Musicians make a difference

Douglas Galbraith on the sounds the world overhears

Have you ever considered how church musicians' work within the walls could change the outside world?

Take *commitment*, the sheer commitment of those who week by week gather to practise, who seek ways of improving their skills, who give up other pleasures to follow a path that can disrupt our lives and timetables and sometimes peace of mind! This is the action of those who know that their gifts are from God and are to be returned to God twofold, tenfold, and with thanksgiving. It is a strong statement in a society where what I have is mine by rights. What a transformation could occur if people were enabled to become humble and thankful before what they have, before the persons gifted to them to live among, before the openings and opportunities that cluster in their path, developing not burying what they are given. To stand before life in thanksgiving is nothing less than transformative, for oneself and for others.

Or take our music's *special alliance with the liturgy* of the church. Even though singers may sometimes concentrate so much on the music that they overlook the 'bits in between', our music has the function of taking words and actions and moving them into a dimension where they 'behave differently', where their rhythms are God's rhythms, where they breathe with the Spirit itself. Not just the words set to music but the whole of the act of worship is helped by music to translate into an act in which God can share with us and we with God.

So maybe our music-making is saying to society in general, what if you were to see all your words and your acts as potentially shared with God? What if the ordinary things of life were porous with the divine? What if all we said or did was seen as potentially God-bearing? This political promise, this fashionable opinion, that put-down, that primed detonator: what difference would it make to acknowledge a divine dimension? What if - as we are reminded by all these wonderful Celtic blessings for milking, turning the soil, travelling, the household lying down to sleep - our living of life were recognised as surrounded by the Three-in-One?

Then finally, the *togetherness* musicians have to find. To go behind the sound is to hear a very strong statement about the importance of a community whose members relate healthy and creatively together.. The parts in the anthem blending together, the antiphonal setting where people have to listen before they sing, the hymn tune which unites a whole congregation in praise, the accompanist tempering the weight to the strength of the singing and the meaning of the song, even the soloist whose single notes can so emphasise the ensemble. And not just the music but the relationships within it and across the whole act of worship: the different roles from director to choir member, from singer to player, from worship planner to welcomer at the door, there is a harmony here too, or needs to be for the music to be at its most eloquent.

For a world where there is so much breakdown, the message of community is desperately to be grasped, the need for people to listen to each other not casually but deeply, the recognition that different people have different roles to play, the acceptance (as Dr. Alison Elliot put it) that 'sometimes it's variety that is important, not consensus'. When Paul exhorted his readers to ‘speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and songs’, he was not addressing a choir practice but a group of people who were struggling with a new concept, what it meant to be a new community in Christ.