Barnes Music Festival 2019
Festival Choral Evensong 24th March 2019

Address by Rt Rev David Stancliffe

'Invention: A musical subject which was so contrived that, by imitation and transposition of the parts, the whole of the composition might be unfolded from it.'

My non-Biblical text is from Forkel's biography of Bach, and is the nearest we can get to Bach's definition of Invention, a subject that you've had at the top of your minds during this festival. *Inventio* – Bach used the Latin word – means not 'making things up' so much as discovery. Bach's apparently simple two-part keyboard Inventions contain within their initial melodic statement all that will subsequently be unfolded by canonic imitation, inversion and development. How do these strands intertwine to create a web of sound that stretches our imagination? In this spirit the question posed for us this evening is What have you discovered through taking part in this festival? What can be unfolded (Forkel's term) from what you have experienced that will help you grow into personal, spiritual and social maturity?

We inhabit a world now dominated by the binary system of the computer, with its on/off, if not A, then B system. Much of our intellectual landscape and the thought processes it begets is now framed by this simplistic duality, which – though neat and tidy – doesn't seem to match our experience of actual reality where there is little black and white, but a myriad shades of grey. So much of what we experience is thrust upon us instantly on line, with little time to evaluate, absorb and reflect on it; and this risks undermining the processes of lateral thinking and imagination. What is happening to the hinterland of personality? So if there is to be any invention – not just the re-hashed pre-programmed availability of AI, how do we take charge – a phrase I prefer to 'take back control' – of our future as human beings, made in the image and likeness of God?

My suggestion for you is a very simple one, as well as a theologically tried and tested one: that we all learn to sing. This isn't a new idea. William Byrd's Preface to *Psalms, Sonnets and Songs* says

Reasons briefly set down by th'auctor, to perswade
every one to learn to sing.
First it is a knowledge easily taught, and quickly learned where there
is a good master and an apt Scoller.
2 The exercise of singing is delightfull to Nature and good to preserve
the health of Man.
3 It doth strengthen all the parts of the brest, and doth open the pipes.
4 It is a singular good remedie for a stutting & stammering in the speech.
5 It is the best means to procure a perfect pronunciation & to make a
good Orator.
6 It is the oneley way to know where Nature hath bestowed the benefit of a good voice: which gift is so rare, as there is not one among a thousand that hath it: and in many, that excellent gift is lost, because they want Art to express Nature.
7 There is not any Musicke of Instruments whatsoever, comparable to
that which is made of the voices of Men, where the voices are good,
and the same well sorted and ordered.
8 The better the voyce is, the meeter it is to honour and serve God therewith: and the voyce of man is chiefely to be imployed to that ende.
Omnis spiritus laudet Dominum.

Since singing is so good a thing
I wish all men would learn to sing.

Byrd's knowledge of what singing together does for people is built on the physicality of the experience. As you sing, you breathe deeply; you stretch your shoulders, open your lungs and begin to feel the benefits of more oxygen. He goes on to reflect on what it does for your stammering and enunciation and then moves to the relationship between art and nature. Lying behind these reflections is an unstated but solid conviction that singing together reflects the order and harmony of the Creator's universe, that those who sing together – more even than those who play instruments – enter in a particular and very physical way into reflecting the harmony of the divine nature, of the Holy Trinity; and that the culmination and goal of music-making is the praise of the Creator. Singing is a rehearsal for heaven.

The sense of our being instruments on which the passion, the divine suffering, is played as a wistful prelude to the divine harmony is an image used by the Welsh priest and poet, R.S.Thomas in *The Musician*:

A memory of Kreisler once:
At some recital in this same city,
The seats all taken, I found myself pushed
On to the stage with a few others,
So near that I could see the toil
Of his face muscles, a pulse like a moth
Fluttering under the fine skin,
And the indelible veins of his smooth brow.

I could see, too, the twitching of the fingers,
Caught temporarily in art's neurosis,
As we sat there or warmly applauded
This player who so beautifully suffered
For each of us upon his instrument.

So it must have been on Calvary
In the fiercer light of the thorns' halo:
The men standing by and that one figure,
The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,
Making such music as lives still.
And no one daring to interrupt
Because it was himself that he played
And closer than all of them the God listened.

R. S. Thomas' poem about the music produced by the tension of twisted gut stretched over resonant wood is an echo of George Herbert's Easter. Both poems compare those twisted gut strings to Christ's body, stretched on the wood of the cross. But Herbert adds a Trinitarian twist: without the third in the chord, or the third person of the Trinity, there can be no harmony, only the bare fifths and unisons of stern monody or organum.

Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
Without delayes,
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
With him mayest rise;

That as his death calcined thee to dust,
His life may make thee gold, and much more just.

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
With all thy art.
The crosse taught all wood to resound his name,
Who bore the same.
His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
Is best to celebrate this most high day.

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song
Pleasant and long:
Or since all musick is but three parts vied
And multiplied;
O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part,
And make up our defects with his sweet art.

Those who sing together will tell you that this is indeed what happens to them. On a very physical level, you share a column of air with your neighbour; then, as your vocal chords begin to resonate in your voice-box, the sound is formed, shaped and projected. As you listen to the lines of the other parts around you, you tune the shape of your phrases and your pitch to theirs. When you sing from a score – as we mostly do these days – you tend to read vertically, as if your melodic line was harmonised and you were checking it against a figured bass. But when you sing off part-books, you have only one line and are primarily conscious of the way that individual line is shaped; you cherish the shape of your own line, and have to listen hard to discern the shifting harmonies as they emerge from the parts around you. This is partly why those who sing together – especially those who sing one-to-a-part or in small groups – learn to listen to each other so intently. It is also why singers become so passionate about what it does for them, and why choirs become so formative of people's ability to relate together.

In 2004, Christophe Barratier produced a film called *Les Choristes*. A short, balding middle-aged teacher ends up in a reformatory – a prison-like boy's school in the back of beyond in rural France. By contrast with the head teacher's bullying and repressive computer-age mantra of action/reaction, 'baldy' (as he is called by the boys) starts a choir, and writes music for it. It offers the boys the first chance they have had to experience working together in a way where everyone is a contributor, and the effect on the boys is transformational. So was the film in France. Within a fortnight its release, a huge number of people there had applied to join a choir, and they soon discovered that there were not enough experienced conductors in France. Could England send some over? was the message on the Today programme. This film was such a hit because it allowed people to glimpse the hidden syntax of music-making, where the commitment of the performers to develop and use their instrument to its full potential is constantly challenged by the demand to listen to others, to attend to what is going on, to remember that you are not the only pebble on the beach. This syntax can be learned, and certainly making music does not need words to describe it. But music making becomes instinctive, and revolves around the passionate tension between the urgent resolution of harmony and the unfolding – the invention – of the structure foretold in the essential kernel of the composition.

But what shall we sing? In exile in Babylon the Psalmist laments, 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' and this is where I introduce you to my final oblique reflection. Stevie Smith wrote ***The Airy Christ*** as its subtitle reveals *On looking into E.V.Rieu's translation of St Mark's Gospel.*

Who is this that comes in grandeur, coming from the blazing East?
This is he we had not thought of, this is he the airy Christ.
Airy, in an airy manner in an airy parkland walking,
Others take him by the hand, lead him, do the talking.

But the Form, the airy One, frowns an airy frown,
What they say he knows must be, but he looks aloofly down,
Looks aloofly at his feet, looks aloofly at his hands,
Knows they must, as prophets say, nailed be to wooden bands.

As he knows the words he sings, that he sings so happily
Must be changed to working laws, yet sings he ceaselessly.
Those who truly hear the voice, the words, the happy song,
Never shall need working laws to keep from doing wrong.

Deaf men will pretend sometimes they hear the song, the words,
And make excuse to sin extremely; this will be absurd.
Heed it not. Whatever foolish men do the song is cried
For those who hear, and the sweet singer does not care
that he was crucified.

For he does not wish that men should love him more than anything
Because he died; he only wishes they would hear him sing.

Warum? Why? we ask constantly with Brahms, and his longing agnosticism in the face of death seems wholly understandable to us. His motet with its resigned conclusion seems very apt to twenty-first-century sensibilities.
But Mark writes into a very different context. Peter takes Jesus aside, and rebukes him for unsettling the disciples with talk of his death: he must not talk of failure, which is how Peter sees this defeatist stuff. So Jesus tries again. Only those who take up their cross and follow him can be true disciples.

As Stevie Smith understands, having read Mark's Gospel in the stark translation by E. V. Rieu, it is not about getting the message down in a set of prescriptive regulations; it is about whether you have caught the tone – can resonate with the song, can see yourself grow as you are entwined with Christ in a two part *INVENTION*.

As he knows the words he sings, that he sings so happily
Must be changed to working laws, yet sings he ceaselessly.
Those who truly hear the voice, the words, the happy song,
Never shall need working laws to keep from doing wrong.

So the Airy Christ, with his strange and challenging song, is hoping for something different: he doesn't believe that keeping the rules and learning the right notes is what saves you; he'd rather you danced with him.

. . . . . the song is cried
For those who hear, and the sweet singer does not care that he was crucified.
For he does not wish that men should love him more than anything
Because he died; ***he only wishes they would hear him sing.***