Hymns Old and New
by Alan Sharp

Poem that cracked the secret of alchemy

Continuing our look at the three hymns by George Herbert in 'Singing the Faith'.

LAST time we considered StF 56,"King of Glory, King of Peace".

The next hymn in our hymn book is also by Herbert, "Let all the world in every corner sing".

The two hymns are complementary. The former tells that our praise of God can be everywhen: "Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise thee".

The second hymn affirms that his praise can be everywhere: "The heavens are not too high … the earth is not too low … Let all the world in every corner sing: my God and King!" In his collection of poetry, "The Temple", Herbert headed this hymn "Antiphon (1)". It was set out chorus, versicle, chorus, versicle, chorus. The antiphon was achieved by the congregation singing the chorus and the priest singing the versicles (Herbert was an excellent singer).

Medium or larger congregations could achieve a similar effect by splitting the voices: lines one and two and seven and eight to be sung by all; three and four women only, five and six men's voices.

The hymn lends itself to imaginative accompaniment, if the necessary forces are available. On the organ I only use the pedals for the "chorus"; worship groups could suggest to their percussionists that they exercise discretion in the "versicle" sections, reserving their fortissimos for the chorus, especially the final one.

"All the world" in the first line is identified in the succeeding versicles: heaven and earth, community (church) and individual (the heart).

The second half of the chorus, "My God and King", recurs at the beginning of the third hymn by George Herbert in StF (668), "Teach me, my God and King".

This poem was called "The Elixir" in his poetry collection. The title refers to the search by mediaeval alchemists to find a substance, the "elixir" or the "tincture", that was believed to have the power to transmute base metals into gold. It was also known as the philosopher's stone. They never found it.

However, Herbert did. However humble our actions, if we can see them as being done for our God and King, they will be turned to gold. Not only our actions; there is a double blessing:

who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
makes that and the action fine.

The action, "drudgery divine", and the room are both transmuted, both become "fine".

My love of Herbert's poetry does not rest solely upon three hymns in StF!

Do explore some of his other verse if you can. Among my favourites are "Love (III)" — "Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back" and "The Pulley" — "When God at first made man".

Both of these are in "Wounded I Sing", a book for Advent by Richard Harries, but equally suitable as a Lent book. There is a poem by Herbert for each day, followed by the author's helpful notes and reflection on it. Lent begins on March 5.

Music for Holy Week

It's interesting how even churches from the same tradition can have very different approaches to aspects of worship, says Paul McDowell.

THE church at which I'm organist has no organ music whatever on Good Friday, so for the past two years I've played at another church in the same city, of the same denomination, at which they sing all 20 verses of "At the cross her station keeping" (see the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book, number 185, for a shortened version).

Two other churches at which I'm associated, of another denomination but both the same, have vastly different musical attitudes; one singing mostly post-2010 worship songs, the other with a robed choir, weekly motets and the occasional Choral Evensong.

All four of these churches have bucked the recent trend by actually increasing attendance at Sunday worship since lockdown. This may be due to increased population — there are new houses everywhere — but it is encouraging.

All of the above churches follow the practice, common in many churches but rare in Methodism, of reading the entire Passion narrative of one of the Gospels on Palm Sunday, or elsewhere in Holy Week.

This practice started as early as the fourth century; in the eighth century singing began to be introduced and by the 13th century different singers were used for different characters in the narrative. Later on, extra words began to be used, firstly as introduction and conclusion and then intermingling with the Gospel text.

One of the most famous Passion texts was that of Brockes, whose poetry was used by Handel, Telemann and several other composers and was adapted by J S Bach for use in his first Passion setting (St John).

The use of hymn texts (chorales) to reflect on the Passion became common at this time.

An anonymous St Luke Passion, copied out for use by Bach around 1730 and incorrectly attributed to him, contained no fewer than 32 chorales. Two of the most popular British Passion settings, Stainer's "Crucifixion" (1887) and Maunder's "Olivet to Calvary" (1904), follow a similar pattern, using Bible passages, free poetry and hymns.

The interpolations and hymns of "Crucifixion" were by W J Sparrow-Simpson, who was then in his 20s. He died in 1952 at the age of 92, so the words (including "All for Jesus") only came out of copyright on January 1, 2023. Victorian and Edwardian tastes lasted long; "Crucifixion" is still popular and a former deputy organist of mine much preferred

Maunder to Bach.

Jonathan Miller's 1994 semi-staged version of Bach's "St Matthew Passion", in which the singers and instrumentalists enter fully into the action, can be found on YouTube.

At two points in the Passion the unusual oboe da caccia can be seen and heard. Literally meaning "hunting oboe", it's named because of its shape (curved through 90 degrees) and its large brass bell. Musicians had no idea what an oboe da caccia was, as it had fallen entirely into disuse since the late 18th century, until 1973 when a curator in Stockholm, Cary Karp, realised he had one in his own museum and that there was another in Copenhagen. Both were unplayable and the combination of a brass bell with an oboe seemed so unlikely that suspicions were raised that someone was pulling their leg, but when a copy was made it sounded so beautiful — mellow and supple — it was realised that this extinct instrument had been brought back to life.

In a completely different genre, in 2006 the BBC organised the Manchester Passion, in which the music of Manchester bands such as the Smiths, the Stone Roses, New Order, Oasis and M People commented on Jesus' death and resurrection.

The Bishop of Manchester remarked at the time that the BBC production had "a sincerity and an ability to shock and connect that is not far removed from how it must have been on the first Good Friday".

Then "Gareth Malone's Easter Passion", shown last year on BBC One and available on BBC iPlayer, was an intensely moving account of eight novice singers being taught to sing most of Bach's "St John Passion".

Do also search, if you have the time, for Zelenka's "Lamentations", Haydn's "Seven Last Words" (there are at least three different versions, try the string quartet version) and Buxtehude's "Membra Jesu nostri".

Paul McDowell is a member of ArtServe and is organist of St Oswald's church in Peterborough.

New Order was one of the bands who contributed to the BBC's Manchester Passion.