

CALEB SIMPER 1856-1942

Master of his craft or musical hack?

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What are we to make of Caleb Simper, a composer whose output inhabits, albeit sometimes dustily, many an organ loft and choir library? His many works, though, have for decades been the object of much disdain from the critics, and while it might be suggested that it is all too easy for those who are not fully familiar with his music to be unkind, some might cynically suggest that it is even easier for those who are. Erik Routley's oft-quoted dismissal is quite typical: "From *The Crucifixion* you go downwards into the underworld of Michael Costa, Caleb Simper and J H Maunder..." (*A Short History of English Church Music*, 1977). (Many though would strongly disagree with his assessment of Maunder). Simper's passing in 1942 was virtually ignored by the musical establishment and press and of his huge output, nothing is currently available in a commercial recording. Nor is there any biography or comprehensive survey of his work, not even a mention in Grove's Dictionary. The most substantial source is Brian Clegg's survey found on: www.cul.co.uk/music/comp.htm Much of this article is based therefore on a personal evaluation of the scores rather than authoritative sources.



Yet, several million copies of his choral works (of which wrote around 200) were sold under his name or his pseudonym of Edwyn A. Clare. The publicity slogan, 'Sung throughout the civilised world' was not without a degree of justification. Moreover, the 12 volumes of his organ voluntaries, consisting of 17 pieces each, are still in print and have provided a ready resource for many an organist.

Born of humble origins and it would appear with no formal training, Simper eventually became a manager of a music warehouse in Worcester and organist and choirmaster at the then popular church of St Mary Magdalene in Worcester, (now closed). The new Nicholson organ there was of some note, now transplanted to St Christoforus Kerk, Schagen, The Netherlands. He subsequently moved to Barnstaple in Devon where he ran another music

warehouse and became organist at Emmanuel Church in the town, albeit with a rather mediocre instrument. Within months of this move, however, the huge commercial success of his compositions and the very considerable wealth it was bringing was such that at a mere 34 years of age, he retired from his day job and devoted himself almost solely to his composing enterprises.

Many a choir has warmed to his choral music, finding much of it easy to sing and memorise, and with gusto! The often predictable if rather four-square phrasing combined with simple harmonies, repetitive elements and that vital musical 'hook' can but give heart to a choir, particularly one of lesser resources. The infectiously buoyant and tuneful Christmas hymn-anthem, *Awake, Awake Good People All*, for example, is hard to beat as an attractive, simple and tightly-constructed choral work. It is difficult to understand why this is not better-known today. Some of his other choral works contain elements of almost embarrassing unsophistication, yet with much that becomes obstinate in the memory. His more extended works though are perhaps best appreciated via excerpts, sometimes just one, and much of his choral output overall is worthy rather than inspired. 'Popular' does not always equal 'good' but popular, it certainly was. Stylistically, the choral music moves little beyond that of the late Victorian era, though some, and often the best, relates to hymnody and anthems of up to a century earlier.

Turning to his organ music, which is the main focus for this article; the harmonic style is considerably more contrapuntal, though often let down by over-complex harmony. Unlike the output of many prolific composers of organ music, there is no use of liturgical themes such as a chorale, hymn or plainsong chant, only the odd adaptation from one of his choral works. Such titles as 'Prayer', 'Communion' or 'Meditation' are interspersed with, 'Loud Voluntary', 'Gavotte', 'Song without words' or a triumphal march. For his various pieces entitled 'Offertoire', Simper may well have had in mind some of those by Italian composers of the time, which tend to be distinctly jolly affairs. Even if not overtly in the title, the influences of opera, operetta and popular song are often evident throughout his output. One can but speculate that his involvement with the music trade will have brought him into much contact with published music of all kinds.

The music is all scored within two staves with a pedal symbol (sometimes optional) suggesting that the pedals can play the bottom line. The fact that these scores can be used for harmonium, pipe organ with or without pedals, or for players without an adequate pedal technique, may well account for some of the popularity of these volumes. (The 'one size fits all' approach though does not always obtain the most musical result). Moreover, each book of 17 pieces contains

an even mix of genres so that just one volume will provide at least one piece for every eventuality. Some are several pages long whilst others, e.g. an 'Interlude', are of a mere few bars and designed to provide brief covering music for a gap or transition in the liturgy. (The volumes also include a small number of works by his son, Roland Chalmers Simper FRCO LRAM, one of which was written at the age of eight. Roland sadly died young in 1917). As with much organ music of this period, not least by composers of lesser rank, the shorter pieces are generally the more successful and can exhibit strong themes that are effectively developed within a simple and balanced structure. For example, the *Adagio*, Book 2 no. 9, (Ex.1) is a delightful gem; certainly one of Simper's best. The long and characterful arc-shaped melody, well-controlled harmonies and texture surely make this a worthy piece in any organist's repertoire and warrants being quoted in its entirety.

Ex.1

Legato ♩ = 104
mf Diap.
A trifle slower

The following *Gavotte*, Book 2 no. 10, (Ex.2) is also of some merit with a characterful theme that largely avoids the the four-square character of much of Simper's music. This is among the more structurally disciplined of Simper's long pieces though, as so often when Simper hits on a strong theme, he extracts his full money's worth out of it even to the point that it represents negative value.

Ex.2 $\text{♩} = 126$

f *Man.* *Ped.* *Etc.* *Ped.*

The *Soft Voluntary*, Book 6 no. 13, (Ex.3) also has an engaging theme that is rhythmically varied, though with around three-quarters of this short piece occupied by repetitions of the eight-bar opening theme, Simper again squeezes it dry, (if making though for quicker and easier composing – and learning)!

13 SOFT VOLUNTARY

Ex.3 *Andante* $\text{♩} = 100$

mf *Ped.* *Etc.*

Ex.4 Con Animo ♩ = 132

The musical score for Ex. 4 is written for piano in G major and 2/4 time. It begins with a forte (*ff*) dynamic and the instruction "Gt. to Sw. with Reeds." in the right hand. The left hand has a "Man." marking. The piece is marked "Con Animo" with a tempo of ♩ = 132. The score consists of three systems of two staves each. The first system shows a strong, rhythmic opening with chords and a marching bass line. The second system continues with similar textures. The third system concludes with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and the instruction "Etc.".

While some of Simper's output is rooted within a traditional organ idiom, the orchestra or even military band often takes over. One of the best of his more triumphal works is the *March in G*, Book 6 no. 9, (Ex. 4). The strong opening theme portends well, though the chord textures and spacing is hardly of the organ world; neither is the marching bass after the double bar. (One can also imagine a big bass drum and cymbal—some romantic Italian organs had such things—on the held chord in bar five. Perhaps the spirit of Verdi is not far away).

So much for the good, and there is much that is. The wheel nuts on the bus though really start coming loose, even off completely, on some of Simper's lengthier marches and offertories. The more triumphant the gesture, often the emptier it is. A crowning example (which I shall spare your eyes) is the *Coronation Pomposo*, Book 5 no.6, with a life-sapping banality in the opening rarely equalled elsewhere, albeit relieved and redeemed somewhat by eventually morphing into a quite decent patch of pseudo-Rossini.

Italian-style opera abounds elsewhere, for example in the March, Book 1 no.6, (Ex. 5), though, wouldn't such repeated chords push some organs' sluggish actions to the limit?

Ex.5

The image shows two systems of musical notation for an organ piece. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The first system is marked with 'Lt' above the treble staff. The second system is marked with 'Etc.' at the end of the treble staff. The music is characterized by dense, repetitive chordal textures, particularly in the bass line, which consists of many repeated chords. The treble line has more melodic movement but is also heavily textured with repeated notes and chords. The overall impression is one of mechanical repetition and complexity.

In other examples of his extended pieces, one can but detect a sense of hurried and careless writing, and with an endless succession of bits pulled from the shelf of spare and empty ideas, strung together with little coordination between them. As an example, and an experience of what is surely crushingly bad music, savour (or merely avoid) the *Offertoire*, Book 3 no.5. (Indeed, at his very least inspired, Simper could be said to be to music what William McGonagall was to poetry and throughout his output there are clear candidates for a Tay Bridge Disaster award.)

There are also numerous examples where the organ music is excessively laden with chromatic, convoluted and cloying harmonies, sometimes acting almost as a cover for a paucity of genuine melodic quality. This can tax the fingers and also result in more challenging pedal parts. Organists sometimes speak of the ease with which his works lie under the hands, but this is not always the case and there is a fair smattering of clumsy writing that pervades Simper's output. Such an example can be found towards the end of *Meditation*, Book 8 no. 4, (Ex.6).

Some of the harmonic cul-de-sacs that Simper gets himself into require more than the skills of Houdini to escape from artfully, and not without a painful crunching of gears, (evoking perhaps our distant memories of Bristol Lodekkas or whining AEC Regents with their crash gearboxes grinding up and down yon punishing hills...but I digress). These are often where the music slows to a crawl, almost as if to give the composer thinking time as to what to do next.

Ex.6

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano piece, labeled 'Ex.6'. The first system consists of a treble and bass staff. The treble staff features a complex texture of chords and moving lines, while the bass staff provides a harmonic foundation. Performance markings include 'rall.' (ritardando) and 'mf a tempo' (mezzo-forte at tempo). A 'Ped.' (pedal) instruction is placed below the bass staff. The second system continues the piece with similar textures and another 'rall.' marking.

Simper's organ works were but just part of a whole industry producing music to meet (and fuel) the fashions of the day; music that was deemed of an appropriate ambience, even total wallpaper, within the liturgy, and more secular genres. Other composers of similar ilk included such figures as Thomas Mee Pattison and Ernest A. Dicks. Their music, if not of great distinction, is written on three staves and has generally much more rigour in terms of organ texture. Dicks' compilations also include arrangements of music by other composers, some of rather greater merit. (The stylistic palette within church music overall has broadened considerably in subsequent years, though who is to say which fashionable sounds that may beguile the senses and underpin certain styles of worship today will not in their turn be largely discarded and even derided?)

So, what of Caleb Simper's legacy? Commercially astute he certainly was, producing material on a huge scale. At his best, he shows highly competent musical skills and was able to absorb a variety of styles, albeit with generally less flare than that of his models. His works are often easy to sight-read and learn, if only because they develop in predictable ways and according the stock musical gestures of the day. Popularity though surely depends partly on the strata of less discerning tastes, and once the fashions change, the lesser creations eventually fade into history. Certainly, there are some fine gems to be found among his organ output; also, useful material to agreeably smother the chatter, prepare souls, even lift spirits... but then there's the rest! But decide for yourself; the organ music is readily available and various recordings of this and the choral music can be found on YouTube; these are interesting to explore...for various reasons! Curiously, the choral music is performed almost exclusively by non-European choirs. But, as the sales slogan said, 'Sung throughout the civilised world'!