

University of Wales Bangor/Royal School of Church Music
SACRED MUSIC STUDIES
Summer Residential at Bangor, August 7–11 2006

Addresses at Evening Worship¹

Monday: *Benedicite*

Hymns 'God who made the earth' (Korean), 'Where are the voices for the earth'
(Shirley Erena Murray); Reading 2 Cor.5:16–21

Each evening our worship will revolve around a canticle. The chosen canticle will yield themes for our praise and prayer, but also give us something challenging and interesting to sing.

In Latin it is a 'little song' – *canticulum*. Properly, canticles are from Scripture, passages that leap out and demand to be sung, words it would be almost disappointing just to read aloud.

Tonight we sing and meditate on the *Benedicite*, also called 'A Song of Creation'. It is from the Apocrypha section of the Bible and it is a wonderfully inclusive celebration of all that makes the world the lively place it is. We chose the shorter version tonight² for its effective three-part refrain, but the longer version adds all the physical expressions of the created world that we enjoy, sun and moon, rain and dew, whales, birds, springs, lightning. The text is constructed so that it rises to a marvellous cumulative climax, each new thing named followed by the repetition of the phrase 'Sing his praise and exalt him for ever'.

The first word, 'Benedicite', is an imperative: 'Bless ye!' 'Bless!' Each group or category is called in to add its voice in blessing its Creator. The interesting thing about this text is that it is not given as the inspired utterance of a poet, but purports to be the cry of three men on the brink of death, as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego face the furnace. It emerges in counterpoint with the reality of human cruelty, and declares another but more powerful reality in which a generous creator offers more than the powers of darkness can ever take away.

The *Benedicite* been used in Christian worship from early times. A writer about 400 AD said, in effect, that everybody sung it, and the Fourth Council of Toledo 633 – of which the chairman was St. Isidore of Seville whose perceptive and enthusiastic comments about music are still quoted today – said it must be sung before the Epistle at every Mass in Spain and Gaul. Today it is most usually found in the daily offices of different traditions.

So here we have a text with music, but the text and the music make a new meaning. You and I know that the music is more than black dots on a stave; music is an event that lies

¹ I am indebted to a short article in *Reformed Liturgy and Music* (Presbyterian Church USA) by the American hymn writer Thomas Troeger (Vol.33, No.3, 1999, pages 3–7) for the basic idea behind these addresses.

² By John Harper. All the musical settings come from John Harper ed., *Music for Common Worship 1: Music for Sunday Services*, RSCM 2000, p.195.

behind the page. Music is more than the sound we make; it occurs beyond pitch, intonation, expression. Behind and beyond the symbols we use, music goes deep into the heart of the faith. Music does not merely decorate our liturgies, it creates another reality. Music has meaning. But what is the new meaning, the meaning within the sounds?

I always thought diapason was an organ stop. The other day I came across its earlier meaning.³ Diapason is all that happens in the space of an octave, C to upper C, A to A. Fundamental to all music is the ratio 1:2. Sound waves divide endlessly into two to make the overtones that enrich the sound. The Top C wave is half as long as that of Middle C and so on. Diapason is Greek for 'all the way through', from a note to its octave and all that happens acoustically in between. For the earliest music scientists, this created and immutable sound world came from God who made its laws, part of creation. That is why our Isidore could say: 'The very universe ... is held together by a certain harmony of sounds, and the heavens themselves are made to revolve by the modulation of harmony'.⁴ But humankind was also part of creation, part of this sound world. Perhaps you know Dryden's *Song for St. Cecilia's Day*:

From Harmony, from heavenly Harmony
This universal Frame began:
From Harmony to Harmony
Through all the compass of its Notes it ran,
The Diapason closing full in Man.

As we sing, we are using the very stuff of material creation, our very bodies, lungs and vocal chords, to praise the One who has formed us. This is not us just *thinking* about creation and the Creator, but being a part of creation and in relationship with the Creator – if you like, actualizing the doctrine. We are really walking, talking, living, singing, doctrine. Good singing takes all our faculties, wills, emotions, understanding, physical strength. In us, all creation responds to its Creator with gratitude and praise. Thus our music-making places us plumb within the whole meaning of life under God, in a life which acknowledges our partnership and our responsibility for what we have received, and how we are to labour to preserve and keep it for all to share, an appeal we will hear and sing when we come to our last hymn.

³ Albert L. Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music* (Lutterworth, 1999), 60.

⁴ From Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History 1*, Faber 1981, 94.

Tuesday: *Easter Anthems*

Hymns 'Christ, of God unseen' (Leith Fisher), 'Christ triumphant, ever reigning'
(Michael Saward); Reading Hosea 6:1–6

We have two canticles this evening, one disguised as the first hymn. We said yesterday that canticles sprang ready-singable from Scripture. Sometimes, though, they are deeply embedded in the very text. You are reading a passage and you begin to feel a unmistakable undercurrent of melody. This is true in some letters of St. Paul, and the reason is that when Paul wanted to appeal directly to those receiving his letters he knew a hymn would hook them. So in Colossians 1, there is this little fragment of a hymn – as scholars tell us – which has been reconstituted into a singable hymn by a colleague of mine, and set to that excellent new tune, Joel.

Our main canticle consists of the set known as the *Easter Anthems*.⁵ Easter we understand. Anthems? The word is from the Old English *antemne*, which in turn is from the Late Latin *antiphona*, 'antiphon', which originally meant a verse of Scripture which could be taken on its own and used in worship.

We are used to canticles coming to us from early in the Church and from far flung places, but the Easter Anthems are a very English affair, and relatively recent to boot. Who was it who decided to put together 1 Corinthians 5:7–8, Romans 6:9–11, and 1 Corinthians 15:20–22 to make this chain of verses that we call the Easter Anthems? They seem to have appeared in this form as the Church of England's liturgies evolved, although they do have a remoter ancestry in the time of Gregory the Great, an ancestry not just of arrangements of words but of drama, for in the Good Friday rites of the mediaeval church there was a liturgical drama in which the Host and the Cross were buried in a symbolic sepulchre on Good Friday.

In a famous early office book, one which originates from the very place RSCM now has its headquarters, the eleventh century Processionale of Sarum, it is laid down that immediately before Matins on Easter Day the Sacrament and the Cross should be raised, in a symbolic portrayal of the Resurrection, and placed on the altar with great veneration, singing 'death has no more dominion over him' as an antiphon with a repeated alleluia.

This forms part of the Easter Anthems, as does 'See yourselves therefore as dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord'. Yesterday, talking of meanings within the music we make, we spoke of our music as embodying the doctrine of creation. Tonight we think of it also as embodying, enacting, the doctrine of salvation, or, if you like, redemption, which echoes the title our first hymn is given when it is found in canticle form, 'A Song of Redemption'.

(By the way, when we talk of doctrines, we do not mean the professional jargon of priests or the technical vocabulary of academic theologians so much as the points in Christian history when there was a sudden blaze of understanding. Doctrines are the result of Christians across the Church and across time hammering out what their faith has meant to them. They are our travel documents for the Christian life.)

⁵ *Music for Common Worship*, p.215, setting by John Harper.

So, as 'dead to sin' we embody in our singing the doctrine of redemption. Some people, of course, are never wrong, by their own reckoning. They can neither believe, or admit, to having made a mistake. It could be a moral mistake or it could be a one of comprehension or calculation. Musicians are specially placed to know that you really can go wrong. Not just wrong notes, but our commitment to our craft means that we are conscious when it falters. Sometimes we are all attention, other times distracted; sometimes meaning what we sing, other times just singing the notes; sometimes listening to others and watching the conductor, other times wondering how long it is until the practice ends. Our human ambivalence does not disqualify us from our place among the music-makers. On the contrary. For our singing is witness to our belief that worship, and the redemption it voices, is based not on the adequacy of our efforts, but on the saving, gracious character of the God we praise, the One in whom, as our last hymn will put it, sinners are justified. God receives all the notes, not just the accurate ones, and looks beyond to the singer as one who has been redeemed, bought with a price. That's how our very singing embodies the central Christian doctrine of redemption.

Wednesday: Song of the Spirit
(Rev.22:12-14,16-17)

Hymns 'Come let us seek our God's protection' (Colvin, Malawi), 'How shall I sing that
majesty?'

(John Mason); Reading Jeremiah 1:4-10

Tonight's canticle comes from that strange, almost surreal, book of Revelation.⁶ It is a book often thought to be full of codes, conspiracies and predictions. The truth is more prosaic, but more far-reaching. It recounts a vision – and it is a very visual book, full of striking images and symbols. These pictures may be unfamiliar and disconcerting to us but they would not be so if we were steeped in the Old Testament, as the writer was. For, of the 404 verses in Revelation, 278 make some kind of allusion to the Old Testament. To understand this book does not require ingenious conjecture but the employment of the disciplined imagination.

Just one example among many: the number 7. '7' stands for completeness. You can't have more than 7 days in a week, for example. So the 'seven' letters of chapters 2 and 3, from Jesus to the angels of the 'seven' churches, are to the complete Church, the whole Church. They are intended for the Churches of all times, even our Church in our time.

It is from the last chapter of the book that our canticle tonight comes, the climax of John's visionary experience. It is about the holy city, the heavenly Jerusalem, beautiful beyond measure, namely the Church. This Church is like a city in which God's servants will worship him and his name shall be on their foreheads. Our canticle comes from the closing verses of the book, which contain wonderful encouragement to Christians who were being persecuted, for indeed the very purpose of the book was to encourage such men and women to stand firm. 'Blessed are those who do God's commandments', runs one of the verses, 'that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter into the city through the gate.'

Already we have seen how our music embodies the doctrines of creation and redemption. Today we could see the music we make as embodying the doctrine of discipleship. To engage in the Church's song is physically to embark on discipleship. I am not talking of setting words which refer to discipleship. The Iona song, *Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?* to the tune Kelvingrove,⁷ may be suggestive and thought provoking, but it is the very making of our music that makes us disciples as sure as when Jesus instructed Peter and Andrew, James and John, Matthew and all the rest: Follow me, risk tying up your future with this strange carpenter who doesn't just saw but talk, who doesn't just measure lengths with his eye but measures the world for the Kingdom of God.

Those to whom Revelation was addressed were accustomed to taking risks for their faith. In their way, singers take risks. Some are small but can feel bigger: of sounding silly to others, of looking daft up there in the chancel. But more importantly, as we open ourselves to the challenges of the music, technical, emotional, spiritual, we are taking

⁶ *Music for Common Worship*, p. 305, setting by Peter Moger.

⁷ Actually, this is a more recent name for the tune. A hundred years before it was set to the lyrics which give it this title, it carried an eighteenth century text, 'Oh, the shearin's no' for me'.

risks. To become part of the Church's music is to offer ourselves for growth, for development, for change. Seldom are we satisfied to stay where we are. The fact that you have undertaken study and are here this week attests to this.

The New Testament has few enough references to music, but where there are some it is in the context of engaging in the struggle not to conform to this world but to begin to act and live in the new style that sketches the template of the Kingdom that is to come. There was Paul and Silas in prison, singing away.⁸ And there is Paul to the Ephesians and the Colossians,⁹ telling them to raise up their hymns, psalms and spiritual songs in the very same sentence as he sketches out the imperatives for the new life in Christ, the ethical code that will not only transform their own life together but touch with the grace of God the everyday transactions of the society in the midst of which they lived.

The very act of singing shows and symbolises the style in which the disciple of Christ lives. We follow a conductor, we conform to the composer's work – the creator who has made this piece, and thus we partake in a different music, different from the one that sells and soothes in supermarkets and subways. We cultivate the art of listening deeply to each other so that we may interact creatively. We sing different parts according to our gifts of voice and skill, but all so that we sound as one, but a oneness that points ultimately to the One in whom we are united and who teaches us the blending of voices and hearts that means reconciliation.

And so, as we sing the Song of the Spirit, in one voice with those who knew the cost of discipleship, may we see ourselves not as musicians only, faithful to the notes, but as disciples, faithful risk-takers for Christ.

⁸ Acts 16:25.

⁹ Ephesians 5:18–19, Colossians 3:16.

Thursday: *Te Deum Laudamus*

Hymns 'God we praise you' (Te Deum), 'When, in our music, God is glorified'
(Pratt Green); Reading Mark 2:13–17

Holy Communion

Today it is not two canticles we sing but two versions of the same one. The Te Deum¹⁰ is not strictly speaking a canticle, but one of the very earliest Christian hymns. Although it sounds as if it came fully formed from the Bible, it was written probably by St Nicetas in the fourth century and consists of some of the core Christian affirmations which are as much on our lips now as they were in these earliest centuries of the Christian Church. Christopher Idle, a Church of England clergyman and author of some 350 hymns, has put this into resounding English which catches the exuberant note of the original, and we sung that as our first hymn to a brand new tune – *Lux Tremenda* – by Alfred Fedak, a Minister of Music at a Presbyterian church in New York, who has written some 80 hymn tunes as well as being a composer of anthems, mass settings and organ music. Here is an example of a fresh translation of words sung by Christians for almost as long as the Church has existed, and one that will appeal because of its contemporary feel. The tune is likely to become one of those standard tunes that everyone feels they have known for ever.

The striking thing about the Te Deum is its sheer inclusiveness. Here is a hymn or canticle that does not allow us to shelter in our own backwater. Who is it who acclaim God as Lord? All the earth, angels, cherubin and seraphin, apostles, prophets, martyrs, the holy Church throughout the world. All people in all places in all time and beyond time. As long as we continue to sing the Te Deum we will never forget the width and depth of the Church nor fail to be enriched by the quality of its praise and its witness, heavenly and earthly,

On previous days we have suggested that the Church's music incorporates us within creation, within redeemed creation, within the life of discipleship. Today we see how our music in the Church embraces us within the body of Christ, within what the New Testament calls a *koinonia*, communion, of belonging with Christ. It is a word, communion, which signifies not just our being in Christ but the action and event in which this is symbolised and made real, the Holy Communion which we celebrate now, in which heaven and earth and all who have lived the Gospel share with all who follow them today.

We often understand the Eucharist or Holy Communion as special nourishment for Christians. And indeed it is all of that. But both the rite and our being in Christ as communion is not just for our own healing but for the healing and reconciling of the world. Communion is a state of being in Christ but it is also a statement of the full challenge and invitation of Christ to the whole world. We may often act as if worship and the rite of communion is an act apart, parallel to life, but rather we should see it as having a direct bearing on life, that it offers to change our systems and our structures, our life and our language.

¹⁰ *Music for Common Worship*, p. 253–5, setting by John Harper.

Have you ever wondered where the medical term *placebo* came from? – the medication that contains no effective ingredient but the very taking of it makes people feel better. The mediaeval Vespers for the Dead began with the antiphon, 'Placebo domino – I will be pleasing to the Lord in the land of the living'. The first word became the shorthand term to refer to the entire service. ('See you at Placebo', maybe they said to each other.) With the development of the patronage system, many low-income clergy made up their wages chanting this Office in the private chapels of aristocratic families, so the word acquired the sarcastic connotation of pleasing an earthly lord in order to remain among the living. 'Singing placebo' became a slang expression for flattery, an essential survival skill in any patronage system. Then in a more mercantile economy it came to mean giving customers what they wanted, and then we end up with the sugar pill.¹¹ All of this from an antiphon.

A trivial example, showing how the language of worship can enter the language of every day. How much more can the striking visual and participatory event of communion affect the society contiguous upon it. The Church in communion with Christ and with the communion of saints, prophets, martyrs, when it participates in the event that once again renews within a spoiled earth the perfect communion and reconciliation promised to all, is already changing the world. How often, as society has developed and changed, has the Church, moved by its hymns and prayers and sermons too, countered the worst in the society of its day through imaginative philanthropy, challenged evil, insisted on an end to injustices, and placed before people something for which to strive.

Creation, redemption, discipleship, communion; yes, our music making is no mere embellishment of worship but the very stuff of faith, the very realisation of the Gospel within the life of our time.

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¹¹ Peter Jeffery, 'A Chant Historian Reads *Liturgiam Authenticam*', *Worship*, Vol.78, No. 4, 323.

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