

I'll Sing as I Love

Alison McRobb asks why does singing matter?

'... the voice of prayer is never silent,
nor dies the strain of praise away.'

So Christians have sung in the beautiful evening hymn picturing the sun's rise and set over 'each continent and island.' But now, alarmingly it *has* died away – the praise – and not only from churches. Choirs, chorales, soloists, gigs – every voice raised in song has been silenced. Valiant attempts to keep melody alive by living-room Zoom have failed to synchronise and satisfy. A new concept, 'droplets', is employed in efforts to keep us fearful, tuneless, barely audible, mumbling behind a mask. And so this present reflection is destined to be very different from its drafted form a few months ago.

Some of us are luckier in our locations than others, should we be minded to deny the 'science' in favour of faith, health and live music. On a warm and sunny Easter Sunday, shut out of church, I was off early walking (allowed) on trodden paths alongside vast barley fields, where everywhere the Earth's message was: 'Now the green blade riseth'. Beside a stream lined with newly leaved oaks I checked that not even a dog-walker was about, sang the triumphant Easter hymns to the blackbirds, and walked on. Now (well) over 70 and classified as 'vulnerable', this was officially my sole outing of the day – a rule I have never adhered to, because here in fresh Suffolk it makes no sense.

People are often keen to establish a 'religious' person's theological position. Somewhere I encountered 'Anglo-choral' – yes, that's me! Chants and worship songs, Scottish psalmody, musical meditations – those I've encountered the world over. But Tallis, Byrd, *Mag* and *Nunc*, the whole Anglican choral tradition discovered in my twenties – with those, in my book, nothing can compete. The Cantilena Singers sang Stanford's *Justorum animae* gloriously at my husband's funeral, but sadly not the other day for my fellow chorister, similarly bereaved. That funeral,

attended by a tiny 'distanced' number in the village churchyard was, by decree, denied music.

Why does it matter, this singing? There are those, like Shakespeare's 'melancholy Jaques', who are labelled unmusical – often quite unfairly. Any musical efforts of his were unkindly expected to produce 'discord in the spheres'. But the human urge to sing is arguably more deeply embedded even than communication in the speaking voice alone. So the concept of cosmic harmony can appear quite naturally in religious thought as praise, with the 'radiant orbs'

'for ever singing as they shine,
the hand that made us is divine.'

In some religious traditions silence is the ideal, and musical expression in song proscribed as inimical to true worship. Even when allowed, the 'dangers' of singing have been the reason for many musical souls to have been denied expression. It takes a Hildegard of Bingen to power a way through that particular prejudice, letting the pure voice rise high in praise, and a female voice at that. At its worst, repression of singing can leave all pretence of rationality behind. The other day I happened on a gloomy film, 'Timbuktu', which depicted heart-rendingly the hatred of singing in cruel regimes. The Isil leader, who had banned all music in the city, did not understand the local African language. His henchmen, goons who were sent out to keep the citizens in fear, had detected and reported a source of singing in an upper room in a quiet alley. On pressing for details, the chief was told the song was discovered to be 'praising God and the Prophet'. Did that make a difference to the verdict? No, judgement was swift. The singer admitted her 'crime' (40 lashes) and to having understood that singing contravened the regulations (additional 40 lashes). The viewer was spared none of the agony, at the the height of which the victim broke into defiant, passionate song.

Less extreme, but still disturbing, is the suspicion with which some of my fellow Scots have traditionally regarded music, vocal and instrumental. My first private student, an impressive ex-London policeman, then psychiatric nurse, called Hugh (Uisdean on his native Isle of Skye) needed a Scottish Higher in English to be accepted as an ordinand by the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, which is considerably 'freer' than the better known 'Wee Frees'. How this was achieved – my introduction to English as a Second Language with a Gaelic speaker – is a whole other story!

Still a graduate student myself, I shared a flat in a nice part of Glasgow with another girl, and here I was to tutor Hugh. The flat, however, formed the basement of the residence of Scotland's best loved soprano, who could distantly be heard above, practising or teaching at times during our lessons. This was obviously causing Hugh discomfort. We had a friendly discussion, therefore, about God and music, but he was not to be moved. There was too much danger of self-love in solo singing, even in church, and an organist on the 'kist o' whistles' could easily be 'worshipping the instrument'.

In contrast, Sir Billy Connolly, whose first career, following a shipyard apprenticeship, was as a respected folksinger, hilariously recalls his primary teacher's efforts with 'musical appreciation' – 'You Connolly, appreciate!' – and her less than appreciated persistence with the 'step we gaily' progress to Marie's Wedding. Long before today's ludicrous appearance of supposedly Gaelic names for every train station on one's train journey north, there was a nostalgic revival of interest in everything Highland, so Connolly and I, and maybe even Nicola, were introduced to Gaelic melodies in class, some very beautiful despite the impenetrable orthography of that language. Scottishness has influenced



Cantilena Singers East Cambridgeshire Chamber Choir.
Photo: cantilenasingers.org.

Christian hymnography too – though I find it difficult to sing John Bell's 'Will you come and follow me?' to the romantic wooing tune of Kelvingrove, where 'the midnight fairies glide', or they did when we oldies were nippers. His hymn 'Spirit of God' to 'Speed Bonny Boat' can have intrusive secular associations as well; but John deserves respect for his lifetime of musical and pastoral engagement in Scotland. He can take credit for a popular shift from the traditions of Presbyterianism, where the eerie intonation of the precentor and the congregational groaning of Hugh's psalms can shut off a musical Christian soul from any vision of angelic choirs.

On the secular side no discussion of singing could decently omit the phenomenon of Gareth Malone, he of the boyish but currently bearded face and the seldom dampened enthusiasm for getting people off their bottoms, on their feet and using their God-given voices. Choices of songs tackled by his pop-up choirs, and arrangements thereof, may not be to everyone's taste, but his commitment and professionalism have been infectious and we can hope that the results will be lasting.

I share his passion. My case for 'everyone singing' is simple: singing is good for every aspect of a person, even if one rejects the clichéd 'body, mind, spirit' division. Almost everyone can sing in some way. Singing is known to aid sufferers from stammering and aphasia. Singing needs

controlled breathing, and almost everyone benefits from such exercises. A lot of muscles are involved in efficient breathing, yet this form of exercise is often neglected by those who ‘can’t sing’. Watch people at big events in churches and cathedrals. They fiddle with their hymn sheets, some of them manage to move their lips, but few are really singing. It’s easy to tell: they aren’t breathing in a way that’s needed to produce sounds. Some footballers and the Royal Family (along with the Prommers on the Last Nights of our history) are inspiring exceptions. You can be sure the Prince of Wales will really be singing.

When people say they ‘can’t sing’, they are usually expressing fear. They have been shamed and told to shut up, like Jaques. They know what professional songsters sound like and they can’t do that, won’t ever be able to. Suppose we took that attitude to driving. Learning involves some discipline, some co-ordination, and a desire to ‘pass’. Most people who really try manage in time. We are not talking about Formula 1. True, people who sing badly, too loudly, drunkenly or inappropriately can be embarrassing, but that does not cancel singing out as a viable form of self-expression, especially when that ‘blest pair of sirens Voice and Verse’ are employed together.

I’ve always tried with people who ‘can’t sing’ or are ‘tone deaf’ to prove them wrong. Most admit they do quite well in the shower, aided by the steamy atmosphere. That negative idea might have been established very early by a teacher silencing a ‘groaner’ – for such I would cheerfully supply a millstone. Any early years teacher will agree that you don’t get a class to sing tunelessly together till around 7 years, and the ‘ear’ develops at different stages with different children. I am lucky to have a grand-daughter who was tuneful by 5; I was unlucky to have a rather deaf colleague who sat next to me at morning assemblies and sang well but just half a tone ‘out’!

So much for the act of singing, what of the song? Milton is right of course that

‘...God doth not need
either man’s work or his own gifts’.

And that obviously would include our musical praise. Thoughtful Christians with their respect for ‘concord of sweet sounds’ have always been

aware of this fine line. The excesses of the Book of Revelation are just that: extravaganzas of Holy holy holy, which give choral voice to the saints’ love for God but are not ‘necessary’. Church choir members following lines about ‘singing for evermore’ in heaven are usually concentrating on their notes, not stopping to consider how easy it is to ridicule this concept. The Christian church, however, has ample biblical backing for worship in song, as had Jesus and his followers in the tradition of Israel’s temple worship, which ‘sings the songs of Sion/ By the streams of Babylon’.

Styles have changed and developed over millennia, and the literature of the rows and walkings-out and outrage over neglect of or additions to particular church music is fascinating, often shocking, ‘Opera in church?’ I remember a worthy retired organist expostulating, on hearing his former choir rehearsing a Haydn Mass. Bang up to date and practically on our doorstep we have the scandalous, to many, decision to disband Sheffield’s existing cathedral choir, in the pursuit of a replacement version dedicated to ‘diversity’.

The evidence for those who spread the gospel of Jesus, however, is that evangelism has been most effective worldwide where the words and music of praise have been adapted to accord with local musical traditions. To hear the Tamil congregation raise the roof in New Delhi’s Cathedral of the Holy Spirit is unforgettable. The Hindi service which follows is more restrained, in an Anglican sort of way, but their hymn book is cleverly constructed, so I could decide to sing ‘What a friend we have in Jesus’ in English or turn a few pages and try it in Hindi. (I have never been up early enough on a Sunday to attend the English service!)

Back home in Suffolk I walked into the beautiful church of St Peter and Paul in Clare on the Sunday morning after the imposing locked gates were finally opened. The vicar was bustling about arranging a ‘plague church’ with some ladies, and obviously too busy to greet a visitor. I asked one of the ladies about the service and she said yes there was one, but would I please move back beyond some invisible line. ‘Will we get to sing?’ I asked, knowing the answer, which I got, and left. Closing the big wooden door I stood in the porch and sang Bunyan’s great hymn, on the

basis that 'one here will constant be'. Nothing to frighten the horses – nobody else was around, and after all, Bunyan did most of his preaching outside churches, when not imprisoned for such audacity. Finding a coffee at last at a stall in the Country Park, I was still humming 'to be a pilgrim' and was joined by the tea lady and a man on a chair. 'We sang that in assembly,' said the lady. The man said he'd been to church, at the nearby Clare Priory, with his wife. 'Did you sing there?' 'No, it was depressing, we were all told to sit on our own. Sing 'Amazing Grace?' So I did, as my coffee cooled.

It's been witnessed that protests are often best conducted in song, and this one of mine concerns song – an urgent call that I would never have dreamed would one day be necessary. Nor did I ever envisage that my memory of playing the piano for SOF's rousing *'Die Gedanken sind frei'* would ever surface in furious indignation over the tyranny of 'droplets'.

In my current study of the medieval South Indian protest movement of the 'bhakti saints' in their opposition to restrictive Brahminism, one voice speaks particularly to our songless situation – that of Basavanna. (Not a household name perhaps, but he does have a statue in Southwark.) Standing for equality, social justice, the status of women – ideas that were just as important to him in the 12th century AD as to those who think they invented them yesterday, this poet gets as close as is possible to the singing voice of worship. He and his fellow poets in their *bhakti* (devotion) were one with the philosophers Śankara and Ramanuja in believing that singing opened the heart to God. Without pretending to know 'anything like time-beats and metre, nor the arithmetic of strings and drums, I don't know the count of iamb or dactyl', Basavanna sings to his 'only one God, my Lord of the meeting rivers.'



Basavanna statue in Basava Kalyana , India. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basava

Says A.K. Ramanujan: 'It is not even he that sings: the Lord sings through him.'

I hope Cantilena will soon be singing once more, though the future for our hundreds of choirs is not bright. What a moment it will be, however, if we can end our concert with Finzi's irrepressible soaring up the scale in 'My spirit sang all day'. Unless we raise our voices now, for our music and our whole culture, the *kairos* might pass. Then there will be no more singing, no lungful of robust breath, no perfect cadence, no smiling conviction, sacred or secular: 'Thou art my joy'. Till then, with Basavanna: 'I'll sing as I love'.

Alison McRobb is a former Chair of SOF, devoted to sound education in theology, particularly in Christian and Hindu traditions. Extras include choral singing, piano playing and painting.

Ed: Alison is also the invaluable proof reader of *Sofia*.

The SOF London conference on music, which had to be cancelled because of Covid 19, will take place next year. 2021.