

The Trinity, Music and Worship

St Brandon's

Ps 150

25 June 2023

I hope you enjoyed the setting by the composer Alan Smith of that familiar hymn 'Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty' which the choir has just sung. It was slightly irregular, almost jazzy, and with a significant change in v.3 – much slower, and in a different key, reflecting the words of that verse: 'Holy, holy, holy! though the darkness hide thee, though the eye made blind by sin thy glory may not see.'

Compare that with the tune that we usually sing this to (No. 212, Nicaea – Richard to play one verse). You can feel the strong, regular beat (it's in the very common 4:4 time), and there's a certain solemnity and majesty about it – in quite distinct contrast to the Alan Smith setting.

So, what is the music doing to the words? In the hymn tune, it seems to be reinforcing the words and saying of God that He is strong, regular, dependable, solemn, majestic. All good and true! But the Alan Smith version seems almost to be suggesting that this holy God is also playful, slightly unpredictable, one who acknowledges and works with the darkness and sinfulness that characterises the state of mankind, and yet remains holy: both merciful and mighty.

So, music can change and open up meaning. Music is doing something to the words. But it's also potentially at least doing something to us, perhaps expanding our understanding of God, perhaps challenging that understanding, perhaps opening up not only meaning but also emotion.

'Holy, holy, holy!' is a hymn we sing often on Trinity Sunday (as we did this year) – 'God in three persons, blessed Trinity' – and we are, of course, still in the early stages of the Trinity season (even though it seems to have disappeared from our readings!). But I'd like to read you a poem by Malcolm Guite, called 'Trinity Sunday'¹ which picks up on this musical theme. As with many poems, it's quite complicated, but I'll come back to some of the key phrases and ideas after I've read it:

In the Beginning, not in time and space,
But in the quick before both space and time,
In Life, in Love, in co-inherent Grace,
In three in one and one in three, in rhyme,
In music, in the whole creation story,
In his own image, his imagination,
The Triune Poet makes us for his glory,
And makes us each the other's inspiration,
He calls us out of darkness, chaos, chance,
To improvise a music of our own,
To sing the chord that calls us to the dance,
Three notes resounding from a single tone,

¹ *Sounding the Seasons. Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year*, Canterbury Press, 2012, p. 48.

To sing the End in whom we all begin;
Our God beyond, beside us and within.

One thing I particularly like about this poem is the idea that it is the Triune God Himself who is the source of all music. God provides the original chord, 'three notes resounding from a single tone'. And if that is so, then all music is only ever a response to the music that God Himself initiates. But it is a response that God invites us to: 'He calls out of darkness, chaos, chance / To improvise a music of our own / To sing the chord that calls us to the dance', and in so calling us he also 'makes us each the other's inspiration'. So, we are given, quite literally, artistic licence, to make music and that, I take it, refers not just to composing, but also to performance which involves its own creative interpretation of the music, and also to listening in such a way that we make the music our own. You surely don't have to be musical to appreciate music!

But whether composing, performing or listening, there is also a *purpose* to music. The poem continues from, 'To improvise a music of our own', with the words, 'To sing the chord that calls us to the dance ... To sing the End [capital E] in whom we all begin'. I take the idea of being called to the dance as implying both that the dance is already going on (it's *the* dance, not *a* dance), that it's a dance therefore that is already initiated by God (as the words from the song 'I am the Lord of the Dance' imply), and that dance implies joy and celebration, a call to engage with, promote and foster all that is good in life.

And, as we 'sing the End [capital E] in whom we all begin', the fulfilment, the God to whom we will return, it implies a certain circularity to music – that as God Himself is the source of all music, so our music returns to Him in praise and thanksgiving. Music has point and purpose.

But, music also does at least two other things. We've concentrated so far on the positive side of music, leading to dancing and singing and praising God, music that starts from God and takes us back to God. But our relationship with God is not always so straightforward, of course. And music can help us here too because it can also have a mystical quality. Music can be ecstatic in the sense of the Greek *ekstasis* which means 'to stand outside oneself'. So music can put us on another plane, so to speak, 'outside ourselves', and thereby help us to see the mystery of our lives in relation to the mystery of God.²

A story might help to explain this.³ There's a piece of music called the *Easter Oratorio* written by the composer Paul Spicer with words by Tom Wright when he was Dean of Lichfield, before he became Bishop of Durham. I had hoped to play you an excerpt but haven't managed to track it down. The work ends with that well-known Easter hymn 'Ye choirs of New Jerusalem' in which the audience / congregation joins in – 'All glory to the Father be / all glory to the Son' and so on, as the last verse goes. It's a fitting end, you would

² I have taken this idea, though adapted it somewhat, from Paul Spicer's chapter in Jeremy Begbie (ed.), *Sounding the depths. Theology through the arts*, SCM Press, 2002, p. 182.

³ See op. cit., pp. 187-8, and 200-1. Again, I have adapted their version to make a slightly different point.

think, to a celebration of the resurrection of Christ, emphasising the victory over death, a triumphal conclusion.

But the composer felt strongly that it shouldn't end that way. It took a while to convince Tom Wright, but convinced he was in the end. And so, the piece finishes with the congregation sitting back down, and a tubular bell tolling in a minor key, the organ resonating against it with an unresolved seventh. The technicalities don't need to concern us, but the point is that the music ends not triumphantly, but unresolved and in mystery. It invites the congregation to go away with that unresolved, mysterious sense and take, not just the triumph of the resurrection but also its mystery, back into the unresolved circumstances of their lives, to live with the continuing mystery of life and God. Music can do that in a way that any other form of communication finds difficult if not impossible.

And one final thing that music does. Let me play you something (but just a note that those online may not get this if Facebook so decides!).

[Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, sung by Paul Robeson – see [Paul Robeson : 'Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Seen' - YouTube](#), play one minute to:

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.
Nobody knows my sorrow.
Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.
Glory hallelujah!
Sometimes I'm up, sometimes I'm down,
O yes Lord.
Sometimes I'm almost to the ground,
O yes Lord.]

As well as the positive side of music, leading to dancing and singing and praising God, music that starts from God and takes us back to God, music that has point and purpose; and as well as the way in which music can open up and takes us into mystery; music can also express our deepest emotions, the sorrow, the pathos of life. There's something in this song about the words and the tune and, of course, the extraordinary voice of Paul Robeson, that take us into the violence and anguish of the slave trade not in a way that sanitizes it, but in a way that gives voice to lament, gives suffering a certain dignity, and bears witness to an astonishing faith and to an astonishing but also mysterious God.

In all these ways, then: in praise and thanksgiving; in the opening up of mystery; and in giving expression to our deepest emotions and yearnings; and probably in other ways as well, music matters, it does something for us and to us. And therefore, music in Church is not just something we *happen* to do, but something we *have* to do.

Amen