



ST GEORGE'S LECTURES

7 - Church Music at the Crossroads

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Church Music at the Crossroads

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Imagine the scene: it is a beautiful spring afternoon in September. The eucalyptus haze is shimmering over the Blue Mountains as I walk from Echo Point to the lookout perched precariously high on the hillside from which the Three Sisters, the graceful trio of rocky pinnacles, dominate the landscape. And what do I hear as this magnificent sight comes into view? "Gee, why couldn't they have built a proper lookout which was more convenient to get to?!" You will remember that this path is on a natural hillside! I will leave you to guess the nationality (she wasn't British or Australian). She was in hot competition for my idiot's prize with the man who was having a lengthy conversation on his mobile phone with his back to the view! We are probably not guilty of this level of philistinism ourselves, at least very often, but inevitably we are all infected by the modern convenience-obsessed way of life which can lead someone to imply in all seriousness that the wonders of nature should be tamed to suit the lethargic tourist.

I should start this paper by setting out my stall. My title is somewhat misleading, not least because it ought to end with a question mark, for I will contend that the idea that the start of the new millennium should provoke us into imagining that we now face a new confrontation between the past and the present is flawed. It is continuity which interests me: however hard humanity may seek to disguise it, this continuity propels us through the cycles of life and binds together past, present and future. Also, I have deliberately chosen to confine myself to a narrow topic, namely what is described as music for Anglican cathedral worship, not, I wish to stress, because I believe it to be pre-eminent, but because it provides a focus for my arguments. I could have chosen to talk about hymnody or about sacred music from cultures other than my own but I have been anxious to avoid touching on such topics in insufficient depth. Above all, I hope you will not interpret my remarks as implying that I support a brand of cultural imperialism, simply because I have decided to explore the virtues of this particular kind of liturgical music.

Given these narrow parameters, I imagine that you will be expecting this lecture to be about the lack of appreciation of church music as we enter the new millennium, and the laziness and philistinism of those who won't make the effort to delve beneath the surface and see it for the real treasure it is – just like my Blue Mountains tourist. You may also be expecting me to talk about girls in English cathedral choirs, guitars in church and so-called "happy-clappy" hymns and choruses and whether or not I abhor them. You may be expecting a denouncement of those in authority who are reluctant to put significant resources towards the traditional forms of church music. Much of what I say will have an indirect bearing on all those subjects which are, of course, important and relevant, but the main burden of my lecture will consider some of the wider issues.



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During the year 2000, the Royal Academy of Arts in London used the excuse of the arrival of the new millennium to mount an exhibition entitled *1900: Art at the Crossroads*. It was based on the remarkable *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, which was the world's biggest international event of the year 1900. Although this lecture is about the beginning of *this* century and also about sacred music, the paintings and sculptures of that original display in Paris provided me with thought-provoking and striking parallels. In it the Naturalists and Symbolists, Impressionists and Expressionists, Neo-impressionists and Modernists coexisted in glorious juxtaposition. This juxtaposition of traditional and modern was very dramatic and provoked extreme reactions from contemporary critics, many of whom expressed serious initial reservations. Subsequently, some of the wiser commentators revised their opinions, including Arsène Alexandre who wrote: "Whether the reservations that we thought necessary to make at the beginning have been abrogated ... is a too difficult matter to determine in an epoch of transition like ours and in an exhibition imperfect despite its immensity."¹ The puzzle for Alexandre and others was the extent to which their own time represented the end of an old era or the beginning of a new one: "a twilight or a dawn" as Robert Rosenblum put it in his introduction to the Royal Academy's exhibition catalogue.

But what has all this to do with church music? Its relevance lies in the fact that if it is decided to mount an exhibition of church music of the year 2000 in 100 years time, observers will be struck by the same impression of diversity between traditional and modern as in the world of the visual arts in 1900. For that reason if no other, it is important to be cautious in making judgements about the contemporary situation and remember the words of Arsène Alexandre, for his assessment still rings true: we are always passing through an epoch of transition.

It is a curious paradox of our time that the human race has not been able to match extraordinary developments in scientific understanding and historical awareness with a comparable increase in what might be described as "raw" confidence. This is evident in every sphere of contemporary life, particularly as we struggle with moral issues arising from medical advances, and some would claim that it originates in an insecurity in responding to the spiritual side of human nature. This insecurity is no less striking in the area of music in church than in any other. As we enter the new millennium, the practice of choral music in the Anglican church appears to be under threat not so much from the secular world, where it seems to be increasingly valued – the popularity of the English commercial radio station Classic FM is a striking example – but from within the institution of the church itself, where it is viewed with some suspicion as associated with the wrong image. It is clearly discernible in the parish churches where there are fewer and fewer choirs, a breakdown which is already having serious cultural consequences. Choral singing has been a long-established route through which the church can influence young people and draw them into the community, and that this form of patronage should be dying out is regrettable. Some claim that the Anglicans are in danger of going the same way as the Roman Catholics: apart from a few notable exceptions, since the reforms of Vatican II, the Roman Catholic church has completely turned its back on its musical heritage and reduced the musical content of the liturgy to the banal.

Obviously, the dramatic secularisation of Western society over the past hundred years has been influential, and in more recent years the development of technology in particular has made it possible for all of us to share in a commercially driven global culture, sadly dominated by the media and passing fashion. But the real threat comes from within, as the case for more popular music in worship is put more and more forcibly, often as a "knee-jerk"

¹ A. Alexandre, "Continental Pictures at the Paris Exhibition", *The Paris Exhibition 1900, Art Journal*, London, 1901



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response to the pressure to be thought “relevant”. The danger does not lie in the concept of using popular idioms, surely to be applauded in the right context, but rather in the notion that they should be applied exclusively. So I am not arguing against congregational participation in music in worship or against the use of instrumental and choral groups, for I believe that they have their place, but I am arguing fiercely for the retention of the aesthetic approach of what has been described as “high art” in worship, and for the regaining of the confidence which values it as central to the liturgy.

Those of us who share this view can take some comfort from the fact that the threat is not a new phenomenon. As Hegel wrote in the introduction to his *Philosophy of History*, “What experience and history teach is this – that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.” The general panic in the church about low attendance at services and the concomitant attempts to make the church more relevant have been encountered many times throughout history and every generation imagines that its own problems are unique. It is a shame that music has often borne the brunt of this, although it demonstrates the power which is believed to reside in the medium.

For example, in some cultures such as that of the Aborigines, it is imagined that the world was “sung” into creation. At an even greater extreme, there is a remote tribe in China called the Dong² who regard speech as an inferior means of communication to singing. In fact, if you wish to marry a woman in the tribe, you have to undergo a singing audition with the tribal elders to demonstrate your suitability by the quality of your voice. Many of us would have remained bachelors for life under that system! If singing is this central to the human species then its significance in the history of Christianity is not surprising. It is also not surprising that it should have been perceived as a threat by countless reformers over the centuries.

Bishop Robert Horne who became Bishop of Winchester in 1562 was a reforming fanatic in the early years of Elizabeth I's reign. In 1570 he undertook a formal visitation of Winchester College and silenced the organ:

... Item, that the organs be no more used in service time, and the stipend for the organ player, and that which was allowed to a chaplain to say mass in the chapel in the cloister, shall be hereafter by the Warden and Fellows, with the consent of the Bishop of Winchester, turned to some other godly and necessary purpose in the College.³

This is just one example amongst many of the mistrust of the place of music in post-Reformation England, and, to be fair, it is not difficult to understand why. On the surface it was a symbol of the oppression of a previous regime, one which sought to exclude rather than include ordinary people. Happily for posterity, in this particular case, Horne's successor, Thomas Bilson, reinstated the position, and the organ was not destroyed, and subsequently Thomas Weelkes was appointed, one of the most talented composers of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras.

Horne would certainly have had no time for the musicians of the previous century and in another place, namely fifteenth-century Bruges. At St Donation's church, the largest of the three choral foundations in the city, the patience of the Chapter certainly exceeded anything that would be tolerated today as they sought to retain the central importance of the choral services. For example, the singer Gilles Joye was reprimanded on numerous occasions but

² quoted in H. Goodall, *Big Bangs*, London, 2000

³ Bishop Horne's register, f.88



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always survived because of his skill as a singer. During mass on Christmas Day 1450 he is alleged to have concocted rude rhymes with two other singers about all their colleagues. In 1451 he was in trouble again for being involved in a street fight. In 1454 he was told that, as a priest, he would have to mend his ways, control his language and above all get rid of the woman who lived with him and was known to the population at large as "Rosabelle"! I should add that Joye's loose living was mild in comparison with that of some of the canons. However, there is a serious additional point to be made here, namely that the music which was performed daily by musicians like Joye, and which was extremely sophisticated and complex, was an integral part of the daily life of the *ordinary citizen*, who identified with it just as much as the paintings and images which surrounded him. And the performers were ordinary, if somewhat colourful characters: this music was not the sole preservation of the elite.

*You need not see what someone is doing,
To know if it is his vocation,
You have only to watch his eyes:
A cook mixing a sauce, a surgeon
Making a primary incision,
A clerk completing a bill of lading,
Wear the same rapt expression,
Forgetting themselves in a function.⁴*

It would be difficult to find a more evocative expression of what it means to have a vocation, and whilst there is no mention of music in Auden's poem, those of us involved in sacred musical performance must surely recognise this description in ourselves: it is an extraordinary privilege, no less so now than in the fifteenth century. Yet, the church musician treads a difficult path in seeking to accommodate apparently conflicting interests. First there is the relationship with the composer and the composition: how does one assess the intentions behind a piece and how should that affect its performance? Secondly, there is the relationship with the listener or congregation: how should one communicate with them? To what extent should one aspire to the highest standards and does this really matter? Is that consideration inappropriate in the world of sacred music? Thirdly, there is the relationship with the performers: how does one enable them to produce a plausible result and satisfy the needs of the liturgical context? Then there is the relationship with the clergy and those responsible for defining the liturgical direction of the denomination's worship. Finally, and most confusing of all, there is the relationship with God: how does one reconcile the "forgetting of oneself in a function" with the overarching obligation as a Christian to offer one's talents in prayer.

These questions would be relevant at any time, but are particularly so at the beginning of the third millennium as we consider the future of church music. Of course, the division between composer and performer is a relatively recent one: most of the great composers of the past were also performers. This is especially true in the field of sacred music: composers such as Dufay, Palestrina, J.S. Bach, Mozart and Liszt come to mind. It is worth considering this as we try to engage the professional composer in writing music for worship, for this is essentially a phenomenon of recent times. My own experience of commissioning sacred music over a period of many years has been mixed. There is a difficult balance to be struck between the idealistic and pragmatic approaches, and a daunting challenge to be

⁴ W H Auden, *Sext from Horae Canonicae, Selected Poems*, London, 1968



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faced in attempting to achieve a persuasive fusion of words and music. This is rarely accomplished, but probably no less so than previously: the shining beacons of the past stand out from a huge mass of mediocrity wherever you look.

Although the contemporary performer is less often involved in the creation of a work itself, whether that be a hymn or anthem or other genre, it is inevitable that some element of his own personality will enter into the performance. At one point in his life, Stravinsky maintained that “the first condition that must be fulfilled by anyone who aspires to the imposing title of interpreter is that he be first of all a flawless executants ... a sin against the spirit of a work always begins with a sin against the letter.”⁵ At one level it is difficult to argue with that assertion, particularly if you are the composer, but there are some who would claim that a concentration on technical accomplishment can become an end in itself and disguise the true spirit of a work. This is a common complaint directed towards church musicians who are accused of putting on concerts and not projecting God’s word. One answer to this challenge lies in a case, eloquently made by the philosopher Lammenais:

*No art originates in itself, and none subsists by itself, so to speak, alone for itself. Art for the sake of art is therefore a platitude. Its aim is the perfecting of beings, whose progress it expresses. Music, a sister of poetry, effects the union of arts, which appeal directly to the senses with those which belong to the spirit; their object is ... to second the efforts of humanity, that it may fulfil its destiny of raising them from the earth, and therefore by inciting, to a continual upward striving ... Art therefore is an expression of God; her works are an infinite manifold reflection of Him.*⁶

This view was shared by Liszt, who believed passionately that music must recognise God and the people as its living source.

Reverting to the role of the performer, the pianist Alfred Brendel describes the performer as the interpreter, and he believes the interpreter must translate the composer’s intentions into his own understanding and thereby participate in the act of recreation. After all, it is not possible for a performer to be wholly objective and neutral, and even if it were it would surely be undesirable. Composers have to accept the fact that their music will never be performed exactly as they imagined it, and it will always be conditioned by the circumstances of its recreation: this applies as much to Mozart as it does to the Beatles. The duty of the performer is to seek to understand the composer’s intentions, and I would maintain that this applies as much in church as it does in the concert hall.

So much for the composer and the performer but what about the congregation? “Judiciously used, [music] can cheer the spirits, expand the soul with magnanimity, benevolence and compassion, soothe its anguish, and elevate it to the sublimity of devotion.”⁷ Bayley’s comments were made at the end of the eighteenth century, a time when sacred music in England was at a particularly low ebb: his was a passionate attempt to articulate the importance of music in church. Presumably, one of the reasons that the church had so readily adopted music in worship was its ability to appeal directly to the soul and engender a certain spiritual response in the listener or participant. This has always placed a heavy burden on the church musician, part of whose job must be communication with the listener. For those of us who work with top professional choirs the opportunity exists to present a living work of art, through

⁵ Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*, Harvard, 1942

⁶ Lammenais, *Esquisse d’une Philosophie* (1840), *Oeuvres Complètes*, Frankfurt, 1968

⁷ John Bayley, *Essays on the Musical Arts* (1798)



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which medium it is hoped that the worshipper is able to meditate and be elevated to another spiritual plain. This means of communication is not very different from what goes on in a concert hall in the sense that a group of people are exposed to a great work of art (it might be a piano sonata by Schubert or a mass by Palestrina) and, mysteriously, it generates a powerful experience: who is to say that at its most intense, this is not a type of religious experience?

By contrast, the hymn is an example of a form of worship which involves a fusion of words and music and in which a congregation participates, whatever their quality of voice or musicianship. This too can result in a spiritual experience of a different type, perhaps less cerebral and, through the act of singing more physical, but nevertheless extraordinarily powerful.

I have made two assumptions here in making claims for the power of music to evoke a spiritual response. The first is about quality and the other is about concentration.

To talk about quality in the liturgy is fraught with problems. In the case of music, attaching a label of relative quality is often perceived as elitist, particularly at a time when clergy are struggling to fill the empty pews. However, this is nothing new. Writing in 1899, Parry commented: "It can hardly be denied by anyone who calls himself a musician that a very considerable proportion of the hymn-tunes in many popular modern collections are as vile as it is possible for anything to be that has an excuse for calling itself artistic."⁸ He goes on to bemoan incoherence and sentimentality in other forms of church music. As he writes later: "Music ought not to be divided into classical and popular, but rather into good and bad." Surely this argument applies in our own age. I think it is essential for the church musician to be discriminating, and whatever other criteria of taste are applied to be uncompromising in the advocacy of "good" music.

That this is not straightforward is graphically illustrated by one of my own attempts to introduce new repertoire. Several years ago, I chose to broadcast a contemporary setting of the evening canticles on BBC Radio Three. I will not embarrass the composer by naming him, but his music provoked one of the most aggressive letters I have ever received. The correspondent complained that the job of those trying to advance the cause of church music was hard enough without people like me broadcasting cacophonous rubbish like that, and insisted that I should be ashamed of myself. That there should be immense variations in concepts of beauty and quality is not surprising, particularly in the context of the church, but it was disappointing to discover that my own taste was so dramatically different from that of my correspondent.

So much for the quality of the music itself, but what about the quality of the performance? It would be naive to assert that the best performances are always those which are technically most accomplished, because this would ignore all the other elements which are involved. However, there are certain musical standards which are generally agreed to be *de_rigueur*, even when ambitions are held at a modest level, and those of us working in the church must aspire to these as much as those working in a secular context. We have to do this, because otherwise we are responsible for deflecting the attention of the worshipper from the central purpose of the liturgy, namely prayer and praise. This is an aspect which is often forgotten: the flaws in musical performance in church can so easily become a distraction, and ultimately have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the liturgy.

⁸ H. Parry, from Royal College of Organists diploma presentation speech, 7.1.1899



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The subject of concentration was explored in great depth by the philosopher, Simone Weil. "Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object," she wrote. "We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them."⁹ Weil contends that desire directed towards God is the only power that can truly raise the soul. This is surely where the listener and performer can become united, through the emptying of the mind and the intensity of concentration, both of which are fused together as a liberating force.

The relationship between a music director and performers is a complex one. There is often a yawning gap between what is ideal and what is practical and I recognise that I occupy a privileged position in my own job, because of the skill of those with whom I work. Although general standards have risen significantly over the past fifty years, there are now fewer centres of activity and declining numbers of singers willing to make the necessary commitment. For some, this serves to encourage the notion that the ideal lies in full congregational participation and an environment which does not require expertise, just enthusiasm. But it should be remembered that even in this context, perhaps more so, the skill of the musicians is fundamental: there can be few churchgoers who have not experienced the accompanist who rigidly adheres to a deadly slow tempo, rendering a hymn completely unsingable. Once again, it is helpful to consider the past. For example, the state of cathedral music in England in the eighteenth century was nothing short of a disgrace. There were few establishments which could boast a full complement of singers, partly because pay was low and they had to find employment elsewhere to subsidise their earnings. Visiting one Cathedral in 1782, John Byng wrote: "The service was most irregularly performed than I ever remember to have heard it; and to a most shabby congregation."¹⁰ In the nineteenth century the cathedral choir in Oxford was generally thought to be the worst choir in the country.

However, the existence of a healthy infrastructure does not guarantee a successful musical establishment. Inevitably, this revolves around the personality, leadership and expertise of the music director, and the ability to harness and develop talent in others. The success of this enterprise has much to do with pure musicianship, but it also revolves around a subtle enabling process, one in which singers and players are coaxed into developing their natural gifts. If this complex relationship between director and performer is undertaken as an expression of faith and belief in God, then it can bear fruit in remarkable ways.

The church's patronage of the arts has been fundamental throughout history, but there has often been a tension between the clergy and musicians. It is hard to know whether or not this has been a creative tension because musicians have always seemed to manage to adapt to liturgical change. At the time of the English Reformations, composers like Tallis and Byrd continued to write music to Latin text at the same time as conforming to the declaration by Cranmer that, as far as possible, there should only be one syllable per note, and that the texts should be in English. Indeed, since the reforms of the sixteenth century spawned works like Byrd's *Great Service* it would be hard to argue that they proved culturally devastating, however high your regard for the elaborate polyphony of the pre-Reformation period.

⁹ Simon Weil, *Waiting on God*, London, 1977

¹⁰ John Byng, *The Torrington Diaries (1781-94)*, ed. C. Bruyn Andrews, 4 vols. (1934-8)



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Of course, not all musicians flourished without interference in Elizabethan England, and there are plenty of examples of the explosion of tensions, both at that time and subsequently. For example, in 1813, Dr Pring, the cathedral organist in Bangor, took the Dean and Chapter to Chancery because he claimed that the increased value in the cathedral tithes was not being spent on the choir, as provided for in the endowment, but on a building project instead. Although the case won the musicians a small increase in salary, in the process it was asserted by the Dean and Chapter that the organist was in the same category as the church yardman, the bell-ringer or the organ-blower. This is quite a contrast with the situation at Christ Church, Oxford in 1546, when the organist was the highest paid member of the community! Historically, the church does seem to have had a remarkable tendency to alienate its best musicians. Mendelssohn was appointed to Berlin Cathedral in the 1840s with the mission to rescue Lutheran church music from decline, but he was subjected to such censorship over the use of instruments, that he left after only two years. This should provide food for thought for anybody who cares about music in worship in the third millennium. It is clear that those communities in which there continues to be a flourishing musical life are those in which there is mutual respect between all those involved in the liturgy.

Julian Barnes' novel *England, England*¹¹ contains a telling chapter in which "the Finest tax deductible Minds" have been brought together to advise a tycoon on the feasibility of reproducing the whole of England on the Isle of Wight – a sort of giant theme park. The tycoon's adviser says: "It is well established ... that nowadays we prefer the replica to the original. We prefer the reproduction of the work of art to the work of art itself ... the book on the tape to the book on the lap ...". One might add: the CD performance in the living room to the live performance itself. This is one of the great pitfalls of the post-modern age and it is illustrative of one of the chief accusations levelled at church musicians: the musical performance has become an end in itself, and therefore lacks a certain authenticity, for it has lost sight of its prime objective and lacks a true soul. Recently I heard a respected clergyman make precisely this point in the context of a radio programme celebrating church music. The argument was advanced that, wonderful though the music might be, it was a constant responsibility of its performers to remember that their activities should be deliberately directed towards God. Yet what does this really mean? Surely it is patronising of both musicians and congregations alike. The striving for excellence, whether it be in the pulpit or in liturgy or in music, cannot be damaging in itself, for it is a reflection of our creation in the image of God: the corollary, the studied avoidance of excellence, is much harder to justify. The tycoon's adviser ends his presentation as follows: "In conclusion, let me state that the world of the third millennium is inevitably, is ineradicably modern, and that it is our intellectual duty to submit to that modernity." This is where the church as a whole and musicians in particular must be cautious, for to mistake the synthetic for the genuine by tame submission to contemporary modernity is a temptation which is hard to resist.

However, if we are suspicious of the modern world we must also be ready to embrace its virtues. For the Christian musician this means the musical vocabulary of our age. In the middle of the last century, the American musicologist, Paul Henry Lang, wrote, "sacred art – not only music but all the arts – has been stagnating for a century or so".¹² Although expressed harshly, he was right to be critical of the unwillingness of church musicians to look outside the comforting world of the established repertoire and to accept the challenge of contemporary music. This is a

¹¹ J. Barnes, *England, England*, London, 1999

¹² Paul Henry Lang, *Musicology and Performance*, Yale, 1997



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challenge which should be accepted with energy and excitement, for we are part of a living tradition and one which must continue to grow to ensure its survival. The rediscovery of the past and the revival of past repertoires are entirely compatible with experimentation with music of our own time, and all this should be warmly embraced by the church musician.

One of the many moving passages from Ursula Hegi's novel *Stones from the River*¹³ occurs during a scene in which the chief character, Trudi, who is a *Zwerg* (a dwarf) takes pity on a young boy, Matthias, whom she suspects of having musical talent. She describes his reactions as he listens to the *Eroica* symphony for the first time and then asks if he can play her piano. "His head tilted, as if hearing some inner imprint of that music, he touched the keys almost reverently as if to map out a path through a foreign country, and in the familiar sequence of notes Trudi heard her own pain and rage." The power of music to act as a catalyst for catharsis is undeniable and Hegi's description, here applied to pain, could easily cover the whole gamut of human experience including religion. This is one of the great gifts that composers and performers can offer humanity. At a primary level, they are exercising a function and allowing that function to absorb them totally, in the way described so eloquently by Auden. In doing so, they often become elevated to a higher level of inspiration themselves, and their activity can become a vehicle for the expression of the human condition and the beauty of God and his creation.

At the beginning of this lecture, I referred to the *Art at the Crossroads* exhibition. It is comforting to note that the coming together of traditional and modern did not ultimately result in the rejection of the former in favour of the latter, at least in the visual arts. However, the world of church music is different precisely because it relies so much on institutional support. As a Christian musician working in the church, I feel nervous about the future, not because of a lack of support and a lack of appreciation of the value of music, but because it can so easily be taken for granted and lapse by default. I have tried to articulate some of the reasons why music in worship is precious, and how it can speak directly to the heart of the contemporary listener. Even those who seek to marginalise it must recognise its power and contemporary appeal. Also, I am confident that the musician's instincts to aspire to the highest standards are not at odds with Christian ideals and indeed they provide an affirmation of them. Worshipping communities need to be demanding of their musicians, vociferous in their support of them and alert to the potential that they have to facilitate prayer and praise for all. Perhaps the position is most helpfully summarised by Simone Weil, who, characteristically, makes it all seem so simple:

*When we have learnt to look at perfect purity, the shortness of human life is the only thing to prevent us from being sure that unless we play false we can attain perfection even here on earth. For we are finite beings and the evil which is within us is finite too ... One of the principal truths of Christianity, a truth which goes almost unrecognised today, is that the looking is what saves us.*¹⁴

So long as composers, performers, congregations, clergy all keep looking, the future can be bright and the contribution of music in worship more and more influential.

¹³ Ursula Hegi, *Stones from the River*, New York, 1994.

¹⁴ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, London, 1951