

MUSIC FOR A KING

A reflection on the poetry of George Herbert, poet and musician

© Canon Jeremy Davies 2009

It is well known that George Herbert was a musician. We have the biographical evidence of Isaac Walton to whose famous account I shall return, but more importantly we have the internal evidence from George Herbert's own writings. We have of course the musical images to which he returns quite often, in which music is sometimes a metaphor for poetry, his own craft, in which Herbert is the musician. Sometimes the music becomes a theological nostrum as in 'Easter' where all music – "*three parts vied*" as Herbert describes it – becomes an allegory of the Holy Trinity. Or very commonly music is seen as the vehicle of grace whereby the divine presence and the divine gift penetrates human affairs or provides the wings on which human yearning may fly to be united with the divine. And sometimes Herbert takes a complete musical idea to make a theological point.

I often point out to couples coming for marriage preparation the strength of the old Book of Common Prayer marriage service compared to the modern rite. "*With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship and all my worldly goods with thee I share in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*" Here the nub of the matter, the coming together of a couple in matrimony, is expressed through the grammar of the sentence. "*I thee*" and "*thee I*" yoked together by grammar as they will soon be yoked together both by love and by God.

In the same vein, Herbert uses a musical form (as in 'Sin's Round' or 'The Echo') to make a profound theological point. And surely that is the intention of all Herbert's poetry: whatever the diversity of his imagery, reflecting the range of his mind, his extraordinary career or the times in which he lived with all its religious turbulence and New World discovery – whatever the diversity of imagery, his intention is very focused and this focus is entirely theological. His delight is in the majesty of God and his saving acts in Jesus Christ through which humankind is brought into intimacy with God himself. We all love Herbert's poem 'Love' – among the most perfect sonnets in the literary canon. But apart from its beauty, wrought in simplicity, and its profundity of thought and spiritual understanding, it stands as an emblem of Herbert's main intellectual and spiritual and moral concerns.

*"You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat
So I did sit and eat."*

And apart from the substance of the poetry, there is the form, which is so varied in Herbert (almost as much as in his contemporary, Vaughan). How many other poets wrote with such a varied palette of alliteration, assonance, metre, rhythm and rhyme? Perhaps in the very diversity of his diction, Herbert was expressing the diversity he discerned in God's handiwork.

It is around three distinctive aspects of Herbert and music that I want to weave this talk – musical imagery, musical form and musical diction. But first of all, by way of introduction, I want to locate George Herbert in his musical world. Herbert's world was a Renaissance world. True, George Herbert had turned his back on many of the delights of that world, either at Cambridge or at court, where he would have found much to divert his mind, catch his eye, tickle his musical, literary and artistic sensibility. But he chose a parson's habit and this benefice of Fugglestone with Bemerton.

However, Salisbury was not such a cultural backwater as Charles I may have deemed it when importuned by the then Earl of Pembroke on George Herbert's behalf. For a start, Wilton was the seat of Herbert's cousin, the Earl of Pembroke, and so a centre for the arts. It is thought that the first performance of 'As You Like It' may have taken place at Wilton, and certainly James I and his court were entertained at Wilton House from October to December 1603. This was some thirty years before Herbert arrived in Salisbury, and almost half a century before the fire of 1647 which destroyed Wilton House and then its subsequent rebuilding by Inigo Jones and others in the Palladian style which one recognises today. But just to mention Shakespeare at one end of the century and Inigo Jones, Van Dyck, Rubens and Reynolds in the second half of the century, suggests that Wilton and Salisbury were anything but a cultural or intellectual backwater. We know from Isaac Walton's biography that George Herbert came regularly to the Cathedral Close, to make music with friends after he had attended Evensong. Let me quote the passage from Walton:

“His chieffest recreation was Music, in which heavenly art he was a most excellent master, and did himself compose many Divine Hymns and Anthems, which he set and sang to his lute or viol. And though he was a lover of retiredness, yet his love of Music was such, that he went usually twice every week, on certain appointed days, to the Cathedral Church in Salisbury. And at his return would say ‘that his time spent in prayer, and Cathedral-music elevated his soul, and was his Heaven upon earth.’ But before his return thence to Bemerton, he would usually sing and play his part at an appointed private Music-meeting.”

If intellectual and artistic stimulation were provided at the Pembroke palace, then Salisbury Cathedral and the Close provided something else. Not only were the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the golden age of English letters (Shakespeare, Marlow, Kidd, Johnson, Sidney and Spencer, Cranmer, Coverdale and Tyndale to name only the most illustrious), they also witnessed the flowering of English polyphony in both sacred and secular music – and this despite the religious turbulence of the age. Herbert would have known the work of Tallis and Tavener, Shepherd, Tye, Morley, Campion (another poet who was also a lutenist and a composer), Rossiter and William Byrd, whom it is more than likely Herbert would have met at his mother's home in Charing Cross when Herbert was a pupil at Westminster School.

Almost inevitably, then as now, the Cathedral and its music would have stood at the heart of the musical life of the community. Giles Tomkins, who was the organist and master of the choristers from 1636 and again after the restoration of Charles II from 1660, may have been a chorister tutor from as early as 1629 and would almost certainly have known George Herbert. Like Herbert himself, Tomkins was a Welshman and had been organist of Kings College Cambridge before he moved to Salisbury. He was the brother of the more famous composer, Thomas Tomkins, who was organist first of St David's Cathedral and subsequently Worcester Cathedral. The fact that at Herbert's funeral at Bemerton in 1633, the Cathedral's singing men and choristers sang the burial office, suggests that Herbert knew the singers and not surprisingly had established a rapport with them.

The Imagery of Music

Let me take two poems which use music as a metaphor but which also revolve around the same preoccupation – Herbert's constant preoccupation, namely his recognition that it is in simple penitence and repentance rather than in magnificent, noble or heroic deeds that we gain access to God. In this sense, Herbert is a true son of the Reformation. Even though he has the skills of a great poet, he knows that they avail nothing in the court of heaven. His words are empty and vain if they do not come from a humble and sincere heart and mind. Just as the court and academe offered worldly temptations on which he turned his back in search of a more spiritually satisfying occupation, so now, as a simple but sophisticated parson here in Wiltshire, he continued to struggle with the demons of pride and self esteem which threatened to undermine his relationship with God.

In the first poem 'Sion', which Herbert must have based on those verses in the Acts of the Apostles (7:47-48) where Stephen says: "*David won God's favour and asked permission to have a temple built for the House of Jacob – though it was Solomon who actually built God's house for him. Even so the most high does not live in a house that human hands have built.*"

Herbert reflects on this passage of scripture, perhaps for a sermon, so that the poem is almost a meditation or preparatory notes. But it is also a profound reflection on the nature of humankind and a sensitive appraisal of his own condition as he discerns his pilgrimage to heaven. In the first verse of 'Sion' which, like a prayer, is addressed directly to God and begins: "*Lord*", the poet is like an admiring tourist in any age, wandering in amazement around, for example, Salisbury Cathedral. But in the second verse, there is a questioning note as one might today: "Fancy spending all that money on the Cathedral or its vestments or its music. Is this the way to walk close with God?" "*Something there was, that sow'd debate*" – meaning that either all the magnificence of the temple raised a question mark or else, despite the magnificence, it resulted in argumentative bickering.

"Wherefore thou quitt'st thy ancient claim"

i.e. God goes back on his request for a temple to be built for him and the architecture of God's house, however magnificent, becomes a source of sinfulness for the bricks and mortar of God's presence are found in the heart, not in cathedrals and temples.

*“And now thy architecture meets with sin;
For all thy frame and fabric is within.”*

In the third stanza, the struggle becomes more personal – less a theoretical discussion about the value of good works as a spiritual exercise and more a battle of wills between Herbert himself and his God, which reminds me of the fight between Jacob and the angel as they struggle together until dawn.

*“There thou art struggling with a peevish heart,
Which sometimes crosseth thee, thou sometimes it:
The fight is hard on either part.
Great God doth fight, he doth submit.”*

And then the resolution of the struggle in the final submission of the final couplet.

*“All Solomon's sea of brass and world of stone
Is not so dear to thee as one good groan.”*

The final verse is a coda which marks a change of key and introduces that Herbertian sense of God's grace transforming human lives. Though, the rest of the poem seems to say, we are weighed down with brass and stone and heavy things: yet the groan of submission is a liberation. And the poem ends with the paradoxical truth that groans of sincere penitence and contrition, far from being dismal, are “*music for a king*”.

SION

*Lord, with what glory wast thou serv'd of old,
When Solomon's temple stood and flourished!
Where most things were of purest gold;
The wood was all embellished
With flowers and carvings, mystical and rare:
All show'd the builders, crav'd the seer's care.*

*Yet all this glory, all this pomp and state
Did not affect thee much, was not thy aim;
Something there was, that sow'd debate:
Wherefore thou quitt'st thy ancient claim:
And now thy Architecture meets with sin;
For all thy frame and fabric is within.*

*There thou art struggling with a peevish heart,
Which sometimes crosseth thee, thou sometimes it:
The fight is hard on either part.
Great God doth fight, he doth submit.
All Solomon's sea of brass and world of stone
Is not so dear to thee as one good groan.*

*And truly brass and stones are heavy things,
Tombs for the dead, not temples fit for thee:
But groans are quick, and full of wings,
And all their motions upward be;
And ever as they mount, like larks they sing;
The note is sad, yet music for a king.*

Then, as an example of the musical image in Herbert's poetry, take what is almost the last poem in *'The Church'*, which is *'Doomsday'*, where Herbert, in a group of four poems, considers the last things: death, heaven and judgement, before the whole sequence ends with the incomparable resolution of *"Love bade me welcome"*. It is as though in all the struggles of this world, with God and with human vanity, love has the last word.

'Doomsday' is a five stanza poem and each stanza begins: *"Come away"*, perhaps making a reference to the song in Shakespeare's *'Twelfth Night'*, which is itself a reflection on mortality and the loneliness and lovelessness of the end of life. I wonder if Herbert knew the song and is here responding to it in a Christian vein.

Herbert's poem *'Doomsday'* is a serious poem with a lightness of touch and he starts as though he is waking up on the other side of the grave and rubbing his eyes, looking around and seeing who else is there – dead or alive. And when, in the second stanza, Herbert refers to the trump of the resurrection:

*"As peculiar notes and strains
Cure Tarantula's raging pains."*

This is a reference to the belief that the bite of the wolf spider, or tarantula, could only be cured by music and wild dancing! Already the picture painted by the demure and serious Mr George Herbert is becoming more and more surreal by the moment. This is a poem full of humour as George Herbert is uncharacteristically carried away by his flight of fancy. The last but one verse suggests the mediaeval understanding of doomsday, which Herbert, I assume, had vividly in mind from encountering the Doom painting in St. Thomas' Church in Salisbury. At the judgement, so ran the orthodoxy of mediaeval piety, the dead would be raised and given their due reward:

*"Some to winds their body lend,
And in them may drown a friend:
Some in noisome vapours grow
To a plague and public woe."*

And then the final verse is a prayer, in a short-lined, bantering metre – perhaps a prayer not to death or to the dead but now to Christ “*whose flock doth stray*”: “*Man is out of order hurl’d*”, full of decay “*Parcel’d out to all the world.*” Nothing can save him or redeem him but the grace of God, undeserved and unexpected. And as unexpectedly as grace itself, music is introduced as the vehicle by which order may be restored and harmony ensured as the dust of death responds to the music of heaven.

*“Lord, thy broken consort raise,
And the music shall be praise.”*

DOOMSDAY

*Come away,
Make no delay.
Summon all the dust to rise,
Till it stir, and rub the eyes;
While this member jogs the other,
Each one whisp’ring, Live you brother?*

*Come away,
Make this the day.
Dust, alas, no music feels,
But thy trumpet: then it kneels,
As peculiar notes and strains
Cure Tarantula’s raging pains.*

*Come away,
Oh make no stay!
Let the graves make their confession,
Lest at length they plead possession:
Flesh’s stubbornness may have
Read that lesson to the grave.*

*Come away,
Thy flock doth stray.
Some to winds their body lend,
And in them may drown a friend:
Some in noisome vapors grow
To a plague and public woe.*

*Come away,
Help our decay.
Man is out of order hurl’d
Parcel’d out to all the world.
Lord, thy broken consort raise,
And the music shall be praise.*

Musical Form

Shape and form were, it seems, as important to Herbert as the matter on which he discoursed. It is almost as though the form, even the grammar of his poetry, mattered as much as the theology or spirituality that absorbed him. And indeed it did matter because the form was not only a clever conceit or rhetorical device, of which the so-called metaphysical poets were acknowledged masters; the form was itself an instrument of divine reflection. 'The medium is the message' was a mantra from my youth but it is one that George Herbert would have recognised.

Of course every artist works with the constraints of their particular medium and their art consists often in pushing the medium to its limits, needing both the limitations or discipline of the form on the one hand and needing to cross the threshold of the form in order for something to be created that has coherence and intelligibility on the one hand but also, on the other, has freshness, vision and originality. And this is true whether we are talking of Beethoven's 'Grosse Fugue' for example or Shakespeare's 'King Lear' or one of Hopkins' dreadful sonnets or Titian's 'Assumption'. Words certainly are a medium with special challenge as T S Eliot observed when he wrote in his poem 'Burnt Norton':

*"Words strain
Crack and sometimes break under the burden
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place
Will not stay still."*

And the poet, who was attempting to say something compelling and original and true about the human condition, imposes upon him or herself particular constraints, recognising that without the discipline of form, utterance ceases to communicate and becomes incoherent.

So all the great poets have taken the fourteen lines of a sonnet as the litmus test of their art (just as I suppose that the great composers from Haydn onwards, however big their musical canvas and their artistic resources, responded to the challenge and the discipline of the string quartet). But sometimes the poet imposes a sterner discipline, not just to be clever (though I guess there is a certain delight in artistry for artistry's sake) but to say something through the form that complements the narrative of the poem. In Herbert's case of course, we think immediately of 'Easter Wings', which I will read in a moment. There you need to see the poem as well as hear it to enjoy the conceit and skill of the poet. But even without seeing it, Herbert uses the discipline of the wings shape, not only to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus but also to rehearse the central doctrines of Christianity from creation to redemption. He uses, for example, the narrow yoke of the wings in each verse (when the words are necessarily fewest) to suggest the poverty of man ("*most poor*" in the first verse and literally "*most thin*" in the second).

But in both verses the impoverished human being is not alone: for humankind is always accompanied by God (“*with thee*” is repeated in each verse to make this point). And just a point of explanation about the last but one line: “*For, if I imp my wing on thine*” is a falconry term where *imp* means to graft new feathers onto a damaged wing in order to improve or restore the falcon’s powers of flight.

EASTER WINGS

*Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poor:
With thee
Oh let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.*

*My tender age in sorrow did begin:
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sin,
That I became
Most thin.
With thee
Let me combine,
And feel this day thy victory:
For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.*

‘*The Altar*’ – the first in the sequence of poems called ‘*The Church*’ – uses this conceit as well where the visual image of the altar provides the form for the poem so that eye as well as ear, mind and imagination – the whole being in other words – enters into the apprehension of the poem. What begins as a clever conceit becomes as much as anything a spiritual exercise.

I have talked about the poem ‘*Sin’s Round*’ before but I make no apology for reading it again today because no poem could better illustrate the way in which musical form offers Herbert not only the shape for his thought but also the substance of it. In this poem, medium and message seem particularly well-married. You can see in the text that each verse begins with the last line of the preceding verse and the beginning and last lines of the poem are the same to suggest a musical round. Herbert here takes a musical form (a round or canon) in order to reflect on the inevitability and the inescapability of sin. Sin, like a round, never stops: round and round we go, caught forever on the spiral of sin like some helter-skelter to which we are condemned for eternity. He reflects in these three verses on sin in thought, word and deed, with thoughts leading to words; words to deeds and back again in a never-ending cycle.

As I say, the last line of each verse becomes the first line of the succeeding verse as the canonic baton is passed on. And the whole poem is framed by the line:

“Sorry I am, my God, sorry I am”

The burden of so many of Herbert’s poems is the recognition of human wilfulness and penitence, matched and indeed out-matched by the grace of God, supremely and undeservedly demonstrated in *“the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ”*. But there is seemingly no redemption in this poem; no mention of Christ’s sacrifice; no way out of sin’s round. Until you realise that there is a way out built into the poem. The first and last words of the poem implicitly convey the promise of grace: *“Sorry I am, my God, sorry I am”*. It is as though Herbert, while reflecting on human sinfulness, has been at the same time reflecting on those words in the Old Testament: *“The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God thou wilt not despise”*. (The word *“cockatrice”* in the first verse is a reference to a mythical creature which was believed to kill with its breath, breathing fire like a dragon).

SIN’S ROUND

*Sorry I am, my God, sorry I am,
That my offenses course it in a ring.
My thoughts are working like a busy flame,
Until their cockatrice they hatch and bring:
And when they once have perfected their draughts,
My words take fire from my inflamed thoughts.*

*My words take fire from my inflamed thoughts,
Which spit it forth like the Sicilian hill.
They vent the wares, and pass them with their faults,
And by their breathing ventilate the ill.
But words suffice not, where are lewd intentions:
My hands do join to finish the inventions.*

*My hands do join to finish the inventions:
And so my sins ascend three stories high,
As Babel grew, before there were dissensions.
Yet ill deeds loiter not: for they supply
New thoughts of sinning: wherefore, to my shame,
Sorry I am, my God, sorry I am.*

Musical Diction

In talking about Herbert's musical diction – the variety of his rhythm and rhyme and form – I want to reflect on his craftsmanship. It is no surprise that many of Herbert's poems have become well-known hymns and that Alec Roth, Barry Ferguson, Howard Moody and others contributed to that splendid collection of new hymn tunes to Herbert's verses called '*Another Music*'. As one commentator has put it (Margaret Bottrall in her '*George Herbert*'):

“An outstanding characteristic of Herbert's verse is its beautiful flexibility and singing quality. These are pre-eminently the merits of the Elizabethan song writers. Campion and his fellows writing for the voice had evolved stanzas of extraordinary fluency which yet kept the natural rhythms of spoken English. Herbert's variety of stanza form is quite exceptional. So in his period, is his frequent use of refrain and the various musicianly devices common enough among lutenists from Wyatt onwards”.

We could deduce Herbert's passion for music from his poetry without Walton drawing our attention to the fact. We have already noted the numerous allusions to music for music was part of Herbert's imaginative repertoire. Clearly a number of poems in '*The Temple*' were written to be sung – not only as hymns but accompanied by the lute. '*Easter*' for example is as consciously adapted for a musical setting as any piece by Campion. Like a composer, Herbert is looking for a rhythmic form that matches the emotion that he seeks to describe. And as a result there is a huge variety of stanza form in Herbert's poetry. "*Of the 169 poems in 'The Temple', 116 are written in metres that are not repeated*". And though Herbert may have learned much from Donne about the variety of stanza form, Herbert's inventiveness, unlike Donne's on occasion, is never dissonant. "*His poems are all fashioned with the musician's attention to beauty of cadence.*"

What I find most extraordinary about Herbert's poetic diction is the way in which he incorporates the phrases and rhythms of actual speech. Although with Shakespeare as a near contemporary, we should not be surprised at this facility. Herbert manages to combine colloquial rhythms with elegant stanza forms and rhyme schemes. It has been noticed that his verse is much more dramatic than any of the Elizabethan song writers' lyrics because his verse is "*enlivened with questions, exclamations and admonitions*". Occasionally, as in '*Love Unknown*', Herbert writes dialogue which suggests that he could have turned his hand to dramatic verse. Often snatches of conversation are incorporated as in '*The Quip*' or '*Peace*'. Herbert's favourite form though is the one-sided conversation. He raises his tone – sometimes upbraiding or challenging, sometimes querulous, sometimes tender – as he addresses his conscience or an unruly thought or his recalcitrant heart. And he gives his unseen co-locutor a character or a person in a play who wears clothes, sits and eats, even chokes on a bone.

Here are a few lines from the poem 'Assurance':

*"Now foolish thought go on
Spin out thy thread and make thereof a coat
To hide thy shame: for thou hast cast bone
Which bounds on thee and will not down thy throat."*

Perhaps his poem 'Time' expresses the humour, the colloquialism, alongside the seriousness of thought as Herbert involves himself in a conversation with Time. And you will notice in this poem, as in so many others, Herbert's characteristic use of question in his poetry. Some twenty poems in 'The Temple' begin with a question, and there are few in which he does not use the interrogative.

TIME

*Meeting with Time, Slack thing, said I,
Thy scythe is dull; whet it for shame.
No marvel Sir, he did reply,
If it at length deserve some blame:
 But where one man would have me grind it,
 Twenty for one too sharp do find it.*

*Perhaps some such of old did pass,
Who above all things lov'd this life;
To whom thy scythe a hatchet was,
Which now is but a pruning-knife.
 Christ's coming hath made man thy debtor,
 Since by thy cutting he grows better.*

*And in his blessing thou art blest:
For where thou only wert before
An executioner at best;
Thou art a gard'ner now, and more,
 An usher to convey our souls
 Beyond the utmost stars and poles.*

*And this is that makes life so long,
While it detains us from our God.
Ev'n pleasures here increase the wrong,
And length of days lengthen the rod.
 Who wants the place, where God doth dwell,
 Partakes already half of hell.*

*Of what strange length must that needs be,
Which ev'n eternity excludes!
Thus far Time heard me patiently:
Then chafing said, This man deludes:
 What do I here before his door?
 He doth not crave less time, but more.*

Much more could be said to amplify the point I am making about Herbert's diversity and variety with metrical form but, having just savoured some of Herbert's range, I want to end this talk on George Herbert and music with his poem 'Church Music'.

CHURCH MUSIC

*Sweetest of sweets, I thank you: when displeasure
Did through my body wound my mind,
You took me thence, and in your house of pleasure
A dainty lodging me assign'd.*

*Now I in you without a body move,
Rising and falling with your wings:
We both together sweetly live and love,
Yet say sometimes, God help poor Kings.*

*Comfort, I'll die; for if you post from me,
Sure I shall do so, and much more:
But if I travel in your company,
You know the way to heaven's door.*

Jeremy Davies
August 2009