

Mozart and the Bible – Robert Cotton

Father Christmas really showed his love for me in the year that I received at Christmas a boxed set of CDs recording all the Mozart piano concerti. My favourites! Many a long car journey has been accompanied by this wonderful music, as it was last week. I am not well-tutored in the composition of classical music, but I know what I like. Yet even I could recognise that, towards the end of the 1st movement of Concerto Number 25 in C Major K. 503, Murray Perahia launched into a Cadenza that was not written by Mozart. The style, complexity and (almost) dissonance were 21st century. Did it matter to have that in the middle of an 18th century concerto?

If I understand the conventions of a cadenza aright, some composers simply left a blank in the score at the moment of the cadenza, thereby expecting the soloist to improvise. In some cases, the first performances would have been given by the player/composer; so Mozart hardly had to write out a cadenza for himself. He would intentionally make it up as he went along (after all, no-one else was playing in those moments).

Somewhat differently, some composers indicate how they want a cadenza to begin and end, starting with one theme, maybe, but ending with another. They might indicate the style but, even in these cases, there is still intentionally a large amount of discretion left to the soloist. Improvisation is integral to what a cadenza is, and the music played will rightly be affected by the mood on the day, the audience, and the quality of the rest of the performance.

Yet, sometimes composers write the cadenza out in full. But the question can still be asked: should a pianist today play exactly what was written, say, 200 years ago? Just because Mozart (as he sometimes did) created this cadenza then, it does not mean (so the argument goes) that I should play it like that now.

The justification for this is that music “sounds” different today. For one thing, the instruments used are generally modern. Certainly, my recording of the Mozart piano concerti is played on modern instruments where the grand piano, if nothing else, produces a depth of powerful sound that simply can not be conjured out of an 18th century instrument. Even if a recording is made on authentic ‘contemporary’ instruments, the music will sound differently to what the people in Vienna heard in Mozart’s day, not least because our ears and brains are accustomed to different sounds. Surely, the modern age is simply noisier in all sorts of ways.

So the logic of this argument is that we cannot replicate a past experience. We can be faithful to the past, but cannot repeat it.

I visited the Anglican Communion website last week, looking for material about ‘mission’. There are some helpful paragraphs describing various reports that have been recently published. Even though many of these are only ten years old, it is recognised that understandings of mission are constantly changing. So, I was brought up short by the sentence which said that each diocese is encouraged to develop its own understanding of mission that is “faithful to scripture”. These words – being “faithful to scripture” – sound backward looking to me: ‘do not do anything that is not found in scripture’, or, at least, ‘Scripture is the supreme judge of what you decide today’. ‘Being faithful to scripture’ evokes for me the desire to do what they did – as though a pattern has been set and all we have to do is repeat it. But, as we know (to take one modest example), the gospels were written at a time when the nascent church was wanting to distance itself from the Synagogue,

and was beginning to endure persecution from the Romans. What was appropriate in these contexts might mis-guide us in our behaviour today.

That phrase I prefer is 'in fulfilment of Scripture'. I fully acknowledge that the experiences recorded in the Bible are of great significance, and are somehow normative for our understanding of God. Our understandings of ourselves and our contexts today are continually changing. So we are called to be moulded by God's life (in heart, mind and soul), and, since we are given inspiration, energy and motivation by God's spirit, we are also charged to fulfil God's calling and hope today. We are to make God's Kingdom real here and now. We are to play, in our lives and communities, a cadenza of such passion and grace that new sounds are heard – music of the soul that may never have been heard before.

After all, 'fulfilment' is a key word in a crucial gospel passage (Luke 4). Jesus, about to embark on his ministry, comes into his home synagogue (with all the expectations of home and family evident in front of him). He quotes Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news...' So he acknowledges his inheritance, God's goal and the Spirit's presence (past, present and future). Then he says: "Today, in your hearing, this scripture has been fulfilled".

Our vocation is to hear and know our inheritance, and to have courage and confidence to fulfil it now. There are moments when the orchestra stops playing, the score is blank, and everyone (including God) is poised to see what music each one of us will make in our lives.