

God in Music: Yale Institute of Sacred Music 50th Anniversary Evensong, Zephaniah 3.14-20, Romans 15.1-13

The Bible resounds with the worship of God in music. In the book of Job, the morning stars sing while God lays the foundations of the earth (38.6–7). The Israelites sing to celebrate their liberation from Egypt (Ex 15.1–18). The psalms sing to God in good times and bad: to petition and praise; to repent and remember God’s mercy. When the prophet Elisha was looking for inspiration, he summoned a musician, and while the musician played, ‘the hand of the Lord came upon Elisha’ (2 Kgs 3.15). In Luke’s gospel, Mary responds to the incarnation by singing the Magnificat (1.46–55), and in Matthew and Mark, the last thing Jesus and his disciples do together is sing a psalm (Mk 14.26=Mt 26.30).

Our readings this evening go even further than that. As the prophet Zephaniah calls Jerusalem to sing to God, God sings in response to celebrate Israel’s forgiveness. Paul, writing to the Romans, imagines the exalted Christ, through himself, singing God’s praise and inviting the gentiles to join in his hymn. As we sing to God, God sings in counterpoint of God’s love for us, and draws us to Godself.

These days, there is no part of our liturgy or our relationship with God that we don’t express in music. As we sing and play, our mood shifts – our heartbeats physically converge – and as the sound we make is absorbed into the humming of the cosmos, we know that we and all creation are one body. But music does more than connect us and express our faith. It also teaches us. Since the Book of Proverbs described God’s Wisdom crying or singing to the people in the streets of the city (1.20), the way we think about music has taught us something about how to think about God.

For a start, music, notoriously, has never been proved to exist outside human minds, but almost everyone is convinced that it does. (There’s no known society without music: it may be one of the things that make human life, in any recognizable sense, possible.) In addition, in what sense music means anything, and if so, what, is famously debatable, and people can respond to the same performance in very different ways – but no-one who responds to music thinks it has no meaning, still less that its meaning is purely behavioral. We don’t do it just to create group identity or attract a mate (though we might be doing that too...).

Music is everywhere believed in, incredibly powerful, and deeply mysterious. And most of the time, we don’t worry about that at all – we trust our instincts and our experience and get on with enjoying it. The way we live with music shows us something profound about how to live with that other deep mystery that is God.

It also shows us something about ourselves. We are made of music, from the rhythm of our pulse and our brainwaves to the way we move, the pitch of our voice, and the cadences of our speech. The waves that form creation sound through us and express themselves uniquely in every one of us. As we live through time, like any anthem or symphony or sonata, we start off with all kinds of promise, and gradually develop and change pace and mood. New themes come in; sometimes we take off in a new direction; eventually we come to an end. And whatever end we reach, we

have to accept that it will never sum up the whole of who we are, because in life, as in music, it's everything that happens on the way that makes us who we are.

What is more, throughout our lives, however high we aspire – however hard we practice – however accomplished we become – we also learn that nothing is ever perfect. Whether we are musicians or anything else, we are always coming face to face with the gap between the life we intuit, hope, and reach for, and what flesh and blood can realize. But it is in that gap between intuition and execution, hope and experience, that we hear the echo of an infinitely greater life – an original music – the stuff we are made of, which is the song of God.

Tonight, we are celebrating the work of Yale's Institute of Sacred Music, which for fifty years has explored the mystery of music and trained church musicians to lead us in worship, and opened our ears to hear, just a little more clearly, the song of God. Tomorrow our celebrations culminate in a performance of Bach's B Minor Mass. And when we have lived through the whole of that liturgy, at the end we will follow the musicians as they climb the endless staircase of the *Dona nobis pacem*, up and up in radiant D major, higher than the highest notes of the singers, beyond the very top of the trumpet range, until we will seem to hear the heavens opened and we will stand in spirit before the throne of God. Because music can always take us where our feet and our intellects cannot.

So we give thanks for the work of the ISM, everyone who has been part of it in the past half-century, and everyone who will be part of it in the future. And, in St. Paul's words, we pray, 'May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

Amen.

(Teresa Morgan, Christ Church, New Haven, teresa.morgan@yale.edu)