

The People's Hymnal. Compiled and edited for congregational use by The Hymn Committee of The Theological College, Washington, D. C. World Library of Sacred Music. 1955. (Organ accompaniment, \$3.50; Melody edition, \$1.00. Seasonal hymn cards also obtainable).

The problem of appropriate hymns for Catholic services seems to be coming more and more to the fore in Catholic circles these days, and the question that a church musician meets with recurring regularity is: what makes a good hymn good and a worthless hymn bad? Anyone who has tried to answer this question in plain and concrete language knows how difficult it is. In the last analysis, musical experience and background together with a certain degree of literary judgment are demanded — and words are incapable of filling in where these are lacking. But the reviewer submits that the introductory remarks of the editors of this new Hymnal will provide much food for thought for those who are concerned with this interesting and vital topic. For after reading the first few paragraphs of the Introduction to this new collection, one senses that the compilers have thought long and earnestly about the nature and requirements of good Catholic hymnody. They do not cover *every* aspect of the subject, but they propose definite views and definite standards for choosing acceptable hymns.

There are a number of things one would like to quote from this Introduction — the following, for instance: "Precisely because the hymn is an expression of popular religious devotion, it is subject to the less happy turns of human nature. These include affectation, exaggeration, and most commonly, sentimentality."

However, there is one criterion set down, which, I believe, needs modification. It is stated that it is useless to sing "our hearts are on fire" when they really are not. And the point is made that "Catholic devotion, as the Church takes care to emphasize, should represent, not what we would wish to feel, but what we actually do feel." One wonders whether such a universal statement can be substantiated.

While it is true that the emotions are not to be exalted at the expense of reason, it is also true that the Church does not expect us to express our devotion with scientific and physiological exactness. Certainly some room must be left for poetical expression. The choice of "our hearts are on

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fire" as an example of over-statement seems to be a particularly unhappy choice, for inasmuch as the Sacred Heart appeared to St. Margaret Mary and pointed to the *furnace* of love which was His Heart, it seems only natural that we should express our own sincere love by saying that *our* hearts are *on fire*. The Liturgy too seems to warrant this expression, for we read in the Secret of the Mass of Friday after Pentecost about the divine fire which *inflamed* the hearts of the disciples (*corda succendit*).

But over and above this particular example, it has always seemed to me that many of the sentiments nurtured by the Liturgy are figurative rather than actual. This is apparent in some of the expressions of the Lenten Liturgy. Thus in the Lenten hymn for Vespers we read, *Audi . . . nostras preces . . . cum fletibus fusas*. "Hear our prayers poured forth *with weeping*." Too, the recurrent use of *macerare* and *castigare* is bold, to say the least. Then again, there is the whole problem of the recitation of the Psalms. The Psalms, we might say, are *the* devotion of the Church since not a day of the entire year passes but what some use is made of them in the official prayer of the Church. Yet, how often the words of the Psalmist are completely different from the actual feelings or sentiments of the person reciting them. One willingly grants that improper "poetic conceits and painfully drawn figures of speech" (in the words of the compilers) should be absent from an ideal hymnody — but the all-inclusive statement about "not what we wish to feel, but what we actually do feel" clearly needs modification.

The words of the hymns

Though some traditional English verses are employed, there is a great number of new translations or entirely original hymns — most of the latter being provided by theological students of Catholic University. From the viewpoint of the words, this Hymnal makes a distinct contribution to the devotional life of the Church in America. The brand new settings range all the way from very good to mediocre. The requirements of rhyme

in many cases seem to cause a certain plainness — some would say triteness: “Love, above,” “salvation, adoration,” “made, aid,” “Lord, adored,” “Son, won,” &c. It is not the reviewer’s intention to say that such rhymes must be absolutely avoided, but in many instances one feels that the rhyme has shaped the thought rather than the other way around. Of course, anyone who has tried his hand at sacred verse realizes the pitfalls that lie in his wait. Some of the efforts of MICHAEL GANNON deserve special commendation, though I personally prefer the words of the Advent hymn, *Make broad the path*, to the new words that Mr. Gannon has written for this strong melody.

It is hardly necessary to say that sentimental ballads like *Mother Dear*, *Mother at thy feet*, *Bring flowers of the rarest*, and so on, find no place in this volume, and those fervent souls who expect hymns to foster their gift of tears will be disappointed in the contents. All the hymns are in English with the exception of a few Blessed Sacrament numbers, *Tantum Ergo*, *O Salutaris*, and the like.

The musical settings

The musical settings really deserve an article all by themselves since a large amount of new material is included. But within the compass of a review, the following points might be suggested.

As far as the range of the melodies goes, the compilers have generally fixed upon D above the octave of middle C as the highest note, though an occasional E above this D makes an appearance. This naturally has necessitated the transposition of a large number of hymns, with the result that B-flat below middle C occurs here and there, and there are many examples of middle C and D right above. The editors state that if a hymn employs too great a range, nobody will sing it. While there is truth in this, it must also be conceded that too many low notes make music “grubby” and ponderous — especially when these notes must be sung. I am thinking, for instance, of the Advent number, *Wake, Awake*, which very appropriately makes use of that fine chorale tune, *Wachet Auf*. This melody, though not insuperable, is fairly demanding because of its length; it seems to me that the congregation that is capable of singing it at all would by the same turn be able to negotiate the high E’s that would be required by an organ accompaniment in key of C.

Or again, take *The First Noel*. A slight revision of Stainer’s well-known harmonization is used, but in Key of C. This avoids the frequent appearance of high D, found in the traditional setting. But to me the piece loses a little sparkle in this transfer — and one would wager that at *Christmas* time, in a well-loved song, the congregation will go as high as you ask!

The harmonizations are unfortunately not all of equal quality. Some are merely note-for-note four-part writing. There may be “authenticity” in the accompaniment for *Silent Night* and *O Come, All Ye Faithful*, but that is about all. Here and there one spots, with great satisfaction, a Bach chorale accompaniment. Mannered as these may sound, there is no debating that they fit the organ with complete naturalness, and the way in which they adorn the chorale melodies adds a meaning to the music which is continually satisfying.

Accompaniment for the Chant numbers generally follows the demands of the Solesmes rhythmic system, and in this they are similar to the late Achille Bragers’ settings. The notable exception to this is Huybrechts’ strange accompaniment for *Advent Hymn* (English of *Rorate Caeli*).

A handful of original melodies are provided by several northern European church composers whose names have become known in this country through the catalogue of the World Library of Sacred Music. I cannot say that any of them strike me as particularly arresting. HERMAN STRATEGIER’S *Our Father* begins well, but the second part seems to wander. The accompaniment to this latter hymn is nicely worked out, and one wishes the composer had been asked to provide accompaniments for the other tunes. I am not sure that ANDRIESSEN’S *Divine Praises* would appeal to the ordinary American congregation. For one thing the note values (at least in the organ accompaniment) for the individual syllables are not marked out as clearly as would be demanded by a congregation.

There is a generous scattering of simpler Gregorian Chant melodies (eleven in all), each provided with English words. It is somewhat surprising to see *Ye Sons and Daughters* in chant notation, since the Solesmes scholars have apparently resigned themselves to the fact that this is a medieval measured tune after all. It appears in 3/4 time in the more recent editions of the *Liber Usualis*.

The sources of the older tunes are usually indi-

cated, though their names are not always given. One would have liked to see the listing of the metric schemes, too. This is a common procedure in Protestant collections; and MR. CYR DE BRANT very appropriately lists the meters in his recent *Mediator Dei Hymnal*.

Concluding remarks

It would be foolish to expect that in a country as large as the United States any one hymnal could satisfy everybody and provide a solution for all the problems that are connected with this form of musical prayer. National traditions, regional customs, individual likes and dislikes, varying degrees of musical education — all these inevitably make for diversity.

But it is an all too patent fact that most of the hymns which have had the widest popular appeal have in recent years become the object of continued and widespread criticism. And rightly so. For these hymns, no matter how much they are cherished by the older generations, are unworthy of the house of God, either owing to their inferior words or music or both.

But the Holy Father, in his recent Encyclical, has pointed out the place that hymns can play in the spreading of Christian doctrine and in the fostering of Christian piety. Therefore, rather than turn our backs on the situation, we must endeavor to replace the unsuitable pieces by others which are both musically and textually superior; compositions, in other words, that are true prayers.

From this point of view, the *People's Hymnal* is clearly a step in the right direction, and every professional organist and choir director, as well as all Catholic school teachers, ought to be familiar with it. How wide an acceptance it will have among the Catholic laity one cannot predict. Since much of the material is not in common use, the congregation which decides to use it will have to devise some system of teaching the tunes to a sizable sector of the people. An easy start, of course, could be made by teaching the songs to the school children first.

One hopes that the Committee which has compiled the book will continue active in this work and will in time give us a second edition which will remove such imperfections as may be found in the present collection. It is with this in mind that the reviewer has offered the above comments.

O Perfect Love (In Te Speravi). Song for solo voice by Rene L. Becker. McLaughlin and Reilly. \$.50.

This little gem has been reissued just in time to fill the spot left open (in Chicago and other dioceses) by the condemnation of such old warhorses as Schubert's *Ave Maria*, de Koven's *Oh Promise Me*, and so on. For it is measured and made-to-order for those brides who feel that their nuptial mass is not valid unless they shed a few tears.

The cleverness of the composition is immediately revealed when one considers that both Latin and English text are provided: the Latin, *In te speravi*, very conveniently happens to be the Offertory for the Nuptial Mass. It is subjected to a surprisingly repetitious treatment — "Tu es Deus, Deus meus, Tu es Deus, Deus meus," etc., but heavens, a soloist should be allowed a *little* leeway at a wedding ceremony. The English (anonymous) text offers a rather profound commentary entirely befitting the wedding ceremony: "Lowly we kneel in prayer before Thy throne, that theirs may be the love that knows no ending, that theirs may be the love that knows no ending, that theirs," etc.

It would be quite against the spirit of church to set such a text to waltz tempo; hence the composer chooses the safer and less common measure of 6/4. But lo and behold! when we reach the sixteenth bar, we find a lovely accompaniment, dum-dee-dee, dum-dee-dee, dum-dee-ee. . .

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porary composers, then, using the vernacular texts can follow the example set down by these great musicians and give to the faithful music which patterns itself after the chant. In this way we will leave inviolate, and for posterity, our great heritage of Latin chant, and can embark upon a new era of music using as the foundations for this art those texts granted by the Holy See.

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