Jonathan Arnold


Few would wish to dispute the claim that organised religion in the Western world has, since at least the nineteenth century, been in steady decline. Certainly, Jonathan Arnold, in _Sacred Music in Secular Society_, has no wish to quarrel with this contention. His concern, rather, lies in exploring why it is that sacred music, far from mirroring this trend, has in fact shown a remarkable degree of resistance to the forces of secularisation, and is, in many respects, thriving. Indeed, as he points out, while faith is being vilified by atheists, and statistics show that Christian religious participation at ordinary parish church level appears to be in irretrievable decline, attendance at religious services sung by professional choirs in British cathedrals has increased by a huge 30 per cent in the last decade. Arnold’s volume endeavours to account for this stark anomaly, and to explain why “western Christian sacred music of the classical tradition, perhaps now more than ever, appeals to such a wide and varied audience” (1).

In his search for an answer, Arnold, who, in addition to being an Oxford academic and Anglican priest, is also an accomplished choral singer and former member of the elite choir The Sixteen, first turns to neuroscience. He is particularly impressed by the work of the psychiatrist and literary scholar, Iain McGilchrist, who, in his magisterial study, _The Master and His Emissary_, claims that Western society since the Enlightenment has been increasingly dominated by “left brain” analytical, theoretical and utilitarian modes of thought to the detriment of more holistic and integrative approaches associated with “right brain” consciousness. This has led not only to the growing separation between the “rational” and the “spiritual”, but to an increasingly mechanistic, fragmented and decontextualised world. Arnold agrees with McGilchrist that, as music is a natural expression of the nature of the right hemisphere, it can serve to fill the emptiness in our consciousness which has been aggravated by our over-dependence on our left-hemisphere brain. Music, for Arnold, is thus “the bridge between two places: sacred and secular” (154 and 155).

Arnold’s book is divided into two main sections: Part I investigates the practice of sacred music, and Part II explores the reception of sacred music. In undertaking his research for this volume, Arnold conducted a series of interviews with several notable literati, all of whom both participate in, and endeavour to preserve, the rich cultural legacy of sacred music. He skilfully integrates the transcripts of these interviews into his text, and the result is an engaging dialogue between his own roles as scholar, pastor and musician and the various
professional positions of his interlocutors. Among those interviewed include philosophers and scholars of aesthetics (most notably Roger Scruton), church leaders (especially Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury), composers (such as Robert Saxton and James McMillan) and, finally, performers with both sacred (such as James O'Donnell, Organist and Master of Choristers at Westminster Abbey) and secular (for instance, Peter Phillips, founder and Director of the Tallis Scholars) associations.

In the main, the interviews unfold antiphonally, and, as the book moves towards its conclusion, there is broad consensus among these various “voices of authority” that sacred music is, in essence, grounded in plainchant, which evolved historically through Renaissance polyphony, and then reached its apogee in the great ecclesiastical music of William Byrd, Josquin des Prez and Johann Sebastian Bach. There is general agreement that this illustrious musical tradition has, in turn, enabled modern composers, such as Arvo Pärt, Henryk Górecki, and Sir John Tavener to build on the great sacred music of the past in order to ensure that secular society in the future might also experience beauty and transcendence.

At its heart, Arnold claims, sacred music “points to something far greater than itself” (10). This greater something is “the message and ministry of Christ” (11). Although he acknowledges that music has the capacity to evoke spiritual sentiments in those who subscribe to other religious traditions, his exclusive focus on Christian sacred music in general, and Anglican liturgical music in particular, makes his exploration of sacred music per se far too narrow. While this is perhaps understandable given that Arnold is a clergyman whose milieu is that of high English church music, it unfortunately proves to be one of the book’s key shortcomings.

In addition to its ethnocentrism, an implicit elitism also pervades the book. Arnold maintains, for instance, that English church music has the ability not only of affording churchgoers and concertgoers an experience of the numinous which would not otherwise be available to them within secular society, but also of connecting the sacred to the secular, and, through enriching the latter, transforming civilisation as a whole. What precisely constitutes “civilisation” is never subjected to serious scrutiny, however. On the contrary, Arnold’s working assumption seems to be that civilisation equates to English Christianity, and its cultural guardians are an elite class of classical composers, performers and public intellectuals. He thus fails to sufficiently acknowledge that, in our heterogeneous and multicultural society, sacred music – and mystical encounter through music – finds expression in a far wider variety of ethnic and cultural forms.

The volume also suffers from methodological weaknesses. While Part II ostensibly deals with how sacred music is received in secular society, interviews