



Faith in Music

11 February 2018

James Lancelot

Psalm 119: 49–56 Colossians 3: 12–17

*Thou art a place to hide me in, thou shalt preserve me from trouble:
thou shalt compass me about with songs of deliverance.* Psalm 32 v.8

Thy statutes have been my songs: in the house of my pilgrimage. Psalm 119 v.54

Come with me on a journey back in time. It is St Peter's Day, June 29, 1992. It has been an unusually busy and demanding weekend in the cathedral and I have escaped to Hadrian's Wall country for a short break to recharge batteries. I am walking alone along a favourite path by the North Tyne just as many Roman soldiers have done nineteen hundred years before. It is after half past ten at night, but in that northern county so soon after the summer solstice there is still daylight.

As I walk, the weekend's music flows through my mind; in particular the anthem we have just heard, Thomas Tallis' setting of *O sacrum convivium*. I ponder on how Tallis takes such simple musical building-blocks and constructs from them a work that is not only of such beauty but is also so illustrative of the text. The Latin describes the Eucharistic feast as being a *pignus* – a picture, a painting, a palimpsest – of future glory. It is as if the veil of the temple was lifted, just briefly, for us to glimpse the glory within. The sopranos' rising phrases seem to strive to reach at something beyond themselves.

As I pondered this there came to me a revelation more powerful than any normal insight and with an intensity equivalent to that of a mystical vision – a realisation that there was no way in which such simple sounds could be moulded into a work of such beauty *without* the existence of a loving creator. To put it another way, the existence of such music predicates for me the existence of what we call God. For there to be such music in the world without love being at the world's heart was simply not an option.

Over the last twenty-five years I have tried to work through the implications of my experience that unforgettable evening – an experience of which I have never spoken before now. There are any number of arguments to demolish my proposition. Quite apart from its complete subjectivity, one could point to my tired and perhaps unusually receptive state that night, and the peculiarly atmospheric and resonant setting. One could counter that there have been some of whom it has to be said that a love of music has not deterred them from acts of profound evil. Musical appreciation does not in itself guarantee a righteous life or a love of God.

Nor would I suggest that sixteenth-century counterpoint speaks to everyone; nor does what we call classical music; in fact music does not speak at all to some. (I am reminded of a certain canon of Christ Church who profoundly detested all forms of music. Choral Evensong must have been a sore trial to him.) Perhaps most profoundly irritating of all, I discovered some years later that Tallis did not originally compose the music of *O sacrum convivium* for that particular text – or indeed for any text, for it may have started life as an instrumental fantasia. Little comfort though that discovery brought me, I can only say that what came to me that night was too strong to be discarded. And I think we have to remember that God has many different ways of speaking to us and through us.

I think we underestimate such intimations, such inner voices, at our peril. From the Old Testament through the New and way beyond, there are reports of men and women hearing voices, often identified as the voice of God. In his book *Human Traces*, Sebastian Faulks suggests that modern mankind has lost its former ability to hear voices. Both Kenneth Clark and Somerset Maugham told not of hearing actual voices but of having spiritual experiences that transcended normality. The journalist AA Gill once wrote that ‘faith is like a piece of string that disappears up into the clouds and every now and then tugs a little’ – ‘a twitch upon the thread’ as Evelyn Waugh put it in *Brideshead Revisited*. We shall never find scientific proof of the existence of God because God does not work like that. We are dealing not with certainty but with its opposite – by which I mean not doubt, but faith.

I began by citing two verses from the Book of Psalms. The first tells of God compassing me about with songs of deliverance. Even in Old Testament times, there was clearly an understanding of music’s power to console and to heal. The second – Thy statutes have been my songs in the house of my pilgrimage – is applicable personally, but also of course to every member of a liturgical choir. And over a lifetime of work in church music it is the psalms which I have come to know and love perhaps above all else, not chiefly for the beauty of their language in Miles Coverdale’s translation, dear though that is, but above all because they articulate and enable us to express the entire range of human emotion, whether it be love, abhorrence, joy, anger, praise, condemnation, exultation, hope, despair, or the wish for God to avenge the evil in the world. Singing the psalms, accompanying them, conducting them and latterly saying them month by month, I have found them to be good companions on a Christian pilgrimage which began with my baptism sixty-five years ago today. ‘Thou shalt shew me the path of life; in thy presence is the fullness of joy: and at thy right hand there is pleasure for evermore.’

Several years ago after Evensong one Sunday I played Bach’s Passacaglia in C minor as the closing voluntary – a piece that even by Bach’s standards stands out as exceptional. Afterwards, when I came downstairs, a close friend said, “For me that piece is proof of the existence of God.” When I asked the Choristers one day, after a particularly beautifully-sung Evensong, if they could imagine a world without music they were horrified – one of them said, “It would have no meaning.” And it was hearing Psalm 150 being rehearsed by the choir that brought one listener in the cathedral from previous unbelief to a sense of vocation that led to his present position of ordained ministry. There will be many other such stories of which we are unaware; we do not know them, and we are not meant to. ‘For we know in part, and we prophesy in part ... For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face.’

For now, then, do not disregard those inner promptings. The unbeliever might dismiss them as being imagination; but there again they might just come from God, to whom be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, majesty, dominion and power, now and for ever. Amen.