

A Sermon preached at St Mary's, Warwick by Vaughan S Roberts
Warwick Summer Music Festival Service 2014

John 20: 1-9

After listening to St Mary's choirs singing lines such as: 'The eyes of all wait upon thee, O Lord' from this evening's introit by Charles Wood or 'quicken me, O Lord, according to thy word' from our anthem by Henry Purcell, it may seem rather obvious to be asking: Where is God in music? However, in reflecting upon this question, I want to focus upon music rather than words. Where is God in *music*? For the purposes of what follows I'll be setting the words to one side – important though they are.

As we come to the conclusion of the 2014 Warwick Summer Music Festival with its wonderful programme of concerts, recitals and services in St Mary's, we have enjoyed a veritable feast of music, a banquet of musicians and a great spread of musical gifts but can we say at any point: God was there or that was the moment when I encountered the Divine?

To help us address this I'm drawing upon the work of musician, composer and theologian Maeve Louise Heaney. She's from Ireland and is presently teaching in Australia. She has a catholic background but is open to discovering God in all sorts of places and all forms of music. And to help us think through where we might find God in music, I want to share some of her ideas inspired by Arvo Pärt's composition *Spiegel im Spiegel* or *Mirror in the Mirror* (see online journal *Religions* 2014, 3 361-384)

Fans of Pärt will know *Spiegel im Spiegel*, a popular piece for piano and violin but set for other instruments as well. However, even if you don't know Pärt's work, it's quite likely that you've come across the piece itself as it's been used a great deal in films and TV dramas to provide mood, atmosphere and colour. It doesn't matter if some of us can't immediately place the piece, because the questions Heaney asks and the ideas which emerge from listening to *Spiegel im Spiegel* can be applied more widely – indeed to many of the pieces we've heard during the Summer Music Festival.

So how do we develop a general understanding of a piece of music? Heaney suggests three key elements to this process. Our understanding develops through what might be called: (i) musical 'trace'; (ii) audience reception; and (iii) composer's intent. Let me say a little about each of those.

First, musical 'trace' – this is about how music could or should be heard, and will include an understanding of speed, style and theoretical analysis of a particular composition. As performers and listeners, we will have different levels of ability and musical education to undertake such a task but music isn't just a diagnostic encounter, it's also an emotional one.

So a second strand of understanding comes from audience reception – and 'audience' includes both performers and listeners. How is the music *being* heard? What effects is it having on our senses and emotions. This is what some call music's 'affective space' and will differ for each of us as we bring our own experiences, memories, musical preferences and more to each listening event. There's more about this in the book, *Personal Jesus*, that I've co-written with Clive Marsh (Baker Academic, 2012).

Then the final strand of understanding in Heaney's work is the composer's intent – for some it will make a difference that Arvo Pärt is an orthodox Christian or that John Rutter

is an agnostic. For others it will not, but the potential faith of a composer should have *some* bearing on how performers and listeners *perceive* the piece they're engaging with – just as our own faith (however that's expressed) will also have an impact.

So our understanding of music is a lively mix of musical and historical knowledge – whether that's from detailed study or just reading the programme notes at a concert; plus our own preferences and emotional response; together with the intent of the composer. But the question remains: Where is God in music?

One answer is: potentially in all of those strands. We might think of the way in which church and faith have influenced the musical trace of someone like J S Bach or more recently James MacMillan. Audience reception is shaped by the *conscious* faith of individuals yet faith can also be *subconscious* and, quite often, like a butterfly – when we pin it down, then we've killed it! And with some composers, God is certainly meant to be present whilst others may have no intention of manifesting the divine yet still do. This picture of God's place in music is untidy, but life and our world can be muddled and have frayed edges too.

However, there's a further way in which Heaney perceives God to be present in music. She uses the analogy of Christ's empty tomb. Not only was this a place that spoke (and speaks) of Christ's presence and absence, it was also a holy and spiritual space in which God-in-Christ was met and encountered. And Heaney sees music as, in some sense, similar to the empty tomb.

One way in which this intriguing idea works out is that just like the empty tomb, music provides space for three crucial aspects of being human. First, music offers space to experience an 'other'. We live in a culture that's obsessed with oneself – selfies, social media, 'because *I'm* worth it' and so on. This isn't a 'grumpy old man' rant about how it was all better in years gone by but an appeal for us to remember there's more to life than 'me'. And music provides a crucial space for us to search out the 'other' in our lives, including the most important 'other' of all: **God**.

Second, music offers us space for meaning-making. We are creatures for whom sense or purpose is important. A lack of sense or meaning in our lives can contribute to all kinds of mental illness. We seek out meaning in many ways – sport, soap operas, video games, the list could go on. Once again performing and listening to music has an important role to play here and provides a path towards that most profound source of meaning: **God**.

And finally, music offers us space for spirituality and for prayer. Christianity and most religious traditions have known this for time immemorial. It's vital to be in touch with the deepest parts of our being – our 'soul' if you like. We can find those depths in silence, in poetry, in art, in wonder and in music. In those soulspaces we encounter the source of life and love: **God**.

So *where* is God in music? God can be on the surface – in the musical traces, the audience reception and intent of composers. And God is also in the space that music opens for us – the space to experience the 'other'; the space to explore meaning in our lives; the space to pray – ultimately a space for encounter and a space for God.