

How can I keep from singing?

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Wow. How utterly brilliant to be joined this morning by not one, but two of the choirs taking part in the International Youth Choir Festival at the Royal Albert Hall. Mzansi Youth Choir and Boston Children's Chorus – thank you, for bringing your joyful and infectious enthusiasm and energy and sharing your talent with us today, as together we proclaim and celebrate the Resurrection.

We are surrounded by music in our daily lives, from the birdsong that even in the middle of the city announces the dawn, through the rhythmic roar of construction and pneumatic drills, to the cadences of foreign tourists and fellow citizens with other first languages. Whatever your taste or mood, somewhere out in this noisy world, there is music to match.

Often we can chart our lives in connection with the music we enjoyed at different stages in our personal history. Even the snatch of a refrain can transport us back to a key moment – the beginning of a new relationship, a particularly memorable summer, a house move, the birth of a child, a bereavement. There are specific songs or symphonies we'll always associate with particular people. Music evokes a whole treasury of memories and a whole myriad of emotions. Certain songs or pieces of music can bring us to the edge of tears, and beyond, not necessarily because of their content, but because of the associations they trigger deep within us.

This week in church we've had some wonderfully rich musical experiences. On Monday the lunchtime recital was given by the Vigala Singers, alumni from the Royal College of Music Junior Department who have played a vital role in our

ever popular Carols for Shoppers service over the last few years. They sang a beautiful selection of sacred pieces which I found particularly moving, knowing that as they sang, not far away the funeral cortege of PC Keith Palmer was making its way slowly to Southwark Cathedral. For me, it became a kind of requiem. On Wednesday, Lucy was joined by friends to perform Arvo Pärt's *Stabat Mater*, which audience members described as both 'spectacular' and 'heartbreaking', and in the evening, Michael assembled four fellow musicians to present the extraordinary work by Olivier Messiaen, *Quartet for the End of Time*, composed and first performed in a Nazi POW camp in 1941. And in our Good Friday service, we were joined by another quartet who played some of Haydn's *Seven Last Words*, considered to be one of the greatest pieces of Easter music. Each in their own way has greatly enhanced our observance of Holy Week. Now with today's celebration, I know the soundscape of this Easter will stay with me for a very long time.

Music and sound colours our lives, although we don't always notice just how much. We learn to tune out many of the features in our daily soundscape. Others refuse to be silenced or ignored. Ask anyone who took part in our vigil here in church last night and they probably have a new found sense of respect for how on earth Lucy ever gets a wink of sleep! Overnight Piccadilly is a cacophony of late night revellers, sirens, and the screaming, revving engines of would-be racing drivers.

Before the arrival of talking movies in the 1920's, films screened in the cinema had live piano accompaniment to help tell the story. Today, the incidental music in most television and film is so seamless that we somehow don't notice it, and yet try watching the same piece without the

music and you'll find it's a much less engaging experience.

Today's Gospel reading is a deeply powerful scene to think through, not just in terms of images, but of sound. Imagine this scene played out on the radio. Mary is at first mystified, hushed into silence as she tries to make sense of how on earth the huge stone has been moved and then we hear her pounding footsteps as she runs, anxious, distressed and breathless, to tell the male disciples that Jesus's body is missing. Next we hear more footsteps at different speeds as the two disciples run ahead of her, reaching the tomb first. There is silence as the first stops and peers into the tomb and then the second, arriving a couple of beats later, goes inside. Then Mary, finally catching up, breathing heavily as she waits to see what they make of this mystery. But they don't speak, they don't say anything at all. No suggestion as to what might have happened; no words of comfort, not even a "thanks for letting us know". They simply return to their homes, this time walking, all sense of urgency gone, leaving Mary alone.

Now she breaks down, and we hear her weeping, as perhaps stumbling, blinded by her tears and not sure what to do and where else to go, she steps into the tomb, to be greeted by the two angels, who ask her why she's weeping. How do their voices sound? Ethereal or measured? Do they echo in the stone chamber? We can hear the stifled sobs and the deep sadness in Mary's voice as she explains her plight, an echo of the mantra already reverberating quickly around her troubled mind: "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have put him." The loss of Christ is so hard; now the loss of his body is perhaps too much for her to bear.

Another sob and then a small intake of breath as she turns around to see someone in the garden. This new voice is calm and resonant, no sense that the one who now speaks is agitated or out of breath, as he repeats the angels' question. This time the words spill out of Mary as her urgency to find him and her distress become heightened, and her voice gets faster with her desperate plea.

"Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

And then, with barely a beat as he seeks to allay her anguish, the moment the whole world shifts on its axis in his speaking of her name; gently, tenderly. And then Mary's shocked but delighted response, the happiest three syllables she's ever uttered, as the impossible becomes reality, "*Rabbouni!*" And now she finds a new energy in following Christ's command to go and tell the news that he is risen; the new mantra becoming a happy refrain, "I have seen the Lord! I have **seen** the Lord! I have seen **the Lord!!!**"

After our Lenten observance, today, finally, we celebrate that Christ is risen and all is right with the world. Except of course, we know that's not the case. Christ has indeed risen, but we well may wonder, when we look at our world today, how we can possibly sing, not so much in a strange land as in a broken world? We only need listen to the news to know this world is not as it should be, it is not how God created and wants it to be, and yet, today, on this Easter Festival, still we sing.

We know there are millions who find it hard, or even impossible to voice a song or even a faint refrain today. We know there are others whose only song is a lament of grief and anguish. We sing for them. We sing because this moving and mystical story we've just heard shows us, tells us, sings to us that with God, nothing is impossible. It tells us, that no matter how big a mess we make of the world, God will not give up on us. It tells us that death is defeated, and that the end of our lives is not the end of our lives, but rather the end of life as we know it. We sing because the Easter Gospel is one of hope in the darkest of times.

Those of you who follow our Twitter feed may have seen a retweeted video clip from the Mzansi Youth Choir as they arrived at Heathrow earlier this week. They entered this country singing for all they were worth. You could hear them long before you saw them come through the doors into the arrival hall. They moved with fluidity, in time to their song. They entered joyfully, full of delight and excitement, and proud to represent the best of Africa the minute they passed

customs and immigration. Watching the clip, I was struck by what a huge contrast it was with the scenes of anger, confusion and distress we saw played out in so many US airports earlier this year, after the introduction of the US President's travel restrictions. This was the perfect antidote, as these young people sang and swayed, and as the faces and hearts of all those around them lit up, lucky as they were to catch this impromptu performance.

Similarly, in January the Boston Children's Chorus sang at the Women's March in their home city, celebrating, in the words of one of the young singers, "despite obstacles and oppression people are still finding a way to have their voices heard and to make a difference in the world." The following month they sang at a Martin Luther King tribute concert. The Boston Children's Chorus website describes its mission to "harness the power and joy of music to unite our city's diverse communities and inspire social change." The chorus members represent Boston as "ambassadors of harmony".

These fantastic young people in our gallery today come from all different backgrounds and many have faced considerable adversity. What these two exceptional choirs realise, recognise, and bring to fruition, is the power of music to break down barriers and bring people together. All of these young singers have come to this country and have come here to this church today, with not just great voices but with open hearts and minds, seeking new experiences and new friendships. It is their very existence and the enthusiasm, energy and joy with which they sing that gives us hope for the future. They are a living embodiment of the hope of the Easter Gospel – the hope of new life and a better, more peaceable future for our world.

I close with some verses from a 19th century American hymn by Robert Lowery, that's been playing over and over in my head in these last few days, which reflects the power of song in the face of adversity, and the power of the hope we find in the risen Christ.

My life flows on in endless song
above earth's lamentation,
I catch the sweet, though far-off hymn
that hails a new creation.

Through all the tumult and the strife
I hear that music ringing,
It finds an echo in my soul.
How can I keep from singing?

What though my joys and comforts die?
I know my Saviour liveth.
What though the darkness gather round?
Songs in the night he giveth.

No storm can shake my inmost calm,
While to that Rock I'm clinging
Since Christ is Lord of Heaven and Earth
How can I keep from singing?

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed.*
Alleluia!

Amen.

Lindsay Meader