

Church Music Society Centenary Symposium

Reflections by The Reverend Canon Lucy Winkett

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The Music of the Church

The Church is bound to proclaim two truths: that God is both transcendent and immanent; beyond us and beside us. Nowhere is this better expressed than in music.

Music expresses the “otherness” of God – the exuberance of God expressed in Haydn’s Nelson Mass, the mystery of God expressed in Messiaen’s *O Sacrum Convivium*, the sadness of God expressed in Rachmaninov’s *To Thee O Lord* and the liberation of God expressed in *O Happy Day*. All of this is music that has an eschatological function: that is, it is music from the past, sung in the present that calls us into the future. It is somehow over us, bringing the eternal into the present and transcending our earthbound existence.

Music may supremely express the transcendent but it also embodies the immanent. In the creation of music, there is often a patron, a struggle, a political and financial context in which the composer works and the performers perform. The theological language of grace and gift is the language of faith; but lurking underneath the gift of music, the free exchange of sonant beauty, is the language of the market, of contract, of obligation and commission.

Music is of this world, even if it sounds as if it has come from the next.

“No Church is an Island”

In claiming the right to comment critically and imaginatively on the cultures which surrounds it, the church sometimes adopts an oppositional stance, but this can leave us on a cultural island on which we build our religion and our case. Our music as well as our theology can become too self referential, taking our cultural reference points from a narrow set of “acceptable” places.

As a lover of Choral Evensong I want to affirm that the combination of Cranmer’s Prayer Book emphasis on the Incarnation, together with the transcendent sound of choristers in an evocative acoustic is a compelling combination for an exhausted urban population looking for peace. The conversational rhythm of the versicles and responses, the ancient wisdom of the psalms, the prophetic energy of *Magnificat* and the sure touch of Simeon’s *Nunc Dimittis* faith, together with anthems that may be from before the Norman Conquest or written especially for that service; all these elements create a sacred space infused with music within which can be held that day’s events, disappointments, disasters and delights.

The Evensong sound world of primarily European cultures ranging over 3,000 years is one that has become precious to us, and pre reformation Latin anthems fuse with the vernacular of post Reformation Europe to bring ecumenical harmony into our daily liturgy.

But equally, as a lover of Choral Evensong, I want to say that it is important we do not ignore its underside too. In a religion where God becoming human liberated us from our earthbound existence, we can’t leave unexamined the self confessed “addiction” to Evensong that some people have.

This addiction can undeniably foster a over-pedantic spirit – and in allowing that pedantry free reign, it can itself become earthbound. And while the 16th and 17th Century polyphony of which we are so

rightly proud makes a vast contribution to the enlivening of the canticles, there is a developed precision about it which takes us to the edge of a spiritual cliff too. A concern for excellence can lead to an intolerance of human frailty; a respect for the musical genius of the past can turn into a reluctance to commission young composers encountering the sacred texts for the first time; the invitation to the congregation to come and rest and not have anything asked of you but that you be there – can turn into a feeling of exclusion of the very people the Prayer Book was constructed to reach.

In contrast to our reliance on and enjoyment of recorded and downloaded music, the church remains committed to live music in a sacred setting. When we gather for worship, there may be mistakes in the music; we will be asked to stand and sit with others, we may even be asked to sing. The live performers will inspire or distract us and a relationship develops across time and space with the composer, (perhaps long since dead) the performers and the congregation. This develops in us a completely different relationship to the music than that with downloaded or recorded tunes. We are not in control: the variation in volume will be huge compared with what we are used to: and unless you are in a large Cathedral, with 7,000 organ pipes, it is likely to be much quieter than you would hear through headphones. There will be endings and silence too: there is no endless “repeat to fade” – another unique feature of recorded music.

Looking into the Future

As Church musicians, we continue to acknowledge confidently that music is one of the best ways to communicate with God and about God. We also recognise that this is not an exclusive prerogative of the Church. If we are culturally curious, as we should be, we will listen, really listen to the tone, cadence and content of modern music - classical and popular - and initiate dialogue. This is part of our mission; not to give in to defensive tones and let our talk be of threat, but find a confident and inclusive spirituality.

As far as the Church is concerned, we should continue to play our historic role of patron of the arts and music and find ways to encourage young composers, performers and singers.

We should recognise too that in a post enlightenment world, where rational explanation and objectivity is prized, music can also help us to regain our subjectivity; *Music began as a way of enhancing and coordinating group feelings. Today it is often a means of recovering personal feelings from which we have become alienated.* (*Music and the Mind* Storr p 122.) This is one of the contributions the church can make to a world where sometimes it seems that all truth is located in the periodic table.

We should also listen to our own sound world within the church, recognising that, if I may put it like this; after Auschwitz, it is not appropriate that before God every cadence resolves, or that every rhythm is comforting. We must allow for dissonance in our worship, for the fusion of real human experience and suffering with the calling of ourselves beyond ourselves.

Rebecca West has one of her characters say in a novel;

“What’s the good of music if there’s all this cancer in the world”? To which another character replies “What’s the harm of cancer if there’s all this music in the world?”

Music, through its ability to express paradox in dissonant chords, its ability to touch us and shock us with the tenderness of its touch, its ability to frustrate us, challenge us, simply to draw us out; in all these ways, music is part of the movement of the Spirit that will always in the end bring order out of chaos.

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