

MUSIC AS A MEETING GROUND FOR THE OTHER ARTS AND THE RELIGIOUS QUEST

Nigel Butterley

Nigel Butterley gave an illustrated presentation on this subject as a keynote lecture. In an effort to capture something of the spontaneity and significance of that event, Michael Griffith interviewed Butterley on this and related topics. Here is an edited transcript of part of that interview.

Butterley's presentation reflected on a number of striking quotations from artists and musicians. These quotes included:

Painting, Poetry and Music are the three Powers in Man of conversing with Paradise, which the flood did not sweep away.

William Blake

If painting, poetry and music are less than that conversation with Paradise they are less than the measure of our humanity, and a betrayal.

Kathleen Raine

The function of music is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences.

John Cage

Reflections on these were interspersed with quotations from among the following musical works:

Elliott Carter, 'Musicians wrestle everywhere'.

Sir Michael Tippett, 'The Mask of Time'.

Olivier Messiaen, 'Regard du Fils sur le Fils'

Igor Stravinsky, 'Anthem' (from T.S. Eliot)

Morton Feldman, 'Rothko Chapel'.

Nigel Butterley, 'There came a Wind like a Bugle' (Emily Dickinson).

Nigel Butterley, 'Meditations of Thomas Traherne'.

Michael Griffith: You quoted Blake as saying that painting, poetry and music are the three powers in man of conversing with paradise which the

Flood did not sweep away. Why did this particular quote strike you as so relevant to your topic for the day?

Nigel Butterley: Well, it's one of the places in which Blake mentions music and it mentions all the other things at the conference, so it was appropriate. I'm not aware of him talking about music anywhere else.

MG: Do you think that musicians, yourself included, use texts to focus and channel and direct their inspiration?

NB: I do... when I'm enthusiastic about something I want to respond to it in music but I don't go deliberately looking for something, it's got to trigger me off.

MG: It seems to me that you've been deeply interested in Blake and in Kathleen Raine...

NB: And other people... Whitman, Dickinson...

MG: In the names you've mentioned, Blake, Dickinson, Whitman and Kathleen Raine, all four are by anybody's definition religious eccentrics; so there is a real eccentricity that's drawing you there. What is it about these authors that particularly attracts you? Is it purely aesthetic or is something somehow related to your own search for truth?

NB: That's very interesting, I hadn't thought of this before. I haven't thought of them all as being eccentrics and I haven't thought why. I wonder if I'm drawn to eccentrics because I grew up in a very conservative, narrow Sydney Anglican parish. I grew up in a family which was not narrow and I was surrounded by books and art and things but it was a family situation in which we didn't talk about serious things very much, nothing was ever sort of discussed... for instance my father never mentioned that anyone was having a baby. I wonder whether I was drawn to eccentrics because my own upbringing as a child was constrained in some ways.

MG: So what did they provide you with; On your first taste of Blake, for instance, what was it that attracted you there?

NB: Strange words, strange images, with Blake as with Whitman. I didn't necessarily understand the poetry and I was drawn to Whitman ages before I set his music. I knew that I was drawn to Whitman but then when I did begin setting his poems I often didn't quite understand what he was talking about. And the Emily Dickinson work called 'There came a wind like a bugle'... ten poems by Emily Dickinson, well two or three of those I'm not really quite sure what they mean... I do perceive something of their world and it's mystery that appeals to me rather than plain sort of facts. Having been brought up in this narrow Anglican tradition, the mystery of High Anglicanism, the mystery of Catholicism, the mystery of Italian paintings... those are the things that stimulate me and I never thought before that maybe one reason why I've been drawn to these [is that] I think I've always been drawn to the eccentrics slightly; slightly all the time.

MG: Your response to those authors is very interesting from the point of view of you being a musician, too. You almost apologise for the fact that you don't understand Blake and Dickinson and so on. But isn't the essence of music surely that it communicates without this necessity for this explicit understanding of a particular content item?

NB: I don't understand music either, no one understands what music is or the power that it has. It's a mystery and so if, for instance, with Emily Dickinson I read the poem, I know that I want to respond to that poem in music and I try and evoke something of the feeling of that poem and in the process I may perhaps momentarily illuminate or somehow help that poem to live for someone. And whenever I set words, one reason for doing it is to make them available to someone who wouldn't have known them otherwise; though my music isn't heard by millions and millions of people by any means; hundreds and hundreds. But at least there will be some who will respond to that poem having come to him or her through my music; and so when my Kathleen Raine songs have been done, on both occasions people have come up to me and spoken to me and said where did you get your poems from. And that's one of the main reasons for doing it: to share my music, as I said before. If I were an academic I would write articles about Kathleen Raine and get PhD's, etc.

MG: But there is another important ingredient in the selection of those four authors that you mentioned: Blake, Dickinson, Whitman and Raine. They are not only eccentrics but they are also writers, all of them, who were deeply aware of the limitations of contemporary religious practice. Now in a sense you have already highlighted this. Blake was very critical of the established church; Dickinson turned her back on it; Whitman wanted to create a new church that linked human beings to nature and Kathleen Raine delights in the visionary imaginative quality of freedom in Blake herself. So it brings me back to the question again, it seems not only a search for mystery, not only a search for something that's aesthetically different, but surely underlying your interest in all these authors is a search for some special or unique or more authentic approach to religious truths than you perhaps experienced as a child.

NB: Yes, and later on I grew away from the specific Christian belief, and so people who come from that Christian tradition but have grown away from it appeal to me because they are as I am; whereas I am not drawn say to Indian philosophy or Buddhism or to Islam or anything else either. It's the Christian tradition which I grew up in and which is part of me. I find myself unable to believe in it anymore word for word; but the whole feeling of it is part of me, so when I find those authors who come from that tradition [and who] moved away from it... Kathleen Raine has been drawn to the so-called Perennial Philosophy, like Blake and Plotinus. Another thing that's happened in my lifetime is that there has been much more that there are other faiths which are also legitimate. I mean when I was a boy Christianity was the only faith and the only right approach to Christianity was through a fairly literal, not too literal, but fairly literal acceptance of the Bible. Then, of course, I was drawn towards the Catholic faith because of the Roman and Anglican traditions. Both appealed to me because there was much more awareness of otherness and much more theatre and much better music and just a much wider world. And also the Catholic faith was saying, this is the truth, this is it and for me searching it was very nice to find someone saying this; there was a time when I was wondering whether I would have to become Roman Catholic. I was also drawn to the Community of Taizé where I spent Easter in 1962 and went through the process of wondering whether I should stay there: yeah, become a monk at Taizé.

NB: Oh, that it was new. Taize was at the centre of the Christian renewal, and when I worked at the ABC in music in 1961 I got the opportunity of working in religion and 1961 of course was a wonderful year, because it was the year before the new Vatican Council. This was the time of ecumenical and liturgical renewal and it was all very exciting and I was in the ABC Religious Department. I'd be going to record a broadcast of a mass from St Mary's Cathedral then going to record the Commissioner of the Salvation Army doing a plain Christianity talk. In those days of course there was very little of non-Christian or Jewish broadcasting, whereas the ABC now has opened up very much more. But at least that was the beginning of awareness that truth was not just in one spot, that there were other people who also had the truth, but they spoke of it in a different way. That was something completely foreign from what I grew. So the idea that the truth is in the Muslim tradition and the Hindu tradition and Aboriginal tradition and everything else - it's all there, it's just expressed in different ways - is something that appeals to me tremendously. As Karen Armstrong said, it's always the emphasis on belief in the Western tradition.

MG: Karen Armstrong herself talks about the Western religious tradition as somehow lacking a real relationship to the inner life, unlike orthodox Christianity which is closer to that kind of psychological depth and in your mention of Blake, Kathleen Raine and Perennial Philosophy. This picks up for me a very important connection between Raine and Blake in what you have been saying. Both those authors see human beings as in a sense dislocated, as somehow disharmonised; you think of Blake's 'Heaven and Hell' and 'Innocence and Experience' and Kathleen Raine's own sense of the importance of Perennial Philosophy as a way towards reintegration. Blake's understanding of the function of the imagination is something that leads to an inner harmony. To what extent is your own taste for Blake and Raine touched by that psychological element in their religious philosophy?

NB: I'm sure it is because that's not the traditional, narrow Christian statement of belief; it's more exploration to me than statement and it's about experience and searching rather than saying I believe this but I don't believe that. That was what I grew up with and that is what's so limiting.