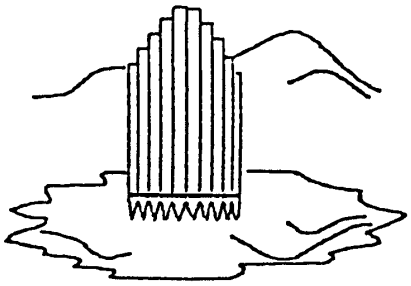
CUMBRIAN SOCIETY OF ORGANISTS



Composing for the Church

A talk to introduce the competition held in Carlisle Cathedral on 16 July 2002

by Adrian Self MA, FRCO, FTCL

July 2002

My heart sank when Jeremy Suter and David Gibbs asked me to open this evening's proceedings with a short talk. We're all here because we want to hear the Cathedral Choir sing the six pieces which have been short-listed. When you've gone to hear Oasis or Green Day, your patience with the warm-up act is going to be in pretty short supply. Actually, it's much worse than that, because I have to embarrass myself in front of two of the most distinguished and accomplished musicians alive today. I don't want to make them blush, but I doubt that you would find two more eminent church musicians and I, for one, feel deeply honoured to able to share an adjudication panel with them.

“Talk about what it’s like to be a composer," Jeremy and David told me. "Say something about word-setting and writing for the Church.” Well it's easy to talk about being a composer: it's not much different from any other occupation. The great fraternity of composers share one common characteristic - poverty. Yes, I know that John Rutter drives a BMW (or at least he used to), Sir John Tavener drives a Bentley and Sir William Walton bought an island in the Mediterranean, but most of the composers I know live in small flats or semis and drive elderly diesel cars. If it's cash you're after, then I strongly recommend a career in accountancy, the law or a management training scheme with Asda. For every Handel or Lloyd-Webber there are a thousand Mozarts who, as we all know, because Peter Schaffer's film 'Amadeus' told us so, ended up in a pauper's grave.

The trouble is that composers don't take up writing music in the same way that someone else might take up stamp-collecting or train spotting. Of course, stamp-collecting and train-spotting can be completely obsessive but I doubt that there is much scientific evidence to suggest that anyone actually emerges from the womb as a congenital stamp-collector or train-spotter. With music it's a bit different. No-one in their right mind would actually choose to be a composer. It's something which a few unfortunates find themselves stuck with. Think of poor old Benjamin Britten. As a young lad, thoroughly miserable at his prep school, his wretched muse wouldn't leave him alone. He'd probably never have admitted it, but what ten-year old would willingly opt to stay indoors writing fugues when he could be out with his mates creating mayhem? Anyway, he got his revenge by writing a series of works which continue to strike fear and terror into the faint hearts of Cumbrian choral societies to this day. I can't help feel that much the same experience must have been the lot of Sir Michael Tippett and one can only wonder at the sheer delight he must have felt when hearing serried ranks of genteel ladies urging us to "burn down their houses, beat in their heads and break them in pieces on the wheel.

I'm not sure that I can really explain why composers compose (unless it's just to get their own back!). There's no money in it (unless you are exceptionally fortunate) and, on the whole, people will make polite noises, but they won't actually like what you write. Choral societies are quite happy with 'Messiah' at Christmas and Faure’s Requiem or Stainer's Crucifixion in the spring. Church choirs can quite easily muddle along on a diet of “Jesu, joy”, for weddings, “Lord, for thy tender mercies’ sake” if they can manage all four parts or a bit of Graham Kendrick if they can't. Why bother? Let's face it: our cathedral choirs are wonderful. Our parish choirs (if we are lucky enough to have one) are, on the whole, anything but. The cathedrals are much too busy with the pressures of singing the daily offices to spare much time to learn anything new and our local parish church will probably not be in a position to offer a forum for burgeoning talent.

It's bleak.

Or is it?

Well, you can either rage about the darkness, or you can light a candle. We've been here before and nothing is fixed for ever. Everything is subject to change. Just look on an old copy of Wesley's glorious anthem "Blessed be the God and Father" and you'll see a little footnote to the

effect that its first performance was given by four boys and one man. Four boys and one man? In an English cathedral, on Easter Sunday, for goodness' sake? Was that the best they could muster? Now, I might be wrong, but I suspect that if Jeremy Suter were to turn up with four boys and one man for Easter Sunday here, the Dean would not be best pleased. Wesley was sick and fed up with the state of music in our cathedrals 150 years ago and he was determined to do something about it. Part of his technique involved falling out with just about everybody and I'm not advocating this, although it has to be said that he was certainly effective. What he didn't do (although we know he was tempted) was to throw up his hands, pack it all in and spend the rest of his life fishing on the banks of the Devon rivers he loved so much. He went on to produce a series of anthems and settings which are without equal. Far from throwing in the towel he actually went to the other extreme and challenged his musicians with music of such visionary quality that it couldn't be ignored.

Now, I mention Wesley because it seems to me that, at its best, his music embodies everything that good church music should be: he is always memorable; he challenges his performers, but he doesn't ask the impossible; he is invariably sensitive to the texts which he has chosen to set; he has a keen grasp of the pictorial and colours up words and phrases in ways which are easily understood without descending to the banal. Most of all, though, Wesley was (a word which in our cynical age so often elicits a sneer) sincere. His music lifts the text off the page and turns what a lesser composer might treat as just a bit of hack-work, into a prayer.

All of this is, of course, a personal view. I'm making no attempt to be objective. I know that a piece of advice commonly given to young composers is to keep on writing and obviously it is important to commit our ideas to paper, but when Jeremy and David asked me to introduce this splendid competition I thought for a very long time before feeling able to come up with any suggestions which might be of help to those who are starting out as composers for the Church. In one sense, such advice is redundant since, if you want to write, you will anyway. Even so, I would like to share with you a few thoughts and suggestions which have helped me.

Don't worry about being original. No one is ever truly original and the history of music is evolutionary, not revolutionary. It's much more valuable to take on board a few models by composers whose music moves you than to go out of your way to try and sound like no-one else. Music for the Church is not an end in itself and music which does not lift the soul to God is likely to be a distraction. Listen to the glorious motets of Francis Poulenc to see what I mean: here is a composer who has no inhibitions about borrowing shamelessly from the past and yet imbuing every bar with his own distinctive personality.

Don't try to put the world to rights with every bar you commit to paper. Few of us have the depth of vision given to a Bruckner or a Mahler and in, so many cases, what the composer may have intended as a heart-rending comment on the human condition can so easily come across as little more than comical melodrama. The Victorians and Edwardians were especially prone to this. For instance, Our blessed Saviour's journey to Calvary is reduced to complete farce with the unintentionally risible "Journey to Calvary" to be found in John Henry Maunders ghastly cantata "Olivet to Calvary". Anyone who sets out to write a 'Threnody to the victims of such-and-such a catastrophe' runs a considerable risk of producing something of unfortunate triviality.

Keep it simple. Keep it short. It is infinitely more likely that you will be able to arrange a decent performance of a two-minute motet than a ninety-minute oratorio. Small is so often beautiful and there are countless instances of composers whose name is kept alive by a tiny, perfectly polished gem long after their huge, sprawling musical canvasses have been forgotten. Parry composed five symphonies (which, incidentally, are very fine) and the huge cantata 'Prometheus unbound' from which the English Music Renaissance is said to begin, but to most people he is the composer

of the stirring tune to Blake's “Jerusalem”. If you want to know how to distil a great deal into a tiny space, have a look at Thomas Attwood's little masterpiece “Teach me, 0 Lord.” Composition is a process of paring down and perhaps the best analogy is that of the sculptor who starts with a lump of solid granite or marble and chips away at it until all that is left is the essential core of his or her design. Listen to late Bach or late Beethoven and you can see what I'm getting at. There are no spare notes - every single note has a function and by removing anything the music would be diminished. If the only piece of his music which had survived was “The Art of Fugue”, Bach would still be worth a lifetime's study.

Sing through every line and every part you write. If it is awkward or ungainly, then it will be even more so for the performers. Delius often spoke of the importance of a sense of flow and this is never so important as in music for the voice. It might seem incongruous to refer you to music by such an overt atheist, but the beautifully-sculpted lines of a work like “Brigg Fair” can make any heart rejoice. The best way I can think of to become thoroughly familiar as to what works and what doesn't is to be a rehearsal pianist for a decent choir or choral society. When you have to play each vocal line or in pairs you really start to know the repertoire from the inside, perhaps even more than if you are actually singing.

Setting a text presents a whole set of unique challenges. Rather than pontificate at great length about 'do's and don'ts' of word setting, it is far more valuable to borrow a score and a decent recording of some of the best examples: Bach's Magnificat in D leaps to mind as a model of how to do this on a grand scale - just look at how sensitive he is to each verse of the text and how perfectly his music matches the mood, or to use the German word, 'affekte' of each section of the well-loved song of the Virgin Mary. A more recent example which is just as impressive in a different way is Britten's setting of Christopher Smart's wayward poem “Rejoice in the Lamb”. How perfectly the composer depicts the poet's cat, the mouse and the flowers each praising God in their special ways!

Listen to the music in your head and in your heart. As we say in the Eucharist: "All things come from you, O God, and of your own do we give you." Prayer is a vital part of writing for the Church (or indeed, any music) and, so often, it is easy to pretend that our music flows as a result of our own efforts and from our own intellects. I can only speak for myself, but I have found that this is an illusion. Sometimes, when you finally put the pencil down in the early hours of the morning, you go to bed feeling really quite pleased with what you have written. In the cold, grey light of the morning a little voice whispers words to the effect: "For goodness' sake - can't you do better than that? Abba would have come up with a more convincing chord-progression in the 1970's!" That's the point when it goes round and round in your head and all you can do is ask for help - it always comes! Stravinsky once memorably said of the process of writing his masterpiece, “The Rite of Spring”: "I am the vessel through which the Rite passed." That is what the composer is: a scribe; an antenna through whom the music passes. The difference between Stravinsky and Adrian Self is that Stravinsky's antenna was much more keenly tuned than mine. Elgar spoke of the music being in the air all around him - his function was to become as finely tuned as he could in order to receive it. When he was bang on station he came up with the “Dream of Gerontius.”

You have listened very patiently to my ramblings. It's not easy to talk about writing music and I am only too painfully aware that I have tended to go around the subject without penetrating its core. The trouble is that attempting to analyse the unanalysable was always going to prove a ridiculous task and, ultimately, music is its own arbiter. With experience, our instincts will discern the unworthy and insincere. The great privilege and awesome responsibility of the composer is to touch those parts of the spirit far beyond the reach of words. When language fails, music begins. Of course composers need skill and competence - that goes without saying, and it can be acquired - but the music itself: that comes from God, even if an awful lot of composers may have

denied it. The spark of the Divine is what makes music a living thing, as potent as a live coal and with similar transcendent properties of healing, cleansing and uplifting. I am sure that everyone here would wish nothing less than that our six young composers will feel able to rise to the challenge of this daunting prospect.