

The Gift of Music

A sermon preached by Dan Turner, Director of Music at St Peter's, Wolvercote, for the Festal Eucharist for Saint Cecilia on Sunday 18th November 2007.

In the name of the † living, loving and creating God. Amen.

I get to travel a lot with my job as a professional singer. Often, I am asked that of all the places I have been fortunate to visit, which is my favourite? Well, for me I am very much 'at home' in Tuscany. There I can relax. I am very lucky that I was introduced to Florence and Tuscany by some friends who have an amazing house in the Tuscan Hills overlooking the Valley of the Arno. When I first visited them they encouraged me not to take any music with me as everyone agreed that I needed to get away from it all.

Whatever illusions I had about finding inner peace as I drank coffee in a side street near the Ponte Vecchio or gazed at Botticelli in the Uffizi or Michaelangelo in the Academia these were quickly shattered as I realised that whatever the tranquillity of my surroundings, my head is full of music. I confess that the music that delighted but in a way also tormented me in some of the most beautiful surroundings in the world was not on the whole classical!

It is said that most of us make our own music for up to two hours a day. A study in Oxford published in 1988, concluded that adults produce music for themselves for up to on average two hours a day.

But why wasn't my head in Italy filled with the music of the angels, Mozart or Bach? Why weren't the daily doses of Psalms, Magnificats and Nunc Dimittises repeating themselves in an eternal liturgy in my head? No, it was Will Young, Sting and a Beatles number (I am very fond of *Here comes the sun* in particular). The point is this: you and I will think of music without sometimes being able to control what we are thinking and creating in our heads.

The Feast of St Cecilia celebrates that God gives us sound and this thing we call music to enjoy and to inspire us. I say that music is God's gift because like the Universe we find ourselves in we are not responsible for it existing and yet rather like our environmental responsibilities we have a role to play as custodians and co-creators with God.

Sound exists all around us, and we use this potential to create music. Music is like language; in that no culture is without its own language neither is it without music, so we see that it is something deeply defining of being human. A mother sings to her child instinctively, children explore the potential of their voices wonderfully in the playground. A wise man once said that unlike being born again as Christians the human race is born singing.

Music is an amazing gift because at its very basic level we add together sounds that can evoke emotions within us. Just ask yourself the question why certain notes sound beautiful together? Why does this chord sound sad and that happy? Why does music chime in with our emotions? I cannot nor can any scientist I know satisfactorily answer these questions. Where does music fit in terms of our animal needs? These are some of the issues surrounding this 'phenomenon' of music. But accepting all of this is one thing but what about a Christian or a Church response to music?

The Church is bound to proclaim two truths: that God is both transcendent and immanent; that he is eternal and beyond our comprehension yet also he is beside us in our human experiences. Nowhere is this paradox better expressed than in music.

In music we can see something of the transcendent beauty of our out of the ordinary God. Think of how you physically react when you hear the exuberance expressed in Haydn's Nelson Mass or a Brahms symphony, or the colossal sounds in the cinema of film music with choirs and orchestra blazing away. What an amazing psychological effect this music can have. Music can express the mystery of God – think of Messiaen's O Sacrum Convivium, or the sadness expressed in Rachmaninov's music or indeed the pathos of God expressed in Britten's War Requiem. Coupled with its ability to move us, music has an eschatological function: that is, it is written in the past, sung in the present and calls us into the future. It is somehow over us, beyond our analysis or understanding, it brings the eternal into the present and transcends our earthbound existence. This is partly because of the phenomenon of music. We cannot hold on to music. We describe it as a 'work' or a 'piece' but actually there is nothing physical we can hang on to. It exists as an experience, which occurs in time using the possibility of vibrations and frequencies that came into being heaven knows when. Interestingly we describe the point of creation as the big 'bang' a big sound and in the Bible the sound of God's voice starts the creative process 'and God said let there be light...' And music can literally I think 'stop' time for us. Think of how you feel when you listen to your favourite piece of music. It is very interesting to note also that our response to music is highly individual. We have a sense of our 'own' music – think about the teenager jealously guarding his or her sense of self by having their own identity through the music that they like and mum and dad simply "just don't understand".

Each person may have their own music, just as a different age group does or even a different time period. Music has a vocabulary for different times and different people but behind this lies an eternal grammar of music.

Music is also immanent; that is expressing truths about this world as well as the next. William Byrd's anthem *Laudibus Sanctis* is full of cross rhythms, syncopation and a wild momentum that would have been recognisable to secular madrigal singers more than the singers of plainchant just a few years earlier. Interestingly, like modern popular music writers, his politics were not far from his music; the rich chords and emphasis on the word 'verum' in his

motet Ave verum corpus revealed Byrd making a musically substantive point about the mass during a protestant era.

Moreover, the creation of music almost always involves a patron, an agreement; a commission and discussion of circumstance. The heavenly language of music is that of gift and grace, but it is created in the worldly context of contract and exchange. This doesn't diminish the power of music; it makes it a medium through which we can meditate even more deeply on the paradox asked of Christians that we live in the world but not of the world. Music in worship, sacred music in a sacred space invites us to claim liturgy as a de-tox against the sickness of consumerism, a unique activity of the believing community that cultivates wisdom, rehearses justice and gives us a foretaste of heaven.

The church needs to be confident in its ability to communicate with the rest of the world in its unique activity: the worship of God. 'Craftsman's art and music's measure for **thy** pleasure all combine'. We affirm the doctrine of creation as we hear voices singing and speaking in our churches. We become co-workers in creation and we join our voices or our instruments or our listening and tune in to the song of God with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. We affirm the doctrine of the incarnation as we proclaim that Jesus Christ made sacred our human flesh, and that we are in the image of God, male and female, of every ethnicity, ability, and sexuality - all of these are the voices raised in worship to God. And we must value all sorts of different types of different people's music – music like the church is a living dynamic tradition that does not stand still. We must take from each different age the best music to worship God with, because he deserves the best. But we must not also go too far the other way in an effort not to be exclusive and try to 'engage' with all popular music, because we then run the risk of the special ridicule reserved for maiden aunts who try to wear a baseball cap in an effort to join in and fit in. It is appropriate that the church continue to commission new music. In a service where we may listen to contemporary music it is important to recognise we bring all human life before God. We recognise 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 allow for dissonance and tension in our worship and music, for the fusion of human suffering with the calling of ourselves beyond ourselves.

My point is simple: there is no music genre that is inappropriate for church liturgy; we should not muddle taste with standard.

Think about Choral Evensong. It offers the best of different time periods: today's choristers in an evocative acoustic, possibly hallowed by centuries of use. In this beautiful service sacred music from across the ages – pre-Norman conquest plainsong and possibly an anthem to be performed for the first time that day are performed together. All of this is a compelling combination for an exhausted urban population looking for peace and God's voice in today's language. The elements of this living tradition of evening prayer create a sacred space infused with music within which can be held that day's events,

disappointments, disasters and delights. An advert here: you have on your very doorstep in Oxford the incredible luxury of all those college chapels offering Evening prayer – an opportunity to take time out at the end of a busy day. Use it!

The urban sound world that many people occupy is hostile. Perhaps that is why so many people create their own soundtrack to their lives by listening to mp3 players. We have created for the first time in human history the concept of the solitary listener who has total power over their aural environment. With an iPod and with modern sound capturing equipment for example, we encounter recorded music where all mistakes are airbrushed out, where we can control the content and volume of our own private recital and most importantly we can stop it at any time. We will not encounter much that isn't familiar to us and we become disengaged from our physical surroundings or at least view them with detachment.

When we gather for worship, for example at Choral Evensong, there may be mistakes in the music, we will be asked to stand and sit with others, we will 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. There will be endings and silence too: there is no endless repeat, shuffle or fade - another unique feature of recorded music.

And the choir or orchestra itself is a living parable of life lived in community. Each singer and player has been given a part to sing by the Creator. If each singer does not sing the part given to her or him, then another voice will not be supported or may miss their cue. If a singer does not rest when they are supposed to, another's voice won't be heard. We see in front of us a parable of human life created by God.

In singing or playing music in church we should attempt to meditate on God's beauty and power. Music is a companion to our earthly pilgrimage – it is always with us, it was certainly with me in Italy!

Rebecca West has one of her characters say in a novel: 'What's the good of music if there is all this cancer in the world? To which another character replies 'What's the harm of cancer if there is all this music in the world?'

Through music and the powerful combination of music to sacred ideas, texts and sacred art in the liturgy and elsewhere in our daily lives we have a resource for interpreting the human condition. Music is a gift from God because it is a way of coming closer to Him. We cannot directly understand God because he is transcendent, but because He is also immanent, He gives us music as part of His creation so that we can learn about Him through sensing Him – we have the capability to listen to God's music just as we look at God's Universe. Perhaps we should affirm at the Feast of Cecilia that not only do we believe in God the Creator of all things, seen and unseen, but also

God the giver of all sounds, heard and unheard. 'From harmony, from heavenly harmony this universal frame began.'

Today in this Eucharist – a thanksgiving - we should say thank you to God for His gift of music, because of its ability to express paradox - the eternal and also the here and now. Say thank you that music has an ability to touch us and to challenge us, to draw out of us our individuality. In all these ways, music is part of the movement of the Spirit of God that will always in the end bring order out of chaos, light out of darkness.

Amen.

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To the bidding *Sounding God*
Please respond *Fill us with your music*

Sounding God, Fill us with Your music

As we come before God this St Cecilia's day,
We give thanks for the gift of music

Living God,
You fashion us in a symphony of creation
Making us co-creators in your marvellous work

As we try to make the music You would have us make
We lay before You the needs of the world

All places where poverty & oppression silences
All places of conflict, war and strife,

In particular we remember today the troubled country of Pakistan,
her leaders and her people,
Those who have been detained
& All who risk their life for the greater good

Let Your voice be heard, O God
Where violence and division deafens
& Let Your majestic tones lead all creation
in sounds of harmony and loving service

Sounding God, Fill us with Your music

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Living God, You weave us together in intricate patterns of rhythm and tone,
may Your Church always play to Your divine counterpoint

We remember today
leaders of our Christian faith
We hold before you Archbishop Rowan and the Bishops of the Anglican
Communion as well as Bishop John and Adrian, Moderator of the Wessex
Province of the URC

We pray for our parish, & this morning for those who live in.....

Living God, inspire Your Church to play your music
With confidence, with creativity and with joy.

Sounding God, Fill us with Your music

God of the Lament,
We bring before you the sick
& those who suffer in body mind or spirit
.....

Also those who have died.....

And those whose years mind it is.....

With your tenderest music
Restore the sick, support the grieving
and bring all your people to wholeness of life

Sounding God, Fill us with Your music

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Living God, As we listen for Your voice,
We fall into the rich silence of your presence

Bringing our cares & concerns,
Our joys & our sorrows,
Thinking of our loved ones, & those we find hard to love
Bringing our best and our worst selves

Still us, &
Hold us in that perfect rest
which is the blessing of those who seek you

then restored and renewed
Filled with Your music
Send us forth to sound out your glory

Amen