

The Language of Music (and the arts)

I firmly believe that musicians and other creative people have an important voice in today's confused and hurting world. My hope is that the following thoughts might be a possible starting point for a new discussion reimagining how we might use our creative gifts to make a positive difference in our world.

Background context

We live in challenging times. Our world is now more complex where the old ways of doing things or ways of communication are increasingly ineffective. Especially since the Covid pandemic there is an increased loss of trust in authority figures/institutions – be they politicians, multinational companies, heads of previously respected organisations such as NHS, mainstream media or church leaders. The words we hear and even the words we ourselves speak, are mistrusted like never before.

Through social media, alternative voices proliferate – with conspiracy theories/theorists gaining huge followings, even when their 'theories' are demonstrably false. But alongside that other voices are now arising daring to expose the half-truths, cover-ups and lies of those in positions of authority, or the hypocrisy of church leaders who preach one thing and live another. The church is seen as increasingly irrelevant.

Communicating the message

In these uncertain times, how is the church responding and adapting? Clearly some churches are doing remarkably well, offering help in their communities with food banks, warm places for people to come to in the cold winter months and a listening ear to those struggling with the issues of life.

This is only part of the picture though...

Often our ways of reaching out to others with the Good News of Jesus are based on word based/preaching models that are simply not relevant to the times we're living in. Many people simply shut down when they are preached at. Billy Graham famously stated in his rallies that 'The Bible says...' but today when many hear that, they respond 'so what'? Given that reality, some churches have not understood that there are many other ways to bring God's love to people – ways which have the capacity to open their hearts.

Perceptions – seeing ourselves in the mirror

I believe we need to see ourselves as non-church people see us if we're going to have any chance of attracting them to our faith. Only an honest and clear understanding of how they perceive us and our faith will help us to realise the problem we have in attracting others to what we believe.

Many people want nothing to do with our faith. They see it is irrelevant, unscientific, biased, judgmental, hypocritical, old fashioned and sometimes dangerous. Some see it as the cause of many of the problems the world faces today (with some justification!). Others see it as nothing more than fairy tales based in unreality.

There are now many stories emerging of historic (and even current) systematic abuse which justifiably appal people.

We need to be honest about these things before we will be able to move forwards.

What has been the result

As a result, many won't come anywhere near our churches. Others are now 'deconstructing' their faith and ending up either on the margins or walking away from faith altogether. The 2021 census in the UK reports that considerably less than 50% of people now identify as Christians for the first time.

Two decades ago over 70% described themselves as Christian. This is a significant drop and brings a huge challenge to the church.

** For a fuller look at some of the problem areas the church needs to be honest about, see the added sections at the end of this document*

The neglect of skill

One area that is close to my heart is in the area of skill and how the church recognises and celebrates these skills. I believe there is a significant role for creative people, from many different cultural fields, to potentially make a difference in bringing God's love to our needy world. Highly skilled musicians or other artists, who have honed their talents over many years, often feel they have no place in church, even though they are faithful followers of God.

In the past it was the church who led the world in the development of the arts. However, since the reformation, where the arts were increasingly seen as idolatrous, highly skilled creativity has been left to those with a worldview that leaves God out of the picture entirely. The arts have always been significant in shaping culture, but much that is created now shows little beauty, hope or light. Often what is reflected back to us, especially in 20th/21st century classical music and art is very dark.

There are several Scriptures that mention the importance of skill. See, for example, Bezalel in Exodus 31:1-6, who was the first person who was said to be filled with the Spirit of God. He was in charge of building the tabernacle – the dwelling place of God in the wilderness. It says he had skills *'to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of crafts'*. See also Psalm 33:1-3, which talks about skill and also Kenaniah in 1 Chronicles 15:22, who was in charge of the singing as he was skilled at it.

In the past the great composers such as JS Bach or Handel wrote to the glory of God, and there are modern examples such as Arvo Pärt, James MacMillan and some incredibly talented composers and arrangers involved in Epiphany and the Musicians Network, but they are struggling to be noticed and the church has little room for such skills. I'm not advocating some kind of cultural elitism, but it would be so encouraging if the church recognised and found ways of using the enormous skills in their midst which are often ignored or mistrusted.

The respected theologian NT Wright comments on the fact that so many churches struggle to know how to understand and best employ artistic people – and how such people feel so out of place in the context of church:

I was brought up in a world where... it was nice to have good music, great art, fine architecture, even perhaps brilliant dancing, in society and the church; but, within the modernism of my youth it didn't seem to integrate with real life in the world, or with real Christian faith. The arts were for recreation and relaxation for those who liked that kind of thing, but (except for some dangerously subversive characters such as playwrights) we didn't expect them to impinge on how we organised the world, how we ran the country, how we did our work, or indeed how we understood and expressed our faith. I grew up singing Handel's Messiah and Bach's St Matthew Passion, but I think I and my contemporaries regarded the music as more or less a way of sugaring the pill, of making the Bible listenable-to, not as something to be integrated more tightly within a Christian worldview. And I suspect that many in our world, and our churches, struggle with this question; not least many whose own talents lie within the arts but who find that neither the world at large, nor the church itself, knows what to do with them, what they are (so to speak) there for. In my experience the Christian painter or poet, sculptor or dancer, is regularly regarded as something of a curiosity, to be tolerated, humoured even, maybe even allowed to put on a show once in a

while. But the idea that they are, or could be, anything more than that – that they have a vocation to reimagine and re-express the beauty of God, to lift our sights and change our vision of reality – is often not even considered.

If musicians and other artistic people are to reach their full potential in God's service, there clearly needs to be a sea change in attitude within the church towards such people. Equally we as musicians and artists need to come together to encourage and challenge each other to take risks again.

How does God speak in a 'post-truth' world?

Pontius Pilate when sentencing Jesus to death said 'what is truth' – and many say the same today. We live in times where many people see truth as 'relative' or create their own 'truth'. Clearly there are dangers with this, though there should always be room for question and doubt. So how does God speak to us today?

Rev. Michael Mitton, author and Fresh Expressions pioneer, recently wrote:

(...we need to experience) the word and works of God in ways that are not restricted by the confines of our rational minds. This is crucial for the development of the church's mission and ministry, which for far too long has been dominated by rational thinkers rather than artistic feelers.

And Pete Greig, in one of his early reflections this New Year, has written:

The world is full of words, all a-buzz with busy, and I'm pretty sure it doesn't need more pronouncements but more presence, more silence, more carriers of the deep still; people so saturated in eternity that they are radically present to the other and the now.

Of course we know the 'traditional ways' the church teaches about God has spoken to us down the ages: through his Word and ultimately, through Jesus.

** Again, see the end of this document for a fuller outline of this, including some observations and questions*

What is often forgotten is that God speaks in many non-verbal ways. His first revelation of himself in Genesis 1 was as 'creator' – 'In the beginning God created....' He spoke though nature, through animals, through prophets, through our hearts, through music and the arts, through circumstances, through his Spirit, through dreams and visions, through silence, through prayer (amongst others).

Mystery and imagination

We tend to want to avoid mystery, imagination and wonder, as if we could put God in a box who we could fully understand in every way.

Liz Milani (quoting Richard Rohr and others) writes:

Many of us live as if we've solved the mystery of God. We love to talk about God in definitive terms. God does this, and not that, God is this, and not that: explain God, box God, Package God up and turn God into a neat and tidy 'product'.

We don't give much room for mystery within the mysteries and secrets that God is and does and declares throughout the world in a million different ways, most of which we miss because we're looking for something specific, labelled, explained, obvious...

If we treat God like a mystery that is solved, a lesson we've already learned, a book we've read and committed to memory, then we know less about God than we think we do.

When the quest for certainty and control is pushed to the background, the possibility of wonder returns. Wonder provides a gateway to wise insight. We must trust that we are held irrevocably in the mystery of God's love, without fully understanding it.

Alongside all our knowing, accompanying every bit of our knowing, must be the humble 'knowing that we do not know'. That's why the great tradition of prayer is balanced by both cataphatic knowing, through images and words, and apophatic knowing, through silence, images, and beyond words. Apophatic knowing is the empty space around the words, allowing God to fill in all the gaps in an 'unspeakable' way.

Wisdom isn't something that happens when you know it all. Wisdom is what happens when you open up your heart to curiosity and wonder. Wisdom lives the questions... it doesn't profess it knows the answer to everything.

God is not a mystery to be solved, but one to enjoy and explore.

The role of music and the arts in our current culture

So how can we speak words of life, hope and love to those who want nothing to do with what they see as an increasingly irrelevant religion? How do we touch people's hearts with the love of God if we can't convince them through our words and preaching?

In essence, we have to capture people's hearts before they'll listen to our words!

Music and the arts, inspired by the Spirit of God, have an amazing way of getting past our intellectual defences. Time and time again we have seen people deeply moved, often in tears, as we surround them with beauty and seek to bring them a taste of something beyond the physical that can't be explained away.

A human being is more than simply a brain on legs. We have feelings and emotions, we feel joy and pain, we have a sense of right and wrong, we appreciate the beauty of a sunset, the power of a piece of music, we can love the unlovable and can sacrifice ourselves for others. All these facets that make up who we are aren't testable or provable through scientific methods. And yet often the only way we seek to communicate faith is through appeals to the intellect – mainly through words (written or spoken). Well-crafted words can be powerful of course and appealing to reason has its place, but in a world where words are so mistrusted, surely God wants to use other ways to communicate? As the book of Ecclesiastes says 'there's a time to keep silence and a time to speak'. Sometimes it's the lack of words that speaks the loudest. You can't argue with a piece of music!

We need to give people a glimpse of who they were created to be.

NT Wright recently recorded an excellent brief video relevant to this, based on 2 Kings 3:15. It's entitled 'Get me a Musician'. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPKMyQOh-XY>

Here are some other perceptive quotes from NT Wright:

The church should reawaken its hunger for beauty at every level. This is essential, and urgent. It is central to Christian living that we should celebrate the goodness of creation, ponder its present brokenness and, insofar as we can, celebrate in advance the healing of the world, the new creation itself. Art, music, literature, dance, theatre – and many other expressions of human delight and wisdom – can all be explored in new ways. The point is this. The arts are not the pretty but irrelevant bits around the border of reality. They are highways into the centre of a reality that cannot be glimpsed, let alone grasped, any other ways.

The artist is thus to be like the Israelite spies in the desert, bringing back fruit from the promised land to be tasted in advance... Here is the challenge, I believe, for the Christian artist, in whatever sphere: to tell the story of the new world so that people can taste it, and want it, even while acknowledging the reality of the desert in which we presently live.

Epiphany (and similar groups) are well placed to 'speak' to people in ways they don't expect. And the greatest effects are often seen when we step out of the doors of our churches and go into spaces where the church isn't often found or doesn't have access to. Many places/organisations won't allow churches access because they are wary of the way faith is pushed. So, we need to discover ways of accessing neutral spaces – 'under the radar' and with no agenda other than to bring blessing and beauty to a world starved of God's love. When we have the privilege of being in these 'neutral' spaces, the people we meet are often surprised at how they see themselves or how they see God.

Some Christians believe that music and creativity has no value without a clear gospel message in words, but that's a very limited view of God and how he communicates. We need to have the confidence that God can speak through music and the arts without anything else being attached to it.

Interestingly, we have found over and over again that God can speak in completely different but significant ways to several people in the same room listening to the same piece of music. There is actually *more* opportunity for God to speak when everything isn't spelt out exactly in words! This is similar in its effect to the Parables of Jesus.

Examples and stories

To illustrate how this works, here are examples of feedback we've received from our Sound Portraits or other creative events:

A woman and her son who we played for in a shopping arcade:

Hi there, I just wanted to drop a note to say thank you so much for the wonderful and uplifting experience you guys gave me and my son Noah yesterday in Peterborough. I actually had no idea what to expect and was so moved by your beautifully improvised portrait of myself and my son. I wish I had recorded it and I'm sorry I didn't stay and say more after you had finished. The truth is I was so overwhelmed that I went and had a cry... Every time I spoke about the wonderful experience yesterday I cried. I feel blessed and so pleased that I was given the opportunity. It's certainly an experience I shall never forget. Thank you so much. From a very happy and grateful Emma and Noah x

From a couple of people who attended one of our creative retreats:

- *What you have offered has changed me - God healed and restored so many parts of me through Epiphany. I dare not walk the same walk that I've walked before - God showed me so much and eventually I know that this misfit has her place and is dearly loved by her Creator and that He has so much for me.*
- *You gave us an unforgettable 'Art work' and 'Icon' full of the healing presence of the Holy Spirit – a transparent, awe-filled 'Thin Place'*

From others who have received Sound Portraits:

- *It felt like such a gift to have my portrait painted with music and I will never forget the experience.*

- *It was an experience that I will never forget and I will feed off it for a long time. I felt such a beautiful, cleansing and healing touch from our Heavenly Father and needed rather a lot of tissues that morning (!)*
- *Thank you very much for giving me such a memorable experience of this unique sound portrait. This calm, beautiful and serene music is perhaps somewhere within me, and I was flattered that it was this aspect of my personality you have decided to emphasize. This whole experience was fascinating and so memorable and uplifting.*
- *Having spent a lifetime on the run, shut-down to a story I never wanted to be my own, with dissociated parts and feeling unsafe in my own body. And now, having reached a place of acceptance, understanding and working towards integration, it was profoundly moving to hear those broken off (and quite different) parts, being 'found' within the music you played. It resonated deeply and was life affirming. You truly were conduits of something very powerful, restorative & healing for me.*

From someone who stumbled across us unexpectedly:

I've been suffering slight depression and anxiety lately so after a fight with my demons I decided to go out for a walk and for some strange reason ended up at Ashburnham Place. walking along the corridor I heard some music violins and very quietly popped my head around an open door and was greeted by a musical band who invited me in to listen and explained a little about who they are, very welcoming 🍷 I sat and listened to them play (including the young lady playing the harp) and it hit me I was meant to come here today because after they played one song I was feeling so relaxed I could feel the love in the room. It was powerful and something I've never felt or experienced in my life.

From a Ukrainian refugee:

Thank you so much. This is one of the best things to happen to me in my life! You're angels. I was bathing and flying - being taken care of. I forgot the war. I can't even put it into the words. It's like I've been somewhere else in some other beautiful and innocent place. A world full of love. Thank you from all my heart for what you do. You are beautiful. It's like healing and awakening - I've never known something like that. Thank you.

There are many more...

So where do we go now?

Ever since I was touched by God's Spirit in a remarkable way in 1978, I've believed that God had a call on my life as a musician. That call was re-energised in around 2007 when I felt a fresh call from God, partially through a significant dream, to encourage other musicians and creative people to explore how they might use their gifts in new ways to bring God's love to our troubled world.

I sense that call again and I sense the call is not just for me, but to others to take a lead.

It is my conviction that God is calling us as musicians and other creatives to seek His face again and to offer our gifts afresh to his service. Through the rediscovery of how we might employ our creative skills, I believe God will help us to become a fresh vehicle through which he may choose to communicate again in relevant ways today - to an impoverished church and a world starved of beauty and hope.

I don't know how that call will develop further, but I hope together we can seek God's face and bring new life to a world that is desperate for life, hope and certainty in times of confusion and hopelessness.

Maybe a good start for us would be to consider a list which I've partially put together for myself:

- *Pray*
- *Keep our relationship with God fresh*
- *Learn to love and accept others unconditionally*
- *Be willing to look at ourselves honestly*
- *Be willing to question even our most cherished theologies*
- *Don't be afraid to face our honest doubts*
- *Develop our imaginations*
- *Learn to embrace mystery*
- *Be willing to explore adventure and new ideas*
- *Be willing to make mistakes in order to learn*

Sounds like New Year resolutions? Maybe it is!

If you would be interested in exploring this more with me and others, please do let me know.

Let's pray that God continues to give us vision, wisdom and courage as we explore the way ahead.

- **Richard Williamson**

Further thoughts on the following pages...

Further thoughts...

The way the church presents itself

Here are some specific issues that affect different churches and therefore present us with a problem when sharing faith:

1. Trying too hard to be relevant:

Some churches are bringing a refreshing new look at how they share faith in our contemporary culture – and with great success in some places. Being relevant is clearly important, and we hope we will attract people to come into our church buildings. I wonder if in being ‘relevant’ we lose some of the mystery of our faith? God is often neatly packaged in these environments rather than being beyond our capacity to fully understand.

There’s another danger in such churches of simply offering a poor imitation of what is available in the world. Our music, art, dance – and even architecture are often lacking in quality. We create ‘nice’ or ‘safe’ music with 2-3 chords, paintings of lions, waterfalls or rainbows (often with Bible verses attached), floaty dance and ‘functional’ buildings with little room for mystery or creative space. I’m not saying that these things have no value – they do. And I’m all for releasing creativity in the church! However much of what we create is obvious and one-dimensional, and it has little traction in a world that does most of these things better! There is little room for mystery, nuance, wonder or for allowing people to interpret what they see or hear in different ways.

In some more ‘contemporary’ churches worship services can seem more like rock concerts led by a small group of musicians at the front of the church on a stage (often guitars, singers, keyboard, drums etc). The volume is often so loud that the congregation can’t hear themselves sing (and often don’t bother). There’s almost an unspoken equation: volume = anointing! Maybe we should ask questions about whether some of the resulting atmosphere is emotionally manipulative rather than ‘Spirit led’. In such settings, there is little or no time for quiet, silence or contemplation.

In such churches everything is programmed and fast-paced and in some sermons become the most important element, sometimes lasting 30 minutes or much more. Again there’s a place for all these things, but not at the expense of allowing God to speak in other ways.

2. Going through the motions with no meaning:

At the other end of the spectrum there are dangers of following a lifeless liturgy which makes little or no difference to those who attend, and certainly doesn’t affect the world around them. Liturgy done well can be very beautiful, but as a lifeless ritual week after week, it offers nothing to draw people into a relationship with God.

There are still some church members who are steadfastly unwilling to change the way they’ve done things for decades and are reluctant to give little creative thought about adapting in any way or about ‘going out’ to love others who won’t come into their church buildings.

3. False or exaggerated claims

The charismatic renewal of the 60s and 70s brought much needed life back into many churches. But again, this has brought a number of dangers and exaggerations when not properly tested. We are desperate to prove that God is truly with us without testing the claims that are made in some church settings. This only ends up causing cynicism and sometimes a great deal of confusion and hurt. Claims of healing aren’t often properly verified or are greatly exaggerated, causing untold damage at times with people saying they are healed, when clearly they aren’t. This puts cruel pressure on those who are ill, suggesting that it’s something wrong with them or their faith when that healing doesn’t

happen. The same is true of 'Prophetic' words which are so easily accepted without properly testing whether they are genuine – and if properly examined are often found to be simply wishful thinking.

This has now spilled over into social media platforms. Sharing pictures of clouds in the shape of angels (or similar), clearly created by programmes such as Photoshop, is ultimately counter-productive and only produces more cynicism *. It's almost as if we need to find ways of convincing ourselves that God is all-powerful. He doesn't need that kind of 'help'!

** Tools such as Google's 'reverse imaging' can be very enlightening when looking into these!*

4. The way we use Scripture:

It has been a wonderful thing to see a fresh love of God's word in recent years. However, in some churches the Bible is interpreted so literally that it doesn't allow for any nuance or doubt or proper examination. Scripture is read and understood as a book of unbendable 'facts' or 'rules' which are not open to interpretation. They take no account of the context in which the books were written, the differences in style and language, the way many of these writings were shared orally before being written down – sometimes centuries later.

5. Judging others:

'Come to my church' is simply not an option for many people now. They don't want to be told what to believe and many feel that Christians are all too quick to judge them. Our view of people as having no real value or goodness unless they are 'saved' is incredibly unhelpful! It's an 'us and them' mentality. If they're not 'in' having said the right prayer, they are said to be lost for eternity. No wonder so many reject what they see of church (and the hypocrisy of some church leaders).

Learning from the church in ages past

We've lost a lot of understanding of faith from previous centuries. Some in the church say that today's church is more like the 1st century church than it has been for hundreds of years. But is that true?

The early church generally met in homes and each person who were part of that church were encouraged to actively participate each time they gathered. Their sincere love for each other and for their communities impacted the world around them.

Our contemporary western church often has a blinkered view and understanding of the ancient roots of the Christian faith. Many older faith communities have much to teach us – the Celtic church being one important example, where community was central with everyone having a part to play when they gathered.

As mentioned earlier, the arts were given a much greater prominence in the church in earlier centuries, which produced some wonderful works speaking eloquently about the character and beauty of the God we serve.

The ways God speaks to us

It's clear that the Bible is one way that God speaks, but it is a far more diverse set of writings than we often allow for. Some almost see it as once single book written by people who were so inspired by God's Spirit that they were effectively involved in 'automatic writing' dictated directly by God's Spirit, with no 'humanness' or flaws of any sort. They see it as a set of unchallengeable rules, which can only be interpreted on one way (usually through a 20th century lens). In fact, the Bible is a series of books by different writers – containing stories, history, human failings and frailty, poetry, imagery and metaphor. It is written in a variety of contexts and cultures at different times in history.

Of course, God ultimately spoke to us in his Son, Jesus. Through his life and his actions, he showed us what God was like and how we should live. But Jesus himself was not a 'didactic' teacher – telling everyone what was true and what they had to believe. He spoke in parables much more than in any other way and allowed room for people to hear whatever they might hear – often allowing for multiple understandings, not all of which were wrong! Interestingly he rarely chastised the crowds who gathered to hear his teaching, but reserved his fury for the pharisees and other religious leaders, whose strict interpretations of the scriptures placed an impossible burden on the people.

[A mental health pandemic](#)

It's worth mentioning as a final thought, that in addition to the problems created by Covid, the mental health epidemic that is developing is potentially even greater problem than all we've endured, and I believe we have a significant role to play in bringing hope and healing to the many who are suffering.