

Address from the Musicians' Service of Remembrance 28th April 2015

By Catherine Bott

“Hark, how the birds do sing, and woods do ring. All creatures have their joy.”

Words by George Herbert: poet and parson, born in this month of April 1593. Ralph Vaughan Williams set Herbert's poetry to music in his Five Mystical Songs: and if you're of a certain age you'll probably have sung the hymn “Teach me, my God and King”. Those words are by Herbert too.

Herbert's poetry is a miracle of clarity and simplicity, so it lends itself very well to music. Which is no surprise: here's what his first biographer Izaak Walton had to say about Herbert the musician:

“The greatest diversion from his study was the practice of music, in which he became a great master, and of which he would say, that it did relieve his drooping spirits, compose his distracted thoughts, and raised his weary soul so far above the earth, that it gave him an earnest of the joys of heaven before he possessed them.....His love to music was such, that he went usually twice every week.....to the cathedral church in Salisbury: and at his return would say that his time spent in prayer and cathedral music, elevated his soul, and was his heaven upon earth.”

From his parish in Bemerton Herbert would often walk, his viol on his back, to music-meetings: private gatherings around a table in someone's house. He once arrived at a meeting very late, and dishevelled, having stopped to help a poor man with a poorer horse. His musical friends at Salisbury wondered that “Mr George Herbert, who used to be so trim and clean, came into that company so soiled and discomposed”. He told them that the thought of what he had done would prove “music to him at midnight”, saying: ‘I would not willingly pass one day of my life without comforting a sad soul, or showing

mercy; and I praise God for such an occasion. And now let's tune our instruments."

Herbert was a devout and kindly man – and a practical musician. It's always a good idea to tune up thoroughly, especially where viols are involved.

The memory of having done someone a good turn was "Music at midnight" to George Herbert. And when it came to the real thing, he had his well-tuned viol. Almost 400 years on from that meeting in Salisbury, we're spoilt for choice: there's a wealth of music available on the radio, around midnight on this, the 28th of April 2015. *Sounds of the 80s* on Radio 2, Norwegian jazz and Icelandic birdcalls on Radio 3, soothing classical music on Classic FM.

My very first experience of being helped by some "Music at midnight" happened when I was seven years old, on a sleepover at my grandparents' house. Tucked up in crisp white sheets, under comfortingly heavy blankets and a shiny plump eiderdown, in a wooden-framed bed just like Rupert Bear's, I was woken from a deep sleep by the most frightening sound I'd ever heard, an unearthly wailing in the street outside.

Now, if I'd been familiar with Ravel's opera *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, or even Rossini's Cat Duet, I'd have known immediately that I was hearing the yowling of a brace of moggies doing what comes naturally and I'd have gone straight back to sleep. But I'd never heard anything like this before and I was terrified.

There was no question of running to my grandparents for comfort: I loved them dearly and knew they loved me, but gran was a bit inclined to dab at one's face with a spit-moistened hanky for no good reason, and her highest praise after a visit was to say to my mum, "she's been no trouble". So No Trouble was what I had to be.

There was only one thing for it: dive right down under the bedclothes and make my own noise, to drown out the sound of whatever was coming to get me. Something my other gran had recently taught me came into my head, so the still of the night was disturbed by a little piping voice singing, tremulously

but bravely: (sung) “Pardon me boy, is that the Chattanooga Choo-Choo?
Track 29, boy you can give me a shine.”

The song gave me courage. So I sang it again, louder. And after a couple of complete performances it not only minimised the yowling but also woke up granddad, who arrived with a reassuring explanation for it.

Even more than kindly words, music is comfort – and joy. My gran loved Puccini, and a few years after that sleepover, by which time I was singing different repertoire at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, granddad – a light music fan - decided to explore the string quartet repertoire. He bought a couple of long-playing records: Borodin – big hit, Bartok - not so much. But at least he gave it a go – he was prepared to open his ears to unfamiliar music, to find out if it would make its way into his heart and soul.

Having begun with George Herbert, some words now by another musical man of the church, whose name will awaken happy memories: Cormac Rigby. For 20 years he was a BBC radio announcer on the Third Programme and Radio 3. Then he became a parish priest, and brought to his sermons a true broadcaster’s skill in crafting informative and thought-provoking scripts, designed to be heard rather than read. Like Herbert’s poetry, Father Cormac’s prose is a miracle of clarity and simplicity: here he’s writing about a musical discovery of his own.

“A long time ago now, I was offered the chance of going to Wagner’s wonderful human comedy *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*. I nearly turned it down. I thought Wagner was too loud and too long and too complex for the likes of me. But then I was given the privilege of....seeing and hearing and feeling it come to life under the guidance of Reginald Goodall.

It was a road to Damascus experience. It fair knocked me off my horse. I could hardly wait to go to later performances, and as each one occurred my

perceptions deepened.....I've bought four complete performances on CD and experienced many *Meistersinger*. And that has created a new reality within me, a conflation of experiences. I now "know" a sort of ideal *Meistersinger*..... I have never actually heard a complete perfect performance, but one exists.....not perhaps in my mind, but in my heart or my soul."

Cormac Rigby makes the story of his gradual discovery of a Wagner opera analogous to the unfolding revelation of faith; having read many of his sermons, I can only say that Radio 3 was blessed to have him in its studios, and his parishioners were blessed to have him in the pulpit. Both he and George Herbert clearly felt themselves blessed by the gift of music.

This annual service celebrates the lives of musicians who have, in myriad ways, turned the key that opens the door to the world of music, for their audiences, pupils, colleagues, friends and family. Andrew Morris has read the list of names newly inscribed in the book of remembrance, and I want to end by mentioning seven representative people from that list who not only have personal significance for me, but also show the many ways in which music works its magic on all of us.

Violinist **Fred Applewhite** was an inspirational teacher and coach at the Inner London Education Authority, The London Schools Symphony Orchestra and Junior Guildhall. Generations of string players owe him a great deal.

Cellist **Dougie Cummings** was Andre Previn's mainstay in the LSO in the 70s: he too was an inspirational teacher, but his sheer indefatigability and good humour in the face of illness was perhaps most inspiring of all.

Vivienne Price founded the National Childrens' Orchestra and gave my dear step-daughter Samantha the chance to experience the thrill of playing in the percussion section in Liverpool's Philharmonic Hall more than 20 years ago. Sam grew up to be a teacher, not a musician, but she's never forgotten that orchestral course, and is now introducing her own little daughter to all kinds of music.

Conductor **Christopher Hogwood** brought scholarship of real depth and distinction to his pioneering work – a quiet revolutionary who changed the way we listen to baroque music. He’s also remembered with admiration and affection, not least by me, as a great broadcaster.

Last year, when Andrew Morris invited me to give this address, he wrote that “the choir will be from King’s College London under **David Trendell** and they are hot stuff.” Well, sadly, that combination was not to be – but under the expert direction of Gareth Wilson, they would have made Trixie Trendell proud this evening.

Critic and writer **Lyndon Jenkins** – we never met, but I treasure the memory of the night I interviewed him on Radio 3 “down the line” to Birmingham Town Hall, live on air, when a concatenation of technical hitches meant we had to “busk it”, as musicians say, for several interminable minutes: his coolness under fire was proof that he knew his stuff and could deliver it under any circumstances.

And finally, flautist **Delia Ruhm** was one of the leading freelance woodwind players in the Midlands – and 50 years ago she kindly agreed to teach a complete beginner – my father. He emailed me last week, describing her as “a kind-hearted and loveable woman – rigorous in her teaching methods but gentle – to whom I am indebted for a brief but memorable musical interlude in my life.”

Just as we all have our own versions of George Herbert’s comforting “music at midnight” and Cormac Rigby’s joyous “ideal” performances, we all have memorable musicians in our lives, to whom we are indebted. The first time I sang in this very church, just over 40 years ago, Professor Harold Dexter, of very fond memory, conducted Guildhall School students in Bach’s B Minor Mass – a Damascene moment for me. After the concert, another one – my first ever glass of whisky in the Viaduct Tavern across the road. To tell the truth, that was a bit more like my granddad’s encounter with the music of Bartok. Before the end of today, I hope you’ll raise a real or virtual glass of

anything you fancy, whether it's vintage champagne, whisky or dandelion and burdock, to all the musicians whose lives and work we honour this evening.

Catherine Bott

April 2015