THE ORGAN CONTROVERSY IN SCOTLAND

By GEOFFREY B. PAYZANT

THE organ is now in quite general use in the worship of Presbyterian churches, in Scotland and elsewhere. But for more than two centuries, the instrument was forbidden in the Scottish Church. The early stages of its return to use, if not favour, are full of lively episodes and churchly rhetoric.

The first introduction of an organ into Scotland took place during the reign of James I, who was crowned in 1423. In 1559, John Knox on his second return from Geneva set in motion a ferocious tide of iconoclasm; this reaction included in its sweep all organs and all ornaments of worship. Within a few years there can have been few or none in the country fit for use.

James VI attempted to introduce surplices, organs, and kneeling, in the Chapel Royal at Holyrood in 1617, but this caused a wave of resentment in the country. The Directory, formulated by the Assembly of Westminster in 1647 determined in detail the manner of worship in the Church of Scotland, and the organ was quite definitely not included.

The stage is set by Squire Bramble, writing from Edinburgh: "The good people of Edinburgh no longer think dirt and cobwebs essential to the house of God. Some of their churches have admitted such ornaments as would have excited sedition, even in England, a little more than a century ago; and psalmody is here practised and taught by a professor from the cathedral of Durham: I should not be surprised, ina few years, to hear it accompanied with an organ".

Smollette's *Humphry Clinker* was published in 1771. Around 1750, Sir Archibald Grant, second Baronet of Monymusk, installed an organ in his library and made the instrument and the chamber available for the regular psalm rehearsals of the parish church choir. Some forty years later, an Aberdeen congregation sounded forth just once with an organ actually in church, but not on the Sabbath. This violation met with a stinging rebuke from the Presbytery and the organ was quietly removed elsewhere.

Such docility did not distinguish the conduct of the Glasgow congregation, whose members made the second attempt, at St. Andrew's Chuch, in 1807. It is with the St. Andrew's scandal of that year that we are here principally concerned. In this attempt to introduce an organ into worship, two organs

are actually involved. One of them was built, curiously enough, by James Watt, the inventor of the improved steam engine.

Watt built his first organ around 1765; it was for use in a Masonic Lodge. So fascinated was he by this project that he made several others, with great improvements in the way of pressure-gauges and in the general acoustics of the instrument. In August of 1807 a small chamber organ built by Watt was rented by "a company of the sitters" of St. Andrew's; we are told that the intention was to use it in mid-week practices of psalmody. The instrument was rented from James Steven of Wilson Street, who was at that time the leading music-seller in Glasgow. This is, despite some disagreement among church historians, the instrument around which was caused the scandal to be described. Its subsequent history should be reviewed at this point, however.

When the congregation of St. Andrew's was ordered by Presbytery to remove their little organ, it was returned to James Steven, and later it was bought by Archibald McLellan, who was a prominent member of the Town Council of Glasgow for thirty years. He wrote: "The instrument, when in proper tune, is of considerable power and very pleasing harmony, and, in my keeping, has been orthodox in its application, from 'Martyrs' to 'Old Hundred' ". McLellan added another stop to the organ; after his death it was sold to James Graham Adam of Denovan. On Adam's death it was sold again, to Adam Sim of Coulter Mains, for fifty pounds. The organ is now in the custody of the Old Glasgow Museum belonging to the Glasgow Corporation.

The other of the two organs involved was a full-scale pipe organ built at York in 1792. In 1802 it was bought by the Sacred Music Society of Glasgow and installed, after two years of negotiation for permission from the magistrates and council, in the cathedral; it was there to be used in rehearsals and performances, but not for worship. At this time, it was the largest and most powerful organ in Scotland. It had nineteen stops. It was also the first organ to be set up with official permission in a Presbyterian Church, at least in the West of Scotland.

The Sacred Music Society suffered a decline soon afterwards and the organ was bought by the sitters of St. Andrew's, but it was never installed in their church. In the winter of 1812, the organ was transported from the cathedral to an Episcopal Church in the city, also called St. Andrew's. By this time

organs were already in use in some non-established churches This same St. Andrew's Episcopal Church had an organ o sorts as early as 1795, along with surplices.

The people of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church had then, two organs on their hands at the time of the great con troversy. The York organ they owned, but never had in thei church. The Watt organ they hired, and it sent the voice o Baal echoing down the long vault of St. Andrew's once i Sabbath worship, on August 23, 1807.

As early as August 21, 1806, the minister of St. Andrew' (Dr. Ritchie) had written the Lord Provost (James Mackenzie for permission to remove some seats from around and behin the pulpit, presumably to make room eventually for the Yor organ. The Watt organ would be too small to require suc an adjustment. Dr. Ritchie pointed out that the magistrate and council as heritors only needed to consider the matter o the seats, as the matter of whether an organ may or may not b used was the concern of Presbytery. The sitters of the churc accompanied Ritchie's letter with a petition in which it wa stated that the proposed improvement if allowed by "ou enlightened heritors" would result in the improvement o psalmody and in an "endeavor to rescue our national characte from the reproach of having almost entirely neglected th cultivation of sacred music". The Lord Provost receive legal advice on the matter from the first town-clerk, Mr Reddie, and on that advice refused the petition. Reddie wa sympathetic to the cause of St. Andrew's, but was obliged t report that it was unlawful.

But by August of the following year, the thin end of th wedge had been installed at St. Andrew's, in the form of th Watt organ. This was, ostensibly, for the quite innocen purpose of assisting at family worship during the week and i the improvement of psalmody.

On August 21, the Lord Provost was dining with a friend Another guest was present, a member of St. Andrew's, o whose sympathies in the matter we are in doubt. He at an rate informed the Lord Provost that on Sunday, two day later, the organ was to be used in public worship. Next day Saturday, the Lord Provost wrote Dr. Ritchie, protestin the proposed action, in view of "all damages which might b the consequence".

After the fatal Sunday, Ritchie presented the admonitor letter to his Musical Committee. On the same day, the Lor

Provost reported the whole matter to the Moderator of Presbytery, while at the same time advising Ritchie of this action and renewing his protest. Some meetings and correspondence followed, but the official session of the Presbytery was held on October 7, when Dr. Ritchie was heard, and it was decided that the use of the organ was contrary to church and civil law. The action of the St. Andrew's congregation was deemed "inexpedient and unauthorized". Dr. Ritchie promised to comply with the regulation, and the matter was terminated, or so it was thought.

There soon followed a minority protest, called "Reasons for Dissent", over the hands of Taylor, Ranken, Davison, and Macgill, the latter being then Professor of Divinity at Glasgow University. A committee of Presbytery replied to this. Then Taylor and Lockhart protested further, and on Januray 6, 1808, Ritchie submitted a statement in support of the "Reasons for Dissent". To this, the Presbytery Committee, chief of them being Dr. Porteous (others were Balfour, McLean, Lapsie), made a formal statement in reply. On May 4, the Presbytery put a final stop to the "war of protocols". The controversy raged for some time in newspapers and pamphlets, and soon after, Dr. Ritchie was appointed Professor of Divinity at Edinburgh. A caricature of him appeared in the papers, showing him as a street musician with a barrel-organ on his back, singing "I'll gang nae mair to yon toun".

Of the arguments brought to the Presbytery in favour of the organ, two are particularly amusing. One of these is the argument from the pitch-pipe; even Ritchie stooped to this. If the precentor is allowed to bring into the church a little whistle with which to give out the note for a psalm, how then can it be decided that an organ, which after all is only a "kist o' whustles", is unlawful. If one pipe to give out one note, why not five hundred pipes to give out all the notes.

The other of these two arguments here being selected because of their special interest is even more shameless. Those who advocated the use of the organ, took a wide-eyed look at the Directory of the Presbyterian Church, and reported that there was no mention of organs in it anywhere. This can only mean, they said, that the Westminister Divines were not at all opposed to their use.

The argument from Presbytery and its supporters was to the point: when the Old Testament Dispensation was ushered in, there was sounding of trumpets; with the coming of the

New Testament Dispensation, angels sang over Bethlehem. Vocal praise is thus divinely assigned to the Period of Grace. Instrumental music was sounded in the Temple, but the function of the Temple ceased in Christ, and the use of instrumental music ceased with it, so far as the praise of God is concerned. Fathers and reformers are quoted in support, with a most impressive weight of learning and elegance of rhetoric on both sides.

As late as 1856 an edition of the two official statements, those of Ritchie and Porteous, was published in Edinburgh by Robert S. Candlish, D. D. In his introduction, Candlish writes: "I am persuaded that if the Organ be admitted, there is no barrier, in principle, against the sacerdotal system in all its fulness against the substitution again, in our whole religion, of the formal for the spiritual, the symbolical for the real".

Candlish's discomfort may have been caused by the fact that the organ was coming into fairly general use among the many dissenting churches in Scotland. But it is a comfort of sorts to organists to know that not only ourselves, but also our predecessor and their instruments, have been at the centre of rife and confusion for so long that rife and confusion have been sanctified by time, as the normal and proper state of affairs.