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‘O Sing unto the Lord’: Sacredness and the Western Musical Tradition

Abstract

Music lies at the heart of devotion and worship in various traditions. In western Europe, musical styles have changed dramatically over the centuries, but what makes particular music appropriate or inappropriate for use in worship? This talk will explore the historical concept of ‘sacredness’ in western music, looking particularly at developments in recent years which borrow from other musical styles, particularly those of eastern European orthodox churches and Asian traditions. It will also try to explain the popularity of some recent church music, particularly the works of John Tavener and Arvo Pärt.

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Music lies at the heart of devotion and worship in many different traditions. In Africa, for example, music and dance are central to many aspects of social and cultural behaviour. Music is often associated with ritual and ceremony. In western Europe, musical styles have changed dramatically over the centuries, but what makes particular music appropriate or inappropriate for use in worship? This morning’s talk will explore the historical concept of ‘sacredness’ in western music, looking particularly at developments in recent years which borrow from other musical styles, especially those of eastern orthodox churches and also Asian traditions. It will also try to explain the popularity of some recent sacred music.

The word ‘sacred’, and its Latin original ‘sacrum’, are linked to the concept of setting apart. Manifestations of the sacred generally reflect the cultural context and especially the religious beliefs of the observer. There is usually an element of the supernatural and of forces beyond our understanding. This power can be invested in particular humans or in supernatural beings, as happens in many different religions, or in particular places, such as Stonehenge with its connection to pagan rituals, the Basilica of St Peter’s, Rome (traditionally the burial site for St Peter and many popes) or Lourdes (with its supposedly miraculous healing powers).

A key aspect of sacredness is that of status in the 'other world', a world that we cannot fully comprehend, and an element of 'otherness' compared with the profane nature of our everyday lives. As one commentator on Indian culture and religion puts it, 'the vast and variously imagined powers of the deities... [are] taken for granted by the overwhelming majority of Hindus', and indeed a characteristic of Hinduism is the absence of a clear dividing line between the sacred and the profane.¹

So is there such a thing as 'sacredness' in music, or is it just a question of taste and inculturation? The distinction in style between sacred and secular music is a comparatively recent phenomenon. In the 16th century the so-called 'sacred madrigal' underlines the link between the musical styles, in which the text determines the function of the music rather than the musical techniques used. Two centuries later, for Vivaldi, Handel or Mozart, it is often difficult to tell without knowing the words whether an aria was intended for the opera house or the church; a good example of this is the 'Laudamus te' of Mozart's C minor Mass, a virtuoso soprano aria whose florid vocal writing would not be out of place in one of his operas. Another well known example from the 19th century is Verdi's Requiem, aptly described by the leading conductor and pianist Hans von Bülow as 'Verdi's latest opera, in church vestments' and undoubtedly employing techniques honed in the opera house to depict the drama inherent in the Requiem text. Nevertheless, alongside the grandiose theatrical gestures at points like the 'Dies Irae', there are moments of stillness and intense contemplation that seem appropriate for a work that was written for church rather than the theatre.

A number of musicians in recent years have tried to identify, in relation to their own compositional practice, what it is that makes music a 'sacred art'. Ivan Moody, the contemporary English-born composer and scholar, who interestingly studied music and theology and has also edited a range of early vocal music, talks of the need to discover the innocence of art, which he sees as the 'primordial basis upon which that sacred tradition may be continued and recreated'.² There is a tension between the sacred and the humanistic, and with the demand for popular and accessible art. Like many recent composers, Moody admires the timelessness of plainchant, and in particular what he terms the simplicity and humility of Eastern chant traditions within the Orthodox Church. In his own composition he attempts to integrate tradition within a personal creative language. This can also include the integration of sacred and secular, for example as in Corsican folk music, where both are brought together in a highly distinctive vocal style. Incorporating folk traditions can be viewed as a means of escaping the modern complexities of urban life through nature, paralleling Rousseau's 18th-century rallying cry of 'back to nature' and the natural innocence of the uncivilised 'noble savage', underlining the links between God, nature and man.

¹ Murray Milner, Jr, *Status and Sacredness: a General Theory of Status Relations and an Analysis of Indian Culture* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), 165

² Ivan Moody, 'Music as a Sacred Art', *Contemporary Music Review*, 12 (1995), 23

So, if there is indeed such a thing as sacredness in art and particularly in music, where can we see this at different points in the history of western music?

For many early Christians, music was a vital element of worship. Pliny the Younger refers to the Christian practice of singing ‘hymns to Christ, addressing him as God’, and there are frequent early references to singing the psalms.³ During the first millennium, sacred music basically meant plainchant, a form of monody in which the text was set to a single line of music whose rise and fall in pitch and rhythmic patterns reflected the meaning and emphases of the words. This close marriage of words and music, also found in the songs of the Jewish synagogue, remained hugely influential in later centuries when polyphony – the simultaneous sounding of two or more parts – came to the fore.

Ex 1: Plainchant Easter chant ‘De ore leonis’ sung by the Benedictine monks of Santo Domingo de Silos (Track 1) 2’

Many sacred works involved the use of a *cantus firmus*: the singing of a plainchant melody in long notes in one part, providing a framework for the structure of the music, while even if chant was not directly quoted, the shape of many lines in medieval and renaissance works is based on the restrained, often stepwise melodies of plainchant.

This smooth melodic style is exemplified by the music of the Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, one of the most influential composers of the 16th century who was charged by Pope Gregory XIII to revise the plainchant of the Roman Gradual and Antiphoner. Palestrina’s purity of style, which involves a limited harmonic palette in which any dissonances are very carefully prepared and resolved, was regarded as more genuinely ‘religious’ than any other, reflecting the true meaning of the words without obscuring them in unnecessary musical complexity. His music provided a model of church music for later years, from 18th-century composers such as Johann Fux, whose *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725) attempted to codify the ‘Palestrina style’, through the Cecilian Movement of 19th-century Germany, which influenced the sacred music of composers such as Anton Bruckner, to the 20th century, where Palestrina’s music was imitated, along with that of Johann Sebastian Bach, by generations of music students.

Ex 2 Palestrina: Kyrie from *Missa Papae Marcelli* (track 11) 5’

³ Basil Smallman, ‘Church music’, *The New Grove*

What is it about this music that makes it for so many musicians, both during and after the 16th century, the epitome of sacred music? There are elements of restraint, of contemplation and of purity: an 'otherness' compared with more modern secular styles with their freer use of dissonance and more irregular rhythms and melodic patterns. Its 'sacredness' derives from the freely flowing lines and balanced structures that are often seen as aural equivalents of the great classical architecture of the Renaissance, and indeed the words purity and balance are often used to describe the music of that other idol of so many musicians two centuries later, Mozart. Palestrina's music, like the great cathedrals of Brunelleschi or Christopher Wren, and the art of Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo, lifts us out of this mundane world and transports us onto a new spiritual plane, presenting us with an ideal that refreshes the spirit.

If Palestrina has provided a widely accepted model of sacred music for western musicians across the centuries, many more recent composers have explored other ways of imbuing their music with an element of spirituality and 'otherness'. For many 20th-century musicians, this search for a deeper spirituality in their music involved looking to the East. The Beatles in the 1960s were strongly influenced by Indian music, particularly the sitar playing of Ravi Shankar, and the techniques of Transcendental Meditation. Before this, the American composer John Cage had also begun to study oriental philosophy. In 1946, an Indian student arrived to study Western counterpoint with Cage in exchange for lessons on Indian music. He asked her what the purpose of music was in India. She replied that her teacher thought that the purpose of music was to quieten the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences. Cage was tremendously struck by this, seeing parallels with early music. 'I also came to see that all art before the Renaissance', he says, 'both Oriental and Western, had shared this same basis, that Oriental art had continued to do so right along, and that the Renaissance idea of self-expressive art was therefore heretical.'⁴ He then immersed himself in the philosophy of East and West, in particular studying Zen Buddhism.

As a musician, this philosophical study in particular focussed on the relationship between sound and silence, and from the late 1940's he considered writing a work with no sounds in it, the title to be *Silent Prayer*. Five years later the idea became reality in the work called *4'33"*, a title indicating the length of the work, which is divided into three movements, marked by some form of action on behalf of the performer. Premiered at Woodstock by pianist David Tudor, who marked the movements by raising and lowering the piano lid over the keys, the work was hugely controversial – a controversy that has never fully died away. This was at the time that artist Robert Rauschenberg was producing a series of *White Paintings*, which inspired one of the editions of the score for *4'33"*, which comprises a blank sheet divided by vertical lines into three sections.

⁴ John Cage quoted in Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors* (New York: Penguin/Viking, 1965), 99

As well as exploring the relationship between sound and silence, Cage was also exploring the relationship of music and time, for music, unlike literature or the visual arts, is a temporal medium in which the positioning of sounds in time is crucial. The theologian Jeremy Begbie⁵ sees the reality of time as intrinsic to God's creation, and the positive characteristic of time as part of God's 'good ordering' of the world.

The Catholic church has expressed its views on sacred music many times since the Council of Trent's deliberations that inspired Palestrina in the 16th century. In 1903 Pope Pius X, in his 'Instruction on Sacred Music' *Tra le sollecitudini*, tries to explain what he means by the decree that sacred music should be '...endowed with a certain holy sincerity of form'. He advocates the rehabilitation of plainchant as 'the supreme model for sacred music' and also praises Palestrina for his music's 'excellent quality from a liturgical and musical standpoint. He objects to the secularisation, and particularly the theatricality, of some religious music (maybe he had Verdi in mind here?), saying: ⁶

Nevertheless, since modern music has become chiefly a secular art, greater care must be taken, when admitting it, that nothing profane be allowed, nothing that is reminiscent of theatrical pieces, nothing based as to its form on the style of secular compositions

Some 50 years later, Pope Pius XII in his Encyclical *Musicae Sacrae* of 1955, also praises the use of chant in various rites, both western and eastern:⁷

51. For as all of these display in their liturgical ceremonies and formulas of prayer the marvellous abundance of the Church, they also, in their various liturgical chants, preserve treasures which must be guarded and defended to prevent not only their complete disappearance, but also any partial loss or distortion.

There has been much discussion about the religious beliefs of one of the most important British composers of the 20th century, Benjamin Britten. His compatriot Michael Tippett says of him: 'We are both of us religious composers, ie bound, *religiati*, to a sense of the numinous, but Britten is more properly Christian.'⁸ Many of Britten's works deal with the idea of redemption and salvation, often expressed in overtly Christian terms, though sometimes also exploring the links between the natural and human worlds (for example in his setting of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

⁵ Jeremy S Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (CUP, 2000)

⁶ Rev James T Benzmilller, 'What's so Scared about Sacred Music?', *Adoremus Bulletin*, www.adoremus.org.

⁷ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_25121955_musicae-sacrae_en.html.

⁸ Alan Blyth, *Remembering Britten* (London, 1981), 22

Between November 1955 and March 1956 Britten visited the Far East, having already been exposed to Balinese gamelan music while living in America. He was especially struck by seeing a Japanese Noh play, and decided to transfer this highly stylised genre to a work based more in the Christian tradition. This became *Curlew River* (1964), the first of his three Church Parables. These works, which mix theatrical and liturgical traditions, are really short operas for performance in church in the manner of a medieval mystery play. The story of *Curlew River* tells of a demented mother seeking her lost child: the mad woman meets a ferryman, who takes her across the river where she eventually finds the boy's grave, the voice of his spirit singing to her and allowing her to find peace at last. Britten draws on monastic convention and ritual: all the characters and the small group of instrumentalists process into the church dressed in monk's habits; they then disrobe and take on the role of the dramatic characters, wearing masks and adopting stylised actions in the manner of the Japanese Noh play. To add to this sense of artificiality, the madwoman is sung by a tenor. At the end of the drama, all the performers put on their habits and process out of the church, singing as they process the traditional plainchant 'Te lucis ante terminum'.

This framing use of plainchant is something Britten had done before in his *Ceremony of Carols*, and it provides a timeless and ritual quality as well as bringing with it a long history of sacred connotations. Britten also uses the musical material of the chant as the basis for much of his music, as indeed he does in his other two subsequent Church Parables. The use of heterophony, the blurring of lines in time rather like the effect of holding down the sustaining pedal on a piano, is drawn from the Japanese musical tradition, which derives much of its 'harmony' from the sustained effect of single melodic lines. The scoring of the work, with an important percussion part, harp and the use of bells, and cluster chords on the organ, also owes much to far eastern instrumental sonorities, and a number of these features are used in Britten's later works too – bells are important in his final opera *Death in Venice*, where they help both contribute to the aural portrayal of Venice and also invoke connections with funerals and death.

The story of *Curlew River* tells of the woman's journey to seek knowledge and closure on the death of her son. When she achieves this her madness is cured – once again the element of salvation and redemption that permeates so many of Britten's works, whether as in this case for performance in church or as in so many other cases for the opera-house.

Ex 3 Britten: *Curlew River*

At the end of the work, the voice of the boy's spirit also draws on plainsong, emphasising its healing nature for the soul of his mother. *Curlew River* came shortly after Britten's War Requiem, a work in which he explored the relationship between the text of the Requiem Mass and the war poetry of Wilfred Owen, a masterly mix of sacred and secular traditions. This is the most overt declaration of Britten's

passionately held pacifist beliefs which underpin so many of his works. He draws on the English church tradition in his use of boys' voices and organ, as well as on the requiem tradition in his musical references to Verdi's great work, the importance of bells, and sections that use choral chanting. Like the Verdi, there are moments of great theatricality, such as the blazing brass fanfares of the Dies Irae and the cataclysmic climax near the end of the work, when the Libera Me explodes onto a chord of G minor (a key central to Verdi's Requiem) before disintegrating into an eerie post-nuclear landscape for the final Owen poem *Strange Meeting*. Here time seems to stand still as tenor and baritone soloists face each other across the trenches, before the poem's final line 'Let us sleep now...' swells into a great wave of sound. For the first time in the work all the forces come together, and for the first time there is a sense of possible resolution, the ubiquitous funeral bells with their ominous tritone interval falling away and the final gentle chord of F major suggesting the promise of salvation.

Another British composer to be strongly influenced by music outside the normal western classical tradition is John Tavener. Born in 1944, he has always been strongly influenced by religious subjects and in the late 1970s joined the Greek Orthodox Church. He has said that 'in everything I do, I aspire to the sacred... music is a form of prayer, a mystery.' He believes that composers should not seek to find their own voice; rather their work should serve some higher purpose.

Tavener is strongly influenced by visual art, regarding the ikon as the pinnacle of Christian art, and indeed he uses the word as a title for many of his musical compositions. He says:

The ikon is the supreme example of Christian art, and of transcendence and transfiguration. It possesses simplicity, magnificence, transfigured beauty, and austerity...An ikon does not express emotion (it is geometric and its colour palette is severely limited) and yet to the believer it inspires awe, wonder, and the reverence of kissing. The ikon is in one sense beyond art, because it plunges us straight into liturgical time and sacred history. But what makes a great ikon? I believe that it is the Holy Spirit working through the painter. I can say no more. It is a mystery.⁹

In musical terms, Tavener sees ways in which the composer can meditate. The drone represents the eternal, which must be present somewhere. He must limit his tonal and colour palette. 'Each new piece is an act of repentance, stripping away inessentials, ever more naked, ever more simple...' 'English hymns have references to God and the Saints, but they have nothing to do with sacred art'. In other words, a religious text or religious ideas alone are not enough.

His musical language is ritualistic, timeless and reflective. It is full of drones low in the basses, with chant-like phrases, often with grace notes mimicking eastern

⁹ John Tavener, 'The Sacred in Art', *Contemporary Music Review*, 12 (1995), 50

ornamental practice. Chords move up and down by step in parallel motion in the manner of medieval organum, and phrases are repeated many times in meditative fashion. Sudden contrasts in dynamics are common. Finally, a crucial element in his works is the silences in between the phrases.

Ex 4 John Tavener Nunc Dimittis (Collegium Regale) 1986 Track 16 2½'

Often linked with Tavener and the Polish composer Henryck Górecki, who shot to fame two decades ago with his Third Symphony, is the Estonia-born composer Arvo Pärt. Pärt studied at Tallinn Conservatory and, after initially writing works in a neoclassical style influenced by the Russians Prokofiev and Shostakovich, developed serial compositions using Schoenberg's methods. However, for some time Pärt had been strongly interested in the music of J S Bach, and his *Credo* (1968) uses Bach's C major prelude from Book 1 of the '48', distorting the material and using it as a 12-note row. It also uses choral whispering, unconventional notation, and free rhythm for improvisation on given notes. The resultant scandal that the work created, however, was less for its musical content than for its overtly Christian element.

The *Credo* marked a watershed, and after it Pärt stopped composing for several years, studying medieval music and plainchant (both Gregorian and Russian orthodox) and exploring simple tonality and two-part counterpoint, developing new compositional techniques.

In 1976 he began composing in a completely new style called **Tintinnabuli**. This was based on the simple relationship between two lines, one a melodic voice moving largely by step around a central note (again the influence of plainchant) and the other a tintinnabuli voice sounding notes of the tonic triad. The music is created by the interaction of these two ideas – the structure of this relationship is determined by a numerical pattern and/or the structure of the chosen text if it is a vocal work.

For Pärt bells are very important: he was fascinated by their rich sonorities with overtones and the fact that there is no clear ending to the sounds. (He spent a year in England studying change ringing.) Pärt says:

'Tintinnabulation is an area I sometimes wander into when I am searching for answers – in my life, my music, my work. In my dark hours, I have the certain feeling that everything outside this one thing has no meaning. The complex and many-faceted only confuses me, and I must search for unity. What is it, this one thing, and how do I find my way to it? Traces of this perfect thing appear in many guises – and everything that is unimportant falls away. Tintinnabulation is like this. Here I am alone with silence. I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played. This one note, or a silent beat, or a moment of silence, comforts

me. I work with very few elements – with one voice, with two voices. I build with the most primitive materials – with the triad, with one specific tonality. The three notes of a triad are like bells. And that is why I call it tintinnabulation.'

Für Alina was Pärt's first composition in this new style. It was for piano and dedicated to his friend's daughter who had just gone to study in London. It is very simple: only 15 bars long, it is easy to play, with the direction 'Peacefully, in an exalted and introspective manner.' It is in a free tempo, recreating the sound of ancient music but with a modern feel. There are no changes of speed or key, and just once the left hand moves from the basic B minor triad, at which point Pärt draws a flower over the note in the score.

Pärt rapidly developed an overtly religious music with an austerity and a simple tonal style that proved unpopular with the Soviet authorities (in 1980 he emigrated to Vienna and then to Berlin). His works, not unlike those of Cage and just like those of Tavener, explore time and silence, a silence from which all sounds emerge and eventually return. There is a simple beauty to his music, with close links to chant (this time from the Russian rather than the Greek Orthodox liturgy, which itself emphasises song rather than speech). Indeed Pärt's text setting is one of heightened speech within the sparse language of minimalism, in which repetition and tintinnabulation recur time and time again.

Like Tavener's works, these are very much sacred icons – stylised works written not for self-expression but to contemplate divine images through the use of musical formulae. The works inhabit a timeless world in which phrases, often involving triads and sometimes static drone basses, build and then die away again.

Music and spirituality are intricately intertwined through a purity of style, a timeless, ritual mysticism born of repetition and contemplation. Like an Orthodox icon, it is art constructed in an anonymous way – a 'stillness' born of tradition and faith.

The Seven Magnificat Antiphons were composed in 1988 for the 40th anniversary of the RIAS Berlin Chamber Choir. The settings of the 'O' Antiphons that are sung on each of the seven days leading up to Christmas Eve are typical of Pärt's music in their expressive intensity, with gentle but insistent repetitions, the use of a drone bass and chant-like phrases, and a spaciousness and luminosity.

Ex 5 Arvo Pärt: Seven Magnificat Antiphons (1988, rev 1991)
Track 10 O Spross aus Isias Wurzel (0.51) O Schlüssel Davids (1.49)
O Morgenstern (1.53)

Like music of other 'holy minimalists' – a rather pejorative term adopted by some writers for Tavener, Gorecki and Pärt, perhaps partly due to their music's wide

popularity compared to many contemporary composers – Pärt is deliberately exploring issues of sacredness in music. He views the melodic (stepwise) voice as signifying the subjective world – the daily life of Man, with his sin and suffering – and the tintinnabuli (arpeggio) voice as signifying the objective realm of forgiveness. Thus he is exploring body and spirit, earth and heaven, secular and sacred.

There are some common threads between the range of music we have looked at today: an interest in tradition and early music through the exploration of chant from different liturgies and the model 'pure' renaissance style of Palestrina, itself strongly influenced by Gregorian plainchant; a strong influence from other musical styles, whether from Greek or Russian Orthodox traditions or from the Far East, and a desire to capture elements of that 'otherness'; and above all an attempt to exploit stillness, simplicity, repetition and especially silence to create a 'sacred' music whose meaning lifts us out of this mundane world onto a genuinely spiritual plane.