

Knox Choir celebrates 150th anniversary

Peter Matheson spoke at the choir 150th dinner on the traditions that have kept Knox singing for 150 years.

“Arise my love, my fair one, for the winter is past, the flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come. O my dove in the clefts of the rock, let me see your face, let me hear your voice.” (*Song of Solomon*)

There are times words run out on you, you either buy flowers, do something practical, or sing. Music is not an ancillary language, an add-on to lectern or pulpit. It may well be, with dance, the primal one, as Oliver Sacks suggests, especially in religious experience, which is all about shifts in consciousness, feelings of awe and wonder, changes in our bodily senses (to quote one definition). Singing allows us to link up with others, to get out of ourselves, plumb emotions we usually keep safely zipped up, get body and mind and spirit into sync. The Psalmist knew that, John Wesley knew that, we in Knox know that. Music’s rhythms and melodies are a ladder to God, or hers to us. My heart and flesh cry out to the living God.

Almost from its beginnings, Knox Church wriggled out of the puritan Free Church tradition’s suspicion of organs and choirs, as Peter Stockwell’s fine chronicle shows. It had been a strong tradition which was necessary for a time; it restored priority to education and justice in impoverished little Scotland, and showed proper contempt for hifalutin’ pomp and ceremony. High liturgy had too often gone with indifference to the poor and to the tough religious questions.

Scotland’s unaccompanied metrical psalms, tunes often in minor key, like Martyrs, still stir me as nothing else in the world does, a bit like the Maori waiata or the Negro spirituals. In the dangerous days of the early Reformation in France folk gathered defiantly at street-corners to sing these unaccompanied psalms; the first step to upsetting all manner of apple carts. Jane Dawson, in her wonderful biography of Knox, sees the psalms as the key link between church, home, and the grim political struggle; a bit like singing the blues, facing down life’s dark side, substituting maybe for the old belief in Purgatory. The minister of St Giles, Edinburgh, the incomparable



Gilleasbuig Macmillan, once told me he only could only cope with the *Jingle-Bells* frippery at Christmas by chanting penitential psalms as he walked up the Mound to the High St.

But we no longer live in impoverished Scotland. With our organ, choir, piano, trumpets, recorders, fiddles, we are blessed with a choral tradition that frees us from the tyranny of now, of trendiness, as if nothing ever happened before our generation. It has opened us up to the best of our catholic traditions: Greek, Latin, German, French, Celtic, English, American, Maori. You choristers remind us that we belong to every age and to none, to every country and to none; with choir and merry organ

we can also tap into the yearnings of ordinary folk for that spiritual home they have lost. Christmas Eve and other special occasions. This yoking of challenging preaching and great music is bedrock for us; there is a powerful dialectic there, which opens up the possibility of deep healing, being swept off our feet; as near as Presbyterians can get to rebirthing. When do we have tears in our eyes at worship, get stirred to face our demons, take on the world again? So often it’s the music. You are dangerous people, you musicians.

Those of us in the pews see you in the choir not as individuals, easy on the eye as you are, but as, a single living, breathing organism, a sort of choral ant-heap, inter-generational, soprano/ alto/ tenor/ bass. Because of your musical gifts, because you have put in the hours, turned up whether you felt like crawling out of bed or not, you touch us where it matters, light the fuse of hope. You are not, of course, the only

group like that in Knox. We are a many-cloistered place. I think of Council, Deacons Court, the Youth Teachers, young Professionals, our extraordinary team of caterers, the intercessors and welcomers and flower-arrangers, but in worship you remind us in a special way that we are family. Your passion and dynamism help us, too, to pulse, to beat out a rhythm, maybe even a syncopated one. And I don’t just mean when singing the hymns. Hildegard of Bingen had a vision of three beautiful figures, caritas, humilitas and pax, gathered around a fountain; I, love, am the glory of the living God. And by the splendour

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that I am, the living light of the blessed angels glows. It was I who wrote humanity, which is rooted in me like a reflection in water. I am the living fountain.

Beauty, a friend said to me recently, is never a luxury. You remind us of that. When I learnt piano as a teenager, Roy Spackman was my teacher. I used to follow Peter Matthews into his studio. I can still see Spacky, no longer young, clambering on to the organ console to conduct the congregation for the broadcast services which were such a feature of the 1950s. That infectious enthusiasm comes across today in your singing and music-making.

By human standards we happen to be an intelligent congregation. (We don't know what God thinks of us.) We use our minds well. We have active lives outside of church. We need these professional and domestic silos we live and work in. And we are all individuals. Born alone, believing alone, dying alone, as Luther put it. But we also need to get out of our minds and our silos, our day-to-day immediacies. In our throw-away culture there is such a dearth of lamentation, such an embarrassment about rapture, soaring to the stars crying glory. Music does that for us. I happen to like the sweep of the robed choir down the aisle because worship is drama, celebration; lamentation and rapture; it spreads the subversive rumour that there is more to life than shopping.



We are so lucky. We all have memories of quite awful church choirs, locked into sentimental ditties, oozing mediocrity; or of elitist choirs at an infinite remove from reality. At Knox you keep coming back to earth. As a teenager here I took great pleasure in studying one senior chorister who would blow his nose into a huge handkerchief and spend the next five minutes minutely inspecting his rich harvest... As a child of the Manse I even remember his name, but wild horses wouldn't make me betray it. Any decent ecclesiology, of course, knows that the whole congregation is a choir. We are here to rejoice, weep, harmonise, affirm together. Minister, elders, choir, organist, congregation, children, old and young. In Edinburgh I would stand on the terraces of the Hibs Easter Road ground every fortnight and be swept into waves of elation or devastation as the Hibeers won or lost. If we removed the pews from Knox maybe the same corporate release could happen here. The big word for being on the move is eschatology, sensing that the Kingdom is just round the corner, tipping into prophetic action, healing. That man of Nazareth on his dusty road, every day meeting new people, finding new words. I wonder what folk songs he sang on the way. But maybe eschatology and pews don't go together.

When the organ thunders, when the choir breaks out into its Hallelujahs, what are we supposed to do, chained down in our pews?

In St Augustine's North African church in Hippo, there were concentric rings around the altar, the clergy, the holy virgins, and so on, and only at the very back the inquisitive or inquiring auditors. Everyone was existentially involved. I'm just wondering how we can better respond to your primal language of music, and to the energy flowing from the pulpit, the living Word. At present a metaphorical Rood Screen separates choir and minister off from Knox congregation. So let's think, how together we can break it down. I think we need a sort of bear pit, mosh pit, theatre pit, interactive space. Enough! We're here today to celebrate, to sing your praises and those of the long line of precentors, organists, choir-members on whose shoulders you stand. To recognise all the sweat and money and tears that lie behind the music. I see Gerald Wilson, Jack Thomson and so many others in the pews and know they are still singing with you in their hearts. Your primal language takes our words, our caring, our work for justice, our truth-seeking, and makes them, as the Good Book says, into a new song. You are the song we sing. We thank you.

— Peter Matheson

