



17 July 2011
The fourth Sunday after Trinity
Sung Eucharist
Choir Reunion Weekend
Genesis 28 vv. 10–19
John 1 vv. 19–28

The ‘unshackled art’ of music to the Glory of God By The Rev’d Duncan Dormor, The Dean

He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord.’

(John 1:23)

I won’t ask for a show of hands, but I’m sure my words will be interrupting the music of Orlando Gibbonsⁱ as it flows through your heads – with that glorious solo which doesn’t just set the words of Scripture but impresses, en-scribes the humble, vulnerable witness of John, not as one who bears a ‘Name’ and status, but simply as *‘the voice of one crying in the wilderness’*; the one who prepares, who seeks to make straight, to enable and facilitate others through his witness to encounter the Lord of Life, Jesus Christ.

‘Crying in the wilderness’, ‘making straight the way’ – these do not seem to me to be unfair descriptions of the way in which music can prepare, prompt, coax our fragile selves into a deeper encounter with Reality, a deeper encounter with the Mystery that is foundational to all that is; can speak to us - curious bipeds made up of the dust of stars but through which blood flows – of a Creative, ordering intelligence that underwrites, undergirds our existence; whose nature has an unsurpassable quality and character of Love - and to a truth to which at some level we feel accountable, whatever name we might give it. This ‘high view’ of music, which sees music, at its best, as having a mystical quality, as revealing something of the Mystery of God in a way that goes beyond the human capacity to talk of the divine is championed by Cardinal Newman for whom Music is part of a *‘Divine economy suited to our need’*ⁱⁱⁱ, next to which, the confessions of the Church are but metaphorical stammers. Or to be even-handed, the Protestant Martin Luther, who in the third decade of our Johnian existence wrote:

I, Doctor Martin Luther, wish all lovers of the unshackled art of music grace and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ! I truly desire that all Christians would love and regard as worthy the lovely gift of music, which is a precious, worthy and costly treasure given to mankind. The riches of music are so excellent and so precious that words fail me whenever I attempt to discuss and describe them...^{xiii}

Words did not often fail Luther.

However for many Christian traditions, music has not just been shackled, but put in the stocks and pelted and sometimes even locked away completely, usually for fear of its power to evoke the senses and stimulate human sensuality. Orthodox Christianity has shunned the idea of separate groups of performers or soloists; Calvinists have made it utterly subservient to the words of scripture; Puritans have on occasion banned it completely. Were one of the early Father of the Church, John Chrysostom, here today he would berate the use of our Sanctuary as blasphemous for he regarded the use of musical instruments as *‘devil’s garbage’*^{xiv}. Or using an image alien to Gents down the years, John Calvin put it thus:

Just as wine is funneled into a barrel, so are venom and corruption distilled to the very depths of the heart by melody”

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All of this is alien to the way that the Bible talks about music and far from poison mainlining its way to the soul through music, many would of course testify profoundly to the exact opposite: Where words *may* touch, effect and change; music in its capacity to reach beyond the grasp of the conscious – can ‘make straight’, can soothe, comfort and bring resolution and reconciliation to the troubled soul. It helps to draw the poison out. In the famous image of Dryden’s set to music by Purcell:

Music for a while.
Shall all your cares beguile...

Till Alecto free the dead.
From their eternal bands,
Till the snakes drop from her head,
And the whip from out her hands^{vi}

As indeed music therapists bear witness to even the tormented, angry, mind divided by angry multiple serpent-voices fighting for supremacy can be calmed.

But it is not that music is simply or merely cathartic or therapeutic, it is a more than that: In reaching deep into the places and spaces of the human heart, music can help us experience God’s grace, can assist the making whole of the person, and by prompting questionings of self, and thanksgivings for others can nudge us towards living with a fuller, deeper, engagement with Reality and a greater openness and generosity to others.

In a place like this – where the canticles of Jonathan Harvey are sung, where Geoffrey’s cat gets to worship the Lord in his own way, where the rhythms of West Side story peek through the singing of Bernstein’s Chichester Psalms, where new music is commissioned we rejoice in a sound that is passionate, gutsy, soloistic. The record of John’s –out witness, your witness is to Luther’s ‘unshackled art’; is for the ‘high view’ of music, a marriage of discipline, technique and performance with a freedom of expression and joy in music-making that could be characterized as play and which we all felt so powerfully last night – passionate, committed, affectionate, a glimpse of what ‘the glory of God’ might mean – a music-making that is reflective of the creative and life-giving energy of God himself.



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For J.S. Bach, who was of course deeply devout, all music was for the glory of God and the instruction of our neighbour and on the top of many of his compositions he inscribed his intentions 'Solely to the glory of God' or 'In the name of Jesus'. That may not be the natural instinct or habit of every singer or organist or conductor in this building today but 'to the glory of God' is not an unfair way of describing the total absorption required by those committed to the 'unshackled art'. For such a 'high' view of music in worship demands a certain responsibility, a genuine heeding to the 'voice in the wilderness', the call of John to repentance, that is, to an honest, scrupulous examination of ourselves, of who we really are within, which is essential to our integrity and to the development of a proper humility in the exercise of the gifts we receive and seek to use for the benefit of others, and therefore to all our 'performances' in the world.

Amen

ⁱ Born in Cambridge, Orlando Gibbons (1583 – 1625) was a leading composer of his day and held positions as organist of the Chapel Royal and Westminster Abbey. *This is the record of John* can be found on a 1984 recording George Guest (Meridian E 4577094).

ⁱⁱ Sermon 15. The Theory of developments in Religious Doctrine para. 40, preached on Thursday morning, the Purification, 1843.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in 'Luther and Calvin on Music and Worship' by John Barber, *Reformed Perspectives Magazine* 8:26 2006 p. 5 which can be found at: http://www.thirdmill.org/newfiles/joh_barber/PT:joh_barber.Luther.Calvin.Music.Worship.pdf

^{iv} For this quotation and various observations I am indebted to 'Music and Religion: Ambivalence towards the Aesthetic' chapter 4 of *Christian Language and its Mutations* by David Martin, 2002, Ashgate.

^v From Calvin's Preface to the Geneva Psalter of 1543.

^{vi} See, for example the following article <http://harpers.org/archive/2009/03/hbc-90004519> which includes a You-Tube video of it being sung by Alfred Dellar.