

St Sepulchre-without-Newgate

2nd May 2017

Evensong for the Friends of the Musicians' Chapel

The Dean of Westminster

On 18th July 1969, on the First Night of the Proms, in the arena, I stood about three rows from the front. I was twenty. Colin Davis was conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra in a performance of Berlioz *Grande Messe des Morts*. I have never forgotten the sheer brilliance of the moment, and my huge excitement, as the conductor waved his baton up in the general direction of the sky and four brass bands spaced around the gallery of the Royal Albert Hall vied with each other to introduce the *Tuba mirum*, the sound ricocheting backwards and forwards across the great hall.

This was not the first time I had seen Colin Davis conduct at the Proms. Some years earlier I was there when he conducted, I believe, the LSO, in the Emperor Concerto with Stephen Bishop, as he was known then, the soloist. But the memory is clear, though on that occasion I was seated high up in the hall, as I had been incidentally when I attended a concert there as part of the Centenary Appeal of the Royal College of Organists on 24th September 1966, called 'Organ in Sanity and Madness': an unforgettable evening, with the gentlemen of the choir of King's College Cambridge beating up the Lost Chord and a contest between James Blades on percussion and Allan Wicks on the Albert Hall organ. Looking back, I see at as having been very much in the spirit of the 60s, one of satire and mockery, probably not admirable, though fun at the time. A leading figure, inevitably, was David Willcocks, whose name was, when I last looked, the most recent to have been inscribed in the book of

musicians memorialised in the chapel here. His early musical education was as a chorister at Westminster Abbey. From the beginning he was self-confident. I heard him once describe his interview, when he rejected Ernest Bullock's offer to accompany his audition piece on the piano saying that he would rather accompany himself since the music was fairly difficult and he knew it. We remember him and all those musicians whose name is in the memorial book with thanksgiving and high regard.

I last saw Colin Davis conduct, at the Barbican Hall on 27th April 2008 marking his 80th birthday, the premiere of James MacMillan's *St John Passion*. Although those two occasions, the Berlioz *Requiem* and the *St John Passion*, were separated by almost 40 years, what they had in common, apart from their conductor, was that these were concert performances of religious music. Of course, Berlioz and MacMillan were both writing religious music explicitly for concert performance and of course they are by no means alone.

For me the interesting question is how to react to religious music, that is music written explicitly for liturgical performance, given a concert performance. I had no queasiness at the Berlioz *Requiem*, so obviously a concert piece, unimaginable liturgically. But the *St John Passion* performed at the Barbican made me uneasy: my personal reaction.

Knowing the Fauré *Requiem* as a funeral mass, at the funeral of friends, I have found it almost unbearable as a concert piece. In a similar way I have found it difficult to tolerate certain groups of singers performing sequences of 16th century motets out of context and gently rolling their heads from side to side as they sing to emphasise the quaint piety of the medium; or a radio channel broadcasting smooth classics to sooth our troubled breast: the *Lark ascending* followed by a *Pie Jesu* followed by an *Adagio for strings*.

But these are perhaps just personal irritations. I have the undoubted advantage of hearing day by day one of the very best church choirs singing some of the greatest music ever written to enhance the celebration of the Divine Office and the Eucharist over the past five hundred years. It is wonderful to know that music written for performance in the Abbey by Abbey organists such as Henry Purcell and Orlando Gibbons has never been out of the repertoire and is sung today probably better than ever. My heart bleeds, though, when we hear in the Abbey a mass by a 20th century French composer which is now never performed liturgically in France. This is one disadvantage arising from the liturgical changes in our Churches over the past 50 years. One benefit though has been that the performance in the Abbey of the music of Palestrina and Victoria, Gesualdo and Monteverdi, Gabrieli, Josquin and Lassus can be in the language and context for which it was written, as can that of Christopher Tye, Thomas Tallis and William Byrd, whether their English or Latin music. And the tradition is constantly renewed. On Sunday afternoon in the Abbey, at one of three choral services, some 800 people heard the choir sing the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis in Herbert Howells setting *Collegium regale* and MacMillan's anthem *Christus vincit*.

But during the 20th century, the Church's music escaped the Church's control and its buildings and is now enjoyed in concerts and on the radio and in recordings of various kinds, in what we might call a democratic explosion. This has led in turn to dissatisfaction with the parish church choir and a significant increase in the popularity of services sung by professional and semi-professional choirs in the London churches and the great cathedrals of our land, as well as at the Abbey. The effect is irreversible. But is it ultimately beneficial?

There are really two connected questions. The first is whether religious music in a concert performance retains the power to move spiritually, to be a genuinely religious experience. The second is wider: about the spiritual nature of music in general.

Both questions are addressed in a book *Sacred Music in Secular Society* by Dr Jonathan Arnold, Dean of Divinity at Magdalen College Oxford, who, before ordination, was a professional singer at St Paul's Cathedral and with the Sixteen, the Tallis Scholars and other similar ensembles. For his book Dr Arnold interviewed performers as well as theologians. He quotes Harry Christophers as saying, 'You don't have to have any faith or any religion at all to get something out of this music. If the music is good, it will do something to your soul.' That is perhaps minimal but it is at least a start. Rowan Williams on the other hand saw the need for an element of participation, which Arnold interpreted in terms of singing the occasional carol at a carol concert, or standing at the *Halleluiah Chorus*. Williams thought there would be something missing if the audience did not perceive something of the faith of the composer and what he or she was trying to express. 'Anyone conducting or performing or listening to sacred music in the concert setting has, at least, to be aware that this is not concert stuff only.' Something in the presentation or the performance has to nudge people towards the spiritual dimension, to enable people to see that, for example, a motet for the feast of the Assumption is the 'casing of the jewel', to see that it conveys something precious, numinous, ineffable, some access to the unknowable God.

In a lecture for the Sandford St Martin Trust in 2008, broadcast by the BBC on 22nd October, the composer James MacMillan spoke of the divine spark of music. He said, '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' he said, 'is a great encouragement to a composer like me who has drawn inspiration from the deep reservoirs of Christian liturgy and theology.'

He went on to criticise the ignorance and arrogance of secularism. '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 élites to bury our religious heritage in the earth of history, while robbing its grave of all its beautiful artefacts.'

But he was also clear that the religious instinct and purpose in composing and performing great music is alive and well. He concluded, 'We must penetrate the mists of contemporary banality to restore the idea of the sacred, in which our true and fullest freedom resides. I believe it is God's divine spark which 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.'

I find myself in tune with Rowan Williams and with James MacMillan.

But finally, I want to reflect briefly on the solipsistic character of so much in the modern spirit. The ultimate referent is ourself: what makes me happy, what lifts me up when I am down, what is good for me, not what is good in itself. This has destructive force. It has the effect of turning us away from God and away from our neighbour, away from all that is beautiful and good, into our own self-absorbed little world.

Worship should take us out of ourselves. The words, the music, the liturgical acts themselves should all contribute to the glory of almighty God. They should enable us to lose ourselves in the joy and beauty of an encounter with the living God. Music can do this as no other medium can. So today we say: for musicians and for music of all kinds, thank God.