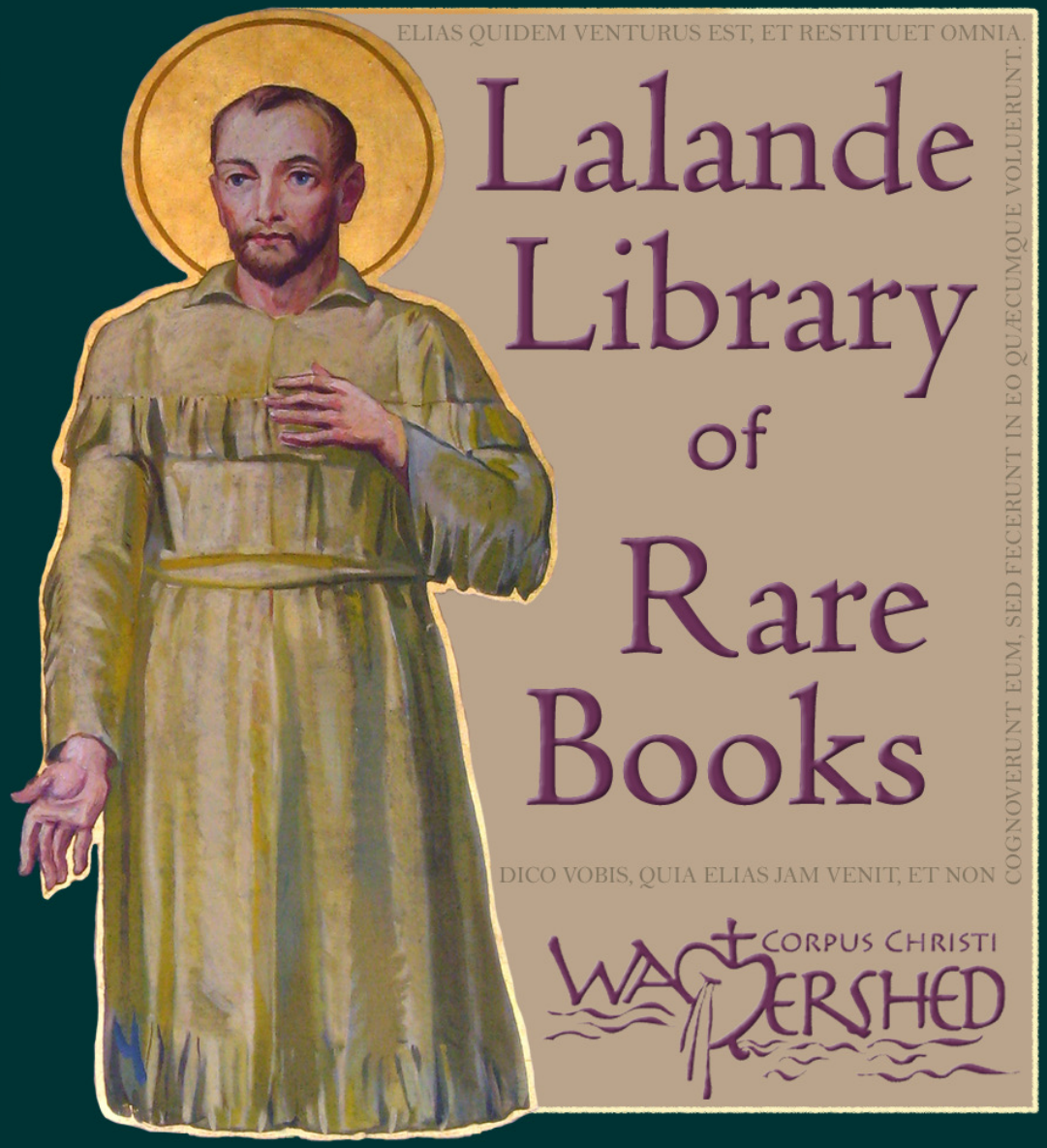
Saint Jean de Lalande, pray for us!



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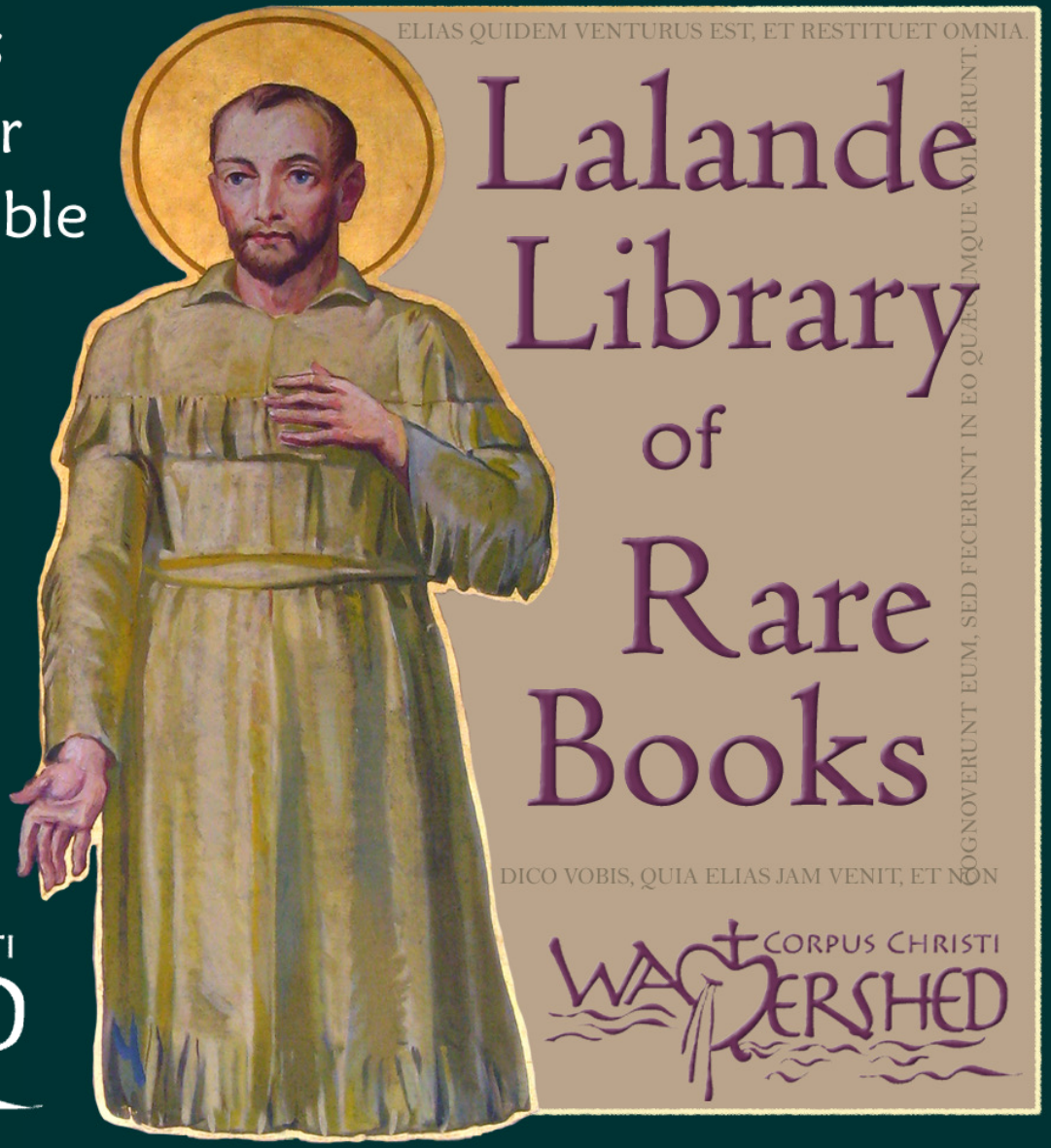

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STUDY NOTES No. 11

THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF PLAINSONG

by

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The *Study Notes* series is intended to help all who have not the time for exhaustive study, but wish to know more about various aspects of church music. In each booklet there is a list of other books recommended for further study for those readers who wish to broaden their knowledge. The aim in each essay is to present fundamental facts in a concise way and to offer practical advice. Both the beginner and the more experienced church musician will find it invaluable to have the complete series in their library.

A number of experts have been invited to contribute to this series and we have left each to write in his own individual way.

GERALD H. KNIGHT
Director

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THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF PLAINSONG

PRELUDE

PLAINSONG is a complete and fully-developed art form, capable of highly sophisticated emotional expression. It is pure monody, with intensely subtle features of rhythm and melody, and its complete freedom from harmonic thought is one of its great virtues. It is true linear music, where one thinks horizontally along an undulating line, and was never designed to be accompanied, since the addition of any instrumental form of expression other than the human voice itself, was not envisaged by the musicians of the early Church.

Points such as these show that the practice of adding an accompaniment to plainsong is theoretically indefensible. The accompaniment cannot improve the chant in any way, since the vocal line stands perfectly well on its own; the addition of harmony, which involves vertical thought on the part of the player, is bound to tarnish, to some extent, the linear beauty of the chant. So the organist must realise that he cannot prevent the appearance of this imperfection; what he can do is to make sure that his accompaniment causes the plainsong the least amount of harm.

But there is another side to the picture: if there were not, it would be pointless for the writer to continue. In spite of these perfectly logical arguments on behalf of unaccompanied plainsong, the organist does fulfil one very important function: he helps the singers to maintain pitch. This is the only real purpose of plainsong accompaniment, but it is a most necessary one; for many choirs have difficulty in singing plainsong absolutely in tune: some, indeed, do not even keep to the proper pitch when they are being accompanied, let alone when they are not. Few things sound more excruciating than plainsong sung out of tune, and there can be no excuse for it when there is an organ accompaniment.

Although the maintenance of pitch is the only admissible reason for accompanying plainsong, the presence of the organ does have other advantages. It has been said, for instance, that unaccompanied plainsong is, to the uninitiated, stark, austere and frequently dreary. This may be so, but it is also true to say that an accompaniment can mellow this austerity simply because it shares with the listener the common ground of harmony; unaccompanied monody is rarely heard these days, but harmonised music is with us all the time

Another point in favour of the organist's presence arises, paradoxically, when he ceases to play. It is the custom in many churches to mark the seasons of Lent and Advent by a more than

usual amount of unaccompanied singing, and if plainsong, where it is normally accompanied during the rest of the year, is left without organ at these times, the contrast can be such that it helps the listener to appreciate more greatly the beauty of the vocal line, unfettered by harmonic bonds. Such a practice can also aid the choir, since the singers will come to realise how difficult it is to keep the correct pitch and to judge intervals accurately, when singing in unison and without harmonic assistance from the organ. Choirmasters will find that prolonged unaccompanied plainsong can do a lot towards improving a chorister's aural capabilities.

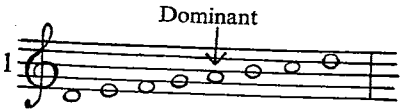
PSALMS AND CANTICLES

It is essential that the accompanist should possess the singer's knowledge of the melodies, otherwise he cannot hope to accompany them with ease. This important fact is sometimes not realised, with the result that the organist is never at one with the singers. So often players are just that little bit behind the choir in their accompaniment, and so are far more hindrance than help; nobody can sing plainsong with any rhythmic flow, if he is permanently retarded by an unenlightened and earthbound accompanist. The organist must sing the chant mentally himself, if his accompaniment is going to be fluent enough to match the flexibility of the plainsong.

The choirmaster will find that a particular reciting note for psalms and canticles will suit his choir and building better than another, and the organist, if he be not the same person, must be able to find the correct key to accommodate the reciting note and the mode in which it is placed. Where boys are singing on their own, either B or B flat will be found to be a convenient note for recitation. For boys with men or for men only services, A is usually the most suitable note, although B flat may be used if the amount of singing involved is small.

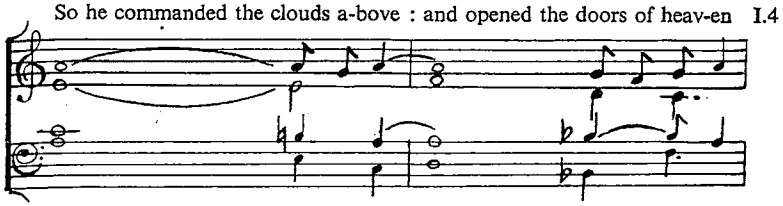
Let it be assumed, for sake of example, that the choir is to recite on A; the organist must therefore play in such a key that will cause the dominant of the Mode to fall on A. Mode I will thus appear as follows:

Ex. 1



These are the true notes of Mode I and so no transposition is needed to allow the dominant to become A. For Tone I, therefore, the organist may use any of the above notes in his harmony, thus:

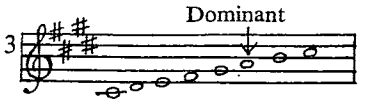
Ex. 2



It will be seen in this example that B flat is used as well as B natural. This is the only accidental which is allowed in plainsong and its use in Tone I helps to avoid the occurrence of the tritone, B - F; the flat should be written in when required and not made into a key signature: the proper key signature for Mode I untransposed is as for C major.

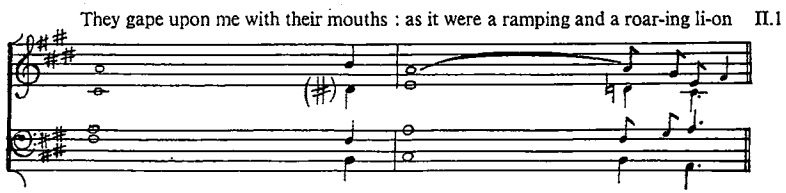
Mode II runs from A below to A above Middle C and since the dominant falls on F, it is too low to use untransposed. In order to set the dominant on A, the Mode must be transposed up a major third. For harmonic purposes, this is the same thing as bringing C up to E, and so the key signature will become four sharps:

Ex. 3



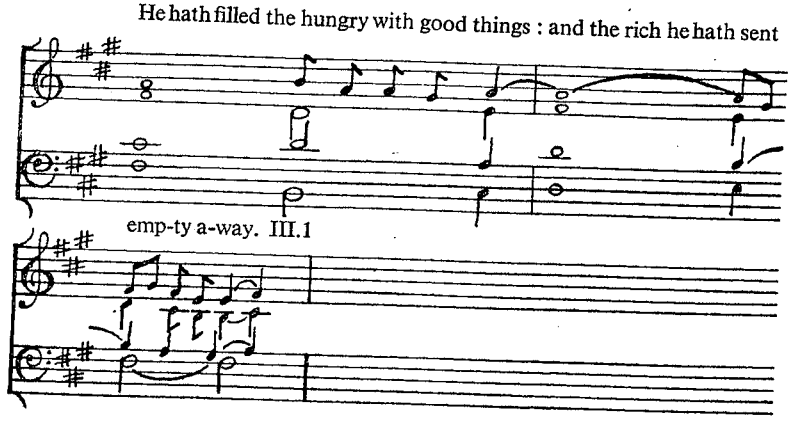
All these notes may be used in the harmony for Tone II and the optional B flat, which has also been raised a major third, has become D natural. This note should appear more frequently than the D sharp in this Tone, since the use of the latter will be found to give a peculiarly piquant effect in the harmony, a device which gains from sparing use:

Ex. 4



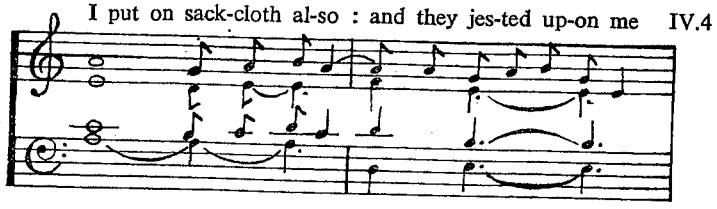
Mode III runs from E to E and the dominant, being C, is too high on which to recite: so to bring it down to A, the whole Mode must be transposed down a minor third: this will give a key signature of three sharps for Tone III. In this case, the optional B flat has become G natural, and this may occasionally be used in the harmony to provide variety. Care must be taken, however, not to produce false relations, since G sharp occurs in the mediation of the chant. It may well be best, therefore, to ignore the accidental in this Tone:

Ex. 5



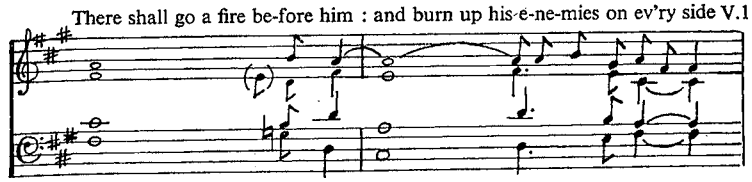
In Mode IV, the dominant falls on A, so Tone IV is left untransposed and there is no key signature. As in Tone III, the accidental (in this case B flat) is almost impossible to use, because of the frequent occurrence in the Tone of B natural. It is not easy to achieve variety in accompanying this Tone; this is due to the limited number of chords available and the need to avoid the tritonic interval B - F:

Ex. 6



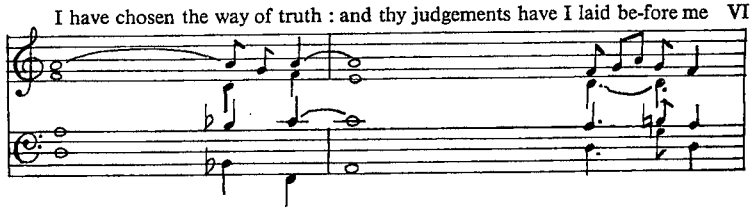
The dominant of Mode V is C, and so, as in Tone III, a key signature of three sharps is used for Tone V. The transposed B flat, G natural here, may be included more frequently in this Tone than in Tone III, but it should not occur too often, since the effect gained will soon pall if the note is used to excess:

Ex. 7



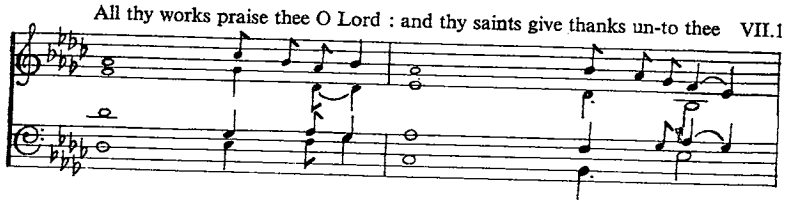
Tone VI may be left untransposed, since A is the dominant. It is wise to use the B flat frequently in this Tone, as in Tone I, to avoid the tritone, but this will inevitably give a tonal feeling of F major in the accompaniment, especially with the use of the perfect cadence at the end: the occasional B natural will bring back the modal character, as will the employment of varied cadences:

Ex. 8



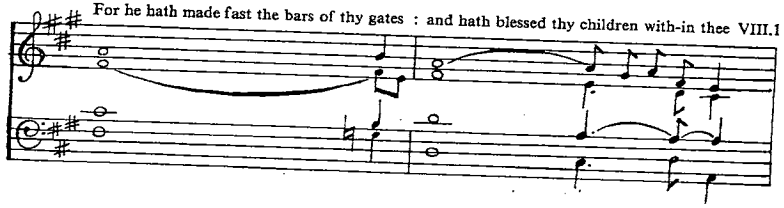
Mode VII lies too high for normal use, the dominant being D: to make recitation on A possible, it must be transposed down a fourth. The key signature will be one sharp, and as F sharp is the seventh note of this scale, F natural may be used discreetly, but with advantage. The mediation of this Tone lies higher above the reciting note than in other Tones, so it may be found less of a strain to recite on A flat, especially if the psalm is being sung by men only:

Ex. 9



Tone VIII is treated in much the same way as Tone V, being transposed down a minor third, and having a key signature of three sharps. G natural may appear in the harmony, but in moderation:

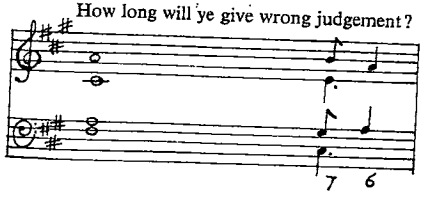
Ex. 10



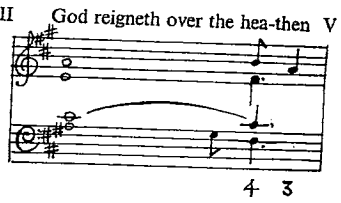
HARMONY

THE accompanist is necessarily rather restricted in the number of chords he may use, since these may contain only the notes of the Mode being accompanied. He is free to use common chords in root position and in the first inversion, but not in the second inversion. In Tone VIII, for example, only the chords of D major, F sharp minor and A major may be used to accompany the reciting note A. Diatonic sevenths may be included in the mediation and ending, provided they resolve, and amongst suspensions and appoggiaturas allowed, these three will be found useful:

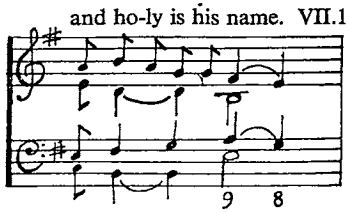
Ex. 11A



Ex. 11B



Ex. 11C

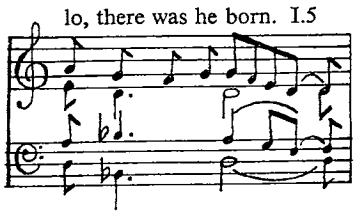


It is hardly necessary to add that the basic rules of good harmony should be observed and that chords should progress from one to the other in a musical fashion.

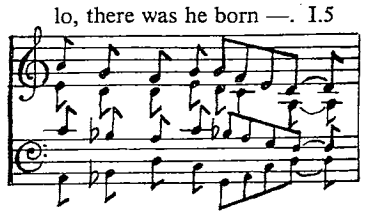
It is wise to keep the accompaniment as simple as possible; fancy harmonies and thick turgid writing are out of place, because attention will at once be drawn away from the chant to the accompaniment. The organist must therefore ensure that his playing does not obtrude in any way; if it does, then the plainsong is spoilt and the organ might just as well be left alone altogether.

Simplicity, however, does not mean dullness and there are many ways in which the accompanist can achieve variety and produce an artistic piece of work. He should see that he does not begin or end every verse with the same chord, but that he uses the chords at his disposal in rotation; he should have at least three different cadences at his fingertips and should try to avoid, as far as possible, having a change of chord on an unaccented syllable: the flow of the chant is often upset by the use of too many chords in the accompaniment. Ex. 12, for instance, is better than Ex. 13:

Ex. 12



Ex. 13



It is wise, when on the reciting note, not to change the chord beneath it, unless there is a break in the singing, as at a full stop, a question mark or breathing point. The custom of changing the chord beneath the reciting note on every accented syllable that occurs, makes for a feeling of restlessness and is best avoided.

TEXTURE

IT IS A pity that so few organists take the trouble to explore the possibilities of variety in the texture of their accompaniment; those who play in four parts all the time show a distinct lack of imagination and should not be surprised if their accompaniment sounds dull. There is no need always to play the notes that are being sung. Thin out the texture to three or even two parts from time to time; the use of one part alone is often very refreshing, provided it makes good counterpoint with the chant. In certain circumstances, some verses of a psalm or canticle might well be accompanied by five-part chords; this practice can be very effective in the tenor register, particularly when accompanying men's voices. Care should be exercised, however, in the choice of stop for this method: a flute will sound muddy in this context, whereas a dulciana will not.

PITCH

IF VARIETY and interest can be obtained through considering the different aspects of texture, then the same can be achieved with regard to pitch; just as it is not necessary to play in four parts all the time, so is it undesirable to use only the middle of the keyboard. Verses sung by boys only may often be accompanied at a higher pitch, with the chant threading its way through a series of held chords. Men only verses may also be accompanied in this way but the organist is advised to keep his own bass (either in the left hand or on the pedals coupled to the manual with no pedal stop) below the pitch of the men's voices; if the chant goes below the bass of the accompaniment, consecutive octaves may well occur between treble and bass. Well-spaced chords in the bottom half of the keyboard sound effective with men's voices, as do chords where the hands are far apart, the chant filling in the gap between them.

SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

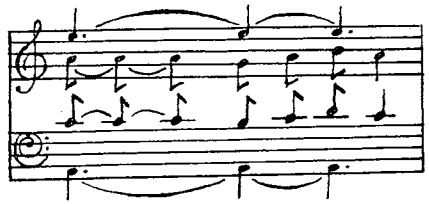
IN ORDER to achieve a sense of continuity and to provide a smooth background to the singing, tied notes should be freely used. Notes common to two chords should always be tied together and there is no need to play repeated notes at all, even if they occur in the chant.

The organist should try to make his accompaniment a texture of unbroken sound. He should especially remember to hold the last chord of the first half of a psalm verse over the vocal break at the colon until the second half begins. Those accustomed to accompanying Anglican chanting may find this a little awkward at first, since the pause at the colon is so much longer in plainsong, but they will realise that it is at this point that the singers can hear the organ clearly and can check with the held chord whether or not they are perfectly in tune.

Excessive chord changes should be avoided as much as possible; one way to accomplish this is to maintain long held notes, provided they fit in with the harmonic pattern, in the manner of a tonic or an inverted tonic pedal:

Ex. 14

They are brought down and fal-len IV



In accompanying psalms and canticles, be sure to play over the intonation of the Tone at the pitch at which it is to be sung; it is easy to forget this unless the accompaniment is written out. It is customary to leave the first half of verse 1, as sung by the cantor, unaccompanied; similarly, the organ may well be left untouched in those passages in Introits, Graduals and other parts of the Proper normally sung by one or more cantors.

There are some who accompany the first half of the Gloria in open octaves, in order to mark the fact that it is not an integral part of the psalm; this is a laudable custom insofar that it makes this differentiation, but there is no need for it to become a hard and fast rule. Normal harmony may well be used at this point in the case of Psalm 119, reserving the use of octaves for the Gloria after verse 176, or when the next psalm is sung to the same Tone.

RHYTHM

THE rhythm of plainsong is so subtle and delicate that it can easily be upset by the slightest indiscretion on the part of the organist. But if every effort is made to avoid:

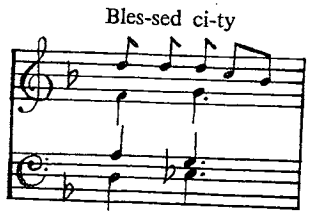
(*a*) The use of too many chords.

(*b*) The changing of chords on unaccented syllables.

then the rhythm of the chant in psalms and canticles can be preserved. Good harmonic progressions are essential if the accompaniment is to be at all musical or artistic, and the presence of too many chords is often brought about by poor harmony; moving from one chord to another on an unaccented syllable, however, is sometimes unavoidable with the English language but its effect should be minimised as much as possible.

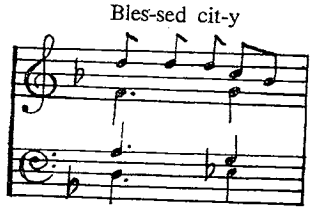
It is in Antiphonal, as opposed to Responsorial, plainsong where difficulties present themselves; when groups of notes appear in any quantity, conflict arises between the rhythm of the words and of the music. In *Urbs Beata* (E.H. 169) the word accents encourage us to play:

Ex. 15



but the accent on the fourth note, being the first of a group of two, demands that we should play:

Ex. 16



A reconciliation between the two opposing rhythms can be achieved to some extent but it can only be a compromise; if the organist bears in mind that the primary accents (those places where the musical and word accents coincide) almost invariably command a change of chord, his accompaniment will be in keeping with the main rhythmical requirements of the chant. It is the secondary accent (a musical stress without a syllabic one or vice versa) which creates difficulties, for so many things have here to be taken into account: the necessity of a new chord by virtue of a different note in the chant, the number of chords already used, the adherence to sound harmonic progressions—these are but a few of the points to consider.

THE OFFICE HYMN

WITH regard to these rhythmical problems, it therefore stands to reason that any "varied" accompaniment to the plainsong hymn must be done with care and previous preparation. Thus it is far wiser for the inexperienced player to keep to the accompaniments

provided in the hymn book than to venture into tracts unknown: any original efforts of this nature should be written out beforehand. In this connection, verses for boys alone may, like the psalms, be accompanied at a higher pitch with a thinner texture and an abundance of tied notes: *e.g.*, Walter Vale's accompaniment to the Veni Creator in the *Plainsong Hymn Book*.

A search through several hymn books may well reveal two or more different harmonisations of the same tune and the use of these would help towards the maintenance of interest and variety; the Advent office hymn *Creator of the stars of night*, for instance, provides one harmonisation at No. 1 in the *English Hymnal*, another at No. 45 in *Hymns Ancient and Modern Revised*, at No. 31 in the *B.B.C. Hymn Book*, and yet another at No. 13 in the *Plainsong Hymn Book*.

REGISTRATION

BEARING in mind the nature of plainsong accompaniment, a little common sense will determine what course one should follow in the selection of stops. The custom of the use of a single flute stop to accompany all plainsong from beginning to end may have much to recommend it in theory, but in practice it is exceedingly tedious; it may have arisen out of the fact that, in many cases, the small organ at the East end of certain Continental churches, which is used for plainsong accompaniment, has but one soft stop on it and that a flute or gedact. There is no reason why organists in the Anglican church should be so restricted; if several soft stops are available, let them be used, whether they be flutes or dulcianas, or whether they be four-foot stops played an octave lower or sixteen-foot stops an octave higher.

Considerable variety of tone colour can thus be obtained, with a little thought, as long as the accompaniment does not become too loud. The level of volume to which the organist may go, may be decided by asking the singers if they can hear the organ while they are singing; if they can, then it is probably too loud. The pause halfway through a verse of a psalm or canticle is the moment for them to listen to the organ; while they are singing they should be listening to themselves.

The organist must not be tempted, however, to shun austerity so thoroughly that he goes to the other extreme. Celestes, fancy registrations and the word-painting so beloved of some who accompany the Anglican chant, are utterly out of place; any sort of effect which causes the organ to become obtrusive must be firmly eschewed.

MISCELLANEOUS POINTS

1. Beware of using a four-foot stop an octave lower when men are singing, lest the true bass should disappear.
2. Dulcianas and other string-toned stops are often more effective in keeping singers in tune than flute-toned stops, because of their greater harmonic development. Certain flutes are so smooth in timbre and so lacking in harmonics that they are difficult to hear clearly at the colon, in spite of their excellent blending qualities.
3. Use single stops where possible. If the singers show signs of going out of tune, do not add a four-foot to an eight-foot stop but redistribute the accompaniment at a higher pitch. There is no reason why the swell pedal should not be brought into service as an aid towards good intonation, but it should be treated with discretion and care.
4. Select a different stop for each psalm and canticle, but do not chop and change about from verse to verse. Keep to the same stop for the whole psalm, unless it be inordinately long and a place for a change suggests itself.
5. Pedal stops of sixteen-foot pitch should rarely, if ever, be drawn, but that does not mean that the pedal board should be used as a foot-rest. A manual to pedal coupler alone enables chords of a wide compass to be employed and plenty of advantage should be taken of this facility.
6. Office hymns may need to be accompanied with a fuller tone than that used for psalms especially if they are sung by the whole congregation. Sixteen-foot pedal tone may well appear here in certain verses, such as the doxology.
7. If the singers are constantly under the note in one psalm (and there is a deplorably large number of choirs where this is so), put the next psalm, if it be not overlong, up a semitone; they will notice the change, especially if the Tones are similar, and be on their toes accordingly. Where either lack of concentration, inadequate listening or bad voice production is the cause of the flat singing, raising the general pitch in this way often gives better results than giving in to the singers and putting the next psalm down a semitone. If, however, the tessitura is becoming too high for comfort and the choir is finding it a strain, then obviously a downward adjustment in pitch should be made accordingly.

POSTLUDE

It is hoped that the foregoing remarks will be of some assistance to organists of Anglican Parish Churches where some plainsong is included in the services. It has not been possible, within the scope

of this booklet, to give anything more than a general outline of certain basic principles, and the reader will have noticed that the accompaniment of psalms and canticles has claimed the largest share of these notes. But then this aspect is the one that probably causes most concern among those who are required to accompany plainchant in the Church of England. For that reason, the accompaniment of the Propers and the Ordinary of the Mass has not been touched upon and, as far as the latter is concerned, published accompaniments are available.

Perhaps one of the most difficult things for an accompanist of plainsong to achieve is a sense of style. It is certainly the most important feature, for a player who has this ability, can make his accompaniment an artistic whole, at one with the chant, but at the same time capable of standing on its own; he can create in his playing a feeling of quiet inevitability, which matches perfectly the apparent agelessness of plainsong.

It ought to be stressed, however, that plainsong accompaniment is an art and by no means an easy one. Considerable skill and experience is required before facility is gained in improvising an accompaniment. For each verse of a psalm is different and raises varying problems of accent, rhythm and cadence; one cannot sit down and accompany a plainsong psalm as one would a psalm sung to an Anglican chant: for the plainsong Tones are so flexible that one set harmonisation will not do for every verse.

There is only one way to learn how to accompany plainsong properly and that is to do as much of it as possible, either at services or in one's own practice time, when the necessity of singing the chant oneself often helps towards a fluent and comprehensive style of playing. In this way, one can get to know by heart certain harmonies and progressions and can leave behind the arduous task of writing out everything in full, a practice which is most essential for a beginner and which must not be evaded or neglected, if acceptable standards are to be attained.

It is true to say that nothing can ruin plainsong more than an unprepared and musically incompetent accompaniment; once the organist realises that his playing must provide a background of sound over which the chant threads its ceaseless path, he should do everything in his power to ensure that his part is worthy of the superlative quality of this art-form, which needs no background, but only sacred words to give it full expression. No part of our musical heritage has had a longer history and yet remained fundamentally the same; there is every reason to suppose that plainsong will continue to enrich the worship of the Church as long as Christianity lives in this world. It has grown up hand in hand with the services of the Church and is an integral part of them. In character, it can be described as sung prayer and in its very nature is mirrored the eternity of God.

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