
Performance practice in 18th-century Georgian psalmody

Sally Drage

Psalmody tune-books published in the 18th century invariably contain prefaces, which were primarily designed to provide singers with a basic grounding in musical theory. As an added bonus for present-day musicians, they may also include evidence of original performance practice. In her paper Sally Drage examines the technical content of some of these psalmody prefaces, and discusses their relevance to modern performances of gallery church music. Essentially this is a preliminary exploration and not a definitive overview, as, despite the excellent work of individuals, formal research into this music is still in its infancy, and much of the repertoire still awaits evaluation.

In order to keep the subject matter within a manageable time-span, I concentrate mainly on books written for the use of country parishes by actual teachers of psalmody, and I limit it to the 18th century because, although precise dating of the gallery period is still open to debate, most of its important musical development within the Church of England had occurred by 1800. As both Sir John Stainer (1900/01) and Bernarr Rainbow (1982) wrote in detail about the educational aspect of prefaces, I shall thankfully ignore the intricacies of the Gamut,¹ so that I can focus on more practical considerations such as time, pitch and ornamentation.

Authenticity

Perhaps I should begin by emphasising two points. First, I hold a personal conviction that the country psalmody and church musicians were not all bumpkins making nasty noises in west galleries. The psalmody's music, and indeed the literary content of their prefaces, imply a much greater level of education than is often presumed; and it would have been nonsensical to publish music which was beyond the capabilities of the performers. Secondly, although it is enlightening to know how the music was originally intended to be heard, truly authentic performance is impos-

sible – we are unavoidably affected by the legacy of two to three hundred years of musical growth; even more importantly, performance conventions which musicians took for granted may never have made it on to the printed page. It is also worth noting that, although we may gain some insight into performance practice by listening to existing recordings of similar vernacular material, they are also unavoidably affected by modern influences, and a purely imitative performance is always liable to be less acceptable than one which is also historically informed. In order to achieve the latter, information from psalmody prefaces can be extremely valuable, so long as we also examine the validity of such evidence.

Psalmody prefaces

Theoretical prefaces to music books can be traced back to medieval times, and it was traditional to add an aura of respectability by quoting earlier treatises. As 18th-century psalmody openly filched not only music but also text, comments such as John Playford's familiar advice (1674, p. 20) on 'Tuning the Voyce' regularly re-appear:

let the Sound come clear from your Throat, and not through your teeth, by sucking in your breath, for that is a great obstruction to the clear utterance of the Voyce ... observe that in Tuning your first Note of your plain Song, you equal it to the pitch of your Voyce, that when you come to your highest Note, you may reach it without Squeaking, and your lowest Note without Grumbling.

However, it is important to realise that these frequent references to poor performance may only be ritual warnings (as a mother cautions her child not to get run over), and are not necessarily verbatim reports of actual practice. Likewise, many prefaces contain similar introductory remarks, which give biblical and historical reasons for the use of music in church; emphasise the Christian duty and moral advantages of godly singing; and, most importantly, praise the current book at the expense of its competitors, by criticising the musical results obtained from inferior publications. Again it is debatable whether these are factual descriptions – they are more likely to be self-advertisement, as it was obviously in an

¹ A system of four-note solfa based on medieval solmisation, which continued to be used right into the 19th century.

author's own financial interests to emphasise that his book would remove all known faults.

Tempo

Although many factors must be taken into account in order to produce a convincing musical performance, the choice of a suitable speed is usually the first and most important consideration. Most psalmody prefaces explain how the correct tempo could be ascertained from the time signatures, which were still based, at least in theory, on the renaissance concept of proportional notation. In practice, as the original rules had broken down by the 17th century, the exact relationship between the different time signatures was often unclear, and explanations in prefaces vary. The eventual understanding was that the slowest common time, *c*, often described as *Adagio*, was one crotchet per second; the next, *♢*, *Largo*, was half as quick again; and *Retorted time*, *♠*, *Allegro*, was twice as fast as *Adagio* (e.g. Dav-enport, 1755, p. x; West, 1769, p. xi). Descriptions of triple time are more varied, and William Tans'ur (1746, p. 40) sensibly advised that although the different types of triple time may be compared to those of quadruple, a suitable tempo is better judged by the main subject of the words. He also suggested that triple time signatures should be modified by putting the appropriate common-time signature before them, or at least by indicating the tempo with *Adagio*, *Largo*, or *Allegro*. Many authors, including Tans'ur, recommended the use of a clock to check the speed of a crotchet per second. Daniel Robinson (1715, p. 16) wrote that the pendulum should be about 43 inches long, and Tans'ur (1746, pp. 41-6) described the Royal Standard pendulum as measuring $39\frac{2}{10}$ inches, but then three pages later in the same book, suggested using one of about 30 inches long.¹

Once the basic tempo was established it was maintained by a measured beat, still based on the renaissance 'tactus' or stroke (which was equivalent to the human pulse, and remained constant despite changes of rhythm and accentuation). Although the original *tactus* could be a real or im-

aginary beat, in the 18th century it seems that most singers made an actual movement of the hand or foot when practising. The majority of prefaces include instructions on how to maintain a steady movement – down, up for each minim in common time, or two down, one up for triple time. James Evison (1754, p. 11) provided a more complicated method of beating common time in crotchets: 'the first Crotchet, with your Fingers down; the second with the Palm of your Hand; the third, with your Hand up about two inches; and the fourth Motion two Inches higher', while at the end of the century, Thomas Firth (1794, p. 19) gave a warning which is still valid today: 'When there are a Number of Performers, the Time should be conducted by one, and not by a Number, and each performer to give Attention to the Conductor, and be guided entirely by him'.

It is, of course, questionable whether 18th-century church musicians kept exactly to these printed rules for choosing appropriate tempi, as they varied little throughout the century although the style of the music changed considerably, and so they may well be another example of the traditional content of prefaces.

Aural transmission and uncondacted singing from memory will always produce a slow response, and many descriptions from the beginning of the century emphasise the extremely slow speed of the 'old way' of metrical psalm singing, with 'lining-out' by the parish clerk. (One only has to listen to a rendering of 'Abide with me' at a football match, to realise how a tune can be dragged out by a large group of singers, without access to printed words or music.) Even in churches where lining-out was no longer used, the singing of solid homophonic psalms was still extremely slow, and would seem interminable today. *The Psalm-Singer's Necessary Companion* (Anon., 1700, p. A4) describes how congregations take 'great time in singing, especially betwixt every two Lines, or at every Line end, that their Voices may recover a little strength', and Robert Bennet (1718, p. 11) wrote: 'Observe, that between every two Notes you make a short Rest, while you may take your Breath to sing again; and by this Rule you will move your Voices together, and not sing before nor after another, which is unhandsome ...'

As the century progressed, more intricate psalm tunes appeared, and the music gained rhythmic variety, particularly with the introduction of triple time. This would have made it easier to keep a steady beat, and consequently the new tunes were likely to have been performed at a faster tempo. The introduction of instruments may also have increased the speed, as the musicians would probably have played for country

¹ There is some ambiguity as to whether Tans'ur is recommending a 30 inch pendulum rather than the Royal Standard of 39.2 inches. The difference between the two is not that great (39.2 inches gives MM 60 and 30 inches MM 68.5), although it seems to me that, on balance, Tans'ur prefers the slightly faster speed. The difference cannot be attributed to variation in the inch which had been standardised during the reign of Elizabeth I and remained fixed until 1824 when a minute adjustment was made (Connor, 1987). [CT]

dances as well as church services, and would have been used to playing more rhythmically.

Although all church music should be concerned primarily with worship, there are really two types: one involving the whole congregation; and the other performed by an elite group, who are often less concerned about the effect of their performance on God than on the mere mortals in the pews. This music, such as anthems, performed for human ears, was probably sung faster than the metrical psalms, as it excluded the congregation, and was performed by a choir who presumably practised together regularly. Thomas Moore (1750, p. 25) suggested that well-taught Companies of Singers who 'are very perfect both in Tune and Time, will perform their Musick in a higher key, and with more Ease to themselves, than those can who are perfect in neither'.

Modern musicians obviously need to be aware of original concepts, but we must also query how applicable these rules are to our performance of gallery music today, as our perception of speed in the 20th century is very different from that of the past. Whereas we are used to supersonic air travel, the horse was then the fastest means of transport; life was slower, and Sundays, at least in principle, were devoted exclusively to churchgoing. Now, as in the 18th century, slower tempi may be more acceptable in worship when the music is sung by the whole congregation, rather than when it is performed in a concert. However, further experimentation with the original tempi is still necessary, and we must always take notice of any tempo changes within a piece, as the proportional speeds are especially important. It is also worth noting that in the performance of anthems, choruses should be sung somewhat faster than the verses (Billington, 1784, p. 4).

Ornamentation

Once we have a general idea of a suitable speed, perhaps the next most important component in an historically informed performance is the use of ornamentation. Today, classical musicians, in particular, are still slavishly tied to the edited printed page, and may secretly envy the improvisational freedom of their jazz and folk colleagues. Many psalmody prefaces emphasise the general 18th-century concept – that ornamentation was a necessary addition to the published music. In particular, operatic performances of the day were heavily embellished, as is implied in the often-quoted satirical story from *The Spectator* (25 October 1711) about the lady from London who introduced 'above fifty Italian airs' into the singing of the 100th Psalm at a country service.

In the 18th century the trill was considered to

be the most important ornament, as indeed it may well be today. It was used especially on the penultimate note of a cadence, but also on all descending dotted notes, on a repeated note of the same pitch, and on all descending sharpened notes and semitones, unless they were shorter than a crotchet (for example: Birch, 1728, introduction [p. 7]; Tans'ur, 1746, p. 23). This exuberance explains why John Crompton (1778, p. xcix) warned that:

some persons have been so fond of this Grace, that they would shake almost every note, which is extremely improper, disagreeable, and awkward; spoiling the whole air of the tune. It is like a person taking a dose of the most salutary physic every day: by which practice, when really wanted, the benefit which should arise from it is lost.

and why John Birch (1728, introduction [p. 7]), having given numerous examples, also made a special plea that singers should not 'murder the Grace, by not giving to every Note its proper Sound'. Robert Barber (1727, p. 16) was especially circumspect, advocating that trills should only be sung by a few voices, and in not more than two parts. More controversially, Richard Upfeild (1718, p. 20) suggested that trills should be used on the last note before a cadence in order to maintain pitch.

Another important form of ornamentation was the use of passing or 'transition' notes to smooth out intervals in a melody. Minims a third apart became a run of dotted crotchets/quavers, and transition notes could also be used on larger jumps; some of John Crompton's (1778, p. ci) examples are almost re-workings of the tune (see Panel 1 overleaf).

Graces could also add dynamic and rhythmic interest to the music. Certain authors (e.g. West, 1769, p. ix) recommended accenting the first and third beats of common and triple time, and the use of the 'Messa di Voce' (as performed in bel canto) as a means of making long notes crescendo and then diminuendo (Tans'ur, 1772, p. 64). John Crompton (1778, p. ciii) even suggested dying away on the last note of a cadence, allowing 'the bass to be heard rather after the other parts'.¹ William Tans'ur (1772, p. 65), who can always be

¹ The tradition of sounding the bass note after other parts had finished is found on some barrel organs such as the instrument built by Bishop and now housed in the church at Llanfair Waterdine, Shropshire. It is also interesting to note that the practice was still common amongst 'finger' organists in the early part of the 20th century, although discouraged in later performance practice. [CT]

Panel 1 The use of passing notes

Example 1 The original tune

How hap - py then are they to whom
The Lord for God is known.

Example 2 John Compton's re-working

How hap - py then are they to whom
The Lord for God is known.

Source: Crompton (1778) p. ci
Transcription: © Sally Drage 1996

relied upon to make a pertinent comment, had rather more to say on this, complaining about:

that abominable, and new-fangled Practice of some of our ignorant and conceited Psalmists, which ... renders their Compositions as ridiculous as the Performers do themselves; who with many antick Gestures of Body, and wry Faces, end their Notes as harsh, stunt, and as loud as if they cough'd their Notes out of their Throats; and end with no more Tone of Musick than if they had struck them out of a Stone ... or, as if they had dropt themselves instantly from a high Precipice, instead of sliding down easy.

Although the prefaces contain detailed examples of ornamentation, actual grace notes are not necessarily printed in the music. However, their absence should not preclude their use, as there may well have been a technical reason for this, particularly in later publications: Robert Catchpole (1761, p. 4) apologised for the lack of ornamentation in his music, as it was printed from type rather than engraved. Some ornamentation is obviously a necessary part of an historically aware performance, but it was a skill which was particularly open to abuse, and the extent to which it is employed must depend not only upon the character of the music, but also upon the expertise and innate musicality of the performers.¹

¹ In the preface to the collection *Devotional Melodies Selected from the Works of the Best Composers* published in Dublin by George Allen, we are counselled to exercise discretion regarding the use of ornamentation: 'The introduction of musical graces requires great caution and judgement, and should be but rarely attempted; it being of much greater importance to sing correctly than to sing ornamentally. Nothing can be more detrimental to the improve-

Dynamics and voice production

It has been argued that gallery music should be sung without expression, as actual dynamics markings were rarely added to the music, but much of the writing created its own shading by the use of dialogue passages, fuguing entries and solos, and we would be wrong to presume that everything was necessarily performed at the same volume. Caleb Ashworth (1762, p. iv) suggested that verses 'should be sung by a soft and low voice alone, or by a few of the sweetest voices; the chorus by all, with a bold tone and accent', and Thomas Ravenscroft's rules (1633, preface) were widely quoted by later authors:

[Let] Psalms of Tribulation be sung with a low voyce and long measure ... Psalms of Thanksgiving be sung with a voyce indifferent, neither too loud nor too soft, and with a measure neither too swift nor too slow ... Psalms of Rejoycing be sung with a loude voyce and a swift jocund sound ... In all of which the observing of Time, Tune, and Eare, will produce a perfect Harmony.

Robert Catchpole (1761, p. xvi) emphasised that:

People should not sing as loud as they can, lest they make their Voice rough and unpleasing, except in some particular Cases; as when they sing the Words Strong, Strength, Noise, Thunder, Might, and such-like. When the Words Soft, Softly, Mild, Meek, Weak, Quiet, or any of the like Kind occur, they should be sung soft.

Most prefaces include some information on voice production. John Chetham's advice (1718, introduction [p. 7]) is another example of a statement which became public property: 'There is one Grace which is an Ornament to the whole Performance ... and that is a clear and distinct speaking of the Words, not altogether according to the Spelling, but after the best and most Polite way of Pronunciation.' Thomas Williams's comments (1778, p. 41) made it into American prefaces: 'The Treble requires Delicacy without Tameness. The Counter, a peculiar Sweetness. The Tenor, a medium between effeminate Softness, and masculine Robustness. And the Bass, Gravity, Pomp, Solidity of Voice, and bold Expression.'

This was the ideal, but Thomas Billington (1784, p. 3), who wrote spectacularly boring music and a magnificent preface, may have been nearer the truth. When commenting on soloists,

ment of a congregation in singing, than the frequent display of unauthorised flourishes and ornaments by the leader.' This collection was certainly published before 1853, the date inscribed inside the copy in the Noel Boston Collection, and probably appeared c. 1880. [CT]

he complained particularly about contra-tenors and tenors who ran out of breath and dropped a fourth, like an organ running out of wind, and reprimanded basses for 'taking a Fourth below the note that ought only to be sung; and so they have slid up to it; which has always reminded me of the yell of the Ghost in Richard the third.'

Obviously we should guard against such faults in our own performances, but it is definitely debatable whether we should agree with a recommendation by Robert Catchpole (1761, p. xvi), who, after making discerning comments about not over-emphasising the ends of words, goes on to state that if the word 'my' appears twice in a sentence, the second time it must be pronounced 'me', so that 'My King and my God' should be sung 'My King and me God'.

Pitch

As good performance practice relies on many factors, we also need to investigate the problems of 18th-century tuning. Our lifestyle affects our sense of pitch as much as our sense of speed, and equal temperament is normally used in modern performances, mostly because of the chromaticism of our music, but also because our musical education relies heavily on the use of keyboard instruments. Singers who learn music unaccompanied have a greater aural freedom, and can develop the ability to adjust the tuning according to the key – a useful accomplishment for gallery musicians, as the open fifths of much of the earlier repertoire only sound really effective when perfectly tuned.¹

Some early 18th-century prefaces imply that there was no real concept of a uniform pitch, presumably because there were so many local variants: before instruments were used, the overall pitch was often a matter of choice, and prefaces usually advise singers to pitch from the lowest note that the basses could comfortably sing. This may not always have been successful, as Thomas Moore (1750, p. 24) observed that tunes were more likely to be pitched too high rather than too low (which could explain some of the references by critics of gallery music to shrill singing). Indeed, some tunes were not even expected to be sung in

the printed key, and an alternative pitching note was added to the music (Richard Willis, 1734). By the middle of the century, however, there does seem to be a greater awareness of the need for a standard pitch. William Tans'ur (1772, p. 28) commented on the raising of pitch: 'our new Consort-Pitch is more fit for Vocal Performance than the old Consort-Pitch, which is half a tone lower'. John Arnold (1769, p. xvii) wrote that: 'It is highly necessary at all Times, in Practising &c. that the Tunes are always pitched in their proper Keys, which will be of great Advantage to Learners, by giving them the True Sound of a Key'.

Use of instruments

Obviously, it was helpful for singers to refer to an instrument when first learning to pitch the notes of the scale. Daniel Robinson (1715, p. 25) suggested using a set of eight small bells which fitted inside each other and could be carried around in one's pocket, and some prefaces advocated the use of church bells (Ashworth, 1765, p. 5), which may have been a dubious advantage, as most bells of the period were notoriously out of tune. Even pitch-pipes, which were widely used by the second half of the century,² were not infallible, as their tuning obviously depended on the accuracy of both the maker and the blower. I particularly like Thomas Moore's plea (1750, p. 26) that 'some of those ingenious Mechanicks who usually make Pitch-Pipes' would make one that sounded exactly like the human voice, which would consequently make pitching easier, and also be less offensive to those who objected to the use of any instrument in worship (a subject which was hotly debated in many 17th- and 18th-century sermons and tracts).

Whatever their propriety, the use of bass instruments, in particular, became increasingly common by the middle of the 18th century. John Arnold (1769, p. iv) advocated using a bassoon not only because it 'makes an exceedingly good Addition to the Harmony of a Choir of Singers, where there is no Organ, as most of the Bass notes may be played on it, in the Octave below the Bass Voices', but also because although 'it requires a pretty strong Breath to blow it', it 'is not at all difficult to learn to play upon, all the Instructions, belonging to it, being only a Scale of its Notes', which is rather an over-simplification of bassoon technique. Thomas Billington (1784, p. 4), however, was not quite so sure:

¹ This argument should not be used to preclude the use of organs within the psalmody repertoire. Equal temperament was not introduced on organs in Britain until c. 1850 and organ tuners did not finally abandon mean-tone tuning until 1869. Even then it took another twenty years or so for the majority of churches to adopt equal temperament (Sumner, 1962, pp. 285–8). [CT]

² Pitch pipes had been introduced in the first half of the 18th century and John Arnold (1741), in advocating their use, implies that they were already established by this time. [CT]

I must here observe, that some Bassoon players are apt to render that instrument very unpleasing to a musical ear; for instead of going on with smoothness, they give every note a kind of a sudden jerk, which is very disagreeable and totally unconnects their whole performance. There are others who, thinking it requires better lungs than judgement or a good manner, over-blow the instrument.

John Arnold (1769, p. iii) not only recommended the bassoon, but also described how organs were becoming popular in many market towns, and how barrel organs which play 'a Set of Voluntaries, also most of our ancient Psalm-Tunes, with their Givings out and Interludes &c.' were 'very commodious for Churches in remote Country Places'. He even recommended various instrument makers, and one cannot help wondering whether he charged for advertising. Certainly he was never backward in promoting his own books, and made every effort to keep up with new trends. In the 1769 edition of *The Complete Psalmist* (p. viii) he slated other composers for not having the expertise to use the C clef, and then in the next edition (1779, p. iv) unblushingly set

[all] three upper Parts in the G Cliff, as I find it more eligible for country Choirs than the C Cliff; and since of late Years several Kinds of musical treble Instruments have been introduced into many Country Churches, to accompany the Voices, as Violins, Hautboys, Clarinets, Vauxhumanes, &c. which Cliff is also much more suitable to those Instruments.

Composition of choirs

As it was obviously uneconomic to publish a book unless it would sell easily, every attempt was made to stay in fashion and to adapt to as many performing situations as possible. Most prefaces emphasise how the music could be performed by varying groups of singers. *The Psalm-Singer's Necessary Companion* (Anon., 1700, p. 39) is particularly informative, as it implies that not only was octave-doubling of the church tune an acceptable practice, but also that women were an integral part of Lancashire choirs as early as 1700, recommending that for 'Tunes that are in Three Parts ... let one half of your Boys, and half of your Women sing tenor, and the other half Medius; and let a considerable number of your Men sing the bassus and the rest the Tenor'.

Many prefaces made allowances for the size and expertise of choirs, explaining that other parts were optional, so long as the tune and the bass were sung (Chetham, 1718, introduction [p. 7]). In country psalmody the melody continued to be placed in the tenor part for most of the century, long after its use had been discontinued in art

music. This was partly because of the usual male dominance of the choirs, but may be also because, as John Arnold (1765, p. vii) argued, it was more practical. Boys who sang treble were not 'sufficiently skilled in Music to lead the Psalm-Tunes and Anthems' and the treble parts were 'not so high and straining for Boys Voices, as they would be, if they carried the Air of the Melody'. Certainly, the intricacies of correct part allocation is one aspect of performance practice which still requires considerable research but which is outside the scope of this paper.¹

Epilogue

It is important to realise that one cannot be too dogmatic about correct performance practice, as musical standards and conventions in 18th-century churches varied greatly throughout the country, so that while one parish's psalm-singing might be supported by a large group of instruments, another not so far away might still be lining-out Sternhold and Hopkins. We must also remember that, as no news is good news, there are bound to be more accounts of the faults of gallery musicians than of their successes. Unfortunately, many of the most derogatory comments are also the most entertaining, and as I am as guilty as most in making use of such quotations, maybe it will help to redress the balance by ending this paper with a selection of some of the more positive remarks which may be found in prefaces.

In 1741, William Knapp wrote that 'Church-Musick was never more in Vogue in this Nation than at present' and he was pleased to hear not only his own compositions, 'but those of other Masters, performed in many of our Parish-Churches, with good Voices and tolerable Skill; where for a few Years past, they scarcely knew any Thing of the Matter'. Even William Riley (1762, p. 1), who criticised everyone and referred to Methodists as 'frantic Enthusiasts', admitted that country psalmody was 'sometimes performed by Persons of tolerable skill', although he hated their unsuitable fuguing tunes. Thomas Billington (1784, p. 3) hoped that performers would not be discouraged by his comments on singing errors, as they were just as likely to occur in London as in the country:

There is scarce a county in England, but, at some particular part or another, I have not

¹ Another problem which clouds this whole issue is the printing of the melody immediately above the bass in many psalmody collections in order to facilitate accompaniment on the organ rather than to suggest a particular vocal scoring. [CT]

heard such singing as would have done credit to some of our town performers. I shall not particularize Devonshire, Derbyshire nor Lancashire, for fear I should be suspected of partiality. As to the Sister Kingdoms, I never had the pleasure of visiting them, but from various reports they are equally as forward in performing three and four part Anthems as ourselves.

This paper has only skimmed the surface of 18th-century tune-book prefaces; aspects of performance practice have been simplified or missed out altogether, and much more research is still necessary. In particular, we must explore other contemporary accounts of psalmody, to determine whether the church musicians of the 18th century actually put the advice given in the prefaces into practice. And finally, maybe we should re-examine our performances of gallery music in the light of this evidence, always remembering that while historical awareness can inform our musical instincts, it can never be a substitute for them.

