

Country Church Music

By Fred M. Gee

The problem of providing good music in the smaller churches in the West, is often a difficult one. This article is written in the hope that some discouraged choirmaster or music committee may receive suggestions that will help to smooth the way. It is a regrettable fact that the style of music, both hymns and anthems, used in many of our Protestant churches, is not in keeping with the dignity of the service of worship. Too many tunes sung to sacred words, are reminiscent of the vaudeville song and the dance. Many of our Sunday schools are using collections of hymns the tunes of which are adapted from secular songs such as "Old Black Joe" and others of like nature. The result is that the children of our Sunday schools, who are the future church members, are taught to associate sacred words with vulgar music. Many Sunday school superintendents labor under the false impression that the children must sing "catchy" and "jiggy" tunes in order to sing heartily. The country choirmaster has a great responsibility and opportunity in this regard. If he wishes to educate the musical taste of his congregation to an appreciation of good sacred music in the church, he should also do some missionary work in the Sunday school.



Mr. Gee is organist and choirmaster at St. Stephen's Presbyterian Church, Winnipeg (Ralph Connor's church). He also teaches pipe organ, piano, oratorio and song coaching and has been organist and accompanist for the Winnipeg Oratorio Society since its inception in 1908. Formerly he was organist at St. Tello Anglican Church, Cardiff, Wales. He is regarded as one of the foremost musical authorities in Western Canada.

The Choir

Before a choir is formed, the choirmaster should have a clear idea of its purposes. He should also consider his own duties, not forgetting that his first obligation is to the church he serves and not to any singers he may engage. In my own church I am responsible for the admission and discharge of singers, and everything is done thru my agency, so that I am held responsible for the efficiency and behavior of the choir. Every choirmaster should insist on being entrusted with this authority, because, with one in control, results are far more easily obtained than where several are in authority. Where paid singers are concerned it is advisable to consult the music committee of the church, and have them do the engaging and dismissing of such. If the committee has confidence in the choirmaster, they will rely on his judgment regarding soloists.

One often hears slurring remarks passed as to the petty jealousies and quarrels existing in choirs. The country choirmaster has more difficulty in this matter than the city choirmaster. Notwithstanding this, I am convinced that the most friendly relations will prevail in the choir if the conductor possesses firmness, tact and the necessary musical ability to train his forces.

Suggestions for Choirmasters

Use method in your rehearsals. Each section (Hymns, Anthems, Canticles, etc.) should follow in regular order. Commence rehearsals punctually. Keep a roll-book and offer small prizes to those attending the most services and rehearsals. Plan your music a few weeks ahead if possible and keep a record of anthems, etc. rehearsed. Do not allow conversation during rehearsal, but give your choir an intermission for social intercourse. If you are convinced that a certain member is guilty of a mistake, do not address that member individually in the presence of the choir. Always address the choir as a whole.

I am of the opinion that the best results are generally obtained when the dual position of organist and choirmaster is filled by one competent musician. In the cities this plan is being adapted more and more each year. In Winnipeg, ten years ago there were only two or three churches so situated. Now there are more than twenty. However, in the country it is not always possible to secure the services of a musician qualified to perform the double duty, so that a word to the organist, who is not choirmaster, may be of interest.

When the duties are divided, the

organist should realize that the choirmaster is "boss," otherwise there will be friction. A tactful choirmaster will, however, take the organist into his confidence on matters connected with the musical service, and frequently invite suggestions. Such details as the tempo of hymns, anthems, etc., should be under control of the choirmaster. The organist has a free hand in the selection of voluntaries and should on no account tolerate interference in this part of the service.

Suggestions for Young Organists

The proper playing of hymn tunes is an important feature of the church service, and is often neglected by both the city and the country organist. In the playing of most hymns, the reiteration of repeated notes in one part, (the treble) is usually sufficient to give the right amount of "motion" and yet retain the proper organ "legato." As an illustration of this, play the first four chords in the tune "Hursley" (Sun of my Soul). The "F" in the treble is the only note that need be repeated. This plan is not suggested for all hymns; for example, "St. Gertrude," set to "Onward Christian Soldiers," requires different treatment to indicate the martial spirit of the music, and therefore the chords should be more detached than in the former illustration. Many other suggestions re hymn playing might be made, but space will not permit in this article.

Just a word about "playing over the tune," before the congregation rises to sing. Do not play it over with such a soft organ tone that the congregation cannot distinguish it. The late W. T. Best satirized this as the "I-hope-I-don't-intrude" style. The object of playing over a tune is to let everyone hear it distinctly, bearing in mind that the registration used should have some connection with the character of the hymn. "Jesus, the very thought of Thee," while being played distinctly, should not be played as loudly as "A Mighty Fortress." Always "give out" the tune in strict tempo, thus indicating not only the melody to the congregation, but the speed and rhythm as well.

The question of organ voluntaries is a large one. Generally speaking, the "prelude" or ingoing voluntary should be of a quiet and reverential nature, and should help to place the congregation in the mood for the service of worship. While the offertory is being taken up there is a wider scope offered, although care should be taken that the offertory solo is in keeping with a religious service. Do not always play on the "full organ" at the end of the service. A lively march, played immediately after a thoughtful sermon based on the "Crucifixion," is a fearful inconsistency, and the organist should see that his concluding "postlude" is appropriate to the nature of the service.

Both choirmaster and organist should know the subject of the preacher's sermons several days in advance, and endeavor to choose anthems, solos and organ voluntaries that will be helpful and appropriate. Attention to these details is always appreciated and noticed by minister and congregation.

The Organ

Many churches in the West are now equipped with pipe organs, but there is a still greater number, which have to be content with the humbler reed organ. Every church has an ambition to possess a pipe organ eventually, and to any such that may be contemplating the purchase of one, I would like to make a suggestion. Do not purchase an organ without first consulting a competent organist. It is better to contract for an organ of medium capacity and have it of the best quality, than to install a larger instrument of a cheaper grade. Every stop should be valuable, and none should be useless. In many large church organs, costly sets of pipes remain practically unused. An organ for a country church, where in



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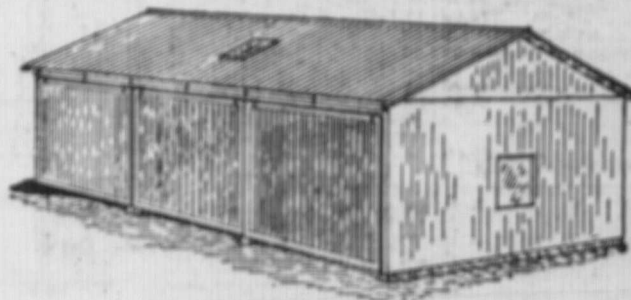
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