

# Music and Religion

Traditionally the music of the spheres was in the key of E flat major. In the 1960s it was flower power, ‘Love and peace, man!’, ‘Make love not war’, ‘Screw in the key of E flat’ – in cosmic harmony. We thought that was common sense, which indeed it was. But love and peace proved more difficult to achieve. You can’t just walk up Primrose Hill together with a flower in your hand and look down on London ‘flower of cities all’ to invoke blessings on it and everything will be all right. Nevertheless, it is still a good aspiration, a positive energy.

There is a tarmac viewing space at the top of Primrose Hill, a reminder of Louis McNeice’s poem ‘Autumn Journal’ (1938-9 at the approach to the World War II), whose first line is: ‘They are cutting down the trees on Primrose Hill’. They were being cut down to instal Ack Ack anti aircraft guns to protect London against the Blitz. There are still wars going on in the world today.



Ack Ack guns on Primrose Hill during the Second World War

This edition of *Sofia* contains edited scripts of the three talks given at the July 2023 SOF Conference in London on *Music and Religion*.

Patti Whaley suggests that the particular place of meaning that used to be occupied by God is now occupied by music, or the need that God used to meet is now met by music: ‘Music functions that way for me, as if it’s a sort of parallel universe that makes up for all the shortcomings of life.’ It does not make specific moral demands but suggests an ideal world of beauty, *splendor formae*, ‘the shining of [sound] shape’ and peace : *tranquillitas*

*ordinis* ‘the tranquillity of order’. She says: ‘I have never doubted that a Bach fugue is what life is meant to be like’.

The French poet Paul Verlaine’s ‘Art Poétique’, ‘Art of Poetry’, begins: ‘De la musique avant toute chose: Music before anything else.’ Stephen Mitchell and Elaine Henson offered what was really more of a gig than a formal talk with many delightful sung examples. They spoke of the power of Choral Evensong, which still attracts many people to cathedrals, not only believers. They concluded by singing a translation of a poem by Verlaine, written when he was in prison.

When Verlaine left his wife and ran off with the younger poet, Arthur Rimbaud, they lived in Royal College Street near me in Camden Town. They fell out over some fish which Verlaine brought from Camden Market. Verlaine rushed off and took a ferry to Belgium. Rimbaud followed him and they had a fight. Verlaine shot Rimbaud in the wrist and ended up in prison.

Verlaine’s famous poem ‘Autumn Song’, ‘Chanson d’Automne’, was broadcast in French on the BBC in 1944 to alert the French resistance to the imminent D-Day invasion. The first line: ‘Les sanglots longs des violons de l’automne’ was broadcast 24 hours beforehand and the second line, ‘blessent mon coeur d’une langueur monotone’ was the specific call to action.

Katie Hainbach, the Head of Music and Arts at Alyth Synagogue, also known as the Northwestern Reform Synagogue, in North-west London spoke about music in Jewish services. As in Christianity, she says, there are a variety of traditions; in some Jewish services music is banned and in others it flourishes. They often sing psalms.

I have never been to a Jewish service but, of course, the psalms are also widely used in Christian services. I love their parallelism. One of my favourites is ‘When Israel came out of Egypt and the house of Jacob from a foreign people, the mountains skipped like rams and the hills like little lambs. The sea saw and fled, the River Jordan turned back...’ I used to hear it sung in Latin plainsong at Vespers in the French Church near Leicester Square and still often hear it in my head: *In exitu Israel de Egypto, domus Jacob de populo barbaro...*