

Manuscript

Liturgical Music by Michael F. McConnell

For many years Director of St Joseph's Cathedral Choir in Dunedin, Michael McConnell is no stranger to the practicalities of music in liturgy, and it shows in several recent compositions of his for the mass. In the main these are settings of the interfaces between priest and people, those bits whose importance is greater than the time it takes to sing them: the Great Amen, Memorial Acclamations, Our Father, Rite of Sprinkling with Holy Water and a setting for the Penitential Rite 3. If nothing else is to be sung, let at least those bits be sung, the post-conciliar document *Musicam Sacram* advised us.¹

But think about the way the community between priest and people is often portrayed at the culmination of the Eucharistic Prayer: the celebrant sings a doxology on any pitch of his own choosing, then the organ or music group comes in with some response or other of their own choosing - in a completely different key. This approach hardly reinforces that sense of unity

between celebrant and congregation which the Council was so eager to promote. Michael McConnell's Great Amen from *The Eucharistic Prayer: Memorial Acclamations* shows a way round this problem: after a chantlike doxology the old two-pitch Amen is sung, followed by a three-bar setting in four-part harmony. Everybody can come in in unison and the choir provides the harmonies, so that whatever pitch the celebrant picked the doxology would just flow naturally into the Amen. The vocal range is not wide, so a choir is unlikely to come unstuck if the priest pitches his bit rather too high or rather too low.

These harmonies are very simple; but even so, what if there isn't a choir? Treat the harmonisation as an organ or piano accompaniment and give the celebrant a discreet note first, as one would for the memorial acclamations, all of which have a very brief organ introduction foreshadowing the first three notes or so of the response. As these are all distinctive, there is no problem for the

congregation in knowing what to sing and again there is an organic flow at this point. There are also settings of three memorial acclamations approved for use in New Zealand. As these all have different verbal introductions, the organ introduction is not so crucial at this point and in the second McConnell does not use one. The third is punctuated with fanfare-like chords using the resources of the pipe organ for which it was clearly designed, but it would also work on the piano. Copies are available from the composer for \$10.00.

McConnell's *Rites of the Mass* contains a Rite of Sprinkling which is an English adaptation of *Asperges me* for cantors and congregation, with a modal chordal harmonisation for keyboard. Douglas Mews' *Lo I saw water* is also reproduced here, and the penitential rite uses the Latin *Kyrie Eleison* from the litany, again for cantor, congregation and simple keyboard accompaniment. The whole Dismissal Rite is included, with a choral harmonisation of 'thanks be to God': it might be more helpful to the congregation if one voice-part at least doubled their line, which the altos could easily do. Once more copies are available from the composer for \$10.00.

The *Our Father* is designed for congregation and SATB choir: it again could be sung unaccompanied. It is in a kind of aeolian F sharp minor, but its join after the priest's 'deliver us, Lord' isn't quite so smooth: his cadence moves from E, whereas the congregation have to hit the raised leading-note E#. But a snip at \$5.00.

O Sapientia, the one piece which isn't a setting for the mass ordinary, is a slight puzzle. An Advent meditation for unison voices and organ, it intercuts lines from *O come o come Emmanuel* with lines from the chants which provided the texts for this well-loved hymn: the great O-antiphons of Advent. The music for the antiphons is found in our oldest tenth-century sources; the tune for the hymn dates from the fifteenth century. Conceptually, these tunes are some 500 years apart. Yet they are both dorian-mode tunes so they can be harmonised with the same five basic chords. A solo voice sings the hymn lines whereas the choir responds with the plainsong lines, and this is what seemed odd: to take something so plainly congregational and treat it as a solo. There are three verses, each one rising in pitch so the piece begins on D but ends in F sharp, a trick more beloved of popular music than of respectful

plainsong harmonisations. The melodic and harmonic joins between the two originals work better in verse 1 than in verse 3, owing to the way that chants do not have even phrase-lengths the way hymns do. I wondered about the purpose of the composition - to introduce chant in a context where it won't be known, such as at school? - and the frustration-level for performers and listeners alike in having a favourite hymn interrupted all the time. Your brain marches on wanting 'rejoice! rejoice!' and all you get is piece of chant harmonised with ethereal treble triads. It takes about three minutes to perform: wouldn't a longer piece still fit as music for offertory or communion, yet be more effective by developing its material more slowly, perhaps starting with the chant or perhaps using either the hymn or the chant as a refrain rather than using both completely in this rather schematic manner? Unlike the other pieces, which are computer-set, *O Sapientia* is hand-written; and costs only \$5.00.

Handwritten or computer-set, the editions are user-friendly apart from a tendency to put the text under the bass line; and it would be easier for singers, especially in the plainsong-generated free-rhythm pieces, if the convention of

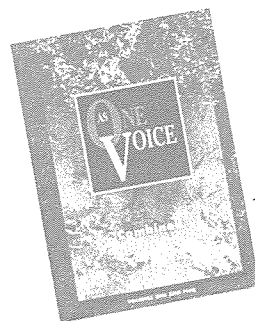
separate quavers for each syllable was observed and the syllables were separated by hyphens. The priest's recitation in the Our Father is a model here; the Memorial Acclamations and the Rite of Sprinkling with Holy Water were hard to read off at first because of these factors.

(Footnotes)

¹ *Musicam Sacram* (Instruction on Music in the Liturgy), art. 29.

Dr Fiona McAlpine

*Scores are available from
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