

Religion and Music

Stephen Mitchell and Elaine Henson

Religion and music went hand in hand long before the appearance of plainsong. Don Cupitt was talking to me on the phone about the theme of music and religion and giving me a little lecture on Neanderthal bone flutes and religion. Since Neanderthal times, music has been used to enhance the practice of faith – perhaps, but, not necessarily with divine approval. Here's Amos, the prophet. Forgive this rather loose paraphrase I found but I rather like it:

God says: I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions.
I want nothing to do with your religious projects,
your pretentious slogans and goals. . .
Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music.
Do you know what I want?
I want justice – oceans of it.
I want fairness – rivers of it.
That's what I want. That's all I want.

God is not the only one to have expressed disapproval of music in worship. C.S. Lewis said he'd much rather go to an early morning, said service without any music whatsoever. As for hymns, they were, he said, 'fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music'. I wonder what his opinion of this hymn by John Campbell might have been:

Oofy socks, stinky clothes,
poo-filled nappies – hold your nose!
In a world that's riddled with rotting and decay,
smells assault us ev'ry day.

Lazarus, in his tomb,
body rotting in the gloom,
with a corpse that's riddled with rotting and decay,
he's past helping walk away.

Jesus came, raised a shout,
called his friend to come right out,
with the power to overcome rotting and decay,
Jesus' love won through that day.

Our own lives, what we do
can get really smelly too.
If our lives are riddled with rotting and decay,
then we'll stink worse ev'ry day.

Jesus, please, seek us out,
see our need and raise your shout;
with the power to overcome rotting and decay,
work to heal us here, today.

I'm not going to condemn John Campbell. He wrote this sixth-rate hymn for a one-off children's service, picking up on the smells implicit in the story of the raising of Lazarus. (Incidentally, imagining the sounds and smells of a biblical scene is a very well-tryed and centuries old religious practice.) I have a sneaky regard for his creative approach to family worship. Perhaps his mistake was allowing it to be published.

C. S. Lewis's mistake was failing to recognise that hymn-singing has been the life-blood of his and my tradition. Eighty per cent of those who've left the church say that they miss singing hymns. And some of those hymns have become community anthems like *Guide me O thou great Redeemer* and *Jerusalem*. It's also said that believers learn their theology not from sermons but from hymns. There's another thing C.S. Lewis fails to recognise and that is the process of song-writing. Charles Wesley is said to have written over 6,000 hymns. Yet only a handful are found in today's hymn books. That isn't a waste of effort, but part of the creative process of hymn and song-writing. Composers like Gershwin and Irving Berlin and the song writers of Tin Pan Alley wrote hundreds, if not thousands of songs, most of which never saw the light of day. Like sketching or water colour painting, song-writing is often done quickly in one session and therefore of course there are a lot of rejects and second rate efforts.

I'm a retired Anglican priest who has been ordained for over forty years. I spent some of that time as a cathedral precentor. So I know a little about Anglican church music but I don't pretend to know much about the music of other denominations and even less about the music of other faiths. Forty years ago I gained a music degree so I have a broad experience of the Western classical tradition, but I'm rather ignorant about music of other cultures.



Choral Evensong in Westminster Abbey bbc.co.uk

In religion, music forms part of a liturgy. It doesn't have to be a very formal liturgy like Evensong, with prescribed texts to be set to music but it is part of a liturgy. The music has the effect of reinforcing the words (without distracting from them), encouraging us to meditate on them, freeing our minds from distractions, lifting our spirits and inspiring us to work for justice and fairness. I'm using the word 'liturgy' deliberately as it forms something of a leitmotif for this talk. The word is often used simply to mean a service of worship but its roots come from the Greek meaning the public's work, the people's work – the work of the people.

Go to a cathedral Evensong as a bystander and let the music wash over you, by all means. But go as a member of a congregation and there's work to do. We, along with priest, choir and people must make those texts and that music come alive and give meaning to our lives. And all this is exactly the same if the music forms part of a much more informal and occasional service. Music and religion come together through liturgy, through work, hard work, our work.

Let's now turn our attention to the role of music in society in general. I read recently that when the 19th century composer Hector Berlioz was a child, the music he would have heard while he was growing up would have been church music, or folk songs sung by workers in the fields, and the occasional town band. It's very

different for those growing up today. Music is everywhere.

We go jogging and exercise at the gym and the music keeps us on pace. (Yes I know I don't go to the gym.) We practise yoga and meditation to music (I don't do that either.) We go to the . . . nightclub (well I *do* go dancing). We may be in a hospital waiting rooms or health centre being soothed by calming music, or invited to choose the music for our MRI scan (Stevie Wonder in my case). We go out to eat and the music is giving the restaurant a buzz. Although maybe we are at that age where we're asking for the music to be turned down because our hearing isn't as good as it was. And so on. Music is ubiquitous providing a running accompaniment to our lives. And one of the consequences of this is that we simply don't attend to most music. It is in the background and we listen passively.

There's nothing wrong with this. Background music is vitally important. As I stepped on to the long-haul flight setting off to New Zealand, I was glad of the lingering melodies and whale sounds accompanying a video of trees and forests. It calmed me down as I contemplated twenty hours travelling at 500 miles an hour, in a small metal tube, at 35,000 feet

All the music Berlioz heard as a child was, of course, live. Today we are much more likely to

be listening to a recording or a 'live recording' as they say. In the concert hall, the performer, dressed like a butler, has more traditionally served up to us the composer's dish of the day, with an exotic and tempting title. Nowadays, it's just as likely to be self-service from Spotify and anonymous musical chefs force-feeding us through various media streams. Whereas we have often thought of music as great works, composed by individual geniuses and performed by the super-talented, today we might do better to see music as an activity, a process which can be an end in itself and through which particular works or performances may or may not necessarily be the outcome. It's a collaborative practice with other artists contributing to the drama of the film, or the musical, or the drama of our lives. Music – wrote Nicholas Cook – doesn't just happen, it is what we make it, and what we make of it. It is less a 'something' than a way of knowing the world and a way of being ourselves.

And again all that implies work to be done by us, giving it real attention, being aware of how music plays a part in our lives, how it fashions us and we fashion ourselves through it. We actively have to carry out work, liturgy. That may still include going to the concert hall to focus our minds on particular pieces of music. It may be joining a community choir, playing in a band, attending a music therapy session – the work of taking part in the process of music-making.

I hope this very brief summary of the place of music in our everyday life rings some theological bells. Music is everywhere. It's omnipresent. It is that in which we live and move and have our being. Yes, for me, as indeed in orthodox Christian belief, God is that which is omnipresent, that in which (as St Paul quotes) 'we live and move and have our being'. Therefore to explore that which is ever-present to us – life, imagination, love, personhood, the things that make us who we are – is an exploration into God. And music is one such ever-present creative force. I would therefore say music is sacred and that we should have a reverence for music as for life.

However, I do need to be careful because I'm not wishing thereby to give music supernatural power. Nor am I distinguishing sacred music from secular music. All music has the power to

make us and move us. It's all sacred in that sense. Nor am I giving the composer and performer priestly powers. We are all capable of making music or, at the very least, making music a part of our lives. As members of Sea of Faith, we would want to say that religion is a human creation. Like art, like music and any other human creation, religion has the power to move us and empower us. But again I should be cautious, because I am not saying that art or music can be a substitute for religion. We may find going to a concert very uplifting. It may take us out of ourselves. It may change our view of the world. Equally, we may find taking a bath or going for a walk or doing some gardening uplifting and life-changing. But remember Amos the prophet: -

I want justice – oceans of it.
I want fairness – rivers of it.
That's what I want. That's all I want.

There has to be, for me at least, more to faith than having an uplifting, life-changing or, dare I say, spiritual experience. There has to be greater justice and fairness. The word religion comes from the word meaning 'to bind'. There has to be (as St Paul says) that which binds us together, love shared among us.

There is another danger in claiming that music is sacred. It's sometimes said that where words fail music speaks; that music communicates that which is beyond words; that music is a universal language; that it's transcendent. Music can certainly press our emotional and physiological buttons. It may be that within a particular community, a piece of music may press the same buttons. If you've seen the film *The Shawshank Redemption*, you'll remember the powerful effect of Mozart's soprano duet from the *Marriage of Figaro* which Andy broadcasts over the prison public address system. His friend and fellow inmate Red, who recounts the story, says he doesn't need to know what the two Italian ladies are singing about. To him, all that matters is that 'for the briefest of moments, every last man in Shawshank felt free.'

But, that said, we should know from so-called programme music and from the music of other cultures, that music isn't universal nor does it affect each of us in the same way or describe a thing or a concept with any accuracy. No, where music fails, words speak.

We live at a hugely exciting time in musical history. We can listen to almost any piece of music that has ever been written. We can be uplifted and energised by the astonishing world of musical theatre. We can be motivated by the power of protest music and rap. We can be turned on by dance music. We can be united through community singing. We can be entranced by an Indian raga or Japanese Hogaku. None of this is a substitute for religion but can come to its service through liturgy.

Creating that liturgy is rather like creating a musical. There's a company, a community, a tradition, a building, a stage within which costume, set, lighting and sound designers, writers, composers, actors and directors collaborate, often over many years, to bring a final work to the stage. It's a huge amount of effort. Religion too has its book, rituals, traditions, buildings, vestments, processions, community, a community of saints, and it needs a similar collaboration and effort to produce liturgy.

On the whole, I think in the church, in my tradition at least, we've been lazy in bringing music to the service of faith. You can't just shoe-horn a pop song into Evensong or a sonata into a Eucharist, without some thought. Equally I think laziness has often been the vice of those introducing religious works into the concert hall. I've been to too many performances of church motets and masses which as often as not haven't worked either musically or religiously. It is like taking a film score and expecting it to work as a concert piece without seriously re-working it. Why not take a short break between the movements of a Mass, have a short reading or project a picture or film to give the performance some shape and contemporary meaning?

There are some good examples. After Jonathan Miller died, I watched a re-showing of his semi-staged St Matthew Passion. It's simple but hugely effective. And there is an even more engaging and powerful production by Peter Sellars, Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic – you can find it for free on their website. 'It's not theatre,' said Sellars, 'it's a prayer, a meditation.'

I'd like to end with a sort of intercession or meditation using the song *The Sky Above the Roof*, a setting by Vaughan Williams of Mabel

Dearmer's rather loose translation of a poem by Paul Verlaine. Verlaine had been sentenced for two years in a Brussels prison for shooting his lover. Perhaps not surprisingly, his wife abandoned him when all this came to light and during his time in prison he converted to Catholicism.

The poem is one of a set of six poems entitled *Wisdom*. From his prison cell, Verlaine observes the sky, the roof and the branch of a tree. He hears a bell and a bird which symbolise for him not only his melancholy but also give him a glimpse of life beyond the prison. In a way, like Andy and his fellow inmates in Shawshank, those simple sights and sounds, whilst reducing him to tears also bring a sense of comfort and freedom. Give thought to people in prison whose view of the outside world might be similarly restricted. There are other kinds of confinement too; someone you know may feel imprisoned by illness, bereavement, depression or grief. The last line is especially poignant, and poses a question we may well ask of ourselves. The psalmist wrote. 'Bring my soul out of prison that I may give thanks'.

The sky above the roof
Is calm and sweet
A tree above the roof
Bends in the heat
A bell from out the blue
Drowsily rings

A bird from out the blue
Plaintively sings
Ah God! A life is here
Simple and fair
Murmurs of strife are here
Lost in the air

Why dost thou weep Oh, heart
Poured out in tears?
What hast thou done Oh, heart
With thy spent years?

The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.
Upon them has light shined.
May we, and those in our hearts,
find true freedom.
May we number our days
that none be wasted.

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