

An inspired partnership: exploring music in worship

Transcripts of the reflections in the opening evening in the "Music in Worship" series at Holy Sepulchre, with links to recordings of the music sung and played during the evening¹

opening prayer (sung):

Come Holy Ghost (Thomas Shorter)

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/come-holy-ghost/1345875087?i=1345875504>

Talk

Introduction

the talk began with the blowing of a shofar

You may be wondering why I chose to start what I have to say by blowing an animal horn trumpet. The answer is that this is a *shofar*, the type of trumpet that was used in worship throughout the Old testament, and it reminds us of the ancient link between music and worshipping God. From the Psalms of David to the music of Hillsong, with Thomas Tallis in between, music has always been at the heart of our worship.

That link is something that is close to our heart as a church. As many of you will know, we are the Musicians' Church, and a key part of our vision for what that means for us involves taking a lead in exploring and helping equip others in music in worship. We are fortunate ourselves to be able to have excellent music across two very different streams and styles of worship (choral and contemporary) and that helps us in doing that.

We are clearly not alone in having excellent music and worship, and my sense is that there is a real flourishing at the moment in music and worship across a number of different styles. Much of that excellence though can be unreflective, and there is far less theological reflection accompanying that excellence in practice. *Why* do music and worship go so well together? *Why* does music inspire and deepen our worship? *What* is our theology of worship? *Why* do we use the particular styles of music that we do? How do different styles of music aid our worship in different ways? What other forms of creative expression, like dance, could also be used in worship alongside our music? Can there be a link between music in worship and music outside of a worship context? There are so many different questions and themes that can be explored!

The vision of this *Music in Worship* series is to create a forum in which those questions can be explored alongside practical excellence in music in worship. Each evening will normally last around 60-90 minutes, and consist of roughly 75% music and 25% spoken reflections interspersed with the music. Both the music and the reflections will explore a particular theme around music in worship. We hope to publish transcripts of all the talks on our website, so that they provide a resource for others. While this first evening is put on by us, we do very much hope that over time we will have a range of visiting musicians and speakers to join with us in exploring things from a range of different angles.

This first evening will particularly explore some introductory questions about how music and worship fit together, alongside music from our choir, our contemporary band, and our organ scholar, Marko Sever.

I want to start with three pieces of music which set parts of a spoken service ('Evening Prayer' from *the Book of Common Prayer*) to music. They are a set of preces and responses, and a Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis. Can I encourage you as you listen to pray and worship with the words and music, but also to think: how is this different from just speaking the words out?

¹ Where possible we have included links to our choir singing the pieces of music referenced, but in other cases we have simply included links to good recordings of other bands or choirs.

Music:

Preces and responses (William Byrd)

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/preces-and-responses/1189650742?i=1189651055>

Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis (Henry Purcell)

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/evening-service-in-g-minor-z-231-magnificat/96153985?i=96154129>

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/evening-service-in-g-minor-z-231-nunc-dimittis/96153985?i=96154136>

Talk

Why Music?

The blessing of music in worship

I love those pieces! They are beautiful and evocative. For me though they are also so much more than that. Somehow the music helps me to go deeper with God and in my worship of him. I think of a famous saying attributed to St. Augustine, “the one who sings prays twice.”² What does that mean? What do we think is happening?

When I use music in my worship, that music helps me to engage not just my mind, but also my heart and soul, and it does so in a way that I often struggle to do without music. I pray twice, once intellectually and once emotionally. Theologically and spiritually I think that that is really important. Jesus told us that the greatest commandment is this: “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord you God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength.”³ So often we struggle with the fullness of that, managing to engage with God with our minds, but struggling to do so on an emotional and spiritual level, with our heart, soul and strength. Music helps us with that, helping us to put this command fully into practice and love God with all that we are and all that we have.

That is not automatic, my mind and heart can both be elsewhere no matter how beautiful the music, and we need to be careful not to overstate this. If used right though, and if our hearts are focussed on God, then music is a wonderful tool and aid to help us engage our hearts and souls more deeply in worship to God.

Let me unpack this a bit more by looking at one of the places in which the Bible speaks specifically about music – and there are a lot! The passage I have in mind is from Ephesians 5v18-20:

“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”

There are two elements to what Paul says here that I want to highlight. The first is to go back to what I have just been saying, and talk about how music helps us to *express* our love and worship to God. In the passage Paul talks about singing and making music in our *hearts* to the Lord. This connection between music and our heart response to God is not a new idea that I have dreamt up this evening (if it was I would encourage you to be sceptical of it). Paul recognises the ways in which music can help us to express our love and thankfulness, our worship, to God. It is perhaps interesting to note that this seems to be borne out in church history, and many of the greatest moments in the history of music in worship are associated with great revivals (for instance, the hymn writing of Charles Wesley).

² There is some debate as to where this reference actually comes from, and it appears to be summary (rather than a quotation) of a passage in Augustine’s *Enarratio in Psalmum*, see <http://wdtprs.com/blog/2006/02/st-augustine-he-who-sings-prays-twice/>

³ Mark 12v29-30 (NIV)

I think that Paul also goes further than that in what he says though. He not only highlights the ways in which music can help us *express* our love for God, what he says also highlights how music can help us to *engage* with God more fully. The focus of what Paul is saying in these verses is on being filled with the Holy Spirit, and music is introduced within the context of the command to ‘be filled with the Spirit’. In fact, music is first mentioned as part of that command – in other words there is a direct connection between the two, and “speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit” is something that helps us put the command to be filled with the Spirit into practice.

Again, it is probably important to highlight that this connection is not automatic. Paul was no doubt well aware that we can use music in all kinds of ways that are not about God, and indeed drunken singing may well have been one of the things that was in his mind as a counterfeit of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of the passage. I wonder whether a helpful illustration here is of an amplifier (since we are on a musical theme!). An amplifier increases the volume, but does not create anything. Likewise, music does not automatically connect us to God or make us think of him – but it can help and amplify what is already in our hearts, and make us more open to being filled by his Holy Spirit.

Music helps us both to *express* our love and worship to God and to *engage* more fully with God. I would like to turn now to thinking about how different types and styles of music can do that in different ways. In the passage in Ephesians 5, Paul talks about a glorious variety; “psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit.” We are now going to change styles completely, and have three pieces led by our contemporary worship band.

Music:

What a beautiful name (Brooke Ligertwood and Ben Fielding, Hillsong Worship)

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/what-a-beautiful-name/1152796221?i=1152796312>

How great is our God (Chris Tomlin)

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/how-great-is-our-god/1061119507?i=1061122333>

Blessed be your name (Matt Redman)

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/blessed-be-your-name/1005930050?i=1005930647>

Talk

What music?

Exploring different styles in worship

Again, I love those pieces. The style may seem very different to the choral worship we had earlier, but my core reaction is the same – I love them, and they help me to worship God. I often say to people that while we have two very different styles of worship in our music, the underlying values are the same – my line is “different styles, but the same Jesus!”

And yet, while the core of both styles is worshipping Jesus, there is something very different about the way in which we go about doing that in the different streams. I’m sure your experience of the two types of worship was very different, and the way in which you engaged with God was also therefore different. That’s something that we can view with suspicion, separating out into different camps depending on what style we prefer. At best we simply say we don’t like another style, at worst we can simply be critical.

Yet, in this passage in Ephesians Paul encourages a range and diversity in musical style, telling his readers to use “psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.” I think that he points towards the ways in which different musical styles can have different strengths, and that is something that we often appreciate far too little. That

is certainly something that is a feature of music elsewhere in the Bible. I think particularly of the range of different types of songs recorded in the Psalms. We may no longer have the music the songs were sung to, but I do not believe that a song of celebration and praise, like Psalm 150, was sung in the same way as a song of lament, like Psalm 89.

When we write elements and styles of worship off we lose something in our worship. One of the great joys for me of being the Rector here at Holy Sepulchre is the opportunity to experience and take part in both choral and contemporary worship to a very high standard. I know that most churches may not be able to have both (and that even here there are other streams of worship we do not have), but I do think that there is great value in appreciating our different streams of worship.

I want to suggest to you that actually it is the very differences that are the strength of the various styles, and to illustrate that by working through one quick example. A very obvious difference between the two types of worship we have had tonight is that we listened as the choir sang for the choral worship, while we all stood and joined in during the contemporary worship. That seems to me to reflect something quite important – my engagement is very different in the two, and the differences in that engagement help my worship in different ways.

When I join in with the contemporary worship I find that it draws me in in a very personal way and helps me to express my adoration and love for God. By standing and joining in, and particularly if I use my body to dance or simply hold my hands in the air, I am also helped to love God with all my strength and passion.

By contrast, my engagement with choral worship is much more contemplative, and focused on awe and reverence for God. The nature of the style, and the fact that the songs are all sung by an expert choir also means that it can involve more musically complex pieces, which draws my mind to the beauty and transcendence of God.

Those differences barely scratch the surface, but they do hopefully illustrate how differences can help us engage with God in different but *positive* ways (although each style also has its weaknesses). As I finish this section though, I do also want to highlight that there can be significant difference *within* the different styles as well. You may have noticed that those three songs the band played a moment ago were very different from each other – moving from a slow ballad, to gospel, to rock, and yet within a single format and overarching style. Of course, we could have done the same with our choral pieces – and in fact we will! The next three pieces of music are all choral, and yet deliberately very different from each other. Once again, listen to them and worship and pray as you do, but also reflect on how you engage with God differently with each song.

Music:

Otche Nash (Our Father) (Nikolay Kedrov)

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/otche-nash-the-lords-prayer/1345875087?i=1345875506>

Sanctus and Benedictus from the *Missa Brevis* (Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina)

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/sanctus-and-benedictus-missa-brevis/1345875087?i=1345875510>

Evening Hymn (Henry Balfour Gardiner)

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/evening-hymn/314411633?i=314411719>

Now, I did say earlier that we join in with the contemporary and not with the choral, but even that isn't quite the whole picture. For instance, I almost always listen to contemporary worship in my own devotional times with God, and I often join in with more traditional worship, which is what I am going to ask all of you to do now. We are going to sing a hymn. Incidentally, I chose it because it's supposedly the Queen's favourite!

Praise my soul the King of Heaven (Words: H.F.Lyte, Music: H.J.Gauntlett)

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/praise-my-soul-the-king-of-heaven/96076117?i=96076127>

Talk

When is music worship?

Exploring the link between music and worship beyond the church

So far tonight we have thought a lot about what music brings to worship, but I want to finish by exploring the inspiration of worship to music. In the passage I read earlier from Ephesians 5, Paul speaks about ‘songs from the Spirit.’ He seems to be suggesting that music can be ‘inspired’ in the literal sense of ‘in-spirited’ - inspired by the Holy Spirit. It’s not simply that we do our best to make music in our hearts to the Lord, but that God might actually help us, and that obviously ties in with what I was saying earlier about being filled with the Spirit. Certainly, that is my prayer for all our worship here at Holy Sepulchre, that all of our worship would be ‘songs from the Spirit’.

My question here though is whether that inspiration can stretch beyond the specific context of services and the church, and whether music in a ‘secular’ context or format can also be inspired, can also be worship.

Firstly, can the music of worship still draw our hearts to God when it is taken out of its original context and simply performed in a concert setting? That is a question that was posed and explored very eruditely in the sermon in last year’s FMC service of thanksgiving here.⁴ I experienced a worked example recently in the form of one of my favourite pieces of choral music, Thomas Tallis’ *If ye love me*, which was performed in a concert here and then also sung by the Choir at Evensong. Even in a concert setting there was something special about the piece, and it drew my mind and heart towards God – I still loved it, and found myself worshipping through it. And yet, I am sure others were not focussed on God in the same way, and were not worshipping. It did also feel as though there was something missing – I engaged with God much more when it was sung again in the context of worship. My conclusion was that we can still worship in a concert or secular setting, but something is lost as well. I wonder what you think? Reflect on that as you listen to that piece now.

If ye love me (Thomas Tallis)

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/if-ye-love-me/123844536?i=123844974>

Did you listen to that as a performance, or did you listen and engage with it as worship? What difference does that make? I’ll leave that thought with you, before moving onto a related question. I want us to look at a piece of music that was not written within a context of worship at all, and to ask whether it too could be worship.

It is a question I am nervous in asking, as sometimes people try and push this too far. As we touched upon earlier in my reference to drunken signing, music clearly does not always point or draw us closer to God. Indeed, music can at times be explicitly *anti*-God – I think of AC/DC’s *Highway to Hell* for instance (a song you will never be hearing at Holy Sepulchre!). To return to my earlier analogy of the amplifier, there is nothing automatically spiritual or Godly about music, but it can help us to amplify whatever is already in our heart, to engage (or not) with God.

Yet I do want to ask the question: can ‘secular’ music be to the glory of God? Can it even be something I use in worship?

⁴ It was preached by The Very Rev’d John Hall, Dean of Westminster Abbey. What he said has inspired me to think on this further, but he may not agree with all my subsequent thinking!

One of my musical heroes is Johann Sebastian Bach, undoubtedly one of the greatest musical geniuses who has ever lived. For him his whole life of music was for and about God, and inspired by his faith. He wrote a wide variety of sacred and 'secular' music, and yet on the bottom of many of his manuscripts of both he wrote the words (or initials) "Sola Dei Gloria" (To God alone be the Glory). He once wrote: "the aim and final end of *all* music should be none other than the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul" (*italics mine*).⁵ With that in mind listen to our next piece of music, a piano prelude by Bach.

Prelude in C Major (J.S.Bach)

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/prelude-and-fugue-no-1-in-c-major-bwv-846/5818035?i=5817939>

Was that worship? I think for Bach it was, and for me as I listened to it then I think it was too. But I know I have listened to that piece of music before, and it hasn't been worship, and I suspect that for most people listening to the piece isn't worship either. I'll leave you to think about that, as we turn to another piece of instrumental music – this time on the organ. I will let you reflect on how organ music is instrumental, and yet so often it *is* written for a context of worship.

Jubilate (William Mathias)

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/jubilate-op-67-no-2/1085153147?i=1085153693>

That almost brings our evening to a close, but I want to invite you to return for our future sessions, usually on the first Monday of each month. Because of Easter though our next session will actually be on Monday 9th June, with our Director of Music, Peter Asprey speaking specifically about choral worship, and our choir once again singing. As we finish though, would you please join me for a final piece of worship, this time combining both the choral and contemporary styles, as the band and organ together lead us in singing 'O Lord my God'

O Lord my God (How Great Thou Art) (words: Stuart K Hine, music: traditional Swedish)

<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/how-great-thou-art-feat-nikki-fletcher/1085442873?i=1085442876>⁶

⁵ <http://www-archive.biblesociety.org.au/news/michael-jensen-end-music>

⁶ Note that on the evening the song was led by both band and organ, but I could not find a recording that used both.