

Scotland needs to recover its lost soul: music

by James MacMillan

Scotland's Music

by John Purser

Mainstream, Edinburgh, 1992, £25

The following book review first appeared this spring in the Edinburgh weekend supplement to The Scotsman. It is republished here with the kind permission of the author, a conductor and composer whose works have been performed in many European countries as well as in his native land. It has been slightly abbreviated and subheads have been added.

In times of political turmoil and change, the arts tend to regenerate themselves, being influenced and inspired by the wider social issues.

The Scots have always had more of a problem with music than with the other arts—it is not seen to be as important in the fiber of Scottish life. The Reformation's cultural holocaust may have something to do with this, or perhaps it is more to do with the class values of our educational system which siphoned off "classical" music for the middle classes and left the rest of us to discover a love of music in the more "egalitarian" trends of folk, jazz, or rock.

When an artist's perspective is sought on any issue, the poet, the writer, the film-maker can offer an insight which is illuminating and incisive. But for a musical point of view, we are usually left with a self-publicizing, self-preening pop star who has mastered the art of the sound-byte and the American accent (necessary for this borrowed culture) and not much else. The sad fact is that Scotland's music remains an unknown or ignored quantity for most Scots, but a universal knowledge of it *must* be acquired if our present quest for self-awareness and self-determination is to be anything like complete.

Purser's writing style is florid but entertaining, scholarly but undaunting, committed without lapsing into groundless propaganda.

What is made painfully clear in the first half of this book is that Scotland had a rich and civilized musical culture, on a par with any thriving country in Europe, which was subsequently and systematically devastated by the barbarism of John Knox and his Calvinist zealots. Scotland has been

trying to recover from this trauma for the last 400 years.

Since a significant amount of this music was generated by the Roman Church in Scotland, one can understand why it became one of the major casualties of the Reformers' attentions. What they vandalized was a long and rich tradition of beautiful sacred music dating back to the ancient Celtic plain chants that were probably in use as early as the eighth century A.D. We are lucky that some of the manuscripts of that music have survived, notably the Inchcolm Antiphone, which dates from the end of the 13th century.

These early chants have a character of their own, certainly similar to the Gregorian plainsong current in mainland Europe, but different in structural detail, reflecting the Celtic love of formal patterning (as seen in the *The Book of Kells*).

The unique and independent nature of the early Celtic Church did not mean that it sought distance from mainland European culture. However, John Purser seems to reinforce a major historical self-delusion that the Columban tradition was an early example of the spiritual rejection of Rome, and thus an early precursor (and excuse) for later schismatic excesses. No retrospective self-justification should hide the fact that religious traditions brought to Scotland via Iona were fully Celtic *and* fully Roman.

Indeed, the most abiding perception of John Purser's book is the blossoming of a musical treasury, which, in its pre-Reformation days, was a successful cohesion of indigenous Scottish elements with absorbed influences from continental Europe. This can be seen in the early stages of part-writing where the techniques of *organum*, pioneered at Notre Dame in Paris, assumed a Scottish flavor with the use of interval types which seem peculiar to this country. The balance of Scottish cosmopolitanism with a national cultural confidence was at its height in the Renaissance golden age at the courts of James IV and James V. From this background emerged Scotland's greatest composer, Robert Carver, an Augustinian canon who trained at Scone. Purser's claim that Carver's music was on a par with anything in mainland Europe is provocative, but seems secure when one makes comparisons.

Carver was probably educated at the University of Louvain, today in Belgium, where he encountered and absorbed the music of Ockeghem, Dufay, and Josquin. His mass, based on the ribald crusading song, "L'Homme Armé," is the only British mass to use this tune. Being Scottish, Carver

had better access to continental developments than his English contemporaries, whose monarchs were continually at war with the French.

The Union of the Crowns

The next body-blow to Scotland's music was the Union of the Crowns and the disappearance of the Scottish court and all its musicians to London. The traumatic repercussions of this event have universal significance in Scottish life, and are only now being put to rights. In music, the result was the spread of a fatalism and the self-destructive belief that Scotland's barren musical landscape was somehow endemic to the Scottish character and that we really were a nation without music in our souls.

The historical and political consequences of this event have meant that Scotland became peripheral to the development of European classical music throughout the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. John Purser's book is, however, a history of the traditional music as well as the classical music of Scotland, and these "lost" centuries were indeed a golden time for Gaelic music and for the repertoire of the pipes, fiddle, harp, and voice—in fact, that huge wealth of music which most successfully captures the true essence of Scotland's cultural character.

When the book reaches the 19th century, I find Purser's advocacy of Scottish composers less discerning. His outrage at the neglect of figures such as MacKenzie, MacCunn, and Wallace is understandable, considering how little they are performed in their own country. However, the honest musician in Purser is irrepressible, and if one delves into the text, one can discover Purser's true opinions. Alexander MacKenzie, admired by Liszt and friend of Grieg and Paderewski, is first described as "one of the most important . . . and inexcusably neglected British composers of his age." But later we read that "his was not a searching style . . . he not only enjoyed being part of the Establishment [in London] but saw it as his business to perpetuate it." Enough said!

Scottish music today

His final chapter on Scottish contemporary music is a brief taster and a starting point for the research of others, but it does raise some important unspoken questions. Is the new Scotland to be an enlightened, civilized place where music takes a more central cultural role than before? If so, we need to nurture a young, educated, and unprejudiced audience to replace the middle-aged conservatives whose very presence in the concert halls stifles the innovation and boldness required to continue the tradition.

In a few decades' time these people will have died out, and classical music could be left without an audience. The necessary activism to counteract this disaster is already under way. It is an activism which should take great pride in our musical heritage and which has received a tremendous shot in the arm from John Purser's scholarship and this inspiring book.

Church music debate hides deeper issues

by Nora Hamerman

Why Catholics Can't Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste

by Thomas Day

Crossroad, New York, 1991.

177 pages, hardbound, \$19.95

The name of Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee came back into the public limelight again in mid-July, when the notorious Benedictine abbot was quoted in the *Washington Post* criticizing a recent Vatican intervention into the American Catholic Church. The issue was a letter to the American bishops, which stated that pastors should actively oppose legislative initiatives which attribute civil rights protections to homosexuality, and upheld the right of society to restrict the right of homosexuals to be teachers, scout leaders, and serve in the military forces.

Once again, Weakland made himself the spokesman for the "gay rights" lobby in rejecting an explicit intervention from Rome. It is hardly surprising; the archbishop has long been the rallying-point for those who choose to cavil with the pope's defense of the sanctity of marriage and of human life, including adding "qualifiers" to undermine the absolute prohibition on abortion, the murder of the unborn. One anti-Weakland group of Catholics claims to have assembled a dossier proving that his Milwaukee archdiocese is a hotbed of homosexual child abuse and other perversions, and even went so far as to link such corruption to the sickening case of Jeffrey Dahmer, the "gay" mass murderer who rampaged in an apparent atmosphere of societal and police negligence in Milwaukee.

But there is another angle. Weakland is the pivotal figure in the so-called liturgical reform which has been going on in the U.S. Catholic Church since the late 1960s, a reform which has resulted in what are called "folk masses" in most parishes, for which the widely used "revolutionary" hymnal is *Glory and Praise*. The composer of the title song, "Glory and Praise," Dan Schutte, S.J., a defrocked, former priest, is reported by one conservative Catholic newspaper to be an activist in "Dignity," the curiously named homosexual-lesbian lobby against the church's teaching on sexual morality.