

As well as being the Sunday next before Advent, today is St Cecilia's Day, the Patron saint of Music. But 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. Now, she tells him! Valerianus – we must imagine him rapidly putting his trousers back on – 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.

Soon after this, Valerianus was caught up in one of the periodic persecutions and put to death. After many spiritual adventures, Cecilia was imprisoned and condemned to be suffocated in the bath in her own house. Although the bath was heated to ten times its normal temperature, she survived. So the Prefect sent the axe-man to cut off her head. According to the legend, her head would not fall off though it received three blows from the axe. Scared out of his wits, the executioner ran away, leaving the virgin in a pool of blood, singing. She survived for a further three days and a thousand years later she became celebrated as the Patron Saint of music. These tales of the lives of the saints are so wholesome, aren't they? So much more suitable for children than *Harry Potter*.

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. But only as far as the site of *The St Cecilia Society for the Preservation of Gregorian Plainchant and Peking Opera* where I learnt, *Most members of the society don't pray, meditate or levitate, but find that chanting evokes feelings like those found in eating great meals, a good basketball team or a very hot Japanese bath. One Sunday afternoon in October 1974, our Founder heard a voice address him on his car radio during half-time in a San Francisco football game. It was the voice of St Cecilia. She said, "Frank, it is your chance to restore Gregorian Plainchant to pre-eminence in world music; and while you're at it, lend a hand to the Peking Opera group in downtown San Francisco". Immediately, Frank formed a chorus who began singing plainchant at the Café Pergolesi in Santa Cruz. The chorus makes itself available, at an immodest fee, for funerals, weddings, house dedications, exorcisms and bar mitzvas. And they celebrate a sort of eucharist using Cappuchino.* It's a story no less strange than that of St Cecilia herself.

Towards the end of the 16th century, music festivals dedicated to St Cecilia became very popular. Lassus won prizes at the early festivals in Normandy in 1575 and 1583 Purcell composed a *Te Deum* and *Jubilate* for the one in 1694. Unfortunately the festivals were discontinued; but happily they were revived by the Musicians' Livery Company in 1905.

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?* Or how about Mendelssohn on Berlioz: *One ought to wash one's hands after handling one of his scores.* Or a music critic on *Tosca*: *In this opera, Puccini's music reaches its final putrescence.* Musicians are also famous for a sort of visceral sadism – as when Barbirolli was rehearsing the chorus in Vaughan Williams' *Sinfonia Antarctica* and he said, *I want you to sound like twenty-two women having babies without chloroform.*

Among creative artists, musicians are perhaps the most singularly obsessed with their art. There is the story of the musician who returned home one day to find his wife battered and bloody on the living room carpet. *Darling, whatever's happened? Answer: I was beaten up and raped. Husband: that's terrible; who could have done such a thing? From the floor where she lay: Oh, I know who did it – it was your agent. ...O really! Any news of that commission from the London Symphony?*

Music is not artificial. The raw material for music is present in the structures of creation: it is, you might say, audible mathematics. It is in the alternating rhythms of day and night and in the personal rhythms of breathing. It is the redemption of noise into sound. Noise is the enemy: that is why hell is called *pandemonium*. Schopenhauer said that music is the voice of the Thing-in-Itself and for Christians the Thing-in-Itself is God. But music can be the voice of other gods. Think of the gods of the Greek pantheon. They were not actual beings who lived on Mount Olympus. They represent personifications of certain emotional states. Mars is not a god in a Roman soldier's uniform. But Mars appears every time we see the coffin of one of our fallen being processed from an aeroplane. Dionysus is not Dorian Gray in a toga. Dionysus is an orgiastic, intoxicated emotional state which on Friday and Saturday nights turns our towns and cities into hell holes. The music of Dionysus is rap and rock and heavy metal.

The devil makes himself known in this world through the noise he makes. There is always something hellish about the intrusion of noise into sound – like a cough in the slow movement of Schubert's *C Major String Quintet* or some idiot's portable phone going off during *In the Bleak Midwinter*.

The closest you can ever come to the Voice of God in music is in Bach. When we hear the last chorus of *The St Matthew Passion*, we feel there is more than mere representation here. It is not just a musical accompaniment of the laying of Christ's body in the tomb: it is that laying in the tomb. Bach, when asked how he managed to play the organ with such genius, answered in his simple way, *There's nothing to it: you only have to hit the right notes at the right time and the instrument plays itself.* And then he added words which must become the motto of every church musician everywhere: *I have always kept one end in view: namely, with all good will, to conduct a well-regulated church music to the glory of God.*

Our lives are rhythm and time. And so, as Eliot put it, *We are the music while the music lasts.* Eliot based his *Four Quartets* on a piece of music by Beethoven, the *Opus 132*. He said:

I have Beethoven's A minor Quartet on the gramophone, and I find it quite inexhaustible to study. There is a sort of heavenly, or at least more than human gaiety, about some of his later things which one imagines might come to oneself as the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering; I should like to get something of that into verse before I die.

So we ought to pray with John Donne:

*Since I am coming to that holy room,
Where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy music as I come
I tune the instrument here at the door,
And what must I do then, think here before*

I end with part of a poem to St Cecilia by a friend of Benjamin Britten's – 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.*