

78th Festival of St Cecilia

20 November 2024

St Paul's Cathedral

Sermon preached by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

It is good to be here, and a privilege to be a part of today with musicians from all three cathedrals, and to have heard this premier of Heloise Werner's beautiful setting of George Herbert's words. And fabulous to have had music by Faure and Stanford, in this centenary year of their respective deaths.

It is good to be here on this 78th St Cecilia Day Festival, supporting and celebrating and affirming the work of *Help Musicians*.

And I'm delighted to be giving the Address today, though not delighted for dear Mark Oakley who, as you know, was to be this year's preacher, and who sends warmest wishes – but sadly from his bed of sickness with a bad chest infection, and he asks me to say how disappointed he is to miss the occasion and not to be able to be here with everyone today.

In case you're wondering who I am: I was installed here at St Paul's as a Chapter member and Residentiary Canon and Precentor ...a whole month ago, having served Suffolk's Cathedral in Bury St Edmunds for over 12 years in a similar capacity.

So I bring greetings from there – Benjamin Britten's Cathedral – I was there just this last weekend for a fabulous staging at the cathedral of his opera *Noyes' Fludde*, involving professional musicians, and hundreds of children, and of course the cathedral's choristers. I love it that Suffolk has that tiny connection with *Help Musicians* and St Cecilia Day Festival, Benjamin Britten having written his *Hymn to St Cecilia* back in 1942, and having been a great supporter of the Charity, albeit under its former name in those days, and of the Festival of St Cecilia.

So – it is good to be here with you.

And now may I speak in the name of our loving, liberating and life-giving God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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The 18th-century poet Alexander Pope once observed that

*“...some to church repair,
not for doctrine,
but for the music there...”*¹

So I suspect that some of you, perhaps many of you, do rather prefer music and hymns to sermons, and just might have the thought at the back of your minds that rather than *talking* about music, we should just let the musicians *make* the music.

Something does need to be said though.

In 30 years of priestly ministry in the Church of England, I've always believed that part of the clergy's role is to be an advocate for, and explicit about, music in worship, and the way in which music helps meet humanity's spiritual and emotional needs.

So, whether you are a person of faith, or no faith, or not sure about your faith, the world – and its policy-makers, businesses, institutions, philanthropists – the world needs reminding that music has the capacity to do what no other art form does: has the capacity to reach each of us at a deep level, to express what can't be expressed verbally, visually, rationally. And the music in our worship helps us glimpse that which is beyond, lifts hearts to make us more compassionate and thankful. Music helps open our minds – transforms the mundane of our everyday life; has the capacity to make the familiar transcendent.

I love the phrase attributed to Plato: *Music gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, life to everything.*

Or – words from the History of *Help Musicians* which I found online last night – “*music adds colour to our world and soundtrack to our lives.*”

Isn't it the case that when we come into spaces such as these, we are entering a place to 'waste time in the beauty of holiness'. It was the child psychologist Donald Winnicott who wrote so powerfully² that, just as children need time to play to develop as adults, so adults also need to continue to play – and that 'playfulness' continues in art and music and culture.

That's why the arts are so important: they are an expression of liberty and beauty – and (from a faith perspective) holy joy before God. As adults, we play when we go to a play, or paint, or write music or poetry, or stand in delight before a beautiful sculpture or tapestry or read a sonnet. The play of a child continues as the adult loses her/himself in the contemplation of beauty. Then we touch truth (or truth touches us): Keats it was who said that “*beauty is truth, truth beauty*”³.

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So we need advocates to remind the world, and those who hold public and charitable purse strings, of the power of music and of the need to encourage and support musicians of today.

To ensure that pipelines and opportunities exist for a new generation of musicians. We will need musical educators, cultural leaders, creative minds, to continue to maintain our national musical culture into the future.

Jaqueline Thomas, cellist of the Brodsky Quartet, tells in her recent book⁴ of how the group started out in Middlesbrough, before they even reached their teens, playing in the Teeside Youth Orchestra and benefitting from free tuition and lessons in schools. She laments the current hollowed-out public services which have so negatively impacted arts and music in education today, undervaluing the most important art form for our society and our collective well-being.

For music – I'm telling you what you know – music is everywhere: shops, restaurants, theatres, online gaming, TV, social media, you can name plenty more – as well as in our concert venues, cathedrals and churches: how would our world function if musicians are not formed, nurtured, cherished and rewarded.

There is a clear need for our nation to have thriving, diverse and creative arts, so crucial for our economy (you may have heard today's news that music's contribution to the UK economy was a record £7.6 billion): music crucial for our economy *and* for our collective well-being as a society.

But as you leave here today, go out with an optimistic and thankful heart on this 78th St Cecilia Festival.

Optimistic because the passion and creative energy which there is – just in this space today – should fill your heart with hope. If you think about it, music in this land has been compromised by plagues, the puritan and commonwealth era, through the turbulence of the Reformation – and most recently through the covid pandemic – and still our creative musical genius, resilience and energy lives on.

We should leave here with optimistic thankful hearts for the energy and vision of *Help Musicians* and sister organisations such as *Music Minds Matter* and *Black Lives in Music* – all making a real difference in keeping that creative genius supported in our challenging times for our musicians.

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Optimistic and thankful hearts for those institutions and organisations and Livery Companies, so many benefactors including you gathered here today: supporting musicians now – and providing the scaffolding for music to flourish in the future – musicians who will in their turn uplift, transform, refresh, and recreate human hearts and souls with their creativity, passion and skill in music making.

Optimistic and thankful hearts for cathedral music here and in so many places contributing to the tapestry of our national musical culture. There are plenty of challenges for many cathedrals, but there is also dialogue, passion and energy aplenty coming together to meet those.

John Mason, back in the 17th-century, in his wonderful hymn – *How shall I sing that majesty?* – we'll sing it at the end of today's Festival – reminds us of the purpose for which we were all created. Of the singer – you and me – “contemplating how to respond to the God who presides over all things”⁵. The hymn articulates the realisation that my song and yours may not be quite up to it – too feeble or sinful as we are. And yet the singer petitions, and God responds – a beam of brightness to illuminate, and the sound of God coming to our ears.

So leave here today with hopeful and thankful hearts: pray that God's leading voice in our ears and guiding brightness to illuminate us will indeed provide the wisdom and energy and will to help us cherish and keep music alive in our own generation and on into the future.

And trust too, that in the end, our human music-making will be gathered with that celestial choir, where Alleluias resound forever.

Holy Saint Cecilia, pray for us.

In the name of our creator, redeemer and sustainer, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.
ENDS

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¹ Alexander Pope *Essay on Criticism*, pt. 2, l. 142

² Quoted in Benjamin Fife's essay *Winnicott on Playing*: medium.com 2020

³ John Keats in the poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn* from the collection *Annals of the Fine Arts* 1819

⁴ Jaqueline Thomas, *Jacksons, Monk & Rowe and the Brodsky Quartet*, Troubador, 2022

⁵ Victoria Johnson, *On Voice*, DLT, 2024