5-1-2001

Te Deum: the church and music: a textbook, a reference, a history, an essay

Donald C. Nevile

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol27/iss1/21

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.
This is a much-needed book! A comprehensive, ecumenical history of Christian music has been lacking for some time. Stimulated "by the need to understand church music itself" (ix), Westermeyer began to write this volume years ago as a textbook for a course in theology and church music at Elmhurst College. It is an introductory overview of church music from a historical and theological viewpoint. His agenda is clearly the nurturing of congregational song, that is, the peoples' song. He is more interested in this aspect of church music, and he generally downplays the role of the choir and professional musicians. He is seeking for "what stands behind the music, reasons for or against it, restrictions placed on it, or what has pushed it one way or the other" (xiii). The book is likely to be well-received.

Nevertheless, it is a troubling volume. In spite of claiming to be ecumenical, Westermeyer is not unbiased. The writing is choppy, and is not always logically or tightly written. Seemingly irrelevant details are interjected into the narrative without any obvious purpose (viz. His opinion on half-verse vs. whole-verse singing of psalms, p. 14-20). It is not truly comprehensive or definitive, and seems to have been written in a hurry.

He begins, of course, with the Old Testament, identifying the folk, monodic, and improvisatory nature of this music. But then he gets bogged down in theology and loses the historical narrative. He ends by focusing on the christocentric nature of the Psalms, and actually restricts his discussion of Old Testament music to the Psalms.

His treatment of New Testament music is similarly fragmentary. He restricts the discussion here to the canticles. Again, there is a theological interpolation on Christology which is not really necessary or helpful. The same is true of his discussion of the work of Christ, and of ecclesiology versus eschatology (52-54). Does a history of Christian music need this much theology? I suspect not.

In his discussion of the early church, he accurately points out the apostolic aversion to instruments and preference for vocal music, carefully documenting the patristic opposition to the instrumental music of theatre, spectacle, and war, as anti-Christian, immoral, and lustful. In trying to refute and undermine this proscription on instruments, he invokes the old "Jerusalem vs. Athens" dichotomy, and the neo-Platonic anti-body theology.

There is a good description of the modes and types of chant which evolved in the patristic church. But then he returns to his priestly/prophetic Old
Testament theology in commenting on the Solesmes style of interpreting this chant. His description of the Carolingian imposition of liturgical uniformity is too brief and sketchy to be of much help. One of his constant refrains is that the music of faith is the peoples’ music. Here he dates the clear takeover of the peoples’ music by clerics in the twelfth to thirteenth century, just before the time of the Reformation.

He elaborates the late medieval view of music as an intellectual activity separated from actual sound. He uses this once again to strike out at the priestly ideal, emphasizing the separation of the common people from their music. But one wonders, did the average medieval worshiper really get so little out of the great polyphonic tradition? He discusses the extra-ecclesiastical and secular/popular forces, so important in their effect on late medieval and early renaissance music. He also examines some of the monastic variants in music, including the Benedictine, Cistercian, and Franciscan influences.

There is a good summary of Luther on music. However, is it accurate to say, as he does, that Luther was not a systematic thinker (144)? He provides a good comparison of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin on music, and expands on how this influences us today, even including how Lutherans have adopted some of Zwingli’s and Calvin’s ideas on music. He elaborates also on post-Tridentine Roman Catholic diversity in music in spite of the strictures placed on church music by Trent. There is also a brief discussion of the Anglican and Anabaptist music traditions. In fact, a whole chapter is dedicated to Psalm-singing controversies among Puritans, Baptist, and Quakers. This too appears somewhat detached from the rest of the narrative, and is of limited interest. Furthermore, his connection of this to high-church musical performance and evangelical praise groups appears to be a little bit strained!

The post-Reformation period is well handled. There is a good chapter on English hymnody, touching on the important figures: Watts, the Wesleys, Doddridge, Steele, Newton, Cowper, and the hymnists of the Welsh Revival. He accurately notes the negative influence of romanticism. Back on the continent, he gives a fair and balanced view of the Moravian and Pietist relationship to church music as basically “going with the flow” of seventeenth and eighteenth century culture. This is one of the best parts of the book, especially the analysis of the interaction of Lutheran Orthodoxy and Pietism. Then he shifts back to the development of baroque music, tonality, and drama in music. He also deals creatively with how concerted music drew away from the peoples’ song during the baroque period. There is a treatment of the development of the oratorio, masses, requiems, and passions, but only a meager single page on J. S. Bach.

His discussion of early American developments notes the early influence of the French and Spanish in North America, but deals mainly with the eastern USA, making only a few references to church music in Canada. He identifies the 1801
Camp Meeting at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, as the source of the modern "revival" phenomenon and the rise of evangelicalism, tracing the growth of the gospel song and chorus from this point.

Other more "traditional" renewals are briefly discussed: those connected with Solesmes, Pius X, Mercersburg, and the Oxford and Tractarian Movements are mentioned. He also gives adequate space to the rural shape-note tradition, referring also to the music of the Shakers, Mormons, and Salvation Army.

Finally, he presents a dozen or so recent themes for consideration. There is a good treatment of emotion in evangelicalism. However, one misses completely any discussion of twentieth-century church music: there is only a list of names and dates. He is best here on the "Hymn Explosion" of the second half of the twentieth century.

In a postscript, he provides a sociological description of interchurch ecumenism and intra-church conflict in our times. He revisits the current "worship wars" and their musical provenance in the marketplace, coming down hard against the idea of marketing Christianity and its music. "The world that overhears the clamour can only assume the partisans believe that truth is whatever will sell and that God, if there be such, has little or nothing to do with the deliberations. As usual, most of the church goes on singing its song to God as best it can in a wide variety of ways in spite of some of its leaders and their battles, thankful for whatever help it gets to sing, and saddened by whatever stifles it" (318). This may be true, but it misses the critical perspective of the continued tension between church and culture.

Westermeyer mirrors the diversity and confusion in church music today. This is too bad, for we need more clarity, not more confusion! Just the same, there is a lot here that you will not find elsewhere between two covers, and the book is stimulating to read. However, as a textbook for a course in church music, this reviewer has found that it needed considerable supplement.

The book is finely and elegantly published, with sidebars on each page to identify the themes, and footnotes rather than endnotes. There is one obvious error: John Bell, the contemporary Scot who composes for the Iona community, was not born in 1920, as reported on page 307. The book concludes with a biblical/musical/theological/historical time line, a thirty-page bibliography, and general and scriptural indices, all very helpful.

Don Nevile
Highwood Lutheran Church
Calgary, Alberta