

And Again I Say Rejoice

Patti Whaley

There is a beautiful scene from *War and Peace*, where Prince Andrew realises he is in love with Natasha, and it is specifically her singing that breaks his heart open. ‘He looked at Natasha singing, and something new and joyful stirred in his soul... The chief reason was a sudden, vivid sense of the terrible contrast between something infinitely great and illimitable existing within him, and something limited and material, which he himself was, and even *she* was. This contrast made his heart ache, and yet he rejoiced, while she was singing.’

When I was asked to give this talk, another image also came into my head, from a poem by Mary Jo Salter:

Once home from a funeral
I listened to a choir sing Henry Purcell.
Rejoice in the Lord alway,
they sang; And again I say rejoice!
How explain to anyone the joy
of that single missing ‘s’ – a winding path

down into a heritage so deep,
so long a part of me it seems
the very state of God

No, surely they were right,
the mourners who stared at me today;
schooled in other mysteries,
I stood as far from them
(or so it felt) as we all stood
from the foreign country of the dead.

Yet at home in my random corner
on truth, with no choice but to play
the world sung in a transposed key,
mine was another mourner’s voice:
And again I say rejoice.

The phrase I want to pick out here is ‘it seems the very state of God’. From what I’ve seen, most traditionally religious people who talk about music and religion regard music as a sort of pathway or preparation for an encounter with God; a route into the soul that clears the way for God to enter, or a way of generating an emotional experience that can be redirected towards God. As Augustine said, ‘to sing is to pray twice.’

Let me make clear that that is not what I’m talking about. What I want to grapple with is 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, in some quite specific ways which may be totally idiosyncratic, although I’d be fascinated to know if other people share similar experiences. This will be a rather more personal talk than the one I made in 1998, and I apologise in advance that I’m going to talk a fair amount about myself, but it’s the only way I know to explain how one comes to feel that music has come to fill the God-shaped hole in one’s life. But I will then try to think through what that means, and whether it’s more than just a sentimental posture, and whether it might help others figure out a similar thing in their own life.

My earliest music memory, in fact one of my earliest memories of any kind, is that the Methodist church we attended when I was 5 years old in Tennessee sang the first verse of the hymn ‘Holy, holy, holy’ as a collective call to worship every single Sunday. I started taking piano lessons when I was six, and I can remember first singing in a church choir when I was about nine. I kept that up all through high school – playing the piano, accompanying the high school choirs, and singing in the church choir. My bachelor’s degree was in music history with a minor in piano, and I went on to do graduate studies in musicology. But musicology jobs were very hard to come by, and after a few years I did a qualification in accounting, lucked into a Price Waterhouse course on computer application design, and basically spent the next thirty years working for government agencies and charities, with some sporadic piano playing and choral singing as circumstances allowed.

When I moved to England in 1990, I did not really find a church home, but I did find the Sea of Faith, and for many years, as you know, this was my religious community. I bought a good Bluthner grand piano, played as much as time

allowed, and enjoyed the amazing musical life of London. In particular, I treasure one weekend in 1996 when the BBC orchestra devoted an entire weekend to the American composer Charles Ives, and I remember saying when the weekend culminated in his fourth symphony, that I was almost – almost! – ready to believe in God again. . It was not long afterwards that I wrote my earlier SOF paper on music and meaning, in which I said, among many other things, that ‘that it would be as much as my life was worth to live up to the Brahms Fourth Symphony.’

In 2007, I started taking organ lessons, mostly because a local friend kept asking me to substitute at his church, and I knew just enough about organ playing to know that I was not doing it right. I enjoyed it much more than I expected to, having not been a particular fan of organ music up to that point. My teacher, never one to miss a recruitment opportunity, invited me to play regularly at the local parish church where he was Director of Music. By that time I had not been a regular church goer for some 17 years, and I had not really planned on becoming a regular church goer, but unless you’re a full-time world-class recitalist like Anna Lapwood, there really isn’t any other way to be an organist. Playing in church is what organists do.

I’ve now been playing the organ for over fifteen years; I play most Sundays, sometimes twice, plus funerals, weddings, evensongs, and special services. English churches are pretty desperate for competent organists these days, so if you’re willing and reliable and don’t mind being paid practically nothing, it’s rare that anyone will question the state of your belief. When I had been playing at my parish church for a year or so, I was asked to write something about myself in the monthly church newsletter. I said in that article that ‘...I may never figure out what I think of the concept of the Trinity, but I’ve never doubted that a Bach fugue is what life is meant to be like.’

So music has drawn me, if not back into a state of belief, at least back into a state of practice, although you might ask, practice of what exactly? I do find that practising music provides plenty of opportunity for practising various virtues if you want to do that – humility and patience spring to mind, especially for those of us whose talent never matches our ambition, and who have to repeat and



Prince Andrew and Natasha. bbc.co.uk

correct ourselves over and over and over again in order to approach a minimally acceptable level of performance. Compromise and willingness to adapt to the wishes of the larger team – not qualities that organists are particularly renowned for, I have to admit, but, still.

Most often, simply gratitude. I’m very conscious of my enormous good fortune in having time to play, easy access to a good instrument, a kind and patient coach, a husband who allows his holidays to be highjacked by my search for an organ to play, a regular and grateful audience – some people even pay me, though I expect I might continue playing even if they didn’t – and the opportunity to play a part in the major rituals of community life. Those occasions when, for example, you sit at the organ waiting to come in on the third verse of ‘Once in Royal David’s City’, thinking, well, here we are again, we have survived another year and we are back at this miraculous moment – these are occasions when I feel how deeply fortunate I am. Like many Anglicans I am particularly fond of Choral Evensong and will be happy to have taken my place in its procession down the centuries, and to have helped keep that tradition alive. ‘Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.’

So far, so good? But saying that music is ‘the very state of God’ implies that music is more than just a much-loved hobby, or even an opportunity to try to be a better, more grateful person. So, two anecdotes that push a little deeper into what this is about.

Around 2019, I chanced into a little filming project for a big-name pianist. The characters in this little film were meant to represent ordinary people who liked to play the same student-level piano classics that were featured on this pianist’s

new album. Part of the project involved filming an interview where I was asked a set of questions, which I had been given in advance, about my experiences as a piano player. I always like to get my questions in advance; in more ways than just music I am by nature not much of an improviser, so I was well prepared, and we went through filming the expected questions and my carefully-thought-through answers. At the end of the session, someone threw in an extra question: Why should young people study music? Well, I don't know! They didn't tell me they were going to ask that! I didn't have an answer, so what I said was as unexpected to me as it was to them, which was roughly this:

'When I was a child, because of my dad's work, my family moved every other year or so. I was always having to say goodbye to friends and walk into classrooms full of strangers. When I finished my master's degree, four years was the longest I had ever lived anywhere. As an adult, I've uprooted myself and moved to England; I've changed careers, gotten divorced twice, lost friends, gained others, and my life in many ways has turned out completely different from what I might ever have planned or anticipated. And in all of that time, no matter where I was or what I was doing, even in times when I not actively performing at all, music has never left me. And no matter what else has happened, no matter whatever disappointments or losses or false starts or mistakes or trying again, *no matter what*. Brahms has never let me down.'

And then, every once in a while, something I am reading throws up to me the fact that our civilisation will end. If we manage to avoid nuclear war and survive global warming, then in some tens of thousands of years there will be a new ice age, and much of Europe will be covered by a layer of ice several thousand feet thick. If somehow Western civilisation survives that, then in some millions of years, the sun itself will burn out and all life on earth will be extinct. But then I realise that in a little corner of my head, a voice is saying 'yes, but...'. And that 'but' is me wanting an exception for music. The idea that there will be no one, no God, no consciousness around to remember and understand and treasure the very special magic that is Schubert – this is unacceptable.

In SOF we used to talk about people who clung to a 'sliver' of real theism. My mind clings to a sliver that somehow there will be a sort of Mind of

God out there that remembers Schubert. I know this is not logical, but the alternative is unacceptable. I am oddly more prepared to put up with the extinction of the human race than I am prepared to put up with the fact that there will be no one around to remember Schubert. That sounds rather cold-hearted and I'm not saying that I recommend this way of thinking or that I have any justification for it. I'm just telling you, that's how it is. That is the thing I am unwilling to give up.

So this is closer to what I mean when I say music is 'the very state of God.' I don't like all music – in fact I'm quite picky – and I don't want music on all the time, and certainly not as some sort of background wallpaper. But music is the thing that has always been there, the thing that has never let me down, the thing I always go back to, the thing that I want us as a human race to be remembered for.

To summarise what Grant Mc Cracken says in his book *Culture and Consumption*: 'One of the most pressing problems any culture must deal with is the gap between the 'real' and the 'ideal' in life, the distance between our aspirations (for ourselves, for our society, for human nature) and the reality with which we are confronted. McCracken identifies three strategies for approaching this problem: 'Those who retreat into naïve optimism must eventually accept that the gap is a permanent feature of social life. Those who move, instead, to open cynicism and a formal acceptance of the gap must contend with the unmanageable prospect of a life without larger goals and hope. The third strategy is to displace our ideals to some distant (and relatively inaccessible) place or time.'

Religion can also be a vehicle for displaced meaning. Faith in the kingdom of heaven – whether it be on Earth at some future date, in our individual 'life after death', or in some other dimension altogether – offers a ready location for displaced meaning, a place where the meek may inherit the Earth, the wolf lie down with the lamb... Through sacraments and religious experience we get glimpses of what this life will be, and we live in hope that we will enjoy it in full if we live as our creed demands.

It feels to me as if music functions that way for me, as if it's a sort of parallel universe that makes up for all the shortcomings of life. But how would it do that when most music doesn't really represent

anything? More concrete art forms – painting for example – can easily conjure up an ideal world where voluptuous ladies forever recline on couches eating grapes. Music can't really do that; aside from occasional pieces that evoke a pastoral life, or a storm, or the sea, music mostly doesn't represent a particular thing or even a very specific state of being.

In spite of that, I'm going to suggest four ways in which music can embody the meaning that I have 'displaced' onto it. Before I explain those, I need to lay down a few parameters within which this meaning displacement would have to operate in order to be successful.

First, a successful haven for displaced meaning cannot just be an escape from 'the real world'. It certainly *can* be that; but many things can function as escapes, by offering simple pleasure, or distraction, or rest. But, to borrow a recent phrase from Julian Baggini, we don't just want an escape from the ugliness of life, but something that helps us to tolerate it and grapple with it. Something that is not just palliative, but curative.

Second, while many phenomena may be available as havens for displaced meaning, it should be possible to argue that some are better than others. Consumerism may act as a locus of displaced meaning for many people, but I'm not sure it has made us better people individually or collectively. I think, for some people, their football team might be their displaced meaning, although from the outside football mostly seems to encourage a sort of tribal competitiveness, which is powerful but not always very constructive. Is music any better? This is shaky ground because, as I noted, music doesn't give you any specific moral instruction, and some people do use their musical talent as a ground for competitiveness and egotism. So if music is my 'displaced meaning', what are the things that I have displaced there, that tell me what sort of ideal world I am dreaming of?

First, a release from myself as an individual, into something more spacious, more boundless. Towards the beginning of Vikram Seth's novel *An Equal Music*, there's a beautiful description of this feeling. He says: 'Every rehearsal of the Maggiore Quartet begins with a very plain, very slow three-octave scale on all four instruments in unison: sometimes major, ... sometimes minor, depending on the key of the first piece we are to play. No

matter how fraught our lives have been over the last couple of days, no matter how abrasive our disputes about people or politics, or how visceral our differences about what we are to play and how we are to play it, it reminds us that we are, when it comes to it, one. When I play [these scales] I release myself into the spirit of the quartet. I become the music of the scale. I mute my will. I free my self.'

I suspect that this is, for musicians, something like what meditation is for people who meditate. Some of the psychological impact of this practice is possibly due to the way you really cannot play well, you cannot even practise well, unless your mind is totally on what you are doing. Letting the mind wander is fatal. You must develop the ability to pay attention and stay focused. If you can do that, then, as the Anglican collect says, 'in [this] service is perfect freedom.'

Second, a different relationship to time, where time doesn't pass but simply 'is'. Oliver Sachs in his wonderful book *Musicophilia* talks about the case of a man with a very severe form of amnesia, who could not remember what happened five minutes ago, but who could perform music beautifully; he had the skills and procedures, and he did not need to know what happened five minutes ago, or what would happen more than 30 seconds ahead. If you are listening to music, and even more if you are performing, you are on a knife-edge of the present moment; there is no time to look back or to think more than about a bar ahead, because the music is continually insisting that you move forward bar by bar by bar. Whether this is what eternity might be like, I cannot say, but it's probably as close as I'm going to get.

Third: order, completeness, and, if it's not too much of a stretch, justice. We create order to rescue ourselves from chaos, as we learn from Genesis, by dividing light from darkness, day from night, and the waters from the dry land, or, if we are musicians, meaningful sound objects from random noise. When Bach proposes a fugue subject to you, you may not be able to translate it into something concrete, but you can see clearly how the phrases respond to each other, lead to a new section, and then bring you back to where you started. Ideas are stated, developed, varied, contrasted, and then re-affirmed. Every voice has its place, and all voices lead to the correct ending.

That may not seem earth-shattering, but think how out-of-control the world seems to us these days, and how desperately we shore up fragments against our ruin, as Eliot said. For me an orderly world implies a just world, a world that is fair, and world where we always get closure. For so many, it seems there is no justice. And yet almost every day, I walk to the church, sit down, turn on my iPad, and if I am careful and diligent and attentive, the Bach fugue will, again, reach its perfect and inevitable conclusion. Is it any wonder that I get twitchy if I have to go for several days without re-enacting this little existential reassurance to keep myself sane?

In this respect my relationship with music is very much like the relationship that believers have with God. We have created God out of our need for order and benevolence in the universe, and then we project that creation out into ‘reality’ and ask it to remind us and reassure us that order and benevolence and justice do exist. Is this, as I asked before, an escape, or a way of strengthening myself – is it curative, or simply palliative? Certainly the promises held out to me by Bach and Brahms keep the vision of a better life in front of me, and remind me not to ‘normalise’ the cynicism and greed and despair that I see all around me; they remind me that this is not how the world is meant to be.

And fourthly, finally, I’d be selling Schubert and Brahms short if I did not at least acknowledge that they are, simply, very beautiful. It is difficult, maybe impossible, to explain this, and explanations always fall so far short of the experience of beauty. The sounds, of course, can be ravishing to the senses; the difficulty is in explaining why they tug so hard at the heartstrings and why they feel so transcendent.

. Victor Zuckerkandl in his book *Sound and Symbol* said: ‘Concerning one thing – that music does cross a decisive frontier; that we find its most essential nature in this crossing, this transcendence – all who have ever thought about music are of one mind... Even Herbert Spencer... pauses in amazement before our strange ability to be moved by melody and harmony.’ Confronted with a phenomenon that he can in no way integrate into his picture of the universe, he sees only the possibility of comprehending it as an ‘indefinite expression of an unknown ideal life’, or of letting it alone as ‘an

incomprehensible secret’ – both of which are confessions of helplessness. I think this is what had such an effect on Prince Andrew as he listened to Natasha. It created that sense of ‘the terrible contrast between something infinitely great and illimitable existing within him, and something limited and material, which he himself was, and even she was’.

So, in my displaced-meaning world, music offers me a release from my individual self, an experience of being radically present in time, a vision of a world where every tone, every phrase takes its rightful place in a well-ordered, balanced whole, and an experience of deep beauty. If I bring the right attention, the right effort and the right attitude to that practice, it will not just offer me a respite from the world, but a renewed sense of the sort of world that I want to help create. That’s as near to ‘the very state of God’ as anything is likely to get.

As always, my attempts to explain this always fall short of how music itself feels, so let me close with one more little anecdote. I recently sang in a performance of the Brahms Requiem – a rare bit of luck on my part, because a local group needed more tenors. I had sung it before, and I love it enormously, but I no longer sing in that kind of big choir, and I hadn’t really had any hopes of ever singing the Requiem again. So it was wonderful, and completely transporting. At the beginning of the concert the conductor introduced the piece and reminded the audience that they were about to hear one of the greatest compositions ever written: ‘If you know this work,’ he said, ‘you know why you’ve come. If you don’t know this work, you’re going to walk out of here thinking, *‘My God, how have I coped before now?’*’

Does that sound over the top? Not to me. If you’re here today, you probably have more than a passing interest in music already, but if you don’t, trust me, we lovers of Brahms don’t know how other people make it through the day. We really don’t.

Patti Whaley CMG is principal organist at the parish church of St Mary in Wingham, and assistant organist at St Mary of Charity in Faversham. When not practising the organ, she is treasurer of various social justice charities, supports the local Ukrainian refugee community, and tries to learn Russian. She is a former trustee of SOF.