

THE CRAIGMYLE LECTURE 2020

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I'm honoured and delighted that the Catholic Union of Great Britain has invited me to give this year's Craigmyle Lecture. I would like to thank Nigel and David for considering me for this and for keeping in touch with me as the preparations gathered pace. As you have heard I am a composer, and most of my time is now spent in the North Ayrshire countryside writing music for orchestras, choirs, chamber ensembles and soloists around the world.

In normal circumstances when I am allowed out, as it were, I travel to conduct concerts in various places internationally. My world revolves around music then, but I am also a practising Catholic and that has a bearing on the nature of my music sometimes. My religion is known about in the world of culture, and most of the time it doesn't present any problems, though for some it can indeed be a bone of contention. No surprise there then, and I'm sure we all know what that can feel like. I will deal with this obliquely in my lecture as it is the gateway into talking about the wider context I have been asked to address this evening - Politics.

I like to consider myself pretty neutral on these matters these days, or at least like most sensible people I keep my views secret! But I have considerable interest in these matters, having been involved with various political organisations in my younger days: and I can still feel the full relevance and significance of general political trends in matters of culture and religion even today. My lecture is by definition a wide-ranging and free-floating one even, covering quite a bit of diverse terrain. Any discussion of Music, Faith and Politics would have to be. I'd like to start with a question - a question I ask myself sometimes, but others also ask it of me:

Am I a Catholic composer or a composer who happens to be a Catholic? Is there a difference? In either emphasis you would expect such an individual to speak about music, of course. He would have a lot to say about his own music perhaps, but there would no doubt be a wider and deeper context for what he had to say. If he was a Catholic, and religion featured in some way in his work, you would expect some references to music of the past, music from previous centuries which had been employed in liturgy, and one might expect the religious traditions and heritage of Catholicism to be referenced in various ways.

But because Catholicism is a religion which has not shied away from the world, and has sometimes set out deliberately to engage with events and developments in culture, ethics, aesthetics, society and philosophy, one might also expect references to politics – politics of the past, the present and indeed the future.

In a mixed audience there might be a wide range of expectations of what a Catholic composer may say about these things. Some might be well-disposed in advance, some much less so, some hostile even. In matters of musical and artistic aesthetics alone, it is felt by some in the contemporary cultural elites that religion is old-hat and cannot deliver anything cutting edge or challenging any more in the modern arts. Part of my lecture will try to challenge that prejudice.

And on the wider and deeper contexts I speak today as a Catholic who has had my own engagements with the world of politics although I realise that I have lost many of my youthful certainties. Christianity's engagement with the world for good or for ill over the centuries has built up a compendium of knowledge and experience which will be valuable for the world as it progresses into ever more dangerous territory. This then, is a reflection on music, faith and politics which emerges from a growing realisation that Christ's crucifixion, God's intervention in history, to become one of us, to share our chequered and sometimes bloody journey towards meaning is as vitally central in our cultural considerations now than ever before. As Catholics we may be in a unique position to offer the world a gift from history – two millennia of experience, some proud, some shameful which will be precious to

our fellow men and women as we sail into uncharted and possibly deadly waters in the centuries ahead.

And in this age of trepidation can an artist, a composer even open up a window on God's passionate love affair with humanity? Bach did it. Others have done it before and since. It may be more imperative now than ever before to do it. It may be the most compelling vocation an artist could ever hope to discover. But the artist will not be thanked for it. And the Catholic artist should not care about this. Catholicism comes into its greatest glories when it establishes itself as a counter-cultural force. A Catholic composer or even just a composer who happens to be a Catholic needs to take on board the implications and urgencies that may be involved in this.

It is, of course a vast subject – Catholicism and music, with a deep hinterland of history and tradition that we could spend days, weeks, months lecturing on. And there would be an expectation to focus on how music works in the liturgy, since that has been the prime context for Catholic music through the centuries. But it would be a lost opportunity to consider wider implications of Catholicism and music in culture, especially in our own times, in the wake of modernity, and for the future.

As a Catholic composer myself I have lived the imaginative life in constant evaluation of these things, and how they may impact on my own work. One of the big surprises in my creative life has been the wider recognition that the spiritual inspirations behind the great composers, past and present, many springing from Judeo-Christian civilisation, should be seriously reassessed. By this, I don't mean in some reductive, anthropological detachment from the sources which amounts to a de facto denial of the theological and cultural claims of that tradition, or an implied, haughty downgrading of its authenticity. Rather, the reassessment is a recognition of the potency of culture, and one culture in particular, with Christ very much at its origin and centre, and a joyous sense of wonder at everything that has flowed from it in centuries of music making. What brings this recognition and reassessment some urgency is the wider, sometimes reluctant concession that religion has played a huge part in musical

modernity from Wagner to the present day. Some of the world's most important composers in the last century or so were profoundly religious men and women. Not all were necessarily conventional believers and many were not even Christian, but the search for the sacred has been constant and widespread in musical modernity from Stravinsky and Schoenberg through to Arvo Part and Michael Finnissy and loads in between (Messiaen, Poulenc, Britten, Schnittke, Gorecki and even Cage and Stockhausen).

When I speak about this phenomenon some are surprised that Wagner figures so centrally at the beginning of the process. His religious faith was shaky at best, sometimes all over the place between a boyhood Lutheranism and a late discovery of Buddhism (with a strange Eucharistic detour in Parsifal) and like most 19th century German leftists, he was sometimes decidedly anti-clerical. But Wagner's significance in the 20th century's search for the sacred in its art music was explored controversially and provocatively in Roger Scruton's "Death-Devoted Heart – Sex and the Sacred in Tristan and Isolde" from 2004. He wrote "Even if Wagner the man made no place for religion, however, Wagner the artist was entirely given over to it... What we see on the stage and hear in the music are human beings steeped in a religious form of life, surrounded by supernatural powers, and living, as it were, on the threshold of the transcendental." Michael Tanner in his 1996 book on the composer describes Tristan and Isolde as one of "the two greatest religious works of art of our culture" (the other being Bach's St Matthew Passion.) So what's religious about it then? Was it not Parsifal that has those big Holy Communion scenes? Well, there is a big "eucharistic" scene in Act 1 of Tristan too.

Tristan has been sent from Cornwall by his master, King Marke to capture Isolde from Ireland into a loveless, arranged marriage. She despises Tristan and he cares nothing for her. An intervention, divinely hatched but delivered by human accident introduces a love potion to the drama, and through drinking from the chalice the two protagonists are lost to love. They fall in love with each other, but more importantly, allow themselves to be given over to the power of an all-consuming numinous force. Love devours them, and this is achieved through the mystical sharing of a

communion cup. The love is erotic and pagan in its original storytelling, but the wider implications in Wagner's music drama are hugely cosmic. The original mythology is channeled through Schopenhauer and Freud and the Christian essence is shrouded and seemingly out of sight. But the implications and symbolism are massive for Scruton. Pessimism, fate and the search for the existential oblivion of the self into the eternal embrace of divine love contains contradictions of Judeo-Christianity as well as metaphors and signals towards it too. This is what fascinated Scruton whose simultaneous search for sex and the sacred in this masterwork is so compelling and disturbing to believer and sceptic alike. For Wagner it is all about the primacy of myth. For him a myth was not merely a fable or a fairy story, and certainly not a religious doctrine but a vehicle of human knowledge. As Scruton wrote "Myths do not speak of what was but of what is eternally. They are magical-realist summaries of the actual world, in which the moral possibilities are personified and made flesh."

The impact on modern literature, art and music was huge. It's ritualistic, quasi-liturgical symbolism impacted on Strauss, Schoenberg, Mann, Joyce and Eliot. Even Wagner's detractors and avoiders came under the spell in reaction – Bartok, Stravinsky, Debussy, Pound, Cocteau, Matisse, Rodin, Picasso – we find the same emphasis on "the moment of mystery, the ritualised core of meaning." Scruton says "All these artists reveal a renewed interest in the sacred as a dominant human fact" and that "The task of resacralising a desacralised world still occupies the attention of serious artists, writers and composers." This, I think, is the essential point in my lecture today. And Wagner's colossal presence is still central. The search for the sacred is clearly very much a current concern in contemporary composition. It never went away, and probably never will.

The etymology of the Latin word religio is interesting as it implies a kind of binding. The English poet Michael Symmons Roberts cites David Jones's essay 'Art and Sacrament':

"The same root is in 'ligament', a binding which supports an organ and assures that organ its freedom of use as part of a body. And it is in this sense that I here use the word 'religious'. It refers to a

binding, a securing. Like the ligament, it secures a freedom to function. The binding makes possible the freedom. Cut the ligament and there is atrophy — corpse rather than corpus. If this is true, then the word religion makes no sense unless we presuppose a freedom of some sort.”

This implies, as Symmons Roberts notes, that the supreme artistic visionary requires religion and theology: ‘So perhaps to “free the waters” and help slake the thirst of a parched culture, poets and other artists need religion, need a theology. Now there’s an unfashionable idea’. An interesting and challenging idea indeed! How would that go down in today’s fashionable citadels of metropolitan *bien pensant* culture?

Major modernist composers of the last hundred years were, in different ways, profoundly religious men and women. Stravinsky was as conservative in his religion as he was revolutionary in his musical imagination, with a deep love of his Orthodox roots as well as the Catholicism he encountered in the West. He set the psalms, he set the Mass; he was a man of faith. Schoenberg, that other great polar figure of early 20th-century modernism, was a mystic who reconverted to Judaism after he left Germany in the 1930s. His later work is infused with Jewish culture and theology, and he pondered deeply on the spiritual connections between music and silence. It is no surprise that John Cage chose to study with him. Cage found his own route to the sacred through the ideas, and indeed the religions, of the Far East. It is intriguing that his famous, or indeed notorious 4’33’ (that is four minutes, 33 seconds of silence), a profound provocation to our listening culture and sensibilities or lack of them, was originally entitled Silent Prayer.

The great French innovator and individualist Olivier Messiaen was famously Catholic, and every note of his unique contribution to music was shaped by a deep religious conviction and liturgical practice. There are, in my view, two composers in history who may be described as theologians: one is J.S. Bach, the other is Olivier Messiaen. Messiaen was a powerful influence on Boulez and Stockhausen (major figures of the postwar avant-garde) and therefore can be counted as one of the most impactful composers

of modern times. His Catholicism, far from being an impediment to this, was the major—indeed, singular—factor behind it. His Quartet for The End of Time was inspired by the moment in the Book of Revelation when the angel announces there will be no more Time. It was composed when he was a prisoner of the Nazis in 1940 in Stalag VIII-A in Görlitz, now in Poland.

The quartet was premiered at the camp, outdoors and in the rain, on 15 January 1941. The musicians had decrepit instruments and played to an audience of about 400 fellow prisoners and their German prison guards.

Messiaen wrote one opera — St Francis of Assisi — but the most important French Catholic opera of the 20th century was written by Francis Poulenc. His Dialogue des Carmélites appeared in 1956. As the American Jesuit Mark Bosco comments, ‘No other opera combines 20th-century musical sensibilities with such profound theological themes on Catholic mysticism, martyrdom, and redemption’. There is no comfortable, airy-fairy, pick’n’mix spirituality here. It is based on a true story from the beginnings of modern revolutionary violence — of 16 Carmelite nuns guillotined in the terror of the French Revolution. It was an act of defiance on the part of the composer against the victors’ mythologising of the secular terror of that time and the secular orthodoxies of the modern world. For a culture that was meant to have put these old things behind it, Dialogue des Carmélites is probably the most successful modern opera of the last 60 years. It is not just another avenue on the search for the sacred but a bold rebuttal of secular arrogances and accepted political orthodoxies, and a beautiful proclamation of Catholic truths. Here, as Bosco highlights, ‘traditional Catholicism becomes[s] intellectually compatible with all that was modern and progressive in French culture in the early part of the twentieth century’. Poulenc’s opera is ‘at once a Catholic story of heroism and faith and yet speaks to the modern world, an opera for the postwar period of Europe in the 1950s and one resonant with our contemporary struggle with Christian faith and martyrdom’.

Here then is an example of two composers in modernity who, in very different and specific ways opened up a window on God’s

passionate love affair with humanity. In the case of Messiaen he looked at the sacrifice and mercy of Christ recapitulated in the life of St Francis. In the case of Poulenc the sacrifice and mercy of Christ is recapitulated in the martyrdom of ordinary women.

The list of composers in recent times radiating a high degree of religious resonance is substantial, covering a whole generation of post-Shostakovich modernists from behind the old Iron Curtain — Gorecki from Poland, Arvo Pärt from Estonia, Kancheli from Georgia, Silvestrov from Ukraine, Schnittke, Gubaidulina and Ustvolskaya, all from Russia — again, courageous figures who stood out and against the prevailing dead-hand orthodoxy of the day, state atheism. And, in this country, after Benjamin Britten have come Jonathan Harvey, John Tavener and many others. Far from being a spent force, religion has proved to be a vibrant, animating principle in modern music and continues to promise much for the future. It could even be said that any discussion of modernity's mainstream in music would be incomplete without a serious reflection on the spiritual values, belief and practice at work in composers' minds.

This artistic context and reading of cultural history has given me much sustenance and encouragement in my own work. Far from feeling isolated and peripheralised in the world of music because of religion and because of my Catholicism, I have felt central in it, and dynamically engaged, as a believer and a Catholic with the swirl of ideas that surrounds us. It is this engagement that has given me confidence and inspiration to write a series of works, choral and instrumental, which have sprung out of theological and liturgical reflections. One of the most significant of these for me was the *Seven Last Words From the Cross* which I composed in 1993. It was one of the early pieces of mine which engaged with the Passion and death of Christ. I've revisited this scenario in various ways in the years since. It sometimes feels I have been circling these few days in human history again and again, and music seems to flow out of the experience. It's odd, but these violent events in the life of Christ have moved me to clothe them in music, but very differently each time I go there. After the *Seven Last Words* (which is for choir and string orchestra) came 'abstract' instrumental works such as *Fourteen Little Pictures* (for

piano trio) based on the 14 Stations of The Cross, and a triptych of orchestral works entitled Triduum, based on the three days before the Resurrection. Later came my Passion settings – St John and St Luke – and my Stabat Mater.

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Why is the death of Christ such an inescapable and recurring focus? Why is the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross an *idée fixe*, not just of my work but through musical and artistic history and still present in the 20th and 21st centuries? There are three things I'd like to link here in pointing the way forward for Catholic culture, art and music now and for the future: the crucifixion, Bach's Passions which tell this story in word and music, (admittedly Bach was a Protestant, but I will explain why this is not a barrier to our aspirations here) and the Poulenc opera mentioned earlier which is an example of Christ's sacrifice being embraced and made manifest and reflected in the lives, and deaths of ordinary people.

The 20th century brought back to our attention that the history of the faith is intrinsically connected to the sacrifice of its martyrs – men and women who followed Christ even to their deaths. They risked everything, even their lives to follow his teaching and to give witness to His divine truths. In the early 20th century martyrdom was something of another time and another place for most Catholics, especially in Western Europe and North America. The churches, in tandem with secular forces were building societies of moral progress and evolution – the outlawing of slavery, universal education, civil tolerance, religious pluralism, scientific advancement. Then everything changed. Tyranny returned emboldened and determined. As the American poet Dana Gioia puts it “The nationalistic hunger for self-determination among nineteenth-century Germans and Italians became the militaristic fascism of the 1930s.” And he goes on “The utopian egalitarianism of Russian progressives soon fostered the Great Terror, the Ukrainian Famine, and the gulags. Cambodia's desire to transcend colonialism created Pol Pot and his re-education centres.” Martyrdom has made a comeback.

When Poulenc wrote his martyrdom opera it was not just a response to an old event in the 18th century, it was a response to what he had just witnessed a few years earlier all over Europe. As

Gioia writes “The example of professing Christians always runs the risk of disturbing political authorities...the best place to begin is the example of modern martyrs – the believers of our own age who were forced to death rather than spiritual betrayal.”

And the source of this martyrdom and sanctity which blesses the world in the spilling of blood? The crucifixion of Christ – and the urgent retelling of this central story in our culture and civilisation is the single most important motivation an artist, of any age, of any century, of any race and any nation, can have.

Why do the Bach Passions still speak to modern man? And why was the death of Jesus – rather than His joyous resurrection – the prime motivation for these masterpieces? St Paul writes, “if Christ be not raised, your faith is in vain”. With that in mind, what is it about his death that has so gripped our culture? In John Butt’s book *Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity*, he examines the Bach Passions in the context of modern man’s fascination with glories past. Such masterpieces provide a firm challenge to the contemporary conceit that the modern world is always improving. The growing popularity of hearing the Bach Passions leading up to the Easter season in our “post-religious” culture is an intriguing one, and may be connected to our attachment to the power and message of tragedy in our culture.

But as Terry Eagleton has written recently “...not all tragedies end badly. The first great tragedy we have from Ancient Greece, Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, ends on a note of reconciliation, and so do many other such dramas, including some of Shakespeare’s. Tragedy isn’t just about total catastrophe. There are usually some shoots of new life struggling to get through....in order to attain that new life, you have to be hauled through hell. There can be no remaking without a radical breaking.”

The figure of Christ himself, in his Passion, death and resurrection, is in constant, uncontrollable interplay with the mind of modern man. Modern man, now more detached from his liturgical obligations than ever before, may be able, paradoxically, to see the crucifixion in wider contexts. Bach’s music proves that the

Passion of Christ has deep beginnings and profound resonance, even for modern man, showing as WB Yeats puts it, “Nothing can be sole or whole That has not been rent.”

In clothing the tragedy of Christ’s death and self-giving for us in music Bach opened up a window on the divine love affair with humanity. The greatest calling for an artist, especially today, is to do the same, (and this is the central thesis of this talk) – that is, that the artist can and should open up a window on the divine love affair with humanity, and the modern Catholic artist should feel no embarrassment or reticence at the task at hand.

Gazing into the future those artists can look at this story and the heroism and sacrifice in the face of evil that it has inspired in others through history, as Poulenc did in his groundbreaking opera, and ponder what has to be done. So who do Catholic and other Christian composers and artists (as well as the faithful generally) look to now in our own age for the most profound and devastating witness to Christ’s message and example? Foremost has to be Maximilian Kolbe, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero and Edith Stein. But there are others. And there will be more to come.

Bernard Lichtenberg, provost of the Berlin Cathedral protested at the official eugenical execution of the mentally disabled – died in transit to Dachau. Franz Jagerstater, peasant and father of small children who spoke out against Nazi racism and religious oppression – beheaded. Heinz Bello who made a stand against German militarism – machine-gunned in Tegel prison. His last words were *Omnia ad majorem Dei gloriam!* (All for the greater glory of God) – a phrase resonant of how Bach would sign his scores.

As Goia recounts; “No previous age mounted so vast or sustained attack on Christianity as the twentieth century. International communism alone assaulted the church on a hitherto impossible scale. Yet by the end of the century communism (at least one version of it) has mostly passed away while the church survives. In fact, the combined persecutions of modern totalitarian states has

at least had one unintended but beneficial effect – Christian ecumenism.”

As the various forms of Socialist totalitarianism, from Nazi Germany to Soviet Russia and beyond mounted their savage onslaughts, Christians began to realise the essential unity of the faith, and finally gave us the heart and eyes to recognise our older brothers and sisters in faith in Judaism, and reach out to all of them in renewed and revealed compassion and love. The shared wounds of modern day martyrdom have given us the resolve and determination to heal the old wounds of anti-semitism and lingering sectarianism. Kolbe, Bonhoeffer, Stein and the Jewish dead of Auschwitz – from their martyrdoms emerge new poppies, new resurrection seeds which regrow the love of God in our hearts.

And in this light then, the Lutheran Passions of Bach are Passions for us all, and the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross is made manifest in the lives of ordinary people. Catholic culture, in music but in all things, has to embrace this as we turn our faces to the future. According to the charity Open Doors, each year around 4,000 Christians are murdered for their faith, 2,600 are detained without trial and 1,200 church buildings are attacked. There is, sadly, no reason to think this will change. Indeed, these figures may rise if (as seems likely) global instability increases. Given their lack of powerful defenders, Christian minorities from Egypt to Indonesia will continue to suffer persecution, ranging from petty discrimination to lethal violence. Expect religious freedom to shrink further in China and India, the world’s most populous nations.

And on this continent, in 2017 alone, according to France’s Interior Ministry, 878 acts of vandalism were committed against Christian places of worship, cemeteries and shrines. That’s an average of nearly two and a half sites being targeted every day. And as Samuel Gregg wrote in the Spectator earlier this year; “...other cases do seem driven by unspecified animus against Christianity...The object of the exercise seems to have been desecration itself. Sometimes this takes very direct form. On October 5, the 18th-century Chapel of La Rosa in the Córdoba

provincial town of Montilla in Spain was entered by individuals who gained access to the tabernacle, extracted the hosts and flung them around the altar. Keeping in mind Catholicism teaches that the host is the body of Christ, it's hard to believe the perpetrators didn't know what they were doing."

From Santiago in Chile to Berlin in Germany we are now seeing organised assaults and desecrations of Catholic spaces, agencies, people and the Blessed Sacrament itself from anarchists, extreme feminists and so-called antifa. We will see more of this.

These attacks on religious places are hardly new. Jewish sites have been targeted by anti-Semites for centuries and Christian sites have been pillaged and burnt in the name of assorted revolutions since 1789. The so-called liberal governments of Spain's Second Republic in the 1930s displayed profound and ghoulis indifference to the desecration of nuns' graves by leftist mobs, not to mention the burning of Catholic churches — the worst case being the destruction of Oviedo's cathedral in 1934. During the Spanish Civil War, it was effectively open season on Catholic buildings and symbols, resulting also in the death of thousands of clergy and laity. This hatred in the west is still with us, getting worse and will be a feature of cultural conflict in the years to come.

At the beginning of this lecture I referred to "uncharted and possibly deadly waters" in the days ahead. The age of trepidation is now and the signs for our culture, our society and the Church are all around us. The American Cardinal Francis George said: "I expect to die in bed, my successor will die in prison and his successor will die a martyr in the public square. His successor will pick up the shards of a ruined society and slowly help rebuild civilisation, as the church has done so often in human history." Whether he got his chronology right is debatable but it is a fair claim to predict growing repression of the Church in the decades and centuries ahead.

He then went on to say:

"God sustains the world, in good times and in bad. Catholics, along with many others, believe that only one person has

overcome and rescued history: Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of the Virgin Mary, saviour of the world and head of his body, the church. Those who gather at his cross and by his empty tomb, no matter their nationality, are on the right side of history. Those who lie about him and persecute or harass his followers in any age might imagine they are bringing something new to history, but they inevitably end up ringing the changes on the old human story of sin and oppression. There is nothing “progressive” about sin, even when it is promoted as “enlightened.”

The world divorced from the God who created and redeemed it inevitably comes to a bad end. It’s on the wrong side of the only history that finally matters...entire societies, especially in the West, have placed themselves on the wrong side of history.”

In this light Catholicism takes up its mantle as a counter-cultural force. In the arts and in music what makes up the ballast of that culture is the exploration in sound, word and image of the life of Christ. His Incarnation, his desire to be with us, to be one of us, his ministry to us, his self-sacrifice for us, his death on a cross for us, his Resurrection for us – seen and heard in the work of Palestrina, Monteverdi, Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Bruckner, Messiaen, Poulenc, Britten, Part and many more in the past, in the present and in the future – this is what now gives Christianity its counter-cultural potency, power, truth, goodness and beauty.