle of ancient grandeur and modern degeneracy.

Whenever an attempt has been made by the members of the separated English communion to restore some of the external ornaments of religion which were lost by the apostasy of their Catholic forefathers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they have been usually met by insult and ridicule from a great portion of what is called the Catholic press; but I must say that the dedication of a modern Catholic

church, as we have seen it occasionally announced, accompanied by a full band of music, and where bishops and dignitaries are exposed to the degradation of sitting in dumb show to listen to the interminable squalling of a few female professionals and whiskered vocalists from the front of a gallery, is a far more ridiculous and inconsistent exhibition. Indeed, with some few exceptions, the churches that have been raised after the old models are become so many evidences of our degradation and our shame. The altar and the arch may belong to the ages of faith, but the singing drags us down to the concert-room of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and is a sad and striking proof of the little sympathy which exists between the architecture and the men.

I have long mourned most bitterly in secret on this state of things, but when a scheme is actually put forth to abolish the very words of the ancient offices and to reduce the services of Almighty God to the level of the conventicle, I can remain no longer silent. It is evident that the extreme hollowness of the present system is attracting attention; but alas! instead of advocating the only remedy, a return to the real music of the Church in all its purity, we are assailed by a scheme for its utter abolition. Monstrous suggestion! but by its very enormity, as I have before said, I trust in God that it will awaken our ecclesiastical rulers to a sense of the absolute necessity of casting aside all novelties and private

conceits and returning to that music which has the sanction of ages and the *full authority of the existing Church*. What can be more perfect, what more edifying and consoling than that Divine Office, the compilation of so many saints and glorious men, and which is so wonderful in the perfection of its system and composition, that the more it is studied, the more it gains on our reverence and love! What appropriate fitness in all the antiphons—what noble simplicity in the hymns! while the Chaunt of the Psalter has an almost sacramental power in calming a troubled spirit and leading the soul to God; these were the divine Chaunts that penetrated the heart of St. Augustine, and though many centuries have elapsed, they have not lost one fraction of their influence. It is a monstrous error to suppose that the people cannot be brought to enter fully into the spirit of the Divine Office. In France, there is hardly a country parish where the people do not join in the Vesper Chaunt and the offices with heartfelt devotion. The mass of persons are opposed to the plain song from pure ignorance; they do not understand it; all their ideas are, perhaps, formed from some miserably corrupt version they have heard drawled out by a cantor, who scarcely knew a note of music, and they never trouble themselves to examine and study the wonderful beauty of these heavenly compositions, which, independent of their own intrinsic merit, have all the weight and authority of the Church to recommend them.

To what extreme inconsistency and absurdity does not the substituting of any other music lead in the celebration of the Divine Office! It is well known that the Kyrie is ordered be sung nine times in honour of the Holy Trinity; modern composers utterly disregard the mystical symbolism of the number, and multiply the supplications to an indefinite repetition merely to suit their notes. Again, the priest intones the Gloria after the old traditions, while the choir takes it up in a totally different manner. The Credo, so far from being a distinct profession of faith as ordered, is a mass of unintelligible sound; and at the Sanctus, where the priest invites the people to join with the angels and archangels, in *one voice* (cum una voce), in singing the Trisagion, a perfect babel of voices usually break forth, and the Ter Sanctus is utterly lost in a confusion of Hosannas, Benedictuses, and broken sentences all going together in glorious confusion, which scarcely ceases in time to enable the distracted worshipper a moment's repose to adore at the Elevation. After a short pause the din recommences, and this generally lasts till a thundering Agnus Dei begins. Whether it is a spirit of pure contradiction that modern composers have usually imparted to this supplication for peace the character of a great row it is impossible to say, but such is decidedly the case. Some of these compositions would be admirably adapted for a chorus of drunken revelers shouting for wine outside a tavern, and if

the words—"Wine, give us more wine," were substituted for "Dona nobis, nobis pacem," we should have a demand in perfect accordance with the sound with which it is accompanied. In lieu of this, were the simple Chaunt, as ordered by the authoritative books, the Antiphonals and Graduals of the Roman Church, restored, the people would soon be able to take part in responding to the clerks in the chancel. The Kyrie would be alternate, the Gloria a real hymn of praise, and the Credo would be again a real profession of the Christian faith, not a piece of complicated music, while the "O Salutaris" would rise from the lips of hundreds, and ascend with the incense to the throne of grace.

How easy in the age of printing to multiply Choral books *ad infinitum*. How simple to print music for the five Gregorian Masses, so as to bring them within the reach of the humblest individual. If these were taught in every school, and inculcated in every Catholic family, our churches would soon present the cheering, the *inspiring* spectacle of a mass of people united, not only in heart, but in *voice*, in the worship of their Creator; and this not in modern and unhallowed sounds, but in the very words sung by the angels in heaven, when the Redeemer was born; and in words to which the old vaults raised to God centuries ago, have often re-echoed with the returning festivals; and in words which, protected by Catholic authority, will descend, by tradition, to ages yet unborn. May the Almighty God in His mercy open the hearts of our



rulers to these important truths; may He inspire our ecclesiastics with the spirit of reviving these solemn offices, which alone embody the spirit of the liturgy and set forth the majesty of the divine mysteries. May He grant us to see a restoration not only of the external glory of His temple but of the reverent service which is alone suited to its ancient symbolism; and may our churches—which, for the most part, are so many stumbling blocks to our separated countrymen, from the discrepancy between the fabric and the service—be purged from the disgrace of these modern performances, and become as shining beacons, not alone by the altitude of their spires, but by the purity and reality of the Divine Office as celebrated in them.

A. Welby Pugin