

ON HEARING THE MESSAGE¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Fourth Sunday after epiphany, 31 January 2021, on the occasion of the orchestral performance of Michael Haydn, *Missa Sancti Gabrielis*

*I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.*²

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth ...*³

This is not the sermon that I had originally prepared for this morning. After much contact with Gabriel Jackson, I had written a sermon appropriate for his *Mass of St James*. That sermon is now on ice until we can properly perform that Mass. You will not be surprised when I say that I have been unsuccessful in my attempts to contact Michael Haydn. He has no discoverable email address, Facebook page or Twitter account.

There is, however, a bridge between my original sermon and the one that I am about to deliver and that link lies in the name, "Gabriel". This sermon is written around Michael Haydn's St Gabriel Mass, *Missa Sancti Gabrielis*. It appears that Michael composed this Mass before 1760, around the time that he took up a post with the bishop of Grosswardein, then in Hungary, but now called Oradea in Romania. The occasion for its composition is unknown, but it can be speculated that it was for the celebration of the archangel's feast day in one of the Viennese churches or monasteries.

Gabriel is represented in the Bible as a messenger. He fulfils this role in Daniel⁴ and in some of the inter-testamental writings. Between 1588 and 1969, Gabriel's feast day was 24 March but it is now incorporated into St Michael and All Angels on 29 September. A mass in honour of Gabriel might be an opportunity to consider how music affects the liturgy and helps us to appreciate its message. In one sense, music is not a necessary part of the liturgy. Many Eucharists happen all around the world without it. Morning and Evening Prayer can easily be simply said. Nevertheless, Christian worship, particularly on Sundays, has had music since it began and originally inherited from the synagogue. It is hard to imagine liturgy entirely without music.

What difference does music make? In the northern winter of 2016/2017, Rita Ferrone, an American liturgist, conducted an experiment at a seminar for parish musicians.⁵ She took Frederick Faber's hymn, "There's a wideness in God's mercy", and had the group sing it to

¹ Readings:

² Luke 1:19

³ Luke 1:26

⁴ Daniel 8:15-26; 9:21-27

⁵ "There's Truth in the Tunes", *Commonwealth Magazine*, 17 August 2017, [Musical Theology | Commonwealth Magazine](#)

two tunes commonly used in the USA, *In Babilone*⁶ and *St Helena*.⁷ Neither of these tunes will be familiar to us. Ferrone reports that the participants found that the meaning changed with the tune. *In Babilone* was easy to sing and “had the bright cheerfulness of sunshine and the energy of a marching tune”. *St Helena*, written specifically for Faber’s hymn, “emphasized its key theological words (mercy, justice, and so on) with changing notes”. She concluded that music is not a neutral way of allowing words to be sung, nor simply “decoration or beautification of ritual forms”, but is “a special sort of witness to truth”. “Poor music in church is not just a regrettable aesthetic experience; it may actually say things about God that we don’t want to say.”

As far as I could discover, there is no English language biography of Michael Haydn. His entry in the World Encyclopedia says that Haydn, continuing the legacy of his father:

... retained an attitude of God-centeredness within his compositions and his life-style, and understood the power of music in religion as a guidance towards the ultimate reality of God and the eternal spirit.⁸

Such belief is not necessary for a person to compose sacred music. As Karl Barth said of Mozart, “[he] does not intend to proclaim the praise of God. He just does so in fact ...”⁹

If the Sherman and Thomas chronological catalogue of Michael Haydn’s work is correct in its dating, and today’s Mass is No. 17, ten of his first compositions were of sacred music. All of his life was devoted to his occupation as a church musician. So, he must have thought that music added to the spirituality of religious life. But how does music do this?

Agreement about the virtue of sacred music is widespread. In a 2019 address to the Italian Association of Saint Cecilia, Pope Francis said:

Singing, playing, composing, directing and making music in the Church are among the most beautiful things for the glory of God. It is a privilege, a gift from God to express the art of music and to assist participation in the divine mysteries. Beautiful and good music is a privileged tool for approaching the transcendent, and often helps to understand a message even [for] those who are distracted.¹⁰

The Pope went on to say how music in general breaks down barriers. In another address in 2018, he noted how choirs animate “the song of the whole assembly” rather than replace it.¹¹ That is to say, this morning’s Mass is more than a performance, it is all of us engaging in worship.

⁶ A traditional Dutch melody first published in the early 18th century. Ralph Vaughan Williams included it in the *English Hymnal* but it was omitted from the *New English Hymnal*. [There's a Wideness in God's Mercy \(In Babilone\) - YouTube](#)

⁷ Composed by Calvin Hampton (1938-1984) in 1978 for Faber’s hymn. Hampton was organist at Calvary Episcopal Church in Manhattan from 1963-1983. [Hymn: There's a Wideness in God's Mercy \(ST. HELENA\) - YouTube](#)

⁸ [Michael Haydn - New World Encyclopedia](#) But see also [95885-m-haydn-booklet.pdf \(brilliantclassics.com\)](#)

⁹ Jonathan Arnold, *Sacred Music in Secular Society*, Taylor and Francis. p. 20

¹⁰ [To the «Scholae Cantorum» of the Italian Association of Saint Cecilia \(28 September 2019\) | Francis \(vatican.va\)](#)

¹¹ [Pope Francis: Sacred music points to the beauty of Paradise \(catholicnewsagency.com\)](#)

Trevor Hart notes that the arts overall are “a source of joy”. They “leave us with a sense of having tasted something good”, even if “we can’t say exactly why”.¹² This is both the point and the problem of relating music and religion.

Musicologist and theologian Jeremy Begbie says:

I have a label attached to a key ring that carries a saying attributed to Hans Christian Andersen: “Where words fail, music speaks.” Music seems to speak with colossal power, yet our attempts to express what it says are usually feeble. And this would seem to explain at least part of the profound kinship between music and religion in history. Religious matters are ineffable: “I can’t say what I believe or why I believe it, but at a deeper level I have an unmistakable sense of the divine.”¹³

Elsewhere, Begbie says that “music is stubbornly resistant to being grasped in words” and this is one possible reason for its affinity with religion and the inability of our words to “capture” God. We should not, however, argue that words are dispensable and music is not. On the contrary, in a Mass, words are significant. They include both the parts that are set to music and those that are said.¹⁴ Together, words and music are both pursuing that about which we cannot, or can only inadequately, speak. Begbie also says that “Music is attracted to words and words are one of the most irrepressible partners of music.”¹⁵

Art, including music, takes us “beyond the surface” and helps us to experience something which we otherwise wouldn’t.¹⁶ In this context, we ought to note that one of the functions assigned to Gabriel in the gospels is to announce to Mary her role in the Incarnation. Theologically, the significance of the Incarnation is that we can see the ineffable divine in this person, Jesus. We need all the help that we can get in coming to an understanding of this event, which must be felt as well as comprehended intellectually.

Daniel Chua argues that, in a non-theological, or anti-theological, world,

Music, acting as a kind of divine surrogate, ... can be heard as a mode of “secular theology”
...¹⁷

However true this may be, it will not do for us.¹⁸ The temptation is to settle for a spirituality without any content. When the Eucharist is set to music, we need both the emotional and physical components of the music and the content of the words.

How does Michael Haydn help us do this? If the *Missa Sancti Gabrielis* was written in around 1757 to 1760, it was the work of a young man, possibly in his late teens. The Mass carries all the enthusiasm of a young composer with his life ahead of him. This is not a comment on the maturity of the work, which judgement I leave to others. It is to say that we are led by Haydn into the unfettered joy of our faith.

¹² Trevor Hart, “Hearing, Seeing and Touching the Truth, in Jeremy Begbie ed, *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2001, Chapter 1

¹³ Jeremy S Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music*, Grand Rapids, Baker Book Group, 2007, p. 149.

¹⁴ Begbie, pp. 154ff

¹⁵ [A Biblical Theology of Music \(part one\) \(jogvanz.org\)](http://jogvanz.org)

¹⁶ Hart

¹⁷ Jeremy S Begbie and Steven R Guthrie, eds, *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology*, (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies) Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2011, Chapter 6

¹⁸ Arnold pp. 135-136

In both the Old and New Testaments, Gabriel is the bringer of good news. He does not pronounce doom or judgement. During my preparation for today, I listened a number of times to recordings of this Mass on YouTube. I will not speak for you, but what I heard was a composition about good news. The canon of the mass contains two sections that can be penitential: the Kyrie Eleison and the Agnus Dei. Both movements ask for mercy and can carry a solemn tone. In this Mass, Haydn writes as though he already knew that mercy was available. The Kyries are light and confident. The Agnus Dei, while more restrained, still exhibits the same surety.

We expect that the Gloria will be grand but Michael Haydn's setting is anything but pompous. It may be characterised as praise to a friend rather than a ruler. Neither is his Credo an attempt to represent deep theological arguments but displays the common Christian belief in a straightforward way. In short, I experience *Missa Sancti Gabrielis* as a Mass of joy, of good news, as told by a young man. As an old man, I rejoice in that experience.

If Gabriel is a messenger of good news; if the gospel is a message of good news; if our liturgy is a message of good news; *Missa Sancti Gabrielis* enlarges and develops that good news in music from the heart. Thank you, Michael Haydn.

I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth ...



Michael Haydn (1737-1806)
Franz Xaver Hornock (1751–1836),



Haydn's tomb
St Peter's Cemetery, Salzburg



Gabriel is customarily pictured with a wand and hold an orb inscribed with the *chi rho* symbol for Christ



The Archangel Gabriel appears to the Prophet Daniel

Follower of Francesco Solimena (Italian, 1657–1747)



Annunciation (c1472-1475)
Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519)