

Sermon, St Sepulchre's, Friends of the Musicians' Chapel, 25th May 2004...

When I was first ordained, I served a curacy in a half-smart suburb of Leeds. My boss the vicar, Howard Garside, was a devout, kindly, blunt Yorkshireman and he believed in saving brass – that's money to southerners. He used to blow out the everlasting aumbry light every evening to save a penny on candles. He could be so direct as to remind me of a story I heard at a farmers' dinner. This farmer was always going on about manure. Some of the posher farmers' wives approached his wife and said, *Can't you get him to say fertiliser?* To which she replied, *I've only just got him to say manure.* Anyhow, one Friday evening we had enjoyed a performance in church of the Fauré *Requiem*. Next morning the senior curate and I were in the Lady Chapel, having just said Morning Prayer, and we were playing a tape-recording of the lovely solo *Pie Jesu*. In barged Father Garside, scowled and shouted at us, *What's this – a so-and-so concert?*

This says a lot about attitudes towards music in church. There is an almost caricature opposition between the parson who tolerates church music because it puts a few more bums on seats and the organist and choir who only come so they can chirrup to their egos' content. They are the artists, after all, and they know of course that the words of the hymns, the Creed, the Gloria etc are a load of baloney and part of what Philip Larkin called, *that vast, moth-eaten, musical brocade, created to pretend we never die.* And I have found you can divide organists into two – so to speak: those who treat the machine as a musical instrument and those – perhaps unfortunately in the majority – who regard it as if it were a steam engine.

I have always loved music in church. It was the music of the Schultz organ in St Bartholomew's, Armley which first attracted me to church – that and the first Anglican hymn I ever heard - *Blessed City, Heavenly Salem* to the miraculous tune of *Westminster* by Henry Purcell. How mysterious that I should now find myself at St Michael's where Purcell was first to play the organ and at St Sepulchre's which is the national musicians' church. I cannot imagine life – let alone religion – without music. I would go so far as to agree with Nietzsche who said, *Without music, life would be a mistake.* So I should like to say a little about music and religion this evening.

Music is no mere accompaniment to religion. It is not an ornament. Alexander Pope complained that a lot of people go to church to hear the music. He should not have complained. Music is the direct presentation of what worship is. This is because it is the representation in sound of the lineaments of the universe which God created. When I hear harmony, I am sensing through the ear those relations of number and proportion that resound throughout all time and space. Artur Schopenhauer put this better than anybody when he wrote, *Music is the soul of the drama or liturgy. It expresses the true nature of the actions and words and makes us immediately acquainted with the innermost soul of the events... Music does not express this or that particular affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment or peace of mind; but affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment and peace of mind as they are in themselves.*

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. The melody has its own character and we get to know it. In a pregnant phrase, Roger Scruton says, *I come to recognise a melody as a personality*. There is personal, emotional almost physical character in musical forms. It has been said for instance that an allegro in a minor key is like someone dancing while their shoes pinch them. 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. Scruton adds, *Listening to a Bach fugue, a late quartet of Beethoven, or one of those infinitely spacious themes of Bruckner, I have the thought that this very movement which I hear might have been made known to me in a single instant. For the musical entity, the piece of music, is only a fleeting visitor to our time; its individuality is emancipated from clock time and so it is able to help us understand how WE might exist in eternity*.

Music of course requires clock time in order for us to hear it, but it seems to exist in ideal time, or out of time altogether – simply THERE. This is a mirror image of the soul. Our bodies, our appearance, our senses are here in clock time and we need clock time in order to express ourselves. But the self or soul that we express has another sort of existence which is in what our religion calls *eternity*. So music is a way of understanding our deepest selves. *We are the music while the music lasts*. And the music is eternal. We know that, say, Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto* would exist even if no one ever played it again.

I must say it again: music is no mere accompaniment to faith; it is the direct presentation of the faith. When we hear *The St Matthew Passion* this IS Good Friday. Listen, if you dare, to the last chorus in C-minor. This IS Our Lord being taken down from the Cross and laid in the tomb in the rock. When you hear *The Christmas Oratorio* you witness the nativity of Christ – and the fact that, in the Bach, the shepherds are indubitably German shepherds from Leipzig with snow on their boots does not in the least misrepresent the Incarnation: rather it confirms it. When you hear, an astonishing setting of the Mass by Lassus, you know that the music partakes of the reality of the ritual. This is what is meant by the expression *sacred music*.

So you see, I am against the Howard Garsides of musical unappreciation. I cannot imagine the practice of religion without music. But now something else follows from this. Because church music is part of religious truth, you can't have the music by itself without a corruption of the music. In other words, if you separate the music from its purpose, you deny the character, personality and meaning of the music itself. The greatest musician of all time, Johann Sebastian Bach, knew this; and that's why his statement that he composed all his works *to the glory of God* was not a delicate pietism, but the literal truth.

I end up saying a word in favour of Howard Garside and all the other musical philistines. Perhaps he wasn't against the music of the *Pie Jesu* in itself. Maybe he thought we were listening to the music for its own sake? And if he did think that, then he would have been right to criticise us: *for church music does not have a sake except for the purpose it serves*. And church music does not have any reference except the setting of the religious truths of the oratorio, the anthem or the Mass. If the music is under-rehearsed or badly-performed, it diminishes the act of worship. That is why our musicians take choir practice seriously. Of course, the corollary of this is that the

words and ritual movements which go with the music have to be performed with the same care and reverence that the choir has for the notes. If the choir smirk and snigger their way through the Prayer of Humble Access, it's as big a desecration of the sacred ritual as if you sang B-flat where you should be singing B-natural.

Because we are physical presences living in a material world, we are obliged to use *things* in order to enact *truths*. Like music itself, we have to use time to express eternity. This is just another way of saying that everything we do is sacramental:

*You are the music while the music lasts.
These are only hints and guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half-guessed, the gift half-understood is Incarnation.*