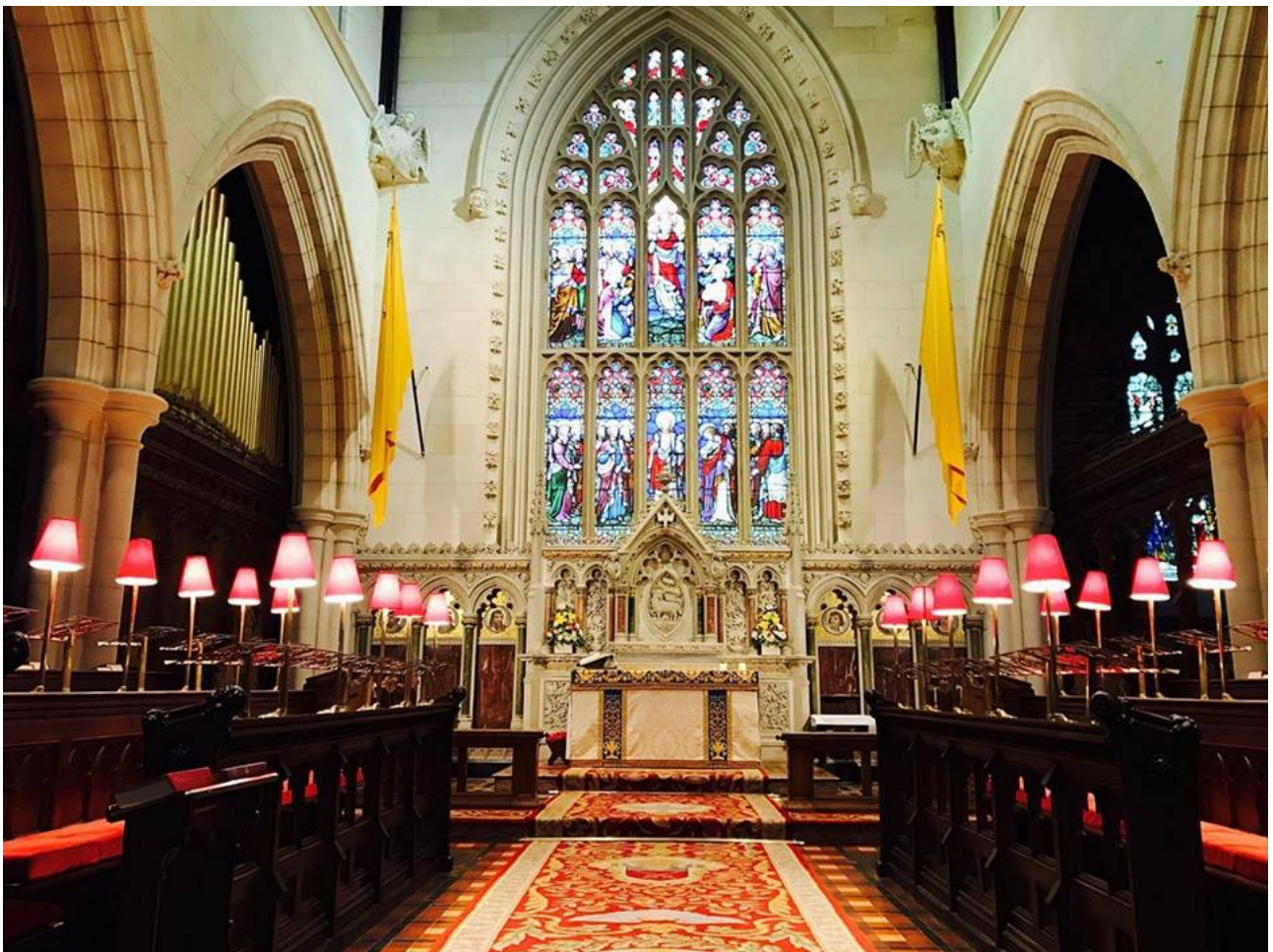




**FAITH PERSPECTIVE -
Thank You for the Music**



St Columb's Cathedral, Derry

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Many Church musicians are happily secular, and for many years I was one of them. If you had asked me several years ago why I did music, I would have said, "Because I love it." If you had asked me why the Church uses music in worship, I could have told you some aspects of its history, but God had nothing to do with it. Religion was nothing more than a nice vessel for music. That the very existence of music is a mystery did not strike me as particularly interesting.

During my train commuting for a chaplaincy internship at a nearby hospital, I often listened to ABBA. One of the many ABBA songs I've come to enjoy is "Thank You for the Music." Its refrain and title thank a nebulous *you* for the gift of musical expression:

So I say, thank you for the music, the songs I'm singing,
Thanks for all the joy they're bringing,
Who can live without it, I ask in all honesty,
What would life be?
Without a song or a dance what are we?
So I say, thank you for the music,
For giving it to me.

The B-section continues referring to this mysterious "you," in search of just who it is that they're thanking:

And I've often wondered, how did it all start?
Who found out that nothing can capture a heart
Like a melody can?
Well, whoever it was, I'm a fan.

I'm a fan, too. I was curious to see, in this song's Wikipedia article, a juicy piece of trivia. It turns out that in the Swedish version of this song, "Tack för alla sånger," there's a reference to the Church:

Vem behöver religioner?
Dom kan vi va utan.

Or:

Who needs religion?
We can live without it.

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If, as these words suggest, music can replace religion, can music replace God? And if so, who exactly are we thanking? Christianity has something to say about this.

Music is a mystery, and its liturgical presence witnesses to the ultimate mystery: God's revelation as Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead. Now that's something many are not prepared to accept. God? Jesus? Resurrection? Can we not just have nice music? And yet Christ is the Mystery of all mysteries, permanently changing the fabric of what we thought was real, revealing instead a reality in which God says, "I am drawing all things to myself" (John 12:32).

Like all aspects of worship, music *points* to something, or actually a *Someone*: God Almighty, the one who gave us music. A classmate once said to me, "Music is the primal form of prayer." He is absolutely right. We do music because we are crying out to God, knowing instinctively that our theological baby talk, however useful, only takes us so far.

Music is a foretaste of God's kingdom, a sign of the joy he desires for each of us, a joy that comes from being conformed into God's image. In Duke theologian Jeremy Begbie's words, "the arts ... can show us how things *could* be, even in this world" with all its sin and brokenness.

Perhaps this is why Anglicanism, like many other Christian traditions, understands music as especially suitable for worshipping God "in the best sort of melody and music that may be conveniently devised" (as Queen Elizabeth enjoined upon her church in 1559). I am thankful that Anglicans believe it, whatever the reason. It got me into church as a child, and kept me there through my agnostic teenage and college years, and the longer I was there the more curious I became about just who to thank for all of this beauty, all of this harmony and joy. Both secular and liturgical music, when not properly ordered toward God, can distract equally from the worship of God, just as false religiosity dishonors true religion. We should take a hint from Bach, who signed many of his compositions with "S.D.G.," "soli Deo gloria": glory to God alone. Bach is great, but God is greater.

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We should continue inviting talented musicians to sing and play in our churches, whether as professionals or enthusiastic amateurs. Some in our congregations may resent musicians, thinking they do not care about Jesus — they are only there for the pay, right? But this is shortsighted. There will also be new or longtime members of our parishes who are drawn in primarily, or even solely, by the music. Music is part of God's long game of showing love for his children in all aspects of life, but especially in the Church's liturgical life. If it were not for the music I came to love in the Episcopal Church, I would not have become a Christian.

Music led me to God, as it is leading others. If music is part of God's Word, then perhaps we can say, as God declares in Isaiah, that it "shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:11).

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