

The Thirty-fourth
ERIC SYMES ABBOTT
Memorial Lecture

THE MOST SPIRITUAL OF THE ARTS:
Music, Modernity, and the Search for the Sacred

delivered by

Sir James MacMillan
Composer, Conductor, Artistic Director

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The Very Revd Eric Symes Abbott
(1906 – 1983)

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***THE MOST SPIRITUAL OF THE ARTS:
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THE MOST SPIRITUAL OF THE ARTS: Music, Modernity, and the Search for the Sacred

As a composer with an acute interest in the theological reflections which underpin much of what I do, I try here to account for this art form of music which many, religious and non-religious alike will refer to as ‘the most spiritual of the arts.’ I argue that the search for the sacred did not end with modernity in music and that, if anything, it has grown and become more complex.

I think some people are getting fed up asking me if it feels odd and lonely being a religious composer, mainly because I have a very long answer for them. Much of this deals with other contemporary religious composers, like Pärt and Tavener and Jonathan Harvey. But the story of twentieth and now twenty-first century music is of a complicated and sometimes bewildering re-engagement of composers with metaphysical, spiritual and downright religious insights. Roger Scruton, in his *Death Devoted Heart*, makes the claim that this has a lot to do with Wagner, and in particular *Tristan and Isolde*. But music, even if it can be at times the most abstract, as well as the most spiritual art form, does not come about in a vacuum. The other arts, and specifically poetry, offer parallel lines of engagement.

There are certain words associated in the public mind with modernism in the arts and modernism in music in particular. Modern music can sound wild and even savage. Like much else in the modern arts, contemporary music can open a door to the dark side of human nature and our thoughts, our fears and our experiences. Yet it is modern music that sparkles and bedazzles as generations of composers fell in love with new bright instrumental colours and experimental orchestrational vividness. And in spite of the retreat of faith in Western society, composers over the last century or so have never given up on their search for the sacred. From Elgar to Messiaen, or from Stravinsky to Schnittke, one hears talk of transcendence, mystery and vision.

Visionary mysticism is much in vogue in discussion about the arts these days. ‘Spirituality’ is held to be a positive factor by many, especially among the non-religious, or those who pride themselves on their non-conventional unorthodoxy in religious matters. Music can be described as the most spiritual of the arts by those who proclaim their atheism and agnosticism. In an age of crystals, vapours and fashionable New Age chic, the word spirituality can be used by many, covering everything from yoga and meditation to dabbling in religious exotica.

For example, William Blake’s visionary mysticism has become popular in our own time. Its private mythology, its narcissistic religion and its gesture politics chime with the mishmash of sexual libertarianism and virtue-signalling at the heart of contemporary liberal culture. It presaged our New Age, and his work is greatly admired and has genuine popular appeal. Jung described him as having ‘compiled a lot of half or undigested knowledge in his fantasies’. In the face of his unassailable

popularity in our own times it might be this very flaw which has alerted the wariness of others. It is worth exploring the scepticism that exists about him and his influence, among perhaps more clearheaded and analytical artists, going right back to G.K. Chesterton in 1910 and T.S. Eliot in 1921. Chesterton regarded Blake as a mystic, but in his book *William Blake*, he gives an account of why he thinks mystics go off-base, as he would put it, especially mystics of the modern world who deliberately seek to put clear blue water between themselves and any traditional experience of visionary mysticism springing from Judeo-Christianity. Chesterton suggests that it is this rudderlessness that lacks some of the fundamental values of genuine mysticism. Because Blake trusted and followed no tradition he invented his own unseen world, leading in timeless gnostic fashion to obscurity and mystification. Blake's mysteriousness, in the negative sense, prompted Chesterton to define a true hallmark of visionary mysticism — that it illuminates rather than obscures:

A verbal accident has confused the mystical with the mysterious. Mysticism is generally felt vaguely to be itself vague — a thing of clouds and curtains, of darkness or concealing vapours, of bewildering conspiracies or impenetrable symbols. Some quacks have indeed dealt in such things: but no true mystic ever loved darkness rather than light. No pure mystic ever loved mere mystery. The mystic does not bring doubts or riddles: the doubts and riddles exist already. [...] The man whose meaning remains mysterious fails, I think, as a mystic: and Blake[...] often fail[ed] in this way.

To widen the context, poets have very interesting things to say on these and related matters, and their wider implications. I have collaborated especially closely with the poet Michael Symmons Roberts. He highlights Seamus Heaney's reference to 'the big lightening, the emptying out' of our religious language, and David Jones's vision of the English language 'littered with dying signs and symbols, specifically the signs and symbols associated with our Judaeo-Christian past'. Symmons Roberts suggests that 'the resultant impoverishment hasn't just affected poets, but readers too, and this has been borne out by the now common struggles of English teachers in schools and universities to provide the biblical and historical literacy necessary to make sense of Milton, Donne, Herbert, T. S. Eliot, and others.'

Symmons Roberts argues, convincingly I think, that this 'emptying out' of religious language was the unintended or perhaps intended result of what might be described as 'The Enlightenment project' which, for some of those involved, was 'meant to see off religion'. Except, of course, it has not happened. Symmons Roberts notes that 'many sociologists argue that it is secularism that's in retreat. Worldwide, the case is clear-cut. Christianity and Islam are growing very rapidly throughout the developing world, and a recent report placed the numbers of atheists worldwide at 3 per cent and falling'. It is, nonetheless, a powerful and well-heeled 3 per cent, almost completely

based in the rich West, wielding great clout over matters political, economic and cultural.

In *Post-Secular Philosophy*, Phillip Blond argues that ‘secular minds are only now beginning to perceive that all is not as it should be, that what was promised to them — self-liberation through the limitation of the world to human faculties — might after all be a form of self-mutilation’. To which Michael Symmons Roberts adds:

The myth of the uncommitted artist (free-spirited and unshackled from the burdens of political, religious, or personal commitment) was always an empty one. To be alive in the world is to have beliefs and commitments, and these extend at some level to politics and theology. But this myth has left us with a terror of the imagination in thrall to a belief. Surely this could limit the scope of the work, may even reduce it to a thin preconceived outworking of doctrine or argument? Yet this fear was always unfounded. The counter-examples are obvious, including great twentieth-century innovators such as Eliot, Jones, Auden, Moore, Berryman, and Bunting. [...] And there’s an equivalent list in the other arts too (music’s list would include Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Messiaen, Poulenc, Gubaidulina, Schnittke, Penderecki). The relationship between creative freedom and religious belief is far from limiting.

Most of these writers and composers would argue, that is, that their religious faith was an imaginative liberation. Some, like David Jones, have said that this withering of religious faith and the resulting negative reduction of imaginative liberation represents a parching of our culture — a parching of truth and meaning, a drying up of historical associations and resonances leading to an inability for our culture to hold up “valid signs”.

The opposite of Jones’s “valid signs” would have to be invalid signs, and there is evidence that T.S. Eliot saw manifestations of these in what he saw as the faulty, incoherent vision of Blake and his gnostic, romanticised heritage and legacy. As Symmons Roberts notes, Eliot disapproved of Blake’s rejection of tradition, considering his obsession with inventing a religious worldview a distraction from the vocation of writing original poetry. Eliot saw a strong framework as the means of avoiding the parching of the poetic flow, and as a structural conduit to a fuller and truer vision:

[...] about Blake’s supernatural territories [...] we cannot help commenting on a certain meanness of culture. They illustrate the crankiness, the eccentricity,

which frequently affects writers outside of the Latin traditions [...] And they are not essential to Blake's inspiration.

Blake was endowed with a capacity for considerable understanding of human nature, with a remarkable and original sense of language and the music of language, and a gift of hallucinated vision. Had these been controlled by a respect for impersonal reason, for common sense, for the objectivity of science, it would have been better for him. What his genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own, and concentrated his attention upon the problems of the poet. Confusion of thought, emotion, and vision is what we find in such a work as *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. The concentration resulting from a framework of mythology and theology and philosophy is one of the reasons why Dante is a classic, and Blake only a poet of genius. The fault is perhaps not with Blake himself, but with the environment which failed to provide what such a poet needed.

And it is to this question of environment that we should now turn, because the very things disparaged by Eliot are held in highest regard by our own culture. And the very framework of theology and tradition held to be an essential grounding for Eliot is the focus of disdain and rejection in our contemporary prejudices.

Let us turn, in this regard, to the example of the composer Edward Elgar. As John Butt writes, 'Elgar's Catholic upbringing tends to be underplayed in most writings on the composer, but it may nevertheless be one of the most significant sources of his compositional character.' Since *The Dream of Gerontius*, indeed, commentators have fallen over themselves in an attempt to paint Elgar's Catholic faith as weak or insignificant. Charles McGuire notes that even his biographer, Jerrold Moore, follows the same tendency: 'It is therefore perhaps inevitable', Moore affirms, 'that, when he produced *The Dream of Gerontius*, a setting of a poem by a Roman Catholic Cardinal which explores various tenets of the Catholic faith, people should jump to the conclusion that his Catholicism underlay his whole life. But his faith was never that strong'. McGuire convincingly explains, I think, this cultural anxiety about Elgar's Catholicism: 'the popular negating of Elgar's Catholicism both at his death and today serves an obvious end: it makes Elgar's music safer, more palatable for a British audience. In essence, it creates an avatar for Elgar as the "essentially English composer" beyond the reach of any of the complicating factors of partisan religion.' However, as the pianist Stephen Hough, argues:

When he decided in 1899 to set Cardinal Newman's "The Dream of Gerontius" to music, he was taking an enormous risk. It was his first major commission, and his career was all set to take off. So to choose this deeply Catholic text in a country where "Papists" were a suspicious, despised and even ridiculed minority was to court disaster. Yet he went ahead, with total disregard for any possible censure or disfavour. So it's hard to believe that the words had no religious meaning for him at the time, especially as he was aware that his faith was an impediment to his career.

If it is true that *The Dream of Gerontius* is the composer's masterwork, and a work of extraordinary vision, then it was a vision burnished with courage—foolhardiness even—and gained singularly through a particularly defined religious tradition and sensibility. This was the kind of framework regarded as vital and necessary by T.S. Eliot when he outlined the conditions required for outstanding visionary art and which had so eluded, or had been so self-consciously rejected by lesser seers such as Blake and his romantic self-delusionists.

Elgar was to suffer for his courageous vision as performances of *The Dream* were banned as 'inappropriate' in Gloucester Cathedral for a decade after the premiere, and performances in places like Hereford and Worcester were only permitted with large sections bowdlerised, with much of the objectionable Catholic dimension removed. It is thought by some that the vehemence of the reaction impacted greatly on the composer, even to the extent of him gradually losing his faith over the rest of his life. He may also have been seduced by the fame and praise which came his way in the wake of his more secular instrumental works which turned him into a national treasure. Indeed, he was to become Britain's official composer, being made a baronet, awarded the Order of Merit and appointed as Master of the King's Music. Proclaimed as "quintessentially English" he became a totem of nationalism. Enjoying all that, why go back to the depredations of Catholic martyrdom? But it was from this religion of martyrs and saints that Elgar drew his most unfettered freedom to visualise a work of greatness. The etymology of the word *religio* is interesting as it implies a kind of binding. Symmons Roberts cites David Jones's essay 'Art and Sacrament':

The same root is in 'ligament', a binding which supports an organ and assures that organ its freedom of use as part of a body. And it is in this sense that I here use the word 'religious'. It refers to a binding, a securing. Like the ligament, it secures a freedom to function. The binding makes possible the freedom. Cut the ligament and there is atrophy — corpse rather than corpus. If this is true, then the word religion makes no sense unless we presuppose a freedom of some sort.

This implies, as Symmons Roberts notes, that the supreme visionary requires religion and theology: ‘So perhaps to “free the waters” and help slake the thirst of a parched culture, poets and other artists *need* religion, *need* a theology. Now there’s an unfashionable idea’. An interesting and challenging idea indeed! How would that go down in today’s fashionable citadels of metropolitan *bien pensant* culture? But, as Symmons Roberts points out, ‘if David Jones is right, then that image of the free-spirited artist is, and always has been, an illusion. Freedom is not absence. The binding makes possible the freedom.’

Major modernist composers of the last hundred years were, in different ways, profoundly religious men and women. Stravinsky was as conservative in his religion as he was revolutionary in his musical imagination, with a deep love of his Orthodox roots as well as the Catholicism he encountered in the West. He set the psalms, he set the Mass; he was a man of faith. Schoenberg, that other great polar figure of early 20th-century modernism, was a mystic who reconverted to Judaism after he left Germany in the 1930s. His later work is infused with Jewish culture and theology, and he pondered deeply on the spiritual connections between music and silence. It is no surprise that John Cage chose to study with him. Cage found his own route to the sacred through the ideas, and indeed the religions, of the Far East. It is intriguing that his famous, or indeed notorious 4’33’ (that is four minutes, 33 seconds of silence), a profound provocation to our listening culture and sensibilities or lack of them, was originally entitled Silent Prayer.

The great French innovator and individualist Olivier Messiaen was famously Catholic, and every note of his unique contribution to music was shaped by a deep religious conviction and liturgical practice. There are, in my view, two composers in history who may be described as theologians: one is J.S. Bach, the other is Olivier Messiaen. Messiaen was a powerful influence on Boulez and Stockhausen (major figures of the postwar avant-garde) and therefore can be counted as one of the most impactful composers of modern times. His Catholicism, far from being an impediment to this, was the major—indeed, singular—factor behind it.

Messiaen wrote one opera — *St Francis of Assisi* — but the most important French Catholic opera of the 20th century was written by Francis Poulenc. His *Dialogue des Carmélites* appeared in 1956. As Mark Bosco comments, ‘No other opera combines 20th-century musical sensibilities with such profound theological themes on Catholic mysticism, martyrdom, and redemption’. There is no comfortable, airy-fairy, pick’n’mix spirituality here. It is based on a true story from the beginnings of modern revolutionary violence — of 16 Carmelite nuns guillotined in the terror of the French Revolution. It was an act of defiance on the part of the composer against the secular terror of that time and the secular orthodoxies of the modern world. For a culture that was meant to have put these old things behind it, *Dialogue des Carmélites* is probably the most successful modern opera of the last 60 years. It is not just another avenue on the search for the sacred but a bold rebuttal of secular arrogances and certainties, and a beautiful proclamation of Catholic truths. Here, as Bosco highlights, ‘traditional

Catholicism becomes[s] intellectually compatible with all that was modern and progressive in French culture in the early part of the twentieth century'. Poulenc's opera is 'at once a Catholic story of heroism and faith and yet speaks to the modern world, an opera for the postwar period of Europe in the 1950s and one resonant with our contemporary struggle with Christian faith and martyrdom'.

The list of composers in recent times radiating a high degree of religious resonance is substantial, covering a whole generation of post-Shostakovich modernists from behind the old Iron Curtain — Gorecki from Poland, Arvo Pärt from Estonia, Kancheli from Georgia, Silvestrov from Ukraine, Schnittke, Gubaidulina and Ustvolskaya, all from Russia — again, courageous figures who stood out and against the prevailing dead-hand orthodoxy of the day, state atheism. And, in this country, after Benjamin Britten have come Jonathan Harvey, John Tavener and many others. Far from being a spent force, religion has proved to be a vibrant, animating principle in modern music and continues to promise much for the future. It could even be said that any discussion of modernity's mainstream in music would be incomplete without a serious reflection on the spiritual values, belief and practice at work in composers' minds.

But with these cultural "spats" between the outlooks of Eliot and Blake, between Chesterton and the New Age, between orthodoxy and majoritarian scepticism, are we looking at different types of transcendence? The search for spirituality seems ubiquitous these days. But in what sense can we call a spirituality made in our own image, to suit our own comforts, to fit our own schedules and agendas, transcendent of anything? Sometimes transcendence has to be fought for, as when Messiaen's music encounters the baffled sneers of its secular, super-rationalist modernist audience and critics, who are eventually won round and see the full glory of the composer's genius, and realise the music is the way it is, precisely because of its theology. As when Elgar composes a huge work that he knows will meet with immediate hostility and animosity. But in this work he seems to be preparing for the inevitable; he had to face up to an unavoidable spiritual challenge which for him involved rejection and ridicule. The cleansing flames of public disapprobation, he would no doubt maintain, was the navigation of a path towards the cleansing flames of Purgatory itself, the very subject of the Newman poem he set. When people say they are baffled by what *The Dream of Gerontius* is all about but are profoundly moved by the music, the transcendence, the revelation and the understanding has already begun in their souls.

The search for the sacred, therefore, seems as strong today in music as it ever was. Perhaps that search now, as it was with *The Dream of Gerontius*, as it was with the theological rootedness of Messiaen's masterworks, as it is in Poulenc's glorious celebration of the mercy, sacrifice and redemption at the heart of Catholic teaching, as it is for any artist who stands out and against the transient fashions and banalities of the cultural *bien pensant*, is the bravest, most radical and counter-cultural vision a creative person can have, in the attempt to re-sacralise the world around us.

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