

MUSIC and FAITH

Music-making and a community of faith

By Benjamin Ho

As human beings, we are communal creatures; we possess an innate need to communicate and to live in community with other human beings. Be it conversations with loved ones or interactions with new friends, we are constantly participating in community life – and being transformed by it. The famous saying “no man is an island” is a reminder that a life of shorn of community is one that is unbearably empty and ultimately, impossible to live.

Likewise, music-making is an activity that is profoundly communitarian in nature. The reason is simple: *we cannot make something out of nothing*. According to Emeritus Professor of Music at Wheaton College Harold Best, it is impossible to be creatively productive without some form of dependence on community. Best cites the example of Beethoven as a case in point:

“Had Beethoven lived in the Renaissance, he could not have composed the music he did...his music did not come about irrespective of context but in the midst of it. In order for him to do what he did and to bring his creative individuality to its highest, he first needed Mozart; Mozart needed Haydn; and then because Haydn outlived Mozart, Haydn eventually turned out to be influenced by Mozart. This same Haydn turned out to be Beethoven’s counterpoint teacher; but Haydn also needed Stamitz and his contemporaries; they needed the sons of Bach; they in turn needed their father...”¹

In other words, music – however original – is always produced in context; the community of composers must be woven into other communities – communities whose thought-forms, governing beliefs and faith dispositions may well be quite different from us. Indeed, God can – and in fact often – speaks through people who may not necessarily profess faith in Him. An example can be seen in King Nebuchadnezzar – whose acknowledgment of God following seven years in the wilderness ranks among one of Scripture most poignant – and authentic – confessions:

His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: “What have you done?” (Daniel 4:34-35)

Over these years in Hallelujah Oratorio Society, I’ve come to appreciate and enjoy the rich and multifaceted character of our choral community. From formal practice

¹ Harold M. Best. *Music Through the Eyes of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 35

sessions to informal “makan” sessions, all of us have something to offer and receive from each other, in the process of which, our faith becomes strengthened. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, “*Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the day approaching*” (Heb 10:25).

The sight of choral members volunteering their time and energy to serve each other is a moving one. One of the most important – and overlooked – task each week during choir practice is the arrangement of chairs, a task that is assumed by only one, or two, brothers. Often, they would arrive at least 30 to 40 minutes earlier to arrange the chairs – one by one. Indeed, their perspiration on the job is matched by their passion for the larger choir community – so that the rest of us will be able to comfortably settle in and start singing on time.

Likewise over these years, the experience of a simple shared meal, the provision of an energy-inducing cup of coffee or the merriment that accompanies the sumptuous Christmas spread are moments that I have come to treasure and be thankful for. They are reminders that our personal selves are defined only in community with other people. As we interact with each other, we partake and participate in each other’s lives; we influence one another and in turn are being influenced by others.

Part of living within the universal and invisible Church is also learning to accept, acknowledge and appreciate the diverse and differing voices within us. Just as the best music often involves the use of counterpoint and contrasting elements, the Church – consisting of redeemed humanity – is a community that recognizes and respects the distinctiveness of its members while at the same time maintaining the unity of the Body of Christ. According to the English philosopher Roger Scruton, this image of “differentiated unity” and “unified diversity” is evidenced in choral singing in which when [the choir] sings, we hear “simultaneous [differentiated] voices which are nevertheless also one voice”.²

As HOS begins her tentative steps into her 35th year of music ministry, we are reminded of the grace of God that has led us to where we are. Let us remember the various communities of peoples that have in some way or another, been instrumental and defining both the character and content of our mission. Finally, let us also learn to be humble, to “*submit [ourselves] to one another out of reverence for Christ*” (Eph 5:21) as we sojourn with one another in this journey of faith. Soli Deo Gloria.

² Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 339.