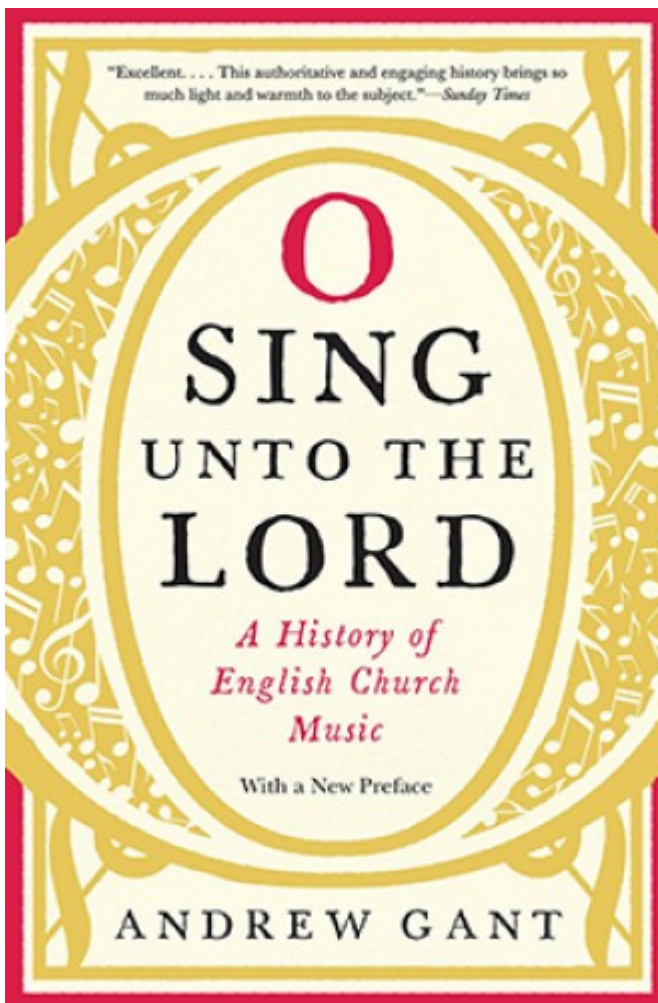


Tracing the traditions of English church music

Andrew Gant's lively book tells a history of sacred song.

by [David A. Hoekema](#) in the [September 13, 2017](#) issue

In Review



O Sing unto the Lord

A History of English Church Music

By Andrew Gant
University of Chicago Press

“Choral music is slow food for the soul,” proclaimed contemporary American composer Nico Muhly in an effusive commentary on Andrew Gant’s history of English sacred music (*New York Times*, April 2). The book’s 400 pages should not deter readers: this is one of the wittiest and most whimsically irreverent works of scholarship in recent memory.

Gant, who teaches at Oxford’s St. Peter’s College, leavens the book’s musicology and history with ironic commentary. No wonder the Enlightenment was bad for church music, he writes, because “‘I believe in God’ has a sturdy, declamatory idea behind it which can be realised in sound. ‘I believe in rational thought and the evidence of the senses’ doesn’t have quite the same ring. Deism, still less atheism, produced no music.” Gant recommends reviving the work of the 15th-century William Cornysh—it “will frighten neither clergy nor choir”—and notes that the key to Cornysh’s productivity is “that he almost certainly had the advantage of being two different people.” (Some evidence indicates that Cornysh’s works were composed by a father and son team.)

Sitting down with this book feels less like reading a monograph than like encountering a friendly fellow in a pub. Gant can be flippant, as when he attributes the lasting influence of Elizabeth I to “her successful use of the policy of not dying,” unlike her royal predecessors. Of a much later queen, Gant notes that Felix Mendelssohn’s inescapable wedding march was popularized “at one of the many occasions when one of Queen Victoria’s children married the pointy-bearded princeling of Somewhere-In-Germany.” When he digresses into New World adaptations of English sacred music, Gant cites the “intriguing late flowering” of 18th-century hymnody under “a one-eyed snuff addict of untutored genius, William Billings.”

Humor aside, Gant’s first chapters provide an exceptionally insightful account of the musical and cultural life of pre-Reformation England. He evokes the solemnity of medieval monophony, the magnificence of Old Hall and Eton manuscripts (“no future age took such pains to make its music look good”), and the intertwined polyphony of English Renaissance masters. In this period, “religion and daily life . . . were aspects of the same thing. Everything you did began and ended with an invocation to Saint or Virgin: greeting your neighbors, signing off your accounts, sitting down to a meal,

sneezing, feeding your animals. Worship was like sex and farming: an instinct, and a necessity.”

Gant continues with an analysis of the Reformation’s influence on church music:

Musically, the revolutionary idea of the Reformation was that you could sing to your God yourself in church, not just listen to a trained initiate do it for you in a secret, private language which he understood and you didn’t. This idea is rooted in doctrine, and creates a divide which runs from before the Reformation and forward for the rest of this history, between music written for the trained professional, and music meant for anybody, anytime, anywhere.

But in its English form under Henry VIII, the Reformation wreaked havoc on musical traditions and on institutions. Priors were razed, manuscripts discarded, and choirs disbanded. Gant notes wryly: “It is often difficult to assess the provenance and importance of the manuscripts we have. It is even more difficult with the ones we don’t have.” The greatest composers of the period served both Protestants and Catholics, openly or clandestinely. In the hands of John Taverner, William Byrd, and Thomas Tallis, encouraged by Elizabeth, Gant explains, “English church music really became just that—English.”

Gant recounts the shifting fortunes of sacred music in the Jacobean period, under Puritan rule, and in the Stuart Restoration. Henry Purcell began writing masterpieces of choral and consort music in his teens, and German immigrant George Frederick Handel showed a genius for setting English texts. And then? “It is open to debate which is the finest period of English sacred choral music. The seventy-five years after the death of Handel in 1759 must have a good claim to being the worst.” But even as music for professional choirs was languishing, the Wesleyan movement brought dramatic changes such as West Gallery amateur choirs and an explosion in writing and singing hymns. New hymnbooks proliferated and congregational singing expressed the “enthusiasm” cherished by revivalists. Organs and organists improved. “An organ, decently played, and loud enough to drown the voices of the clerk, charity children, and congregation, is a blessing,” wrote a commentator quoted by Gant.

Gant contrasts the conservatism of Victorian hymnody with the writing of fine new anthems for choirs in the 19th and 20th centuries. Church music in England had

“slept through the Classical and Romantic periods,” writes Gant, but “Wesley, the Oxford Movement, Parry, Stanford and Elgar effectively proved to be the handsome prince who woke it up again.” Gant also discusses works by Ralph Vaughan Williams, Benjamin Britten, and many others. Arnold Bax’s sacred music is “finely wrought and fragrantly harmonized”; Peter Warlock, “a musical miniaturist and prodigious drunk,” wrote with “rare beauty and intelligence”; Herbert Howells wrote his first service music on a bet and tailored his musical language to particular chapels and cathedrals. John Rutter, Peter Maxwell Davies, and Michael Tippett also get a nod: like Vaughan Williams and Britten, they championed church music while keeping their distance from the church.

“So what happens now?” asks Gant in the epilogue. Organists and choirs keep improving, and composers continue to enrich the tradition even as church and culture grow farther apart. Ironically, much of the greatest sacred music of the past century has come from atheists and agnostics, for whom “the music of the angels is all a metaphor.”

Perhaps sacred choral music will be preserved as “the soundtrack to a suite of fine but forgotten old buildings,” Gant muses. But to learn the music of the church is also to learn melody and harmony, teamwork and concentration. Sacred music can unite communities and bring together young and old, rich and poor, people of faith and people who appreciate what faith sounds like. Gant’s lively history will help keep the tradition alive.