

# Book of the month

Peter Westfield welcomes a hymn book for the twenty-first century



## ANCIENT & MODERN

Hymns and Songs for Refreshing Worship  
Full music edition (other editions are available)

Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd, 1782pp, hbk  
978 1848252424, £30

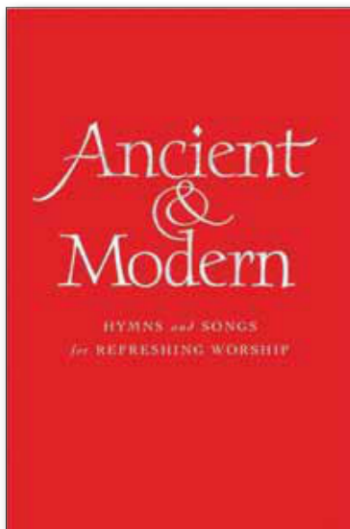
There is nothing new about bad new hymns: a trawl through the first edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861) will reveal some of those destined to become justly neglected over the ensuing decades and centuries. Equally, it is true that there will always be certain hymns which are of sufficient musical, poetical and theological quality as to merit a place in the liturgy of the church in perpetuity – and that these hymns must themselves have been new once upon a time! The challenge facing the compilers of a new hymnal in the current age is how to acknowledge the fact that new hymns are neither automatically good nor automatically bad, but should be judged on their own merits, and so be deemed either worthy or unworthy of a place alongside the great hymns from past generations.

It is partly for this reason that the publication of a new hymnal from the *Ancient and Modern* stable is always worthy of note in the world of church music, and thus by extension in the liturgical world more generally. Along with the *English Hymnal* titles in their various guises, *Ancient & Modern* is the definitive repository of English-language hymnary: indeed, it is a valuable part of our patrimony. It is pleasing to note that the fact that both titles are now ultimately produced by the same publishing house seems, thus far, not to have had a detrimental effect on either one of them.

*Ancient & Modern: Hymns and Songs for Refreshing Worship* is published just thirteen years after *Common Praise*, the previous major hymn book from A&M. *Common Praise* was a major success, not least because it avoided the pitfall of its predecessor, the *New Standard Version* of A&M, which privileged modern hymns irrespective of their quality at the expense of some older hymns still widely in use in English churches. So how does the latest edition of A&M measure up to its predecessors, and indeed to its rivals?

In answering that question, it is as well to note the astute observation of the editors in the preface that there is now 'a true catholicity [small 'c!'] of approach' in the use of hymnody in churches, with an accompanying proliferation of worship songs, chants and choruses, that it is now extremely difficult to include a representative sample that will satisfy everyone in one collection; and indeed this book is the largest ever produced by A&M.

It must therefore be true to say that, even when attempting to adopt a catholic (small 'c!') approach, different hymn



books will appeal to different traditions within the Church. For those who value a wide selection of hymns proper to the seasons and festivals of the liturgical year, the *English Hymnal* stable is still probably the place to turn to. And for those who make extensive use of songs rather than hymns in the proper sense, there are a host of other books and resources to use.

The great achievement of *Ancient & Modern: Hymns and Songs for Refreshing Worship* is (despite the title!) in gathering together a fine collection of the very best of modern hymnody in the strict sense of the word: new words and new music

which nonetheless conform to the traditional conventions of hymn-singing such as metre and rhyme.

It is my prediction that for those congregations who seek to keep pace with contemporary developments in hymn-writing (as opposed to being perpetually stuck in the Seventies and Eighties with only Graham Kendrick and Paul Inwood for company), this new hymnal will quickly become the standard by which all others are judged. There are, for example, dozens of hymn tunes by the superb John Barnard; the author and composer Peter Nardone is well represented; and both of these have tunes set for a beautiful hymn on the theology of baptism by David Fox, 'At the dawning of creation'. But these are just an almost random flavour of what the new A&M has to offer.

By and large, the editors have successfully achieved their aim of sailing a 'course between the rocks of poetical butchery on one side and gender obsession on the other': archaic and so-called politically incorrect language has only been amended where 'widely accepted alternatives exist elsewhere' or where the change is unnoticeable. Thus, the Christian soldiers in Baring-Gould's famous hymn escape unmolested, as does the Lord and Father of mankind, but Cyril Alington's 'Good Christian men' have been turned into 'Good Christians all'.

This is, then, a fine new hymn book. But the sheer physical size of it (bordering on the unwieldy), and the catholicity of approach which the editors acknowledge is now required, does rather raise the question, will it be the last of its kind? In an age of data projectors, photocopying licenses, and an increasingly prevalent expectation of tailor-made orders of service for all but the most routine of services, will the humble hymn book be able to justify its existence in the future?

The quality of this latest collection makes it easy for me to say, 'I hope so.' **ND**