

## Sermon for the Service of Thanksgiving for Musicians

Church of the Holy Sepulchre

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I have much to give thanks for when it comes to music and musicians, and I'm entirely at one with the purposes of this service and your memorial book and Chapel, which are to facilitate the remembrance of those who have allowed themselves to be called to fulfil a musical vocation and to offer thanks for all they have achieved and given through their devotion, discipline, art and creativity.

The list of names that were just read out included famous and far less well-known musicians, and that is good, honest and true. When I think of our choir at King's and those who have passed through it, I think of the many for whom this was the pinnacle of their musical life and the few, the not inconsiderable few, I should add, for whom it was a vital and shaping nursery for an influential which achieved wonderful triumphs and gave unquantifiable joy to many.

This very weekend we heard of the death of Sir Andrew Davis, a massive figure in classical music, who was organ scholar at Kings under Sir David Willcocks. He is on record as saying that the scholarship was the hardest job he ever had. Perhaps we can imagine why. The range of the repertoire, the need to be reliable as well as interpretive and musical, not only on broadcasts and at great services, but at every single daily rehearsal, the duty of teaching the youngest choristers the basics of music and musicianship. And all this this alongside reading for a degree.

It takes a lot of work, as well as a lot of talent, to fulfil a musical vocation, as all who are here to remember a particular loved one will I suspect readily attest. Music is hard work, but not all hard work.

In his day Charles Gore (1853-1932) was a leading Anglican bishop and a man of deep spirituality. After attending a performance of the Brandenburg concertos in the Queen's Hall he commented, 'if that's true, then everything is alright.'

Music, brilliantly composed and excellently performed, can have a profound impact on us. The feeling that purely instrumental music can give us an access to truth and reality that is lost when we rely on words is not uncommon. There can be profound consolation in this, but also inspiration. Really good music, that which warrants our undivided attention, draws us into a world of blended order and creativity. We do more than enter the mind of the composer when we listen closely. We connect with their heart, with their soul, with their deep personal truth. It's only ever partial of course. You don't know *all* about Ralph Vaughan Williams when you listen to *The Lark Ascending*, but you connected with something in him when you have heard it for the first time, and then on your hundredth listen you connect with something else – something deeper.

To be true to its own integrity, in its intrinsic holiness, music must be gracious; it must have the quality of grace. Human beings given a musical vocation literally overflow when they do their music, whether it's composing, playing, conducting or singing. Music is fundamentally generous.

Nothing could be less bombastic than good, true, holy music. It's a tragedy when it is used for propagandist purposes or to serve any exploitative or oppressive agenda. At tragedy, a waste, and maybe even a blasphemy

In music, as in all art, the creature has the opportunity to be the creator; to engage the material of creation to shape and offer something new. The truest music is live, in the moment. It lasts as long as its own resonance. Recorded music isn't the same. It can be wonderful, but it doesn't have that profound quality that comes when performers and listeners combine with such wrapped engagement that there is nothing else.

A fantastic orchestral, choral or solo performance can have this quality, and thus transport people to a place of unspeakable joy. But the epitome of music making for me is the thoroughgoing participation of community singing. It's the hymns that have it at a truly great service, however beautiful or moving the choral gems might be. It's by hymns that the roofs of churches and cathedrals – indeed chapels - are lifted, and the barrier between earth and heaven removed. It's in the hymns that all can be in tune with heaven.

The twentieth century Methodist hymn writer, Fred Pratt Green, got it right when he wrote

When in our music God is glorified,  
And adoration leaves no room for pride,  
It is as though the whole creation cried,  
Alleluia.

At its best music is true, gracious, holy, comforting, inspirational and connecting. Let us therefore praise God for music and give thanks for musicians.