

The Christian West And Its Singers
The First Thousand Years
Christopher Page

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Comprising more than five hundred pages and weighing in at well over two kilos, this is indeed a big book. It is also a book with scholarly weight and scholarly insight of the highest order. The reader cannot but be stunned by the breadth of Dr Page's learning and the range of sources consulted. Without a doubt, it is a book which eclipses all previous writings on the subject. Should, however, such a description seem to suggest a plethora of academic minutiae likely to weary the reader, let me say at once that anyone remotely interested in the choral tradition will find himself constantly enthralled as he is taken back over the centuries of church music. Dr Page's book can confidently be expected to find a place in the library of anyone interested in the origin and development of the Christian West and its singers.

The Western Christian musical tradition begins hesitantly in house-churches. Later on, with the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, it grows in complexity and strength, eventually spreading throughout Europe. Dr Page shows how the choral tradition developed on the demise of the Roman empire, in the various barbarian kingdoms and later on in the Carolingian empire. He makes masterly use of epitaphs, images from the catacombs, chronicles, lives of the saints and a great many other written sources to illustrate the changing story. Finally, we learn of Guido of Arezzo and his invention of staff notation in the ninth century. Prior to this, there was no trace of notation, and the only way the melodies of the chants could be transmitted was by singers who knew the material by heart coaching others until they had mastered them. Agobard of Lyons is quoted as saying in 838 that too many singers study from earliest youth until the hoariness of old age" to learn their chants. He went on to say that, as a result, they neglected their "spiritual studies, that is to say, readings and the study of divine eloquence". And this, rather than anything purely musical, is what impelled Guido to invent the stave. Towards the end of the book, Dr Page remarks that the stave "provided the means for an aggressively expansionist civilisation to train singers relatively quickly so that the flag of the Latin liturgy could be planted in Spain, Livonia, in the Holy Land, and in a great many of the larger hospitals and chapels, often in rural or indeed wild locations. There is something to lament there, but also something to laud. The world has the Passions of J.S. Bach, and the late quartets of Beethoven, because monks, clergy and knights of the central Middle Ages sought a form of life with a rigour to match their consciences, then drained marshes, took boats along unchartered rivers or attempted to reclaim, at huge cost to themselves and to others, new lands for Christendom".

Today, it is not infrequently said that girls and women are now finally being 'allowed' in choirs where once they were not welcome. Indeed, there has been talk of battles being won! History provides a rather more nuanced perspective on the issue. "A singer in a church of 450-650 was generally appointed in much the same way as a gravedigger," we learn from a chapter in the book on schooling singers in the cathedrals between those dates. And in Rome, the fourth-in-command of the *schola* faced excommunication if the assignment of chants to individual singers was changed in any way during the course of the service! In fact, says Dr Page, the members of the *schola* did not enjoy much prestige.

Interestingly, we learn of how, even in Christianity's very early days, the singing boy was appreciated. At Carthage, the Catholics held the boys in great affection, and in the 470s, when the boys of the great orphanage of Byzantium sang, the people of Constantinople "flocked in crowds to hear them."

This review is but the briefest of sketches. For a fuller picture, place an order for the book with your bookseller!