

Sir James MacMillan

Chiara Bertoglio writes “Music allows us to practise an ecumenical approach in a spontaneous and natural fashion: most works of Christian sacred music transcend confessional belonging; and even in those whose confessional identity is more marked, music seems to blur the edges of separation, and to present diversity only as a different perspective, another nuance or a shade of colour which will likely enrich our understanding of faith”.

Coming from Scotland where confessional identities have been at their most marked for centuries and where the edges of separation can still tear the heart, I find this a bold and visionary perspective on the role of sacred music in our growing understanding of each other, of denominational culture and of the nature of God Himself. It was only a few years ago that I realised just how blurred the situation was in my own country in this matter – a land where the Reformation is widely regarded as being particularly fierce.

A range of common and conflicting perceptions about Scotland’s Reformation period have arisen over the centuries and through the generations. Even though I have lived here most of my life I have always had a niggling doubt that we have never had explained to us the full story of this momentous time. Even although I studied history in a Scottish school I was aware of large gaps and holes in my understanding of the great cultural revolutionary period which shaped this nation’s character and soul. Even although I was a music student at one of Scotland’s great Universities, I managed to bypass many of the composers and musical narratives which had underpinned the Scottish Reformation process.

A few years ago I attended an exhibition in the University of Edinburgh of the part books of Thomas Wode which challenged some of my perceptions and filled in the considerable gaps in my understanding, explaining the vital continuities, as well as the sharp changes, experienced by Wode himself and his contemporaries in the late 16th century.

It became clear that music and singing were vitally important components in the life of the nation at this time. The eight Wode partbooks formed the centrepiece of the exhibition that also displayed a variety of contemporary objects, including books and manuscripts, musical instruments, paintings and maps. The partbooks, gathered together for the first time from across the world, constitute a unique treasure within Scotland’s history, containing the only surviving record for most music found in Scotland during this period. Thomas Wode was responsible for producing the four singing parts for the metrical Psalter, so intrinsically vital for the new reformed liturgy of the day. But he added much more music from before 1560 and from various parts of Europe. These partbooks are illustrat-

ed by him and contain fascinating annotations. Wode's life is an encapsulation of the dilemmas and conflicts of the age. He began his ecclesiastical career as a Benedictine monk at Lindores Abbey at Newburgh, Fife and ended it as a Protestant clergyman. Nevertheless, the psalms provided a constant thread through his life and that of the lives of all Christians of the day, regardless of how tossed and turned they were by political and ideological power manoeuvres. The material in the exhibition showed the full extent of music's centrality in the cultural life of Scotland in the late 16th century. I was beguiled by Wode's own illustrations which indicated how ordinary men and women of the time engaged with word and song in the praise of God.

These books preserve one of the most important contributions ever made to Scottish music. As well as his commissioning of new psalm settings in simplified and more homophonic styles suitable for the impending Calvinist age, Wode also included a lot of other music from the time, and crucially from before the great conflagration, and from Scots, English and continental composers. Therefore we are given a glimpse into the musical life of this country at one of its most dangerous hours. The list of composers is astonishing. As well as the Scots, David Peebles, Andro Blackhall, Robert Johnson and Jhone Angus, we find the Englishman Thomas Tallis, who took his own tortured route through the Reformation down south, and continentals like Clemens non Papa, Lassus, Arcadelt and Palestrina.

These composers especially are not immediately associated in the public imagination with the reformed Scottish Church, which took its worship models from Geneva and emphasized the simplest form of unaccompanied psalm singing. However, as Noel O'Regan writes,

the tide did not turn right away and there were experienced singers and musicians in the Chapel Royal and elsewhere who would have welcomed harmonized psalms and canticles [...] He proceeded to use the remaining pages (of his part books) to build up an anthology of polyphonic music from a variety of sources. As he says in one of his annotations, he was afraid that "musicke sall pereishe in this land alutterlye" (music shall perish and in this land, utterly) and so he set out to preserve as much as he could of it, whether it was pre-Reformation Latin motets by Scottish, English and continental composers, popular religious songs, anthems setting English texts or instrumental dance music.

If only ecclesial, theological and spiritual matters could be left to the leadership and guidance of musicians!

The exhibition of Thomas Wode's partbooks opened up a new vista of understanding of the Scotland of the late 16th and early 17th centuries. It shone a light on the music that musically-literate Scots of the time loved, and loved performing. These collections are evidence of a flourishing musical culture in Scotland as it began its new phase of retreat and isolation. But music respects neither im-

posed ideology nor geographical and religious boundaries. Wode's work shows that Scotland, in spite of everything, was connected to a wider world, and absorbent of the most important European music of the day.

The power and significance of one of his annotations on these books resounds through the centuries to Scots today. He wrote that singing in four or five parts was "meit and apt for musitians to recreat their spirittis when as thay shall be over cum with hevines or any kynd of sadness, not only musitians, but evin to the ignorant, of a gentle nature, hearing shal be conforted and mirry with uss". (Singing in four or five parts was meet and apt for musicians to recreate their spirits when as they shall be overcome by heavy-heartedness or any kind of sadness, not only musicians but even to the ignorant, of a gentle nature, hearing shall be comforted and merry with us).

These words by a musician at a time of great trial and trouble can be a manifesto even for future generations as to the power of music – especially so when faced with the depredations of iconoclasm and enforced forgetting. If Scotland has to face more cultural revolutions in the future, I hope there will be new Thomas Wodes around to cultivate in the darkness and to preserve all that is good in the human spirit.

Even though my experience of these massive historical, cultural and theological convulsions are limited to the local dimension, I feel that the Scottish story of this important time has, in microcosm, huge universal significance – a significance which is explored and revealed with great authority, insight and optimism through Chiara Bertoglio's meticulous researches.

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