

UNLESS THE LORD BUILD THE HOUSE¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Second Sunday after Epiphany, 19 January 2020, being the occasion of the orchestral performance of Howard Goodall, *Missa Aedis Christi*

Nisi Dominus aedificaverit domum ...²
Unless the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.

These opening words of Psalm 127, in their Latin version, sprang to my mind last October, when Warren Trevelyan-Jones announced the title of today's Mass, *Aedis Christi*, which means "House, or Temple, of Christ" and refers directly to Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, for which the Mass was commissioned.

Even a dedicated biblical literalist would not imagine God in a hard hat, steel capped boots and visor appearing alongside the builder's labourers on a work site. This psalm does not denigrate the work of builders, rather, it locates their work in a larger context. When I considered what that context might be, I thought first of origin or inspiration. Where does it all come from?

Inspiration is a word that we use often in relation to music. We talk about a composition as being "inspired". The term is derived from the Latin meaning to "blow on or into". It is something that happens to a person. Inspiration has a specific theological meaning, in particular, in relation to the Bible, the authors of which are said to be inspired by God or the Holy Spirit.³ But even the Harvard Business Review recognises its general importance because it is "the springboard for creativity":

In a culture obsessed with measuring talent and ability, we often overlook the important role of inspiration. Inspiration awakens us to new possibilities by allowing us to transcend our ordinary experiences and limitations. Inspiration propels a person from apathy to possibility, and transforms the way we perceive our own capabilities. ... The heights of human motivation spring from the beauty and goodness that precede us and awaken us to better possibilities.⁴

In a specific reference to inspiration and music, Maeve Heaney says that:

Any musician or composer knows that there is a place from where music emerges which is before or beyond our conceptual grasp of things, and which does not even "submit" to words once it has actually emerged.⁵

¹ Readings: Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-14; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

² Psalm 127:1 (Vulgate)

³ "Inspiration", Joseph A Komonchak et al., *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1990, pp. 522-526

⁴ Scott Barry Kaufman, "Why inspiration matters". *Harvard Business Review*, 8 November 2011, <https://hbr.org/2011/11/why-inspiration-matters>

⁵ Maeve Louise Heaney, 'Musical Space: Living "In Between" the Christian and the Artistic Callings', in Tom Beaudoin, *Secular Music and Sacred Theology*, Collegeville MI, Liturgical Press, p. 29
<http://maevelouiseheaney.com/about/>

From the Christian perspective, the beauty and goodness that precede us come from God and it does no disservice to the skill of a composer to affirm that. As an apparently simple example, we can begin with the Sanctus in today's Mass. Goodall's website says:

... the *Sanctus* ... was inspired by the sound of bells he heard one August in the village of Embrun in Southern France. The Mass began to emerge from Howard's noting down of the sounds of the mingling of distant and nearby bells.⁶

This simple online statement does little justice to the detailed explanation that Goodall gives in his book, *Big Bangs*.⁷ In his communication with me during my preparation for this morning, Howard said,

... the whole piece entered my head as a result of a strange experience in a French mountain village, first the Sanctus, then gradually over the next hours & days, the rest of the piece. All of my compositions, one way or another, pop into my head as 'finished' - that is, the whole work appears like a CD, with all its sections, movements, orchestrations, harmonies, melodies in a final state.

More directly, in *Big Bangs*, Goodall describes the process in this way:

I sensed something in me had changed. I could 'hear' the bell concert as a sort of choral wash, as if it hadn't really ended but was now being sung instead. Within a few minutes I realised the sound had a top, middle and bottom, it wasn't simply a generalised wash, it had crystallised into a form. Now I could hear the bells as individual voices singing Sanctus.⁸

The completed work emerged from this experience and not necessarily in the order of the Mass text. Howard told me:

I can certainly confirm from personal experience that one rarely 'hears' the piece in chronological order. I don't know about other composers but I would guess it is the same for them. Any part of the texture or narrative may act as a starting point.

I could not imagine a better analogy of how our sacred scriptures might have come into existence. As Heaney says,

allowing music to come into being implies inhabiting, or at least being receptive to, the implicit and unknown parts of our mind and our bodies. Grace can be at work.⁹

This Mass is not the only one written for Christ Church, Oxford and having the same title. Herbert Howells, William Mathias and Sherlaw Johnson are three that I could find. Howard told me that he was not influenced by any of these compositions.

As far as I remember I have never heard Howells' or Mathias' settings (a deliberate policy if I am writing my own setting, not to fall into any sub-conscious repetition or regurgitation of others' work) ...

Given that musical styles change over the years, a major necessity for composers of sacred music is the integration of acceptable sounds into acceptable liturgy. Writing about the later sacred output of Haydn, Eftychia Papanikolaou says that, by the end of the 19th century, the

⁶ <http://www.howardgoodall.co.uk/works/choral-music/missa-aedis-christi>

⁷ Howard Goodall, "Je suis compositeur" in *Big Bangs*, London, Vintage Books, 2001, pp. 88-91

⁸ Goodall, pp. 93-94

⁹ Heaney, p.30

sacred had moved from the church to the concert hall in a process called by Carl Dahlhaus “the secularization of the religious and sanctification of the profane”. This transition “epitomized a move from private to public, a symbolic gesture of private subjectivity entering the public sphere”.¹⁰

Since the contemporary form is almost entirely for the concert stage, today’s Mass, written for a cathedral church, and thus for religious rather than secular use, must aim for a successful reversal of the 19th century development. To my ears, it does that especially through its meditative atmosphere, a clear contrast to the declamatory Baroque effusion of last week’s Mass by Biber. Perhaps the secret is the cultivation of an interior spirituality through public performance. Howard told me:

In the case of sacred settings, my first instinct is to try to find a personal connection with the meaning of a particular section of text, to eke out what the meaning of the whole might be, seen through the prism of our modern experience.

This brings me to what I imagine might be a second possibility for the larger context suggested by Psalm 127, that of foundation. On 20 May 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was then in Tegel prison in Berlin, wrote to his friend and later biographer, Eberhard Bethge. In this letter, Bonhoeffer developed a description of the Christian life by way of an analogy based on the concept of *cantus firmus*, the term used to describe “a pre-existing melody forming the basis of a polyphonic composition”.¹¹ Bonhoeffer said:

Where the ground bass is firm and clear, there is nothing to stop the counterpoint from being developed to the utmost of its limits. Both ground bass and counterpoint are ‘without confusion and yet distinct’ ... like Christ in his divine and human natures. Perhaps the importance of polyphony in music lies in the fact that it is a musical reflection of this Christological truth, and that it is therefore an essential element in the Christian life. ... Only a polyphony of this kind can give life a wholeness, and at the same time assure us that nothing can go wrong so long as the *cantus firmus* is kept going.¹²

Bonhoeffer’s thoughts have been taken up by Craig Gardiner in a study of the Iona Community and its founder, George McLeod:

... if Christ is conceived as the *cantus firmus* of all Christian living, then his “solid song” will be fragmented, mirrored, echoed, and retextured within a variety of people whose own diverse and individual melodies only find their unity, indeed their community, in Christ.¹³

Goodall’s Mass is not of the kind usually referred to as polyphony or as having a *cantus firmus*, yet, we could ask what its *cantus firmus* might be. I would suggest that the *cantus firmus* of *Missa Aedis Christi* is the text of the Mass itself and, particularly its Latin text. Indeed, Goodall has himself said that he specifically chose the Latin text. His website says:

¹⁰ Eftychia Papanikolaou, “Between Tradition and Innovation: Sacred Intersections and the Symphonic Impulse in Haydn’s Late Masses”, *Sacred Music*, Volume 136, Number 4, Winter 2009, pp. 5-16

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cantus_firmus

¹² https://ia801209.us.archive.org/29/items/DietrichBonhoefferLettersFromPrison/Dietrich_Bonhoeffer_Letters_from_Prison.pdf pp. 133-134

¹³ Craig Gardiner, *Melodies of a New Monasticism: Bonhoeffer’s Vision, Iona’s Witness*. Eugene OR, Cascade Books, 2018, p. 10

Howard decided to write the Mass for performance in Latin partly because he felt that so few contemporary masses were written in this way, and also because he felt strongly about the superiority of the language for singing.¹⁴

He amplified this for me, saying,

... one of the great ironies of the diverged histories of the Anglican and Catholic traditions since the Reformation, and particularly how it played out in the early 20th century, was that if ... one wanted to hear a sung ... Latin mass as part of the liturgy ... you would have to have gone to an Anglican, protestant, cathedral to do so ...¹⁵

Regardless of the language, however, the canon of the Mass, the part that remains the same on every occasion, forms the cantus firmus of our worship. Those of us who travel know that we can attend a Eucharist anywhere and recognise what is going on. This is because such a cantus firmus, whether understood directly or remembered in our own tongue, points us to the Christ and creates a worshipping community. It is what allows us to join an apparently different, but actually the same, community when we are far from home.

In that case, does it matter what the composer or the performers think about the text?¹⁶ Goodall has written on this specifically in the context of this Mass:

A year or two later, when I recounted the Embrun episode to a roomful of people, a man punctured the silence with the assertion that it was the most convincing proof he had ever heard for the existence of God. I have wondered about his comment often since then. It does indeed appear as if the music is emanating from some other source, but is this just an illusion, a trick of the brain? What I sometimes feel like is a skilled interpreter, able to pilot the music from the 'dream world' to the page, but I don't know if the place the music is coming from is God's place, as the man's remark implies.¹⁷

This question remains hanging in the air this morning. In the end, what sustains us is the cantus firmus of our liturgy. It sustains us whether we are feeling well or ill, whether we are concentrating or distracted, whether our faith is sure or uncertain, whether we doubt or accept, whether we are in pain or at peace. This morning we owe to Howard Goodall his openness to the sounds around him, to the bells of rural France, and his choice of a clear cantus firmus for his composition.

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Unless the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.

¹⁴ <http://www.howardgoodall.co.uk/works/choral-music/missa-aedis-christi>

¹⁵ He comments on this in more detail in Goodall, pp. 89-91

¹⁶ For an extended discussion of this question, see Jonathan Arnold, *Sacred Music in Secular Society*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, pp. 21-28. See also, Nicholas Groves, "The music of worship—or the worship of music: the relationship between music and liturgy". A paper read to the Norfolk Organists' Association, Saturday 6 April 2019 https://www.academia.edu/38742299/THE_MUSIC_OF_WORSHIP_-_OR_THE_WORSHIP_OF_MUSIC See <http://www.nickgroves.yolasite.com/> <https://lamp.academia.edu/NicholasGroves>

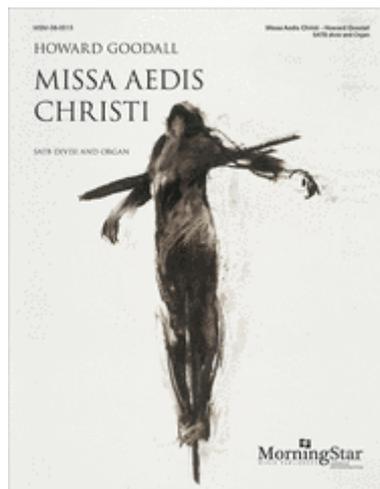
¹⁷ Goodall, p. 97



Rowan Atkinson (*Blackadder, Mr Bean*), Howard Goodall and Richard Curtis (writer of *The vicar of Dibley*) at Oxford



Howard Goodall





The cathedral bell tower at Embrun, Hautes-Alpes, France