



Text of Presentation by Professor John Harper to the General Synod

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Sometimes the sheer range of musical expression available to us can be overwhelming. Never before has there been such a rich palette of styles and resources on which we can draw to express our praise and our prayer.

For almost three hundred years, music for the people in the Church of England was largely confined to metrical psalms. Now we can pretty much choose what we like. In this we are unlike some of the Churches within the Anglican Communion that determine which songs and hymns may be used from an authorized book. That freedom to choose is both a privilege and a responsibility.

With all these choices, all these cultural reference points, all this diversity, it can be easy to overlook the fundamental power of music to express worship, and to change those people who share that experience of music in worship.

The innocence of the voices of young children. The inspiration of a hymn sung by a great assembly. The exuberance of a praise band or a youth choir. The unfathomable depth that we might encounter as much in a simple African-American spiritual as in the majesty of the closing chorus of Bach's St Matthew Passion. Sometimes the still small voice of God that we might discern as we share an Iona song, a Taizé refrain, or a simple anthem sung with prayerful commitment by our own parish choir. Or in the beauty of the music of silence.

Music can so affect our senses, so free us to worship God beyond words, so take us individually and collectively out of ourselves, and wrap us in the power of the Spirit. It can be transforming, whether we are listener or participant. It is far more than a tool to enable active participation or to cover up the taking of the collection.

The vision of music transforming the worship of the Church can be far from the reality. All of us must have experienced the stultification, the frustration, even the pain of music done badly in church, or the desolation of a few scattered voices trying to sing something too high or too hard. And there are those places that have no one to lead or coordinate the music, and other places where the music seems to be an obstacle or a distraction.

Too often we lack the understanding to know how to use music well; too often both our musical leaders and our worship leaders lack sufficient knowledge of how and when to use music to best effect. Too often there is no competent person to enable the music at all.

If we want music to do its full part in transforming worship, we have to commit to a patient and long period of practical transformation of people through education and training. That either requires enormous resource, or imaginative partnership between the church, the charities like the RSCM committed to the education and training of church musicians, and the education sector.

We have to seek creative partnerships at local, diocesan and national levels, and enable that network join up. We have to think imaginatively. There may be far more musical talent and inspiration in our local church than we thought - and it may not always come in the form we expected. Then there may be opportunities to extend music to the enrichment of the whole of parish life. We all need to engage with the issues and become part of an active network of involvement. If we believe that music matters, then we have to recognise that it will require nurture and attention over several decades.

And above all, we have to hold on to the vision of worship transformed and transforming with a kaleidoscope of good, well-chosen and well-used music: a music through which the priesthood of all believers is strengthened in faith, and made confident in proclaiming the Gospel in the world.