

Meditation on Music

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. Acts 16:25-26

One of my favorite movies, a documentary from 2007, is entitled: „young@heart“.

It is a movie about an extraordinary choir in the US. The members of the choir are not professional singers; they are amateurs, hobby singers. The very special character of the choir is that all the singers are between 75 and 99 years old.

Some of them experienced both World Wars. Some are healthy; some are very sick. One of the singers has to bring his Oxygen Unit along when they meet for a rehearsal or for a concert. Again and again one of the members dies and the choir has to reorganise itself. They do not only share their love for music. They share their life stories, their joys and their pain, they share their fear of having cancer and of not being able to sing anymore. They laugh, they cry, they sing together: Songs from John Lennon, Coldplay, Manfred Man and the Rolling Stones.

Between 1997 and 2004 they were on twelve concert tours through Europe, Australia and Canada. As one of their lead singers, Fred Knittle, who suffered from cancer, said with a deep smile in his face:

„I travelled from Continent to Continent, until I was incontinent“

For me the most moving scene took place during a concert in one of the high-security prisons in the US. When listening to the song „Forever young“ from Bob Dylan, murderers and other criminals started crying in public.

And when Fred Knittle, who dies after the last concert in the movie, sings „Fix you“ from Coldplay, more than an idea can be heard and felt, that music is much more than sound or tones.

Music creates community, music connects people, music comforts, music relieves, music helps us to laugh and to cry as well. Music brings God into my ear and through my ear deep into my heart and soul...

I often think: Why don't we share this experience more often, this comfort, this belonging together, and last but not least this peace, which music can bring into our lives. We are mortal, all of us...and in the face of this mortality we are so much in need of comfort. Actually we do not have any time for hate, violence or greed. We need our short lifetime for one another...for music and dancing, for singing, listening, breathing again.

„Lights will guide you home / And I will try to fix you...“ (Einspielen)

When you try your best, but you don't succeed
When you get what you want, but not what you need
When you feel so tired, but you can't sleep
Stuck in reverse

And the tears come streaming down your face
When you lose something you can't replace
When you love someone, but it goes to waste
Could it be worse?

Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones
And I will try to fix you

And high up above, or down below
When you're too in love to let it go
But if you never try, you'll never know
Just what you're worth

Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones
And I will try to fix you

Tears stream down your face
When you lose something you cannot replace
Tears stream down your face, and I

Tears stream down your face
I promise you I will learn from my mistakes
Tears stream down your face, and I

Lights will guide you home
And ignite your bones
And I will try to fix you (Coldplay)

Let me tell you about a novel, "Night Train to Lisbon". Pascal Mercier, the writer, tells us in this novel about Gregorius, a man who one day leaves his everyday life to get to know the rest of his life that he hadn't yet lived. He is in search of himself. He wants to know if there is more than routine. He wants to know if his life might be a whole one, which he had not yet discovered. And he wants to know if there was a God who could heal his life.

Gregorius had difficulties to believe. But sometimes he stood in front of the door of a cathedral and he was able to express his feelings:

"I would not like to live in a world without cathedrals. I need their beauty and grandeur. I need them against the vulgarity of the world. I want to look up at the illuminated church windows and let myself be blinded by the unearthly colors. I need their luster. I need it against the dirty colors of the uniforms. I want to let myself be wrapped in the austere coolness of the churches.

I need their imperious silence. I need it against the witless bellowing of the barracks yard and the witty chatter of the yes-men. I want to hear the rustling of the organ, this deluge of ethereal tones. I need it against the shrill farce of marches. I love praying people. I need the sight of them. I need it against the malicious poison of the superficial and the thought-less. I want to read the powerful words of the Bible. I need the unreal force of their poetry. I need it against the dilapidation of the language and the dictatorship of the slogans. A world without these things would be a world I would not like to live in." (P. Mercier, Night Train to Lisbon, 168)

"A world without the organ and the ethereal tones would be a world I would not like to live in."

A world without sacred music I would not like to live in...

One of my friends is Martin Schleske. He lives in Landsberg, not too far from here, and he is one of the best violinmakers in the world. Years ago he published a wonderful book about violinmaking. The German title is "Der Klang". The English translation is called "The sound of life's unspeakable beauty".

He talks about violinmaking and at the same time he talks about spiritual life. "I firmly believe that music is simply a prayer that is cast in sound".
"Our heart is like a soundboard. Like every instrument, our life – our heart – has its own unmistakable sound"

Music initiates this sound of our life.

Music is a language, which can be understood when words reach their limits. Music is one of God's languages, maybe his favourite one.

I must confess:

Sometimes, when my brain and my heart are full of problems, I go to church not because of the sermon, no matter who is preaching, but because of the music and the old hymns. Music takes me out of these never ending spirals of thoughts, at least for some time; it is a bit like singing at midnight; it helps me hope for a perspective without these worries, it helps me wait for an earthquake which opens doors and unfastens chains. When we listen to music, when we start singing, no matter whether loudly or silently, no matter in which language or tradition, we open our inner being for God's whispering, his poetry, his declaration of love.

Therefore: Let us sing, let us share this love of God, let us pray with melodies, let us praise and complain, if necessary.

One last thought for today:

Any good music carries a small crack in itself. Hymns which do not carry a crack in themselves should be banned from church. It is the crack of our world which is full of pain and which is not yet a healed world. This world, this crack somehow has to be mirrored in a song.

It was Leonard Cohen who wrote in one of his famous songs:

"There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in"

When there is a crack in your life: Let music get in / Let light get in / Let God get in / Ask God to come to you...

Music is simply a prayer that is cast in sound...

Let us sing and pray / let us pray and sing / both to God's glory / both to find deep peace...

„Forever young“ by Bob Dylan

May God bless and keep you always
May your wishes all come true
May you always do for others
And let others do for you
May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung
May you stay forever young
May you stay forever young

May you grow up to be righteous
May you grow up to be true
May you always know the truth
And see the light surrounding you
May you always be courageous
Stand upright and be strong
May you stay forever young
May you stay forever young

May your hands always be busy
May your feet always be swift
May you have a strong foundation
When the winds of changes shift
May your heart always be joyful
May your song always be sung
And may you stay forever young
May you stay forever young