

A Sermon preached in King's College Chapel on St Luke's Day (Trinity XX), 18 October 2015

KING'S DIVINES: ARTHUR HENRY MANN (1850-1929), College Organist 1876-1929; Fellow, 1921-29

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What do you think of when you hear the word 'divine'? I must confess that images of portly, bearded, Victorian organists don't rank high on my particular list. Yet I've undertaken to speak this morning about Arthur Henry Mann - 'Daddy' Mann - as one of a number of 'King's Divines' whom we are celebrating in this 500th anniversary year of the Chapel. If I may be hard pressed, then, to find the Divine in Mann, I can perhaps try to put Mann in the context of the Divine.

Mann was appointed College Organist (we would now say Director of Music) in May 1876. His remarkable fifty-three year tenure, comfortably outstripping, as I speak, that of any of his successors, encompassed crucial events and developments within the College, the country, and across the world. The Choir as we know it today effectively took shape during his time; indeed, his appointment was informed by the College's desire for improvements in the 'efficiency' of the Choir and the dignity of Chapel worship. Signal changes to these ends were the decision to recruit Choristers from beyond Cambridge, thus paving the way for the establishment of the present School; and the admission, from 1880, of undergraduate Choral Scholars. These at first sang alongside the Lay Clerks, who had traditionally made up the back rows of the Choir. But from 1886 vacated Clerkships began to be replaced by Choral Scholars, a process which would not be complete until 1928. That was the year in which the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, instituted in 1918 by Dean Eric Milner White, was first broadcast by the BBC; while in 1927, Mann had made the first commercial recording of the Choir for the HMV label: an activity for which, along with broadcasting, he had little sympathy.

On the national stage, Mann's time took in the reigns of three monarchs, with special services conducted in Chapel to mark their deaths and accessions; and on the international, the College was catastrophically affected by the First World War. Only sixty-four out of an expected 170 men came into residence in October 1914; three years later, a mere seventeen. By then, Mann had grieved the deaths of several Choral Scholars, not to mention eight former Choristers lost in 1916 alone.

Considering his longevity in post, the College archives relating to Mann are not particularly rich. I want to touch this morning on one document which has been preserved. It's the text of a lecture which Mann first gave in 1910, entitled 'Suggestions for Improvements of Various Parts of Our Sacred Services', and addressed to 'a number of my brother organists of East Anglia'.¹

Anyone in Mann's audience who expected to get the inside track, as it were, on performing the latest canticle setting or anthem - 'Stanford in C' had appeared in 1909 - would have been sorely disappointed. What Mann chose to speak about was the performance and perfecting of those sung parts of Morning and Evening Prayer which were unchanging from service to service. He gave special attention to the 'monotoning' - 'the most difficult work a Choir can be called upon to perform', he called it - of the General Confession, Creed, and Lord's Prayer, stressing the need for maintenance of pitch, distinct pronunciation, and homogeneity of word stress, tone and timbre across the whole Choir; and he was quick to point out that he was 'referring only to Choirs; Clergymen in this respect are hopelessly past even praying for.'

¹ King's College Archives, AHM 1/6.

What is so striking is Mann's uncompromising concern for those parts of the Service (parts which we of course now regularly say rather than sing) which, to the average Lay Clerk, might by their very familiarity have seemed the most tedious and musically uninteresting. On the other hand, it is they which carry the central liturgical weight of the Daily Office. Not for nothing did one of Mann's obituarists write that 'the preparation of the music to him was a sacred duty, the accompanying of the service was an act of worship.'² There is no need for me this morning to labour the point that the beauty and perfection at which Mann was aiming have remained one of the defining characteristics of the Chapel Choir ever since. What I shall suggest is that reading his lecture affords all of us who attend services here an opportunity to reconsider why we do so: what do we come for, what do we take away?

Not even the simple two-chord 'Amen' concluding Collects and other prayers was beneath Mann's concern. In King's, he said, he endeavoured that the final 'Amen' (presumably that concluding the Blessing, or the Final Responses) should be sung so quietly and within a gradual diminuendo that the boundary between sound and eventual silence might be indistinguishable. Some, he noted, had likened the Choir's performance of this single concluding word to 'the whispering of angels.'

Well, we might smile indulgently at that, allow Mann his Victorian sentimentality, pat our chorister son or daughter on the head and allow them a second helping of gruel. But the theologian Oliver Davies, drawing on Thomas Aquinas's view that 'angels may not have voices but they do have a kind of interior speech with which they proclaim the praise of God and teach others', has developed a closely reasoned argument for the 'creativity' of God which makes substantial claims not just for music and the singing voice, but for a genuinely 'angelic' music; 'There may be,' writes Davies, 'a kind of architecture of the voice, which carries to us where human beings sing 'angelically' in both form and spirit, in praise and proclamation.'³

This brings us within earshot of those 'Holy Angels bright, who wait at God's right hand'. This well-known hymn originates with Richard Baxter, Puritan and contemporary of John Bunyan, but was added to and reworked by John Hampden Gurney (1802-62). It was the final hymn sung at Mann's packed funeral service here in late November 1929 (Mann had died on the 19th, two days after presiding at his last Sunday services); and it was an inspired choice for that occasion. Over-familiarity risks blinding us to its careful structure, and to the fact that the words are shot through with imagery that is not merely musical but makes repeated reference to choral music. As the address works down, verse by verse, from the angelic host through the faithful departed, then the 'Saints who toil below', finally to reach the individual human soul, we are invited to contemplate an infinite loop - a communion, no less - of 'praise and proclamation' poured out in melodies reaching from Heaven to Earth and back again.

Nor is this a matter of contemplation alone:

'My soul, bear thou thy part,
Triumph in God above,
And with a well-tuned heart
Sing thou the songs of love.'

The sense of 'part' here is not merely the ephemeral one of participation, of 'taking part', but rather the specifically musical one of a line or voice within a contrapuntal texture. We are exhorted to find our own voice within the 'one equall musick' - John Donne's celebrated

² *Cambridge News*, 20 November 1929

³ Oliver Davies, *The Creativity of God: World, Eucharist, Reason* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), pp. 167-68.

phrase – envisaged by Baxter and Gurney.⁴ And thus it is that in practising and perfecting our own ‘psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs’, in ‘singing and making melody’,⁵ we perform something of the Divine that is within us; or, to put it another way, in our musical envoicings we find that there is vouchsafed to us, after all, something of the Divine in Man.

⁴ Sermon preached at Whitehall, 29 February 1627/8; *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U Cal Press, 1953–62), VIII, 191.

⁵ Ephesians 5: 19 (Epistle for Trinity XX).