

Chapter Three

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

You won't have too much difficulty, perhaps, in bringing to mind that moment when on a muggy summer's evening you put some blocks of ice into a glass. Clunk... clunk. You unscrew the white cap of the green bottle, and pour... glug, glug. Hissssss. The glass mists over as the gin hits the ice. Unscrew the tonic. Pour it. Sshusshhh, and you-know-who bubbles. Slice a lemon, squeeze its droplets out, let it go... splash. Another gentle hiss.

Now comes the moment you've been waiting for. Lift the glass to your mouth, sip, and let a chilled rivulet trickle over the teeth and down the gullet. There it flows - that sensation of coolness tingling its way to near and distant parts.

That is a function of religious music. And unless you are running a cathedral, it is cheaper than gin. Also, music doesn't attack your brain cells, your stomach, your liver. It may, like gin, go for your larynx if you are a participator, but this is not usually lethal. On the other hand, like gin and tonic, or whatever your favourite summer tippie is - white wine, cider, beer, apple juice, orange juice, milk shake, chilled coffee - a vital function of church music is to release you from the sweaty grip of moral perspiration into a cooler, spaced-out world of inspiration; where, as the Latin word *spiro* implies, you can breathe more easily and deeply, stand back from life's tactical skirmishes - even from its moral and religious tactical skirmishes - interpret your situation as a whole, or, to paraphrase Wordsworth, re-assemble hot-house emotional furniture in tranquility. This is at least one function of art, and music can be the purest art, though I concede that religious music does not always attain that level.

For those who are alienated by an alcoholic reference, or who feel that a cold October night is not the time to be lyrical about summer drinking, I postulate, not a July day, but a February one, majoring in slush, depression, and the kind of chill in your bones which makes global warming beckon like a free weekend in the Caribbean. You stumble in the front door, kick the frozen slush off your wellies, trip over the dog doing his ham imitation of an underfed Husky, turn on the kettle, throw the day's booty of milk, bread and catfood into the pile of unwashed dishes, put a teabag in a mug, pour in the boiling water, add milk, prise with a frozen finger a digestive biscuit out of a blue tin, grimace at the yellow daffodils on the blue tin, heave your carcass on to a stool, lift the mug to your lips and... aaaah... hot tannin carries adrenalising caffeine to every corner of your besieged cadaver.

This also, in the icy wastes of a myth-frozen culture, is a prime function of music, church or otherwise - to thaw out the parts that you thought would never feel anything ever again - to restore the circulation of the heart's blood.

These are two functions of church music, to cool and to warm. But there is another. After all, we do not spend most of our existence ambushed by extremes of hot and cold. We live in a temperate zone. Our religion is not characteristically overheated by emotion or spectacularly frozen by intellect. Just as, compared with other parts of the world, our summers are relatively cool, and our winters relatively mild, so our religion is relatively undramatic, neither very up or very down, pretty straightforward middle of the road stuff. Yet we sing in church. Why? Well, there is a third kind of liquid we imbibe. Water. In one form or another, water is built into our diet. Sometimes, these days, as when one grills factory processed bacon, water seems built excessively into our food. As you know, most of the human body is composed of water. Without water, we die. I am so bold as to suggest that the reason even we undemonstrative Northern Europeans do this irrational thing in church of opening the hole in our face and throwing our voice up and down a bit without any obvious practical motive - is that, if we don't, our religion dies.

How can I say that, when one Christian group greatly respected for its uncluttered spirituality positively glories in not doing this thing? The Society of Friends makes a point of silence, does it not? Ah, well. In the first place, Quakers are much less bureaucratic about such things than we think. They are human, sensitive beings, who love to listen to music, and can sing as well as anyone. But, in the second place, what is silence? The absence of sound? I doubt if you have ever heard the absence of sound? How could you hear it, if it is not there? You cannot prove a negative. Put it this way: have you ever experienced the absolute absence of liquid? No - if liquid was entirely absent, you'd be dead. If sound was entirely absent, you'd be - no, not deaf, even stone deaf people have mental sensations corresponding to sound - but again, dead. When the composer John Cage, in his composition 4'33", instructed the pianist to sit for four and a half minutes and do nothing, he was not inviting the audience into an experience where sound was absent. On the contrary, he was luring us into a recognition of the music in the sounds that are everywhere around us. BBC engineers do not allow the absence of sound, although for a very special effect they may come near it with white noise - a sort of acoustic equivalent of a Black Hole, sucking into its mystical negativity any light energy foolish enough to stray within a few zillion miles. Transmitters shut down if there is not some texture of noise, even if the casual listener, hearing on an average domestic receiver, might interpret it as silence. But that is an interpretation. Silence is not a physical reality: it is a metaphysical, an abstract concept.

If we can take this one way and say that silence is actually quite noisy, we can take it the other way and say that noise can be - in the metaphysical sense that is its only real sense - quite silent. I recall several moments in my life when, in purely decibelic terms an acoustic experience was such that I must filch from the great preacher J.S. Stewart one of his most decisive adjectival exocets - SHATTERING - the noise was shattering, yet the effect on my brain was to create internally an awesome silence. I recall a couple of such occasions in the Usher Hall, at early Edinburgh Festivals. Ian Hunter, the Scots impresario

who brilliantly laid the foundations of the Festival, brought over the orchestra and chorus of La Scala, Milan, and they sang Verdi's Requiem, twice. I was there, twice. On the second occasion, the tumult in the hall caused such a tumult in my psychic system that I spent an entire night on Blackford Hill encountering a brilliant God who didn't so much demand my life as simply occupy it - to such an extent that when I arrived home for breakfast my mother said, "This is what comes of not having enough fresh air and vegetables."

But that was after the second performance. Two nights before I had heard Verdi's Requiem for the first time. Heard? What does "heard" mean? This is not a silly question. That figure who strolls, strides, lounges, lunges, and finally self-destructs his way through the Gospel narratives certainly had sufficient reservations about the listening function to lob a couple of paradoxes in its direction. The disciples were exasperated literally beyond belief, perhaps, by the cryptic epigrams, stories, and filmic sequences which Jesus transmitted instead of clear moral service announcements, or pharisaic party political hard sells, but when they yelled, "Why do you make it so difficult, why do you tell things in parables?" Jesus' answer is a model side-swerve: "I tell things in parables so that people may hear and not understand." One might rephrase that apparently less than helpful remark, something like this:

I tell it in parables so that the message may mean something special to those who not only take in the words as an acoustic phenomenon activating the eardrum, but receive the metaphysical light contained within the sound package. Then the light may burst open within the inner ear and spread radiance into the farthest recesses of that auditorium which is the human brain, that cathedral which is the human personality, that ultimate human reality which no theologian or acoustic scientist can measure.

That is true hearing, that is real listening. And the effect can be a devastating inner silence: because, faced with the blinding light of an ultimate truth, there is nothing left to say. Jesus' other repeated advice was: "He who hath ears, let him hear." I needn't labour that point. Clearly, the possession of two pieces

of radar equipment sticking at right angles to the head does not, in Jesus' assessment, necessarily constitute what He thinks of as hearing.

Well, there I was forty years ago, in the 'gods' of the Usher Hall, about to 'hear' Verdi's Requiem for the first time. The organ gallery was pulsating with Mediterranean vibrations - the La Scala Chorus, a couple of hundred Latin temperaments shimmering like the original cosmic material awaiting its Big Bang. Victor de Sabata, the conductor, loped on from the wings, a sinister amalgam of Boris Karloff and Batman. During the Requiem, as much of his time was spent off the rostrum as on it, his vertical take-offs suggesting attempts by an alien octopoid to extract electrical voltage from high wire pylons above the Usher Hall roof. Nothing, however, prepared one for the assault of the 'Dies Irae', the wrath of God. As it began, extra brass pullulated in doors on both sides of the hall. They were breeding like cockroaches. Everywhere, trumpets were rampaging, and trombones marching like Birnam Wood on Dunsinane. I see yet de Sabata shaking demonic fists and damning us all to Hell, as, flying through the air, he detonated the Apocalypse. The din was appalling. And what I experienced was: absolute silence. It was a moment of reality. Time stopped. Watches ceased ticking. The door of the eternal opened. That, if you please, is silence, and a Quaker need have no quarrel with that. Nor need an agnostic, an atheist, a Buddhist, a Hindu, any human soul. This kind of metaphysical silence I equate with another condition, perhaps best described as seriousness. One might even say: high seriousness.

Let me try and explain that by referring to another Festival occasion in the Usher Hall: a performance of Bach's B Minor Mass by the Huddersfield Choral Society and the Liverpool Philharmonic, conducted by Malcolm Sargent. I had only experienced this work (WORK? - this cantilever bridge across eternity) once before, when my music teacher at Fettes, Tommy Evans, had taken a group of us to a performance by the then Edinburgh Royal Choral Union under Herrick Bunney, in St. Giles Cathedral. On the way, Tommy Evans said, "This is possibly the greatest single piece of music ever written", so our

expectations were not slim as we climbed the Mound to St. Giles. Herrick told me, years later, that it had been a disastrous performance, because he was new, both to the choir and St. Giles, and hadn't realised how manifold and deadly were the acoustic ambushes laid by the reverberations in the St. Giles nooks and crannies; so there were moments when basses in one far-flung contrapuntal galaxy were in telepathic rather than metronomic communication with tenors spiralling up the outermost arm of distant fugal nebulae. Herrick was obviously a better judge of the details of the choral ensemble than I, so if he says there were problems, then there were problems, but what I heard exalted me. In the Sanctus the angels swung their censers and the earth moved. The basses and organ pedal growled around the perimeter of space as the 'Et Incarnatus' and 'Crucifixus' sank through the transdimensional trapdoor. If that was my first experience of the 'B Minor', what was to happen when Sargent, the most brilliant choral conductor of his age, brought his favourite well drilled choir to bear on the masterpiece? Again: silence. As the final chord of 'Dona Nobis Pacem' ended, my thought was: "I can never laugh again." That was pompous, fey, callow; but it was so intensely felt that I can recall the exact sensation. If any human being can be this serious, I said to myself, if life is worth this degree of seriousness, then I am silent before life. I cannot pollute the silence with words; and never again am I free to laugh.

Well, one's late teens are a time for such gargantuan solemnity. But I wouldn't devalue that response, not even now that I am on my way to garrulous geriatricity. It had been a transfiguring experience. So it was with eagerness that I subsequently opened my Scotsman to read the review of the performance. It was of the "this hurts me more than it hurts you" variety. The then Scotsman music critic, Stewart Deas, was not lukewarmly on the fence. Let your yea be yea, and your nay be nay. His nay was nay, alright. He excoriated Sargent for turning in a sub-Festival performance where the Horn had fluffed a note or two in its solo obligato in the 'Quoniam'; but even more heavily he laid into Sargent for putting too much dramatic emphasis on the final chord of each chorus. I'm not saying

Stewart Deas was making technically invalid points, just that, in terms of our inner hearing, he and I might have been in different halls hearing different performances.

That is why public reviews of performances should, in my view, always include a celebratory element, so that, whatever happens, you wish you had been there, if you weren't, and you're glad you were, if you were: rather than looking embarrassedly over your shoulder and thinking: "Oh, I missed that technical point, so it wasn't so good", as if your experience was less authentic than the reviewer's. As it happens the present policy of Glasgow Herald reviewing is under Michael Tumelty tumultuously of the celebratory kind - indeed it may swing the other way so that you think: "My goodness, if it was that mind-blowing, why didn't my mind blow?" Well, that's a fault in the right direction, an excess of enthusiasm is still a breathing of the spirit. But even though the Scotsman's ex-critic Conrad Wilson, like Christopher Grier before him, could be waspish in the best Eastern Wasp manner, there was style and eloquence in reserve to give emotional body to his technical assessments. His successor, Mary Miller, writes like an angel, yet, like Wilma Paterson at the Herald, without sacrificing tough musical criteria. All this matters, because you have to decide whether evaluating music, analysing it, writing about it, is a branch of showbusiness or of academia.

I will have more to say of this later, because it goes back to the question of what is being heard, who is doing the hearing, and what the whole performing and hearing process is in aid of. It is in aid of people. Music is not in the first place a matter of abstract principle, but of experience, and I do not know of any currency other than experience the truth of whose coinage can better stand the test of time. After all, if experiences are vivid after forty years they must have amounted to something. On the other hand, I realise that if I am to continue to wander up paths of reminiscence, then you are entitled to be reminded of the general direction in which we are heading: which is that as much as liquid is essential for life, so as vital for religious life is music. But that immediately led to a consideration of traditions of spirituality which are less vocal, and we have been thinking

about what spiritual or emotional silence is: our tentative conclusion being that it does not depend on the absence of music, still less on the absence of sound. That is where we are, and I would like to stay there a little longer.

Think of the wasp. Not the waspish critic, but the common or garden black and yellow buzzing wasp. Can you, in your mind's ear, hear it? Now consider the bumble bee. This also is black and yellow. Possibly the yellow verges on the orange. The clothing is furrier. The general effect is less sleek and missile-like. But compared with the elephant, whale, or even bluebottle, markedly the same. Now hear the bee buzz. In your auditory opinion, are these buzzes markedly different? I mean, put you in an airtight sound studio, place earphones on your head, and play in tapes of wasp and bee in an unknown order, are you confident you could say which was which?

But now we'll change the scenario. We'll blindfold you and lead you into a garden. It is June. Your nose is wafting in perfume of box, lavender, roses. The sun beats. Birds twitter. There is buzzing. You don't have to ask. It is bees, it is beautiful, it is eternal childhood summer. God's in His heaven and all is lazily right in a bee-loud world.

But be led now, if you please, to a small stuffy room in August. There is tea on the table. Raspberry jam sits around, awaiting union with a scone. Your companion gives an exasperated squawk. A newspaper goes thwack on the table. Irritation is in the air. Something is buzzing. Guess what? No prizes for guessing: a wasp.

Don't tell me your ear told you the difference. It was the whole picture, the general environment, and - more - the myth attached to the situation that led you to hear one thing rather than another. It was a composite constellation of images in your brain, an imaginative package, which said bee or wasp.

In that sense, the actual notes, or even the sequence of notes, in a piece of music is not the message. Without the notes, a piece of music doesn't exist, as without the buzz, no bee, no wasp. But the notes in themselves don't tell you what is going on. Your imagination does. Therefore, worry not if your church lacks

organ, choir, or brilliant musician. We all have imaginations. That is the chief resource of church music, and it is free. If there is any one reason why these days music is not the thrilling element in church worship that it might be, it is that we all let our imaginations lie moribund. Twelve people in a congregation, released from inhibition as they are seized by the vast import of the words of a hymn or psalm, can lift not only the indifferent singing of a scattered congregation, but also the indifferent playing of an organ presided over by a poor player.

I'm not saying that the performance at the organ doesn't matter. Imagination there can lift everybody. Obviously, there is interpretation of music in all performances. We will of course return to that topic frequently - for the music doesn't exist unless the notes are lifted off the page by a human being or beings who by an alchemy nobody really understands recreate an emotional earthquake experienced by a brain which for 200 years may have lain decomposed beneath the ground. But have you considered the mirror miracle: how did those notes arrive on the page in the first place? Some composers composed at the piano, but more heard the music in their head. How did that happen? The ear was not involved. There was no sound at all. And they weren't hearing through memory, because the music was, as of that moment, being created *ex nihilo*. 'The Messiah', the 'Mass in B Minor', Mozart's 'Eine Kleine Nachtmusik', Beethoven's 9th, Tchaikovsky's 5th, Wagner's Ring, 'Abide with Me'. These were heard before they were heard: How? Heard in absolute silence! Not bad little on-board computers the great composers had, in those pre-computer days. The Jehovah of Israel and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ was, for a pre-Luddite, not a bad knocker together of information technology systems.

You will by now perceive what I'm getting at. I'm trying to demythologise music - or is it re-mythologise it? I'm saying there isn't a thing which you can identify as music. Music is wider than any definition you can give it. Music is, in fact, a way. A way of being, a way of loving, a way of worshipping, a way of understanding. A way of sympathising, empathising, synthesising. Music is a way of being born, or being re-born, of

being crucified, resurrected, transformed. Music is a way of life. Music is a way of dancing on the edge of thinking. And, above all, music is a way of listening. Only at the end, and at the margins, and at the bottom of that list, is music a technique of organising sounds.

Certain conclusions follow. Music in the church is far too important to be left to church musicians. But equally, music is far too important to be left to the priest at the altar, or the minister in the pulpit. It is too important even to be left to the theologian or liturgical expert laying down what worship is about. And, equally, music is far too important to be left to one person seated at the organ, or the enthusiastic choir-master, or the soprano who always gets the solos. Or the junior choir who have to be encouraged. And, finally, music is too precious to be left to the loudest voices 'in the pew' who know what they like, want what they like, and will make everyone else uncomfortable till they get it. All these, of course, have a role to play. The role of some will be functionally, if not spiritually, more central than the role of others, but the interplay, and proportion of these roles will vary from one place to another - will vary, indeed, to such a gigantic extent that it is virtually fruitless, certainly very difficult, to suggest general rules for the conduct of music in church. One fundamental point I hope to make in these lectures is that nothing kills the potential of music more stone dead than a conventional assumption as to who does what and how. Because if music is a general way of approaching reality, of dealing with life, of living, then there are as many approaches to music, and experiences of music, as there are sentient beings.

That is even more true if there is any validity to the even wider point I'm making, which is that music is not in essence to do with sound patterns, but with an apprehension of life which I will be content for the moment to label as lateral, intuitive, irrational. That is not to say it ignores the rational, the formal, the linear, the argumentative, the intellectual. Who could say that intellect was absent from a fugue of Bach, the sonata form of a Haydn symphony, the epic developments of a Beethoven symphony, the steel and silk counterpoint of a

Shostakovich symphony; but who could doubt that what is lacking in the equally clever mathematical computation of the brilliant music student who never becomes a great composer is an extra dimension and that extra dimension is of the essence: and that extra dimension can be in the simplest hymn tune or popular ballad. Looked at mathematically, a great song of Cole Porter, Irving Berlin or Lloyd Webber is probably not intricate enough to be academically interesting, though if you do analyse it it will possibly bear examination even on those terms. But what is the genius of it? And why is 'Still The Night' a great carol? Clive James has a nice phrase in one of his classic TV reviews in the Observer in the Seventies. He observes that humour is common sense, dancing. Let us say that music is: thinking, dancing. I say thinking advisedly, because if music is feeling only, it does degenerate; and you've only to switch on Radio Two or listen to certain evangelical or charismatic songs to know where that takes you.

Music, then, is not an objective pattern of sound waves available for hearing. It is what you hear. But also, music is not just what you hear. It is an amalgam of what you hear and the way you hear it. But even the what you hear element is wider than what we commonly call music.

Nowhere is this mutual interdependence of music and environment more obvious than in a great cathedral. You wander in on a dark afternoon in November. There is no choir, no service in progress, not even a choir rehearsal. A few tourists move slowly up the aisles in and out of shadows, sit in side chapels. Shafts of pale winter sunlight abseil down the nave from windows high in the tower. You sit in wonderment. Your spirit opens up to the unity in complexity of all that you see. More than that, your brain responds to the intellectual power of the environment. The massive forces matching gravity, exploiting it, playing with it, turn stone into counterpoint; the vast mythology is compressed into medieval glass, even though, being no longer medieval, you do not have the time to absorb it; subliminally it triggers your brain's capacity to recognise magical order. The whole experience is already a symphony, a tone-poem, a master fugue. Yet the organ hasn't sounded one

note. The only sounds are those arbitrary little bangs, thuds, and squeaks never absent from a huge living building. Then, quite unexpectedly, out of the blue, out of the shadows, out of the eternal *nihilo*, sounds a profound organ pedal note. It is quiet, a sixteen foot Bourdon perhaps, but it stirs something within you.

That note is pregnant with yet unborn implications. Although it is only one note, and so low that you can hardly identify it as a note in a scale, let alone a key which might contextualise it, in other words although it can hardly yet be said to be music, its vibrations steal over the vast shadowy structure, beginning to ebb and flow like waves. Well of course, they are sound waves - encroaching on every gap and space in the cathedral and within the network of your receptive senses. All this is but the work of seconds, yet in that time timeless apertures are opened. But what is it going to be? Bach, Caesar Franck, Herbert Howells? Like a flower opening to the sun, your inner ear has been triggered by a thousand messages connecting the tendrils of your spirit to the musical mouth of the eternal which a cathedral plus one organ note is. For just as music is not a sequence of notes, so an organ is not a collection of pipes. An organ is the instrument called the organ plus the instrument which is its echoing chamber, in this case the cathedral. But you are still waiting to hear what specific musical world is to unfold from that first penumbral stirring. A second note follows, a semitone up. Then a third, another semitone. This is going to be a chromatic adventure - Franck or Howells, somehow it feels too deliberately paced for Messiaen. But now, the fugitive harmonics are merging in the cathedral's resonance. The building is being slowly massaged into a soft perturbation. More notes follow. It is a chromatic scale.

By the time you have realised what is going on, namely that the organ tuner has come back after his pie and pint at the pub to continue his day's organ tuning work, it is too late to deconstruct your emotional response. Upon a few unmusical acoustic signals your imagination has created an edifice of expectation. You heard, in anticipation, musical landscapes opening out in the brains of Bach, Franck, and Howells. They

never actually took place, but for a while they might as well have, for, like the bee in the garden, the buzzing of this sixteen foot pipe was amplified and coloured in your brain by the whole environment. So in a timeless moment your whole being was responsive to a myth. It wasn't a con. A myth is not a trick, not an illusion. A myth is the world you live in, using all the materials that are available. In that sense music is myth and church music is liturgical myth. What is required to make the mythical potential come alive is not brilliance, but a willingness by average people to engage in risky alchemy.

Let me offer an example from the world of films, an appropriate enough medium for comparison, for you could argue that in the 20th Century film is the common liturgy. Television might seem a competitive candidate for such a title, but the specific requirements which liturgy imposes - coming together at a given time and place - are missing in television, quite apart from the atmospheric components of hush, dimmed lights, a cultic jargon, and a sense of expectation.

What does Australia say to you? 'Neighbours', of course. One has to time the switching on of the BBC 6 o'clock news to the second to avoid the last bars of the 'Neighbours' jingle which sticks to the aural palate like a cupful of saccharine. Australia also means Clive James and Dame Edna Everage, and the older ones amongst us recall other references. There is an old fashioned Australian tune called 'Waltzing Matilda'. It is an unofficial Australian National Anthem like 'Scots Wha Hae' or 'Auld Lang Syne'. It jogs along quite nicely.

In the 1950s I went with some fellow theological students to the Cameo Cinema in Edinburgh to see the film, 'On The Beach', based on the Neville Shute novel of that title. Apart from the psychologically intriguing fact that a couple of the students who were American walked out in protest at what they took to be an implied criticism of U.S.A. strategic nuclear policy, what remains with me after nearly forty years is one film sequence. The basic scenario is that there has been a devastating nuclear exchange in the Northern Hemisphere, from which all communication has ceased. The film takes place mainly in Australia, where people become gradually aware that the

radioactive fall-out will eventually reach them. An American submarine happens to be in Australian waters and eventually sets out northwards to San Francisco to discover what if any life is left. A wide aerial shot of the sub shows it as a frail little craft voyaging on a vast ocean, seeming to carry on its back not only the hopes and fears of the Southern Hemisphere but vicariously the sins of the human species. Is this the Apocalypse, or is there another chance? Ulysses setting out across the Ionian Sea did not carry such a burden. Is there a light, a life, a future, beyond the horizon? Is there a wife to return to, a city, a civilisation, anything?

I thought it a genuinely epic moment, that one wide shot of a little grey sub alone on a southern sea, and in that old film of the 50s it pressed on one's spirit with the urgency of an ominous reality. A true myth took shape in front of one's eyes. Now what music would you match to that? Siegfried's journey down the Rhine? The closing pages of 'Götterdämmerung'? Mahler's 'Song of the Earth'? Or a commissioned score from Tippett?

What we got was 'Waltzing Matilda'.

Ah, you laughed. You were meant to. But listen. Whoever wrote the score had woven 'Waltzing Matilda' as a leitmotif through the film, adapting it to different moods. That sort of thing can be wearisome. But at this moment the score pulled off an emotional coup. Pillars of brass emerging from surging seas of strings alchemised the tune into a massive adagio statement. Heard by itself it might have seemed pastiche Elgar or just genuine Hollywood; but then, you see, genuine Hollywood, as well as British film studios, can be impressive both in craftsmanship and emotional integrity. The import of the passage lay in its association with the immense implications of the story and its visual frame at that moment. Musically, the strength of the passage lay in the crunch discord at its emotional heart, resolved by heroic octaves in the bass.

You will expect me to say what I am going to say, so I will say it. It was hymn-like. And there is no reason why even quite modest organists cannot attempt to lift out of the treasure chest of our hymn books moments of like splendour. A hymn story not so epic? The Bible is a library of just such Odysseys. The

absence of film images? The preacher's task is to create them. But also many churches convey a sense of bigness and space; and the words of the hymns frequently carry resonant images. The music not always inspired? The hymnary contains hundred of tunes as good as or far better than 'Waltzing Matilda'. The urgency missing? In an average congregation there is more real-life drama, encompassing vast sadnesses, terrors, and joys, than 'Neighbours' will have in a year. The lack of ability of the organist? It doesn't take brilliance - just a willingness to take emotional risks.

If there is one fundamental message I would like to convey in these modest exercises of reflection, it is this: that each person and group is responsible for creating and living appropriate and possible myths, with whatever materials are available.

In the case of the Baird lectures, for example, I realised I had better practise what I'm preaching. The original idea was to make them thoroughly audio-visual. Having spent most of my working life in broadcasting, with all the riches of radio and video and film available, it was tempting to enrich lectures on church music by washing the eye with images and feeding the ear with all the finest organs, orchestras, choirs, massed congregations in Europe. But gradually, as I considered what all this was about, these ideas retreated down the shingle of the audio-visual world. In the end, it became a question of integrity and trust. Integrity in the sense of trusting one's materials. I was asked to give lectures. And I was given a beautiful hall in which to deliver words. Was it an environment for technical props? For an electronic organ? A piano was in residence, and that fitted the ambience of the exquisite room. But more than that, I considered that the average minister, organist, choir-leader, Sunday-school teacher, worshipper, starts with not more than this: a room, hall, auditorium, church. One instrument. An hour to fill. It would, I concluded, be gross cynicism to bring people into that place, fill their ears with lush sounds brought effortlessly from other times and places and distract their eyes with images of huge crowds brought together in, say, 'Songs of Praise', in circumstances totally abnormal for the normal congregation, and then after that send people back to what they

would consider to be reality.

And then I came to the kernel of the matter, that music is something wider than rows of notes. It is an approach to life, a way of conducting one's mind, and, therefore also, a way of using words. Which means, in passing, that the clergy's proper contribution is not to tell the organist or choirmaster how to do their job, but to use pulpit and altar professionalism to approach words in the spirit of that ultimate word, the logos, which I guess is more like music than anything else. As my thoughts unravel, we will open up the musical box in various ways; for the main part, however, words are the materials I must use.

Let me, then in this continuing word exploration of the width of the concept of music, lift the curtain on some contrasting liturgical events. Ah, you think, is he actually going to get near the subject of church music at last? No, probably not, at least not in the sense of addressing practical problems in a systematic way. What I am still trying to do is to show how music in and out of the liturgy interconnects, for the basic reason that life itself is liturgy. For those who, as Jesus said, have ears to hear, the rhythms of daily life contain within them the springs of eternal action.

First I take you to the parish of Ardersier, half way between Nairn and Inverness. I can't take you into the actual church where my uncle exercised for almost half a century his single and singular ministry; for a few years back, the church, originally in the centre of the rural parish, was made redundant. No longer, now, do villagers walk the two miles to join small farmers scattered around in the parish graveyard before being summoned in by the bell. So the church building was demolished. But I could take you to that still used graveyard and tell you of an Easter Sunday morning when my uncle opened up to me the central mystery of Christianity and the single most beguiling secret of the Gospels: the strangely close presence of the other.

The music that Sunday morning fell short of Sydney Smith's celestial prescription: eating *paté de foie gras* to the sound of trumpets. The organ was no organ, if contingent on

the *bene esse* of organ-ness is the possession of pipes. It was what my old friend and teacher Bill Minay called a hargroanium. It had transatlantic pretensions, burdened as it was with the title American organ. Which side, one wondered, was it on in the American Civil War? Did Scarlett O'Hara, singing Dixie, the sunset in her hair, ride it at the head of a weary Confederate rabble; or did this noble piece of brown furniture lead posses of Yankee troops to 'Mine Eyes Have Seen The Glory Of The Coming Of The Lord?' Certainly the instrument was battle weary. A handy tube of glue was a *sine qua non*, as in fluctuating temperatures the sharps and flats fell on to the floor like autumn leaves. To this Cinderella, my uncle played prince. After announcing the psalm or hymn, he processed down the pulpit steps and with his ramrod back and shock of white hair sat at the organ, pumped the footbellows, and led us in praise. Unlike President Ford, he could do two things at once, pump and play, but not three. The counting of verses had to be the work of another, to wit my aunt. Her task was to remove her spectacles at the beginning of the last verse. Occasional *lacunae* in this department led my uncle to extend hymns beyond the inspiration of the original author, and the congregation to become adept at inventing lyrics to cover these *ex gratia* verses.

You can picture the scene, then. Elements of bathos, inadequacy, even farce. A long way from the glories of Easter Sunday in Durham Cathedral, which I have three times experienced, or in Canterbury Cathedral, experienced once. Yet... this Ardersier Easter has pervaded my life for longer than these. You see, I have not yet told you all about the music. I haven't told you about the early summer bluebottle or bee drowsily buzzing on the window ledge during the prayers. I haven't mentioned the chirrupings and chortlings of early arrivals on the courting, mating, and nesting front. Or the tantalising drone of Lysanders and Beauforts circling Inverness Airport, then, during the war, a training aerodrome. Or the grass growing outside. Or the painful, tender vulnerability of cracked old country voices mingling with treble pipings from apple-cheeked children. But I've meanly kept the best till last. The organ itself. Yes, no pipes. Yes, in poor repair. Yes, played by

an eccentric clergyman, who, though a wondrous pastor was on the organ stool no John Langdon, Walter Blair, or George McPhee. Ah, but... this machine spoke so sweetly. Those who built it were craftsmen of their kind. Its pulchritudinous shimmerings conjured up lutes and flutes heard in a Sylvan scene. Or, at a pinch, it could have been the strings and flutes of a French cathedral organ floating out across a high Gothic transept at evening.

How can this be? Well, years later I had the curious experience of playing a harmonium under the direction of Sir Thomas Beecham. It was a performance of 'L'Enfance du Christ' by Berlioz. A choir of angels sang off-stage, to the side of the Usher Hall organ gallery - outside that very door through which the La Scala squadrons of brass had unleashed Verdi's hounds of hell. This time the sound was very different - the angels of Heaven, tender, sweet, and reassuring. For this the Berlioz score required, not any old harmonium, but a particular make which, in the event, had to be brought across from Paris just for this one performance under my reverential fingers. I'm not saying that the old Ardersier instrument was of that calibre of refinement, but I am pointing out that we categorise at our peril. Pipes good, everything else bad, will not serve in the real world, even the real world of art. My music professor Sidney Newman once said to us music students: "You'll spend 90% of your time moving music stands." This he meant as a parable. Begin with what you have. Dream, yes, but work your dreams through your basic material.

This then, was the musical background for the treasure that my uncle was to reveal. And what was this? I tread softly here, for I tread on the dreams of decades of summers, winters, Christmasses and Easters, shimmering cadences of emotional cloud wisping across the sky of one's life till they merge at the edge of one's imaginative horizon with those first intimations of immortality of which one hesitates to speak lest they crumble in the mouth.

But, simply, my uncle opened the Bible and talked. He read the story of the meeting on the Emmaus Road. He spoke of friendship. He said that the other, the friend we need, is always

there, with us, in the presence of others, or alone, invisibly. It was as simple as that. The universe is not an enemy, but a friend. It was as simple as the music we had sung, as transparent as the windows through which I saw the clouds bundle along and the birds cavort. It was as artless as the highest art. So it has stayed with me for ever. Do not, therefore, tell me that a renewal of the magic of church music requires enormous resources, any more than you can persuade me that a renewed mission in Scotland requires either Billy Graham or a new "strategy for outreach".

But next, I take you to St. Giles Cathedral. The contrast could not be more bizarre. Easter Sunday in St. Giles was a packed house, with (in the fifties) a still healthy organ in full cry. Happiness was a Herrick high on horn-piping Handel and a Harry hilariously hoisting hymns into hypostasis. Harry was Harry Whitley, the new minister, and thereby hangs this tale. The tradition in St. Giles had been that at the conclusion of that part of the Great Communion Service which precedes the carrying in of the elements, that part of the congregation which did not intend to partake of communion was invited to leave; at which point a substantial quantity of bums separated from seats, some belonging to tourists, some to conscientious abstainers, some just to those more inclined to wrap their tongue around a sparkling G. & T., or a sherry with more bite than a quaff of dull and serious communion wine. Harry Whitley did not only recognise the liturgical tawdriness of all this, but he felt deep down in his bones - and he was not one to disobey his bones - that at Easter this bucking of the climactic liturgical act of the Christian year, this breaking of its rhythmic spine, was an act of sacrilege, an act ultimately of unreality. I don't think it is going too far to say that he felt that to kill stone dead a liturgical movement that sweeps by inexorable logic of theology, word, poetry and choreography towards its crisis in the re-breaking of bread and re-spilling of wine, and thus through divine catharsis to redemptive hope and resurrected living - to kill that for reasons of convenience was to re-crucify Christ. So he announced his intention to carry the service through from beginning to end without a break. Many in the Kirk Session were

aghast. The Senior Minister, Charles Warr, shook his head. Chickens, it was implied, were coming home to roost. Even Whitley supporters went slightly green at the gills. It will be chaos, was the general advice. But for Harry more was at stake than human order, even liturgical human order.

I was in the organ loft that extraordinary Easter morning, and heard and saw it all. The atmosphere was electric. At eleven, the choir processed and Herrick, taking the organ by the scruff of its then considerable neck, heaved it into the front line of the Apocalypse, all guns blazing, the sky lit up by tracering mixtures, St. Giles' old pillars pulverised by pedal panegyrics. Lifted straight out of this gorgeous organistic mayhem like the morning star itself released from the craw of creation, the Whitley voice flashed skyward in a cry of joy indistinguishable from pain. "The Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed."

I seldom, if ever, heard a declamation of such primeval force. All in Harry Whitley's journey of faith that he was on this day staking on an act of liturgical recklessness went into that moment of cosmic exposure: for when any human spirit stakes all, it is the cosmic in all its divine brilliance that is exposed. And that is music indeed.

The service, lifted by that rare pair of liturgical twins, the organist Bunney and minister Whitley, climbed through one ecstatic moment after another. Then came the place for the usual break. But this time no announcement about leaving. No invitation for those who wished communion to come up into the choir and make a nice orderly congregation, and the rest to go home for lunch. Just no commercial break at all. The Elders processed out and back in with the elements. Doubt and confusion arose. So did people. As Harry proceeded with the Great Statements and Prayers, more and more 'sightseers, trapped into a commitment they did not wish to make, began like late theatregoers to push past knees and make for the exits. The lonely voice was at times drowned out by a bustle like Glasgow Airport on a Bank Holiday.

I will draw a veil over the confusion. The post-mortem was painful. I can only declare how I saw it then. For me it was one of the sublime liturgical experiences of my life. I have heard the

Communion Service read hundreds of times, and have read it myself more than a few. I've heard it read quietly, loudly, read like a telephone directory, like Rabbin Burns, like Pavarotti, like Adolf Hitler, like Alastair Burnett, read blandly, hysterically, with dignity, warmth, compassion, sensitivity. But never did I hear it cried out of the centre of chaos, for the sake of an eternal principle, that if we were worth dying for, He is worth being broken for.

In other words, the breaking of the bread is meaningless, pointless, is a non-reality, if He is not there Himself. And if He is there, we must attend to what it is that we are doing. And that, in certain circumstances, means pursuing the logic of the theme through whatever discord is required to achieve a harmony which actually has meaning. For without potential discord there is no music, only confectionery. At the end of that service, I was exhausted, as we all were, for it was as if the statue in the cemetery in Don Giovanni had come alive and opened a trapdoor into an ultimate dimension where the choices were real. The liturgy like the statue, had come alive. Jesus was crucified, but He was - perhaps - risen.

Points remain to be made about this. The first is that any attempt, simple or complex, quiet or spectacular, to be true to the deepest reality, to let free that deep magic which is C.S. Lewis's phrase for the nakedly supernatural, is fraught with risk. It is a condition of real artistic management that the material may finish up managing you. Second, in the midst of this turbulence, the most exact description I can give of what I felt inside myself is silence. I was transported into an area of seriousness from which all triviality was excluded. If music, words, actions, liturgy, faith, could be this serious, then there was nothing left to say.

Third, you don't have to share the Whitley view of liturgy, of communion, even of Christ, to allow the general point that whatever your hunch about a matter of religion, art, or life, sometimes the only way to back that hunch is to go away over the top. I am a great respecter of those who go over the top, because they are frequently disparaged by the Pharisees of their group, community, or profession, so they go over, more often

than not, alone. Yet, not alone, for - fourth - the quiet experiences in the Ardersier country church and the turbulent experience in St. Giles were the same experience, the Easter experience of another being there, of something going on that could not be fully explained by a time and motion study of the events physically and intellectually taking place. Again, this is not a matter for Christians only. All art is about this. If art is not about that Real Presence, it is not art at all. Music is about that 'other', potentially beside and within. Music is about a sometimes frightening, but ultimately friendly universe.

In more recent times, my wife and I attended Easter Sunday morning service in Paisley Abbey. We went there, not for what we thought we might get out of it, but because we wanted to support the minister who in the preceding year had experienced a wife with cancer and the break-up of his marriage. Ministers being goldfish in bowls called Manses, everyone in the congregation was fully apprised of all this. The atmosphere in the packed Abbey had, therefore, a certain frisson. Being the Abbey, the music under George McPhee was of great distinction. The minister being Johnston McKay the prayers and sermon were of an equal distinction. All that was inspiring enough. What made the occasion breath-taking was the sense of the bread of truth being broken. The preacher's voice appeared to break on at least one occasion, yet the urgency of his kerugmatic and pastoral message was not sentimentalised. As a result, the singing of choir, and especially of congregation broke through Scottish reserve. There was a sensation of rising, rising through and rising above, pain, defeat, and all the big and little deaths of our lives. Having gone to support, we came away supported. There had been another Presence there. The grace to be vulnerable had transmuted into the courage to be: and this had alchemised the service from being a memorial to an Easter of long, long ago into being a new Easter, here, now.

Of the enchanted buildings whose doors have admitted my entry to liturgical other worlds, none is more famous than Durham Cathedral and none more infamous in our times than its bishop. On the Easter weekend of 1988, I was in York on film business. Having spent the Good Friday vigil in York Minster,

I had an impulse early on the Sunday morning to bowl up the A1 to attend the Matins and Communion Services at Durham. Both services turned out to be inspirational musically and kerugmatically. The then Dean at the first, and the Bishop at the second, preached with clarity and fire. When three months later I lay in intensive care fighting for the survival of a cardiac system that was trying to obey genetic instructions to despatch me, the remembered clasp of the Bishop of Durham's hand as he handed me the wafer was among those weapons that won for me another round of life.

It was therefore in a mood of grateful pilgrimage that the following Easter I climbed up the hill to the same two services in Britain's most sublime Norman building. But there was acid in the air. That very morning, the Bishop had surfaced as headline news. Yet again he was held to be denying the actuality of Christ's resurrection. His alleged apostasy was all over the Sunday papers. (The Easter Monday editorials in quality papers were even heavier in judgement). I had little doubt, as was later confirmed, that he had been set up by the media to provide an Easter story, but I was still perturbed. David Jenkins used a limited openness of language to reformulate eternal truths - 'always reforming' being a Reformation principle; was such theological activity now fair game not only for the lynch mob of journalists, but for apoplectic politicians and dyspeptic churchmen?

Twenty-four hours later, Jenkins recovered his resilience, but as he climbed the pulpit steps to preach he seemed vulnerable, and indeed his voice broke near the end. What you cannot mistake, after a lifetime of church attendance, is atmosphere. I was surrounded by a thousand people who were on the edges of their mental seats. The sermon was four things: witty - the funny asides drew that kind of instant response only obtainable from an audience that is with you; exegetically serious; eschatologically urgent (the theme was that God has raised Jesus from the dead to judge us at the end of all things); and, at its climax, evangelically emotive in its confession of belief. This address was not *about* resurrection. It *was* resurrection. That, the vast congregation made clear, in the warmth with which

every one of the them was determined to shake the Bishop's hand at the door.

All this, however, for present purposes is but background to the musical happening. The sound of that throng singing the Easter hymns with the support of the organ in full throat was, from the outset, never short of wonderful. After the sermon, however, there was a sea-change. The Cathedral organist, James Lancelot, finished with conducting the choir downstairs, nipped up to the organ loft. There are a number of explanations of what followed. It is possible that the Assistant Organist had laid by in the loft a crate of malt whisky, some casks of Amontillado, or even just a bottle of claret, and that the final hymns and voluntary were played upside down by their four feet, their right hands being busy toasting the Bishop with a glass or two, while their left hands threw incendiary devices into the *Tuba Mirabilis*. Or, enthused by end of term Easteritis, they were jumping up and down on trampolines attached to the manual keyboards and pedals. The only flaw in these otherwise persuasive scenarios is that the wildness of the emotional conflagration was expressed in playing of such brilliance that what burned off the walls of the nave and lifted the central tower into orbit was not grotesque noise but glorious music. What it expressed was: the grave is open. The congregation lifted into orbit with it. That roar of a multitude transfigured by love into an epiphany swirled around the stone arches before flying through the hole where the tower had been. The tumult went rolling over the fields of England and the Pennine hills to Southwick's pearl of a church in a little clearing in the trees, where these days by the Solway I find a special silence, up over the crowns of St. Giles, and Paisley Abbey, and down into the graveyard by the Moray Firth where Ardersier Church used to stand. There, the sound went wherever it is that sounds go when they die. It was the end of all things indeed; but this was an eschaton where the last trump was happy. I have no doubt that the Jenkins sermon, rising out of its context of a beleaguered, partly broken preacher, raised all of us there that day, and that the Cathedral organist, caught up existentially in that breakage and resurrection, lifted us into an apogee. Speaking subjec-

tively, at the crowning climax of the last hymn, with tears on not my face only, what I heard in my heart was not any sound at all, but the wonder of an absolute silence.

You know how it is when you come out of the cinema. You have been absorbed in a world, and suddenly you're back in the other one of streets, busy pavements, bus queues, rain, or even more disorientating, sunlight. As we emerge from the liturgical 'highs' I have described, we should perhaps look in sober daylight at a couple of potential *caveats* to all I have been saying, and the way I've been saying it.

The first may seem tendentious, not to say trivial; but it might be as well for me to say it before someone thinks it. I've been using a certain kind of language to express experiences which I would describe as spiritual. Others would say they were merely emotional. Others again would be more precise. Raking about in their Freudian dustbins, they would point out that the language I used to describe climaxes of excitement in St. Giles and Durham was not a million miles from the kind of prose that might be deployed by an excitable novelist to describe - well, you know, the kind of thing which used to be covered in the cinema by crashing waves and cameras angling up to the sky. Now, of course, you, and you, and you, would never entertain such a thought, but over there, behind the pillar... so let me just deal with it. Although Freud's simplistic, if not downright distorted tunnel vision into the unconscious is now as vulnerable as Newton's view of a mechanical universe, the trickle down of its assumptions has affected popular thinking, and lies, I suspect, behind some of the latent scepticism about religion and liturgy in our secular culture.

For example, theological students have told me they are too embarrassed to sing certain devotional hymns because of the supposed psychological naïvety of the author. One specifically mentioned was John Newton's 'How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds', with Freudian toes particularly curling over the verse, 'Jesus, my Shepherd, Husband, Friend'. Gosh, how awkward, to have old Sigmund up there in the rafters, lasering into our subconscious, to report neurotic defects to - well, to whom?

Does God mind? This is on the verge of being such rubbish that one is inclined to dismiss it. But, as I shall keep saying, if we are to recover our emotional nerve in the matter of church music, then we have to recover it on a broad front, and not be forced on to the defensive on matters emotional, for without emotion music is worth zilch.

We'll return to this general question again. Just to dispose of the psychoanalytical twitchers, let me say that the great central tower of Durham Cathedral is not only a phallic symbol, it is also, by happy chance, the great central tower of Durham Cathedral; and the Usher and McEwan Halls, where I describe other climactic experiences, are not only, being round, conceivably (it's not very likely, but I'm making a case) suggestive of those pleasant objects referred to in the Song of Solomon in a number of lyrical ways, they are also, in the real world I inhabit, the Usher Hall and the McEwan Hall. When God composed His Creation, He integrated it in such a way that an infinite number of micro and macro elements mirror each other in harmony and counterpoint. Those who seek to undermine the open experience and expression of spiritual uplift by recourse to psychological formulae achieve either what George McLeod has often referred to with pardonable exasperation as 'analysis paralysis', or, more likely, *reductio ad absurdum*.

There is, however, a more serious point to be attended to.

That is that a substantial number of people would say that everything I've been saying so far is absolute codswallop. Many trained in philosophy, linguistics and music would think that my use of language has been sloppy to the point of distorting all the categories that make rigorous inter-disciplinary dialogue meaningful, that my whole word and world view is hopelessly romantic and out of date, and that my anecdotal approach to the subject is worthy of a coffee table compendium of children's addresses, but not of a serious approach to the aesthetic and practical problem of church music.

To hear this said would be wonderfully reassuring, suggesting that possibly I am, after all, on the right lines. Not because they are wrong and I am right, but because in this matter there is no right or wrong, only the freedom to be true to one's

experience. Language should not be an army to deploy defensively or aggressively against a foe. That is what Jesus had to contend with as the scribes and Pharisees tried to box Him in. Language is a door to open. But I recognise that such criticism levelled against my approach would be entirely justified on its terms. What it would say would be in essence a direct rebuttal. Where I say music is much wider than sound patterns, it is a way of listening to the cosmos, and by implication, of finding meaning there, they would say the whole point of music is to be meaningless: it is just notes. It is not a transferable experience. They would possibly say the same of poetry, certainly of painting. The visual experience is itself. It is not 'about' something else.

I respect that view and the rigour of the analysis that protects it. But in my assessment all that does is to push the meaning argument one stage back. If music is only notes, why do we bother, for example, to spend millions of pounds to build the new Glasgow Royal Concert Hall?

But I am happy to answer the point with one phrase of the so recently departed Leonard Bernstein. Speaking not theoretically, but as a master magician in the arena of practical music making, he once said, "Music is a metaphor for living."

At the beginning of this chapter, I compared religious music, first to a cool summer drink, then to a warming winter cuppa. I then said water is actually what we need to survive at all; and some form of non-linear expression, such as music, is as essential for the spiritual life as water is for the physical. I finish however, with wine. What goes with the broken bread is spilled wine. What flows in our veins and is pumped by our heart to give us a full bodied life is blood. In the end, music that is not full-blooded is dead. I hope I have said enough to show that to be full-blooded is not necessarily to be loud, or big, or quiet, or this, or that, or anything. It is just to be alive. We may not be here for a purpose. We may be meaningless fragments amidst the shards of the stars. But, even so, each of us has the vocation, however hidden, to pick up sparkles from the star that made us, those sparkles that move in our veins and surface in electrical impulses in our brains. And I hope you can see that these

sparkles hidden within us all make up the music of our life. That is our life. Our life is, or is meant to be, music.

In the film 'On The Beach', as the lonely submarine passed on a Sunday morning though the Golden Gate, San Francisco lay around, untouched by bombs, but dead, silent. Except for one sound. A radio signal in morse. Though the lifeless streets the American submariners traipsed, desperate to meet just one human survivor. When found, it was discovered to be a bit of morse apparatus operating on its own. That was sound, but not music. Powerful though it is, that is not the Christian myth. We say something else. Music is not gilt on the gingerbread. It is the metal that does not corrupt, stored against the recession of light, health, mortal breath. Music appears to end in silence. But as we pass through the gate of that silence, out of that non-mythical furnace from which all myths come we will hear something - not an undecodable message tapped out by a dead universe, but that which makes the divine human and the human divine: an ultimate music, a good magic - trustworthy alchemy - a voice of redeemable and redeeming gold.