

**CHURCH OF SCOTLAND**

**MAGAZINE AND REVIEW,**

May – December

Edinburgh: Alexander C. Moodie

1853

*Scottish Psalmody*

The musical service of the Church has ever been regarded as a most valuable and prominent part of the public worship of God. Music seems no where to possess such a peculiar and hallowed influence, as when employed in the offices of devotion. The importance of Church Psalmody, indeed, is so conspicuous, that we conceive it to be our duty, in a Journal so entirely devoted to the best interests of the Church of Scotland, to take the earliest opportunity of bringing forward its claims; to endeavour to impress upon the minds of our clergy and congregations its immense value and the responsibility attached to it; and to offer some remarks on the necessity which exists for its more general improvement and cultivation.

It is unnecessary to go back to remote antiquity to discover when Psalmody was first introduced into the service of the Church. Sufficient authority for its warrantableness will be found in its employment in the Jewish Temple and Synagogue, as well as in the first ages of the Christian Church; and as regards the latter, we find St. Paul bearing his testimony in its favour, and urgently recommending its adoption, in his Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians. On the conversion of the Saxons to Christianity, a kind of music was introduced to which they had hitherto been entire strangers.—this was Church Music, which speedily began to be cultivated by the Britons, not less probably from a natural taste for the tuneful art, than from a principle of piety. The ablest instructors were procured from Rome, in order that a more extended knowledge of the art of music might be diffused, while various ecclesiastics were sent from England to that city, to receive instruction. The language of praise must have speedily discovered its increased efficacy when joined to such an exponent of the heart as music.

"Music, the natural expression of feeling, has always been regarded as the chief help to devotion. The Jewish and the Christian Churches have, in all ages, made it a prominent part of religious service—it is approved by the practice of inspired prophets and apostles; and a hymn was the last act of worship in which our Lord joined with his disciples. Nor, when we consider how admirably it is in all respects adapted to our nature, can we wonder at this universal feeling. Poetry, united with music, is the chief delight of the child and of the savage, and is also the highest intellectual enjoyment of cultivated minds. And if thus powerful, when employed upon objects and interests which exclusively relate to this life, what should be its effects when its subject are of infinite dignity and importance — the perfections of God; our relations to Him as our Father, Redeemer, and

Judge; the principles which hallow our present duties; and the hope of a glorious immortality." <sup>1</sup>

Fully concurring in these sentiments, let us now endeavour to ascertain what has been the progress of Psalmody in Scotland, and what is its present condition.

With the advancement of civilization, the art of music in Scotland gradually increased in cultivation and refinement. There are melodies still the boast of the land in the present day, possessing a beauty of pathos and individuality of style not to be found perhaps among any other nations, (yet characterized by a simplicity almost amounting to plainness) which sufficiently prove the strong susceptibility and love of the Scottish nation for the art of music, and afford incontestable evidence of the genius possessed by those to whom we are indebted for our national songs. It cannot be denied however, that glorious as was the Reformation of the Christian religion in Scotland, which liberated truth from the thralldom of superstition, and paved the way to the possession of general enlightenment and happiness, it was yet attended by the gradual deterioration of the music peculiar to the sacred service of the Church, and deterioration which it is impossible not to acknowledge. The taste for decoration and gorgeous ornament which so extensively prevailed in the churches at the period of the Reformation, having been equally manifested in the musical services, it was at once and for ever resolved, by the champions of the pure Gospel, that all such extraneous aids and means should perish, and be effaced from the service of the Reformed Church.

"An inquiry into the causes which have led to the decline of the art of music in Scotland, will show that these are clearly traceable to, and appear to be involved in, the whole series of events which followed upon the era of the Reformation — the chief cause having had its origin in the extreme notions entertained by the early Reformers, of the primitive simplicity that ought to characterize the celebration of the public service of the Church'—notions formed and matured at the time, no doubt from full persuasion, but in the midst of religious strife and contention, and unbounded zeal for a cause to which they had devoted their whole energies — circumstances by no means favourable at any time to the exercise of cool and dispassionate inquiry and judgment. Viewing with feelings of strong imagination the unseemly abuses that had crept into the Church, and which then seemed to stand out in prominent relief upon the gorgeous edifice upreared by priestcraft, to awe into subjection to priestly rule the judgment of mankind, but which formed a part only of the great original design, they determined to efface the whole fabric from the ground; and without pausing to consider whether there might not have been beauties hidden by the very glare of these defects, they resolved to raise another structure, which should not only not resemble, but be in every respect opposed to that which had been condemned." <sup>2</sup>

It may thus be perceived, that since the period of the Reformation, a distaste for, and even positive interdiction of any attempt to re-introduce or revive the musical services of the Church has been the cause of the imperfect and neglected state in which our National Psalmody has continued for so many generations. The extreme ostentation

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<sup>1</sup> The Christian Remembrancer, February, 1836.

<sup>2</sup> Observations on the state of the Art of Music in Scotland and its capital, Page 2.

and thirst for display and effect on the one hand, had, it is to be feared, found too much contempt and disdain for externals on the other; and, in consequence, Scottish Psalmody has ever since, generally speaking, been subjected to the influence of such feelings. To leave such causes and effects however, now comparatively remote, it may be affirmed, with some degree of certainty, that much of the neglect of Psalmody in Scotland, in the present day, is to be attributed as much, or even more, to the indifference of clergymen themselves on the subject as to congregations. If a matter so full of interest receives no encouragement from the pulpit, and if no incentives are employed by the minister to secure the attention of his people to what may be termed one of the most touching and most solemn offices connected with his public ministrations, we cannot wonder that for so long a period our Scottish Psalmody has not received that amount of consideration befitting its importance. It is undoubted, that ministers, "by advocating the claims of music on the attention of their congregations on religious grounds; by teaching and enforcing, as a religious duty, that too much care cannot be bestowed on the cultivation of an art so intimately blended with devotional feeling"—could exercise a most powerful influence in reviving and promoting the practice of Psalmody.

We now come to consider the means employed in our Scottish churches in the sacred musical service. These are solely the voices of the congregation, under the conductorship of a leader termed a precentor. In the absence of instrumental aid,—by which term we confine ourselves entirely to that afforded by the organ,—it is evident, that in the person of a precentor there should be found the qualifications of a musician, since upon him must devolve the duty not only of leading or directing the congregation on the sacred occasions of his office, but also of affording them at other times the means of instruction, were it even of the simplest nature. This is a point on which very little careful attention is bestowed, namely, the securing a properly qualified person to conduct the Psalmody. It is too frequently supposed, that the object sought for in a precentor is sufficiently attained if he possesses an ordinarily pleasing voice, leaving altogether out of view the far more important desideratum of his being a correct musician.<sup>3</sup> He should possess a voice sufficiently powerful, yet not so much so, or employed in such a manner, as will render him an unnecessarily prominent feature in the Psalmody. Extreme care is requisite on his part, that the tunes should not be pitched too high for some voices nor too low for others. In the selection of the tune, too, how frequently are the musical feelings of many in our congregations distracted and offended by the utter misconception often found in this essential particular!

"In adopting the tunes, much will necessarily depend upon his own taste and discrimination. Having carefully considered the import of the words, the judicious precentor, in selecting a tune, will not fail to take into consideration not only the key and mode, but also the tune and general character of the piece, so that the sound may become, as it were, an echo to the sense; and in order to enable him to judge with propriety of such

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<sup>3</sup> It should be stated, however, how futile it is to expect to find, in this class of officers in the service of the Church, men of experience, and on whose musical education considerable labour and care has been expended, when we reflect for a moment on the very disproportionate amount of remuneration they receive in return for their services — this amount frequently falling below that given to the beadles. The standard of precentors can never be elevated until a proper degree of remuneration is given, commensurate with the services they are expected to perform.

compositions as from time to time he may have to introduce, he should, be familiar with the rules of harmony and musical composition, as well as with the works of such composers for the Church as lived about the time of the Reformation, and with those of their immediate successors; for, should he possess merely the stentorian qualification of being able to lead the congregation, he may indeed call himself a precentor, but can have little claim to the appellation of musician." <sup>4</sup>

To the members of a congregation themselves however, ought we to look for considerable assistance in the performance of the Psalmody. One of the most important requisites is, that all should be duly impressed with an elevated sense of the nature of the service in which they are for the time being engaged. Deep religious sentiment ought to characterize the efforts of all who raise their voices and hearts in adoration of the Giver of all good; and to endeavour to swell the hymn of praise with true fervency of spirit, that it may ascend to the Throne of Grace, and prove an acceptable offering to the Lord. But how much is it to be deplored, that too many of the congregation, while this sacred service is proceeding, are either apathetically joining their voices, or more frequently listlessly engaged in scanning the persons, habiliments, and manners of those around them; and the ill-suppressed yawn too often exhibits how slight an interest is felt in this solemn duty. A wellknown writer is of opinion, that those who cannot join with effect in the singing should altogether abstain from it—

"I would earnestly entreat those," says he, "who sing very ill, not to sing at all, at least in the church. If they are silent, they may have their affections raised by the singing of others; but if they sing, especially if they sing loud (which bad singers seldom fail to do), they will not hear the congregation, and they must disturb every person in the neighbourhood of their pew who has a musical ear." <sup>5</sup>

This may at first sight seem a startling proposition, but we are not sure if it does not recommend itself to all who have a musical ear. Of the propriety of the congregation singing softly, no doubt can be entertained, since the precentor will thus be able to exercise a greater degree of control, and observe a better degree of time, than can be attained when an undue amount of sound is permitted to prevail.

Having thus briefly touched on the means and manner in which Psalmody is carried on in our Scottish churches, and having attempted to show that too great indifference is exhibited on all hands to this inestimable portion of our service, we would now only offer a few suggestions for its improvement. First, then, the clergy themselves should sedulously inculcate from the pulpit its great importance, and impress upon the minds of their congregations the necessity of a greater feeling of unity and attention on their part than the subject has hitherto received. Congregations should meet frequently for practice, and not confine themselves to the single occasions when they are assembled in public worship. Next, in order to have a thorough improvement in Psalmody, the teacher himself, that is, the precentor, must be improved, and a higher standard of excellence

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel's Psalmody.

<sup>5</sup> A Letter to the Rev. Hugh Blair, D. D., on the Improvement of Psalmody in Scotland. By James Beattie, LL.D.

required of him; which again is only to be obtained by a proper degree of liberality in remuneration. Lastly, Musical committees should be appointed from those members of congregations who are known to possess a knowledge of, and take an interest in, the subject, and whose advice and assistance in carrying matters of detail into effect could be of advantage. But most especially should the rising generation receive encouragement and attention; and this is the more easy of attainment, as in most initiatory schools, children now receive a certain portion of musical education, and are thus fitted to take a share in the service of the church, with more advantage than in former years.

The importance, too, of one uniform collection of Psalm tunes should not be overlooked, and this ought to receive the earliest consideration of the General Assembly; for by the adoption of a uniform Psalmody, a higher degree of usefulness would be the result than is now met with, from so many detached collections being in use. It is only such a uniform collection as would render the custom of hanging up boards, containing the numbers of the tunes to be sung (which is sometimes the case in certain congregations), of much general utility; since it is only the members of this or that particular congregation where such boards are used, who are aware to what especial collection these numbers refer.

It would be very improper were we to omit acknowledging the immense benefit conferred on our National Psalmody by the labours of the Association for the Revival of Sacred Music in Scotland. The advantage of a musical education, such as is afforded by this excellent institution, cannot be too highly estimated by those who have charge of the training of young minds; and it is satisfactory to know, that these advantages are on the whole very generally appreciated. The Association, and all those to whom its prosperity is an object of interest, owe a deep debt of gratitude to its distinguished President, whose unwearied benevolence and unbounded liberality, in this as well as in other objects, aided by the soundest judgment and discretion in their employment, so worthily adorn the elevated position he occupies.

Our remarks have extended beyond the limits we had assigned to ourselves. But we earnestly trust, that our notice of Scottish Psalmody, however brief, may be the means of directing more general attention to this most important subject, and may lead our clergy to consider the necessity of some improvement in this part of the public service of the Church.