

Christ the King (B) 2018 – St Ceciliatide

“Now of the arts which appertain to and infuse the Holy Liturgy, adding to its splendour and efficacy, the sacred Chant is to be ranked foremost; for we know by our own experience that it not only giveth a certain fullness to Divine Worship, but that it also draweth the mind heavenward after a wonderful manner.”

That is from the Nashdom edition of the Graduale Romanum, published in 1930. It pretty much nails the point of music in Church – it draweth the mind heavenward after a wonderful manner, indeed.

We celebrate church music particularly today, but from the dawn of human culture, all music has always had a place apart in that it has always had something magical about it, something beyond this earth and something that speaks to us of eternal things. It somehow brings together physical laws of tones, overtones, acoustic relationships that in their very essence have structures and coherence rooted in the nature of the universe with an ability to lift the material to another realm, to achieve that remarkable thing for us that we call transcendence.

Early Creation myths from many traditions speak of God creating through sound, as Wilfrid Mellers has written, “it was God’s hum, shout, croak or gibber that stirred creation within the void.” In our tradition it was the ruach Elohim, the breath of God, that hovered over the waters and said, “Let there be light!”

In this second verse of the Book of Genesis we encounter already this profound identification with breath and creation, and when we sing, or listen, we seem to participate in this same creative act that summoned the Universe into being and which sustains it in all its beauty. When we sing, or allow our minds and hearts to join in, to be uplifted by music, we have a wonderful sense of being transported, of experiencing our place in the universe in a deeper way and finding ourselves closer to the God who made all things to sound in praise of him.

St Cecilia, according to tradition was a Christian woman of Rome, who, despite her vow of virginity, was betrothed by her father to another patrician called Valerian. At the wedding ceremony, Cecilia took herself apart and sat, ‘singing to God in her heart’, praying for help. Valerian, at first bemused by Cecilia, was swiftly converted to the faith and St Cecilia became the patron and midwife of the power of music to stir and enable faith.

Of course, a great deal of the music that we hear in our daily lives is cheap, rotten stuff. We are assailed in restaurants, in supermarkets, through our television sets and radios with vulgar ditties and meaningless jingles. All the more reason to come to church and rededicate ourselves to the real thing, a music conscious of its purpose and its dignity.

So it is that, inspired by St Cecilia, we come to praise Christ our King through the gift and power of song and, at the same time, give thanks for the science and art of music as it brings us closer to the heart of all things in the heart of our Blessed Saviour.