

12th October 2008

"Give me the '*making of the songs of a nation*' and I care not who makes the laws." This statement was made by Andrew Fletcher in 1707 in Saltoun, England, at the Convention Concerning a Right Regulation of Government for the Common Good of Mankind. This is a powerful statement suggesting that music is a very powerful commodity.

When we look at the verses of the OT reading and particularly if we carry on a little, what do we notice? We see that as Moses and Joshua were walking down the mountain, and before they reached the camp, they heard a great deal of *noise*. Joshua heard this *noise* and thought that there was a battle going on in the camp. Moses on the other hand, observed something else. He said, and the best translation of the Hebrew text is: "It is not the noise of the shout of victory, nor the noise of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing I hear."

Revelry...sounds of war in victory or sounds of war in defeat perhaps.

It must have been pretty poor singing!!!!

This year marks the 50th Anniversary of one of the greatest composers of the 20th century... Ralph Vaughan Williams, today being his birthday. He was English to the core. What is more, he professed himself first to be an atheist and then later in life an agnostic. Despite this and to honour him, you may notice that a number of his hymn tunes and anthems are included in our services today.

He also often wrote in, (what was called when I was at University,) a *neo-modal* style, where the ancient tones of plainsong were the building blocks of harmony and where tonality is 'shovelled' from one place to another without so much as a 'by your leave'... but also with stunning effect. '*Let all the world*' this morning is a fairly good example of this.

At University College London, we had a very plummy history of music tutor called Joan Kemp Potter. Fabulous, learned, captivating... and totally OTT.

One day in a seminar she simply said ... sit and listen.

She put some music on a rickety tape machine

'Afterwards,' she said, 'each of you tell me how you feel!'

Bolshy Precentor to be...used some fairly rude language to himself at that point, convinced he wasn't going to feel anything, let alone show it.

The strains of Vaughan Williams 'Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis' wafted its way through the sound system... it 'wafted' for all of 18 minutes.

The music came to an end, and the effect was remarkable...a stunned silence, several uttered words like 'WOW', several others including me were in bits reaching for the Kleenex.

Music can create a mood or complement the mood of other things... for instance 'worship' music can make or mar any act of same.

A Greek named Cassiodorus suggested how different plainsong modes encourage certain moods in the listener. He said the Dorian mode is related to modesty and purity, Phrygian is supposed to stimulate fierce combat, Aeolian induces sleep, Ionian, he suggests raises IQ and the desire for heavenly things, and Lydian mode *soothes the soul when one is oppressed*.

Bring on the Lydian I say!!!

Other Greeks such as Orpheus, Aesculapius, Plato and even Pythagorus saw music as a healing agent... the latter calling it 'musical medicine'.

Music can also disturb...

Recently here at a magnificent concert, two fabulous pianists combined in the piano duet version of the Rite of Spring by Stravinski. Fabulous but not easy listening. However, Stravinski could not have foreseen the effect on the audience at its first performance.

The response was opposition, and actually a riot broke loose.

A witness to this incident, Carl van Vechten, says recalling the disturbance, "The young man seated behind me in the box stood up during the course of the ballet to enable himself to see more clearly. The intense excitement under which he was labouring betrayed itself presently when he began to beat rhythmically on top of my head with his

fists.”

I am not sure that myself or indeed any of us would be impressed by such a reaction here during worship and its attendant music.

“But what is the purpose of the music in a congregational setting?”

Congregational singing serves to draw people together, the people are doing something aesthetic together; hymns are sung which have a text which means something, a tune which either complements or alternatively ‘denies’ the text, and at a whole host of different levels and for different reasons for either professed singer or those ‘trying hard’ evokes an emotional reaction in the singer...and that, whether we understand the music or text or not.

There are some hymns which although technically possible simply cannot have another tune apart from the one which is ‘always sung’ otherwise some of what I would call the *‘emotional story’* of the thing disappears.

Choral anthems on the other hand appear to lead the worshipper to reflect on religious beliefs and values and their implications for them as individuals by their active listening. Again the type of music set to these words can either make or mar the text. In the anthem this morning, which the President feels that he needs to actually sing with the other basses of the choir, try to reflect on how the music complements the text and the emotional effect it may have on you.

Music can effect us in ways we find hard to express... or indeed understand, often speaking to us at level which is beyond words, for example the VW *Fantasia* effect on me as a student.

Musically here at the Cathedral:

we aim for inclusivity and standards.

we aim to help shape young people’s minds and souls in appreciating how the variety and beauty of that which they sing or play points them to the ‘variety’ and beauty of the Creator Himself.

we aim to look outwards to those who simply do not have such a facility through the Choir Outreach Project, and look inwards to train, to the best of our ability, those who become part of us as musicians within this foundation.

we aim to encourage **all** to appreciate the breadth of what music is in itself, and which speaks to our souls in so many different ways and at so many different times of our lives.

To finish, I leave you with a question... a question related specifically to VW.

I have never quite understood, how someone who created such beautiful music which most certainly points me to the beauty of the Creator, and someone who was steeped in the church music of his day veered between being an atheist and an agnostic.

Answers on a post-card please.. it would solve one of the greatest mysteries of my life thus far!

Canon Stephen Foster