

Music and Faith

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Musical experience can be seen as symbolically expressive of our immersion in sacred history, binding our sense of past, present and future in one. The writer is a Benedictine monk of Glenstal Abbey, Ireland, and teaches in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

Music and the whole person

At what point in our lives do we begin to hear?

The answer is: in the womb.

The child in the womb can hear various things, including the voice of its mother. When some new born babies were played recordings of their mothers' voices, artificially reproduced in the form in which those voices had been previously audible in the womb, the babies actually preferred the previous in-the-womb form of their mothers' voices to the newly encountered airborne version.¹ So womb sounds are clearly not just perceptible, but alluring. What the child in the womb hears are the sing-song intonations, the 'music', of the mother's speech. It also hears the rhythm of the heartbeat of the mother. It is encountering for the first time melodic and rhythmic sounds which are the foundations on which more sophisticated music will later build.

Once an infant is born its involvement with music continues. Infants are genetically programmed to learn language through the processing of simple, organised sound patterns, as they occur in music. This is the reason for the sung babbling babies produce.² Language, in turn, is our major tool for finding our way round the world. Young children seem also to discover time through music. By singing melodies and rhythms, and comparing them with one another, and making them interact and combine, the infant gradually discovers that our world is a world of time. Can one time fit inside another, can two times go side by side? In music we find out!³

Because of these important early encounters with music, our unconscious minds carry into later life a memory of music so deep that it is barely separable from our sense of existence itself. Music is where I first discovered my world. It has something to do with my very being. The subtle sense of fullness of life and being, of simply feeling good, which we often experience when we sing may well be connected with this, and the seriousness of our emotional attachment to music in general arises because it is a statement of our existence. Music says: 'Here I am.' You cannot ground the experience of personal life earlier than the womb, and music was there already, as appealing

sound co-extensive with my awareness of an outer reality to which I am related.⁴

Christianity is also a kind of birth, where I am born anew in Christ from 'water and spirit' (John 3.3-5) and the image of the 'womb of baptism' has a long history in Christian tradition. Just as my mother's womb, where my early growth and development took place, was a musical environment, so the Christian liturgy, our place of supernatural growth and development, is also a musical environment. Since our whole liturgical participation is one great dynamic of ongoing rebirth, it seems fitting that, as grace likes to perfect nature, this new liturgical Christian birth should be as musical as our natural birth, resulting in a Christian liturgy as musical as the womb of the mother.

For Josef Jungmann, music 'is not merely an adornment and embellishment of the liturgy; it is liturgy itself, an integral part which, to be sure, does not belong to the essence of liturgy but does form part of its complete frame, just as hands and feet belong to the complete figure of [a human being].'⁵ Worship tends to be musical, because my Christian birth right involves the bringing to life of my whole person founded upon a musical foetal experience and a musical infancy. As psychoanalysis demonstrates, we are never more fully in touch with ourselves than when we search out the deep truths of our infancy. If worship is truly to be an approach made to God with the whole of my being, it would seem to require this musical cry from the uttermost depths of my pre- and post-natal past, the cry of rhythm and tone, sung or played. Music in liturgy recalls for me my complete history, helping to bring my whole person before God.

Is it necessary for a person to enjoy normal hearing for all these things to be the case? The application of these considerations to the experience of aurally impaired people is not problematic, as it might at first seem, especially since the work of Dr Paul Whittaker, and his ground breaking organisation Music and the Deaf, drew attention to the rich engagement which even the profoundly deaf may have with music. While it can be hard for hearing people to

understand how this is the case, deaf people are frequently moved by and deeply involved with music. For profoundly deaf people, music can be felt as vibration in the fingertips when touching a source of sound, and similarly through the soles of the feet placed on a floor resonant with musical vibrations.

Amplified sound can be perceived by the deaf with the whole body and, in this case, different areas of the body may respond to different sounds, low sounds being felt in the lower part of the body and high sounds in the higher part. Conceivably this is why we habitually speak of 'low' and 'high' musical pitches, since responding to music with the parts of the body is not something which only deaf people experience, and it is hard to account for these musical metaphors of 'low' and 'high' pitch in any other way. The correct perspective to adopt, of course, is not that deaf people respond to music like hearing people, but that both deaf and hearing are united in response to music as vibration, because that is what music essentially is. 'Deaf children are astonished that they are able to 'feel' the beat by experiencing the vibrations of various musical instruments.'

Music and future hope

We have seen above how music speaks comprehensively of our past by linking us to early states which were musical or proto-musical. However, music also speaks of our future. Our lives take place in the medium of time and, of our five senses, the one linked to time most clearly is hearing. We are much more deeply certain of hearing's link with time than we are of the other four senses' links with time. For example, if somebody asks us if our experiences through the other four senses, sight, touch, taste and smell, take place in time, we think for an instant before saying 'Yes, obviously, they take place in time.' However, if somebody asks if our experience of sound takes place in time, we reply immediately and without hesitation 'Of course it does!' For Walter Ong, hearing makes for a particularly interesting contrast with sight in this respect:

There is no way to stop sound and have sound. I can stop a moving picture

camera and hold one frame fixed on the screen. If I stop the movement of sound, I have nothing – only silence, no sound at all. All sensation takes place in time, but no other sensory field totally resists a holding action, stabilization, in quite this way. Vision can register motion, but it can also register immobility. Indeed, it favours immobility, for to examine something closely by vision, we prefer to have it quiet. We often reduce motion to a series of still shots the better to see what motion is. There is no equivalent of a still shot for sound.⁸

Thus, in the case of a photograph, the original temporality, present in real life, is fully suppressed in the photographic image which is literally timeless. However, if we record a sound, even if it is a single unchanging sound, then the original temporality of the sound itself has to be preserved somehow in the recorded 'image'. We cannot record a sound 'image' in a way which does not record the original time passing, as we can with a visual image. Sound cannot have time excised from it. It is always on the move with time; and the direction time takes, is, as we know, towards the future. To produce a sound in the present therefore evokes a future like symbolism. It is invested with a deep sense of life going on and reminds us that time cannot be stopped.

Music is a specialised way of constructing sound. It is, usually, sound constructed to be perceived as beautiful. If sound already points me in the direction of the future, as was just suggested, an interesting question about music arises. Do beautiful musical sounds open up for me the idea of the future as beautiful? Do they impart a flavour of beauty to my sense of an uprising future? I suggest that they do. The idea of a beautiful future is another way of describing hope. The fact that music expresses hope is one of the great themes of human experience found across times and cultures. Music is widely used among humans to express some existing hope, or to arrive at a state of hope yet to be achieved. Musical hoping breaks into human lives through informal music-making, in humming, whistling, and singing, and in the music which we imagine in our heads. Primitive humans used music to achieve social bonding and mutual support.⁹ Bruno Nettl points out that all known

cultures link religious rituals with music¹⁰ and it is religion which embodies our ultimate hopes for meaning in life. This widespread human experience affirms that beautiful music does indeed suggest the idea of a beautiful future, whatever form the latter might be felt to take. Musical sound is a privileged place where our imaginations can link beauty with the future, in other words, a place where we express hope.

I have suggested now how music in liturgical worship can point us both backwards and forwards. It becomes a symbol of how we have emerged from the womb and infancy, and how we are then ordered in hope towards the future fullness of the life of heaven. Music is a mirror, in which we are shown an image of the whole of ourselves, in our whole past and our whole future. Liturgical music is a sacrament of sacred history as the latter has been given expression in our personal existence. When liturgical music also rises to a high aesthetic level to become great music, it functions as an icon of the greatness of the Christian life, its existential weight, its deep texture of experiences, its vast implications, and the greatness of Christ who makes that life possible.

Music as a revelatory blending

It is of course not enough for Christians to be pointed forward and back. We live in the here and now, and music also has the ability to symbolise the kind of society the Church is. In the words of David Ford, sounds – do not have exclusive boundaries – they can blend, harmonise, resonate with each other in endless ways. In singing there can be a filling of space with sound in ways that draw more and more voices to take part, yet with no sense of crowding. It is a performance of abundance; as new voices join in with their new distinctive tones. There is an 'edgeless expansion' (Jeremy Begbie's phrase), an overflow of music, in which participants have their boundaries transformed. The music is both outside and within them, and it creates a new vocal, social space of community in song.¹¹

This social space of musical community undoubtedly resembles the Church,

where people likewise experience a transformation of boundaries and can 'blend, harmonise, resonate with each other in endless ways'. Liturgical music-making becomes a kind of aural icon of the Church itself, because the way that the components of music blend together to create a musical whole suggests human community in a mode where participants are members one of another, as in the Church. For example, the singers of the notes of a musical chord are both united in one chord yet distinct in singing their individual notes. As notes they are individual but as a chord they are members of one another. The community of the Church is like a musical chord and the Holy Spirit seems to want us to know this. From the New Testament period on, worship has sometimes contained singing in the Spirit, 'when the worshippers sing ... spontaneously in unrehearsed ... harmony with telling numinous effect.'¹² Perhaps the resemblance between musical community and Christian community sheds some light on the purpose of the somewhat surprising charism of singing in the Spirit sometimes given to worshipping congregations.

The blending of musical elements as a means of symbolic disclosure may have an even more exalted function. For Jeremy Begbie the link between music and our faith in Christ and the Trinity is especially close. He points out how the sounding of two musical notes simultaneously gives rise to an ability to hear those notes as both blended together and separate from each other. This, he says, furnishes an analogy within human experience of the unconfused conjunction of Christ's human and divine natures. The harmony of music becomes an icon of fusion in distinction, 'the sound of the Incarnation.'¹³ The same idea can be extended to the Trinity, whenever three notes are sounded. When we hear music, there is a kind of intuitive knowing, nested analogically within a greater unknowing, of how Incarnation and Trinity can be as they are.

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