

A Call to Musicians

1. Introduction

Over several months in 2007, as I put time aside to seek the Lord again, I believe God began speaking to me about a call that is particularly relevant to a number of us who are classical musicians, and possibly to others involved in the arts.

Background

Over the years God has moved remarkably amongst classical musicians in this nation. In the late '70s and the '80s we saw something of a revival amongst musicians involved in ensembles and orchestras across the UK. This was a time of great expectation and excitement with the emergence of the New English Orchestra and the Musicians Christian Fellowship – and then Wellspring and other groups. Many of us were touched by the Spirit of God and knew a strong anointing in our playing and also in our relationships together. This was a time of walking on water and taking risks! The MCF grew rapidly, the NEO had a number of remarkable performances in the UK and Austria, and conferences led by Robert Weston gave many of us the opportunity to combine music and intercession in extraordinarily powerful ways. In our risk-taking we made a number of mistakes, but it was also fertile ground where we learnt to abandon ourselves to God's Spirit and saw a great release of spiritual and musical creativity.

God has clearly been with us over the years since those early days. However life hasn't been easy for many of us. As I have travelled around over recent months it has become increasingly clear to me that many of my musician colleagues are now in much pain. Many are feeling that their gifts not been understood in local churches and have often been frustrated with the quality of music that is offered as worship; others have struggled with the challenges of parenthood, or have had to learn to deal with the loss of loved ones, health problems etc. Still others bear the scars resulting from broken relationships and unfulfilled dreams. The result has been that the inherent creativity in many of these friends has often been suppressed, resulting in frustration, and in some cases real depression and a lack of hope for the future. The stresses of modern life, especially as we've grown older, have also taken their toll - causing many of us to lower our expectations of how God might work with us. Choosing of necessity a rather less stressful lifestyle has caused many of us to lose our willingness to be 'dreamers' and 'risk-takers'. However, I believe the struggles that we have faced have been for a purpose – and will result in a greater depth to future ministry that would not have been possible if things in life had been easier.

A new awakening

I believe God is calling us again to awaken and to rediscover the callings and giftings that He has placed deep inside each of us - to seek Him afresh and to find new creative ways of expressing our love for Him and also to learn how to express the pain in our lives in order to reach out to a needy world and in impoverished church.

New musical languages

In our music making, some of us have been in danger of abandoning the creative stream that flowed through us in those early days in favour of a safer stream where everything is nicely packaged and 'acceptable' – and as perfect as possible. Of course we need to do all things well – but I believe God is

calling us to take risks again in our music making by learning to express His heart through *musical languages* taught to us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

One musical language I believe that God wants us to develop is the **language of holiness**. As we offer our lives to Him afresh – lives that are holy and abandoned to Him, I believe He wants to use our creative gifts to ‘speak’ afresh to a world and to a Church that is in desperate need of hearing God’s voice and seeing His face. Not a cosy over-familiar vision of God, but a fresh understanding of Almighty God who is holy – the creator of the universe and the Lord of History: a God who is rightly to be feared.

A second language I believe God wants us to develop further is the **language of lament, exile and identification**. We have "sung our songs of victory" and worshipped God as our healer and our friend – but the Lord is also looking for those who can express the grief in His heart, and also the pain that is in so many people’s lives today. Such music may not necessarily need words (spoken or sung) – but it will identify closely with the cry of our hearts expressed in worship, improvisation and heartfelt intercession.

A third language we need to nurture is the **language of hope**. Hope in a world falling apart, hope in the Church and hope for the glorious fulfilment of the Kingdom, leading up to the return of the King. This is the language of glory – reflecting the glory of His splendour and encouraging us to look forward again with expectancy.

New creativity and networks

Alongside this, I believe that God is going to release a new creativity as we seek to use our traditional musical skills to communicate to the church and the world today. Creative concerts both inside the church and out into the world have the potential to bring the beauty as well as the truth of the gospel in fresh ways to people who are currently hardened or cynical to traditional forms of preaching.

In order to facilitate this a new Musicians Network is beginning to emerge – not an organisation as such with fixed membership who do most things together, but a network of people who can draw on the experiences and callings of each other as we seek to serve God as musicians in a variety of different ways. In some ways this is like the original Musicians Christian Fellowship but with new practical, fruitful outworkings. The aim is to bring creative inspiration and encouragement to one another, providing us with new momentum to seek God about employing our musical gifts in His service. Alongside gifted communicators who can answer questions that arise from such creative events, I believe we will be given tools which have the potential to ‘speak’ in fresh and powerful ways to society today. Already we are seeing signs of new growth as a number of us have begun stepping out in faith using our musical skills to reach out in creative ways into our needy world. I believe this network may well extend even beyond the UK into Europe and possibly elsewhere.

Training up a new generation

In addition to this, I believe that God may be calling us to work alongside and to mentor a new generation of young musicians to teach and train them in the ways of the Lord – and together to minister before Him. Already opportunities are opening up to go into specialist music schools and colleges around the country – other opportunities will undoubtedly follow. Skilled musicians, including gifted young people, have unique gifts which have the potential to express the heart of God in ways that words alone cannot do.

Fresh outworkings

Already new ministries are emerging that each have unique skills and different ways of reaching out. Some who are exploring these new opportunities currently work in existing ministries; others have no affiliation with any existing ministry.

In short, I believe God is calling us to offer our lives and our musical gifts to Him afresh. In so doing I believe there is potential for God to use us to bring a new sense of hope, and provides us with an opportunity to express and identify with the joys and sorrows of those we meet and also a to bring a fresh understanding of His holiness.

2. A way forwards

Dreaming and Imagination

We, as Christians, need our imaginations awakened again. In politics and economics - and in the church, there is little or no imagination to look for a new way forwards. All we can think of doing is more of what we've already done, which basically creates more of the same problems and puts us in an even tighter space.

Our primary role as artistic people in this situation must be to ask God to bring the light and the knowledge of the presence of God into people's lives. We need to hear the voice of God afresh and it is only imagination that will help us to discern how He might use our gifts, uncluttered by a desire to hold on to what is safe etc.

We need to dream again! We need to dream outside of/beyond our present reality – imagining what we could be rather than maintaining things as they are.

Parables as a model for creative communication

Jesus parables were a unique new way of communicating! They helped His hearers not just to see life as prescribed by the Roman or religious authorities, but pointing to an alternative 'Kingdom of God'. Jesus didn't try to reason with the people. He spoke in parables, using familiar images of the day to point to an alternative, greater, eternal Kingdom that was not discernable without spiritual eyes being opened.

Parables were in effect 'creative' or 'artistic' in nature. They spoke in ways that bypassed the logical mind and were therefore able to reach the heart. We as artistic people have wonderful tools to help people to see beyond the perceived realities of today – to a God who is beyond our capacity to explain in words alone.

Martin Luther King said in his famous speech 'I have a dream' – which was not an acceptance of the dominant, racial status quo – but a dream of what could be.

As we look to the future, we need to dream about what could be, rather than accepting things as they are. Dreaming is the key to the future – and is the only hope of life in a world falling apart. (cf. Heb 11:1, Psalm 33:10-11)

Dreaming stirs imagination and creativity

In fact music and the arts could play a prominent role in any new move of the Spirit. Many prophetic people (Jean Darnell and several others) have suggested that they believe new moves of the Spirit in evangelism and renewal or revival will have musicians and other artists at the forefront. Many other church leaders are suggesting that music and the arts are keys to the future. The current Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright, wrote recently in his book 'Simply Christian':

*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 role of artistic people

In a recent lecture, 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 (see www.ntwrightpage.com/sermons/Harvard_Beauty.htm):

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.

Wait for the Lord

I believe we as artistic people need to wait again for the Lord – spending time listening to Him and to each other. I believe we've had glimpses of this over the last few years in our ministry, but I believe God is encouraging us to seek a fresh way of expressing/communicating what he is saying today to a church/nation/world in such turmoil.

As well as waiting on God ourselves, maybe we need also to carefully listen to those who are near to God to hear what God is saying (not the self-proclaimed prophets who make large public proclamations – but those who quietly and humbly wait on God and whose lives we know we can trust) – then join with them to present this using our artistic gifts as vehicles to help carry the message.

The essence of God's call to us as musicians is to pray that God would bring His presence (or awareness) to others as we offer our gifts and our lives before Him. Whether through worship, improvising, prayer for healing, concerts etc – the presence of God to heal, encourage, speak, inspire – and also to learn to 'fear' again a God who is holy.

A new hymnody

One way of responding to God is in our worship. In 'The Message of the Psalms', the American theologian Walter Brueggemann argues that our hymnody is lacking as it is so often a diet of songs of 'orientation' (all is well, life is good etc), and lacks songs of exile or lament – the reality of life. We continue to sing our songs of joy and victory in a world falling apart. Whilst this has some value (God is always worthy of our unfettered praise), it often ignores and hides from the realities of life. We are not as honest as maybe we should be in the church about our pain, our fears, our times of doubt etc – to the extent we are sometimes in denial. We need new ways of expressing pain and disorientation etc (cf. Ps 88 and many others). We've done some of this over the years, but we as creative people need to consider again how to expand our musical and artistic vocabulary to express and identify with these realities of life.

The Psalms of 'disorientation' are very explicit and graphic. The language is strong and doesn't hold back. There is a struggle with Yahweh. Often our ways of talking to God are couched in careful language. The Psalms indicate that we can be open, honest and forthright with God – even angry at times! The 'why' or 'how long' question is in order. If we learn to play and pray around these issues, our 'language' (musically and verbally) can be very honest and possibly graphic. We often look for answers and resolutions to problems that are often not immediately available – so identification is incredibly important!

I can foresee us having involvement in times of public lament for issues that affect many people or even nations. How do we identify in prayer, intercession and music with such situations? In Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah's time it was the destruction of the temple and the exile of Israel. In our day it could be the terrorist threats, rogue nations and ideologies when they seem to prevail in their wickedness, epidemics, famine, displacement of whole nations of people from their homes (including ethnic cleansing), loss of freedom, the failure of politics, the state of the church. We may hold some keys as artistic people led by the Spirit of God to help people to mourn and cry out to God (cf. Psalm 74 as an example).

In addition, we need to ask the how we might express the holiness, otherness, awesomeness of God in our ministry. Not just a God of healing and comfort, but a God of justice; one who is holy, other, supreme, beyond our imagination – a God who is beyond human reason, beyond our capacity to understand!

Finally, and crucially. how can we help people to look forward again with hope. Inspired by the Holy Spirit. I believe we can be vehicles to display the gloriousness of the hope of the coming Kingdom and the King. Tom Wright again:

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.

Music and musicians in the Bible

Many have looked at the use of music and musicians in the Bible over the last few years, but is there something to be learned for today and about a potential role in the future? Here are a few summarised thoughts on how music and musicians were used in the OT:

- It was used for proclamation/announcements to the nation(s)
- It announced the presence of God
- It announced war
- God brought deliverance from evil spirits as music was played
- As instruments played, walls fell!
- It was used linked with prophesying
- It was used at great public occasions such as coronations, dedication of the temple, rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem
- It was used primarily to give thanks and praise to God
- As praise was offered God's glorious presence filled the temple
- God brought healing as musicians played
- It was a full time occupation for the Levites and priests in David's time
- Many were involved (288 to 4000 people!)
- The musicians were skilled
- A Mentoring/teaching process was instituted
- Many instruments were made specially for use in temple worship
- It was used in battle – with musicians at the head of the army
- God brought victory as praise was offered
- It was used to bring laments
- New songs were written
- Dedicated and purified lives were important if such offerings were going to be accepted by God

I believe God wants to use musicians in similar ways today. In our nation falling apart this must be a time to bring the very best of praise back into the 'temple' and proclaim that our God is King! We need to start preparing ourselves for this and encouraging creative people to seek the Lord again.

It is possible that a new 'training' group might emerge – one that brings young musicians alongside those mature in the faith and experienced in Spirit-led ministry, to learn about how to be filled with God's Spirit and how to listen for His voice, whilst developing practical skills as God's musicians. This may lead to:

- A group who are open to be called with little or no notice to minister before God or to intercede for the world
- A group who will be ready and willing to take up the mantle that the musicians had in the temple in the time of David
- Musicians who will both celebrate and weep before God in their playing – identifying both with the pain of the people and the pain in the heart of God

This call is a cry to Almighty God to reveal Himself again as we offer ourselves and our creative gifts to Him. In times of revival, God reveals Himself without clever ideas – people are drawn to Him because he is there! No events, campaigns, billboards – just the presence of God bringing conviction and hope where there is no hope.

3. Our current predicament – the context of this call

Our nation and the church are in a precarious state just now...

The Nation

The world we live in is gradually being eroded. Politicians are no longer trusted and cynicism prevails. There are no accepted moral absolutes. Britain, aiming to be the preserve of freedom and democracy, is now the surveillance capital of the world and is encumbered with more and more laws and increasingly draconian powers of arrest and detention – all of which has the exact opposite effect to the stated desire of maintaining our liberty and freedom and creates a nation in fear rather than being a nation at peace with itself.

Permissiveness is now rife. The numbers of teenage pregnancies continue to rise as do the cases sexually transmitted diseases. 'Living together' before marriage has become the norm – many have chosen not to marry at all. The sanctity of traditional family life is no longer honoured and same sex partnerships now have equal rights to married couples. Divorce rates are at an all-time high and the 'right' to abortion on demand is taken up by thousands each year.

In our schools (and our homes) authority is now scorned and accident and injury claims are rife in the courts – to the extent that teachers and parents are fearful of exercising any discipline. The drug and gun culture is prevalent and the police struggle to keep control over the gang culture in our cities. The slave trade is also a huge industry in this country and worldwide, with human trafficking for the sex industry etc at an all-time high – despite laws against slavery being introduced 200 years ago (see www.stopthetraffik.org).

Walter Brueggemann, in his book 'The Message of the Psalms', describes our current condition well. Commenting on the passage in Psalm 14:1-5 ('*The fool says in his heart there is no God*') he says:

Where God is not, everything is possible. The outcome is that the action of such a person is corrupt, without good (v. 1), without discernment, and therefore exploitative of other people (v. 4). The connection affirmed is clear. Where the creator is not honoured, creaturely life disintegrates and

degenerates. The end result is a life filled with terror (v. 5a). There are no guard, no limits, or boundaries, but everything is continually at risk. A person who follows that way has no supports for life beyond his own hopeless efforts, and those efforts are inevitably inadequate.

Many in society are desperate to find some hope for the future – but are finding it increasingly hard to find anything to be hopeful about! In a world which has lost its ability to celebrate anything of beauty and can only find strife and discord, I believe we as creative people have unique means which can not only speak of the reality of God but also bring hope into such a bleak scenario!

The Church

Perceptions

In the face of the state of our nation, the church has an ever diminishing voice. Biblical faith as we've received it over the last 2-3 centuries is largely ignored by new modern rejectionist ways of thinking. Our freedoms to speak, proclaim or declare biblical truth are fast being taken away and elements of power/control/dictatorship are rapidly emerging in government. Autonomy is the spirit of the age – you can believe or do what you like so long as you don't force your beliefs on to me.

Religion

Many now are not only suspicious of religion (whether Christian or any other), they see it as responsible for much unrest throughout the world and argue that it should have no protection in law. They point to wars fought in the name of religion over centuries and also to current conflicts in the around the world – and blame many if not all of these conflicts on religion. Religion is seen as brainwashing and is at best not to be trusted, and worst extremely dangerous. Freedom of religion, though currently enshrined in law, is seriously under threat. Many now believe that religious people need re-educating and that religion should have nothing to do with modern society. Books (and now blockbuster films) by atheist authors such as Philip Pullman ('His Dark Materials') and Richard Dawkins ('The God Delusion') have become best-sellers read by millions.

Words

We have become a society which no longer trusts words. Politicians, business leaders – and even church leaders are no longer listened to. No-one trusts what is said because trust has been abused so often. Our church has often been a church of words. We have appealed to the mind with persuasive words and argumentative reason – and for a time this was the best form of communication – but no longer.

Outreach

We are struggling to engage people with our evangelistic efforts - it is often difficult to attract enough non-churchgoers to the events we put on, however creative. Clearly there are still some successes in this area, including some exciting attempts at 'Fresh Expressions' of church which are having a positive impact in some places, but we still have a long way to go if we're going to have real success in drawing people back again to the good news that our faith offers.

Morality

Personal morality in the church has declined sharply. Divorce rates in the church, even amongst evangelicals, is nearly as high as that in society at large. Some evangelical leaders are seriously questioning whether sex before marriage is wrong. A number of high profile church leaders have been exposed having adulterous affairs and others involved in child molestation. Huge debates about homosexuality are splitting the church throughout the world.

Our utilitarian, comfortable 'god'

As a result, much of the church has become increasingly introverted and 'me' focussed. Since the charismatic renewal of the '60s and '70s there has been a danger of viewing God as familiar friend who does things for us and comforts us - and forgotten that he is Almighty God – a 'free agent' who is not bound by our traditions or ways of doing things.

God has been tied down and is expected to act in certain ways – especially in the charismatic and evangelical churches who have created formulas for how God will act in every situation and have forgotten that 'Aslan is not a tame Lion'!

In much of the church we are so concerned with fellowship and comfort and narrow answers that we have lost an understanding of the holiness of God and no longer stand in awe of the God who created and sustains the whole universe.

Brueggemann, commenting on Psalm 50 says:

The psalm is a protest against perversion of the God-Israel relationship so that it has become increasingly friendly, cosy and bilateral... our contemporary version might be a friendly collapse of God's holiness into a blind graciousness'. Psalm 50 vs. 21 says: 'You thought I was one like yourself'. God is not and is a free agent – and such an attitude brings judgement.

The prophet Ezekiel spoke into a similar situation in his time. His message was that God will not conform to our expectations of Him! He is a jealous God who will do what is right for the sake of His name (cf. Ez. 36:22 ff). If we continue to be presumptuous about God, attempting to tie Him down to set of so-called 'spiritual laws' that we have created, we are potentially in danger of God removing his hand of blessing over our nation and the church.

Exile

Some say that the church could well be entering a time of exile. If this is true, we cannot hold on to the familiar ways we've always done things in the past – believing that this will bring answers. By doing this we are holding on to death, or possibly something that God has abandoned or is in the process of abandoning. We need to relinquish these yearnings for the 'good old days' before we are able to receive new hope for the future. Walter Brueggemann again in 'Hopeful Imagination' says:

We cannot hold what we have and receive God's new Gifts

Decline

Despite the fact that a small number of churches are still growing, the overall picture indicates that the church in Britain is in rapid decline. Some estimates say that many of our mainstream denominations will have completely disappeared within the next 20 years if the haemorrhaging is not stemmed.

4. Conclusion

When fear and a lack of hope grip a nation and nothing that politicians do makes any difference - and amongst the community of faith God has been relegated to just being a 'familiar friend', with much of the church appearing to be in terminal decline, is there any hope that God may want to speak in new ways into such a crisis?

It is my conviction that God is calling us as musicians to seek His face again and to offer our gifts afresh to his service alongside those other ministries who share the same heart & vision. 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 communicate again in relevant ways today - to an impoverished church and a world starved of beauty and hope.

In the light of these thoughts, will you pray with us that God may reveal more of what he may ask of us as musicians? If you are a musician yourself, please let me know if you'd like to be involved or would like to know more. If you are not a musician but would like to support us in prayer and other ways, again please let me know and I will send you further details. We would very much value you standing alongside us as we continue to seek God for the future.

Richard Williamson