

The Anglican Musical Tradition: Introduction

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Theological Foundations

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The Anglican Communion is a part of the mainstream of Christian faith. Its understanding of the value and purpose of music is not uniquely its own. Anglicanism merely calls attention to the fact that the Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation, and sanctification constitute the essence of sacred music. The noblest and most sublime part of something is its essence.

Who is the Audience?

God is the audience. We are the "performers"—whether it is the entire congregation united in song or a professional choir involved in a complex musical composition. Thus, the function of music is not to assuage the emotions of the hearers. In other words, its purpose is not to entertain the congregation, but to be a part of what the congregation offers to God in its liturgy (Greek for "public obligation or service"). Because sacred music is directed towards God rather than human beings, it does not try to anesthetize or arouse its hearers, but to be "an outward and visible sign" of the worth which the congregation gives to God in its public worship (Anglo-Saxon for "giving value to whom it is due"). Anglican music true to its essence exercises restraint and distinguishes itself from secular expression because sacred music is analogous to the Divine Order, as *In Tune with Heaven, the Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Church Music* (London: Church House, 1992) observes. All public worship, including music, is God-directed. Music can be plain or elaborate, but right tunes and words always signify God and His mighty acts. This is why creation, incarnation, and sanctification constitute the essence of sacred music.

Creation

God speaks His Word to create the cosmos, and all that He makes is good: "And God saw that everything that He had made and, behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31a). Physical reality—be it the beauty of a natural landscape or the pigments of a Rembrandt painting—is good because God made it. God also created the mathematical structures which music makes audible—time, tone, timbre. Although sin marred creation, the created order is still inherently good, and we can perceive God's presence in it through visual and auditory symbols of His grace.

Incarnation

Not only is creation good because God made it, but He spoke the Word to create. That Word is the person of His Son, Jesus Christ: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14a). Christ's incarnation, the fact that He bears the very stamp of God's nature (Colossians 1:17), clearly reveals to humankind the essential nature of God—which His Word seeks to communicate with His creation. Communication is thus an attribute of God made manifest in the incarnate Word. This desire to communicate is also an essential aspect of all the arts, and especially music, the sovereign auditory art. Those who sing pray twice, as St. Augustine of Hippo says.

Sanctification

Growth in grace is sanctification. Music also has a sacramental quality that can aid us in this process of our sanctification. The Catechism of the Episcopal Church defines a sacrament as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as a sure and certain means by which we receive that grace" (*Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, p. 857). Besides the sacraments as such, the Catechism adds on p. 861: "God does not limit himself to these rites; they are patterns of countless ways by which God uses material things to reach out to us." Music can be a means of grace when, as John Milton says, it enables us to "keep in tune with Heaven" and/or bring us into God's presence. Furthermore, music is an essential component of our votive offering to God in worship. Sanctification is not simply what God's grace does to us; it is what God does to that which we offer Him of our own free will.

Human subjectivity is not the target of sacred music. But music directed to God has, as a byproduct, the power to elevate the emotions of those who offer it or hear it.

Historical Development

Harold Chaney and Arnold Klukas

The very name "Anglican" refers to Latin for the Church of England, *ecclesia anglicana*. Anglican music began when Christianity began in the British Isles. No documents tell us with certainty what music and instruments accompanied Christian worship during Roman and Celtic times.

Medieval period

The Venerable Bede remains the primary source of information about the history and liturgy of the English church before the Norman Conquest in 1066. He notes several important liturgical and musical characteristics that would remain constant in the life of Anglicanism.

The first is Benedictine Monasticism's emphasis on daily singing of the Divine Office. One of the distinctive worship forms of Anglicanism is the daily round of services called Matins and Evensong. Both sung offices develop from the Benedictine tradition of the sevenfold Divine Office and continue the tradition in Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. From the first vernacular Book of Common Prayer in 1549 and continuing today, cathedrals and greater churches of the Anglican Communion have commissioned the best composers of their respective eras to provide unique settings of the opening sentences, Psalms, canticles, and prayers for these services. In addition, from 1549 onwards, a rubric has remained in both the order for Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, which states, "here, in those places in which a quire is to sing, be the anthem." The express function of the anthem is to be purely a votive offering to God consistent with the Anglican understanding of all public worship as God-directed.

The second is the importance of plainsong. Bede narrates that Benedict Biscop brought Peter the Chanter from Rome to teach his monks at Jarrow and Monkwearmouth how to sing their offices properly.

The third is an avoidance of revolution in politics and liturgy; rather than radical change, slow assimilation and gradual change remain characteristic from the Synod of Whitby onwards. This suggests that continuity has priority over novelty.

The Norman Conquest destroyed many buildings, liturgical books, and works of art. But it is remarkable how the characteristics of the pre-Conquest Church reemerged about ten years later. In spite of the replacement of Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastics with Norman ones, the unique Anglo-Saxon

preference for monastic cathedrals continued unabated until the Reformation. Eight of the fifteen medieval cathedrals were under Benedictine rule, including the primatial see of Canterbury. Even the so-called "secular" cathedrals were similar to the monastic foundations in their separation from the urban populace and their parallel foundation of choral schools to provide trained choirboys and educated adult singers, known as "vicars choral." Surviving liturgical manuscripts as well as archaeological evidence, both monastic and secular show that cathedrals not only offered the sung daily offices and high mass, but also sang a second mass in honor of the Virgin Mary in a chapel separate from the choir stalls. Plainsong continued to be the dominant form in masses for convents, monastic communities, and religious establishments, whilst the sung masses in the Lady Chapel were often polyphonic and sung by ensembles separate from the monks or vicars choral. The Rites of Durham, for example, mention the daily sung mass and vespers in its Lady Chapel with its own organ and singers. The epoch of plainsong was the first golden age of Anglican music.

Reformation

Henry VIII dissolved monasticism, but the tradition of the sung daily offices continued, and plainsong in the monastic tradition was not only retained, but also encouraged. The eight monastic cathedrals were re-founded with secular canons, and six former monastic houses were elevated to cathedral status. By royal charter the majority of choir schools became King's Schools, and a portion of the students continued as choral scholars. Canterbury Cathedral, for example, continues the choral tradition begun with St. Augustine, and its King's School makes claim of a 1,500-year history! Twelve canons, twelve vicars choral, and a number of choirboys who were scholars at the King's School replaced the monks of Canterbury. Sung Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer and Vespers replaced the sung monastic offices. The daily High and Lady Masses were eliminated. Daily Eucharists were said. Sundays and festivals continued the tradition of the choral Eucharist.

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer prepared a vernacular liturgy, which was published on Whitsun 1549. He gave this work the title *The Book of Common Prayer* because it contained two daily offices as well as the Holy Communion and other sacraments and rites. This new English language book was a conservative evolution from the pre-Reformation past, continuing the traditional ordering of sacraments and offices. The importance of music was not forgotten. Cranmer commissioned John Merbecke to provide a simplified chant for the vernacular liturgy. In 1550 Merbecke published *The Booke of Common Prayer Noted*. Thus the church music of post-Reformation England shared the aesthetic and liturgical underpinnings of the medieval tradition.

Within a short span of time uniquely English characteristics began to appear. These in many ways mirrored what was happening on the continent. English replaced Latin texts, and the creation of simplified musical settings fostered congregational involvement. These new settings mainly used one note for each syllable, a simple harmonic vocabulary, and restricted to melodic range and tunes that were easily committed to memory. The church calendar and services were likewise simplified.

The Act of Uniformity of 1549 decreed that *The Book of Common Prayer* and that none other was to be used henceforth. This abruptly swept away centuries of Latin musical tradition. Musicians scrambled to fill the void and at the same time comply with the sweeping demands of the English Reformation.

Second golden age

Anglican music following the Reformation coincided, happily, with what has to be regarded as the golden age of the English language, the so-called Tudor period. The "second golden age" of Anglican music extended through the 18th century. The greatest composers of the earlier part were Thomas

Tallis and William Byrd. But there were a host of others as well. The rubrics of *The Book of Common Prayer* not only specify the use of music, they also encourage the singing of anthems at Holy Communion, Morning Prayer, and Evening Prayer. Cathedrals, colleges, and larger parish churches patronized an astounding number of compositions for trained choirs; most notable is the uniquely Anglican form called the "verse-anthem" which was a choral meditation on a verse of Scripture or a collect or sentence from *The Book of Common Prayer*.

The vast majority of English parish churches, however, had neither organs nor professional singers. From the 1552 revision of *The Book of Common Prayer* onwards congregations sang metrical Psalms, canticles and hymns, first to unison melodies and soon in four-part harmony. This practice of singing metrical psalms, along with translated texts and tunes from the continent (from Luther, for example), was the chief source of what came to be one of the lasting and all-prevailing elements not only throughout Anglicanism, but of nonconformist churches as well--the English hymn. Since the English church began to exist as an entity separate from Rome, it cultivated a comparatively simpler and less florid polyphonic style that permitted more direct settings of the English texts. These new settings mentioned above placed great value on the intelligibility of the words being sung. Music of this tradition was an art form unto itself. Congregations listened eagerly, and it was hoped that they would listen with their whole being and not just expect to be entertained. One of the traits of Anglicanism, both in terms of its theology, liturgy and music, throughout most of its history, has been the acceptance of a necessary diversity. Initially, and for much of its post-Reformation history, Anglican church music has generally followed two tracks: (1) the tradition of cathedral and collegiate foundations and (2) the music in parish churches.

Music of the cathedral tradition was performed by professional choristers (men and boys), often in residence. The greatest composers of the day provided the musical material, played the organ, sang and acted as choirmasters. Music specifically created for the cathedral-collegiate environment consists of settings of the ordinary sections of Holy Communion (*Kyrie eleison*, *Gloria in excelsis*, *Sanctus*, and sometimes the *Credo* and *Agnus Dei*) and of canticles for Mattins and Evensong. Usually composed as a unified set of pieces, they became known as "Services" and were an art form peculiar to the English Church.

Music at the parish church, at the simplest level, was largely confined to hymn and Psalm singing and perhaps to simple Psalm-tone settings of the canticles and simple settings of parts of the eucharistic ordinary. Contrary to the intentions of the cathedral situation, congregations at parish churches were (and still are) expected to participate actively in the musical portions of the services.

The dividing line between these two traditions is extremely fluid. Many parish churches may well approach, if not equal the richness and high professional quality of music found in the best cathedral environments. Until the mid-18th century, the church together with royal establishments were the principal cultural outlets, the counterpart to today's cultural organizations, i.e., symphony orchestras and their concert halls, opera houses, art museums, etc. Church authorities were in a position to command the best musical talent available.

During the 18th century, hymnody continued to be much more conservative and measured in Anglican parish churches than it was in the revival meetings and local chapels in the late 1700s. Anglican worship eschewed the "enthusiasm" of the street corner evangelists who used popular tunes and florid lyrics.

In the USA, the American Revolution changed the name of Church of England to Episcopal Church (following the custom in Scotland). However, in all other respects American Anglicanism continued to parallel the attitudes, observances, and musical practices of the Church of England.

Degradation and new life

Anglican music tended to diverge along lines of theological difference during the 19th century. Those who gave priority to personal conversion used hymn tunes with melodic and harmonic idioms that tended to be overly subjective. Similarly the words of these texts were intended to assuage the emotions of the hearer. As a result, hymns like those eschewed during the end of the previous century made their way into Anglican worship. They left their mark on every subsequent hymnal. Other Anglicans, however, wanted to restore the objectivity and transcendence of pre-Reformation English worship. For example, John Mason Neale scoured cathedral and university libraries for Latin and Greek texts and translated them into vernacular hymnody. They tried to avoid operatic effusions from the Continent as well as the hymnody of emotional assuagement mentioned above. As a result, they reintroduced plainchant and polyphonic compositions and incorporated them into the established norms of *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662). *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1860) provided, for the first time in England, a "quasi-official" hymnal to accompany *The Book of Common Prayer*. Percy Dearmer, the liturgist, and the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams, among others, brought new life into Anglican music. They produced *The English Hymnal* (1901) which included folk tunes, modern compositions, and a distilled collection of texts from the wider church universal. This hymnal emphasized the corporate nature of worship and the integration of music into the church year rather than focusing on the subjectivity of the hearer.

The historic spirit of Anglican music began to be restored in the 19th century and continued well into the mid-20th century. This "third golden age," as some call it, flourished when great British composers provided compositions for the Church. These included Britten, Stanford, Howells, Parry, Walton, and other modern artists who took the traditional words of the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* and made them come alive. The fact that the official liturgy of the Church of England remained constant from the mid-17th century until the late 20th century also encouraged these artists to provide works, which were universal rather than ephemeral in their style and composition.

American Episcopalians were well aware of these new developments in the Church of England and sought to provide an "official" hymn collection that would be approved by the General Conventions of the Church in 1892, 1916, and again in 1940 and 1982.

The 1940 Hymnal was a paradoxical mix. On the one hand, it contained hymn tunes with melodic and harmonic idioms that tended to be overly subjective. On the other hand, it reintroduced pre-19th century hymn tunes and introduced the work of some of the best composers of the 20th century; these contributions made it a landmark in the progress of musical sophistication and textual catholicity in the Episcopal Church. This hymnal also became the standard by which all denominational hymnals were judged. It passed the paradoxical mix on to other American Christian traditions.

In the USA the revised 1928 *Book of Common Prayer* had kept the beauty of the traditional language and the characteristic elegance of the measured cadences of earlier post-Reformation liturgical books. It encouraged a number of American composers to emulate their British confreres. The expansion of the Episcopal Church both membership and influence during the 1920's saw the initiation of a number of cathedral foundations intended to follow English models in both architectural style and liturgical practice. Men and boys choirs, in the English tradition, sang not only the

compositions of British composers, but also those of North Americans such as Leo Sowerby and Healey Willan. Winfred Douglas and David McKay Williams, among others, enriched the service music intended for the Prayerbook by adapting plainchant to the English texts and providing both text and music for the Propers (such as Introit, Gradual and Sequence, etc.) of the liturgy.

The present crisis

The actual present situation of Anglican music today is difficult to describe. Ecumenical concerns of modern liturgists have led to the ICET (International Commission on English Texts) text common to the majority of Christians with liturgical rites. With the American Book of Common Prayer (1979) and its related Hymnal (1982), for example, composers from Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and even Orthodox traditions can be found in performance at Episcopal liturgies. Furthermore, the concern to include a variety of ethnic traditions into the "mainstream" of ecclesiastical practice has provided a somewhat uneven and inconsistent smorgasbord from which to choose individual compositions. As a result, music from diverse sources and disparate historical periods are often found co-mingled together. The customary "seamless robe" of parallel musical for public services of the church is no longer the common experience for the Episcopalian worshipper in most American parishes. Nevertheless, *The Hymnal 1982* makes it possible to reconstruct significant parts of the traditional music for the [Holy Eucharist](#) and for [Morning and Evening Prayer](#).

The secular priorities of today's social scene have brought about the demise of the traditional men and boys choir in most Anglican churches, including Episcopal parishes in the USA. Choral Mattins and Evensong have fallen into disuse, and some impatient pastors and people have often preferred shortened liturgies that rule out elaborate music. As [About Sacred Music America](#) explains, the demands of a "religious market" economy have also eroded high standards of musical competence. The fusion of music and text, which was the distinguishing quality of all Anglican choral music, is all too often replaced by univalent music that conveys simplistic and childish lyrics.

In spite of this, Anglican musical practice, over the years, has been enriched by the resources of the wider Church. In many Episcopal churches today musicians and their congregations still strive to offer up music intended as a sacramental act of worship performed, not for the entertainment of the congregation. True to the essence of their tradition, they faithfully attempt to offer back to God the best product of the musical gifts with which they have been bestowed.

The Future

[Charles Don Keyes](#)

The following is based on and linked to Charles Don Keyes' essay "Christian Faith for the 21st Century," published on the Internet in 1996.

Julian Victor Langmead Casserley (1909-1978), Professor at the General Theological Seminary (1952-1952) and Seabury-Western Theological Seminary (1960-1975), predicted in the 1960's that

by the year 2050 the world in which we have grown up and with which we are familiar, our type of civilization, culture and society, will have been entirely swept away. But perhaps the most familiar landmark that will still be surviving in undiminished vigor will be the Christian Church. It has sometimes been observed that in a world of total change nothing whatever has come to stay but the gospel. But the Church and the gospel will survive, if they do survive, not because they have refused to change but because they will have been humble enough to accept inevitable change and wise enough to confine themselves to the modes of change that conduce to survival. (Julian Victor Langmead

Casserley, *Evil and Evolutionary Eschatology: Two Essays*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990)

September 11, 2001 magnifies the urgency of Casserley's message because the tragic events of that day show us how vulnerable civilization is. This ought to awaken our sense of responsibility to the future. Christians must resist letting civilization be "entirely swept away" because civilization, even with its defects, is more godly than savagery. The gospel of Christ's Incarnation civilizes. Preserving and proclaiming it rightly require radical change.

Church leaders have to break out of captivity to the mistaken belief that survival of their institutions depends on selling a "product" to the momentary individual. Instead of capitalizing on the decline of the culture, churches ought to safeguard "the momentum and identity of the specifically Western culture, including humane, naturalistic, scientific, aesthetic and theological elements of the profoundest significance" (Julian Victor Langmead Casserley, *In the Service of Man*. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1967).

Casserley's and our affirmation of western culture does not deny the validity of other cultures. True inclusiveness respects the integrity of each of them, including our own. Inverse chauvinism pretends to affirm multicultural diversity by selectively denying the validity of western culture. It denies the fact that one of the highest products of western civilization is its tolerance of difference. The Christian revelation transcends all cultures. It must also simultaneously criticize and elevate every culture it touches. Each civilization, western or otherwise, preserves its validity by constantly renewing dialogue with its own classical cultural heritage and handing it over to those not yet born. Tradition isn't something locked up in the past. It witnesses primarily to the future.

Various Christian traditions have different ways of witnessing to the future of civilization. True ecumenism does not compromise doctrinal differences. Instead it focuses on how the peculiar excellences of the different traditions can mutually benefit one another and, in doing so, contribute to the survival and well being of humankind.

Episcopalians, for instance, must safeguard their ethos of traditionalism and social tolerance. People in our unhappy time need this as much as they misunderstand it. Sometimes they even ridicule it. In spite of this, Episcopalians must not denigrate their heritage, but steadfastly reaffirm the unity of cultural conservatism and true liberality, which is the practical fruit of their theological focus on the Incarnation of Christ. To do this they must hand the musical rhythms and harmonies that produce this vital unity over to the future. The spirit of the Council of Whitby that gives continuity priority over novelty might continue to inspire grass roots Episcopalians. They immediately grasp, but are not usually allowed to articulate, that liturgy ought to be an aesthetic spectacle. This is equally true whether the liturgy is said, sung, simple, or elaborate. Even when said, the peculiar cadences of post-Reformation Anglican liturgy are a type of music. *The Book of Common Prayer* unites Anglicans in their diversity through a certain way its ethos orchestrates the symbols of faith. Music in the broad sense is integral to the authority of liturgy for interpreting the Bible and bringing the gospel into daily life. Civilized secular life and sacred ritual both need such an aesthetically based [nonauthoritarian model of authority](#).

God is the audience of sacred music, and we are the "performers." That is the essence of sacred music. Human subjectivity is not its target. But, as stated above, music directed to God has, as a byproduct, the power to elevate the emotions of those who offer it or hear it. The essence of sacred music and its byproduct are not tied to any historical period. They belong as much to the future as to the past. But this depends partly on what we do. Acting as if there were no future is the surest way not to have one. When the arts are degraded, Christians ought not to capitulate, since that would

further the decline. They must do the opposite and allow themselves to be instruments of God's grace in bringing new life into the aesthetic wasteland. Ralph Vaughan Williams and others mentioned above who restored the historic spirit of Anglican music at the end of the 1800's inspire us by their examples.

The future of sacred music in the western tradition, Anglican or otherwise, does not just depend upon musical professionals and urban parishes. It is mainly in the hands of grass root believers who hold fast to the indestructible model of the beauty of holiness in the mainstream of western Christian music. The [five centuries of congregational hymns](#) familiar to everyone exemplify this, as do all of the sound files of Sacred Music America.

[Back to the Anglican Musical Tradition](#)