



19 October 2014  
The Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity  
Choral Evensong  
Genesis 1 vv. 1–19  
1 John 4 vv. 1–12

## **Praise My Soul: explorations in sacred music Creation, music and desire**

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I come here this evening, exhausted from an exhilarating weekend in which our small, ancient church in the suburbs of the London Borough of Barnet has been packed with a cast of some sixty musicians and performers, young and older giving two performances of Benjamin Britten's masterpiece "Noye's Fludde". Written in 1957, it tells, in the style of a Mediaeval Mystery Play, of Noah's summons by God to build an Ark and to populate it with his family and two of every kind of animal while God brings a great flood upon the earth to rid all creation of its sin. It has been tremendous fun. It has also, for me personally, been something of a dream come true to bring that work to the community in which I am set. In part this is because it was through being a church musician that I came to believe I was called to ordination in the first place, but also because I believe music has the power to galvanise and transform people, socially and even morally. So, this reflection upon Creation, Music and Desire is in no small way autobiographical.

### **Beginning with creation:**

What does it mean to be Created? For Noah, it means that he hears the voice of God and, by his free will, follows that voice. This is the same, free will that we all enjoy. If we say we are created, we imply a relationship with a creator. We make ourselves (grammatically speaking) subject to a Divine object. We are who and what we are because of our relationship with our creator. We are not the authors of our own identity, and this is not limiting. Because if we are in relationship with the one, infinite, eternal, all-knowing, all-loving God, then we are not in any way constraining who we are. Indeed, we are far more likely to limit ourselves if we are defined by human constructs or ideas such as national, cultural, familial or social norms.

I went up to University in 1992. In the context of this mostly student congregation, that seems a very long time ago. It wasn't. But, we do live in a very different country from even twenty or so years ago. Various social attitudes have changed and legislation has been passed and there has been a striving for this to be a more inclusive society – inclusive of all sorts of people – that it has been. Sadly, the Church of England has not always set a great "inclusive" example through those years and I am not going to make any attempt to defend it. But it is worth remembering that until very recently, the church was something of a safe haven for those who were "different", an Ark from the Ocean's Roar of prejudice and intolerance. For whatever hesitation the law and society might have had about those who were "different", to say that all people are Created and Created in the Image of God is the great leveller. Despite being unique, we are all the same. Being created, we embrace fully our freedom, our privileged place within creation, the realm of all things. One of the reasons we go to church and worship is to be re-orientated towards our Creator, to be reminded of the free-will that we have been given and our place within, as the Nicene Creed puts it, "all things visible invisible".

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### **And so to music:**

Music, like us, is part of creation. But, where we are part of things visible, music straddles things visible and invisible. Music is a physical phenomenon – we see that in vibrating strings and gleaming organ pipes - but its affects are heard and felt as well as seen. Music also needs to be handled with caution. This evening, music will be performed both in chapels and in nightclubs: music has the power to move us to great virtue, yet also has the power to move us to something less than virtue. Music and morality are connected. You are what you listen to.

For the ancient world and the Church Fathers, the study of music was of interest, because music marks the threshold of our being affected by the physical world at a moral and emotional level. Good music was that which created a measured response, a calming of the relationship between the body and soul. Music is the point at which things visible meet things invisible, we gain an expanded view of ourselves and of our place within creation. Augustine of Hippo, writing in the fourth century, understood the importance of the study of music as a means to understand of our relationship with God, and Divine order, our place within the “Ceaseless Round of planets, singing on their way”. For them, music and its ability to bring order and calm to our lives, was an expression of the invisible Divine order breaking into our consciousness through our senses, and simultaneously, the way in which we respond to God. Indeed, Augustine of Hippo took the study of music one step further as a means by which to understand the unique, mysterious relationship between Jesus’ human and Divine natures, more of which anon.

For, me, not being raised in a particularly religious home, singing daily in Exeter Cathedral Choir while an undergraduate, just as the choral scholars do in this chapel, was a novel experience. I was exposed to texts, music, ritual, a pattern of seasonal worship a community and social activity that was both mysterious and remarkable. Choirs tend to be quite close-knit. They have a shared experience and, whether they like it or not, are shaped and formed by the repertoire they sing. In Cambridge, they are the only groups still undertaking compulsorily what would have been the entire corporate life of these colleges when they were founded: combining daily prayer with study. Choir members may not be pious, but alongside their studies, they are steeped in scripture. They’ll have the psalms at their fingertips for the rest of their lives and they’ll have more of the Bible from memory than they - or many others - realise. Crucially, they will have absorbed these texts corporately and in a context of the annual telling of the story of salvation from Advent Sunday onwards. The discipline of singing the Daily Office and of Holy Communion means that choristers and choral scholars are daily confronted by things visible and invisible; they are being formed in this place, not just academically, but morally and even theologically.

### **And so to Desire:**

So, music is one way in which we connect with and express the world beyond ourselves, the realm of things Invisible: things emotional, physical, social, cosmic and perhaps even religious. Music has also been said to awaken the desire for which we are “hard wired”: the desire to look beyond ourselves for relationship with all creation and with God, a desire that stems from our being free creatures, made by God in God’s image.



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It's a common phenomenon that making music, singing in particular, is a popular response to a crisis or oppression. Think of slaves singing scriptural Spirituals, of the musicians playing on the deck of the sinking Titanic. As I speak, I daresay there are a few essay crises in our midst, and essays due tomorrow morning are being hastily prepared in the courts that surround us. Our raised voices and the mighty organ will remind those in such a crisis of an order in creation and a Divine stability that may well - perhaps unexpectedly - offer a consolation that they might not be able to express, but which is the consolation of God and things invisible in their midst. The essay crisis will pass, but God and the worship of God will endure. What we do here in this place is not just for our own benefit, but to keep things invisible, an expanded awareness of creation and our desire for God, in the midst of this community.

Desire and Crisis are central to the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. The birth of Jesus, God made human, expresses God's desire to be at one with us. Jesus' ministry reawakens a desire for renewed relationship with God. Yet both God's desire for us and our desire for God lead to crisis, the crisis of the Cross. It is the great paradox: Divine purpose and Divine order established by, musically speaking, the angry dissonance of the Cross. Augustine describes Christ on the Cross as the point at which the body redeems and restores right relationship between the body and soul. In musical terms, this is the point of greatest musical "tension" and dissonance. Yet, it is through this apparent disharmony that Christ works. The implication is that all dissonance is an echo of the Cross: "The Cross taught all wood to resound his name", as George Herbert put it. Indeed, for Augustine, because he understood the sacrifice of the Cross to be evoked at the Eucharist or Holy Communion, he went one step further to suggest that, in restoring a right relationship between body and soul, Jesus was not only The Master Musician, but the Eucharist is the supreme work of musical art. God's desire for us and our desire for God are expressed on the Cross. The resonance of these desires permeates all creation, things visible and things invisible, and every musical dissonance reminds us of them.

So, music is powerful stuff, to be both relished and handled with caution. It reminds us of our participation in a creation that is both visible and invisible; it has the power to excite us to virtue; it can restore our bodies and souls to right relationship; it has the power to shape us morally; it reminds us of God's desire for us and it points to God's salvation through Jesus at work in all times and in all places. Thank goodness, therefore, that our schools and universities are training people for such an extraordinary responsibility and thank goodness that children and students commit themselves, their skills and talents to serving both the church and the world in this way. So, for the musicians here and those beyond this place, who keep music, its great benefits and invisible qualities in our midst, thanks be to God. Amen.