

Music and Worship

Lent Term, 2014

19th January: Professor Robin Kirkpatrick, Verticality event

26th January: Dr Simon Perry, Jesus is my girlfriend

16th February: Mr Alvo Von Cossel, Music and Suffering

23rd February: Professor Morna Hooker, Music and Justice

1st March: Dr Jeff Mackowiak, Metal, Music and Mayhem

Professor Robin Kirkpatrick

Verticality event

January 19th

Second Sunday in Epiphany

Today is the second Sunday in Epiphany. This is the season associated with the Magi, with the bearing of gifts, with light suddenly – and gratuitously – kindled in the depths of darkness, with illumination coming from above and freely given. So it makes excellent sense that the Chaplain should have chosen ‘Art and Eternity’ as theme for the term’s preaching. It is also appropriate that the Chapel today should have the opportunity to see Sue Henderson’s beautiful meditations on the theme of verticality. We look upward seeking light, and find this evening that our eyes are directed up – and down – the surfaces of the Chapel-stone by these strong, subtle and involving textures. And the choir is singing Rameau, whose great concern, I’m told, was with harmonic verticalities. There are psalms, too, that sanction the raising of our gaze;

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—

where does my help come from?

2 My help comes from the Lord,

the Maker of heaven and earth.

All of this elevation is, surely, natural. And King David’s verses may well be taken as the archetype of that great football anthem which asserts that ‘You’ll never walk alone’, provided that, walking through a storm, you ‘keep your head held high’.

For all that, I’m not sure that we shall do full justice to Art or indeed to epiphany or even to eternity if we think in terms only of illumination, inspiration or else of some rocket-like ascent transcending all our present complexities and perplexities. One of Sue Henderson’s works – not on show here tonight – has the splendid title *Falling out of the Abyss* where the paradox of falling to salvation prepares one for important complications. And actually when you next begin to sing ‘You’ll never walk alone’ – no doubt welling up as you do so – you might remember that this show-stopper comes from the musical *Carousel*, which is set against the swings and roundabouts of a fair ground – and takes as its hero a gambler who, having committed suicide, spends most of the evening wandering up and down from heaven to earth.

So downs as well as ups will be my theme tonight, along with roundabouts and, above, all spirals. Some justification for this emphasis is offered by the etymology of the word vertical. This – or so I am told by the theologian who organised this evening’s exhibition – associates verticality with the Latin *vertere* – ‘to turn’ - in particular [and in Sanskrit?] the turning of a human head, the human vertex. Thus we should be ready to discover here, alongside plumb-line geometry, con-vers -ation and even con-vers -ions, the turning of person to person and the turning of persons to truth. This has a particular appeal to someone such as myself who is concerned with verse – since poetic verses are also ‘turnings’ But it also has a bearing on the way we understand both Epiphany and Eternity.

As to Epiphany, one recalls from St Matthew that the Magi, having delivered their gifts, ‘re-turn’ to their homes by a different route. And well they might. After all, on first arriving, these three wise men had done something pretty stupid. By alerting the power-crazed Herod to the birth of a rival king they had helped to trigger the massacre of the

innocents and the flight of the Holy Family, as refugees, into Egypt. One implication is that, until they had seen Christ, the magi, no less than all of us, were caught up, even if unintentionally, in a spiral of destruction. Another implication must be that, in celebrating the epiphanic light, we cannot even now ignore the swirl of surrounding darkness. Despotism, blood lust, innocent refugees – and Syria, the CAR and South Sudan? We may, as the tonight's Psalm 40 declares, sing a new song but this is sung in acute awareness of the slimy, vertiginous pit from which we have been drawn – and into which we may quite easily fall back..

As for Eternity, if we suppose that this indicates merely a straight-line destination on, say, some for once-accurate sat-nav, the word can all too easily become a narcotic substitute for reality. We need, I suspect – at least theologically – to abandon ideas of eternal comfort and to speak more fully of Creation. The reality is that we, as creatures, did not create ourselves. The truly epiphanic offering is that we have, somehow, received our lives as a gift and may in faith, expect that, when that token is, at death, redeemed, we should participate ever more fully in the infinite complexities of creation. That thought is as terrifying as it is exhilarating. And metaphors relating to spirals may better capture this – spiralling out of control – than vertical simplifications. After all, DNA is a double helix. And that, so I'm told, is Life. Moreover, the word spiral is directly related to breath – respiration in English; spiro – 'I breathe' in Italian.

Now, some of these considerations have already been reflected in the readings appointed for this evening's service, especially [on the handout] in the wonderful lines from the prophet Isaiah;

Before I was born the Lord called me;

from my mother's womb he has spoken my name.

2 He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,

in the shadow of his hand he hid me;

he made me into a polished arrow

and concealed me in his quiver.

These same lines also anticipate much that I shall be saying about the poet Dante, and may serve to illuminate the relationship between art and eternity, or between our human words and the Creative Word of God. Prophecy and poetry are not, after all, entirely distinct. So the words that God has put in the mouth of Isaiah have, indeed, the straightness of an arrow aerodynamically launched at its target; and they glisten like a well-honed sword. Yet their dangerous brilliance is held in, and enhanced by, the dark cones – or spirals – in which they are contained, the womb of the mother and the quiver of God their Maker. These two cones - or spirals – are the two original sources of life. And arrows fly most surely when rotating through the intervening air. .

So what about Dante? If, by some remote chance, you haven't read him recently, then you'll know, at least, that he goes down through Hell, labours up through Purgatory, then zooms ever upwards towards God in Heaven. [There is, by the way, a Radiohead version of this itinerary, as well as a rotten Dan Brown novel.] But are these vertical locomotions quite enough to explain the relationship between Dante's art and eternal truth? Not really. So let's home in on the detail of Paradiso 21.

In the canto illustrated on the handout – Paradiso Canto 21 – Dante is two thirds of the way on his journey towards the ultimate vision. This journey is represented as an ascent from one planetary heaven to the next, Dante being guided ever upward by his girl-friend, Beatrice. [I won't explain why, for fear of annoying any big-bang theorist who happens to be present here this evening.] And at times Dante does quite explicitly compare his rocket-like ascent to the flight of an arrow. He now arrives at the planet Saturn, where the souls he meets are the souls of the contemplatives and ascetics – monks and hermits – who in their earthly lives have focused their minds entirely on God. Here, too, he sees a golden ladder leading still higher to the hidden summit of Divine reality – and the allusion here is plainly to Jacob's Ladder, as featured in the Book of Genesis.:

I saw, as gold in which a ray shines through,
a ladder stretching upwards – and so far
my eye-lights could not follow where it led.
I also saw, descending rung by rung,
so many brilliancies that every flare
the sky displays I thought was flowing down.
Compare; jackdaws, by instinct, as the day
first breaks, will flock and stir their wings, as one,
to bring some warmth once more to icy plumes.
Then some will make away and not return,
while others do go back from where they'd come,
And some will stay and wheel round that same spot.
In just that way these sparks appeared to me,
combining in their scintillating showers
as each one struck upon a certain step.

This, then, is the scene that Botticelli illustrates – in his great sequence of 100 drawings, which follows the Commedia through from start to finish. And one thing that this drawing gets spectacularly right is the coil of Beatrice's gesture – maternal yet energetic, her robes spiralling around the upward reach of her dancer's arm. And all of that takes us back to this evening's theme. Yet other things are not so Dantean. Above all, Botticelli's art is possibly a bit too pretty – too predictably concerned with angelic choirs – to do justice to the concentration and actual violence of Dante's poetry, or even for that matter of the Genesis reading.

For one thing, in Dante's own picture, there are jackdaws – and I'd really like to say more than I've time for about jackdaws, chilly and chattering. More importantly, there are, in Dante's account, no smilingly beatific faces. In Saturn, for once, even Beatrice doesn't smile. And the soul that Dante proceeds to speak to – the severe St Peter Damian – is gathered up into a single pyrotechnic light, spinning, spiralling, vigorously around its central hub. In fact, in the next quote this spiralling manifestation of inward of energy is spoken of as a grindstone or millstone. This – apologies, Botticelli – is hardly pretty at all. But it does identify and define the rigorous centred con-centration that Dante would have seen displayed, ideally, in the ascetic life. Equally, it suggests that the point of ascetic concentration is to grind out the very essences of existence. A mill-stone spins so as to separate the grain or fruit from unwholesome chaff. Metaphorically this may also be true of spiritual contemplation. And, by the way, in

Genesis, Jacob's ladder does not descend so as to helicopter him to heaven but rather to bring the announcement that his tribe will spread out to possess the promised land and be fruitful.

But then Dante's canto offers a further aid to nutritious concentration. Apart from Dante's nervy conversation with the rather edgy Peter Damian, absolute silence prevails throughout this episode. Elsewhere in Paradise there is always in the background, as one might expect, the rather soothing muzak of the heavenly spheres. But not on this occasion.

Imagine. The Robinson choir is famously mellifluous; and you've come this evening, quite reasonably, to hear them sing. But for once they don't. They just sit there, not even smiling. Wouldn't this, though, itself be a kind of art – an event, a performance, a John Cage chorale? And wouldn't that silence spiral into a concentrated attention on another world or, better say, this world seen anew. The silence might well seem like an eternity. What the hell's going on? But slowly your eyes might circle around, noticing here the Warden's raised eyebrow and there the Chaplain's sharp-eyed re-assurance. You'd hear the rustle of a hanging fabric, the swoosh of real traffic on the road outside. So the initial shock might generate – 'might' I say – its own contemplative concentration and even some new understanding of what life is all about.

Well, it's something like that which now occurs in Dante's meeting with Peter Damian. Dante has a question to ask. But significantly he doesn't receive a very informative answer. There are, it seems, things that even souls in Heaven can never know. And that in itself tells one something about eternity. Which is that it won't, after all, be a kind of celestial Wikipedia. .God as creator is infinite and infinitely exceeds the gigabyte allowance of any creature, be it human, saintly, angelic or even that of Wise Man bearing gifts. Well, thank heaven for that. For if Heaven is not, after all, to be an ever-lasting pub-quiz-plus-iPhone, then it is, as Dante's lines now reveal, a carousel of inter-communicating energies – the epiphany of creation. . The next verses on the handout are among the most dense – and tense – that Dante ever wrote:

Nor had I reached the last of all these words
when that light took its centre as a hub,
spinning around itself as grind stones do.
The love within it then replied to me,
'Divine light drives its point upon me here.
And penetrating that in which I'm wombed,
its virtue, joined with my own powers of sight,
lifts me so high above myself I see
on high that essence where that light is milked. [Paradiso 21:

Divine light – as though it were an arrow - penetrates the light in which the saint, like every creature, is properly enclosed – or 'en-wombed' as Dante's metaphor has it. And, as light is joined to light in something like an intersecting helix, the eye of the creature is born anew and feeds on the milk – the essential food – of God's own creative act.

In the poetry of these lines, there is much that resembles the language of the prophet Isaiah – penetrating verticals but also the circling darkness in which life, both human and divine, is always generated. Nor, in the perspective of Christianity, should it be all that surprising that the metaphors Dante here employs are so markedly physical and even carnal. Christianity is concerned, after all, not with some transcendent demiurge but precisely with an incarnate God, working to sustain and advance all creation.

So, comforting as eternity might be, we all – the artist included – need to come down to earth. And this is what Dante now does in a twist – or turn – that denies us all complacency. In the next lines on the handout Peter Damian is seen to focus his attention on the corruptions of the contemporary world, as seen particularly in the gross pollution of the monastic cloister. In life, Peter Damian was a notoriously bad-tempered saint, constantly attacking the greed, pomp and fashion-sense of his fellow cardinals. Dante, a notoriously bad-tempered poet, here attributes to Peter a characteristically scathing diatribe;

Our modern pastors, though, have put on weight.

They need some propping up on either side,
someone to hoist their backsides up, or lead.

The robes they dress in cloak their steeds as well,
so two beasts go within a single skin.

What patience, God, to bear a sight like that!

A fat horse is mounted by a fatter priest whose robe is so opulent that it covers both of them like a single skin in which two beasts, human and equine, are seen to wriggle out their grotesque co-existence. There is something horribly cartoon-like about this picture – as if it had been conceived by, say, Gerald Scarfe. But the meaning is precise. The relation here of horse to rider is an exact parody of that inter-communicative relationship of spiral lights that exists between Damian himself and God. And so far from being, productively, a grindstone, the flabby monastic horseman offers only a parody of that clearly delineated existence that all creatures were made to enjoy. As Dante will go on to say, the cowls and tunics of luxurious monks have now become mere sacks of rotting flour.

And with this the silence of Heaven is at last torn asunder by a thunderous cry of indignation from all of the other contemplative saints;

I saw, as this was said, more little flames,
ascending and revolving, step by step,
more beautiful at every turn they took.

They came and circled round this soul, then stopped,
and gave a cry so piercing in its sound
that nothing here on earth could equal it.

And, thunderstruck, I did not understand. [Paradiso 21:

The swirling chorus here is beautiful but also piercing. The choir may well like to try it. But this is where I draw my own, merely wordy, conclusion about art and eternity – and spirals, too. In many respects, the impulse and impact of Dante's art in this canto - his angry art – is more like that of El Greco than of Botticelli. Here the whirlwind of

Christ's energy, as God's creative word, is needed to cleanse the verticals of the temple from the corruption that has turned the place into a pit. So we should allow, I think, that art, like prophecy, can very often be angry in its focus.

But that is not quite where I want to leave it. For there is another turning here – a turning of conversion, even of conversation. El Greco in fact painted the Expulsion-episode as many as five or six times. It is as though he returned to the scene time and again in penitential concentration on the actions of God and human delinquency. And there is a turning also recorded in the conversation between Peter Damian and Dante. At this point – next on the handout – Dante is roundly ticked off by Peter for asking silly, abstract questions that only God can answer, and so now he restrains himself – con-centrates himself – to ask only the simplest of questions;

Minds that shine here, on earth give off mere smoke.

So just consider whether those down there
could do what, raised to Heaven, no mind can do.'

His words so cut and limited my thoughts
that I gave up the question, holding back,
to ask him, very humbly, who he was.

Now simple as this is, it touches an absolutely fundamental feature of Dante's writing .His poetry may indeed soar upward and glisten epiphanically in the light. But just as frequently his vision dives downwards to grasp the smallest and finest detail of the created universe. This, actually, is where jackdaws would have come into it. These are not offered, in Dante's poetry, merely as symbols of some saintly reality, they matter in themselves, in the ornithological patterns of their flight, in the textures and temperatures of their feathers, now icy now, warmed by exercise. They participate in creation. And better be a jackdaw than a sack of mouldering flour. But best of all be someone you can name and talk to, even be the bristling Peter Damian. Throughout the Commedia Dante names names and risks often dangerous, if always vigorous, encounters with historical persons. And that is perhaps where poetry and creation meet. Yes: it may well be that in Paradise our words will be transformed into magnificent song. And maybe the textures that surround us this evening will catch the light and the furls of wind in Heaven all the more brilliantly. But in either case we shall want, here and now, to go on talking, meeting, engaging, turning each to each and refining all things to as sharp a point as we can. And that is what art, in all its forms, unendingly, creatively, invites one, here and now, to do. So just turn around.

Second Sunday after Epiphany: Art and Eternity [?] January 19th 2014

Psalm 121: A song of ascents.

1 I lift up my eyes to the mountains—

where does my help come from?

2 My help comes from the Lord,

the Maker of heaven and earth.

Psalm 40[a]

1 I waited patiently for the Lord;

he turned to me and heard my cry.

2 He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.

3 He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear the Lord
and put their trust in him.

Isaiah 49: 1-2

Before I was born the Lord called me;
from my mother's womb he has spoken my name.

2

He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me into a polished arrow
and concealed me in his quiver.

Dante Paradiso 21 28-42

I saw, as gold in which a ray shines through,
a ladder stretching upwards – and so far
my eye-lights could not follow where it led.
I also saw, descending rung by rung,
so many brilliancies that every flare
the sky displays I thought was flowing down.
Compare; jackdaws, by instinct, as the day
first breaks, will flock and stir their wings, as one,
to bring some warmth once more to icy plumes.
Then some will make away and not return,

while others do go back from where they'd come,
And some will stay and wheel round that same spot.

In just that way these sparks appeared to me,
combining in their scintillating showers
as each one struck upon a certain step.

Sandro Botticelli from his complete illustrations of the Commedia

Paradiso 21: 79-87

Nor had I reached the last of all these words
when that light took its centre as a hub,
spinning around itself as grind stones do.
The love within it then replied to me,
'Divine light drives its point upon me here.
And penetrating that in which I'm wombed,
its virtue, joined with my own powers of sight,
lifts me so high above myself I see
on high that essence where that light is milked.

Paradiso 21: 130-142

Our modern pastors, though, have put on weight.
They need some propping up on either side,
someone to hoist their backsides up, or lead.
The robes they dress in cloak their steeds as well,
so two beasts go within a single skin.

What patience, God, to bear a sight like that!
I saw, as this was said, more little flames,
ascending and revolving, step by step,
More beautiful at every turn they took.

They came and circled round this soul, then stopped,
and gave a cry so piercing in its sound

that nothing here on earth could equal it.
And, thunderstruck, I did not understand.

El Greco The Expulsion from the Temple [National Gallery]

Paradiso 21 100-105

'Minds that shine here, on earth give off mere smoke.

So just consider whether those down there

could do what, raised to Heaven, no mind can do.'

His words so cut and limited my thoughts

that I gave up the question, holding back,

to ask him, very humbly, who he was.

APPENDIX

[Had there been time, a comparison – and contrast – might have been drawn between Dante's jackdaws and the famously epiphanic falcon of the following poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins]

The Windhover

To Christ Our Lord

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-

dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding

Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding

High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing

In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,

As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding

Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding

Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing.

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here

Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion

Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plóid makes plough down sillion

Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,

Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

Dr Simon Perry

"Jesus is my girlfriend"

26th January, 2014

This term's services focus upon music and worship, but music is a notoriously difficult thing to try and define. There are multiple and contradictory philosophies of music, and do we speak about composing, or performing, or hearing? And what counts as music? Beethoven or Bieber? Birdsong? Rainfall? Laughter? Is there music in the unaccompanied speech of a human voice? And what purpose does music serve? To offer consolation, or to effect disruption? Given the sheer complexities of the many and varied questions concerning music, no one at Cambridge would be foolish enough to try and define it... or would they?

Aristotle has told us there are only five senses – and what are our senses? They are dimensions of humanity that access dimensions of the universe as it is. But is it possible that the universe contains dimensions we do not consciously sense? And are there ways of experiencing those dimensions? Well according to the well-known vocal, mathematical, Clare College choral duo, Whitehead and Plumpton (if I've understood them correctly), mathematics is one way of accessing dimensions of the universe to which our senses would not otherwise carry us. If mathematics are concerned with the substructures of the universe and how it works, then some philosophers claim that music is thoroughly mathematical – and for that reason music carries us into a fuller experience of what the universe really is.

I wonder if it is for this reason that the seventeenth century philosopher, Leibniz, once wrote, "Music is the pleasure the human mind experiences from counting without being aware that it is counting." Maths does not simply provide structures for those sitting down to compose music. At a far more complex level, music and mathematics converge on the physics of sound: how pitch is determined by force or weight; how the relation of notes to each other produces a scale; and how frequency determines the harmonics of sound. Of course, this is not the place to go into that, but maybe it is true to say that music exposes us to the nature of the universe in profound and complex and subconscious ways.

But how much of our human nature is engaged when we listen to music? Very little according to Immanuel Kant, who viewed music as pleasing but trivial – because it doesn't engage our understanding or our moral world. In contemporary language – Stephen Pinker regards music as "auditory cheesecake!" I can't help thinking there may be a little more going on we listen to music.

Why do advertisers use 'jingles' to sell us things we don't want? If advertising is the art of forcing us to make irrational decisions based upon ignorance, why is music such an important part of that? Why, for centuries, have soldiers marching to battle – been roused for combat using military music? Why do armies employ military bands? Why do football hooligans belt out their hymns in the stadium before going on the rampage? Why do rowers here in Cambridge, psyche themselves up for a race using the 1980s rock classic, eye of the tiger? Given that this sermon series concerns the relation of music and worship – then the link between words and music is an important one. Music is one of the means by which an ideology, doctrine, worldview, ethics can be sunk more deeply into the human spirit than might otherwise be possible. Maybe music reaches parts of our being that nothing else can reach.

So – as a working definition for music – perhaps we could say that music is what happens when hidden dimensions of our humanity experience hidden dimensions of the universe.

If it's true, those who compose music are not simply creating something that was never there – so much as revealing something that was always there, so that it strikes a cord with us. In this sense, musicians are explorers, hunters, unveiling their discoveries to us – offering the possibility that we might become more fully human: As more of who we are experiences more of what there is

Of course, that can be a blessing as well as a curse. When it comes to worship, the songs that we know are those that have stood the test of time: but what about those that failed the test of time? I have a friend who's collected popular worship songs from the 1960s:

- I'm bubbling bubbling bubbling ... bubbling bubbling bubbling ... I'm bubbling bubbling bubbling ... for God!
- I wanna throw up, I wanna throw up, I wanna throw up my hands in worship... Im gonna throw up, I'm gonna throw up, I'm gonna throw up my hands in praise.

Popular worship songs at present, share this problem – not necessarily musically but lyrically. The most pervasive publisher of Christian music comes from a set up called Hillsong – who rejoice that the vast majority of songs submitted for recording and publication, are not really about God – but about how God makes me feel. Here – there is no attempt to experience the diversity of otherness that is in the universe – and music is used to endorse the security of a world with which I am familiar. Less of who we are experiencing less of what there is.

The Jesus of Scripture is presented as Prophet, Priest and King – and any decent hymn book would reflect that threefold pattern. But – according to a Masters Thesis submitted to the London School of theology, if we learn our theology from Worship songs – then Jesus is no longer Prophet, Priest and King – instead, Jesus is my girlfriend! In other words, if you simply remove the name Jesus from most worship songs, and replace it with words like baby, honey, darling and so on – the songs would be no different to secular love songs. Of course, no right-minded representative of the liturgy police would deny the importance of emotion and intimacy in worship – and there is nothing wrong with this. The real problem comes when it is the only diet of liturgical music – and when music drills that monoculture into your psyche, it leaves a distorted view of world, and self, and God. If music is what happens when hidden dimensions of our humanity experience hidden dimensions of the universe.– there is no guarantee that music can make this happen. And the quality of the worship music has little relevance. All too easily, music confines us within the familiar – and less of who we are experiences less of what there is.

As problematic as the “Jesus is my girlfriend” mentality is the removal of emotion and intimacy in worship than can happen in certain liturgical and choral settings. Traditionally, this is why we sing psalms as part of our worship, since the psalms are full of vibrant, raw, unrestrained and violent emotion.

But does that emotion electrify our contemporary choral tradition? The question it raises for me is the extent of training, or background, or experience of hearing – that is required in order for the emotional impact of our choral tradition to become natural. Why is it that traditional forms of music simply don't do it for so many people today? People who have grown up to experience different types of music as natural? It is all too easy in a setting like Cambridge, for those who appreciate what we consider more sophisticated types of music to retreat into an Onanistic elite, treasuring the familiar and denouncing the unfamiliar – and yet, that retreat is precisely the “Jesus is

my girlfriend” sentiment: “The world out there, the terrifying beauty of the other – can stay out there... and I will stay comfortable with the familiar.” Less of who we are experiencing less of what there is.

Music has all the capacity to endorse Christian tribalism in any form, to deliver us from our self-awareness, to confirm and strengthen us in all prejudice, and to keep us in unreflective submission to all that makes us comfortable. It can serve as a hammer on the nail-head of closed-minded, irrational doctrines and ideologies.

But if ... music is what happens when hidden dimensions of our humanity experience hidden dimensions of the universe, if it releases more of who we are to experience more of what there is, then surely it has a key role to play in the worshipping life of any kind of Christian community. What does it mean for music to draw us out of ourselves, to experience otherness in new and unexpected ways, to help us to become ever more human? These are the questions that speakers will address over the next few weeks.

But let me finish by returning to Aristotle. Plenty of studies argue that in human evolution, music preceded spoken language by several thousand years – which would mean that if, as Aristotle said, we are political animals – it is only because we were already musical animals. The challenge is not whether or not we are ‘musical,’ but whether we will allow music to make us ever more fully ourselves.

Music and Suffering

Alvo Von Cossel

16th February

All generic and clichéd presentations about music invariably begin with quotations from dictionaries and brief explanations about how these definitions aren't quite good enough. The Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, defines music as "Vocal or instrumental sounds put together in melodic, harmonic, or rhythmical combination, as by a composer". This, like virtually all dictionary definitions of music, isn't quite good enough. It misses out that which is fundamental to all musics: the emotional aspect. Having a definition of music without mentioning the emotional side is like having a major world religion whose creed mentions only doctrinal matters, and omits anything to do with the loving kindness of God. Imagine that!

The New Grove – a musician's bible – tactfully defines music as "The principal subject of the publication at hand, whose readers will almost certainly have strong ideas of the denotative and connotative meanings of the word." This definition is amusingly useless, but it does tell us that there are all sorts of losers out there who think they know what on earth they're talking about (possibly a reason why so many musicians become clergymen, and certainly the reason why I'm standing here today). [pause]

Only very few musicians in the world are paid for their performances. These are the professional musicians, the actors who can, in many ways, create emotion on demand, for an audience with expectations. But most of us – musical amateurs – play for ourselves. Music is a way for us to express our emotions and, even if others may be listening, we are our own audience. The act of playing or singing takes away the burden of words. We don't need heart-to-hearts to tell anybody how we feel; we don't need to find words for sometimes ineffable emotions. Instead, we 'speak' through the music in a way that may not be intelligible to others; perhaps in a way that need not be intelligible to others.

But what about when we can't play? And here I don't mean being a cellist with a broken wrist. I mean, rather, being a Jew with a broken heart. The Jews in our first reading, Psalm 137, – their homes having been devastated, and they having been captured by the Babylonians – when required to sing one of the songs of Zion, they react in a way that I could never have expected. Instead of being humiliated further and having their culture commodified, they do not play. But their decision not to play is not an act of defiance towards their captors. Giving a rendition of the songs of Zion – "the Lord's song" – becomes impossible outside the right frame of mind. We're talking about a tough crowd, here: they would happily murder Babylonian babies. (I think we'd all agree that there's not much musical virtue in the sound of an infant going "splat!"). And yet their inability to sing represents their deepest, darkest grief, and the extent of their defeat. Their homes and livelihoods have been taken from them, and, quite possibly, they have witnessed the murder of their own children. Nothing seems to matter anymore, other than the everlasting, unchanging Almighty God. And yet they are even removed from Him, in a place far from Zion, far from the synagogues and comforts of their home. Their music has been taken from them.

By not singing, they are admitting their defeat, and they are surrendering to the Babylonians. They've been completely destroyed, and there remains no hope in their eyes. Indeed, "How shall [they] sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

The fact that music is of such high importance to these Jews, that they are capable of physical violence, and yet incapable of song, suggests an inseparable relationship between music and society. Music was a necessity for them.

Today, music is becoming more and more of a commodity, and communal music-making is now only part of ever-disappearing musical subcultures, such as choral societies, brass bands and hymn-singing Cambridge College Chapel congregations. There is a consensus among evolutionary scientists that music significantly predated speech among humans, and former civilisations did have very well integrated musical cultures. Yet the absence of any serious and regular communal music-making from the agendas of most people in the Western world today has caused Sigmund Freud to regard music and all acts relating to music as an expression of a desire to escape from reality, as though we turn to music when we're fed up with the mess that is quotidian existence. To me, though, music is no more an escape from reality than a walk in the park or a badly executed knock-knock joke. Listening to music, rather, is a "path of temporary withdrawal from the hurly-burly of the external world" (Anthony Storr). It helps us to adapt better to our world, rather than helping us escape from it. It creates clarity in our minds when there is otherwise no clarity. If only briefly, music turns the chaos in our minds into order.

Here, I'd like to talk about music as a vicar for experiencing the Divine. In listening to or playing music, we often engage with that which is known as the "oceanic experience": that feeling of vastness and eternity that is unknown to our physical world. It is easy to define what the oceanic experience is and what it makes us feel, because we can put names on certain emotions and things (e.g. happiness, joy, vastness etc.). But it is impossible to convey how this experience feels. There are no words that could possibly convey the how; only the what. But

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where does this experience come from? How is it brought about? An idea I've have is that we do (or, at least, can) experience the Divine vicariously, through music. No clichéd visions of the Cross, no Henry Tozer-esque voices booming supernaturally out of the heavens. The access of the Divine is indirect, but it is there. In Nietzsche's Thus spoke Zarathustra, that beautifully poetic ode to the Sky opens with "O Sky above me! O pure, deep Sky! [. . .] Gazing into you, I tremble with divine desires." Do we not also tremble with divine desires at the sound of music? Does music not, in some way, bridge the gap between us and God, whom- or whatever He may be?

I therefore ask: are acts of devotion and worship bereaved of their power in the absence of music? If we were only to say the words of the mass-ordinary, without music, – for instance "Glory to God in the highest" – we would sound like emotionless zombies. And even if we stopped being so overcast, rainy and British in the way we speak our liturgy, something would still be missing. Just try imitating the supreme sense of triumph that the Choir will generate in the anthem tonight, by speaking the words "Hosanna in excelsis Deo"! For exactly this reason, I would argue that the service of compline, in which the congregation does nothing at all other than listen to music and poetic liturgy, is the most powerful of all liturgies. And I'm clearly not the first to think it. There's nothing coincidental about the fact that the oldest extant hymn melody in our Western music tradition, dating back at least 1200 years, comes from the compline service. While eucharists and evensongs have changed over the centuries according to various musical and political factors, compline remains true to its most ancient origins. There has never been a need to update it, to make it in-keeping with contemporary trends in music. Compline allows for introspection and contemplation, granting the congregant access to the oceanic experience, to find mental order in a world which is, by nature, chaotic.

I can't say whether there is divinity in music. But I can say that it works wonders for the mind and heart. Finally, then, we might have found out what music is: as Robin Maconie puts it, if noise can drive us mad, then perhaps music can "drive us sane".

Amen.

Music and Justice

Professor Morna Hooker

23rd February, 2014

Mine eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He has loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.

Glory, glory, alleluia!

Glory, glory, alleluia!

Glory, glory, alleluia!

His truth is marching on.

It is difficult to recite these stirring words, because they positively demand to be sung. It's partly due to the rhythm of the words, and partly due to the fact that they are so well-known. The so-called 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' has become so popular in America that it's sung at both Democrat and Republican Conventions, as well as at Presidential inaugurations. What could be more appropriate than to remind politicians that 'He is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgement-seat'? or to summon them to action with the call, 'let us live to make men free'?

The words, written by Julia Ward Howe, were penned during the American Civil war, when the North was intent on 'making men free', but they were not the original ones. You may well know the tune better to the words of 'John Brown's body' – a song written a year or two earlier, about one of the soldiers fighting for the abolition of slavery. But whichever words we sing, here is music that is inextricably tied up with the notion of justice.

That, however, demonstrates my problem this evening, for I have been given the title 'music and justice', and words and music are not often so happily wedded together. Take, for example, some of the most revolutionary lines ever penned:

He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their heart.

He has cast down the mighty from their seat,

And has exalted the humble and weak.

He has filled the hungry with good things.

You will all have recognized these words from the Magnificat, which must have been set to hundreds, if not thousands, of tunes. But how many of them suggest that kings are being hurled down and the poor lifted up? We sang or heard two vigorous versions earlier in the service, but more often than not, the music simply flows over us, impressing us with its beauty, but failing completely to stir us into action.

The Magnificat is a song of praise, thanking God for what he has done, which, when you consider its original setting – in the mouth of the pregnant Mary – is extraordinary, because so far he has done nothing, except cause a poor, unmarried peasant girl to conceive, and so risk being shunned by all her neighbours. No one, so far, has been scattered or cast down; the poor have not been lifted, and neither have the hungry been fed. The hymn sets out a programme for what God is going to do – and he is going to do it through Jesus and his followers. Like so many hymns and prayers, this one is not a shopping-list of requests to God, but an agenda for his people: it is through them that the mighty will be brought low, and the poor will be given justice.

It is no accident that our Old Testament lessons this term have been taken from the Psalms, for the psalms were composed to be sung in the temple. What the music was originally like we do not know, though the reference in tonight's psalm to a lyre, a ten-stringed harp, a new song, and a shout, suggest a glorious cacophony. And what were they shouting about? Why, the fact that God 'loves righteousness and justice' (Ps. 33:5). Unlike so many so-called gods worshipped at that time – gods who toyed with men and women, and acted totally arbitrarily – the psalmist's God was reliable, righteous and just. Now it has to be admitted that this is not always the impression that one gains from the Old Testament, for there are passages there which suggest that God is capricious and vindictive. But turn to the prophets, and you will find them insisting, like the psalmist, that God is righteous and just, and that what he requires of his people is, in the words of Micah, 'to do justice and love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God' (Mic. 6:8). The prophets demanded what we now term 'social justice'. 'Let justice flow like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream,' thundered Amos (5:24). The core commands, in both Old and New Testament, are the commands to love God and to love your neighbour. If you love God, who is loving, just and merciful, then you must love your neighbour as yourself: that is only just.

In our New Testament lesson (Luke 4:14-21), we heard Luke's account of how Jesus read from the book of Isaiah at the beginning of his ministry. Once again, we have an agenda – an agenda for what he is going to do: he will bring good news to the poor, announce release to the captives, bring sight to the blind, set the oppressed free, and proclaim the year of Jubilee. Now you may think that I am cheating here, since although this passage may be about justice, it is not set to music. But it is the closest thing we have to music in the New Testament, and in my Bible, both the passage in Isaiah and the quotation in Luke are set out in verse form. Like the Magnificat, this poem announces a reversal that will bring justice for the poor and the captive – and notice how that theme is stressed: Jesus will declare release for the captive, he will let the oppressed go free, and he will pronounce the year of Jubilee, when slaves were released. This is his mission – to bring freedom.

That's a theme that has been linked with music down the ages. Think, for example, of Negro spirituals, in which the singers long to cross over Jordan, into the Promised Land. We tend to assume that they are thinking of heaven as the Promised Land, and that they are longing for death – and for many of them, that was the only way they would ever be set free. But maybe they were hoping against hope for slavery to be abolished, or for escape, across the River Mississippi, to the northern states of America. And who can miss the relevance of the spiritual 'Go down Moses'?

When Israel was in Egypt's land: Let my people go,
Oppress'd so hard they could not stand: Let my people go.
Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.

It is no accident that the gospel was seen by the slaves as a promise of release. The tragedy is that for so many of them, that hope was never fulfilled in physical terms.

Music is such a powerful way to express emotion, that it is hardly surprising that it has continued to be linked with cries for social justice.

A century after the emancipation of slaves in America, the civil rights movement produced its own songs. But racism was not the only issue that needed to be tackled – poverty and the need for social change were also dominant. Bob Dylan's *The Times They Are a-Changing* expressed the spirit of social and political upheaval that swept through America in the 1960's. He composed it, he said, in a deliberate attempt to create an anthem for change, and it was based on earlier Scottish and Irish ballads which had also attacked injustice.

The song most closely associated with the civil rights movement was, of course, *We Shall Overcome*, adapted from an earlier gospel song and popularized by Pete Seeger, who died last month. Seeger's music was protest music, and he used it to campaign for the causes in which he passionately believed, whether they were concerned with civil rights, international disarmament, or the environment.

In 1982 my husband and I visited South Africa. It was not a country we would have chosen to visit, for apartheid was firmly embedded, but my husband had been commissioned to look at theological education there. We spent some of our time in the interdenominational college where ministers were being trained, and while we were there we gave some lectures, and we both had the same experience in every class we took. No matter what the subject, the conversation always ended up in the same place: when was the revolution coming, and what would happen? . . .

There would be, we were assured, a blood-bath, with blacks taking vengeance on the privileged whites. I suppose it was not so surprising that my husband's classes on the prophets should lead to a discussion of justice – though what the students were demanding was not so much justice as more injustice, but with different perpetrators. But I was puzzled: how had a class on the sources of the Gospels or the authorship of the Pauline letters led into this talk of the arrival of what my students saw as the Kingdom of God? That was all they were interested in. We left very depressed. It seemed clear that South Africa was heading for disaster.

And then we called on Desmond Tutu – not, at that time, the revered Archbishop, but the second most hated man in the country. The first, of course, was Nelson Mandela, firmly locked away in prison, but visiting Desmond Tutu was like breaking into a prison, for his office was fortified and guarded like a castle. 'Do you have a message for the Church back in England?' we asked. 'Tell them not to lose hope,' he said. Hope where there seemed to be none? But of course, he was right, for in the end, there was no blood bath, and his Truth and Reconciliation courts did their best to heal the wounds.

And that is why I have asked the choir to sing the South African National Anthem for us tonight – an anthem that is made up of words composed in five different languages, but whose origin lies in two very different songs. The first, *Nkosi Sikelele' iAfrika*, was originally composed as a hymn in Xhosa, but came to be sung as an act of defiance against the apartheid government. The second, originally composed in Afrikaans, expressed the aspirations of the Boers. In 1997, they were brought together, adapted, translated, and welded into what is now the National Anthem.

But it is still a cry for the justice which the prophets, centuries ago, saw as the fundamental characteristic of their God, to be firmly established in the land. And that haunting melody is instantly recognizable to us all. The music is the message:

God bless Africa

Listen also to our prayers

Lord bless our nation,

Stop wars and suffering.

Save it, save our nation,

The nation of South Africa. . . .

Sounds the call to come together,

And united we shall stand.

Let us live and strive for freedom

In South Africa our land.

'Metal, Mayhem, Madness ... Meaning?'

Jeff Mackowiak, Robinson College, 2 March 2014

READINGS: Ecclesiastes 1: 1 - 11 (KJV); Mark 11: 12 - 22 (KJV).

'That got me right in the feels, bro'.

In an article surveying the various words of the year of 2013, published in The New York Times Sunday Review, the lexicographer Grant Barrett identified 'feels' as a word of the year, above and beyond those selected by various dictionaries. 'Feels. n. pl. Feelings. Originated online, thrived as a meme in 2012, and now in 2013 shows signs of moving into more widespread English slang', Barrett reported. For previous generations, an affecting anecdote might move your 'soul', non-corporeal and vaguely spooky, if not fustily Victorian, or it might stir your 'heart', that doubly freighted organ, charged with profound physiological duties while making irresistible emotional demands. The modern young person, though, turns the whole assertion of personal impact much more sensory, tactile — even materialistic: Your 'feels', feel; the way your ear, listens.

'That story of Jesus and the moneychangers, got me right in the feels, bro'.

Yet, though the sophisticated — or, perhaps, just superannuated — ear might chafe, is this phrasing all that novel? As Ecclesiastes reminds us, there is nothing new under the sun, and for all the 'selfies' and (God help us) 'twerkings' appearing in dictionaries nowadays, commonalities of sensibility and anxiety are preserved. Sure, there is amplification, abasement, adaptation, acceleration, compaction; technology plays its role, and mores change. (Yet I am fairly sure Sylvia Plath would have understood the urge to take a selfie, and I am certain, say, that Walt Whitman would've been snapping away.)

vanitas vanitatum. 'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, ^[SEP]vanity of vanities; all is vanity', as tonight's King James Version has it. This, though — as I am sure you are all aware — is not a pithy caution against self-admiration for the compulsive selfie-taker, as the less lyrical, less magisterial, yet more sprightly and demotic New International Translation's rendering reminds us: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. ^[SEP]"Utterly meaningless!^[SEP] Everything is meaningless", in the modern coinage. Two translations, centuries apart: Not quite congruent, but similar in shape. Each with drawbacks; each with excellencies; each, vitally, with expected audiences — and fervid advocates: One might even call them 'fans'.

The 'shock of the new' is a cliché, in music even moreso than linguistics ... or Biblical translation. I was at an evensong at King's College Chapel three weeks ago, and the celebrant announced — to the assembled tourists and students and townsfolk — the choir's final solo piece, with the direful phrase: 'This evening's anthem is by a ... contemporary Australian composer'. A tremor ran through the congregants, the very angels atop the rood screen put down trumpets and half-covered their ears. But that anthem, a setting by Carl Vine of Tennyson's 'Ring Out, Wild Bells', was in a familiar, and culturally valued idiom, classical music, performed in a sacred space, by the embodiment of the Establishment, King's College Choir. For all its dissonances (which were minimal), it fit the venue and occasion. It met expectations. The congregation smiled on exit — not toe-tapping, exactly, but not flummoxed or sputtering, either. How would that same congregation, though, perhaps in a different venue, have responded to a heavy metal take on the same themes, if not the same poem? I would suspect: Not terribly well ...

True story: I once requested the (scrumptiously titled) volume *How Black Was Our Sabbath*, a memoir of roadies' travails on tour with the seminal Birmingham heavy metal quartet Black Sabbath. This was in the Reading Room of

the University Library. (Classmark: M950.c.200.508, in case anyone wants a peek.) The text, when it duly appeared, was placed on the table by the library staffer with such disdain, that tongs may as well have been used. Plutonium is handled with less trepidation. And in some senses, heavy metal – the ‘schlock of the new’? – is easy to mock. T. S. Eliot, in a letter to celebrated American New Critic Cleanth Brooks, once wrote: ‘Reading your essay [on one of Eliot’s own poems] made me feel [...] that I had been a great deal more ingenious than I had been aware of, because the conscious problems with which one is concerned in [the] actual writing [of poetry] are more those of a quasi musical nature, in the arrangement of metric and pattern, than of a conscious exposition of ideas’. Eliot – rather disingenuously, to be sure – was, in a way, disclaiming Deep Meaning in his verse, as he had been too busy getting the tune right. Heavy metal bands are, shall we say, even more guilty of this.

Beyond metric and pattern, way beyond matter, there are guitars to worry about; and more guitars; and squiggling, indulgent solos; and phalanxes of Marshall Amplifiers stacked up, cranked to eleven; and pyrotechnics; and bone-liquefying drum fills; and hip thrusts and heads banging. And noise. Tennyson once referred to the sound of the organ of Trinity College Chapel, from Great Court, as ‘thunder-music, rolling, shak[ing] / The prophet blazoned on the panes’. ‘Thunder music’, he called it: Tennyson had clearly never experienced, say, the ‘Masters of Reality’ Tour of Black Sabbath, at Birmingham Town Hall on 25 January 1972.

So, I’m not making great claims for lyrical sophistication, or even existential depth.

Music, of course – or most music – has always featured interplay between the sacred and the demonic, the ordered and the chaotic, the beautiful and the damned. The gloomy dies irae pops up in unlikely settings, like Rachmaninoff’s ‘Rhapsody on the Theme of Paganini’. Perhaps because Paganini, famously, for the sake of the fiddle – or so it was reputed – had sold his soul to Lucifer, as American bluesman Robert Johnson was later to, at a Mississippi crossroads – again, allegedly. (Some musicians and composers, it seems, were of ‘the [Devil’s] party’, while knowing it; some music, party-music.) Frederick Nietzsche – incidentally, the only philosopher quoted with any regularity in the films of Arnold Schwarzenegger – in *The Birth of Tragedy*, praises, in ancient Greek culture, the primordial intermixing of Apollonian and Dionysian modes: ‘Dionysian music’, he explains, ‘especially awoke in that [ancient] world fear and terror’ – to the inestimable profit, Nietzsche contends, of Western art. There’s even a curious reminder of this always fertile, sometimes febrile, inter-melding every time you cross Garret Hostel Bridge, here in Cambridge. Facing North, and looking down, you see the punt armada of Trinity College. They are all wittily named, or half-named, Trinity’s punts, after ‘things involving three’. Some are easy: ‘Hat Trick’, ‘Little Pigs’, ‘Peace Sweet’. Some are more obscure: ‘Lithium’ (the third element); ‘Mile Island’ (after Three Mile Island, the site of a 1979 nuclear disaster). One’s amusingly risqué: ‘Ménage’. My favourite, though, seems assertively, even proudly, Infernal: ‘Diabolus in Musica’, ‘the Satan in Music’, a punt so called after the feared tritone, a musical progression felt since the Middle Ages to insinuate dissonance and unease into the most celestial of choirs, and one, to this day, central to Heavy Music of many kinds.

What of the iconography of heavy metal?: The corpses and hornéd demons and nightmarish churches and flashes of lightning which grace (if that’s the right word), with fearsome regularity, the album covers as much as feature in the lyrics? It’s a brand, in part. In a review of the 1991 album *Arise* by the band Sepultura, one reviewer complained: ‘I do wish [Sepultura] wouldn’t start each album with a quiet interlude intended to lull you into a false sense of security – you’re never fooled, because you don’t buy a record with a skull on the cover expecting to hear mood music’. That’s precisely it: The iconography of metal is more kitschy Halloween than loathsome Black Mass, marketing rather than malevolence. (Black Sabbath took their name from a Boris Karloff film playing near their rehearsal space.) And, of course, All Hallows’ Eve presupposes an All Saints’ Day to come – and soon.

Such dressing of celestial ends in chthonic cloaks has a storied literary and philosophical heritage, of course. The most popular poem in Puritan New England was a lurid, sensational, epic-length affair entitled 'The Day of Doom', by Michael Wigglesworth. It was so beloved that no first editions are known to survive. Volumes were, literally, thumbed to bits ... by the Puritans. And Wigglesworth's brimstone visuals – and his poem's chugging, brutish, ballad-stanzas describing Damnation and the Unrighteous – could supply material for a trilogy, minimum, of Iron Maiden concept-albums.

Today is the Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, but I think it characteristic of the young to never regard their own times as ordinary. Apocalypse always seems (nearer-) pressing, the climate (ever more) threatening, cultural portents (escalatingly) grim. Ecclesiastes emphasises recapitulation, eternal recurrence, a nothing-newness under the sun – always rising, always setting. This can reassure, but it also might, to some, seem enervating, nurturing complacency, sapping fervour for change.

In a 1972 profile article on Black Sabbath, the author recalled sitting with the band, as casualty reports from the Vietnam War flickered in over a radio; the band's bassist, Geezer Butler, sighed: 'It's a satanic world. The devil's more in control now, and happier than ever before. People can't come together, there's no equality. The higher you climb, the more people you have to cut down'. Their collective rage at the mechanization – indeed, corporatisation – of slaughter during Vietnam, its mercantilisation on TV news, found memorable expression in one of their most enduring and perceptive songs, 'War Pigs'.

It begins – over a sludge of down-tuned guitars, and the droning wail of an air-raid klaxon:

Generals gathered in their masses

Just like witches at black masses^[SEP]

Evil minds that plot destruction

Sorcerers of death's construction

In the fields the bodies burning^[SEP]

As the war machine keeps turning^[SEP]

Death and hatred to mankind^[SEP]

Poisoning their brainwashed minds

Oh lord yeah!

Politicians hide themselves away^[SEP]

They only started the war

Why should they go out to fight?^[SEP]

They leave that role to the poor

Those are true words, and angry ones, too; the moneychangers have left the Temple, it seems, and moved into armories, into government, into business. And it can all seem so insurmountable, so irremediable. Last week, Prof. Hooker spoke of music and social justice, a hopeful noise; metal seems often more about despair, the anthems shouts of helplessness – a rage against the Machine ... and the Machine never stops.

Metal has never been cool. (I have long been an enthusiast.) Its fans often feel dispossessed, pessimistic about the world's future, sometimes their own. Sabbath, accordingly, has released songs confronting – even, perhaps, some might contend, reveling in – nuclear war, environmental calamity, societal collapse.

But I would argue that in metal, generally, as with Black Sabbath, particularly, above such parochial dreads, such local extinctions, echoes always that same existential worry haunting a pessimistic reading of Ecclesiastes: That it is, indeed, all 'vanity', all 'Meaningless'. (Pick your translation.) Such worries are ancient, and plagued – oh, dear – Victorians like Tennyson, Housman, and Hardy, of course, and persist still, unquenched. To my mind, though, they find their most piquant modern expression in a poem – entitled, simply, 'Meaning' – written late in the twentieth century by the then-octogenarian Polish Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz; across three stanzas, options are presented starkly – and intimately:

– When I die, I will see the lining of the world.

The other side, beyond bird, mountain, sunset.

The true meaning, ready to be decoded.

What never added up will add up,

What was incomprehensible will be comprehended.

– And if there is no lining to the world?

If a thrush on a branch is not a sign,

But just a thrush on the branch? If night and day

Make no sense following each other?

And on this earth there is nothing except this earth?

– Even if that is so, there will remain

A word wakened by lips that perish,

A tireless messenger who runs and runs

Through interstellar fields, through the revolving galaxies,

And calls out, screams, protests.

Either a supernatural, Providential order beyond the visible, inaccessible to experiment, or nothing 'on this earth [...] except this earth'. Either a bright and numinous realm 'beyond bird, mountain, sunset', in which a deductive explanation is ready to hand for that which we must presently take on faith (a world in which, in short, 'What was never added up will add up'), or – to the detriment of religion, of metaphysics – one in which the arbitrary is doomed to remain ever as such; in which the dead are lost to us, eternally; in which 'a thrush on a branch is not a sign, / But just a thrush on the branch'.

Or, as Black Sabbath put it in 1971's 'After Forever', perhaps anticipating 'Meaning', and doing their own bit to '[call] out, [scream], [protest]' (those, of course – 'call[ing] out, scream[ing], protest[ing]' – the 'head-banging' imperatives of Milosz's anguished finale); here's 'After Forever's' open:

Have you ever thought about your soul – can it be saved?

Or perhaps you think that when you're dead you just stay in your grave.

Is God just a thought within your head or is he part of you?

Is Christ just a name that you read in a book when you were in school?

Cruder, less subtle, brusquer, yes. Louder, certainly. But age-old worries, evoking eternal, irresoluble questions -(on this side of 'Forever', to use Sabbath's conceit; this side of 'the veil', to use Tennyson's).

And I must say, that Sabbath song, like the lament in Ecclesiastes, gets me 'right in the feels', every time. Rock on.