

Chapter One

GO FOR GOLD

I had a dream the other night which unstuck my brain. I wrote it down when I woke, so I can report with confidence that what I am about to recount is what I dreamt; though whether that is of any interest is, of course, another matter, one's own riveting dream being potentially someone else's jaw-cracking yawn.

I was walking along Edinburgh's Princes Street. With me was an urbane ex-colleague, Head of Programmes for my first few years in the BBC. A good boss, calmly inclined to say yes to an interesting idea.

"An awful lot of waffle on the air these days", said Pat.

"Wasn't there always?" I asked. Then I added, "Some people used to say I waffled."

"Er, yes, I recall that", he acknowledged.

"But I didn't!" I felt obliged to remind him.

"Not always", he parried.

I knew he was teasing. Well I thought he was. In case of doubt, I spelt it out. "There are three ways of communicating. First, minimally: economical language. No overt style. The 'style' is in the structure, the interior clarity, diamond precision, unadorned logic."

"There you are", Pat said, "three unnecessary adjectives already." I ignored this.

"Then there is language which is pushing the boat out, extending boundaries, stretching words and images, trying to mean something new or make an old meaning accessible in a new way. If we stop that stretching process, we die. On the other hand, of course, by not pushing the boat out we may avoid mistakes, or what strike purists as mistakes?"

"Are you saying", asked Pat, "that pure language is a mistake?" I chose to ignore this also.

“And thirdly, there is waffle. I hate that because it fouls the nest for those of us who are throwing words or music around a bit, for more positive reasons than filling space. Waffle gives rhetoric a bad name.”

“Quite”, said Pat minimally.

I woke up. And thought: now I know how to begin Chapter One.

I think what I'm going to be saying, again and again, in different forms, is that communication is glory, and vice versa, and that the essence of communication is the glorious taking of risks. That goes for God as well as for us. Communication which makes any effort to connect with the divine is going to be more than minimalist. It isn't, on the other hand, going to inflate into empty waffle. What it is going to do is push the boat out. When God created the cosmos, a pretty big boat was being pushed. The Big Bang was hardly a minimalist gesture. Whether or not you go along with Stephen Hawking's deconstruction of eternity, the universe we now inhabit is not just star-studded and crammed with purple passages (sunsets were appearing before the first Hollywood film or pulpit prayer). It is massively complex and still bursting with evolutionary potential.

If God is mixed up in all this, is communication the same as communion? Yes, I think so. Maybe communication is communion being busy: evolving, stretching. Sometimes, too busy? Then we need the silence. A subliminal text can come through a silence. But also, an inner silence can come through the most riotous physical noise. Whether you call it Art or Religion or God, or just being intensely alive, that is the glory of high communication: the dangerously risky moment, in which dimensions overlap.

Trapped the other day without a book in a train which had lost the will to move, I worked out that I'd written something like eight million words in my adult life, and that's not including memos. What for? The articles, papers, editorials, scripts, sermons, prayers, talks, letters, do not survive. What was the point? I suppose they were just me saying: “Here I am.

There you are. And somewhere in and around and between us is significance." Either that significance got communicated at the time or it didn't.

But the possibility that there might be communication, that is the glory; even if one's best efforts remain sketches. We can all understand the frustration of Arthur Sullivan's fabled organist with the chord fetish, groping for his perfect amen. The spirit of delight may come rarely; perfection never. On earth, dead butterflies do not fly, and information on what goes on in heaven is not available. But true communication hints at absolutes and can suggest perfection. Moreover, it doesn't always come via the great writers or composers. A gem of naïve honesty can strike a chord so clear that a miniature moment can be transfigured. That is why a hymn thought little of by the musical establishment may reach parts that approved hymns don't reach. And that's why I've heard encores by great visiting orchestras from America and Russia unman an audience in a way the preceding symphonic performances didn't. Not because the encores were tuneful, famous, and brief - audiences are more sophisticated these days and don't need bribing by lollipops - but because the 'work' of the evening accomplished, the players and conductor were letting their hair down, allowing their hearts to speak, and that was going straight to the audience's heart. At such moments I've felt myself surrounded by an attention so rapt it was like being a child again on Christmas Eve. Emotional? Yes, exactly.

Whether we're talking about an orchestra, a hymn, a sermon, a prayer, organ voluntary, solo song, we're talking about the human drive to communicate which can reflect and include God. There is an inside and an outside to this. The inside is the logic, the structure, the grammar - the bones. The outside is the performance, the impression - the skin.

Let me describe a specific encore which will reinforce points I'm making elsewhere about speeds, loudness and the taking of risks, but which will here underline the distinction I'm drawing between structure and performance. By an odd chance I was able to compare two performances of the identical

encore given by the same orchestra and conductor. In November 1991, the St. Petersburg Philharmonic with its conductor Yuri Temirkanov gave two concerts to capacity audiences in Glasgow's Royal Concert Hall. Temirkanov doesn't wear his heart on his sleeve. He wears it, in the form of a large white handkerchief, in his breast pocket. From there it emerges for the theatrical removal of moisture surplus to requirements. By the time we reached the first encore we were all as exhausted as he had made quite clear he was. Then the magic. It was the *pas de deux* from the Nutcracker Suite. If you analyse it, the theme is little more than a downward scale. The speed at which he took it was as dangerously slow as the Bernstein 'Nimrod' I describe later. It could hardly be danced at that speed. He also maximised the dynamic range from extreme pianissimo to very loud indeedissimo. It slew us. And I mean that respectfully. I couldn't forget it for weeks. I still haven't forgotten it.

Nine months later I happened to tune in to the conclusion of a live Prom on BBC TV. Same orchestra, same Yuri (there are two conducting Yuris). Same encore. Different encore. Same notes, different event in space-time. Same structure, totally different emotional reality.

The obvious difference lay in the speed which was more normal. It was a standard performance by a fine orchestra. With the (musically dubious) assistance of camera close-ups, one could tell the conductor was literally going through the motions - in his case still considerable motions. The players didn't seem particularly *engagé*. That I confess to be a highly fallible impression, but I won't budge from asserting that there was a major gap in overall voltage. Why?

There could be a hundred reasons, as many as there are individual lives in an orchestra. But an obvious explanation is at hand. At the Glasgow concert in November, the Moscow coup was but three months past, and Yeltsin still in a power struggle with Gorbachev. The Soviet Union was disintegrating and Mother Russia was suffering a winter of grave food shortages. The city from which the players came had only just changed its name - my tickets were marked 'Leningrad Philhar-

monic' - and ex-colleagues of mine were meeting the orchestra and processing relief supplies. Audience and orchestra were bonded in a sense of deep familial concern. It was, in short, a liturgical moment, and music of great simplicity spoke to that moment. It was a prayer.

There is a place for bare logic - but it is not in music, certainly not religious music. No, not even in Bach. As we'll see later, classical counterpoint is not clockwork, nor for that matter is bare plainsong. If all you see is bones, something is not well. The images of Belsen, Somalia, the Balkans, disturb because they reflect people who are dying. But the converse is true. Shelley, Blake, Chaikovsky, George Matheson - are not just romantic wafflers squeezing out shapeless purple passages. Under the shining skin is a bony structure, a climbing frame for blossom. There are, of course, different kinds of structure. That of the semi-operatic nineteenth century hymn may seem different from that of the sinewy sixteenth century psalm tune, and both may differ from that of a twentieth century song. Yet their inner structures are close. It is the colour and fragrance of their surface that is different, and there should be no problem at all in enjoying all of them.

I was taught both verbal and musical grammar by inspired teachers, and whether I'm writing non-minimalist prose or improvising impressionistic noises on piano or organ, I have relied (successfully or otherwise) on these structures I inherited. You only can push the boat out if you have a boat to push. The first *sine qua non* is some kind of sound craft. What I want to suggest in these lectures is that soundness is not always what it is thought to be. Soundness is not always good taste or conventional competence or fashionable approval. Throughout our churches and communities there exist a multitude of crafts. They may be of all sizes, speeds, and abilities, like the variety of crafts which crossed the channel in 1940 to rescue the British Army from the Dunkirk beaches, but, like that uneven flotilla, they can do the job: in this case the job of saving that wonderful communicative glory: the churches' song.

So where do we begin? With passion. In all their variety, the boats got to Dunkirk and back with a disciplined commitment - the rational element; but also with an undertow of urgency, danger, suffering - elements of high drama. Without vision, the people perish; without passion, music is dead on the page. Passion, however, is more than feeling... and more than rationality. It is the fibre made by the entwining of both. Music which matters is a struggle to batter through a sea of feelings with a solid craft - however small - which can be rationally steered.

I am fortunate enough to be a member of the West Kirk in Helensburgh, where the music maker is Walter Blair, Director of the Junior School at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music. He has been organist at the West Kirk for twenty-eight years, which says something about his commitment. But what about staleness? Ah, there might be the rub. Might be. But isn't. Each Sunday, the project of lifting the worship is approached with passion. I think I can detect the odd Sunday when he is not genuinely inspired. But even then, one is excited, because the fibre of his commitment brings him and us onto a high level of engaged seriousness. He never fails to attack - organ, hymns, anthem, the lot. Discipline, you see, is not a boringly rational factor. Discipline is cousin to discipleship. And that, as you will recall, was intimately connected with passion.

OK, we can't all be Walter Blair. But I have been moved in many a country or small town church over the years by an organist of limited ability who has with passion led the hymns in such a way as to lift the congregation's understanding. And what of those of us who are not practising musicians of any kind? We all have to live day by day, and music can be a passion at the heart of our lives.

It is not given to many to be organists, pulpit stars, or poets. Few become architects or generals. Not a lot of us make it to be designers of clothes or aircraft. Only a tiny minority become even flyers of aircraft. Most of us do not see what we think are visions. And yet.

And yet we are immortal. Or have intimations of immortality. We drink of life. Like Christ, we suffer and laugh. (It was

G.K.Chesterton who ventured the enlivening thought that when Jesus went away to be alone it was to laugh. I like that picture. Splitting, so to speak, his sides in an agony of hilarity at the lunacies that had encompassed his day; but too sensitive to have hurt feelings by relieving the pressure on his funny-bone in front of vulnerable souls. Of course, He cried too. The two kinds of tears are close.)

Like him, like everyone, we have these moments of enhanced awareness. The helpless giggle over a banana skin. The taking in of breath at a puppy tumbling, a wagtail bouncing across a lawn, a toddler running to its mother. Or, at the dark end of the spectrum, the face of a starving child, or a old man dying, coming at us out of the TV screen, haunting us with its implacable declaration of mortality. At such moments, we connect with something wider than job, comfort, convenience. But really it is there all the time: the stab of momentary awareness of an alternative dimension; in the loved voice, lapping waves, autumn wind, winter storm, beautiful woman, distant train, noise of the city at night, church bells... and the moments of terror in danger, lonely freedom, exposed decision-making.

Which is what this book is about. It is about hearing tunes. Tunes of glory. Tunes of reality. Singing them, or playing them, but in the first instance hearing them, because we can all do that. It is about hearing tunes in life, in one's head, through one's ears - the inner one as well as the outer one.

The immortality which can be touched by tunes is available in church and out. But since these thoughts originated in lectures about music and God, I'm particularly concerned to say that tunes - glorious tunes - can still actually be heard in church. Yes - in church! All the talk about church music being boring, or having become boring is loose talk. The rumours about church music being dead or dying are - well, just that, idle gossip. Reports of the decease of church music have been greatly exaggerated. It just isn't so. Nor need it be so.

We should neither believe melancholy old organists and ministers who say the best lies behind us, and ahead stretches a

trackless desert of mindless mediocrity; nor should we give credence to excitable new wave young (or acting young) musicians and clergy who, dismissing the past, say the best is all ahead, and, go ahead, folks, CLAP!

Skippers of sound craft, however modest, have a more balanced approach. Even if they are not steering by the stars, their compasses and radar are not dictated to by passing moods and fashions. Not only musicians and clergy, but the majority who are neither, would probably think that by definition the best so far is in the past, but that by the same historical definition, if one has any faith at all, an even greater amount of the best lies in the future. The best, in other words, is potentially everywhere. But it has to be navigated now.

In considering what sometimes appears to be a dialogue of the deaf on these matters, should we perhaps tackle the linguistic obstacles presented by the very existence of the words 'best' and 'past'?

'THE BEST'

What should church music aim at, in any age, in any circumstance? The best! Of course. Naturally. What else, when God is involved?

But what is the best? How do you recognise it, let alone achieve it?

More fundamentally: is there such a thing? Does 'the best' exist?

Even in religious communities, is an ideal 'best' a chimera? In the late nineteen sixties, as Executive Producer of 50% of ITV's network religious output from London, I was much exercised by such questions. Quality control, an industrial concept, was central to an industry like ITV, where the product had to sell to advertisers *via* viewers, but quality of what? That was a riddle religious TV had to grapple with, for was not God about something more than saleability? (A conundrum pressing even more sharply today as cable and satellite options proliferate in the market.)

I received a startlingly simple insight on this matter in the less than obvious venue of Windsor Castle. The then Dean of

Windsor was minded from time to time to summon sundry great and good to mingle there with a number of those still toiling at the rockface of this or that field of endeavour. As a reward for brain-thrashing and think-tanking one's way through a number of seminars, one enjoyed the *frisson* of resting one's bones on a Windsor bed. This weekend, it was a media, society, and industry work-out in which journalists, editors, generals, producers and knights of industry hammered away at social values. One of the speakers was the Chairman of Courtaulds, and he sliced the ceiling off my brain when he said, "The best is the enemy of the good."

Not a new thought. But the success of this industrialist carried weight. In essence he was saying: if your activity is directed obsessively at an unattainable standard, you may fail to achieve what is attainable. If you insist on brilliance, you may impede merit. Don't let an ideal aim distract you from an achievable one.

Buried within that truism is a message of great practical importance: that we should not be hypnotised by 'standards'. All too often, a 'standard' means a standardisation; and all too often that means standing at the station, stationary, with no motive power to take an enterprise further along the line of the possible.

The fact is, of course, that 'the best' is as relative a term as 'good'. What is objectively valuable, or subjectively valued, varies from place to place as much as from time to time. In Chapter Six, I consider the whole question of objective and subjective values. For the moment I only wish to underline that no worshipping group anywhere should feel under pressure to achieve music-making for which it lacks either the heart or the ability; nor should any musician feel intimidated into aiming for a best which is so wildly unrealistic that aiming for it produces a worst. But that doesn't mean being cowed into the opposite, a nervous acceptance of the dull and safe. One intimidation is as bad as the other. The true value is freedom. Where there is a freedom - and that is a fundamental Christian category - to be as modest or outrageous as may be, free to be

unapologetically traditional here and dangerously experimental there, then there will be life; and that will be the actual best. Not a safe 'standard', not a stereotypical standardisation, either ancient or modern, but a happening in the here and now, which lifts these people at this moment into a space where liberty of mind or head or body is experienced, or all of these, or permutations of these.

'THE PAST'

For church music, the past is an irrelevant concept. It always was, for what an absurd misconception it would be to think that against the ticking of the cosmic clock an idea, a tune, or style in, say 1789, was automatically inferior to its counterpoint in 1889. Rather the reverse, some would say - and they would be wrong also. Yet this chronological snake still hypnotises us. Many do assume that the product of 1989 must be better than that of 1889. Or, if not better in an absolute sense, then more relevant, more useful. That is what I dispute. On the snakes and ladders board of church music, the snake is the concept of time past and the ladders are the rigid structures of current fashion.

Worship is more like chess: a multidimensional game where every piece (every worshipper) has her or his role to play; where freedom counterpoints within the discipline of complex rules across space and time, and where the outcome is never predictable. This multidimensional framework harmonises with what we are discovering about the dynamic relativities of space-time in the structure of the cosmos, not to mention the layers of conceptual rigidity being stripped away by voyagers into the worlds of quantum, chaos and sub-particle worlds whose technical terms seem to lose shelf-life from month to month.

So let no organist, choirmaster, minister or priest be blackmailed by the imagined past ('it's aye bin like that'), or an imagined present or future fashion ('unless you do this, we won't get the young folk in'). If all we get the young folk into is a charnel house of contemporary dry bones, why bother?

Having thrown out these preliminary questions, and before trying to engage with them at length, I'd like to encapsulate the main burden of what I've been trying to say so far in one story.

The story centres on a grey old building which broods, sometimes it seems morosely, on a ridge of Auld Reekie. Nudged by lawyers, councillors, and the patrons of howffs, and infested in summer by camera-bearing Belgians, you can see it through an outsider's eyes as (a) a mausoleum of long ago events, (b) a tourist attraction, (c) a cheap lunch in the crypt, (d) a highbrow sort of place for Sunday worship.

I saw it as an insider. I choose St. Giles Cathedral at this point because it represents Presbyterianism. Maybe that doesn't matter any more. Or maybe it does. For out of the maw of the Reformation faith there issues this rock-hard challenge: can the word as reality be encountered again and again in our time? The Kirk of Scotland, like the Church of England, is an established church. Like it or not, it is there to serve the whole people. St. Giles was at one time the epicentre of national revolution. Evolution is more our way now - and just by walking into St. Giles you can see the visual marks of liturgical evolution. It is, however, a musical story I have to tell, for one of my messages is that 'the word' is not about words.

The Queen was in town... Not for the first time, you might say, knowing the town. Ah, that's where you'd be wrong. It was the first time. It had been a year of heightened British consciousness (the movement towards Scottish consciousness showing only fitful political signs). The King had died. Hillary's British team had climbed Everest, then far from being the busy tourist destination it is now. The young Elizabeth had been televised to the nation from Westminster Abbey. And now crowned, she had come across the border; her mission to engage in an act of commitment to the Scottish people. And where else to do that but in the High Kirk of Edinburgh. There, if in any one church building, that Kirk was forged which the new Queen was pledged to defend.

It was half past eleven on the night before the service, and, apart from a handful of security men, I was alone in St. Giles.

Earlier, the building had been flooded with light for final camera rehearsals, the walls had been awash with organ music, the rafters ringing with the sound of choristers, and the old flags shivering to brass fanfares. I suppose the flags hadn't really shivered, but my spine had. I was then assistant organist to Herrick Bunney and I was involved in this glorious mayhem up to the hilt. I was still young enough (three and a half decades before scientists floated the chaos theory into public consciousness), to perceive intuitively that the more minute your planning, the nearer you get to the anarchy at the heart of existence. (Young people and very old people know this. The middle-aged keep it at bay.)

Charles Warr, the small but perfectly formed Dean of the Thistle, had mapped out the entire service with a meticulous care honed by a lifetime of ecclesiastical flummery. He was indulgent to me, as an insignificant whippersnapper, just one tiny cog in the elaborate liturgical machine assembled for the event. Another mogul was equally indulgent: Ronald Falconer, then in charge of Scotland's BBC religious broadcasting. A crisp moustachioed man, of an avuncular jollity masking a steely command of his fiefdom, he commissioned me, at one camera rehearsal of a procession, to come out of the organ loft and take the place of the Lord Lyon, King of Arms. This was the nearest I ever got to being a Colossus on the world stage. I mimed the then elderly Lord Lyon's disjunctive lope - totter would be within an inch of exaggeration - to such effect that Ronnie Falconer dined out on it for weeks.

All this had been highly amusing. But it had vanished like melting ice-cream. What I was now confronted with was reality. An empty St. Giles. Richard Dimbleby, the commentator, had gone off to his hotel. The camera crews were in their beds or their pubs. Clergy, civil servants, royal advisers were with their wives or their whisky. The choirs, trumpets, trombonists, and drummers were wherever. Here I was in a vast and shadowy space, alone with an organ console; and in dialogue with the hard core of a worship challenge I could not escape.

To describe this challenge, I have to introduce the only mogul that mattered to me at that moment, Herrick Bunney. Later I will have many things to say about this remarkable man.

His significance for me at this moment was that he had done something absolutely staggering. A couple of days before, he had entrusted me with the climax of the service. Apart from all the visual glory - the brilliance of the lights, processions, colours, robes, uniforms - it was to be a journey round a pantheon of high musical moments. Everything was timed to the second, and from the moment an hour before the service that the first voluntary began, the experience would roll towards glory - or, inconceivably, disaster. Nothing was left to chance. My spine still tingles when I recall Herrick's beginning that inexorable process by bringing his hands down at the split second on the first chord of the noble Elgar Organ Sonata. That was the beginning. What of the end?

After the Queen had received the Honours of Scotland - crown, sceptre, and so on - before the communion table, she was to turn and process out. Herrick chose me, a musical child, to be the father of that climactic moment. It is only looking back from the vantage point of maturity that I now realise what an act of courage and faith that was. What he said was: *improvise*. *Improvise*: on the air, on TV, on film, before all the ermined and medallioned great and good of Scotland: *improvise*?

His musical rationale was this: over the previous two hours and more he would have been flooding the old stone walls and the airwaves with everything he could prepare: organ, brass fanfares, choral climaxes, congregational shouts, all conceived, designed, rehearsed, refined, as only Herrick Bunney could, and then blooming into a thousand musical colours as only he could make them flower. But at this moment, he wanted something different. So he said, "Go for broke. Don't play safe. Jump off the cliff. Crash in against the dying chords of the brass fanfare. Let the moment carry you." These may not have been the exact words, but it was certainly the message.

What nerve, what generosity, what trust! It wasn't as if he couldn't improvise. He has always been a master of the inspired

processional paean. It was as if Gary Lineker sent himself off the field in injury time. And what a hair-raising risk! At that moment I could have destroyed everything that he had built up. He almost lost his nerve when the night before I'd told him I planned to improvise on the theme, 'She'll be coming round the mountain when she comes'. But he trusted me to be joking. And I repaid that trust by trusting in his faith that I could somehow do it - but, I now see, it was not me he was trusting. It was the moment. He was trusting that God would be in that moment. He was trusting that if we stepped off the cliff together, with the danger of musical and professional death, something real would be born. So was it? Was it real? Or was it in the event, just musical waffle? I can't tell you. That's the point. It was, at that moment, 'the word'. Or wasn't. Whether it was is a secret of history, known only to people long gone, or to minds which will not remember.

But how moving to listen, four decades later, to the recent Radio Scotland programme when we heard the actual sounds of that great old organ, not only dying but being killed. Dismantled. Pipe after pipe, cable after cable, taken down, taken away. A creature of once golden glory returning to dust.

So that a new creature might arise to lead in the praise of glory.

Later in the programme we heard the glory of the same Herrick Bunney playing the new organ, now one of the finest anywhere. He and the organ I'd once played had grown old together. He and the reborn organ were young again. On eagle's wings indeed. But then Herrick's own wings have always been in working order. He has always been willing to risk the moment.

Life and death are paradoxical, beyond our comprehension; and round the paradoxes may cluster pain of the deepest red. But if you trust the risky moment, from the ground of God there may blossom, to beyond the stars, life that shall endless be.