

Sermon, St Cecilia 2008

St Cecilia, whose day we are keeping today, is the Patron saint of music. I think it's Cecilia's husband who deserves to be called a saint. In the third century, Cecilia, a virgin full of passion for the Christian faith, was engaged to be married to Valerianus a noble pagan.

After the marriage ceremony, the couple retired to the wedding chamber where the bride told her husband that her body was always guarded by a jealous angel and that she had taken a vow of perpetual virginity. Valerianus – we must imagine him rapidly getting dressed again – asked to see this angel. Cecilia said, *You may see the angel only if you go at once to the third milestone on the Appian Way where you will meet Pope Urbanus who will baptise you.* Obediently, Valerianus went off and returned a Christian. The angel then appeared to the couple and crowned them with roses and lilies.

I read about Cecilia in my dictionaries of Christian biography and then decided to try the Internet. The first site I clicked on turned out to feature a girls' high school in Holland and some nice pictures of the St Cecilia Majorettes. Double click on *more* and I was invited to visit the *Ave Maria Website for Single Catholics*. This was clearly not for me, so I moved on.

Musicians are well-known to be waspish – particularly with their fellow musicians - and good at the *sforzando* put-down. So Beethoven was once asked to listen to another composer's opera. When he'd heard it, he said, *I like your opera. I think I will set it to music.* The great mathematician Albert Einstein was an amateur violinist and he used to play duets with Arthur Rubenstein. Once after a late entry by the fiddle, Rubenstein said, *What's the matter Albert – can't you count?* Musicians are also famous for a sort of visceral sadism – as when Barbirolli was rehearsing the chorus in Vaughan Williams' *Sinfonia Antartica* and he said, *I want you to sound like twenty-two women having babies without chloroform.*

Artur Schopenhauer went so far in his adoration of music as to say that it is the expression of the deepest spiritual reality – in effect the voice of God. When I hear harmony, I am sensing through the ear those relations of number and proportion that resound throughout all time and space. In saying this I am only echoing words from Pythagoras who spoke of *the music of the spheres* – teaching that the movements of the stars and planets are governed by divine harmony

And the substance of music, like the substance of the world itself, is mysterious. When we listen to a melody, what we hear is movement; but really nothing moves. When we say that a melody moves from, say, C to G, there is no movement, only sequence. We recognise the same melody when it is played in a different key, when it is played more quickly, more slowly. There is personal, emotional almost physical character in musical forms. Someone said, *An allegro in a minor key is like a girl dancing while her shoes pinch her.* And the key of C-sharp is *like an unprotected woman finding herself at Shepherd's Bush on the Central line and wondering how she's going to make it back to Clapham Common.*

You will hear people say that music is a matter of taste. And indeed it is. But that doesn't mean that every musical opinion is as good as every other – any more than every mathematical or geographical opinion is of equal validity. Taste in music is delivered by the masters of music such as Bach, Mozart and Haydn. They showed us how to compose well: so what is the point of composing badly? It doesn't mean that we should compose in the style of say Haydn or Schubert, any more than we should write in the style of John Donne or George Eliot.

But as in literature, so in music, there is an authentic tradition and it is taste which informs us what belongs to that tradition and what does not. And there is no getting away from the fact that taste needs to be educated. You need to work at it. Like Mozart, for example, who copied out meticulously the fugues of Bach in order to teach himself counterpoint. If Mozart himself put himself to that labour, surely the "A" level music student or the aspiring young composer should not think he can avoid such work?

I heard an interesting programme this week on Radio Four from which I learnt that Purcell's great ode to St Cecilia was first performed in 1692 at Stationers' Hall, a few hundred yards from where I live. The presenter of that programme said, *In Purcell's day, every intelligent person knew of the connection between St Cecilia and music – but times change.* They certainly do, my dear. More than most other aspects of western civilisation, music has been dumbed down.

When newspapers and the broadcasting media used to refer to *music* they meant good music – such as Bach, Beethoven and Purcell. Now *music* means pop music – that is noise. And, when they have to refer to real music, they put on their anti-elitist sneer and say *classical music*. What price western civilisation when the BBC made more of the death of John Peel than it did of the Queen Mother's? Last week the whole of the mass media went into awe-struck mourning over the death of a rock drummer. The *Today Programme* played a two minutes' burst of this audible

filth and James Naughtie, solemn as Remembrance Day, intoned, *Radio Four at its best*

Once serious newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* give us four or five pages at a time to pop and rock. Their Patron Saint of music is not Cecilia but such as Mick Jagger and John Lennon – author of the poisonous, nihilistic dirge called *Imagine*. If you are a working class black boy in the East End and you're caught with drugs, you may be arrested: if you're one of our leading rock musicians, you will be celebrated for your drug-taking and very likely end up with a knighthood.

Pop music is unavoidable. It is there in ringtones, as background noise to the news, cooking programmes and even the football results. It spoils exquisite documentaries about the natural world. Almost every pub and restaurant is infested with it. And though I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the lavatory, sub-musical trash whines out of the radio as *crossover* or the politically-correct excrescence of so called *world music*.

Of course, the church has led the dumbing down. All these doggerel choruses; musical infantilism; babyish tunes to the twang of the liturgical guitar. Church music has got itself into a rut. In fact I might even say it has got itself into a R***** - but then I've been promising to behave myself. Some – not all - editions of the BBC's "flagship" *Songs of Praise* with their trademark soft-focus, ubiquitous candles and sub-Lloyd-Webber parodies are the musical equivalent of a tart's boudoir. Perfumed unction for unbelievers who, nonetheless, take the cosy view of religion. Terminally insincere.

And what we have in so many modern musical services is a combination of philistinism, banality and secularism. Many of the musical aspects of these services are simply blasphemous, for they obscure the vision of God. They replace the beauty of holiness with institutionalised sentimentality, the celebration of what is unworthy and fake. They are aids to atheism.

Perhaps the Pope is not, for Anglicans, infallible in matters of religion, but I like very much what he said recently about music: *The greatness of western music from Gregorian chant to polyphony, to the Baroque age, to Bruckner and beyond is the most immediate and the most evident verification that history has to offer of the Christian image of mankind and of the Christian dogma of redemption.*

We should pray for a restoration throughout the church of the kind of music which forms our worship here. I end with a verse by W.H. Auden:

*Blessed Cecilia, appear in visions
To all musicians, appear and inspire:
Translated Daughter, come down and startle
Composing mortals with immortal fire.*