
The performance style of west gallery music

Vic Gammon

In attempting to reach an understanding of performance style within the genre, Dr Vic Gammon examines the various types of evidence available, including traditions from North America and Scotland and the carol singing still enjoyed in public houses in Yorkshire and Cornwall today. He defines the 'plebeian musical style' prevalent in the galleries as 'full-voiced heterophonic polyphony' and argues that it was wilfully suppressed by educated reformers who were unsympathetic to the qualities which it exhibited. He suggests that confusion arose between poor performance practice per se and the aims of a minority of art musicians who attempted to dominate a popular musical tradition belonging to the majority.

The question of the performance style of any historical music is an interesting but difficult one. The question is interesting in itself, but it is also interesting for specific and practical reasons. First, the manner of performance may help our understanding of the wider historical context in which the music was made and how the attitudes and values of different groups related to it; secondly, if we wish to perform the music in a style approaching the original then we must consider and assess all the available evidence on performance style that can be mustered.

What sorts of evidence exist and how can we assess them? I think there are basically four types.

Direct evidence consists of the materials west gallery musicians have left behind, primarily manuscript and printed music books, a very few testimonies, and 'archaeological' remains such as musical instruments, galleries, singing desks, pitch pipes, plus evidence of the church musician's full range of musical practice (e.g. bell-ringing records, country dance tunes in manuscript books etc.). Direct evidence is vitally important but it is not adequate to a full understanding of the subject.

Direct evidence can tell us a lot about what and where musicians performed but it tells us relatively little about how they performed.

Descriptive or literary evidence was not generated by the musicians themselves but by other members of their society who were witnesses to musical performances.

There are problems with descriptive evidence. It is mediated evidence, it has passed through the

mind of the witness and through language which may have had a different significance to contemporaries 150 or so years ago than it does to us today. A great deal of this material is hostile to west gallery music and we must ask if it is therefore reliable. A vital concept here is *consistency*: one piece of evidence should not be relied on; ten pieces of evidence saying broadly similar or related things start to build a picture that is much more reliable.

Comparative evidence also presents some difficulties and needs to be handled carefully. What can surviving but different musical traditions tell us about English west gallery music of 150 to 200 years ago? My answer to this is: a significant amount if it squares with other types of evidence being considered. As well as the direct descendants of the west gallery tradition (such as the carol singing traditions of South Yorkshire and North Cornwall) three traditions seem particularly relevant to understanding something about west gallery performance style: the shape-note singing of the south-eastern USA, Scottish psalm singing now represented only on the Isle of Lewis, and the performance of traditional English music by traditional singers and instrumentalists recorded during the last 90 years.

Contextual evidence is of a different order to those types of evidence considered so far; it is secondary not primary and exists in the body of work of historians who have looked at social changes and particularly changes in forms of popular culture in the 18th and 19th centuries. This now considerable body of work is not uniform in its approach but nevertheless forms a context of understanding against which any historical interpretation of west gallery music must be judged. It may actually say little or nothing specifically about west gallery music but it is vital in informing our notions of the context in which west gallery music flourished. Style relates directly to contextual evidence in that it is precisely the style of performance, which relates intimately to the class of the performers, to which the reformers so often objected. For me the great mentor, guide and critic in this field was E. P. Thompson, and his *Customs in Common* is a good place to start reading (Thompson, 1991). Problems of sources in relation to the history of popular culture are discussed admirably by Peter Burke in his book *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Burke, 1978).

Finally, all of us bring to any work of interpretation the attitudes, values, assumptions and prejudices we have developed through our lives and experiences. My interest in west gallery music developed out of a profound interest in what I prefer to term traditional music, the music that quite ordinary people make for themselves out of the musical resources that they inherit and that are available to them. Such an interest implies different priorities from the musicologist whose concern may primarily rest with the activities and products of that small and over-studied minority, the musically educated. I make no apology for this but state it so that the reader may know from whence I come.

No research is totally pure and unbiased but individual researchers can try to be aware of and honest about what they bring to the research and their fundamental attitudes to music.

Some readers familiar with my previous writings on the subject might find certain parts of this essay familiar. I have included this material because it is from works now long out of print and is germane to the focus of this essay. Most of my evidence comes from Sussex, as this is the area I have studied in depth, but where I have found or been kindly provided with material from other places I have happily included it.

Characteristics of west gallery music

'old compositions with their Repeat and Twiddle'
(Frederick Jones, Stanmer and Falmer church band)

The musical portions of the Anglican service in the 18th and early 19th centuries consisted mostly of metrical psalms; only in the 19th century did hymns become the norm. Some of the solid tunes inherited from the Reformation such as 'The Old Hundredth' and 'Tallis's Canon' had continued in popularity, but a very different type of church music, often extremely elaborate and flamboyant, became enormously popular in the 18th century. The name 'west gallery' music is now commonly given to this genre and a great deal of it has recently been unearthed in printed and manuscript form. Many west gallery pieces use repetition as a musical device and what contemporaries called 'fuguing' (re-entry in imitation after a tacit) was a common element. It was common in some areas to repeat the last two lines of each stanza. The Rev. E. B. Ellman of Berwick, Sussex, reported that 'in many cases the third or last line was repeated three or four times, or sometimes one word only was repeated'; later he adds 'sometimes the last two lines of the last verse were repeated six times over' (Ellman, 1912, pp. 194, 197).

The other important element in the psalm tunes of this period was what was described as their florid nature. Melismatic passages are not uncommon in the religious music of the period. Frederick Jones, a one-time member of the Stanmer and Falmer church band, described such pieces as 'old compositions with their Repeat and Twiddle', an apt and concise description (MacDermott MS, I, 53–4).¹

Much of the music that was performed by village musicians was of a type that invited both participation and individual elaboration, the repetitions allowed anybody to join in that would, and the florid nature of the melodies invited individual elaboration and decoration. The harmonic structure of the pieces was usually very simple, or the lines were melodically rather than harmonically conceived.² In practice often only two parts were performed, even if more existed. Traditional survivals of west gallery pieces show that they lend themselves to impromptu harmonisation. As the revival of west gallery music has shown, it was highly sociable music. The music was structured but allowed much freedom of expression. Much of it was quite rhythmic and exuberant. (Gammon, 1985, gives further exploration of these ideas.)

Stylistic elements of west gallery performance

'shakes, turns, cadences and other frivolous ornaments'
(J. A. La Trobe, 1831)

From a number of accounts, mainly hostile criticisms but very consistent over a period of well over a century, we can draw quite a good picture of how rural church musicians and congregations performed. In particular, the singing style of country church musicians had a marked consistency. The learned Dr John Burton visited Sussex in 1752 and wrote an account of his travels including this fascinating account of the singing at Shermanbury church:

The more shrill toned they may be, the more valued they are: and in church they sing psalms, by preference, not set to the old and simple tune, but as if in a tragic chorus, changing about with strophe and anti-strophe and stanzas, with good measure, but yet there is something offensive to my ears, when they

¹ The K. H. MacDermott manuscripts are held by Sussex Archaeological Society, Barbican House, Lewes, East Sussex.

² See, for example, the two-part manuscript books from Wilmington Church, Sussex, now held in the Sussex Archive Library.

bellow to excess, and bleat out some goatish noise with all their might.

(Blaauw, 1856, p. 17)

It is possible to separate out a number of elements of style in accounts of this sort. We learn that the singing was loud, often pitched high in the vocal range, nasal in tone, and facial features were said to be distorted when singing. Singers tended to ornament their singing in a number of ways while the tempo at which psalms were performed was sometimes said to be slow. The harmony that country singers performed was often painful to the educated observer's sense of music. According to the parish records, Buxted had a parish clerk in the 17th century who 'warbled forth as if he had been thumped on the back by a stone'. The Hailsham shoemaker, Thomas Geering, recalled a Hailsham church singer like this:

He was gifted with a powerful voice and his greatest pride was to be heard at church. For years he was our leading male treble doing the Psalms and the anthem, the women, as was the country custom in those dark days, singing the seconds. Fortissimo was our friend's forte, and well he obeyed the rule – all other voices paling beneath his crushing tones. His voice more than filled the church, and at times in Jubilate he has been heard, or on a summer morning, distinctly in the street.

(Geering, 1884, p. 104)

That high-volume voice production was common is attested to in an account of an 1829 hymn-book from Rye which urged that:

softness in the various parts of the airs should be attended to, for good singing does not consist in being too loud; and besides it is difficult for ordinary voices to be loud, without being harsh and discordant.

(Rye Church, 1829)

William Figg, a Lewes minister, warned church singers to:

curb that grossest of all improprieties, the attempt of any one or more of the Performers – by straining the voice to drown the rest or by any Awkward motion of the hands or body – or [by] distortion of feature excite mirth and ridicule instead of calling forth solemnity and devotion.

(Figg MS, 1811)¹

Figg's strictures give us quite a lot of information about the sound of church music around East Sussex in the early 19th century:

The music ... in country churches ... frequently consists of a jargon of sounds, destitute of harmony, melody or any other laudable recommendation to the utter destruction of solemnity and devotion ...

(Figg MS, 1811)

He warned singers:

by all means to avoid that vulgar manner in which the words of the psalms are generally expressed, also to abolish that sudden snatching or jerking manner at the end of the last note of every strain and frequently in other parts of the performance.

(Figg MS, 1811)

G. W. Ashby's uncle recollected that Wadhurst church had boasted 'two of the best and most powerful voices in England ... Cooper and Luard, tenor and bass'. Ashby's uncle was in fact a bass with 'a very strong, deep tone', but he said it was nothing compared with Cooper's (MacDermott MS, I, 155). In the late 17th century Thomas Mace had written of:

the whining, toting, yelling or skreeking there is in many country congregations, as if the people were affrighted or distracted.

(Mace, 1676, p. 9)

John Barwick, compiler of the Kentish Divine Harmonist, scolded singers for 'unnatural habits; such as making wry faces, or forcing sound through the nose, or singing through the teeth' (Barwick, n.d., xvi). The men at Rusper sang in 'very harsh and unmelodious tones' when Lucy Broadwood was young, and at West Tarring in the mid 19th century 'the alto singers sang through their noses' (MacDermott MS, II, 4; I, 151). J. A. La Trobe disliked rural church singers 'throwing in, according to their notions of beauty, shakes, turns, cadences and other frivolous ornaments' (La Trobe, 1831, p. 138).

Clearly there was much that educated people and particularly musically educated people found objectionable about country psalmody, but reading through their mediation it is possible to detect a considerable consistency of singing style.

Observers found it less easy, indeed seem not to have had the vocabulary, to describe instrumental accompaniments; but again it is possible to get some idea of what these were like from our hostile witnesses. The music was called 'loud', 'agonising' and 'awful'. Such reports suggest there was a marked consistency between vocal and instrumental styles. An account from about 1770 speaks of performers in a west gallery into which by the aid of a ladder:

musicians and singers, male and female, contrived to scramble, and with the aid of bum basses, hautboys, fiddles and various other

¹ Figg, William (1811) *Psalms and Hymns*, Sussex Archaeological Society, Barbican House, Lewes, East Sussex.

instruments, accompanying shrill and stentorian voices, they contrived to make as loud a noise as heart could wish.

(*The Record*, 24 September 1848)

To these observers and reformers all this amounted to musical ignorance and incompetence, but the performers took a very different view, often being 'vastly proud of themselves' and taking great trouble over their music. What these accounts bear witness to is the existence of a fully developed popular musical style that existed in rural areas between about 1650 and 1850. It was a style without an articulated theory, it had no books of instruction, but was nevertheless real. Like country dialects it was assimilated through upbringing and exposure. It was a thoroughly pervasive style used for secular songs and traditional dance music as well as for psalms in church. For convenience I will call this combination of style and repertory the *plebeian musical tradition*.

Reformers often complained about the secularity of the music and the style of performance, of church music 'defiled by mingling with what's profane and irreligious' (Milbourne, 1713, p. 35). Musical interludes between psalm stanzas were often like, and played like, popular dance music – a music that many church instrumentalists were highly proficient at playing. The mixing of the religious and the secular in a number of manuscript books from the period leads one to think that the separation was not always seen as too important; sometimes dance tunes were at one end of the book and psalms at the other, but in other cases the two were intermixed. Much evidence suggests that the connection between church bands and social dance was strong and widespread. Looked at another way it could be said that playing in church was just one of a number of musical activities that rural musicians might undertake. Inherent in this situation was a potential tension between the sacred and the secular that reformers often made central to their arguments.

Occasionally, as in the fascinating biography of Sussex church musician, composer and gardener, James Nye, one gets an account of these tensions from a participant. After a conversion experience Nye felt that being a member of a band that played for dancing 'was a snare to me'; he expressed the old Protestant worries about the sensuous qualities of church music: 'I cannot help being carried away with the sounds instead of the substance'. He composed a quantity of psalm and hymn tunes, and was obviously quite proficient in reading and writing music (Nye, 1982, pp. 13–15).

Musical literacy, orality and aurality

How did these villagers pick up their skill in music and why did choirs and bands form in certain places and not others? The latter part of the question appears easier to answer than the former. Bands and choirs were strongest where there was a man who combined some musical skill with organisational and leadership abilities in a community. Often such men were parish clerks, a position traditionally associated with musical leadership in church. Examples of men combining these roles are Michael Turner the Warnham shoemaker, Thomas Cox the Ditchling cordwainer, and John Unstead the Waldron wheelwright. The singing at Westmeston discontinued after James Nye, an agricultural labourer at the time, left the church refusing the position of parish clerk (Gammon, 1977; MacDermott MS, II, 45; *Sussex Agricultural Express*, 1 March 1845; MacDermott MS, I, 134; Nye, 1982, pp. 15–17).

A number of church musicians were musically literate, as both manuscript and printed sources attest, although we cannot be sure of the exact proportion. It is probable that many of the musically literate were self-taught. The means were available; many psalm collections contained the rudiments of music as an introduction and other sorts of self-tutor were available. Given these and the encouragement of others, it is not difficult to see that many literate artisans could teach themselves some skill in music reading.

Another way in which villagers might pick up skill in music was through the activities of itinerant singing and music teachers. These individuals crop up quite a lot in 18th-century records, and were the butt of much hostile criticism of musical reformers. Such men would have a vested interest in the musical literacy of their customers to whom they could sell their 'books of their own selections, which are seldom correct' according to the rector of Westbourne (Tattersall, 1794, p. 15; Temperley, 1979, p. 146).

Although there is significant evidence of musical literacy among church musicians it is probable that the majority did not read music. There is evidence that musically literate members of a band would teach the parts to the other members by ear as happened at Twineham (MacDermott MS, I, 161). Musical literacy under normal circumstances is usually a function of ordinary literacy. The necessity of 'lining out', the practice of the clerk reciting each line of the psalm before it was sung, points to a situation of widespread illiteracy. The ability to write down music is not an indispensable qualification for musical creativity. But before the advent of sound recording, composi-

tions had to be written down if they were to come down to us. Just as manuscript music collections give only a small indication of the amount of musical activity, so written compositions by villagers only represent the tip of an iceberg. Evidence of compositions by a gardener, a shoemaker and a carpenter survive in the Sussex records (Nye MS;¹ MacDermott MS, II, 43–4; Harmer, 1931).

The key point to make here is that west gallery music is as much part of the oral/aural tradition as it is part of the literate tradition. It is neither one thing nor the other; it partakes of both. Writing may give some pieces a certain stability but west gallery music is subject to the same processes of variation that traditional music is subject to, processes of degeneration and regeneration or (as that old Darwinian Cecil Sharp (1907) would have it) continuity, variation and selection. Variation between different manuscript and printed versions of the same psalm tune often point to oral/aural processes at work.

The oral/aural nature of west gallery music also reminds us that direct evidence such as printed music books and manuscripts are vitally important but not adequate to a real understanding of this music. Can you imagine reconstructing New Orleans jazz from a few band parts and a couple of descriptions? Even in the western art tradition many aspects of performance style are not passed on in written form but from teacher to pupil. Nor are written instructions as to how the music should be performed of much help – the simple test here is to read the introduction to *The Sacred Harp* and then listen to a genuine Sacred Harp convention recording. You would have to be rather unobservant not to notice the differences. If we are honest with ourselves, we know very little about the performance style of much music of the past; the vastly different interpretations of a lot of ‘early’ music are eloquent testimony to this fact.

Comparative evidence of west gallery performance style

We can look to surviving musical traditions to give us some evidence about west gallery performance style. It is not simply a question of pointing to a different type of music and saying ‘west gallery music must have been like that’. It is the links and the consonance between different sorts of evidence that is vital. When the historical evidence fits with the comparative evidence we can say we are moving onto firm ground.

In the first place, there are the direct survivals of west gallery music in England. Notable here are the carol singing traditions of South Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. The styles of different groups vary considerably, partly depending on the frequency of performance. Some sound like out-of-practice church choirs, whereas others, like the singers based at the Fountain at Ingbirchworth, sing out in a most exuberant and vigorous way (*While Shepherds Watched*).² Cornish carol singers demonstrate direct continuity from the west gallery tradition as in recordings made at Padstow (*Rouse, Rouse*). The Mabe Male Voice Choir, recorded in the 1930s by the BBC, is a most interesting case. They are well-disciplined singers who have something of the vocal sound of choirs from South Wales but they make wonderful and unexpected use of rubato and glissando (BBC Record Library). The direct survivals of the west gallery tradition are interesting and support the general thrust of my argument. However, on their own they are insufficient to buttress the argument that a performance style can change considerably in 150 years in response to all sorts of pressures.

English traditional singing, as manifested in sound recordings made over the last 90 years, is another important source of evidence. English traditional singers tend to favour a full, open throated voice production. Ornamentation is relatively little favoured although there are some notable exceptions to this. In particular the recordings of Joseph Taylor of Saxby All Saints in Lincolnshire demonstrate a refined decorative style of singing which makes full use of rubato. Taylor was born in the 1830s and recorded in 1908; at the time of being recorded he was a member of a church choir *and had been for many years*. Percy Grainger thought that his

effortless high notes, sturdy rhythms, clear unmistakable intervals and his twiddles and ‘bleating’ decorations (invariably executed with unflinching grace & neatness) are irresistible.
(Unto Brigg Fair – quoted in notes)

I am sure La Trobe would not have thought that! There is other evidence that ornamentation was more commonly practised in the past in English traditional singing than it has been in the last 90 years. Many traditional singers both in England and Appalachia (for example Gordon Hall and Almeda Riddle) demonstrate the jerking at the end of the voice at the end of each musical line that William Figg and others complain about. Tra-

¹ James Nye manuscripts. Sussex Archaeological Society, Barbican House, Lewes, East Sussex.

² For details of this and other recordings see the list of recordings at the end of the references section.

ditional singers as recorded by folk-song collectors have an overlapping social profile to members of west gallery bands. (See Gammon, 1985, pp. 32, 153.)

English traditional instrumental music was largely ignored by earlier generations of folk music collectors and there can be little argument that it constitutes in this century a less vigorous tradition than instrumental music in Ireland or Scotland. The evidence we have is of the residue of a residual tradition. Nevertheless some recent work has begun to map its characteristics and style (Hall, 1990). It is a highly rhythmic music that gives little ground to the polite manners of western art music. There is a lot of evidence that a great many west gallery instrumentalists were traditional dance musicians and that the style of English traditional instrumental music has had a continuity and consistency for the last couple of centuries. It is an imaginative leap to think what a west gallery band consisting of players playing in the style of Scan Tester, Walter Bulwer, Oscar Wood, Bob Cann etc. would have sounded like but it is the sort of imaginative leap we have to make if we are ever to do this music justice (*Boscastle Breakdown; English Country Music from East Anglia; I Never Played To Many Posh Dances*).

Perhaps the most beneficial influence on the revival of west gallery music, and the one that can give us most historical insight about performance style, is the shape-note singing tradition now mainly confined to the south-eastern USA. Shape-note and west gallery music are two developments of one single musical tradition. Shape-note music, represented by such collections as *The Sacred Harp* and *Southern Harmony*, is the American bough of a musical tree that started life in 17th- and 18th-century England and took on an independent existence in the later 18th century. (Some Americans find this point hard to take, wanting to hang on to the notion of a 'native' American vocal music. One of the most pleasurable moments of my life was convincing Alan Lomax – I think I convinced him – that the two were sprung from the same stock.)

In lectures I often play a performance of a piece from *The Sacred Harp* from Lomax's field recordings (for example *White Spirituals from The Sacred Harp*) and then play the same piece from a recording by a choir such as 'The Western Wind Ensemble' (*Early American Vocal Music*). This juxtaposition makes the points I am trying to expound in this paper more eloquently than I ever can. The trained singers reduce this wild and wonderful music to an innocuous footnote in western musical history. To perform it well the answer is not to 'yokel it' as so disastrously tried on the recent

New Oxford Book of Carols recordings ('Old Foster', *The New Oxford Book of Carols*),¹ but to learn the aspects of the traditional performance style, as it were, from the inside.

The singing groups associated with the shape-note collections that have had a continuous singing tradition since the 19th century, are a living testimony to the vitality of west gallery / shape-note tradition. Listen particularly to the singing style and the vocal tone and listen to the rhythmic impetus they give the music. *That* is the sort of thing the 19th-century reformers were complaining about in England!

Closer to home we have the survival of what Temperley has shown was once a widespread style of psalm singing, in the performance of Gaelic psalms from the Isle of Lewis. (This style also transplanted successfully to the USA; e.g. 'Why Must I Wear This Shroud' and 'When Jesus Christ Was Here on Earth' on *The Gospel Ship*.) This decorated and heterophonic singing style with its lining-out of the psalm, represents the survival of a stage in musical development before the advent of the west gallery tradition. This is not to say that there are no points in common between this 'old style of singing' and west gallery performance. Take the vocal style, for example. I cannot hear the sound of the Lewis psalms without thinking of Burton's phrase about bellowing to excess and bleating out 'some goatish noise with all their might'; yet I find nothing offensive in the sound, rather something profound and soul-stirring (*Gaelic Psalms from the Isle of Lewis*).

When I play recordings of Lewis psalms in lectures I often ask people to name from where the music comes. Unless someone in the audience knows the music, the answers encompass almost everywhere in the world but western Europe and areas settled by Europeans. India and the Middle East are favourites. The audiences are not being foolish; they are recognising that certain aspects of this music are widespread throughout the world; for example the pentatonic scale, the decorated singing and the hard-edged, open-throated voice production. Lomax and his associates have shown us that vocal styles can be described through a number of variables, and different cultures emphasise different ones of these (Lomax, 1968, pp. 34–74). What cannot be contested is the widespread distribution of the 'open-throated'

¹ The recording to which the writer refers is *The Christmas Album* (CDC 7 54529 2) on which Andrew Parrott directs the Taverner Consort, Choir and Players. It is not directly linked with *The New Oxford Book of Carols* and only three of the fifteen items are taken from this anthology. [CT]

singing style, relaxed but loud, appealing to singers who have to fill big spaces or sing in the open air, used, for example, by women in Bulgaria, South African choirs, epic singers from the Balkans and India, Native Americans and European Americans living in Appalachia, African American Gospel singers, polyphonic singers from Albania and Georgia, and numerous other groups throughout the world.

I think the evidence is overwhelming that west gallery music was performed with this kind of voice and not with what increasingly seems to be something unusual in the evolution of the world's music, the types of voice favoured by the western art music tradition.

One fascinating final point in this section is to note the similarity in tone between the accounts of west gallery music, some examples of which I have quoted, and the accounts of explorers, travellers and missionaries when they encountered the musics of exotic peoples. These in turn bear a marked resemblance to the hysterical reaction by the white middle class in the USA to the emergence of jazz (Harrison, 1973, *passim*; Taylor, 1978, pp. 116–17; Ogren, 1989, pp. 139–61, 15–16).

The 19th-century reform movement and its objections to style and class

Questions of style are intimately linked with the suppression of west gallery style church bands and choirs in the middle decades of the 19th century. To the educated reformers and those who followed them, the artisans and labourers who made up the bulk of the practising musicians were ignorant of what music should really be like.

This is very clear in the writing of a reformer like William Vincent writing in the 1790s. He believed that there were 'few clergymen in country benefices, who do not sincerely lament the existence of a Select Band in the gallery ...'. He believed in 'moderating the voice to the most harmonious pitch'; he wanted to simplify the music and reform 'the bad habits of delivering the voice through the nose instead of the mouth, the unnatural shrillness of the upper voices, and the tone of provincial utterance'. Voice production and accent were 'evils' which could be 'corrected by instruction and practice'. To Vincent the improvement in musical taste among the 'higher and middling ranks' was noticeable but this had not extended to the 'rustics' who insisted on performing 'rude' anthems (Vincent, 1790).

J. A. La Trobe, writing in the 1830s, believed that country performers had 'no idea of instrumental music beyond noise, or of vocal music beyond vociferation'. Against 'boisterous anthems and fugues', La Trobe would have the clergyman sub-

stitute 'simpler and more sober compositions'. La Trobe believed that evils to be reformed included:

- singing out of tune, frequently too flat, with a nasal twang
- straining the voice to an unnatural pitch, as though it were a contest of physical strength
- introducing awkward drawls and tasteless ornaments.

He believed that the substitution of the church band by:

- A violincello, a precentor with a clear and true voice, and a chosen band of children, instructed to sing naturally without screaming - which is their general rule if not kept in check - would form the best choir in any church.

La Trobe's contempt and hatred for what he termed 'the common class of country singers' is evident throughout his book, and he gives a detailed account of the ways in which west gallery bands and choirs could be expelled from their role in the church (La Trobe, 1831, pp. 4, 6, 68, 72, 76, 89, 90 and *passim*).

Much more material of this sort could be quoted from many local and national sources. Supposing the reformers were right, supposing the instrumentalists and singers were terrible, ignorant, untrained musicians who were just plain bad. This is a common reaction I have had when arguing the case that there was a consistent performance style adopted by west gallery musicians.

Some of the west gallery instrumentalists and singers no doubt were poor musicians, but we must be careful not to confuse two aspects of the problem, competence and style. A *style* is made from the totality of conventions, musical ways of doing things (that in themselves develop and change) and which constitute that particular style; *competence* is the degree to which those conventions are mastered. All musical styles can be performed well or badly but the answer to low competence in any style of music is to encourage improvement. The reformers constantly confused style and competence and mixed the whole thing up with a belief that it was not possible for humble and informally educated people to perform well. What the reformers aimed at was the abolition of the style and the exclusion of the west gallery performers who, it was said, suffered from 'ignorance and want of breeding'.

In a society where musical learning is informal, where the oral/aural tradition largely prevails, musical style cannot be divorced from other cultural traits. Musical style was learnt naturally like accent and dialect, body hexis and movement, norms of dress and self-presentation. We have seen that accent was one of the things objected to by reformers. To attack the style was, in a com-

plex way, to attack the people, their sense of self and their integrity; they were, in a way, that style.

The common reaction to such an attack is flight or fight, capitulation or resistance. Some choirs stopped playing, some went to other churches or based carol-singing activities on local pubs, some actively resisted.

The second and third quarters of the 19th century witnessed local but significant opposition to the expulsion of the west gallery musicians; these included strikes, ritual humiliation (rough music), desertion from the Anglican church to nonconformist churches, and street fights between old and new choirs. La Trobe anticipated all this and put it down to 'the low spirit of malignity which boils in the breasts of the common people when thwarted', an eloquent testimony to the class nature of the expulsions.

By 1859 the *Church of England Quarterly Review* could report:

The days are happily numbered in which a fiddle and a bassoon were looked upon as appropriate accompaniments to a church choir ... Few churches are now without an organ, and the wives and sisters of the clergy form an excellent staff of organists, where there are no funds to secure professional help.

(Quoted in Mackerness, 1964, p. 195)

This account could have added the national school-master or -mistress to the list of 'excellent staff' for completeness.

Ten years later the Rev. Hepburn Campion of Westmeston told his younger listeners that:

they had no idea of the difficulty and trouble which the clergy had with those who had strong opinions of their own with reference to church music - the strong ideas of themselves, and the exalted views of their own performances.

(*Sussex Agricultural Express*, 1 June 1869)

He added that 'younger folks would scarcely credit the spirit of resistance that was exhibited'. But from as early as the 1870s on we start to hear notes of regret being sounded at the loss of west gallery music.

At the Church Congress of 1871 and in letters to the press, Dr H. J. Gauntlett stressed the pastoral loss caused by church music reform:

I am old enough to remember the parish orchestras of some ten, a dozen or fourteen parishioners, who accompanied the parish choir in their metrical psalms and hymns. This band commonly consisted of oboes, clarionets, bassoons, violoncellos, a double bass and sometimes a French horn. Instead of wood and metal with wind from a bellows, it was living sounds from living men; and in place of one instrument there were a dozen.

With every regard for a really good organ, I maintain the employ of a dozen parishioners in worship is to be preferred to the use of a small organ.

(*Church Bells*, 21 October 1871)

An interesting feeling of loss is expressed in an anonymous poem published in the *Ashurst Parish Magazine* in April 1897. It describes the old days in the village including the parish clerk that has gone and the old rustic choir; a barrel-organ has taken its place, but one member of the old choir 'sits in a place apart':

Mute as to speech, at time conceals his face
Like some tall schoolboy put there in disgrace.
For well he knew the tune when with strong
voice

In Psalms and Hymns full loud he did rejoice.
When asked to modulate his power and tone
He deemed it best to let it all alone,
His harp he could not tune to different strain
He felt too old to learn to sing again.

It is worth taking a moment just to focus on what this poem tells us about performance style: with '*strong voice ... full loud* he did rejoice', 'When *asked to modulate his power and tone ...* He felt too old *to learn to sing again*'.

This slight historical diversion has brought us back to notions of style with a vengeance. We have seen that style and social class were intimately linked and that what the educated middle-class reformers really objected to was plebeian ways of doing things and plebeian control, 'the management of music in crude and vulgar hands'.

The performance style of west gallery music

What can we conclude from this survey?

I have felt a tension in writing and revising it. Am I writing for those who wish again to perform west gallery music or for the generally interested? In a sense I think for both, and I hope for many people, like me, this work serves a dual function.

No doubt west gallery music was performed with very different degrees of competence, but practitioners operated within a pervasive and general style of performing that I have termed, for convenience, the plebeian musical style. It is most likely that the hostile witnesses were generally correct about the style; once we accept that what they considered vices may have been virtues, we can see the west gallery style having a number of features in common with other traditional styles of performance, most notably an open-throated full-voice production (of a type that has been found all over the world) and the use of individual elaboration to each single line.

In the singing of the Isle of Lewis and in simi-

lar styles in the USA we have come across a full-blown heterophonic style. Much of the English music of the west gallery period was polyphonic, as is its close relative, the shape-note tradition of the USA. To describe west gallery music I would say it was a type of music performed in an open-throated full voice, where different lines interwove but where each performer, vocal and instrumental, felt a certain freedom to elaborate and decorate his or her vocal or instrumental line, as in English traditional singing and instrumental playing. If you need a musical term to sum up the dominant west gallery style of performance, *full-voiced heterophonic polyphony* will do the job.

We can never be the rural singers of 18th- and 19th-century England; they were people of a different age, different class and a very different life experience. But we can, through critical thought, reading, listening and practice, make a good attempt at performing a wonderfully exciting style of music that our artisan and labourer ancestors made their own. This seems to me much better than uncritically assimilating west gallery music to our post-industrial, middle-class, 'heritage in-

dustry', received voice production, ways of doing things. If we steep ourselves in the music that relates in different ways to the west gallery tradition, listen to it carefully and critically, if we cultivate the English traditional style of instrumental dance music playing and learn to sing in a full-voiced, open-throated way, we will begin to do justice to the west gallery tradition and, incidentally, we will broaden ourselves in the process.

The father of the American composer, Charles Ives, who led the singing at outdoor religious camp meetings, once rebuked a smart young Boston musician for criticising the singing of an old stonemason:

Watch him closely and reverently, look into his eyes and hear the music of the ages. Don't pay too much attention to the sounds – for if you do you may miss the music. You won't get a wild, heroic ride to heaven on pretty little sounds.

(Ives, 1973, p. 132)

Quite so. But perhaps, ironically, we need to pay more attention to the sound in order not to misrepresent the music.

