

THE SPIRIT AND THE MIND

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The RSCM's motto, *Psallam spiritu et mente*, admits a variety of translations. Here are three:

I will sing with the spirit and with the understanding also. (Traditional RSCM version)

I will sing praises with inspiration and intelligence. (Cynthia Hall, RSCM Oxfordshire committee)

I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind. (NIV)

This verse comes from a long passage in which St Paul is trying to deal with all manner of issues of divergent behaviour in the Church in Corinth, and in particular, in 1 Corinthians 11–14, with their arguments over appropriate worship. Some think that, because they experience God one way, others must therefore be wrong. The context is a lack of tolerance, and a lack of understanding that God calls us to different ministries and different manifestations of the Spirit. Does this sound at all familiar? I suggest that Paul still challenges us today regarding our own music and worship.

Whether you begin with Jewish animal sacrifice trumped, as explained in Hebrews, by the one perfect sacrifice for all time and our consequent need to respond with our hearts, or whether with the idea of honouring or 'giving worth' to God ('wurscipe' being the Anglo-Saxon root of 'worship'), worship implies the ideas of 'excellence' or 'best offering'. The first chapter of Malachi challenges us: would we be happy to give second best to our masters or governors, he asks? If not, how dare we give it to God?

And yet, worship is really about our own transformation, through the grace of the Holy Spirit. Offering or sacrifice is only possible when we give our best, our whole being, to God. God doesn't need us to give to him for his sake ('Do you think I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?' Ps 50.13). Rather it is through giving ourselves completely to him that we are transformed to be his true ministers in the world.

If this is so, the matter of worship is not about absolute or relative standards in music or liturgy as the world might see them (my church's choir relative to your church's choir). Jesus viewed the widow's mite as a better gift than the larger offerings of richer people. That is good news for those of us who don't run or sing in professional choirs! However, it does not let us off the hook, professional or amateur, when it comes to giving our best offering. The widow's mite was praised precisely because it was her best possible offering. She could not have given more out of her poverty: whereas out of their riches they could have done so. That is why riches are such a temptation: a church in relative financial riches (as the Church in the West undoubtedly is, whatever the state of the nave roof) is in danger of missing the point about its worship, and getting into comfortable complacency.

In 1 Corinthians Paul refers to other aspects of worship too. He is keen that the members of the community build up each other in love, demonstrating that corporate worship is about our ministry to each other as well as how we relate to God and give ourselves to the working of his Spirit. Paul is also aware of the impact of Christian worship on unbelievers, who ought to be able to come into our worship, see its sincerity and exclaim: 'God is really among you!' (1 Corinthians 14. 25). In other words, Christian worship should be a tool of mission. Is it any wonder that a church constantly infighting is dwindling in numbers? If we do give ourselves up in worship and let go of our prejudices and positions, transformation becomes as possible as in, say, love or education. While monastic life isn't easy, we often recognize the power and sincerity of its prayer and music; perhaps we are actually observing the manifestation of a community transformed through self-giving worship?

In the RSCM motto, Paul mentions two elements of our offering, the spirit and the mind. We often overlook one at the expense of the other. Let's start with the

'mind', the 'understanding', the 'intellect', the 'mente' of the motto. Some of us perhaps know of worship where we feel this doesn't play enough part, and where emotion seems to rule. Perhaps it seems too sentimental, over-emphasizing the personal register, under-engaged with wider theology, employing simplistic or derivative music or containing a lack of robust liturgy.

Paul refers to many gifts in 1 Corinthians, and some are more obviously talents of the mind (for instance, he apparently prefers prophecy or preaching to 'speaking in tongues' because through it others are more easily edified and understand what is going on). Remember the parable of the talents: God gives us intellect to develop and use and return to him with interest. And many have done so. Think of the flowerings of Renaissance polyphony, the tight poetic conceits of John Donne, the glorious church and cathedral buildings we have inherited. It's easy enough for us as church musicians to bask in the reflected glory of all this intellectual creativity for the service of God and assume we are automatically an active, contemporary part of that inheritance.

But how do we really relate to it? Are we developing our own talents, or are we, like the lazy man in the

parable, bringing them back to God each Sunday having buried them in the ground all week? If we play the organ or any other instrument, are we really practising music for our worship, or is it easier or more convenient not to? Are we seeking the help of others (including the RSCM) in tackling any problems in the sound of our choir, or are we pretending it has to be like that, regardless of the effect on the congregation?! Are we preparing for leading our music group, reading the texts through and thinking how best to bring out the meaning, or are we leaving it to the Holy Spirit to guide us with no concomitant effort from us? As PCCs or church leadership teams, how great a priority is worship for our spending, efforts and prayers? A colleague, sick of being told that she should not be paid as organist by the church because God had given her a talent for music, apparently retorted: 'Yes, but you should have heard what the talent God gave me sounded like before I had any lessons!' Talents need nurturing and training. And as singers, are we turning up to church having warmed up our voices, always on time for rehearsal and with a positive attitude, ready to give of our best? Might we think about taking singing lessons to develop our talent further?

When it comes to the choice of words and music, are those of us who criticize others' choices not also guilty of the same things? Are all composers giving of their best, or regurgitating old ideas pretending that they are new? Which are the composers who have something fresh or original to say, in whose hands music brings words

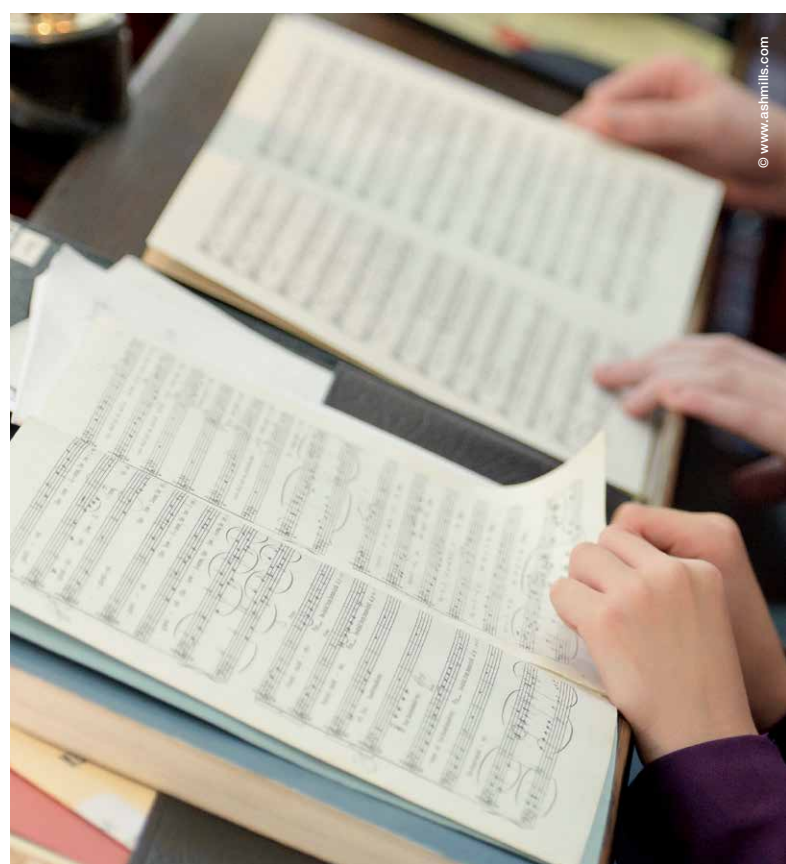


Left: Are we developing our talents and returning them with interest?

Right: Which are the composers who have something fresh and original to say?



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alive? Are we quite happy to conspire with others in commissioning unoriginal music (for instance, examples of the 'lazy minimalism' of the past few years?) which we don't have to work at interpreting or understanding? What of the prevalent style of contemporary choral music perhaps best described as 'comforting' with its predictability of tonality, four-bar phrases and occasional last-verse modulation? Are our selections as choir directors suitably diverse across different styles or periods of music? Do we promote compositional excellence? Do our texts mean anything? Is Christmas just about cute babies in nice blanketed mangers, or are the myrrh, the slaughter of the innocents or the danger and the refugee status of the Holy Family a feature in our meditations and celebrations?

All parts of the Christian message need representing, especially the difficult bits! Intellectual engagement with the challenges should trump cosiness. A strong church should have the confidence to proclaim its full message, and not edit out the challenges because of people's potential sensibilities. In 1 Corinthians, Paul may be suggesting sensitivity between members of the church, but not, I believe, at the expense of the Christian message itself.

When it comes to the 'spirit' or 'inspiration', it's usually a different part of the church which has the stones to throw. We want to know why certain church communities appear to have older congregations, less dramatic worship, prehistoric language, boring hymn books full of Victorian gobbledegook, dreary singing, a groaning organ and a lack of liveliness when it comes to prayer meetings, Bible reading groups or social action.

Again there's a challenge here for us all. How dry worship can become when we don't offer our passions and emotions as well! Think how varied and passionate the Psalms are (for instance, 52, 88, 150). By contrast, think what happens in Psalm 137 when the Israelites, in exile in Babylon, feel that God's Spirit is no longer with them. Their inspiration dries up and they cannot any longer sing the Lord's song (verse 4). Is there a danger that an unemotional, un-passionate rendering of worship implies that we don't feel that God is among us any longer either?

The acts of God in Creation and Redemption are as inspiring as it is possible for us to comprehend. They are far more exciting than a new car, the results of a football team, shopping, holidays or anything else. They are such big gifts that we surely have no alternative but to rise in adoration, praise and worship. There are different kinds of appropriate response in worship, some calmer, some more dramatic, but all should be authentic and all-embracing, rather than artificial or uncommitted.

Good worship comes of burying our differences and trusting each other, of giving ourselves fully, and of allowing the stirrings of the Holy Spirit to work within us. It should inspire us to live out our faith in the wider world. Everything proceeds from it, which is why it must be the first priority for the Church. As musicians we must play our part, since we can greatly influence it. Let our choice of music and hymns inspire and uplift, challenge and, where appropriate, comfort. Let us give fully of our talents and develop our skills and intellects in God's service, and let us be open to passionate music making, whatever the medium. Let others in our church be so inspired by the way we offer worship that they draw alongside and offer their own talents in God's service. Then will our churches offer a truly worthy worship, and our talents will be returned to God with interest.



INSPIRING WORSHIP: HOW CAN THE RSCM HELP YOU?

Over the next couple of months, please will you share with RSCM staff how you would like us to help you to sustain and renew your worship through music, so that our local events, courses, publications, staffing and internet resources can be shaped by the very mission of our motto. You can write to pa@rscm.com or to the address on page 5. As we put together a strategic review for the future of the RSCM, please let us know what you think will help us achieve the RSCM's aims for church music and resource the music of our churches.



Let us be open to passionate music making, whatever the medium.