

How can we sing the Lord's Song?

Craig Gardiner's 2008 Whitley Lecture focuses specifically upon worship, and upon overcoming the gaping moral chasm that is often felt between what happens during Sunday worship, and what is happening in the world outside. "Using the metaphors of music" he says, "we will draw out some connections between the sacred and the secular and offer a way of seeing God that affirms that heaven is as concerned with our politics as our prayers, as interested in our work as with our worship." (p6)

Unpacking a metaphor first proposed by Bonhoeffer, the essay takes up the musical practices of 'polyphony', '*Cantus Firmus*' and 'Counterpoint' to explore how the church can be released from its captivity to a schizophrenic Christ. A Christ, that is, whose commitment to the church seems incompatible with a Christ committed to the cosmos. Each musical metaphor is considered in turn:

1. **Polyphony**, literally meaning 'many sounds', is the production of many different notes at the same time. When strumming a guitar chord, for instance, no single note dominates but all work together to produce a unified voice. Seemingly distinct aspects of life in God's world (e.g., sacred and secular) can be sounded together in harmony.

This is a refreshing metaphor because far from simply observing a truth, we are drawn to participate in a performance. Or rather, to participate in a person. We are reminded that theologians such as Robert Jenson and David Cunningham use the notion of polyphony to draw attention to way that we encounter God moving in Trinitarian relationship. But what is to prevent the sounds and melodies of our world and our church being heard as a dis-harmonious cacophony that makes you want to shove your fingers in your ears?

2. ***Cantus Firmus***, literally the 'firm voice', is the primary melody from which all others take their lead. It is the pre-existent melody of Christ upon which all those who participate base their own musical performance. Our attunement to this Christ in turn means that our own harmonies will sound alongside the melodies of the world's suffering: "... the Christian community and the performance of its worship will need to display not only a willingness to be in the world, but an openness to let the life of the Church be shaped by the pain and sufferings of the world, from those of all or no faith." (20)

But participation is not simply performing scripture as though it were a musical score. Rather, Scripture itself is witness to the pre-existent melody, the *Cantus Firmus*, and invites us to participate in that pre-existent life of God.

3. **The Discipline of Counterpoint:** Polyphonic worship resists the monotone habits of worship, based upon sticking to what *we* know, what suits *us*, and refusing to allow the world outside to shape 'what we do here'. The discipline of the counterpoint ensures, 'an ongoing interaction between the melodies of work and worship, prayer and politics.' (24). The metaphor as a whole undermines the barriers that exist between different spheres of life, and the rest of the essay is taken up with the question of how this takes place firstly within the church, and secondly between the church and the world.

Within the church, the examples focus largely upon celebrating the diversity of traditions that are found together within the whole Christian story. We are then invited to imagine how polyphonic worship can enable those within local congregations to celebrate the diverse

melodies that sound together in their common life. Within the world, we are invited to strike up allegiances with secular projects and organisations whose actions – unbeknown to them - strike a melody that harmonises with Christ's *Cantus Firmus*.

In a single lecture of course, it is impossible to explore every avenue and illustrate every point. There will probably be questions we will want to ask and points we will want to raise, which after all will be possible for those who hear the lecture delivered. But it seems to me that the lecture as a whole delivers more than it promises. It offers not only 'a way of seeing God', but a way of hearing, feeling and discerning the action of God in the world. Into a world where we are still largely preoccupied with viewing, observing and describing God as an object, this lecture is an invitation to be totally immersed in the life God offers us.

A copy of the lecture is well worth the £3 it costs, and can be bought at:
[s://sslrelay.com/www.baptiststore.co.uk/sess/utn1547bd2974da8b4/shopdata/index.shopscrip](https://sslrelay.com/www.baptiststore.co.uk/sess/utn1547bd2974da8b4/shopdata/index.shopscrip)

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