

MUSIC & SPIRITUALITY / June 9, 2019 UUC / Eric Funk

Music is a vehicle that can and should carry congregants into a deeply spiritual open, receptive place. This offers the possibility of a revelatory experience with each gathering while creating connection between people who have gathered to worship.

In order for the music to function as a vehicle in a spiritual setting, the mindset of the musician/s needs to be sacred. By sacred I mean in total surrender, total humility. I recall once feeling so unsure of my ability to play the music I was asked to play for a particular service, actually making a kind of internal plea to God for help. The answer that came to me was, “Get out of the way”. In other words, trusting your ability to make music, and the talent and skills you bear, is all that’s necessary.

Getting out of the way means being a tool for the divine. It’s egoless. It’s very different from secular performance. In both cases, one is trying to create connection. But with sacred music that connection is with the divine, with all that which lies beyond this plane. Think of a gospel musician, going way beyond the notes on the page, musically reaching for something beyond our understanding, something that, if looked for with the intellect, cannot be found. There is a required suspension of disbelief in order for faith to rise and triumph. Institutionally, I think that sacred music should be grounded in theological or spiritual truths; a conscious relationship between liturgy of word and music is essential. There needs to be a close relationship between clergy and musicians, guaranteeing thematic connections and more memorable experiences.

As you probably know, rhythm and blues + early rock n’ roll took sacred songs and put SECULAR words to them, performed memorably, for example, by the likes of Ray Charles, Sam Cooke,

Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett, and others. “I’m gonna wait for the midnight hour...gonna see my sweet Jesus in the Midnight Hour”, was a Wilson Pickett trademark, inserted into the gospel end of many tunes. And a lot of MoTown and Soul music takes the model of the gospel service onto the concert stage. The energy of inducting the crowd, doing call and response, fueling the music with improvisation and physical movement, getting folks clapping and dancing, - “Stand up! Put your hands together!” - all comes from that *gospel thing*.

It’s a reversal of that which, for example, Martin Luther did by putting SACRED words to secular songs, wanting the congregation to blast out the familiar songs but now with new words. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, as the church moved away from the territoriality of clergy having to do everything as ordained and acknowledged intercessors, a *philosophical shift* that involves the inclusion of lay persons and everyone who gathers having more central and active roles in every aspect of the religious service, including music, creates a deeper connection. Oftentimes now the choir will serve as cantor for call & response sung liturgy or the cantor will be selected from the congregation, similar to sacred readings being done by lay persons.

Many Christian protestant churches have shifted away from music functioning as a vehicle for sacred transition from the ordinary world to the sacred world. Instead, church musicians are entertainment periodically placed throughout the service. The appearance of applause in church services is very strange for me, as a lifelong sacred music musician. For me, this is like applauding a prayer. It doesn’t make any sense. Even in the secular world, every truly great musician is seeking to take the listener into the music, NOT into the musician. Applause is expected in concert performances. Ideally, the applause is in response to the achievement of taking the listener so deeply into the music that each person was deeply moved, the musicians themselves seeming

to evaporate at “lift off” once the music begins. To the musician, it can feel like a failure to have the audience applaud them as some kind of iconic heroine or hero. It’s all about mind-set. It’s all about getting out of the way.

We each know when we’ve achieved that balance point. It’s not a “dig me” thing. Rather, it’s knowing how to become and sustain being a lens, a lens through which the music passes and touches the hearts of each individual and thereby everyone gathered, no matter how few or how many. Music sometimes is the only thing that can penetrate the broken heart, enter in – the wound so deep, the grief too huge. Music may be one of the most powerful means through which we might experience our connection to ourselves, our connection with others, and as a reminder of our being an active part of something unfathomably larger than ourselves, transcending our ability to understand but ever triggering our deep internal sense of that unbreakable connection.

As a meditative response to this morning’s talk, I decided to play a piece I composed which I entitled “Bear Paw Battlefield – “I will fight no more, forever” (Chief Joseph)”. This composition is part of a brand new commission I just completed for the Billings Music Teachers’ Association. We agreed that I would create for them a set of original works for piano (and a few for violin) at the intermediate and advanced level. I entitled the collection “Montana: An Album of Twelve Tone-Paintings for Piano & Violin, Op 157”. The idea is to have pieces of music directly connected to various places in Montana, trying to capture the ‘energy’ of a particular landmark that means something to me, music that will create an extra-musical, programmatic cue for young musicians as they learn these various pieces in the collection.

When I was in high school in Havre, friends of mine and I would frequent a particular area near Chinook. It was full of cattails. In

the autumn, our game was to go there, pick an arm load of cat tails, sneak around in the morning fog and try to hit each other and send the seeds flying, our form of counting coup. There was one area that we all avoided, a stand of trees near a stream that had a powerfully sad ambient energy. To us it felt “haunted”. We wouldn’t know until decades later that this was the last stand of the Nez Perce in flight from the US Cavalry to Canada, the spot where Chief Joseph said those poignant words that are now part of the title of this simple piece of music. Because it was composed to carry a specific kind of feeling tone, I thought it might serve as a strong model of that which I’ve been speaking about with you this morning: the concept of “getting out of the way”.

When music is trying to portray a specific feeling, it isn’t reliant upon simple things like being in a “major” or “minor” key. Instead, we composers (and ultimately performers) seek to replicate what the body, mind, heart are experiencing during that feeling state. The music mirrors the feeling state. With sadness, the music, like us, is inward turned, halting, constrained, holding back, unapproachable, quiet, hurt, simple, and consequently direct in its understatement. This is the physiological and mental state I had to be in creating this and also, now, in performing it.

I hope this puts strong musical punctuation on my message for you this morning.

Thank you.