

The Secret Life of Songs

Ten years ago, I began what has become an Advent tradition of looking back over the conversations that have defined my counselling practice that year. Each time I've done this, a theme or an image has emerged. This year, we have accompanied a number of people who have experienced profound losses. In reflecting on these grief journeys, one shared characteristic that emerges is a realization of the limits of words to find and express meaning in the face of tragic loss. Fortunately, there are many *languages* that can go as deep or deeper than words. Music is one. And I will share four pieces that speak to me, particularly in this season. But first, the back story.

If you're like me, every so often for reasons that are hard to explain, an idea will break through and elicit the immediate response - "That's really true!" Not true as opposed to false, but capital 'T' True. One of these moments came for me in a music class at Conrad Grebel College in 1979, when the professor, Len Enns, made the case that music was in fact a language. Not like a language, but an actual language that speaks through our minds and hearts and souls. That's true, I said to myself, it's a language written in words and notes.

I'm a charter member of that half of the human family for whom the tune of a song speaks more strongly and enters more deeply, than the words. This means having to admit to those of you in 'the other half', that there are many wonderful songs whose lyrics are at best, questionable. When a strong tune + strong lyrics unite - that is a gift. The first time I can recall receiving that gift was hearing, "Friendly's song" -- the Early One Morning theme from the Friendly Giant show on television. That simple recorder melody bypassed my ears and spoke straight to my four year old heart. "Look up, waaaaaay up," it beckoned.

The way I've come to understand what's going on when music actually speaks to me is the idea that we have the equivalent of a tuning fork that runs right through the centre of our being. When a piece of music (or an idea) speaks, that tuning fork resonates. Sometimes it's a tingle like a vibrating triangle, other times it's more like a crashing cymbal. Those same rhythmic vibrations slowly but surely transform the *instrument* from pieces of wood into a resonant violin.

In a therapeutic conversation, people often experience what they might refer to as a "light bulb moment" or an "epiphany". When I enquire about these moments, the recipient often describes something similar to a musical resonance occurring deep inside them. Upon reflection, they distinguish these moments from the experience of simply taking in a new idea. Ideas engage the mind, while these resonant, epiphanal moments describe something that was already known, but experienced for the first time.

As one whose rhythm of life has been shaped by an annual telling of the Christmas story, I am relieved each year when something comes along that makes the whole thing new again and I feel a resonance within. Often that's been through the voices of children, encounters with people on the margins or stories of incarnation from the people we meet through our work. But sometimes, that resonant chord will sound most clearly and simply through music. I promised you four examples of the music that speaks. Here goes. You may want to have your computer nearby so that you can listen to each song.

Thou Shalt Know Him, by Kingston composer and choral conductor Mark Sirett is my pick for Advent. This piece struck both the words and music chords within me the first time I heard it performed by the Pax Christi Chorale. It describes what I refer to above: when we encounter what is True, we already recognize it, in this case through an inner "holy harmony." There are many recordings on Youtube. I suggest starting with the recording by the University of Calgary Chorus recorded while visiting Notre Dame D'Auvergne church in Ponteix Saskatchewan.

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIRok8SM_SQ&feature=related)

or the crisp voice of the youth of the CCH concert choir recorded at a 2009 Kiwanas Festival.

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lu6z85X_wK0)

Fairytale of New York by the Irish band the Pogues with Kristy McColl. Music and lyrics create a tense contrast as the nostalgia and hope of Christmas Eve transcends a drunk tank in NYC. Despite the popularity and controversy and having heard it a hundred times, I can't listen to it without feeling hopeful and alive. I suggest the Pogues original music video.

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwHyuraau4Q>)

alongside their performance recording from St. Patrick's Day 1988

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrAwK9juhhY>).

(Note the NYPD has a pipe and drum band but not a choir and they never sang Galway Bay!)

Of all of the music I have shared with those who mourn, none speaks more clearly than Henryk Gorecki's 1976 Symphony No. 3 Op. 36 known as *The Symphony of Sorrowful Songs*. The 1993 Elektra recording of Dawn Upshaw and the London Symphonietta became the best selling recording of classical music by a contemporary composer, ever. One powerful edition is Isabel Bayrakdarian's recording for the film Holocaust - A musical memorial from Auschwitz.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=miLV0o4AhE4>

And finally, Bruce Cockburn's 1993 album entitled simply, *Christmas*, is consistently the most played album (actually cassette tape) in our home. Reviewer Michael Doyle on E-pinions describes it as, "the only 'Christmas' album worth playing in July - a take on the season that sparkles with wit, reverence, and a touch of nostalgia for childhood." But it's Cockburn's *Mystery* that I leave you with, for I can think of no better way to describe the resonant language that lives well beneath the words.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zIZLo3jWZg>

Blessings to you and yours in this season of expectation and incarnation.