

From the Dickinson Collection: Music and Worship by Clarence Dickinson

Compiled and edited by Lorenz Maycher

The first installment in this series, "From the Dickinson Collection: Reminiscences by Clarence Dickinson, Part 1: 1873-1898," was published in the July 2008 issue of THE DIAPASON; next appeared "From the Dickinson Collection: Memorizing Controversy," September 2008; "From the Dickinson Collection: Reminiscences by Clarence Dickinson, Part 2: 1898-1909," February 2009; and most recently, "From the Dickinson Collection: Speech to the St. Louis Chapter of the American Guild of Organists, by Clarence Dickinson," June 2009.

Introduction

"Music and Worship" is the fifth installment in THE DIAPASON's "From the Dickinson Collection," a series of articles featuring items from Clarence Dickinson's personal library, housed at William Carey University in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. We are very grateful to Patricia Furr and Dr. Gene Winters, of William Carey University, for so generously providing access to this collection and granting permission to publish these important historical documents, preserving the legacy of Clarence and Helen A. Dickinson.

—Lorenz Maycher
Laurel, Mississippi

Whether we belong in the pulpit, the choir loft, or in the pews, the music in the church service is bound to be a matter either of interest or of concern to us, since it is a constant part of worship. In

the past, in most churches, the music just happened; it was not chosen with any particular idea in mind. Something was sung, something was played. Now this has in large measure been changed; a great deal of thought is being given to the subject.

The sermon naturally gives the theme to a church service; that is to say, it gives "direction" to the worship. The great Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, once said, "The sermon is an extension of God's revelation of Himself in His Word, and is in truth, a sacrament." The music must reinforce the message of the sermon, must imbue it with appeal and with an emotional quality which will win the heart when the mind does not follow. As that old Dean of Bristol said 300 years ago, "A song may find him who a sermon flies." But music must do something more: it should create the spirit or the atmosphere for the whole service. It should lift up the hearts of those present into the very spirit of worship, be so sensitive to the significance of meeting in the house of God that the intellectual and spiritual illumination of the sermon shall be intensified into a message from the Most High.

A service is held for the purpose of bringing the people consciously into the presence of God. They should feel that, as Martin Luther said, "Here, God speaks to us through His Word," and further, "The people speak to Him in prayer and song." This bringing of men into the very presence of God, awakening in them the consciousness that He is in their midst, is the ideal of every service; and the degree



Clarence Dickinson at the Möller organ, Union Theological Seminary

to which a service achieves this is a measure of its value. With this as its purpose, the service must build up a sort of crescendo of interest; it must have, first, a pictorial or dramatic quality, and second, movement toward a climax.

We are coming around to the idea that a church service ought to be a unified, integrated whole. As the Federal Council's Commission on Worship said some years ago in a report, "We have at last come to realize that a miscellaneous collection of devotional items does not constitute a service." A service should be a perfect and united whole, and, to ensure this, the music must not be hit and miss, chosen according to the mood of the director or to the repertory of the choir. It must be perfectly integrated with the service in an inner unity; the texts must be in the thought of the service, the music in its mood. And this thought and this mood are determined by its center and climax, which is the sermon.

For the opening of the service, a song of praise seems to be most fitting; as the Psalmist sings, "Enter into His courts with thanksgiving and into His gates with praise." Praise was one of the earliest worship-emotions which stirred the heart of man when he began to realize the majesty and glory and power and might of God. The early church opened its services with praise. There is in a great opening song of praise an emotional exhilaration which lifts us out of everydayness, out of petty thoughts and cares, and into a mood of worship.

With the consciousness that we are in the House of God, that we are come into His presence, comes the realization not only of His power and majesty, but

of His holiness. As we stand in the white light of that holiness, we are conscious of our own littleness, our earth-bound outlook; we see with appalling clarity of just how entirely we "have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and have done those things which we ought not to have done," and we cry out for mercy; and God, the loving Father, always hastens to meet penitence with forgiveness. For this we thank Him, remembering also His many past mercies, in Psalm or Hymn or Anthem.

The realization of God's love and compassion strengthens our desire to know Him better, to learn something of His will and His purposes for mankind, and how best to requite His great love by serving Him. This we learn through the Scripture lessons and the sermon, which is, as we have said, "an extension of God's revelation of Himself in his Word." As we thus come to know Him, we needs must adore; and we offer to Him all we are and have, consecrated to His service. This is the Offertory, which therefore, with the sermon, should constitute the high point of the service, a part of "the sacrament."

Such a service has climax, and possesses the dramatic elements of movement and direction toward that climax. But the music can only heighten the climax and lend definiteness to the direction and emotional intensity to the movement if it is integrated with the service, in perfect inner unity.

Upon the consecration will follow the return, in joy, to everyday living, ready to do the will of God as servants in His eternal kingdom. The expression of this lies in the closing hymn, in the benediction, and, at the very end, in the organ postlude.

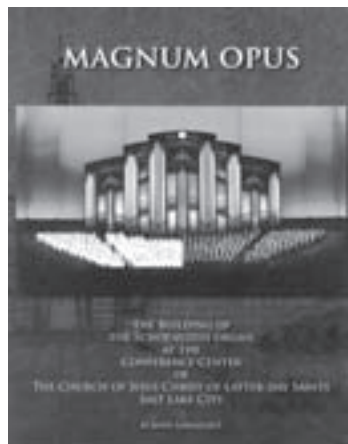
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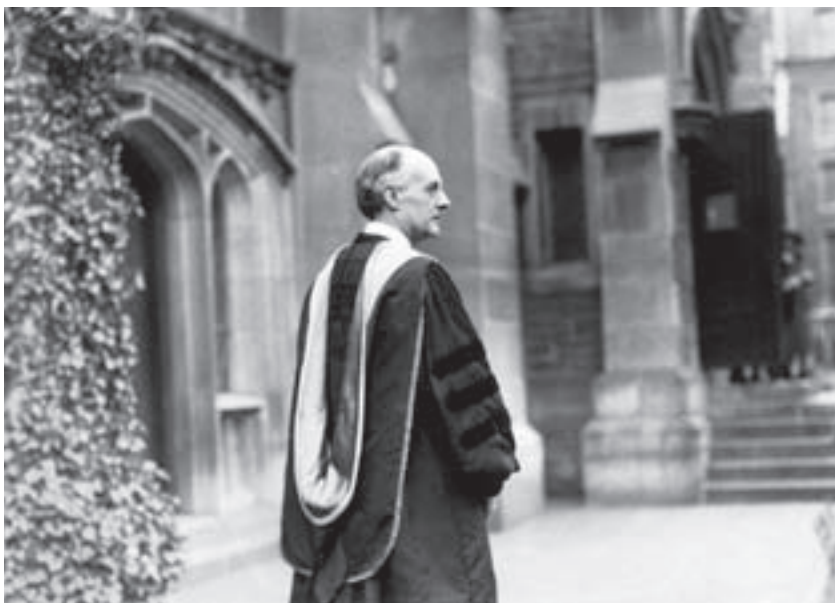


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Clarence Dickinson at the Skinner console, Brick Presbyterian Church, New York City, preparing for a service



Clarence Dickinson standing in the Union Seminary Quadrangle, near the Chapel entrance

Often I have heard ministers and musicians alike regret that the postlude is practically lost in the movement of the congregation. It can indeed be a beautiful and uplifting thing when, at the close of a vesper service, for instance, ministers and congregation resume their seats silently for a short, lovely organ number. But this is not the function of the organ postlude to the morning service; its function is to say to the departing congregation, "Go forth into the world in peace and in joyful readiness for service. You are glad to have been in the House of the Lord; it was good to be here. And now, recharged by the dynamic power communicated by the service, go forth to make His Kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."

There are three great avenues of life and thought, as I feel it—three doors that make up the triune gateway to Heaven: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. The scientists concern themselves with truth, and the scholars and the literalists. The chief interest of the church's ministry since Puritan days in this country has been goodness, or morality. But there is a third door, and many who "become as little children and enter the kingdom of Heaven" enter through the gate of pure beauty. And this is largely what we are called upon to do as musicians in the church. The beauty of music is not an ornament to the building we call worship; it is a portal. It awakens man's sensitivities to the highest and loveliest things, it lifts him out of and above himself to their contemplation; it unites him with the things that are pure and holy through its emotional power. For this reason, we must have music that is worthy to be the portal to worship, and as beautifully and truly interpreted as possible, that it may not fail to be a gateway open to the presence of God.

I was deeply impressed by a sentence in an address given by that great missionary, the author of "The Christ of the Indian Road," Stanley Jones, recently at Columbia University: "Beauty is as necessary to the soul as light to the eye, truth to the conscience." Such beauty is not mere superficial ornamentation, but deep vision and thrilling impulse, through the perception of things of the Spirit, unseen, eternal. As William Pierson Merrill wrote of it, "Music is not a garnishment of the service, but a part of the food for the soul," or as Walford Davies has expressed it, "Music is not an ornament to the service, it is not even a means of inducing the mood of worship; it is worship."

That we may bring to God, the Creator of all beauty, our perfect worship, we must enrich it with beauty. That we may create and foster in men that spirit of worship, we must reveal the beauty of the Most High; as Ecclesiasticus has it, we must "put on the comeliness of the glory that cometh from God."

Every great movement in the church, every signal victory or triumphant assertion of faith, every widespread renewal of trust and love, has found spontaneous expression in music. The almost passionate revival of religion in Italy led by Francis of Assisi can hardly be understood unless we know how all Italy burst forth into passionate songs of love and praise to the God whom Francis had, as it were, brought down again to man, that man might be reunited to God.

Again, think of Luther. How shall we realize the effect of his great fight for spiritual emancipation of the people, unless we hear them join "with heart and soul and voice" in the chorales of Luther and of the great Johann Sebastian Bach? In the Wesleyan movement, the atonement ceased to be only a dogma, and



Clarence and Helen A. Dickinson at work in the library of their New York apartment

came to signify overwhelming love and self-sacrifice; how can we realize that more convincingly than in the sacred songs of Charles Wesley?

Now, out of my long experience, I should like to offer you a few suggestions:

First: Good music should not be regarded as synonymous with difficult music, and put aside as unattainable by the small church choir. Many beautiful anthems, lovely old carols, breathing beauty and love and consecration, may be had in very simple arrangements.

Second: What may be called expressive music is best confined to choir singing. Only on occasion, under special religious exaltation, will a whole congregation sincerely pour out its soul in words; but it will be moved to such an attitude by the devout, noble singing of such a solo as "If with all your hearts," from *Elijah*, or "O God, have mercy," from *St. Paul*.

Third: In spite of my earlier recommendation that the music of a service

should express the theme of the sermon, there are times, in my opinion, when it is wise not to have all the music, especially the anthems, follow the themes too closely. It may be an advantage to have them different in sentiment so that some hearts that may not be attuned to the sermon that day may perhaps receive a message through the music. I have in mind a story, told to me by a minister, of a day when a heartbroken member of his congregation came to church for the first time after much illness and suffering in her own person and bereavement of those dear to her. The sermon and all the hymns (save the opening one of praise) bore on some such theme as the peace movement, but the offertory anthem, "Ye shall have a song in the night—The love that it revealeth—All earthly sorrow healeth—Ye shall have a song in the night," brought the calm and solace that she sought.

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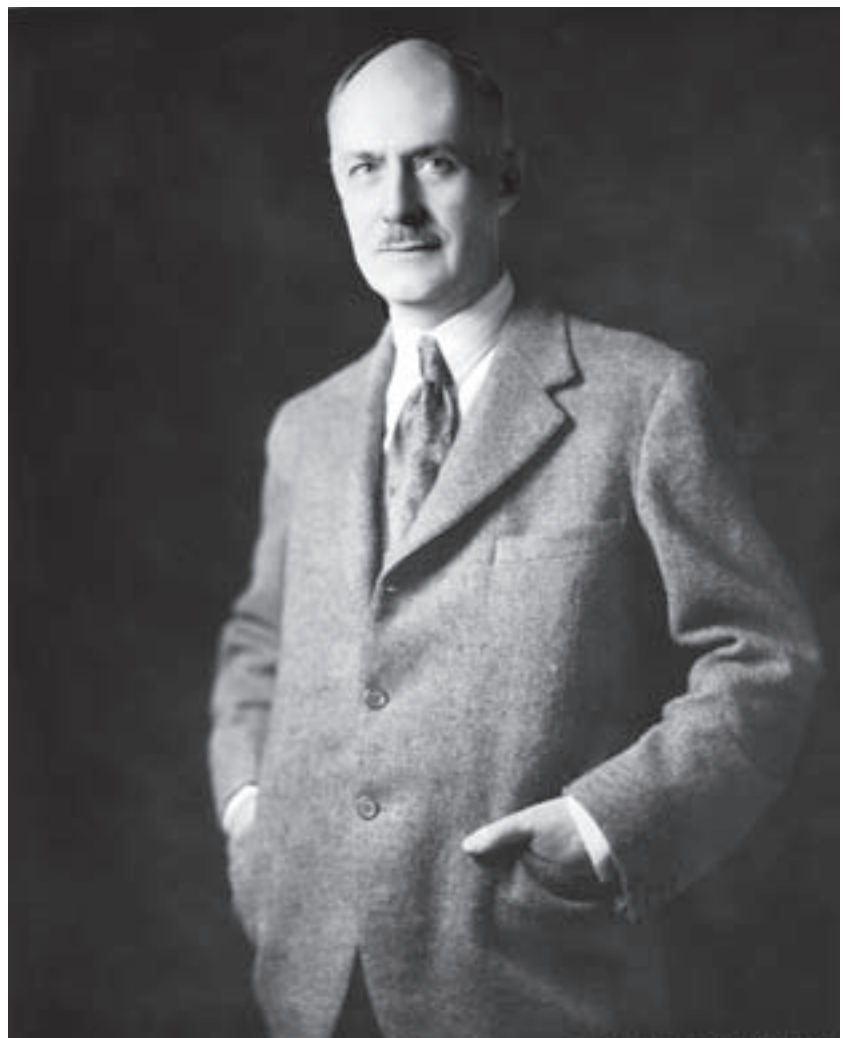
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Clarence Dickinson with students of the School of Sacred Music at Union Theological Seminary, New York City

Fourth: The organist and choir-master should endeavor constantly to raise the standards of the music in his church. If a congregation has been in the habit of using commonplace music, it is unwise to break away from it at one fell swoop. It takes patience and repetition. But gradually a group may be led away from trivial music joined with words of no spiritual import,

to the stately dignity, the noble sincerity, the glorious exaltation of inspired words set to harmonious music, with a resultant gain in the virility and dignity of the religious conceptions of the congregation. A hymn new to the congregation, or an unfamiliar tune to an old text, should be sung several times in close succession. In time it may become a favorite.



Clarence Dickinson in a studio portrait

I have never found it necessary to play down to any age. If they are accustomed to good music, they come to expect it. I can still hear the choirboys at St. James Church, Chicago, when we had to sing the school hymn of a young man for his wedding. It was rather waltzy for an anthem, and the boys, accustomed to good church music, exclaimed, "Huh! Cheap!"

One can express adoration and praise in any musical language, but is it inspiration and exaltation put there naturally, or is the composer just trying to do something not done before and hanging it on sacred words? The church service is not the place for experimentation. The extreme modernists are making us familiar with new combinations of harmony; in fact, they overdo the use of certain combinations, so that one can become bored, not startled, with their use. Musicologists of today publish many dull, uninspired pieces from the past without troubling themselves with anything but perfection of technique. It is our job to find music inspired by faith and love.

We must keep ever in mind the power of music to lift the individual person out of his self-centered existence. When he joins in singing a hymn or listens to an anthem, he ceases to be wholly individual; the congregation becomes one, and he a part of it. Personal differences of creed, questionings, doubt, disbelief are forgotten as hearts and voices unite in gratitude, joy and aspiration. Music is a redeeming force in that it can free us from ourselves by setting us within a vision of beauty which unfolds all about us, and by giving us a glimpse of something which, while immaterial and non-corporeal, is yet eternal and infinite. A large element in Salvation, or redemption, is just this release from the tyranny of self and its demands, its smallness and its limitations. St. Chrysostom wrote to a friend after a time of terrible trial and strain, "I came up here to the mountains to get rest and refreshment, but I

have not succeeded, because I brought myself with me."

He who has known what it is to lose himself wholly in listening to a great symphony, or any great music, knows what I mean: the sense of entire oblivion to self and the material world, the sublimation of a sort of translation to another plane of being. In Koussevitzky's address upon receiving an honorary degree at Harvard, he said, "We belong to those promoters of the ideal who lift men out of the grayness of their everyday living into a world of beauty and vision." Thoreau describes it, "What is the prospect such strains of music open up to me? My life becomes a boundless plain, glorious to tread, with no death or disappointment at the end of it." This is the redeeming power of music. It can give us release from self and from time, and make us realize our kinship with the infinite.

But, if these greatest messages in the world are imperfectly given, if the people do not get them because we do not communicate, we are failing in our duty to God. You cannot "put over" something you only half know; you are too busy with the notes to bring out the meaning. This means rehearsal for all of us; faithful, constant, regular rehearsal; and having something to say in our work, to know perfectly what we are going to say, and say it with all our heart. It is a big job we have before us, and it is up to us to work with might and main, beside the minister, to do our part through our messages of sacred song—messages of courage, cheer and faith, of hope, and love, and the certainty of Eternal Life!

"Whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away; but there shall be music forever in the presence of God and His saints."

Lorenz Maycher is organist-choirmaster at First-Trinity Presbyterian Church in Laurel, Mississippi. His interviews with William Teague, Thomas Richner, Nora Williams, Albert Russell, and Robert Town have appeared in *THE DIAPASON*.

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