

Chapter Two

THE GOLDEN MEAN

A friend - at least I think he is - referred to this book as a prospective exercise in "*Kirche und Kitsch*" - roughly translatable as the church and bad taste. It was a gauntlet teasingly thrown down. I am more than happy to pick it up and to wrap it tenderly around everything I have to say. Because if we are afraid of bad taste, we are afraid to live, let alone worship. If we are afraid to make mistakes, afraid of judgement by professional or peer groups, afraid of philistinism, afraid of being caught out, we will be so paralysed by the glare from all those imagined (or actual) judgements that, like a rabbit transfixed by car headlights, we will die of immobility. Conscious or unconscious fear is, I suspect, one of the root causes of the apparent *malaise* of much of our church music in Scotland: the endemic Scottish fear of being caught out, caught at it, caught being vulnerable, caught being wrong.

An underlying theme that I think will be heard running through nearly every story I tell will be the central role of personal experience. The answer to whatever problems there are in church music lies mainly within each of us. It is not always extra financial resources that are required, though they are helpful. It is not a sudden new surge of professional musicians that will save us; that would be wonderful, but it simply isn't available. It is not new organs, new groups, or a revolution in choral techniques that will determine the future of song in the church. It is not even new songs, reinvigorating though they are. It is the exercise of our imaginations and the activity of our emotions that will decide whether magic returns to church music - if, indeed, it is missing. But counter-

pointing that personal theme is a counter-subject of depth and difficulty.

We have to begin by understanding what music is about. And why it costs so much effort. And why it is worth the effort: of composing it, performing it, listening to it. It is about death. That is why it costs so much. And that is why it is worth more than its weight in gold.

A son going off, to university, job, or war, that is a death to those who are left behind, and it may be a death for him, too. A daughter going off to career, college, marriage; that is a death to her family; and something inside her may die. Something that has to die, for her to evolve. Built into the normal universal rhythm of human life is this dying, this wrenching, this pain. And I haven't mentioned illness, hospital, divorce, bereavement, or any of the other disasters that flesh is heir to. I'm talking about events that involve the discord of emotional pain and that psychic disjunction which is necessary for spiritual growth... one is saying no more than has been said by spiritual gurus down the ages, as when Jesus talked about the need for seed to fall into the ground if there is to be new growth: if, to paraphrase George Matheson's famous lines, there is to blossom, from the ground of being, new being. For - of course - these common human dyings are rich in potential resurrections. Out of the living cathedrals of marriage, or work, or out of solitariness built lonely stone by painful stone in the lives of those who do not find expanding structures to live in, out of all human experience, is born again the Son of Man, who comes again and again on clouds of glory. Whether these clouds are dark ones with silver linings or gold ones with dark linings is impossible to disentangle. Good Friday and Easter, Christmas and Pentecost, are intertwined in the one fiery ball of experience. The joy in life's pain and the ache in life's joys, are the twin progeny of being alive: and they are at the heart of music.

Music involves three things: phenomenal attention to the detail of sound patterns; conceptual architecture in an infinite perspective; and a commingling of pain and delight. The pain and delight proceed from the tension between detail and

infinity. Because the universe is not a straight line, but a golden ball, disintegrating, exploding, expanding, evolving, re-integrating, the detail and the infinite come round in the dance of meaning to face each other in struggle and embrace. You see it in the Epstein sculpture of Jacob wrestling with the angel. The classic musical microcosm of this struggle is the discord. The macrocosm you see classically in the structures of fugue, sonata, symphony, opera. Try to imagine a fugue without discord, a symphony without conflict, an opera without a catalytic crisis. You cannot do it. You cannot separate form and essence. The concepts fall apart. But also: try to imagine the New Testament without the crucifixion. The fact that I can add that without obviously changing key is significant. It explains why not only in medieval, classical, or Victorian times did composers find Christian ideas compatible, indeed inspirational, but in our secular age as well. This compatibility between musical discord and conflict on the one hand and Christian theology on the other, provides a key to evaluating much simpler musical artefacts than symphonies and operas, namely hymns.

What is a hymn? It is a bridge between on the one hand that infinite attention to the most intricate detail which is the work of the professional musician, whether composer, performer or analyst, and on the other hand, that simplicity which gives music its *raison d'être* in the spiritual Pantheon. There are many topics one could cover in a survey of church music: enough for a hundred lectures. But, just as I rejected the use of visual and audio equipment to enrich the fabric of the lectures, because I thought it misleading to play in at the press of a button, choirs, orchestra, organ, and congregations beyond the reach of the average church, so I have rejected covering so much ground at a height of 30,000 feet that one is by the end not conscious of having made a real journey and seen the actual terrain.

What are the main ingredients of the environment in which most people of the ground experience church music? They are, still, in the congregational scene, the basic instrument - usually the organ to which I will refer particularly later, the choir; and

the congregation. And what is it that these will most commonly do? Why, sing hymns. My contention is that if we get the hymns right, we have every chance of getting everything else right. This is more obviously true in the hymn sandwich liturgy of the Church of Scotland and other related Reformed traditions, but I would argue that it holds for nearly all Western Christian forms of service. I have taken part in Anglican and Roman Catholic cathedral celebrations based on choir-led orders, which would have not fulfilled their spiritual remits if a couple of hymns had not, at critical moments, gathered the detail and the infinite together in a simple but sweeping architectural span. At these moments, the golden ball of the Christian cosmos is gathered together out of the disparate elements of a dozen, or a hundred, or a thousand human lives and thrown into the air; for one of the perpetual challenges of the hymn is that its performance is unpredictable.

There are so many random factors waiting to work every time a hymn is announced that the organist playing over the first line is just as heroically about to step off the cliff as a conductor stepping on to the platform to face an unfamiliar orchestra. The difference is that some organists are not as aware of this as they might be. I will, therefore, refer to hymns as significant, both for the practical reason I have just outlined that they constitute the liturgical fulcrum of our common worship; but also because they provide a touchstone of the values implicit in the way we approach church music in general. Of course, one can get the hymns right, and other things wrong; but it is less likely that one will get other musical matters right if one treats the hymns wrong - for example, casually, contemptuously, boringly, unrhythmically, or without sensitivity to the words. On the other hand, it is possible to treat hymns with a mind-numbing degree of vulgar melodrama. Not that vulgarity is by definition to be excluded. The right kind of vulgarity is as valid an ingredient in the worship cocktail as, in its time, was the Latin Vulgate; and if one suggests, as I will, that God, judging by the evidence, is a Great Entertainer, then an element of *kitsch*, of bad taste, is as entitled to feel at home in the range of

liturgical entertainment as a Norman pillar or a baroque ceiling. Indeed, it sometimes needs a tourist better educated than I am to assess what in a baroque church in Central Europe is *kitsch* and what is high art. When, for example, is a nativity tableau charming *kitsch*, when is it art, and when is it just embarrassing?

Recently I visited the Church of Holy Mary, Mother of All Angels, adjoining Prague Castle. In a kind of crypt, there is a nativity tableau of breath-taking boldness. Its depth is greater than its width. You stand with the life-size shepherds and their sheepdog behind you, and in front the scene round the crib, the Magi opulent with their *entourage*, and away beyond them, fading into an actual physical distance like the farthest point on a deep opera stage, a golden city set on a hill, which I found to be remarkably evocative of the real Bethlehem when I visited Israel later in the making of the same film. Lying beside the crib in Prague are two lambs. At the toss of a coin into a hat, one lamb opens a mouth and goes "Baa", the other one opens its mouth and responds "Baa". This has to be *kitsch*. Yet the whole scene has such power that it somehow carries the absurdity past one's sense of the ridiculous into the heart. This room is opened for two weeks every Christmas, and the queue stretches miles down the hill. How dare people be so fond of *kitsch*? The question is, of course, begged. One man's bad taste is another gentleman's relish.

Showing us this Nativity tableau was a Capuchin monk. The church was attached to a monastery, but he was the only monk left. In the Stalinist days, the monastery was an army barracks, and Brother Mark, like the others, was put in prison merely for being a monk. Now, his brown habit restored to him, he looked after the church. He was old and bent, with a face in repose of appalling humility - appalling in its exposure of one's own egocentricity - but, his smile of rapture at the treasures in his care was carefree. I asked him through the interpreter if he felt any particular carol suited the scene. He answered in Czech through the interpreter, a ball of energy named Dasa, 'From The Heart Of Mary, A Flower Is Born'. I asked, "Could either of you sing it?" They both did. The monk

began, tremulously, his recently imprisoned voice speaking like a broken reed in an organ abandoned on a scrap heap. Dasa joined in, and their voices gained confidence. I pause here to remind you: they were singing in a tiny space between a group of large shepherds plus collie dog, a phalanx of wise men, one of whom looked like Othello, and a Channel Four film crew. It was as if we were in the middle of a Bill Bryden miracle play in the Cottesloe Theatre crossed with a Citizen's Theatre Christmas pantomime, and suddenly transposed to the Jorvik Viking Centre in York. It was away beyond being a matter of taste, good or bad. It was like that moment just beyond the point of no return when an aircraft has to rise into the sky or die, and has begun to drum your ears into the back of your seat with the effort to be airborne - and then suddenly is. In the midst of the absurdity, what the monk and the interpreter were singing was a chorale-like carol. The two inadequate voices blended in a rising tide of conviction - one Catholic monk, one Protestant woman, singing to a British TV production unit.

Our producer was not in that room. He was in the adjoining church, puzzled and moved by the distant effect of the *a cappella* sound. The rest of us joined him, and asked the monk about his story, one of patient suffering, which he wore lightly. We already knew Dasa's story, which has culminated in her being possibly Prague's top interpreter who interprets for her hero, the playwright turned president, Vaclav Havel. Ray, the producer, asked if I'd like to play the baroque organ, high in the gallery. I played three things - 'Adeste Fideles', 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing', and an improvised toccata. The instrument had that French brilliance which verges on out-of-tuneness. The carols sparked into the ancient church like a display of firecrackers. The monk approached and spread before me some music. It was the carol he and Dasa had sung. As I played it, he knelt and prayed, and my colleagues down in the church saw his face transfigured. The House of God which had been raped, pillaged and sold for thirty pieces of Marxist dogma, had today breathed, sung and been *kitsched* - kissed - into life. No less a commitment should we make with every hymn we sing. If we

are afraid of hymns taking off into raw emotion, then we should avoid them altogether.

I said at the outset that music is about death, or to put it musically, discord. This is, I believe, a true statement, but not an obviously true one. In the case of Christian music, I would hold it to be self-evidently true. The child in the crib did not only die, as all babies die by the time they are thirty, seventy or a hundred. The baby in the crib died in a form which was defined as crucial. The monk who sang that carol had once died: he had ceased to be a monk. The lady who interpreted had lived through two deaths of freedom in her beloved Czechoslovakia. Our driver had seen friends die in 1968. The church and monastery of Holy Mary had died. Now they had all experienced a resurrecting hope; and Dasa worked with a man she described as the Word made Flesh: a playwright president, who had been imprisoned for the sake of his words, and had now with healing words set the captive free. You cannot have Christmas without Good Friday, and neither Christmas, nor Good Friday ring bells in infinity without Easter Sunday.

I have told that story for all sorts of reasons, which will unfold, but let me underline a musical point. It is not only a pious dominical truism that where two or three are gathered together, something may happen; it is a musical truth. In this case what were the elements of sound that made up a powerful emotional cocktail? Two artificial lambs going baa; two unimpressive voices singing a Medieval carol; and an organ playing some Victorian carols. Admittedly, the visual environment was strong, but the atmosphere in many a plain church can be just as strong when you step in off the street.

It is not what big extra musical resources you can get that matters, it is what you do emotionally with the resources you have. You may be familiar with that proposition of the new science which has already achieved the status of a platitude in stating that the flapping of butterflies' wings in the Amazonian jungle may cause a tornado in Texas. Using this as an image and not as a proof, I would suggest that the way we deal with the second hymn at the morning service in the Old Parish Church

of Muckleshuggle on a Sunday morning in bleakest February, may determine whether bells ring out across the cosmos, a million starfields from now. If you don't accept that connection, then singing in church is probably a rather out of date form of communal vocal therapy. Infinitesimal detail and infinity are mutually incarnate whenever a soul takes off at the end of the runway of emotional and intellectual risk. Music is one of the human runways which faces clearly into the prevailing wind of death. A hymn, at its best, adds the engine of artistic integrity to the wings of spiritual *naïveté*. If it all works, you have lift off.

I will try to be spare in the adumbration of doctrine. This is partly because of a reluctance to pinion the butterfly of spontaneity on the page of principle, and partly because principles, grandiose though they may sound when couched in professional jargon, usually boil down to common sense. But every now and then it may be helpful to floodlight a piece of common sense, so here is a nostrum: the detail must be carried by the whole.

Let me rephrase that in various ways: the whole must be strong enough to bear a strongly emphasised detail. The nativity scene must be powerful enough to carry baaing lambs. By all means make a dramatic point, but only if you can do so without fatally damaging the dramatic impulse of the whole. A decorative detail must not spoil the architectural sweep. To put it more boldly, if a hymn tune is worth doing at all, it is worth taking the risk of doing badly. For the sake of making a dramatic point, you may have to risk miscalculating and spoiling the whole effect. Some great cathedrals have gargoyles, where the masons let their hair down and fashioned faces which would send Monty Python and Spitting Image artists running to Mummy. But they were usually put in positions where they do not threaten the composure of the whole perspective, in other words, where they are invisible. That is a relatively safe process. In other cathedrals, you may find a feature which you suspect has taken the more serious risk of spoiling the overall perspective - for example, an organ screen impeding the flow from nave

to choir. But, short of taking it down, you can't be sure. That syncopation in the overall rhythm may be just what the building needs to avoid a relentless drive of the eye to a second-rate reredos at the east end. It all comes down to balance, some sort of golden mean. But I must flesh out this simple principle with examples, so let us for the time being leave the worlds of hymn singing and architecture and attend to the methods of very great music makers.

Sir Adrian Boult was the most architectural of conductors. This wasn't accidental. He intended to be so: it was a conscious approach. He articulated it in a simple way. In any given concert there should be one main climax, and all other climaxes should be graded down from that. Within each work the same control of emotional contour applied: one Ben Nevis, other lesser Munros, and then hills and hillocks. This intelligent appraisal of the decibelic landscape was implicit in his style of conducting. Those who like the conductor to be a balletic visual aid to the music drama found Boult dull. He just stood there, a moustachioed colonel of the regiment, beating time for the officers and other ranks. Ah, but if you got close enough to see how he beat time, and if you listened! His control of the baton was legendary. It was a long baton, and he was able to flick his wrist in a way which made its point go into a minuscule spasm which communicated across the orchestra. For a bigger effect he might jerk the whole stick. For a dramatic effect he might move the lower arm slightly across his body. And if he wished to unleash a fortissimo he indulged himself to the terrifying extent of raising his arm somewhat and then lowering it with a final whiplash of the wrist. This was indeed fine motor control in the service of a balance between detail and overall perspective. I recall, with affection, three particular examples of how effective this was. The first was in what you might call a routine performance of Mendelssohn's music from 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. In the scherzo there is a sequence in three time when the first note in every six is lightly accented, but the first note in every twenty-four accentuated slightly more. I watched

every time that accent was reached. Not only did the wrist flick, but the whole arm shot slightly forward. This sent a tremor through the orchestra, and a tiny magic chuckle animated Mendelssohn's melodic line. I have watched other more dynamic conductors doing this piece, and either that moment passes unnoticed, or the accent is too crudely ostentatious.

Not long before fire destroyed the St. Andrews Halls in Glasgow, I heard Boult conduct Vaughan Williams' 'London Symphony'. I had heard it the night before in Edinburgh, and had found it so magical, I took the train through to Glasgow to hear it again. I can still hear the symphony's opening and its closing epilogue as they were that night. Boult stood emotionally as impassive as the Cenotaph, brooding over Whitehall. His hand and baton hardly moved. The strings were so hushed they appeared to disappear. The symphony moves from London at dawn through a day of busily changing moods to the magic moment of the great city wrapping itself again in sleep. Out of the palpable dark float the distant chimes of Big Ben. In the haunting acoustic of that old hall, it was a remote bell tolling in a child's dream of long long ago. Why was it OK to have Big Ben chiming in a symphony? In what way is this less *kitsch* than lambs baaing? Because, as with the cuckoo in Delius's 'On Hearing The First Cuckoo In Spring', the sound is not thrust at you ostentatiously. Its *naïveté* is cradled tenderly in an atmospheric texture woven with sophisticated craftsmanship. And Boult's conducting was so gossamer, he spun the web so delicately, that there was an extra courtesy of space and distance, as in a cathedral, so that one did not feel pressurised to make a judgement. But quiet magic was not Boult's only trick. Years later, I attended a performance of 'Belshazzar's Feast' at the Royal Festival Hall. Behind my wife and me were music students from the Royal College of Music. The programme note told us that the dynamic young conductor we'd expected was sick, and Sir Adrian had taken his place at short notice. The students were disappointed and scathing. They thought, and in the way of students, did not hesitate to say loudly for the benefit of the rest of us, that even in his prime, Boult was the only

conductor who could rob Walton's music of its pagan ferocity. Now, in his geriatricity, he would kill it. I wasn't so sure, but I recognised there might be a mismatch between a fastidious and now frail English gentleman and Walton's muscular material. I needn't have doubted. For if your control is based not on the acrobatics of adolescence or the physical drive of early manhood, but on intelligence, age is not a handicap. It was an electrifying performance. The old wrist flicked to startling effect. The lower arm swept the choir into thrilling climaxes. At the peroration, the whole arm raised itself in judgement, then crashed on the rostrum rail, and the choir jumped. At the end the students were dumbfounded. "My God," said one, "the old boy pulled that off." Yes, my God, I thought, he did, didn't he, you pompous little git. You see, colonels of the regiment have their passions. They have, however, learned to channel them. The same is true of good organists leading good hymns.

The principle of balance between detail and total effect is even more important for organists than for conductors. What is the image of the conductor? A man of power, I guess. I don't think this is entirely due to the ancient status handicap shared by a male dominated career in holy orders. The drive to dominate in a physical way was built into the role of the modern conductor as it developed in the heyday of the nineteenth Century romantic orchestra, where the impression is that the conductor is controlling and unleashing vast forces. But think about it. The conductor is actually in possession of no power whatsoever. It is all, literally, sleight of hand. He is faced with a band of musicians who, if they so choose can reduce him in a matter of minutes to utter helplessness. I once actually watched an orchestra so despair of the beat of a conductor, that they resorted to the ancient practice of follow my leader - they turned their attention to the first violin leader, John Fairbairn, and followed him. All the conductor has is a stick. It makes no noise, unless he is desperate enough to rap it on the rail. That is why I will so often use anecdotes about conductors to make points about performance: for a conductor is analogous in his role to a creator God who cannot operate without co-opera-

tion. In total contrast to this, the organist is in a position of genuine power, indeed of totalitarian dictatorship. Without effort he can deploy decibels like bombs. It was always an illusion that an American President could wipe out the world by pressing an actual nuclear button, but it is no illusion that an organist can wipe out a congregation by pressing the full organ button. However, fear not, for fear is as poor a guide in matters artistic as spiritual. Like nuclear power, noise cannot be disinvented. Admittedly there is a modern movement in organ building as in orchestral playing of the classics, to return to a baroque scale in instruments, but if an organ is to be able to lead a congregation, then the full organ, even on a baroque instrument, is still going to be a formidable sound. The responsibility of worship is therefore even more keenly laid at the door of the one person controlling that sound - the organist - than at the door of the orchestral conductor, whose responsibility is shared among a large number of instrumentalists.

Who am I to suggest anything more clever here than Sir Adrian Boult did? The organist should aim at an emotional contour for the service. Even if he doesn't know the praise list till he visits the vestry before the service, a very bad practice on the part of clergy, but still a not uncommon one, that still allows a few minutes to assess where the hymnological peaks are likely to be. Perhaps Mount Everest can be descried above distant clouds - a commanding last hymn - and the other climaxes scaled down from that. Possibly there are two Scottish Munros, a strong psalm to begin, an equally strong paraphrase before the sermon, but in this case the emotional peak may be measured not in loudness but in intensity in a devotional hymn in the centre of the service, played quietly with a throbbing pedal to catch the accumulating emotion. The point is not to squander your assets in being either monotonously quiet or monotonously half-loud, and above all not by being monotonously fortissimo. It's a bit like driving a vehicle. If you drive flat out all the time, apart from endangering other road users, and terrorising your own passengers, you are limiting your options, because you have no reserves of power to get out of a sticky

situation or exploit an opening. But equally unhelpful is to ramble along at such a monotonous forty miles per hour that you drive other drivers to apoplexy through frustration and fall asleep at the wheel yourself.

That doesn't sound deeply aesthetic or theological. Well, I did say it boiled down to common sense. All I'm saying is, make it interesting. Let go sometimes - be very loud. Be quiet sometimes - very quiet. Take risks. Have variety. But make it a coherent, eloquent variety. Let the whole service say something.

However, there is more than one way to skin a cat, and the Boulton way of conducting is not the only one, by a long chalk. I now introduce three remarkable conductors of whose style the very last thing that could be said is that it was monotonous. Each indeed came at different times under the judgement of bad taste, particularly in the matter of speeds. Imaginative flexibility in the speed of hymns is the next weapon I want to identify in the armoury of the anti-monotony effort, so why not learn some lessons from the approach, and the mistakes, of some supreme interpreters?

Paul Kletzki was a Polish conductor, now dead, who had exceptional physical and psychic magnetism. As long ago as 1932, Furtwängler had nominated him to take over the Berlin Philharmonic. But that was ruled out by the Nazis. Kletzki was the Karajan that never was - only, in my opinion, better. He was tall, with a huge forehead, and quite extraordinary eyes. They communicated directly with individual members of the orchestra and the connection often took the form of a brilliant beady wink. The then Scotsman music critic, Christopher Grier, not known as a paid up member of the Mills and Boon School of Criticism, reported that members of what was then the Scottish National Orchestra had fallen in love with Kletzki, and went on to write that he made every instrument sound more individually like itself than was normal. I watched from the Usher Hall organ gallery as Kletzki conducted Brahms's Third Symphony, and was so gripped that I came through to Glasgow the

following night to reassure myself that it was as extraordinary as I had thought - and it was. The first movement is difficult to get right in terms of speed. It is a broad six/four sweep, which can't be conducted in six/four beats without sounding fussy, but can, if allowed to broaden too loosely, fail to acquire momentum. Kletzki took it dangerously slowly. It didn't falter, though, far less fall apart, because he implanted within it a deep spring of dynamism. I had the bonus of attending the rehearsal, and heard him rehearse one tiny point - as many would think it - for several minutes. In the eighth bar there is a flourish of two quavers in the tune. I have heard it often under other conductors, and one hardly notices it as an ornamental detail lost in the onward flow. Kletzki took it to bits, trying again and again to coax the violins to treat it as significant, to turn it into a lyrical bridge, a surge of yearning. The same transformation had to occur with the equivalent figure in bar ten.

You may recall what I said earlier about the baaing sheep in the Prague nativity scene - a concept which could have detracted from the overall effect; and I raised the same question with regard to gargoyles and organ screens in cathedrals. Did this lavishing of attention by Kletzki on a detail of phrasing, which amounted to a temporary slowing up of these quavers, impede the onward flow of an already deliberate tempo? It might have. That was a risk. But the effect was the opposite. It converted the surface flow into a profound surge, and this undertow accumulated throughout the symphony, so that when we reached the last movement, its dreamy sunset ending had a hypnotic effect, almost sending orchestra and audience into a trance.

Can I offer an example of such a risk taking in the presentation of a hymn? It is not an exact equivalent, but does illustrate the risk factor in temporarily stretching a tempo. When I first heard W.O.Minay, the organist in St. Cuthberts, Edinburgh (of whom I shall have more to report in Chapter Six), play an Easter service, I was taken aback by his treatment of the second last verse of 'Jesus Christ Is Risen Today'. On the line, "Now above the sky He's King", he applied full reverse thrust on the two words, "He's King" with a strong change of

key on “King”, and a bold pause, before launching back into tempo. It was spectacular, but risky, because it could have been said to break the back of a climactic verse. A case of you pays your money and you takes your chance. For my money it worked because it rescued the cardinal theological point about the Resurrection from the familiar flow of words and music. It erected, as it were, a musical icon to that central truth which simply couldn't be ignored. I discovered subsequently that that idea originated with Sir Edward Bairstow when organist at York Minster, and it became a tradition at York. So, as always in such cases, an idea which has taken root in different places, began as a risk taken one Easter morning decades ago by one man alone in the organ loft thinking, “I wonder if this will come off”, and giving it a whirl. Without that readiness to risk failure and the judgement of bad taste, nothing new will ever be attempted.

My next spectacular conductor is **Leonard Bernstein**. Now Bernstein was something else again: a genius; a cross between Leonardo da Vinci and the Marx Brothers. His ‘West Side Story’ is a *raison d'être* for the twentieth Century, certainly for that aspect of it known as the United States, but he is capable, in his risk taking of such flights of doubtful taste as to make him *kitsch* king of the symphony. His conducting of Elgar's ‘Enigma Variations’, transmitted on British television, was electrifying, not merely shaking dust off Elgar's shoes, but hoovering the shoes themselves into an alchemy of the Black Arts. Some of it was refreshing. ‘Nimrod’, however, was a disaster. I defend to the death Bernstein's courage in going over the top in the matter of tempo, but I defend also my right to assess, as other reviewers did, that in the cause of nobility he obliged too much, bowed too low, sank too deep, and killed the goose that lays the golden egg, namely the tune. He didn't just do it slow. He stopped the clock ticking. He took ‘Nimrod’ into a time warp. Any slower and it would have gone backwards. There was no pulse at all. The patient had kicked the bucket. How could he? Because he had a mystical vision of something ineffable, beyond the

conditions of time. It was a noble mistake, though a mistake it was, for the simple reason that it didn't work.

Sir John Barbirolli did not have to strive to be noble. His was a Napoleonically noble style of arm-waving. In the Royal Festival Hall, in one of his last concerts, he conducted what seemed like a valedictory performance of Elgar's Second Symphony. Time stood still, but in a different sense from Bernstein. Every tempo was elegiacally right, and the sunset ending was an apotheosis which sent my wife and me walking along the Thames Embankment in tears.

Nor was the reaction confined to us. From one side of the hall ran Neville Cardus, the celebratory writer on music and cricket; from the other side ran Lord Boothby. In the aisle, they hugged, and their eyes were moist, too. William Mann, the Times critic, wrote the next day that something of an unusually spiritual character had happened during that performance. I discovered much later that Elgar's Second was the music that 'Glorious' John said he would have chosen to die to. I don't know whether he did. I do know that he is the conductor who in my presence most urgently caught the passion in the fugal string passage in the 'Funeral March' in Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony. His emphatic forcing of every note built up an almost unbearable tension.

But Barbirolli, too, could nod. Mahler's Ninth Symphony is his valedictory one. The last movement is a subdued howl of a soul facing extinction, transmuted by sobbing stages into a more tranquil but still aching acceptance of diminishment and death which, like Tchaikovsky's Sixth trails into silence. If you compare George Solti's recording with Barbirolli's, Solti's is several minutes shorter. I think sometimes Solti is too crisp. But in this case I find him exactly right. The music sobs enough, it doesn't need amplifying. Barbirolli over-eggs the emotional pudding. It's a great searing performance by the Berlin Philharmonic, but it is too much. The movement, half-way through being milked, capsizes under its own weight. Or so I feel - but *tempi* are always subjective. Are there lessons to be learned from

these orchestral experiences which might be applied to hymn-singing?

Take the hymn 'O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go', a hymn of the deepest subjective hue whose final words we have already quoted. What is to be done with it? Well, I know what is not to be done with it, and that is to dust it down, polish its shoes, smarten up its jacket and tie, slick down its hair, cuff it on the ear, and send it off to 'Songs of Praise' to be toughened up, made to stand straight and turned into a man.

I yield to nobody in my admiration for the classic television formula that 'Songs of Praise' has become, but like all institutions it can sometimes deal insensitively with individual cases. Rows of shiny faces drilled to watch the conductor or die, and deploying dentifugal force as if all singing "cheese" is all very well for Christian soldiers marching onward, but it verges on Gulag treatment for "From the ground there blossoms red, Love that shall endless be". What goes specially wrong is the speed. There has crept into being in recent decades a consensus among many, possibly a majority, of sensible house-trained church musicians that healthy singing doesn't hang about. It's all part of the understandable reaction against lazy sentimentality and loose emotional living down there among the more maudlin Victorian hymnological aspidistras, but it is in danger of becoming a cure as pernicious as the disease. Yes, of course a hymn should not be so slow that, like Bernstein's 'Nimrod', it falls apart in your hands. But, if it is a poem of passionate intensity, set to an appropriately yearning tune, neither should it be set off at a spanking trot to jog four times around the block.

We must have the courage to risk what I have called *kitsch*. Is deep emotion something so dangerous or degrading that we have to throw round it a *cordon sanitaire* of hygienic speeds approved by the local Speed Watch Committee or the Central Board of Time and Motion Studies in the Efficient Management of Praise Resources? Can I take your mind back to the scene in the Prague Church of Holy Mary, Mother of all Angels, when the old priest and the interpreter to President Havel joined in singing about Jesus as the flower from Mary's heart? The

George Matheson words are a kind of Protestant Bultmannian version, are they not, where redemptive love blossoms red not from a Madonna's heart, but from the ground of being.

By a nice piece of serendipity, the next day our little Channel Four Production Unit in Prague attended a morning service of the Czech Evangelical Brethren. It took place in a plain room, and took the form of a hymn sandwich. The young minister spoke and prayed, the congregation of thirty sang. Two of the four Reformation chorales they sang are in our CH3 and were sung crisply, accompanied on the electronic organ with impeccable taste, in the continental reformed style - that is without any deviation whatever of speed or tone colour. This is objective praise, as they see it, and as I was brought for a while to believe in it, when I was a theological student. But it was noticeable that for the children's song, the minister and another young man took guitars and led a song with a swing. I am not guitar-mad, myself, but these were well played, and there is no denying that as they swung slightly and the subjective tune gathered momentum, the quality of the voices was about twice as loud, and, more to the point, twice as warm, as it had been in the hygienically neutral chorales.

Later that day, I was standing in Wenceslas Square in Prague with Bob, our driver, ex-theological student. Beside us was the martyr's grotto. In the centre, a photograph of Jan Palach, the student who immolated himself when Brezhnev's Russian tanks rolled into crush the 1968 Prague Spring. There was a row of photographs of other martyrs of that time. Flowers, candles and coloured ribbons abounded. Artistically, it was a right old mess. Aesthetically, it was *kitsch*. Bob then described the days in November a year before, in which he was intimately involved, when blood ran. Around the grotto, the street was now covered in large, flat paving stones. He said these had been put in to replace the small cobbles which were used to stone the invading tanks. But if one did not know that story, he said wistfully, these would just be dead stones.

Without each human story, hymns are dead stones. Every hymn is a potential nativity, grotto, open wound, open tomb.

Into every hymn, and every performance of every verse of every hymn, should be poured all we can give of our heart's blood, redeemed by as skilled an art as we can manage.

Surrounding this memorial to Palach and the others were curious shapes like twisted mounds of earth. It was a shock to realise that this was the accumulated waste wax of all the candles that had been burned there. Grief, passion, despair, hope, faith, poured together into a mould. When we sing, it may or may not be in good taste, but let it be about something that matters. Music matters because it is about death, and life; it is a mould into which all our deepest discords and harmonies are melted.

On arriving back from Prague, we found on the Euston concourse copies of the Evening Standard with a familiar face on page one. You may have wondered: what have orchestral conductors to do with real life, especially in the modern world? Well, newspaper editors are hard men. They sell newspapers that people want to pick up and read. The photograph was of a conductor. Leonard Bernstein was dead. This composer and performer, whose style of living was as rampantly generous as his style of conducting, had made his last leap into the air. The paper quoted a critic as saying, "Bernstein did not age gently and gracefully. His kind of conducting exacted a high physical toll." To quote the opening paragraph of this chapter, written without knowledge even that Bernstein was ill, "Music is about death. That is why it costs so much. That is why it is worth its weight in gold."

The article went on to say, "Bernstein's performances were subject to human error, but they came into the world bloody and pink and blue, kicking and screaming, laughing and crying." That isn't a bad motto for those responsible, in towns and villages up and down our land, for the musical aspect of our worship. If our music, and especially our singing, seems sometimes becalmed, if not dead in the water, perhaps that is because we are more concerned to avoid error than to kickstart worship into life. What about a policy of bringing, for example, hymns into a Sunday morning, "bloody and pink and blue, kicking and screaming, laughing and crying."

Music is about death. Music confronts death. Music defeats death. Mendelssohn and Brahms are biologically dead. But an orchestra they conducted played recently in Glasgow: the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra in its Brahms season played not only the Third Symphony, but all four. The conductor was Kurt Mazur. What was my question: what have conductors to do with the modern world? It was the wordsmith Havel who carried the day for freedom in Prague. In East Germany, it was a conductor, Mazur himself, who at a couple of critical moments used his influence with both the old government and the crowd to enable a public debate to take place. Mazur had no party power. But, to allow free communication to flow, for the sake of the possibility of a rebirth of his people and culture, he risked arrest and death. If the Christian idea of Resurrection means anything, it means that whatever is about Death is about Birth also. Whatever is about human error is also about divine freedom. So on the Glasgow train we acquired champagne in the buffet car, and toasted Bernstein as a human being who will never be dead, for the tunes and discords of his life have melted into moments of glory on wax, that we can hear every time a disc or tape reveals again his brave risks with taste. For glory is not about being always right. It is about being.