

♪ West Gallery Church Music ♪

1. An Introduction

by Francis Roads

West Gallery church music, so described because it was often performed by a band of singers and instrumentalists from a gallery at the west end of a church, was the repertoire of town and country churches from about 1700-1850. It differs markedly from cathedral music, both in style and function. It was written for and in many cases by amateur musicians; professional performance was not usually envisaged. As few local churches had organs at this time, it can always be performed without organ accompaniment.

One West Gallery tune that everybody knows is the melody of the Yorkshire song "*On Ilkley Moor Baht 'At*". This is the setting *Cranbrook* by the Canterbury composer Thomas Clark (1775-1859). He intended it as a setting for a hymn by Philip Doddridge, "*Grace, 'tis a Charming Sound*", but it was later adapted as a setting for the Christmas text "*While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night*." Like many West Gallery composers, Clark started as an amateur; his day job was that of shoemaker.

A gallery band is well described in Thomas Hardy's novel *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), and the repertoire is more scholastically examined in Nicholas Temperley's *Music in the English Parish Church* (CUP 1979). In recent years many groups, or quires, as they prefer to style themselves, dedicated to the repertoire's performance, have sprung up, of which London Gallery Quire is one. The West Gallery Music Association provides a coordinating body, and focus for researchers in the field.

Much of the repertoire consists of settings of the metrical psalms from the Elizabethan "Old Version" of Sternhold and Hopkins or the "New Version" (1696) of Tate and Brady. There are also hymns, anthems and canticles, and some very lively Christmas carols. The music is often of a florid and joyful nature; too joyful indeed for the reformers of the mid-19th Century Oxford movement, who sought to replace it with the more solemn repertoire typified by *Hymns Ancient and Modern*. The style survived longer in the non-conformist chapels than in the established church, and remnants of it survive in the folk repertoire up to the present day. The sister tradition of Shapenote singing in the USA is unbroken, and as vigorous as ever.

The style of the music presents a spectrum. Some is almost as sophisticated as cathedral music, while at the other end of the spectrum there is music which is strikingly different from the cathedral repertoire, with many departures from the conventional canons of classical composition. Some musical progressions may seem strange or even harsh at first hearing. There are common features of the cathedral style (such as suspended dissonances) which the West Gallery composers appear deliberately to avoid, while there are other musical features favoured by them (such as open fifths) which are infrequently found in cathedral music.

But whatever the sophistication of the composer, the music is always practical for amateur singers. There are rarely any great technical challenges, and the range of the parts is comfortable. Singers who cannot reach the high soprano or tenor notes in cathedral music will find the West Gallery repertoire a refreshing change.

West Gallery music was sung in many different ways; unaccompanied; with organ or other keyboard instruments; with one or more melody instruments doubling the vocal lines; or with keyboard and melody instruments together. Doubling the voice parts with instruments helps singers whose sight reading is limited, and is the performance style preferred by most specialist West Gallery quires. Traditionally the players used any available string, woodwind and some brass instruments, and in modern practice one can use almost any melody instrument. Sometimes the instruments have brief passages to themselves, known as "symphonies."

The underlay of the texts sometimes shows scant regard for classical standards. This is especially true in the metrical psalm settings, where a setting which suits some verses of a psalm may give rise, in other verses, to inappropriate musical gaps in the sense of the text, or even to the splitting of a word. Judicious rearrangement of the underlay can usually avoid such awkwardnesses.

The non-classical features described above are one reason why for many years the West Gallery repertoire was ignored, falling between the stools of classical musicians, who felt unable to take the often amateur composition technique seriously, and folk musicians, who felt that any notated style fell outside their province. In recent years many musicians have re-evaluated the West Gallery repertoire by its own standards, and found much worthy of performance. Sometimes quires have chosen to recreate whole services in the 18th Century style. Quires also make musical contributions to churches' regular services; sing West Gallery music as part or all of a concert performance; or give lecture-recitals on the West Gallery style, often with audience participation. Many regular church choirs have invited an experienced West Gallery musician to lead a workshop, with a view to adding some West Gallery settings to their repertoire.

Further information about publications, workshops and other West Gallery events and activities may be found at <www.wgma.org.uk>. Roding Music welcomes any enquiries. There are three other leaflets in this series: 2. *Arranging a West Gallery Event*, 3. *Preparing your West Gallery Event*, and 4. *Interpreting West Gallery Church Music*.



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