

## What Makes Music Sacred[?,.]

I recently found myself editing some pieces for handbell choir that I'd written at least 20 years ago. A small choir has a range of 37 notes which is a little less than the range of a vocal choir. What makes them really challenging though ... and a lot of fun ... is that each person can only hold two bells at a time. Each person in a vocal choir sings their entire melodic phrase. In a bell choir each person can only ring two notes of a phrase. A ringer may not have to think about the pitch of a note but getting the timing right is incredibly more difficult. In addition, the volume has to be 'just right' in order for the phrase to be seamless. You can't consciously think about it. You have to feel it and have faith that the other notes will be rung when their time comes. Subconsciously of course you need to count like "von Count" if you don't want to end up hopelessly lost. While I can't think of any handbell pieces that I'd characterize as "sacred", I also can't think of any ensemble that's inherently more sacred in characterization. Not the sound of the bells. ... they're too tinkly and percussive, but the complete surrender of one's self to the whole in order to make the ensemble work. Whatever bell you're holding needs to be rung with strict dependence upon and in support of all the others. There are no 'stars' in the ensemble nor can one be an example to others (or compensate for them) by ringing louder. Anything that makes you stand out also makes you look the fool and ruins the ensemble in the process.

Chant is characterized as the most sacred of musics. While that's usually attributed to the modes it's written in, arcs of melody, free-flowing rhythm and the sacred writings chant is grounded in, I firmly believe that the idea of absolute ensemble is the essence of its sacred character. A handbell choir requires multiple individuals ringing in succession to create an arc of melody and pulse of rhythm. Since each contributes just one or two moments of a phrase, there's an inherent emphasis on interrelatedness rather than independence. Chant has a seeming independence because it can be sung by a single person to great effect. I'll suggest later on that any individual person is in ensemble within oneself, but first let's ask a question about the objective of a choir singing chant. Is it mainly to get the words across? To present a rich sound of many voices with very slight deviations in pitch and being slightly out of sync with each other? Or is to present the pure sound of a single voice wherein the many are perfectly one?

Interestingly, the best way for an ensemble to "get the words across" is not by singing louder or exaggerating enunciation. It's by pronouncing each syllable at exactly the same time, for the same duration, with precisely the same consonants and shaping each vowel exactly the same way; while also voicing exactly the same pitch, disposition and loudness. Preference for the quality of 'rich' vs 'pure' may be a question of personal taste, but only purity offers a sense of transcendence; which is kinda what you're going for in a spiritual setting. Chant was what Augustine was referring to when he wrote about music having the capacity to "instill a deep sense of devotion in weaker minds". If you read his *Confessions* (bk 9, chpt 12) you'll find that it was the beauty of a child's repeated melodic phrase that caught and held his attention long enough to decipher the words being sung. As strong as Augustine's mind was intellectually, his *Confessions* clearly show it to be spiritually weak at that point in his life. Being the intellectual giant that he was, music probably couldn't do more for him than to carry the directive the child sang - "take up and read". His disposition demanded he physically get up and go find a bible to read. The religious text underlying

chant saves us the trouble of getting up by simply changing focus from melody to lyric, but my focus here is on the music itself.

We can learn something of chant's sacred character by examining Augustine's experience. Why a child's voice? Children's voices have a purity that's displaced by richness and nuance as they mature. A child's voice has no vibrato to muddle their pitch and the intervals they sing have not been tempered by the culture in which they live. Rather, they sing the innate and universal measures of pure and perfect intervals. "Innate and universal" is crucial to gaining any insights on early music (historically and developmentally). Changes in pitch are only recognizable as melody because of an inner understanding of these pitches in relation to a tonal center. When the child sings, it holds a tonal center in mind while moving away from and drawing closer to it by discrete steps called tones or notes. Each step has an impetus either to a neighboring tone or to the center tone. If these steps and intervals - as they relate to a center - were not universally known to every human being, there would be as many strains of music with their own unique vocabulary and grammar as there are strains of language. It's also unlikely that a small child could produce a musical sentence affecting Augustine as deeply as this one did if that melody were just childish drivel.

We also need to bear in mind that back then, music was neither pervasive nor available at the push of a button. The opportunity to learn even the simplest intervals, structure and rhythms of music by mimicry would have been very limited and yet infants coo melodies prior to forming words. That's probably because they understand the music of language long before they understand anything else. You can say awful things to an infant, but if you say them sweetly it will be content; say nice things roughly though and it'll be disturbed. What they innately perceive and respond to is the tone, texture and temperament of voice. Next they'll learn the rhythm, articulation, ornamentation, melody and phrasing of spoken language and only at the end come semantics. All of the elements of music are already present in spoken language. They're subtle but they're there. Don't take my word for it but inside your head read this next phrase ... "in a monotone voice at a constant meter with no accents, inflections or pauses and see how it feels". Robot ... not human ... right? And didn't you really want to pause at that comma? If that little exercise helped persuade you that music underlies language, then it's worth considering that the words of my phrase could have been *any* string of words. The point didn't come across by understanding the words, but solely from the inner experience of the absence of musical elements in "robot voice".

I'm glad Augustine was in a rush to find a bible once he thought about the words "take up and read" since that spurred him on the path he took and I enjoy his writings. What I think he missed out on though, was savoring and participating in the pure religious experience of beauty inviting him into harmony. If he would have "taken up and read" what was in his heart at that moment rather than run into the comfort of his intellect however, he might have been frozen in place by love. By his own description, there he was, sitting alone in spiritual anguish, crying out to his Lord with tears of contrition in his eyes when the child's melody instantly altered his countenance. Had he sat in stillness ... absorbing the beauty ... and out of thankfulness joined the child's voice in song so that the two of them resounded as one - his mind would have been engaged along with his soul in nothing other than "being one". One with the child in song; one within himself whereby mind and soul are drawn to the reciprocally reflecting and inwardly known true measures and zenithal beauty of pure and perfect intervals; and one with his Lord, his God - for where else do inner standards come from and through whom else's love could two persons become so perfectly united in time and timbre as to "be one voice"?

It's not divine mandate that harmonizes two people into one through music. It's desire on the part of each individual not only to attain within themselves the innate universal standards of pure and perfect intervals but to listen so carefully to the other - and pay such close attention to the logic and structure of the music - that they can feel the other as part of their internal process. In persons with a reciprocal desire to be as one, it is love for the truth and beauty of the music which yields the perfect harmony of oneness. If it's true that love is in the heart, then if I "take up and read" what's in my heart, I'll ultimately find that it's love for the innate, inner standards that make the perfect harmony of unity possible. Music is just one mode of expressing and attaining it. And chant is just one type of music calling for unity of persons. Chant is probably the most primal and basic though because it consists of a single melodic line that makes adherence to inner universal standards all the more crucial; since individualistic embellishments ruin the sense of unity by standing out.

Engaging the inner standards in solitude can already bring out the sense of being touched by 'the Sacred' as one's heart, mind and soul all strive for the same goal with their own capacities. When done in community however, there's an extension and amplification of the love one feels for the harmony of truth and beauty within oneself because of the added dimension of harmonizing with other people. One may be coming to these standards by merely listening to Gregorian Chant, or a raga or an Islamic cantor or the sounding of a temple bell in East Asia if the listener is astutely gauging what it perceives against its inner standards. Whatever the mode (listener or participant) or avenue however, it's the same sense of unity that's instilled in each person by 'the Sacred'. A person could even be an agnostic or a stone atheist but if tinged by a feeling of transcendence when united in this inner harmony they may reconsider their mindset ... which brings us back to Augustine's observation that certain types of music can instill feelings of devotion in minds with a weakly developed spiritual sense.

Handbell ringing - unlike singing - does not task the individual to give voice to the pitch of a note according to an inner standard since the bell itself has that pitch by design. But unlike singing, handbell ringing demands the surrender of individuality to community by design. If the ringer before you just rang their bell slightly ahead of the beat, you need to adjust so that your bells sounds 'in time' with what's going on. Ringing exactly on the beat, in that context, will throw off the whole sense of ensemble. So even though you're right ... you're wrong. Truth lies in the score as written but only relative to what's happening at the moment. Beauty lies in the seamless flow of one ringer with respect to all the others. A transcendent love for the music appears when the entirety of ensemble negotiates the truth and beauty of the score relative to each other in the moment of performance as perfectly in harmony as possible.

Whether one's singing or ringing, rehearsing or performing, the degree of sacredness in music derives from inner sensibilities and a drive toward innate standards in the harmony of communion. Even tipsily slurring a drinking song *could* be sacred *if* music is only a pretext to come into communion with a person 'going through something'. It's not the notes of music or the lyrics that are sacred. It's love for the other in unity with the Sacred that's sacred. Lyrics and the character of different types of music can yield a more explicit sacred quality, but ultimately what makes music sacred is the harmony of communion: Harmony within oneself; with the others one is engaged with; and with the Divine reaching us individually through our innate and universal inner sensibilities for truth and beauty as affirmed by love.