

MUSIC IN AFRICAN CHURCHES

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The story goes that a very beautiful setting of the "Te Deum", based on a Native African melody, was sung on a great occasion in Kampala Cathedral. One of the members of U.M.C.A., was present, and, in conversation afterwards, remarked to the Bishop of Uganda how much he admired it. Shortly afterwards, however, at luncheon a very keen and educated African Christian leaned across to the same Bishop and said "Bishop, you must never allow that 'Te Deum' to be sung again in the Cathedral; it has too many wrong associations for us."

And there, in a nutshell, is shown the general attitude of Africans to their own music in church. The African, in his conversion to Christianity, wishes (at the moment anyhow) to make a complete break with the heathen past; in fact, the word "heathen" in Swahili has a definitely derogatory meaning, and can never be used in polite conversation. The deplorable consequence in regard to music and other matters, is that there is therefore never any possibility of building on African music in our churches. Canon Pearse is reported to have tried to introduce Shambala music at Kikongoi, which is, of course, in the Shambala hills: the Africans would have none of it, and walked out of church in a body. When I was at Korogwe, we felt the need of having a drum beaten to keep the rhythm of the unaccompanied singing during the outdoor procession of Palm Sunday. It was very much frowned on by many of the African Christians as smacking too much of "heathen" rites and dances.

What music, then, is to be used in church? Are we to adapt "Bunnett in F" to the African congregation? In fact, we do sing most of the popular tunes of "Hymns, Ancient and Modern" and the "English Hymnal". The Africans even sing, and like them very much, Gounod's setting of "Ave verum corpus". It is, however, significant that they seem to like, and sing best, the tunes based on the traditional folk melodies, like "Heron-gate". But the main backbone of church music is, of course, the ancient Plainsong of the Church. The Eucharist, in the Diocese of Zanzibar, is nearly always sung to "Missa de Angelis", and very well it goes. The psalms and canticles are sung to the plainsong tones, and, while we do not attempt the more elaborate plainsong settings of the Proper of the Eucharist, one common plainsong setting is used always. Swahili is extremely easy to sing to plainsong. Nearly all the words have their stress on the penultimate syllable, and those who have wrestled with fitting plainsong to English, with the difficulties of manipulating meditations etc. will realise what a boon this is.

It is often said that native African music is confined to the pentatonic scale. (That is, it is confined to five notes, and omits two of the seven notes of the Western Octave: an example of a melody in the pentatonic scale is the well-known principal theme of the slow movement of Dvorak's "New World" symphony, which, interestingly, is reputed to be based on African melodies.) That is as it may be: but the African has no difficulty in hitting all seven notes of the Octave well, and, generally speaking, true. His difficulty comes when incidental flats and sharps appear in the tune. For instance, I have heard ghastly attempts to sing the tune "Greensleeves" which is set to a Christmas carol in a hymn book, and, although one would like to try, one realises that it would be quite impossible to teach them the beautiful tune "Crimond". Attempts have been made in the official tune book to adapt some of the well known tunes by altering such incidental flats and sharps that occur to naturals; to me, personally, and to many others these always bring pain and grief when we hear them.

The reason for this inability to sing these incidental flats and sharps is probably the absence of keyboard instruments in Africa, or rather, unfamiliarity with them. The Africans are spared listening to the landlady's daughter monotonously practising her scales upstairs. None of the churches in the Diocese, except a few, such as the cathedral

with a regular European congregation, have even a harmonium: the average congregation must sing unaccompanied, or not sing at all. There are many advantages in this state of affairs: not the least is the result that the "silent worshipper" who never opens his mouth in church to sing the praises of God, would get short shrift in Africa; for, if the ordinary worshipper does not sing, there is no choir or organ to cover up his deficiencies: and probably most would agree that unaccompanied vocal music is the ideal for church worship. General experience has shown that when, as in the cathedral at Zanzibar on great occasions, African congregations have been accompanied on the organ, the result is often quite catastrophic: the singing goes very flat, if it does not stop altogether. Is it fanciful to suggest that the African's musical sense is inside him, rather than outside him, that is, that he is, at the moment anyway, a performer rather than a listener? As someone said to me recently, it seems that Africans, musically, are in the phase of the English Elizabethan Madrigal age, when people made their own music, rather than listening to others making it for them. It certainly appears that, when this experiment of instrumental accompaniment has been tried, few of the congregation have taken much notice of it, and have gone on in their own sweet way quite regardless of it.

Generally speaking, Africans are naturally musical. They all seem to be able to make some sort of noise, more or less in tune: I have not yet come across an African who is "tone deaf". One year the boys at Kiungani performed a Christmas Carol play in the Cathedral at Zanzibar which lasted for about an hour and a half and consisted of both solo parts and choruses in harmony. For reasons touched on above, there was no organ accompaniment, but Fr. Weigall played a carol as a voluntary at the beginning and at the end, there was no need whatever to transpose the carol either up or down; the boys' choir was dead on the note after an hour and a half. All the cooks I have ever known find their work seems much easier when they sing (the song may be about their mother, or some well-known local character); I have often heard them singing songs, with words made up on the spur of the moment usually about the iniquities of their employer, myself included. I have eaten many breakfasts cooked to the strains of "Missa de Angelis", and very good they have been! There is no doubt that music and singing come naturally to the Africans.

Sometimes, of course, the singing in church is excruciatingly bad. One disadvantage of the lack of instrumental accompaniment is that it is more difficult to keep time without it. The sense of rhythm of the Africans in their native dances is one of their chief attractions, but when the African comes to church, perhaps just because he wants to leave all "heathen" associations outside, he seems to forget his sense of rhythm altogether, and the general tendency is for the average congregation to drag in a quite appalling way; sometimes one wonders whether the hymn they are singing may not peter out altogether. The usual system is to have a cantor, preferably with a tuning fork, to begin the first line of the hymn: the ideal is for him to continue right through the hymn, leading and keeping the congregation together, but in practice, seeing that he is usually a more proficient singer than the rest, he is often tempted to go off into the alto, tenor or bass parts, and leaves his poor sheep without a shepherd with lamentable effects. Again, the ordinary congregation have little or no idea of voice production, and certainly none at all of light and shade in their singing: the tendency is often to shout, and attempts at harmony often degenerate into a bitter struggle between the various parts as to who can make the most noise. But where, as in schools, there is a chance of training the congregational singing, there is a very real thrill in their church music, whether it is in unison or in four-part harmony. That can often even be said of an ordinary parish congregation, well taught and led; for African's musical sins usually arise through ignorance, and they are always ready and willing to follow a lead. It may not be the type of music or singing that one hears in Westminster Abbey, but it can be very beautiful and devotional.