

Sermon preached by the Very Reverend Michael Tavinor, Dean of Hereford at the Three Choirs Festival Eucharist on Sunday 9 August, 2009.

If you were to be led blindfolded into a building, and if, for the sake of argument, you weren't able to hear the words that were being sung and, assuming that you weren't from outer space and had some knowledge of western music – and that the wordless music being sung was, say, Palestrina or Byrd, you might be forgiven for thinking, fairly quickly- that you were in church. You might also think this even more, if, say, wordless Gregorian chant were being sung.

But if, on the other hand, you were led into the same building and, the jolly *Agnus Dei* or one of the solos from today's Haydn mass were being sung – again wordlessly, so as not to give the game away – you might be less certain – you might even think you were in the Vienna Opera House.

For Haydn and other composers of his generation, the dividing line between sacred and secular in music is really rather narrow.

Now, sometimes, the church has found this quite hard to cope with. And so instruments went out in much of the changes of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation and we all know about Cromwell and the Commonwealth. There was a certain style - the 'real macoy' when it came to church music, and the taint of the opera didn't help that.

More recently, the Roman Catholic Church got itself into this particular tangle. In 1903, Pope Pius X published an encyclical, *Motu Proprio*, in which he spoke out against modernism and thundered against church music which showed secular influences. The pure Palestrina style was really the only vehicle for sacred music. This, of course, gave rise to a generation of composers with names like Rigatoni and Cannelloni – 'has beens' – probably from the Rome opera who churned out masses in the acceptable style – not a consecutive fifth in sight – but, oh, how boring....

Nor has the Three Choirs Festival been exempt from this crisis of confidence when the blurring of divisions between sacred and secular has been broached.

In 1812, at the Worcester Festival, a critic complained about the interpolation of a song - an adaptation of music by Handel into Arnold's *The Redemption*. It was not so much the musical juxtaposition that offended this critic but rather the secular sentiments. With delicious irony, he says:

The extremely bad taste in allowing the song 'Holy, holy, holy', to be thrust into a sublime composition, already perfect in itself, amounts to an act of positive desecration and an insult to the Divine Majesty, when the fact is declared that the original words of this beautiful air in the opera *Rodelinda*, are those of a love song, *dove sei, amato bene*.

Whatever next.....

The nadir in this muddled thinking came in the Worcester Festival of 1875, when the Dean and Chapter, to celebrate their nicely restored Cathedral, banned any secular music – banned orchestras – no oratorios, even Messiah – just Mattins and Evensong. The *Birmingham Town Crier* gave an epitaph:

In memory of the Worcester Music Festival –
Persecuted by prigs, Puritans and Parsons,
Choked by a highly Christian Chapter,
It faintly and feebly
Breathed its last
Before the eyes
And in the presence of its
Chief assailants and assassins.
Weep, Worcester, weep.
Thy lyric glory's gone.

No more, alas, to be
Till Dean and Chapter
All translated are
Into the silent see.

In fact, we know that an enormous amount of church music has a secular background or ancestry. Even the great Mozart was not above re-cycling themes, and his *Coronation Mass* shamelessly pinches themes from the *Marriage of Figaro* and vice versa. And why not? Should sacred and secular music really be in such watertight compartments? Are there styles appropriate only to each department? After all, each uses the same raw material - the 12 notes of the chromatic scale, rhythm, texture, melody.

Much, of course, depends on how we define holy. Our Eucharist this morning uses the music of Haydn's 'Heligmesse' in which the composer weaves in a simple, secular, folk tune and challenges us all to reflect on where the holy is for us. And it's important for us, who come to a festival like this to have quite a broad church view when it comes to those sacred/secular divisions – and the sort of content we include.

In the Solomon Islands, when they come to the Sanctus in the Mass, they sing 'Tambu, Tambu, Tambu' – and from that, of course, we get our word taboo. For some people, this is exactly what the holy is –taboo - forbidden ground – the private – keep out. God himself is often portrayed in the Old Testament not only as awe-some and awe-inspiring but as unapproachable –only to be approached in a cloud or with veiled face.

Jesus changed all that. He was constantly seeking to break down barriers between sacred and secular. He thundered against the Pharisees who would hedge their holy god with rules and regulations and reserved him for the so-called holy ones. Jesus wanted people to see God in the whole of creation – not just the so-called holy. And he was revolutionary in seeing the holy in what others called untouchable – tambu – taboo – the prostitute, the tax collector, the Roman soldier. These could also be powerful vehicles for God's love and holiness.

Yes, there seems to be something in human nature which relishes the battening down of hatches – the wish to limit and fence off. Jesus always challenges this and asks us, once again, to be generous and visionary in where we set the boundaries to holiness.

The Environment – how we treat our world – this is a mark of holiness, too.

After a year of terrible turmoil in the financial world – how we deal with our money – this is a mark of holiness too.

And perhaps, in his music Haydn is doing this – celebrating this glorious fusion - this joining of the sacred and secular – the sanctuary and the opera – the basilica and the concert hall – the voice and the orchestra - the widening of the boundaries of holiness.

Perhaps our festival, in its truly catholic expression of the art of music – with its companionship – its hospitality - its bringing together of all backgrounds – perhaps this is about breaking down barriers –certainly in a world – and even, dare I say, in a church, which seems to take comfort from erecting more barriers rather than demolishing them – our festival can point to a true inclusiveness.

And what better way in which to celebrate this inclusion – than to break bread together – all of us - to receive - together - the bread of life in thanksgiving for the many ways in which Christ breaks down - and builds up - ever extending His kingdom of self-giving love.

Amen.