



BARNES MUSIC FESTIVAL CHORAL EVENSONG

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ADDRESS BY BISHOP MICHAEL MARSHALL

In the last Act of the Merchant of Venice, the two lovers sit under the moonlight on a grassy bank, with music playing in the background:

‘How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit, and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears, soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.’

Yes, indeed, that scene constitutes the perfect cocktail of the senses – sight sound and scenery, music and place (as in your Music Festival) all combining to create a moment of self-transcendence.

And that’s my starting point this evening – a confident assertion that music, perhaps more than any other of the arts, draws us out of ourselves in an experience of wonder and self-transcendence – that self-transcendence for which the human spirit since the dawn of time yearns; a cherished moment in what Blake calls ‘that sunrise of wonder’ – moments when in the words of Wesley’s hymn we are truly ‘lost in wonder love and praise.’

“If you don’t worship,” says the psychiatrist to the teenage boy in Peter Shaffer’s play *Equus* - “if you don’t worship you’ll shrink, it’s as brutal as that.”

Yes, it’s as though we don’t realise our full human potential without this something other, call it wonder, worship or whatever; as though unless we open up in some form of self-transcendence of wonder or worship, we will remain imprisoned within the limitations of a self-centred worldview, trusting for evidence in only what can be perceived by our very limited short-sightedness.

There’s been much research in recent years by neurologists into the strange phenomenon called Synaesthesia. It seems that it’s possible to map out some kind of geography of the brain in which different parts of the brain are allocated different tasks. But occasionally in some people there is a connection between the part of the brain responsible for colour discernment, and that which responds to sound vibrations in music and different keys. For example, a piece

of music in a specific key shows up a particular colour – sound and sight connecting at a point of transcendence beyond them both. And it's that cross over of the senses – place and music; sight and sound, which creates a richer experience and deeper appreciation of both what is seen as well as what is heard.

'But the arts are not drugs', cautions E.M. Forster. 'They are not guaranteed to act when taken. Something mysterious and capricious as the creative impulse has to be released before they can act.' (I've often wondered if that's why CD's can never replace a live performance).

But yes, indeed, it's that release of what E.M. Forster calls "the mysterious and capricious creative impulse" which some of us would call the creative inspiration of the Holy Spirit, - it's that which is the compelling and driving force moving us out of ourselves to a place beyond ourselves where everything is further enriched and high-lighted – scenery and sound, music and place combining to draw us out of our self-centred world and re-centring us in the wholly Other, (as in contemplative prayer) in wonder, worship and adoration.

But then I'm led to ask: So what about music in religious places as the title of my address tonight suggests. There's no question that, at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition, music has an indispensable part to play in worship and in opening people up to that self-transcendence we call worship.

I mean in the Orthodox churches of the East, there's no such thing as said worship or a low mass. Every word is sung and if you can't sing you can't be ordained – that would sort some of us clergy out, wouldn't it!!

So, 'To sing is to pray twice,' is a saying attributed to Augustine, but if indeed he did say it I think he might have said today with neurologists' knowledge of the brain – to sing is to pray with both sides of the brain, enabling us to make the connection between reason and intuition; between logic and experience between head and heart in what I like to call a cocktail of the senses.

But tonight I want to go further still and ask, what about singing religious music in a designated religious building where after all both music and the aspiring architecture and the senses of sight, sound and smell (yes, incense) all point beyond themselves – what about that?

Well, of course liturgical music in a religious building is undoubtedly enriched in what we might want to call a religious context – holy space. But I refuse to get stuck there! Having experienced this self-transcendence or worship somewhere, it's that same mysterious, capricious and creative impulse of the Holy Spirit which drives us out at all times and into all places to uncover,

discover and recover the spirit of worship and adoration everywhere, with a new respect for the whole created order, as what Shakespeare calls, 'God's spies'.

And I say that because, as our choir sang earlier, 'The heavens declare the glory of God, but also the whole firmament shows his handiwork.' For it's those who have both what Augustine calls the ears and eyes of the heart who perceive that the whole created universe, let alone the hills, as in the musical, are indeed alive with the sound of music, because in a sacramental worldview the manmade divisions between religious and secular; spiritual and material; sacred and profane simply fall away in the larger vision. And this is not pantheism but panentheism: God in his creation as well as beyond it. "The world of nature is God's first text," said St. Bonaventure, in which both earth as well as heaven are perceived and experienced as being inhabited by the glory of God, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

You see, I believe the prophet Isaiah got the shock of his life in what we might want to call an eye-opening, aha moment when he sought religious solace in the supremely religious place – the Temple of Jerusalem, - and when he heard the angelic song of the angels with its subversive worldview: "Holy, holy holy," the angels sang, is the Lord of Hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory - not just religious places at religious times. It shattered his previous parochial world view for as Elizabeth Barrett Browning puts it: 'Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush is afire with God.' Or again, Gerard Manley Hopkins: 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God.' That's the ultimate breakthrough of religion from God's side, patiently waiting for our responsive attention, when, as Addison says: "And man the marvel seeing forgets his selfish being for the joy of a beauty not his own."

But what is this glory of God, you might ask, which Isaiah claimed to have experienced. St. Irenaeus gives us a clue: He says: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive" – a human being firing on all cylinders of the five senses; a human being fully aware, with sensitive antennae tuned to the transcendent cadences beyond time and space – yet also a human being who nevertheless still yearns for more from that further dimension of the beyond, because he or she intuitively knows from bitter/sweet experience, as C. S. Lewis puts it, that even the best of music and place, scenery and sound in this world is but "only the echo of a tune we have not yet heard, the scent of a flower we've not yet picked, and news from a country we've yet to visit." And I believe it's music as well as the arts which can especially goad us on the long pilgrimage to experience that sound and sense and space beyond, for ourselves.

So what of the meantime? In the meantime, three cheers and more, I say for your Music Festival. We live in an age starved of authentic self-transcendence, wonder and worship, sadly seeking and even compulsively demanding the short cuts of the drug culture to open up the locked doors of perception, involving, as your Festival encourages, people not only in hearing music but also into participating in choirs and other places where we sing. That's such a very important counter-cultural protest in a functional age in which the arts are in danger of being squeezed out both in the curriculum of our schools as well as in our amateur choirs in churches. (Only recently the government has been challenged about the reduction of music teaching in our schools as an impoverishment in our whole educational system).

So I hope that your Festival whether in churches or so called secular buildings, whether performing religious or secular works will continue to encourage (no, inspire), **especially our young people**, to partake in making music and not just listening to it, and so to experience that self-transcendence, worship and wonder which is so vital to a rounded humanity, drawing us into the fullness of our human potential and that fullness of life to which the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ beckons and draws us. AMEN