

The Songline of God

'If music be the food of love, play on.' said Shakespeare. And we know why. Music accompanies love because music gives expression as nothing else can to the emotions, the feelings, the subtleties of love. Words help of course. But if you set them to music, so much the better, as the record companies know.

And it's not just love that feeds on music. Where would we be in grief without the soul music of the blues, the lament aria, the funeral dirge? Or politics, with its national anthems, stately music, coronation suites. Or war. The stirring march, the victory anthem, the last post.

And religion. How could we begin to say what we need to say about connection to the deep mystery that surrounds our life without music? Praise, prayer, worship cry out for music and in music. As the psalmist said: 'praise him with the timbrel and dances; praise him upon the strings and pipe.' How else?

People have debated since the dawn of time about what is most basic in human experience. The Gospel of John goes for the word. 'In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God'. In the final analysis, this view thinks that life is connected with the mystery that grounds it by word, by thought, by language. Goethe, the famous German poet, disagreed. Up stream from the word, he believed, was the act. 'In the beginning was the deed', was Goethe's view. We are fundamentally actors in the presence of a God

who acts. Still others opt for feeling. ‘In the beginning is felt awareness’, they say. Love if you like. Love is the basic truth of the human journey. And love is the truth of God.

But, of course, still others argue for the musical note. Not word, not deed, not love, but music—rhythm, harmony, song are the basic stuff of being. Pythagoras and his followers spoke with reverence of ‘the music of the spheres’. The harmonies which make the world go round. The songlines of God.

Well, we don’t have to choose between them. Each holds and implies the others. Word, deed, love, music. They belong together. And they tell us what is deepest and best in human life. And also what is deepest in the being of God. A friend of mine once said that the Blessed Trinity is best understood as a jazz trio with the Holy Spirit on tenor sax. She didn’t say what the other two members--the Father and the Son--were supposed to be playing. And when I asked, she replied, ‘work it out for yourself, you’re the theologian’. I’ll leave you to ponder that one.

I don’t need to argue the case in this company for the central importance of music in life. You all know it, love it, play it. I want to celebrate the significance of music in life, and especially in life as we are experiencing it in Australia. It seems to me that in recent years in many ways our community has become colder, more mechanical, more technological. Not that I am against such values. They are important. But somehow, as a nation, we have increasingly been asked to believe that the most important value in human affairs is

economic efficiency. And that does seem at best restricting, at worst destructive, of the human spirit.

There is a mystery at the centre of a life that will not be measured by economic calculations. It feels stifled and constricted by such bean counting. It looks for colour, it longs for freedom, it courts wildness, openness and mystery. ‘The wind blows where it wills,’ said Jesus talking to Nicodemus--a politician by the way--who came to ask him what matters most in human life. The wind of the spirit. The wind of God. The wind that moves, that sighs, that roars in the depths of the human heart. That wind, said Jesus, blows where it wills. You hear the sound of it. But cannot tell whence it comes or whither it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. Everyone who feels something of the mystery of God. This spirit of God, this music of God, is more than what we can name, or buy, or predict, or purchase. It gives to human life zest, newness, creativity.

This is what music so wonderfully expresses. It blows where it wills. It cannot be held captive. Or locked in formulas. Or measured in dollars. It is life and freedom, harmony and dissonance, blues and folk, improvisation and score. It is the music of the spheres and the songs of young love. It is you and me. At its most profound it is the songline of God in our midst.

Some time ago I came across a musical parable. An Organisation and Methods unit, so the story goes, visited a university to examine the effectiveness of the workings of the Vice Chancellor’s Office. The visit coincided with one of the concerts of the Philharmonic Orchestra, to which the VC was in the habit of going.

On this occasion he couldn't go, but with a burst of generosity, gave his ticket to the leader of the O and M unit. The main work that night was Schubert's Unfinished Symphony. When he asked his visitor the following day how he had enjoyed the concert, the VC was surprised to be handed a type written report. It read:

(i) For considerable periods the four oboe players had nothing to do. Their number should be reduced and their work should be more evenly spread over the whole concert, thus eliminating inefficient activity.

(ii) All 12 violins were playing identical notes. This is unnecessary duplication. The staff of this section should be drastically cut, and if a loud sound is really needed this should be obtained by means of an electronic amplifier.

(iii) Much effort was absorbed in the playing of demi-semiquavers. This is an excessive refinement. I recommend that all notes be rounded up to the nearest semiquaver. If this were done it should be possible to use trainee operators, at considerable savings.

(iv) There is too much repetition of musical passages. No useful purpose is served by repeating with horns a passage that has already been handled by the strings. If all such redundant passages were eliminated, the whole concert time of two hours could be reduced to 20 minutes and there would be no need of an interval. If the composer had attended to these matters he would probably have been able to finish his symphony.

That says something to our times. We have organisation and method, efficiency and economy. But we're in danger of losing touch with soul. We are looking to reduce the number of violin players. And we miss the music of the spheres. We are concerned to make everything count. And we fail to hear the songline of the spirit, that pours forth from the depths of history, from our fragile humanity, and from the profound glory of the world we inhabit. We reduce the great jazz concert of God to a few puffed notes on the tin whistles of our technical efficiency. And it's a crying shame!

I don't mean that religion and music are the same thing. They're not. Many great musicians would want none of such a link. But I do know this: that religion without music lacks sensitivity and colour, feeling and mystery. And perhaps music with religion lacks depth and eternal meaning. Religion without music is deaf and music without religion is ephemeral.

But whatever we think of the match, music and religion agree that there is more to life than meets the eye, or the purse. There is a mystery and splendour at the heart of our journey that is more than we can put into words, more than we can express in deeds, and more than we can experience in feeling. Though we need all three. But along with words, deeds, and feelings, we need music to express the mystery which exceeds and yet infuses them all. The mystery which faith calls God. Which Jesus called the Spirit.

A jazz trio with the Holy Spirit on tenor sax? What of the other two? I'll tell you my choice. I think God the Father, the creator, is on

double bass. He gives reality its fundamental rhythm, the pulse of life, the movement of energy. And the Christ figure? He's on piano in my scheme of things. The one that gives our human song sharpness and shape. And, as my friend said, the Holy Spirit plays sax. It is the Spirit of God that spreads the sense of the whole musicality of being warmly, freely, hopefully to all who have ears to hear and hearts to feel.

'The wind blows where it wills. You hear the sound of it. But you cannot tell whence it comes or whither it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

Graeme Garrett