



Hearing a music you would never have known to listen for

by *Jeremy Begbie*

The first phase of an on-going project, Theology Through the Arts recently culminated in a festival in Cambridge. Here Dr Jeremy Begbie, Director of TTA, writes about the importance of the work in which he and others are engaged.

Back in 1993, I found myself in the music department of the University of British Columbia, speaking on the music of John Tavener. I spoke about a number of his better known pieces and the beliefs which gave rise to them. Half an hour of questions followed. Strikingly, all but one of the questions were about God – not music. They were couched in the language of music theory, but the subject-matter was God. I found out afterwards that only two or three in the room had any Christian commitment.

A few years later, I was leading a group of thirteen musicians in a church in south-east England. I was faced with everything from a harpist to a bass guitarist, aged between twelve and sixty. I put a biblical passage on their music stands – Matthew 3, the story of Jesus' baptism. I invited them to turn this into sound. Most had never read the text before. An hour later, I couldn't stop them, and they wondered why no one had told them that the Bible could be so compelling.

Last summer, I addressed a very mixed audience at the London Institute of Contemporary Christianity. I talked about improvisation – in Oscar Peterson, Dizzy Gillespie, Bach and Beethoven – with its remarkable mixture of

consistency and unpredictability. I tried to show that something similar marked God's ways with the world – reliable, but at the same time constantly new and surprising. A few days later, I had an e-mail telling me about a man who through this talk recovered his long-lost Christian faith, and with it his marriage.

What links these three anecdotes? Simply this: music was helping people *discover* the Gospel. And what goes for music, goes for the other arts too. I could tell similar stories of film-makers in Los Angeles, dancers in South Africa, Pentecostal painters in the Philippines. Through pigment on wood, bow on string, flickering image on white screen – we can not only *express* what we *already* know, we can *discover* what we don't know, or only half-know. The Christian faith can be learned and experienced afresh.

And that means the arts can be part of theology. Of course, for many, theology is a "turn-off" word. It evokes images of outdated tomes, destructive questions, irrelevant debates amongst elite academics. But the heart of theology is simply "faith seeking understanding", something anyone can practise and every Christian should practise. It is a voyage of discovery, exploring what Paul called the breadth,

length, height and depth of the love of Christ (Eph. 3.18). My conviction is that the artist is needed on that voyage, that the arts have their own special powers to uncover the riches of the Gospel we proclaim. In other words, we need to do theology with the artist as partner – "theology *through* the arts".

Three years ago, Bible Society caught this vision and generously provided the initial funding for a three-year project based in Cambridge which promoted theology through the arts in a number of contexts – mainly in churches, seminaries, schools, colleges and universities. It culminated in a large festival last September, and, I am glad to say, is continuing apace in Cambridge and St Andrews.

Some time ago, one of our Advisory Board members, Nicholas Wolterstorff, remarked that "the time is obviously ripe" for theology through the arts.

To see why, we need only think of two very prominent features of our so-called post-modern climate in the West.

First, to state the obvious, much of our population lacks even the most elementary knowledge of the Christian faith. As is so often said, apathy is not the key problem, but ignorance. This is not to deny a huge spiritual searching in our culture, only to be realistic about

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▶ the widespread ignorance of Christianity we face today in many sectors of society, especially among young people.

Second, if the pundits are to be believed, it is a culture increasingly alive to the arts and all things aesthetic. In Michael Buerk's recent *Soul of Britain* series for the BBC, charting the state of "spirituality" in the UK, the fact that a whole programme was devoted to the arts speaks volumes. That swell of yearning which goes under the catch-all word spirituality, is very often expressed through the arts. Just think of the aftermath of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales – the flood of poems, processions, flowers, songs.

I have a friend living in Los Angeles who supervised the music for the recent film *The Third Miracle*. It tells the story of Frank Morris, a Catholic priest whose failing faith and hope are slowly rekindled.

Before its release, over a hundred people attended a test screening. The producers wanted comments on the technicalities of the film. But, my friend wrote: "They didn't get the information they were looking for. Instead they got an hour-long discussion that they had to stop forcibly, about God, faith, and miracles. And apart from my friend, I was the only person in the room that [had] set foot in a church in the last five years. There is a very serious conversation going on in ... Western culture at the [turn] of the 20th century about God ... and the church is not invited to the conversation most of the time". If he is right, maybe the reason we are not invited is because we have not taken time to learn the artistic vocabulary used in the conversation.

Put these two together – an educational need and an artistic alertness – and you have ready soil for all sorts of initiatives which could help people discover the Christian faith through the arts. The sculptor Henry Moore was once asked by a vicar about the process of sculpting a Madonna and Child. Moore said: "I think it is [only] through art that we artists can come to understand your theology."¹

What was true of Moore is probably true of a growing

number today, whether they are professional artists or not. If we ever needed confirmation of that, we were given it earlier this year. I remember the sense of shock at watching a skilful television presenter, through a gently inflected mid-Scotland accent, asking me to gaze at some paintings of Jesus, and to consider the beliefs that surrounded and motivated them. Here in so-called "post-Christian" Great Britain, Neil MacGregor, Director of London's National Gallery, was unfolding the majestic themes of two thousand years of Christian belief without cynicism, irony, or condescension. And he was doing this *through* artistic images, from Botticelli to Spencer, Da Vinci to the internet. This is, indeed, theology through the arts for millions.

The National Gallery exhibition linked to that successful series, called *Seeing Salvation*, attracted thousands of visitors a day. Why can't there be a similar initiative in the next five years in every art form?

But is there anything very new in this? A year ago I was speaking in South Africa, as a guest of the University of Cape Town. Interestingly, the black and coloured theologians repeatedly said to me "the arts have always been part of theology for us. Some of us say: 'if you can't dance it, it can't be true'. What makes you think you're doing anything original or special?"

Quite so. There is little new about theology through the arts. For centuries, when people have explored the things of God, they have naturally turned to the arts. But sadly, in the West, what has gone under the name "theology" has frequently split head from heart. Dazzled by a certain kind of intellectualism, the arts have often been banished as at best irrelevant and at worst dangerous. The same attitude still lurks in many churches – the arts cannot make us any wiser, they can only entertain or (worse) distract us.

It is time to challenge this stance in whatever way we can. It is time to invite the artist to help us all explore our faith more thoroughly, and, in the process, experience it and live it out more fully.

Many times I have found myself playing the piano in the middle of theological presentations. When people recover from the initial shock and drive away hazy memories of Victor Borge, they often say it seems completely fitting – because something tortuously difficult to understand was suddenly made transparently plain and in a way which touched many levels of their personalities (like that man in London who recovered his faith and his marriage).

The doctrine of the Trinity, for example, becomes hugely more believable and can fill us with a far greater sense of wonder when expounded through overlapping and complementary sounds of a three-note chord or three-part singing. Professor David Ford's recent book *The Shape of Living* shows how profound thinking and a range of emotions can go together as he interweaves his theology with the poetry of Micheal O'Siadhail. Henri Nouwen, in *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, expounds Jesus' parable through Rembrandt's classic painting, stretching the intellect while exposing unforgettably the pain and joy of the prodigal's homecoming.

I began the project with a deep love of Scripture. Some of my friends were anxious that my involvement with the arts would take me away from the Bible, that the world of paint and notes, lights and stage, would gradually replace the authoritative words of Scripture. In fact, just the opposite has happened. At its best, Theology Through the Arts is not about allowing the arts to stand in authority over the Bible, but allowing the Bible to exercise its authority more strongly through the arts.

A year ago, my own local church in Cambridge set up a series of evenings in which virtually the entire New Testament was presented to sell-out audiences from all over Cambridge – in drama, song, mime, and so on. It was planned by a mixture of dramatists and university theologians. Every night was packed out, and many had never stepped inside a church for years. As our vicar commented, it is rare to be able

to put up a sign outside the church which reads “Church packed, Bible being read”. One of the organisers commented “every one of us had to go back to the text and have a closer look”.

I was reminded of a thirteen-year old flute player in that music group, improvising on Matthew. She was glued to the text as she had never been before. That is perhaps the most important thing the arts can ever do for us, take us back to those ancient texts to have a closer look and discover their power afresh. That is my experience, the experience of leading artists and theologians who have taken part in our project, and the experience of the hundreds who came to the festival last September.

To pick up some words from Seamus Heaney, you hear “a music you never would have know to listen for”.

Notes

¹As quoted in Walter Hussey, *Patron of Art* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1985), p. 24.