

Music, Modernity and The Sacred

by James MacMillan

There is much debate these days about religion in our contemporary culture. Much of the discussion on, for example, Christianity in the Public Square is largely concentrated on politics, science, education and so on. The arts can easily be overlooked as profound shapers of the public imagination and as unique indicators of direction in human civilisation. This evening I want to redress the balance by swinging our focus momentarily to religious matters as they relate to our modern, pluralist and democratic culture, and look at the way in which artistic, and in particular musical, creativity is assessed and valued.

Before the specific, though, a few words about the context. Much debate about religion in recent times has become polarised and fractious. The process of secularisation in European societies has led to a triumphalist assumption that a war has been won by the forces of the grand secular project. However, history has an annoying habit of sneaking up and mugging the certain and the convinced. Religion has clearly not been beaten into the pulp that some might have hoped for. It features in surprisingly new ways in our ongoing cultural discourse.

Has our culture given up on religion then? Clearly not. In fact, the stridency in the tone and the vehemence in the voices of atheist campaigners could be interpreted as an increasingly desperate and panic-stricken recognition that religion is, and will continue to be, for good and for ill, a constant in humanity's narrative about itself. The campaigning atheists, as opposed to the live-and-let-live variety, are raising their voices because they recognise that they are losing; the project to establish a narrow secular orthodoxy is failing.

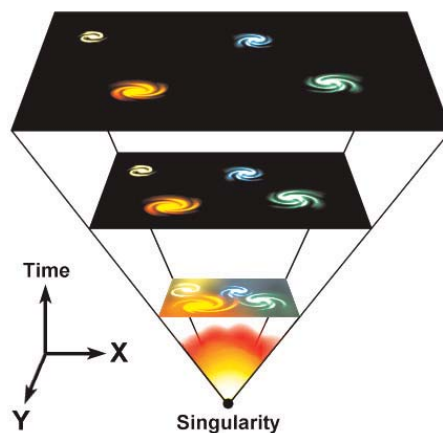
So far, though, these campaigners have been given a fair wind by powerful allies in the media, but the challenge to the religious is rendered lean here because most of the media snipers are ill-informed about their target. The most vocal hecklers have little real comprehension about religion, and have no intention of remedying the defects in their research. As Madeline Bunting wrote in a recent Guardian piece:

“The ignorance in the media is, to some extent, to be expected; this is the frontline between believer and sceptical secularism,

and most journalists have a sketchy understanding of the complexity and history of theology that make up a religious tradition, and even less sympathy or interest.”

This has implications for the nature of our pluralism. The ignorance-fuelled hostility to religion, widespread among secular liberal elites, is in danger of colouring society's value-free “neutrality” in ways that are both bland and naïve. They are also impractical, unattractive and, I suggest, oppressive. A true sense of difference, in which a genuine pluralism could thrive, is under threat of being reduced to a lowest common denominator of uniformity and conformity, where any non-secular contribution will automatically be regarded as socially divisive by definition.

From within this stultifying vacuum, there emerges an historic task for the religions, to speak for a more genuine pluralism in which the Christian Church could rise to become an honest broker. That claim will, of course, be met with some justified scepticism. It is relatively new for Catholicism, for example, to talk about a God of justice and love who affirms difference. (This celebration of difference is not just new for Catholics – it is a



fresh project for all of us.) But that celebration is now here. The historic doctrines of Creation and the transcendence of God enable the religious to create a real space for others, where all can be enriched by difference, and where it may be nourished in utmost seriousness.

To do this first requires the building of bridges. But how can these bridges be built? In 2005, a YouGov poll asked the question “Would you consider yourself to be religious?” Although 71% of the general public said “yes”, only 21% of the TV industry was as positive. If this is the case with the TV industry, you can be sure it is the same for the metropolitan Arts, Cultural and Media elites. These are people who speak only to themselves and have convinced each other that the rest of the country thinks just like them. They are wrong.

There is a huge amount of anecdotal evidence that points to a widespread discomfort felt by religious people in this world. They confront ignorance and prejudice about their beliefs, because to be religious, according to the new secular, liberal orthodoxy is to be reactionary, bigoted and narrow. A smug ignorance, a gross oversimplification and caricature that serves as an analytical understanding of religion, is the common intellectual currency. What kind of bridge can be built to this precious and introverted milieu? It would be a disaster if secular liberals were abandoned in their increasing illiberality. The democracy that they affect to defend would not survive the erasure of the spiritual perspective from the Public Square. The bridge has to be built by Christians and others being firm in resisting increasingly aggressive attempts to still their voices. They must go on speaking truth to power, expressing their insights and creativity from a confident understanding of their traditions and beliefs. It will make for honest and informed debate and a bridge built on sure foundations.

So much for the context. But in addressing the specifics one has to ask, “Can a religious artist still be understood and affirmed in this artificial pluralism? And can that person be celebrated for what he or she brings to our common humanity and society, because of their worldview, or is he or she destined to be marginalised or derided?”

For me, I found one inspirational answer in the 1999 Letter to Artists from John Paul II. The subtitle of the Letter fascinates me. It is written: “To all who are passionately dedicated

to the search for new ‘epiphanies’ of beauty so that through their creative work as artists they may offer these as gifts to the world”. It is this openheartedness and generosity of spirit that points to art itself as the bridge which will heal the wound of division created in our current culture wars.

In paragraph 10 the late Pope says this: “Even beyond its typically religious expressions, true art has a close affinity with the world of faith, so that, even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience. In so far as it seeks the beautiful, fruit of an imagination which rises above the everyday, art is by its nature a kind of appeal to the mystery. Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.”

There are, perhaps, many secular artists who will simply shrug this off as meaningless and irrelevant. And there are some forms of art in modern times where the connections with the numinous are clearly more difficult to discern than with others. But in the case of music there seems to be a veritable umbilical link with the sacred. Through the centuries, musicians have proved themselves to be midwives of faith, bringing their gifts to the historic challenge of inspiring the faithful in worship. But modernity has brought with it a breach in the working relationship of composer and church. It has also brought with it a series of crises in the very aesthetic of serious music itself. We are witness to a dis-engagement between the living composer and the wider culture. The first to notice this and to confront it in his writings was the German philosopher and musicologist Theodor Adorno.

As Simon Frith, the pop professor at Edinburgh University puts it: “Adorno’s is the most systematic and the most searing analysis of mass culture and the most challenging for anyone claiming even a scrap of value for the products that are churning out of the music industry.”

For someone so closely associated with the Marxist analysis of culture and society, Adorno is, nevertheless, able to reflect on the spirituality of our contemporary predicaments. His conclusion is provocative. He noted that the colonising power of popular culture is made invincible by its ability to fill the vacuum created by “spiritual disenchantment” in the



West, and the gradual disintegration of religious culture and ideas. His essential point is that the “culture industry” of global capitalism, a system where entertainment is linked inseparably with the goal of massive profit-making rather than what we might call human flourishing, has swamped popular music. Notice today that the defenders and propagandists for popular culture still refer to it, unapologetically, as “an industry”. Adorno’s analysis is that the popular music of mass industry culture is superficial, consumed by unthinking hearers, who buy in vast numbers, and are utterly beguiled by predictability, cliché and constant sameness.

He sees the passive masses apparently colluding in their own manipulation. One has to admit that Adorno was prophetic in seeing the “culture industries” as creating, controlling and exploiting musical tastes. Popular music has emerged in parallel with advertising, breeding, as he would see it, immature, and ultimately powerless individuals. The Scottish theologian and musician, Jeremy Begbie, suggests that this is a culture that “can offer no effective critique of its society: it offers at one and the same time escape from life’s banalities as well as confirmation of them, its twin functions being distraction (in effect, a kind of drug) and affirmation (it can only maintain the status quo)”.

That finds an echo in the American theologian Albert Blackwell who observes: “mirthless promotional photographs betray no sense of irony over rock groups who struggle to project individual disaffection and social non-conformity by endlessly reiterating our musical culture’s three most conventional chords [I,IV and V].”

Some may claim that pop culture is harmless. But its ubiquity has become an imperialistic force, edging all else out, a cuckoo in the nest. The main casualty is the innate curiosity of the young. They are discouraged from making discoveries in music and much else. All they get is what is flung at them through the usual, sanctioned, and controlling media. Popular culture, in spite of its protestations of the opposite, seems to curtail and limit natural curiosity, and can lead to uniformity, conformity and narrowness, the very things that pop culture claims to be against. The meaning and significance of art music seems now only to baffle the wider culture. Its power of communication eludes many who have been weaned off the importance of sustained concentration and deep, active listening.

In his book, *Music and The Mind*, the psychiatrist Anthony Storr makes some bold claims about what great music can bring to our experience. He suggests that our feelings and emotions are given structure, fluency and order when exposed to the abstract constructs of music. Music, as the deep mathematics of creation and cosmos, connects our over-stimulated lives in the modern world with an archetypal sense of order in nature. Music, when it speaks directly and profoundly to the human psyche, can provide a transformative sense to human life in all its corporeal, intellectual and spiritual parameters.

Deep in our culture we have traditions which have felt the truth of this. From Pythagoras to T.S. Eliot, there have been thinkers who knew that a life without an active listening and awareness of serious music is a life diminished. The lives of countless individuals left damaged by a lack of exposure to listening and awareness of music leads to a damaged society. We see this all around us, every day.

And yet, even in our “post-religious” secular society, occasionally even the most agnostic and sceptically inclined music-lovers will lapse into spiritual terminology to account for the impact of music on their lives. Many people will still refer to music as the most spiritual of the arts. One hears of lives being transformed by music, of moods and perspectives being altered, of attitudes shifting and renewed meaning and purposefulness taking root in lives touched by music.

The serious, open and active form of listening (necessary for classical music, for example) could be said to be analogous to contemplation, meditation and even prayer in the way it demands our time. The complex, large-scale forms of serious music unfold their narratives in time with an authority that cannot be hurried. Something of the essence of ourselves is sacrificed to music. Whether we are performers, composers or listeners, we are required to give something up, something of our precious time.

Music gives us a glimpse of something beyond the horizons of materialism, or our contemporary values. What is music, after all? You can’t see it, you can’t touch it, you can’t eat it, but its palpable presence always makes itself felt; not just in a physical way, but in ways that reach down into the crevices of the soul.

What is music? Is it simply the notes on the



page? If so, how can we equate those strange, black static symbols with the vivid, and sometimes convulsive emotions provoked when the resulting sounds enter our ears, our brains, our bodies and into our deepest, secret selves?

Here are three more clues. The musicologist, Julian Johnson, in his book "Who Needs Classical Music?" suggests that "neither the word 'intellectual' or 'spiritual' captures music's essential activity; the projection of that definitively human awareness of being more than the sum of our parts".

To which the Scottish Jesuit, John McDade, would add that; "Music may be the closest human analogue to the mystery of the direct and effective communication of grace." This suggests that music is a phenomenon connected to the work of God in the way it touches something deep in our souls and releases a divine force.

Thirdly, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in a sermon he preached some years ago at the Three Choirs Festival, summed it all up in the following way: "To listen seriously to music", he said, "and to perform it are among our most potent ways of learning what it is to live with and before God, learning a service that is a perfect freedom...In this 'obedience' of listening and following, we are stretched and deepened, physically challenged as performers, imaginatively as listeners. The time we have renounced, given up, is given back to us as a time in which we have become more human, more real, even when we can't say what we have learned, only that we have changed."

Serious music presents a living challenge to the dead-hand of things as they are. The boundless vision of composers through the ages points to the realisation of ourselves as something greater than we are. This is why lovers of music refer to it as the most spiritual of the arts.

Because of the general assumptions made about the triumph of disbelief in our culture, some misconceptions have arisen about modernity and the sacred as they relate to classical music. Sometimes it is more than misconception that is the problem, though. Sometimes the problems are spin and bias.

A fly on a wall told me an interesting story recently. The fly was at a meeting of the committee that runs one of the major university presses in the country. A series on Music in the 20th century was suggested, seen

from different perspectives – economic, political, nationalist, gender-based and so on. The suggestion was that the series should also include a book on music and religion in the 20th century. This was abruptly dismissed. "What had religion got to do with music in the 20th century?"

These were leading, highly intelligent academics. Somehow the religious dimensions of many of the leading musical figures of the last century had not ever been part of their consciousness, even although the development of art music in the 20th century saw the most serious resistance to the anti-religious consensus found elsewhere.

Major modernist figures of the last 100 years were, in different ways, profoundly religious men and women. Stravinsky was as conservative in his religion as he was revolutionary in his musical imagination, with a deep love of his Orthodox roots as well as the Catholicism he encountered in the West. Schoenberg was a mystic who reconverted to practising Judaism after the Holocaust and pondered deeply on the spiritual connections between music and silence. This is probably the reason John Cage chose to study with him. (*Silent Prayer* was Cage's original title for 4'33.) Messiaen was famously Catholic and every note of his unique contribution to music was shaped by a deep religious conviction and liturgical practice.

The list of composers in recent times radiating a high degree of religious resonance is substantial, covering a whole generation of post-Shostakovich modernists from behind the old Iron Curtain – Gorecki, Paert, Kanchelli, Silvestrov, Schnittke, Gubaidulina, Ustvolskaya. And, in this country, after Benjamin Britten have come Jonathon Harvey, John Tavener and many others. 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 is a great encouragement to a composer like me who has drawn inspiration from the deep reservoirs of Christian liturgy and theology. I have used that liturgical insight in works like my recent *St John Passion* and the *Seven Last Words from the Cross*. But it has also been a significant motivation in purely



instrumental works like *Veni, Veni Emmanuel*, a percussion concerto which charts a kind of journey from Advent to Easter, and in my almost-completed 3rd Piano Concerto, which seeks to revive the practice of musical reflections on the Rosary.

Many people in the West think that it is strange and undesirable to seek to make and shape art according to religious belief and practice. But art can have many strange origins, so why should liturgical experience, for example, not be a catalyst for further artistic exploration and creativity?

To give a stark exposure of the biased mindset that works among some of the cultural elites, I would like to relate this story. I was sharing a pre-concert talk platform with another composer and a well-known presenter who was asking us questions about our music in the programme. The other composer had set a Latin liturgical text, but had interlaced it with Jewish and Islamic texts too. When asked about this he was very keen to make clear that he was not religious, and in fact quite hostile to what he termed “organised religion”. He wanted to show, in this work, that in spite of the divisiveness that religion brings to society we are all essentially the same, bound together by our common humanity, and that if we could only ditch all this outmoded, reactionary, spiteful mumbo-jumbo, what a wonderful peaceful world it would be. Just look at the Middle East, Northern Ireland... Isn't it time that we all started thinking rationally, and put this murderous medievalism behind us in the dustbin of history etc.

And then with no sense of irony at all, our interlocutor turned to me and said” And James, when you write your music, do you consciously set out to convert people to your point of view?”

Many prefer to regard a Christian intention and inclination as a dubious business. How, then, must we now view the artistic heritages of Europe, deeply rooted as they are in Christian belief and tradition? Are the profoundly religious sensibilities of Josquin, Palestrina, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, and Bruckner all now merely to be appraised through the dusty detachment of the museum? Can we only see their work through the prism of modern or post-modern aesthetics, where the original

“extra-musical” motivations are dismissed as the inevitably primitive instincts of a redundant sensibility?



If so, then the arrogance and ignorance of secularism has surely triumphed for 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 which shaped it. This allows the cultural

elites to bury our religious heritage in the earth of history, while robbing its grave of all its beautiful artefacts. This is the modern incarnation of cultural imperialism writ large. It is as depressing in its nihilism as it is skewed in the bias of its propaganda.

There is another way to see the tradition and practice of shaping art according to religious belief, and that is to see a living culture still in evolution and growth. When we come to analyse the steady and constant search for the sacred in modernity, and especially in the music of the last 100 years or so, we can see that faith has not withered. In music, more than the other arts, there has been a constant stream of composers who were, or still are, religious.

In different ways, we can see a unity that is core to the widespread search for sanctity in the work of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Messiaen,



Cage, Britten, Poulenc, Schnittke, Gubaidulina, Ustvolskaya, Penderecki, Gorecki, Paert, Kanchelli, Tavener and many others. Seen from this perspective, we can see the religious principle as being part of the essence of musical modernity. The search for a spiritual paradigm seems entirely natural, part of a continuum in musical history.

To the militant atheist, who seeks to dominate the heights of command and control of European culture all this may seem undesirable. But in the wider context of the past, and various prevailing modern trends, it is hardly strange. Yet, in spite of the wilful amnesia of some and the aggressive manoeuvring of others, the religious artist will continue to be an essential part of human flourishing in our brave new world.

Some might even say that the bravest, most radical and most counter-cultural position a creative person can take today is in the celebration of a timeless spirituality. The re-sacralising of our world has been made manifest through the unsung, subliminal and sub-conscious project of musical modernity. If modernism has also brought in its wake a desecration of the human spirit, we must penetrate the mists of contemporary banality to restore the idea of the sacred, in which our true and fullest freedom resides. Without it our lives will become meaningless. 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.

