

The Complexity of Musical Influences from the Opera *Louis Riel*

as a composer is evidenced in his ability to bring together the music, language, and culture from diverging backgrounds and create a musical drama of grand proportions, expressed in a unique and personal musical language. While a professional revival of the opera may yet be a way off, I would like to think that the chances of Somers' *Louis Riel* being remounted at all owes something to the inspiring talent, dedication, and vision of the Opera McGill production under the direction of Dixie-Ross Neill.

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Endnote

- 1 Opera McGill spent close to \$250,000 to mount *Louis Riel* in a new production, nearly four times the regular budget for the annual main production. This figure is not outrageous when one considers the costs regularly associated with professional opera productions.

Spirituality and Vocal Music: An Exploratory Perspective

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"I try to get to the summit of my soul and paint from there, there where the universe sings (Colle, 1988, p. 9)." This is how Lawren Harris, one of the Group of Seven painters, expresses his approach to painting. We think it captures the challenge of singing as well. The purpose of this paper is to explore some themes in the relationship of spirituality to music, particularly vocal music. It addresses the question: Where do we sing *from*?

One development today is the differentiation of spirituality from religion and the search for a grounding of spirituality in insights and images that include other than religious sources. One possible foundation may lie in the conviction of the worth, value, or sacredness of the human person, and, indeed, of all life and being (King, 2003).

We shall use the term "spirituality" to designate this human quest for meaning. A person's spirituality comprises the vision, values, and support system to which they turn to discover or create meaning in their life, and to respond to the inevitable sorrows inherent in existence. The quest for meaning designates essentially the quest for identity and worth, for belonging and purpose.

One particular way of experiencing this intrinsic worth or sacredness of persons is through music, and in particular, vocal music. In part, the quest for meaning can be described as the quest to find and express one's authentic voice, and to hear and articulate that voice within a greater context.

Spiritus: Breath, Wind, Spirit

We may explore the relationship between vocal music and meaning by looking at the etymology of the words "spirit" and "spirituality." The Latin word *spiritus* (and its Greek and Hebrew cognates, *pneuma* and *ruach*) means at once breath, wind, and spirit. This association comes most obviously from the observation that as long as we are alive, we are breathing; we have the breath of life in us. Breathing, of course, is twofold: We inhale, or draw breath in, and we exhale, or let breath out. When we send breath out, as we do in speaking or singing, it is like the wind. Frequently, in children's books, the

wind is depicted humorously as a cloud with a face whose mouth is blowing, often fiercely.

Yet we also live and breathe by more than breath. We draw in and project out sorrow and joy, isolation and love, fear and hope, greed and compassion. Any such qualities can be the spirit that shapes our lives. In this sense, too, a person may ask: What is the life-breath, the spirit, of all that lives and breathes, the spirit of the universe? Spirituality, then, refers to the spirit within us by which we live; it is what lies behind the way we see and live and sustain our lives, both as individuals and as part of a larger context.

A first observation is that breath, wind, and spirit, can be felt and heard, but not seen, as intimated by the very title of W. O. Mitchell's novel, *Who Has Seen the Wind?* (1998) The title itself is taken from a nineteenth century poem by Christina Rossetti, and Mitchell states in his preface that *Who Has Seen the Wind?* is the struggle of a boy to understand the ultimate meaning of the cycle of life. The linguistic roots of the word "spirit" thus suggest that meaning comes to us at least initially through the experience of touch and hearing. Two other Latin words indicate that openness to discover that meaning is essential. The word "obedience" in its root sense, means to listen closely, to listen intently, to tune in to the meaning of life. "Absurdity," on the other hand, means total deafness, the inability or refusal to find meaning in life.

Silence

Sounds may only be heard upon a background of silence. Leopold Stokowski, the eminent conductor, has said: "A painter paints his pictures on canvas. But musicians paint their pictures on silence (n.d.)." The Latin word "*silens*" and the Anglo-Saxon cognate, "still," refer to the cessation or absence of both sound and movement. Conversely, they bring out a connection between movement and sound. Kathleen Norris (1998), educator and author, invited elementary school children first to make noise and then to make silence. Regarding silence, she invited the class to breathe normally but quietly, and to sit so still that they made no noise at all. She said the children were so still that silence became a presence in the classroom. Afterwards, she invited them to write down images of their experience. One insightful child noted that "silence reminds me to take my soul with me wherever I go" (pp. 16-17). This child expressed, with a simple clarity, the awareness that silence allows us to be present to our own inner self, and to carry and embody that presence in all our activities.

Hearing in silence is not merely an automatic, passive activity. It implies openness from within, a listening to one's own spirit, and in a wider sense, to life, and to the universe itself. From this attentive listening comes the expression, the giving voice to what one has heard. Such a voice, in turn, can be heard only in silence. The silent listening to the voice of another is a form of respect or reverence; an acknowledgement of the worth or value, the to-be-honoured-not-violated quality of each person. Here, too, we find a link between a contemporary spirituality grounded in the sacredness of the person and spirituality of music and of voice for which respectful listening is essential.

The silence within which one listens and is heard, the canvas upon which music is written, sung, and played, may be linked to the silence advocated in many traditions as indispensable to the discovery of self, others, and the transcendent. The moment of silence that comes just before a concert begins and follows its conclusion just before the applause commences is an honouring silence. This is not an empty silence, not a mere absence of sound, but a full space, a complete presence. It is like the indefinable, breathless moment between the intake of breath and its exhaling. This turnaround point of the breath may be what T. S. Eliot (1944) calls "the still point of the turning world (p. 15);" the eternal now, within, yet beyond all space and time. It may be found in the moment of silence following the crescendo in Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* or the electrifying space between the tenor and baritone parts in the climax of the duet from Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*.

Such silent space is a welcoming rather than judging or rejecting silence; one in which persons sense themselves as spoken to and heard, and as valued. According to theologian, Karl Rahner (1974), if we enter into this kind of silence and gently allow ourselves to draw closer to ourselves beyond the surface busyness, we may discover that everything is suffused by something that appears like emptiness, a kind of silence whose stillness cries out. Of this infinity that silently surrounds the person, Rahner says, "Trust the nearness, it is not emptiness (p. 28)."

The ancient Greeks portrayed the Muses, the source of music and all the arts, as daughters of Zeus, the shining sky, the cosmic order, and of Memory (reflective of an oral tradition). In effect, they saw music as intrinsic to the nature of the universe. It was a divinely inspired gift, breathed into certain individuals, who were thereby called to bring healing and consolation to their fellow human beings. The Greeks also spoke of the music of the spheres, the sounds made by the motion of heavenly bodies. This music was always present, but never noticed since there was no background of silence against which to hear it (Harris & Plazner, 1998, pp. 52-54). A choral director (Lorraine King, Windsor, Ontario) offered this contemporary version of that image. In terms of

musical entries, she said, "we should not think of ourselves as starting to sing, but consider that the music is already flowing and we simply join it (personal communication, May 25, 2005)."

Listening

Recently we visited many centuries-old churches and buildings in France, including the magnificent cathedrals of Amiens and Chartres, the village church in St. Médard en Forez, the small chapel used by the ecumenical community in Taizé, and the abbey of St. Pierre in Solesmes. The monastic community of Taizé has developed a form of prayerful music and meditation, offered especially to young people. The monastery of Solesmes has pioneered, sustained, and promoted the retrieval, authentic interpretation, and dissemination of Gregorian chant. We experienced the silence in these places as a tangible presence—pervasive, enveloping, yet open, and unfathomably vast, knowing no boundaries. This was a listening silence that absorbed the clutter of our mind and heart, and gently insinuated itself into our very soul. It became a foundation upon which to hear, speak, and sing truthfully, as well as a challenge to do so. We experienced our own sacredness both as a gift and a call; a reality with which we are endowed, yet one which we must also honour and act upon. We sensed, too, something of the mystery within which that sacredness is grounded, sustained, and evoked. Even when small children entered this space, they seemed to sense something. They began to move slowly and quietly, and to speak very softly, if at all.

To sing in such a space is a memorable experience. When we sing from and into this tangibly silent space, it is, as has been said, as if the stones themselves sing. Our voice sounds like a voice that is singing with accompaniment. It is heard not just as coming from us, but as enveloping us as well. When we begin a new phrase, the echoes of the previous phrase continue to resonate, and we feel sustained by our own voice, as though our unison voice sings in harmony with itself.

Issues of hearing and singing are treated extensively in the work of Alfred Tomatis, a world-renowned French physician and researcher. Tomatis (2005) says,

The act of singing permits us to open a dialogue with space so that we become flooded by its vibrations and merge with it, acoustically speaking. ... Reverberation creates a rich harmonic that envelopes both singer and audience and sends feedback between singer and hall (pp. 6-7).

In these spirit-echoing spaces, we feel our voice as linked to the voices of all who have sung in this space. We feel called to create a sound as open as the space in which it is heard, and to make of our own bodies, so to speak, a cathedral in which our song resonates openly. In these places, we hear our own voice as beautiful and are drawn to sing as truthfully as possible.

This blend of an encompassing yet boundless silence and a sustaining and reverberating acoustic space suggests that the basic spirituality of these places may live, breathe, and move in their very architecture. They summon the singer to pass beyond any internal clutter or noise, to enter the silence, and to allow it to penetrate within. Certainly, we must attend to technical considerations, such as pitch, tone, tempo, phrasing, and dynamics. Beyond that, however, we must hear our singing as a sacred endeavour that flows from and to the silence and gives it voice, that responds to and addresses the resonant space. In this vein, we believe it is T. S. Eliot who has said that artists must work to perfect their technique so that when they have something to say, they will not betray it.

This experience of silent space suggests that a key to treating ourselves as sacred and responding to the sacredness of others is not to identify ourselves or others with our clutter and our noise—our anxiety, fear, hostility, pain, and so forth—but to attempt to tune in to and reach the resonant silence of the person behind this confusion. In doing so, we provide an open, compassionate space for that person. This approach may be crucial to personal relationships, including that of teacher and student. Like music, it would seem that real communication rests upon and moves toward silence. Silence then becomes not merely the cessation of words or music, but their assimilation and absorption; not an absence of experience, but the deepening of experience and its taking root within.

We have noted that hearing in silence is not merely a passive reception, but openness from within, a listening to one's own spirit, to the spirit of another, and, in a wider sense, to life, to the universe itself, of which we are each a unique expression. Paul Madaule, a student and friend of Alfred Tomatis, directs The Listening Centre in Toronto. He offers a useful distinction between hearing as the passive reception of sound, and listening as the active process of tuning in or screening out certain sounds. "Listening," he adds, "involves the perception of both external sounds as well as those of our own voice...self-listening (Madaule, 2001, p. 16)." This process of hearing, listening, and self-listening, which begins in childhood, is the same process that takes place in the acquisition of singing, which, he says, for many children, occurs earlier than speech.

Voice

In a recent conversation with us, Dom Daniel Saulnier, director of music palaeography at the abbey of St. Pierre in Solesmes, France, observed that singing is a vital function and the universal mode of expression. Singing, he says, is sensitive knowledge that involves the whole person (personal communication, June 4, 2005). Tomatis (2005) notes, similarly: "Singing is a basic human function. ...One can never sing enough. It is one of the most complete modes of expression, involving mind, body, and emotions (pp. 7, 26)."

What is implied here is the conviction that there is a human need not only to listen, but to express ourselves, our whole selves. Such self-expression depends upon what is heard and truly listened to, and singing may be its most complete form. Tomatis (2005) comments also: "Listening to ourselves or to others requires a self-effacement that few can attain. The kind of listening involved in singing demands enormous self-discipline (p. 26)."

To voice what we hear is, in its deepest sense, to give voice to our own spirit as unique expression of the spirit of the universe. It is not to break the silence out of which this sound arises, but to give it voice. "Voice" comes from the Latin noun *vox* and its verb form *vocare*, which means to call, to emit or send forth sound, to express from within outward, to breathe forth our spirit. The related word "vocation" means that which one is called to be and to do from within or from the divine. It suggests the call to breathe forth one's authentic voice in word, in song, in life. So, too, the word "evoke" means to call forth, to summon. Our calling from within both invites and calls forth an acknowledgement, a listening, and a response from another.

Our voice is at once expression and outreach, as illustrated in the folk tale about Rapunzel. In her loneliness, Rapunzel sings beautifully, and her voice rings out through the forest where it captivates the young man who hears it. It is the voice that comes from one's inmost, unique self that at once expresses who we are and evokes a similar response in others. Here, too, that voice is expressed in singing. A contrasting story concerns the figure of Echo in Greek mythology. Echo is condemned only to repeat what she has heard, never to initiate conversation or engage in dialogue. Since she has no voice of her own, she gradually fades away and dies. To be fully alive, a person must find and express their own voice, tell their own story, sing their own song.

As expression and outreach, our voice may be viewed not only as summoned to express its authentic self, but as longing to be heard and acknowledged, to be recognized and listened to attentively. Voice is thus essentially relational: I cannot truly

tell my story if no one hears; I cannot fully sing my song if no one listens. Tomatis (2005) comments that we must take care in terms of what we hear and listen to, since it can have a powerful impact. "When we listen," he says, "we are utterly changed (p. 26)." We might also add that we are transformed by what we allow to affect us deeply.

Interrelatedness

The dialogue between individual and acoustic space, speaker and listener, singer and audience, all point to the interrelatedness of person and community; the unique person who yet shares a common humanity with all others. There is a certain loneliness to the human condition itself. In part, it is perhaps the price of uniqueness, the irreplaceable voice that each one of us has and is, the distinct song that each of us alone can discover and hear within and sing. In part, it may be the realization that we can never fully express in word or song what we have heard and felt, although we must forever try to do so.

At the same time, when we sing in these silent yet resonant spaces that have known centuries of human presence, we may experience our connection with those who have conceived and crafted such places, with those who have rejoiced and wept within their silence, and with all who have been touched by these spaces and left their own imprint upon them. In performance, too, we are linked in a variety of ways in a common experience with the composer and what he or she sensed and tried to embody. We are also linked with other performers who have given voice or instrumental expression to this piece in their own way, with audiences who receive and respond to this tangible expression, and perhaps with the common silence upon which all speech and music rests. A prime example of this communitarian character is Gregorian chant. It is sung from, within, and into silence; it purports to give a human voice to divine words; it has deep and ancient historical roots; and it is sung by many with one voice and both expresses and builds community. In this sense, music, especially vocal music, embodies a fundamental human challenge: to find one's unique voice and to share that voice in a way that is life-giving for self and others.

Suzuki and McConnell (2002) remark that in every breath we absorb atoms from the air that were once part of birds, trees, snakes, and worms, as well as other human beings in the near and distant past.

Spirituality and Vocal Music

Air is a matrix that joins all life. ...As we have breathed in our forebears, so our grandchildren and their grandchildren will take us in with their breath. We are bound up inseparably with the past and future with the spirit we share.

They conclude, "Every breath is a sacrament, an affirmation of our connection with all living things, a renewal of our link with our ancestors and a contribution to generations yet to come (p. 38)."

A final observation is that music has both an interior and an exterior dimension. Music is first heard within ourselves, and then passes through our voice or fingers into sounds that are heard flowing in the air, interwoven with silence. Such sounds may bring listeners to places deep within themselves: places of memory and longing, places of loneliness and love, places where life has been felt and lived intensely. In this sense, music may be described as what we have termed "tangible soul." A striking example of this feature is found in black spirituals. The horror of enslavement drove many further and further inward, to a place of depth, wisdom, beauty, and compassion that no cruelty or hatred could reach. From this place came a voice, in story and song, an authentic voice; a voice, we believe, of the spirit of a people, of the human spirit, and of the spirit of the universe.

Conclusions

To conclude, perhaps the key insight that links music with spirituality is that each of us is a unique and sacred word and song, uttered from the heart of the universe, and from whatever lies within and beyond that universe. To paraphrase the words of Lawren Harris, the challenge for each of us is to try to get to the summit of our soul and to paint certainly, but also to speak, to sing, to live from there, there where the universe sings.

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