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# LAUS DEO?

On Composers' Expressions of their Spirituality

Richard McGregor

I said to myself, it is as if the eternal harmony were conversing within itself, as it may have done in the bosom of God just before the Creation of the world. So likewise did it move in my inmost soul. [Goethe]<sup>1</sup>

To reflect on a composer's spirituality might be akin to dancing on a minefield. It ranks with questions such as 'does a composer's sexuality affect the way he or she composes?' or 'what differences are there between male and female composers?' as having many answers, and none.

Paul Hillier, coming face to face with this issue of spirituality in his study of Arvo Pärt, both engages and disengages with the problem. To engage us in the discussion he has a subsection of the first chapter entitled 'Music and Spirituality', but he has effectively already disengaged with the area in the preface where he says:

The problem is that in most cases, contact with the more abstruse areas of spirituality has been cursory; it is unfamiliar territory, and the vocabulary it summons up is untried and remains superficial, decorative at best ... Pärt's music is inspirational; we breathe it in and, if we are not careful, out come – words.<sup>2</sup>

In the end a more or less traditional analytical approach serves, and the link between inspiration and spirituality is eschewed in favour of more rational analytical methods where an exploration of the composer's technique is the usual substitute: the knowable hints at the unknowable and Wittgenstein's tenet that 'in the face of the inexpressible, we should remain silent' is inverted to become 'we should be silent about that which it is difficult to express'.

Wilfred Mellers facing a similar problem with Poulenc avoids discussion of the issue despite having to examine a corpus of unambiguously religious works inspired by Poulenc's perhaps quirky view of his re-adopted Catholic faith. In fairness to Mellers, he would have had to directly address Poulenc's spirituality in an interface with his sexuality, so in the end it is no doubt easier to simply keep these in the background. Links between spirituality and sexuality, or perhaps more precisely 'sensuality' are possibly more prevalent than we might think, and we are prompted to keep this in mind by Mellers in one of his rare excursions into the area when he remarks:

Poulenc's appetite for sensuous experience usually has sexual undertones; indeed his sexual ambivalence may condition his ambivalence between experiences sacred and profane, and this in turn must affect his wide appeal.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly there is not a great distance between Hillier's 'inspiration' and Meller's 'sensuous experience'/'ambivalence'.

For the purposes of this article we need to be clear on how sensuality and inspiration are to be parsed. We must treat 'sensuality' not in the narrow sense of providing some form of sexual gratification but as that which excites the senses leading on occasion to transcendency: a point where it meets 'inspiration'. Here we perceive many points of contact – aspiration, gratification and sublimation being just three. I have, for the moment however, avoided making a similar defining context for 'spirituality'.

We have already come a long, but necessary, way from the starting point. It is now important to find an historical perspective for the discussion. Here we meet a severe problem since our knowledge of the exact connection between earlier composers and the spiritual dimension of their work is virtually unknown. To put it more bluntly we have to presume that before Bach's time composers sought employment through the church because they believed in a Higher Power and presumably felt they owed at least part of ability in their art to some Divine Provenance. We assume that Palestrina was a deeply religious man but our evidence for this, for the most part, could almost certainly be shown to derive from several centuries' veneration of the music he wrote as representing an 'ideal' of religious music. Thousands of students have been educated into the technical mysteries of Palestrina's pure, balanced, and beautiful style, but how many ever sought the spiritual depth behind it; or rather, the assumed spiritual depth? Furthermore, we have little idea as to exactly how his music was received by his listeners. Did they find it 'inspirational', did it 'move' them, did it excite their senses? More importantly, did Palestrina intend that it *should* 'move' them and was his prime concern, specifically, to provoke his listeners to a greater awareness of the 'presence' of the Higher Power? Clearly we will never know, most particularly because Palestrina left the music only, not accompanied by books of words which tell us how to perceive the relationship.

We might be on slightly safer ground with William Byrd when we take into consideration the known circumstances of his life, employment and religious convictions. But we can go no further. Passing swiftly over a hundred years or more, the same might be assumed of J.S. Bach, were it not for the fact that it was his custom to inscribe the words 'Sola Gloria Deo' at the end of a score, and, likewise, Haydn wrote 'Laus Deo' at the end of his work and 'In Nomine Domine' at the beginning. Yet most musicians would ascribe a greater spiritual quality to Bach than to Haydn. No doubt deeper digging would elucidate that this was probably simply based on the simple fact that Bach wrote much more religious music than Haydn and remained for most of his life within ecclesiastical employment. I do not make this point to invite what would be fruitless comparisons between the composers, to the detriment of one or the other, depending on the criteria being employed, but rather to note that both composers believed that they were writing not primarily for themselves or for their public. The implication behind the inscriptions is that both were giving the finished work to the Higher Power as an offering. It would be inconceivable to propose then that either composer believed other than that his creativity was God-given.

In the Romantic period there is no shortage of large scale powerful and challenging works whose religiosity is channelled into dramatic expression; Berlioz's *Te Deum*, his *Requiem* and Verdi's *Requiem* are three particularly pertinent examples. Even Mendelssohn's *Elijah* has some of these qualities. The essential problem for us as listeners now is that we cannot distinguish between what we think the composer actually believed from the bombast of musical rhetoric, driven by the composer's need to balance sections and movements, control dynamics and texture, stir the emotions, excite applause and so on. Interviewed by Robert Craft in the book of 'Conversations', Stravinsky dismisses much of such Romantic music when he says:

When I call the nineteenth century 'secular' I mean by it to distinguish between religious religious music and secular religious music. The latter is inspired by humanity in general ... Religious music without religion is almost always vulgar.<sup>4</sup>

Stravinsky is typically exclusive when it comes to religious music. When asked 'must one be a believer to compose in these forms?' he replies absolutely 'not merely a believer in the "symbolic figures" but in the Person of the Lord, the Person of the Devil, and the Miracles of the Church'.<sup>5</sup> No room for half measures here. He is, however, more coy when pressed on the exact relation of this stance to his music. Speaking of the need for the final section of *Symphony of Psalms* to be 'thought of as issuing from the skies' 'agitation followed by the calm of praise' he quickly rejoins 'but such statements embarrass me'.<sup>6</sup>

Judging by the nature of his output, it would seem likely that Stravinsky's *dictum* should apply to Arvo Pärt. Pärt is not known for making extensive statements about his music but one very revealing quote is found in Hillier's book.

A composition comes as a single gesture which is already, in essence, music. The path to this is hard; you descend to the lowest spiritual plane, the bottom of the world, not knowing what will be found. The only thing you know is that you don't know anything. If this gesture, like a seed, takes root, it must be cultivated with extreme care so that it may grow; meanwhile you are oscillating between heaven and earth. The compositional task is to find the appropriate system for the gesture. It is one's capacity for suffering that gives the energy to create.<sup>7</sup>

It is worth spending time looking at this statement in some depth: it is suffused with Biblical, and hence by implication, 'spiritual' imagery. First the 'path': this is either the narrow path to salvation or a reference to Jesus as the Way the Truth and the Life. Next we descend to the 'lowest spiritual plane': this might equate with Hell and the reference might indeed be to Jesus's descent there before his resurrection. Next the image of the seed: this is either the mustard seed from which faith grows or a reference to the parable of the sower, or indeed both. And just to complicate matters it could also be an acknowledgement of Webern's idea of a musical work's 'thematic seed'. Finally, Pärt refers to the 'capacity for suffering' and this is, no doubt, an analogy with the 'suffering servant' as Isaiah describes the Messiah to come. A final layer of meaning might be implied: the whole concept of bringing form out of nothingness evoking both Genesis and the opening of John's Gospel.

Such a connection with the 'logos' is not unique in the words of 'spiritual' composers. Messiaen's statements key into the same metaphysical connections, while Tavener, in the opening chapter entitled 'In Retrospect' in *The Music of Silence* actually says:

Sacred Music must be able to be sung ... The Word must be heard. Music is the extension of the Word. It is at the service of the Word ...<sup>8</sup>

Of course it can be argued that this relates to the specific context of the setting of sacred texts, but his implication is that this can only be done 'properly' by a composer who carries the spiritual burden of 'the Word'. To reinforce his point he later speaks of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* as 'an absurdity and an anomaly because it resonates only against itself ... it's just an excuse for an expansive exercise in anguished self-expression'.<sup>9</sup> Tavener concedes however that the composer who seeks the 'music [which] already exists' is not just following a Christian tradition but a Platonic one. His epigrammatic statement 'Music just is. It exists'<sup>10</sup> certainly 'resonates' with Pärt and Messiaen, but whether other overtly 'spiritual' composers would identify with this position statement, which stops just short of deifying the Art, is debatable. The Platonic tradition referred to here will not stand up to great scrutiny in this context, since in Platonic terms music was 'anti-moral'. If music is anti-moral then it cannot have spiritual content in the terms conceived of by Pärt, Messiaen and Tavener.

We have begun to see that it is common for, as Stravinsky would have it, 'religious religious' composers to use words which are suffused with verbal symbolism derived from religious ritual on the one hand, and related to perceived Divine inspiration on the other, although most stop short of describing their music and motivation as being a direct consequence of the qualities or fruits of the Holy Spirit. There can be no question that their spiritual 'positions' are sincerely held.

The prime motivation for most composers who see themselves as expressing spiritual truths seems to be the understanding that the act of composition is itself a liturgical act. Thus, for example, Gubaidulina says that 'in each of my works I experience the Eucharist in my fantasy'<sup>11</sup> and Macmillan speaking of *Veni Veni Emmanuel* says that 'it is a musical exploration of the theology behind the Advent message' and specifically that 'at the end of the piece the music takes a liturgical detour from Advent to Easter ... as if the proclamation of liberation finds embodiment in the Risen Christ'.<sup>12</sup> Likewise Messiaen says that in *Trois petites liturgies* and *La Transfiguration* he 'intended to accomplish a liturgical act, that is to say to bring a kind of office, a kind of organised act of praise, into the concert hall'.<sup>13</sup> If this is a recurring 'motif' in the works of Pärt, Tavener, Macmillan, Messiaen and Gubaidulina, we must perforce assume that it is both absolutely necessary for their 'inspiration' and the prime motivation for the expressive act itself. Macmillan is prepared to go further and suggest that whatever extra-musical stimuli lie behind individual works, these are 'transubstantiated into the musical'.<sup>14</sup> The mystical qualities suggested by such writings are possibly the domain of Catholic and Orthodox composers. It would seem unlikely that

a composer from a Calvinist background would adopt the same register in speaking of his/her work.

A second musical element which has close connection with the metaphysical and is clearly central to the compositional act is what both Tavener and Gubaidulina refer to as a structuring of 'sacred time'. The very fact of music as a temporal art comprising of products which simply cannot be comprehended in one instant or in one comprehensive 'observation', makes this a central component of the spiritual dimension in their music. Because God does not exist in time no music is going to be able to capture the essence of the Divine, and hence parallels with 'the Word' break down here. Nevertheless composers like Messiaen, Pärt, Tavener, and Gubaidulina deliberately manipulate the temporal elements to emulate in human terms an experience of the Divine. Gubaidulina says:

Mankind as a whole creates 'essential time', that is the time that revives and cures the essence of the human spirit. This task is especially important to me when it is realized through art: sacred time.<sup>15</sup>

It is unlikely that most of Gubaidulina's or indeed Tavener's audiences share with them a concept or understanding of the notion of 'sacred time'. Since the average concert goer does not generally have sufficient musical knowledge to go beyond the perception of a work's structural integrity at a superficial level, the implied spiritual depth behind the structuring of time which both these composers explicitly define and which is no doubt equally applicable to Messiaen and others, will only translate itself at best, on the part of their listeners, into an unconscious awareness of a work's underlying organisational principles.

Furthermore, plainchant has been used in various works by all these composers and it seems likely that this cast backwards in time to a form of music expression which is conceived as being close to 'spiritual purity' in musical terms is no accident. The depth of sacred time is evoked by plainchant, if only by proxy, while the simplicity of the medium is a model for direct communication not only with the audience but with the Higher Being. This raises an interesting question as to exactly what an avowedly non-spiritual, or to be more precise an anti-religious institution composer such as Maxwell Davies believes he is achieving in his use of plainsong. Since Davies's work is absolutely rooted in plainsong, his almost obsessive use of the material could suggest a search for deeper spirituality and a desire for a sense of timelessness as a perceivable quality in his music.

The tonal simplicity of plainsong is clearly a factor to be considered but in a wider context. There is much more to the tonal rooting of composers such as Pärt, Messiaen or Tavener than can be discussed in this short space and indeed this is an area which has been subjected to varying degrees of scrutiny over the past centuries and on a great variety of different levels. Olivea Dewhurst-Maddock,<sup>16</sup> for example, argues that vibrations of specific pitches can affect certain limbs and organs of the body: she has it that C affects *inter alia* the bones, muscles of the lower back legs and feet, that D links to physical and mental energy, and so on. These 'physical' attributes are not far from those

characteristics of the various keys which composers and theorists have defined over the past centuries. Thus where Dewhurst-Maddock finds D linking with energy, Rameau declares D major to convey liveliness and rejoicing.

Leaving aside the question of whether Rameau's D major is actually the same exact pitch as present-day D major, it is evident that the association of pitch centre with physical states, or more precisely, states of being, is indeed a factor influencing and shaping the compositional choices of those composers with whom we are principally concerned here. For example, Dewhurst-Maddock associates 'A' with pain control, for Charpentier, A major was joyous and pastoral, for Rameau it denoted liveliness and rejoicing and for Lavignnac it was free and sonorous.<sup>17</sup> Relating these to specific works we find that Poulenc favours A major, or Aeolian mode, for passages of hope and strength – Mellers describes the last movement of the flute sonata as being in A major the 'key of youth and hope'.<sup>18</sup> Another particularly striking example of the use of A major/modal is the cyclic Creation theme which opens Messiaen's *Visions de L'Amen*. This might appear to be a particularly Gallic trait were it not that we also find it underlying a good number of Arvo Pärt's works as for example in 'An den Wassern', *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten*, *Fratres* and *Tabula Rasa*. Some of this use of A may be conditioned by the tuning ritual and by extension, to the harmonic series, thus connecting to the fundamentals of the human auditory experience.

There are many musical areas which could be covered in an examination of the wellsprings of a composer's spirituality but one further will have to suffice here. We might think that a composer's choice of instruments and voices is conditioned primarily by pure practicality; the use of what is readily available or what is required through commission, for example. For the composers we have been considering this is not necessarily the case: Gubaidulina speaks of the cello in *Seven Words* as a 'crucified deity'<sup>19</sup> – the strings of the cello undergo crucifixion; Tavener's use of voices is certainly symbolic, as is his preference for the particular vocal quality of Patricia Rozario. Messiaen's use of the organ has extra-musical associations, and even Stravinsky was not averse to the symbolic use of instruments, as when Elijah's chariot climbs to the heavens in the third movement of *Symphony of Psalms*.

While we might have come some way towards understanding the composer's position we have not yet explained why the listening public buy into these ideas in music at a time when spirituality in the Western world is at a low ebb. John Rahn's view is that we 'need real art – art where craftsmanship expresses the world and reconnects to the Sacred',<sup>20</sup> because as a people seek to 'redeem ... violent tendencies' they renounce 'the appetitive or acquisitive' and affirm 'the contemplative'.<sup>21</sup> Macmillan believes that religious contemplation and musical listening are strongly connected and he declares that 'we give something of ourselves to the object whether it be a musical performance or the Divine'.<sup>22</sup> The implication is that the audience is willingly giving up part of itself to the experience: a voluntary sacrifice. Giving oneself up to the musical experience, like giving up part of oneself to God is both a recognition of an old tribal need but also an acceptance of transcendence. Of course in the Christian tradition giving up part of oneself is not enough - it is to be the whole life which should be offered. The parallel here with giving

up oneself in human Love should not be missed, and indeed Messiaen confronts us with this directly in his *Turangalila* symphony of 1948.

Although when Macmillan refers to the ‘downside of the *zeitgeist* for spirituality’<sup>23</sup> in some contemporary music as ‘[the] need to retreat from the world’, he is undoubtedly referring to composers such as Pärt and Tavener, he could equally well be describing the spiritual state of being of their audiences, and indeed maybe even of his own audiences. Every age creates its own *zeitgeist* and in many ways the *zeitgeist* is made in the image that the people need at that particular time. Perhaps the popularity of CDs of ‘spiritual music’ is due in no small part to the largely unconscious desire that the present age needs to define its own spirituality.

No composer wants a passive listener. Much money has been made on ‘easy listening’ compilations or wallpaper music designed to slow down or speed up shoppers’ progress through a store: neither of these promote active ‘listening’, just ‘hearing’. Composers concerned with embodying spiritual ‘truths’ within their music seek the ideal listener, prepared to give up self to the transcendental experience of the music. This was certainly in Stockhausen’s mind when he composed *Stimmung* but Stockhausen was not specifically attempting communion with the Divine in that work. Composers such as Pärt, Gubaildulina, Messiaen and Macmillan desire listeners who are prepared to seek wholeness through complete identification with the music. For the ‘religious religious’ composer the ‘bottom line’ is that the state of wholeness derives from attachment to the Eternal, to The Creator, from whom their music ultimately flows. The wholeness which comes from such communion with the Creator implies that individuals have a sense of wholeness with each other. In other words, music becomes the unifying force which binds mankind together. This is hardly a new idea and is neatly summarised in the words of Boethius:

the soul of the universe is united by musical concord ... For when, by means of what in ourselves is well and fitly ordered, we apprehend what in sounds is well and fitly combined ... we recognize that we ourselves are united by this likeness .<sup>24</sup>

Notes:

1. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, *The Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, original edition, New York: W. W. Norton 1966, p. 369 [and see: [www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/FINE/juhde/bird961.htm](http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/FINE/juhde/bird961.htm): accessed 9 January 2005].
2. Paul Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, Oxford: OUP 1997, p. xi
3. Wilfrid Mellers, *Francis Poulenc*, Oxford: OUP 1993, p.127
4. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky*, London: Faber and Faber 1959, p.124
5. *Ibid*, p.125
6. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues and a Diary*, London: Faber and Faber 1961/68, p. 46
7. Hillier *op. cit.* p. 20
8. Brian Keble (ed.), *John Tavener The Music of Silence*, London: Faber and Faber 1999, p. 47



9. *Ibid*, p. 55
10. *Ibid*, p. 74
11. Vera Lukomsky, 'The Eucharist in my fantasy': Interview with Sofia Gubaidulina, *Tempo* no 206, 31-2
12. An interview with James MacMillan was conducted in June 1998 during the 2nd Annual Vancouver New Music Festival located at:  
[www.sfu.ca/twentieth-century-ltd/macmillan1.html](http://www.sfu.ca/twentieth-century-ltd/macmillan1.html) [accessed 9 January 2005]
13. Claude Samuel, *Music and Color: Conversations with Claude Samuel*, Portland: Amadeus Press 1986, p. 22
14. Macmillan, *op. cit.*
15. Elliot Schwartz, Barney Childs, and Jim Fox, (eds), 'Sofia Gubaidulina: An Interview with Dorothea Redepenning' in *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music* New York: Da Capo Press 1998, p. 451
16. Olivea Dewhurst-Maddock, *The Book of Sound Therapy*, London: Gaia Books, 1993 pp. 90-1
17. Summarised in Jean-Jacques Nattiez, tr. Carolyn Abbate, *Music and Discourse: Towards a Semiology of Music*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1990, pp. 125-6
18. Mellers, *op.cit.* p. 165
19. Vera Lukomsky, 'Sofia Gubaidulina "My Desire Is Always To Rebel, To Swim Against The Stream"' in *Perspectives of New Music* Vol. 36 no.1 (Winter 1998), p. 22
20. John Rahn, 'What is Valuable in Art, and Can Music Still Achieve It' in John Rahn, ed., *Perspectives on Musical Aesthetics*, New York: Norton and Co 1994, p. 61
21. *Ibid*, p. 60
22. Macmillan, *op. cit.*
23. *Ibid*
24. Boethius, *De institutione musica* quoted in Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Musical History: From Classical Antiquity through the Romantic Era*, New York: W.W. Norton 1950, p. 81  
[and see: [www.musictheoryresource.com/members/MTA\\_2\\_1a.htm](http://www.musictheoryresource.com/members/MTA_2_1a.htm) accessed 9 January 2005]