

In harmony with heaven

Scotland's leading composer expresses his Catholic faith through music, suggesting the medium remains the most numinous of the arts. It is not only a means of connecting with the sacred, but also shows how to be human in a dehumanised world

There is much debate these days about religion in our contemporary culture. Much of the discussion on, for example, Christianity in the public square is largely concentrated on politics, science, education and so on. The arts can easily be overlooked as profound shapers of the public imagination and as unique indicators of direction in human civilisation.

The subtitle of Pope John Paul II's 1999 "Letter to Artists" fascinates me. It says: "To all who are passionately dedicated to the search for new 'epiphanies' of beauty so that through their creative work as artists they may offer these as gifts to the world." It is this open-heartedness and generosity of spirit that points to art itself as the bridge that will heal the

wound of division created in our current culture wars.

In paragraph 10 the late Pope says this: "Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience. In so far as it seeks the beautiful fruit of an imagination which rises above the everyday, art is by its nature a kind of appeal to the mystery. Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption."

Many secular artists will simply shrug this off as meaningless and irrelevant. But in the case of music there seems to be a veritable umbilical link with the sacred. Through the centuries, musicians have proved themselves to be midwives of faith, bringing their gifts to the historic challenge of inspiring the faithful in worship.

Modernity has brought with it a breach in the working relationship of composer and Church. It has also brought with it a series of crises in the very aesthetic of serious music itself. We are witness to a disengagement between the living composer and the wider culture.

The first to notice this and to confront it in his writings was the German philosopher

and musicologist, Theodor Adorno. For someone so closely associated with the Marxist analysis of culture and society, Adorno is, nevertheless, able to reflect on the spirituality of our contemporary predicaments. He

noted that the colonising power of popular culture is made invincible by its ability to fill the vacuum created by "spiritual disenchantment" in the West, and the gradual disintegration of religious culture and ideas. His essential point is that the "culture industry" of global capitalism, a system where entertainment is linked inseparably with the goal of massive profit-making rather than what we might call human flourishing, has swamped popular music. Adorno's analysis is that the popular music of mass industry

culture is superficial, consumed by unthinking hearers, who buy in vast numbers, and are utterly beguiled by predictability, cliché and constant sameness.

In his book *Music and the Mind*, the psychiatrist Anthony Storr makes some bold claims about what great music can bring to our experience. He suggests that our feelings and emotions are given structure, fluency and order when exposed to the abstract constructs of music. When it speaks directly and profoundly to the human psyche, music can provide a transformative sense to human life in all its corporeal, intellectual and spiritual parameters.

Deep in our culture we have traditions that have felt the truth of this. From Pythagoras to T.S. Eliot, there have been thinkers who knew that a life without an active listening to and awareness of serious music is a life diminished. The lives of countless individuals left damaged by a lack of an awareness of music leads to a damaged society. We see this all around us, every day. And yet, even in our "post-religious" secular society, occasionally the most agnostic and sceptically inclined music-lovers will lapse into spiritual terminology to account for the impact of music on their lives. Many people will still refer to music as the most spiritual of the arts. One hears of lives being transformed by music, of moods and perspectives being altered, of attitudes shifting, and renewed meaning and purposefulness taking root in lives touched by music.

The serious, open and active form of listening (necessary for classical music, for example) could be said to be analogous to contemplation, meditation and even prayer in the way it demands our time. The complex, large-scale forms of serious music unfold their narratives in time with an authority that cannot be hurried. Something of the essence of ourselves is sacrificed to music. Whether we are performers, composers or listeners, we are required to give something up, something of our precious time.

Music gives us a glimpse of something beyond the horizons of materialism, or our contemporary values. To which the Scottish Jesuit

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John McDade would add: "Music may be the closest human analogue to the mystery of the direct and effective communication of grace." This suggests that music is a phenomenon connected to the work of God in the way it touches something deep in our souls and releases a divine force.

The boundless vision of composers through the ages points to the realisation of ourselves as something greater than we are. This is why lovers of music refer to it as the most spiritual of the arts. Because of the general assumptions made about the triumph of disbelief in our culture, some misconceptions have arisen about modernity and the sacred as they relate to classical music. Sometimes it is more than misconception that is the problem, though. Sometimes the problems are spin and bias.

Major modernist figures of the last 100 years were, in different ways, profoundly religious men and women. Stravinsky was as conservative in his religion as he was revolutionary in his musical imagination, with a deep love of his Orthodox roots as well as the Catholicism he encountered in the West. Schoenberg was a mystic who reconverted to practising Judaism after the Holocaust and pondered deeply on the spiritual connections between music and silence. This is probably the reason John Cage chose to study with him (*Silent Prayer* was Cage's original title for "4'33"). Messiaen was famously Catholic and every note of his unique contribution to music was shaped by a deep religious conviction and liturgical practice.

The list of composers in recent times radiating a high degree of religious resonance is substantial, covering a whole generation of post-Shostakovich modernists from behind the old Iron Curtain – Górecki, Pärt, Kancheli, Silvestrov, Schnittke, Gubaidulina, Ustvolskaya. And, in this country, after Benjamin Britten have come Jonathan Harvey, John Tavener and many others. Far from being a spent force, religion has proved to be a vibrant, animating principle in modern music and continues to promise much for the future. It could even be said that any discussion of modernity's mainstream in music would be incomplete without a serious reflection on the spiritual values, belief and practice at work in composers' minds.

This truth is a great encouragement to a composer like me who has drawn inspiration from the deep reservoirs of Christian liturgy and theology. I have used that liturgical insight in works such as my recent *St John Passion* and the *Seven Last Words from the Cross*. But it has also been a significant motivation in purely instrumental works such as *Veni, Veni Emmanuel*, a percussion con-

certo that charts a kind of journey from Advent to Easter, and in my almost-completed Third Piano Concerto, which seeks to revive the practice of musical reflections on the rosary.

Many prefer to regard a Christian intention and inclination as a dubious business. How, then, must we now view the artistic heritages of Europe, deeply rooted as they are in Christian belief and tradition? Are the profoundly religious sensibilities of Josquin, Palestrina, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Schubert and Bruckner all now merely to be appraised through the dusty detachment of the museum? Can we only see their work through the prism of modern or post-modern aesthetics, where the original "extra-musical" motivations are dismissed as the inevitably primitive instincts of a redundant sensibility?

If so, then the arrogance and ignorance of secularism has surely triumphed for it is imperative to the secular project that our Christian heritage must be seen through an objective separation in which the object can be appraised

without ever having to consider the historic, philosophical or religious ingredients that shaped it. This allows the cultural elites to bury our religious heritage in the earth of history, while robbing its grave of all its beautiful artefacts.

Yet, in spite of the wilful amnesia of some and the aggressive manoeuvring of others, the religious artist will continue to be an essential part of human flourishing. Some might even say that the bravest, most radical and most counter-cultural position a creative person can take today is in the celebration of a timeless spirituality. The re-sacralising of our world has been made manifest through the unsung, subliminal and subconscious project of musical modernity.

If modernism has also brought in its wake a desecration of the human spirit, we must penetrate the mists of contemporary banality to restore the idea of the sacred, in which our true and fullest freedom resides. Without it our lives will become meaningless. I believe it is God's divine spark that kindles the musical imagination now, as it has always done, and reminds us, in an increasingly dehumanised world, of what it means to be human.

■ This is an edited version of a talk, "The divine spark of music", given by James MacMillan as the Sandford St Martin thirtieth anniversary lecture last week. It will be published in full in the Quaker journal *The Friends' Quarterly* in November.



The composer Arvo Pärt.
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