

**A PRACTICAL DISCOURSE
ON SOME PRINCIPLES OF
HYMN-SINGING**

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A Practical Discourse on Some Principles of Hymn-singing by Robert Bridges

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PRACTICAL DISCOURSE

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WHAT St. Augustin says of the emotion which he felt on hearing the music in the Portian basilica at Milan in the year 386 has always seemed to me a good illustration of the relativity of musical expression; I mean how much more its ethical significance depends on the musical experience of the hearer, than on any special accomplishment or intrinsic development of the art. Knowing of what kind that music must have been and how few resources of expression it can have had,—being rudimental in form, without suggestion of harmony, and in its performance unskilful, its probably nasal voice-production unmodified by any accompaniment,—one marvels at his description,

‘What tears I shed at Thy hymns and canticles, how acutely was my soul stirred by the voices and

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sweet music of Thy Church! As those voices entered my ears, truth distilled in my heart, and thence divine affection welled up in a flood, in tears o'erflowing, and happy was I in those tears ¹.'

St. Augustin appears to have witnessed the beginnings of the great music of the Western Church. It was the year of his baptism when, he tells us, singing was introduced at Milan to cheer the Catholics who had shut themselves up in the basilica with their bishop, to defend him from the imperial violence :

'It was then instituted that psalms and hymns should be sung, after the manner of the Eastern Churches, lest the folk in the weariness of their grief should altogether lose heart : and from that day to this the custom has been retained ; many, nay, nearly all Thy flocks, in all regions of the world, following the example ².'

What great emotional power St. Augustin attributed to ecclesiastical music, and of what importance he thought it, may be seen in the tenth book of the *Confessions* : he is there examining himself under the heads of the senses, and after the sense of smell, his chapter on the sense of hearing is as follows :—

'The lust of the ears entangled and enslaved me

¹ *Confess.* ix. 6.

² *Ibid.* ix. 7.

more firmly, but Thou hast loosened and set me free. But even now I confess that I do yield a very little to the beauty of those sounds which are animated by Thy eloquence, when sung with a sweet and practised voice; not, indeed, so far that I am lured and cannot fly off at pleasure¹: and yield though I do, yet these sweet sounds, joined with the divine words which are their life, cannot be admitted to my heart save to a place of some dignity, and I hesitate to give them one as lofty as their claim².

For sometimes I seem to myself to be allowing them undue honour, when I feel that our minds are really moved to a warmer devotion and more ardent piety by the holy words themselves when they are so sung than when they are not so sung; and when I recognize that all the various moods of our spirit have their proper tones in speech and song, by which they are, through I know not what secret familiarity, excited. But the mere sensuous delight, to which it is not fitting to resign the mind to be enervated thereby, often deceives me, whenever (that is) the delight of the senses does not so accompany the reason as to be cheerfully in submission thereto, but, having been admitted only for reason's sake, then even attempts to go before and to lead. Thus I sin without knowing, but afterwards I know.

¹ This is perhaps rather a quality proper to the sensation.

² 'Et vix eis praebeo congruentem [locum],' which might only mean 'I cannot find the right place for them.'

‘Then awhile, from too immoderate caution against this deception, I err on the side of too great severity; and sometimes go so far as to wish that all the melody of the sweet chants which are used in the Davidian psalter were utterly banished from my ears, and from the ears of the Church; and that way seems to me safer which I remember often to have heard told of Athanasius, archbishop of Alexandria, that he would have the lector of the psalm intone it with but a slight modulation of voice, so as to be more like one reading than one singing. And yet, when I remember my tears, which I shed at the hearing of the song of Thy Church in the first days of my recovered faith, and that now I still feel the same emotion, and am moved not by the singing but by what is sung, when it is sung with a liquid voice and in the most fitting “modulation,” then (I say) I acknowledge again the great utility of the institution.

‘Thus I fluctuate between the peril of sensuous pleasure and the proof of wholesomeness, and am more inclined (though I would not offer an irrevocable judgement) to approve of the use of singing in the Church, that, by the pleasure of the ear, weaker minds may rise to the emotion of piety. Yet when it happens to me to be more moved by the music than by the words that are sung I confess that I have sinned (*poenaliter peccare*), and it is then that I would rather not hear the singer¹.

¹ *Confess. x. 23.*

What would St. Augustin have said could he have heard Mozart's Requiem, or been present at some Roman Catholic cathedral where an eighteenth-century mass was performed, a woman hired from the Opera-House whooping the *Benedictus* from the western gallery?

It is possible that such music would not have had any ethical significance to him, bad or good. Augustin lived before what we reckon the very beginnings of modern music, with nothing to entice and delight his ears in the choir but the simplest ecclesiastical chant and hymn-tune sung in unison. We are accustomed to an almost over-elaborated art, which, having won powers of expression in all directions, has so squandered them that they are of little value: and we may confidently say that the emotional power of our church music is not so great as that described by him 1,500 years ago. In fact if we feel at all out of sympathy with Augustin's words, it is because he seems to over-estimate the danger of the emotion¹.

There is something very strange and surprising in this state of things, this contrast between the primitive Church with its few simple melodies that

¹ St. Augustin does not allow that a vague emotion can be religious; it must be directed. Few would agree to this.