

PERSPECTIVES ON CHURCH MUSIC

By Carl Schalk

Lessons from Christmases Past

In the countless services of "Lessons and Carols" held in countless churches throughout the world this past Advent and Christmas season, most, if not all, have included the singing of the anonymous 18th-century carol "O Come, All Ye Faithful." My guess is that the arrangement sung in the majority of those services was that of David Willcocks, long-time conductor of the choir of men and boys at Kings College, Cambridge, England, published over a half a century ago.

Willcocks' setting is worthy of careful examination by church musicians, both for what it does and for what it doesn't do, for its beauty, but especially for its utter simplicity.

The first five stanzas are set to one simple harmonization for either organ or choir. Stanza six introduces a treble descant, at the same time maintaining the basic harmony with only a few slight modifications.

Then stanza seven, the final stanza, begins with the organ in unison. The second phrase ends on the dominant chord, the pedal descending through the seventh degree of the scale, moving toward what one expects to be the tonic in first inversion. Instead, in a moment of genius, Willcocks chooses a diminished minor 7th chord, on "Word" in the phrase "Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing." By any standard it is a most arresting moment, the harmonic high point of the carol.

One lesson this Willcocks arrangement teaches us is that it takes only one striking chord to make a significant impression. If the entire carol had been replete with such chords in every phrase, the impact of that one diminished minor 7th chord would be lost in a sea of harmonic overload. When our attention is constantly being drawn primarily to the cleverness of the composer or performer, we are being drawn to the wrong place. Willcocks' setting avoids that temptation and is a clear demonstration of the slogan that "less is more."

A second lesson that arises from this example is the simple need for balance in the more general use of varied accompaniments. Does every hymn in every service need a varied accompaniment? Does each stanza of every hymn need its own unique setting? Does the overuse of this legitimate technique help or hinder better congregational singing?

The best answers to these questions can be arrived at with a related example. A fine pastor with whom I worked many years ago had a habit of

frequently—perhaps too frequently—using a particular rhetorical device in his preaching. I am certain that in his mind it was a useful technique. But to the listener, after a few times it became a distraction. That can easily happen to church musicians. The effective usefulness of any technique or particular skill, in preaching or in music, lies in knowing *when* and *when not* to use it.

Jan Bender, a church musician and composer whose name is familiar to church musicians everywhere, often remarked about the composer's eleventh commandment. It was simply: "Thou shalt not overdo." It is a lesson David Willcocks' simple, yet exquisite, setting of a familiar Christmas carol teaches anew every Christmas season.

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