

Songs of Love and Hate – Singing Worlds into Existence

Introduction

I want to take us on a short tour through 5 different worlds, each brought into being and sustained by song. When I say “song” I mean music: sometimes music alone, sometimes music and lyric. In one case the song is what is often referred to as “classical” music – although it is a 20th century work. Another is a religious work that combines lyric composed several millennia ago with music only a couple of hundreds of years old. And there’ll also be something very contemporary from a North Shore composer.

Each of these 5 examples will give us a different clue to the way music effectively creates the worlds we live in. They will illustrate the way song helps pattern how we see, interpret and choose. They will help us to see:

- The way song socialises its singers into particular worlds and their values
- The way it cultivates alternative worlds and new sets of values in contrast to those its singers have inherited
- The way song invites people into worlds that might not yet be
- The way it creates the hoped-for-future in the present – what theologians esoterically describe as realised eschatology
- And they will help us to recognise the sometimes stark choices we are invited to make between the competing spiritualities songs embody.

Let’s be clear. When I talk about music creating worlds, I’m not being metaphorical. This isn’t just a figurative way of speaking. Music is actually part of the mechanic that structures who we are, how we interpret our experience and how we choose to live. It is one of the means by which the world we live in finds its form and its meaning. So we do well to pay attention to what it is, how it works, and how it forms us.

Let’s begin with hymns of the faithful.

1. Hymns of the Faithful

// Ye Gates Lift Up Your heads on High (excerpt)

The words of the Scottish Psalter of 1650, from Psalm 24, to the tune St George's Edinburgh by Andrew Thomson. For those within the community it's a signal of Presbyterianism, at once both nostalgic and a means of drawing the past into the present while simultaneously projecting it into the future. It is a doorway to an arcane experience.

Hymns are, by their nature, esoteric. Their meaning lies in the theology of the community that finds its identity in the object of their praise. Once, when that community more or less coincided with the community as a whole, we may have thought we all lived in the same world. That is no longer true.

When we sing hymns today we are announcing a particular world-view. It is different from that of most other members of the community. It's a world-view derived from (although, as we shall see, by no means the same as) our understanding of God.

That is certainly true of traditional hymns. They instructed their singers on how to understand their faith and, through it, the world they lived in. It's no exaggeration to say that they created Christians' worlds by being the lens through which they taught believers to view and interpret reality.

In fact, the Victorian hymns that dominated New Zealand Church life until the last quarter of the 20th century so reflected the age of their genesis that they undoubtedly created a disconnection between church-goers' everyday experience and Christian faith as it was sung, between what worshippers *actually* believed and what they were *supposed* to believe. In many cases that forced a choice, and that led to emptying pews.

Contemporary hymnody has responded to this situation in at least two ways, each of which, in turn, reflects a different theological tradition.

One sought to match the language of religious song with a contemporary understanding of the divine-human relationship. As a hymn-writer often identified with the Iona Community in Scotland, John Bell, has said:

"I discovered that seldom did our hymns represent the plight of poor people to God. There was nothing that dealt with unemployment, nothing that dealt with living in a multicultural society and feeling disenfranchised. There was nothing about child abuse... There was nothing that reflected concern for the developing world, nothing that helped us see ourselves as brothers and sisters to those who are suffering from poverty or persecution."

Bell and colleague Graham Maule chose to articulate their theology through verse because they understood that “while people often forget what they hear preached, they remember what they sing.”¹

Bell and Maule’s new songs – and others in the tradition - subvert the world-view of Victorian hymn singing. They propose some new ways of articulating and even understanding Christian doctrine and, with that, a new world in which religious life is to be lived.

Another response to the “other-worldliness” of many traditional hymns has been concerned not with updating the theology, but updating the old-fashioned music.

Many contemporary choruses and worship songs, usually reflecting a more conservative theology, reaffirm traditional orthodox doctrine, but set it to contemporary folk and rock music. They are comfortable with the reactionary theological lens through which these songs define reality, but they update the soundtrack.

Some have noticed that it’s not just the music that’s been updated. Many of these worship songs, while claiming allegiance to doctrinal orthodoxy, seem quite happy to contemporize their theology as well. Perhaps without being aware of it their lyrics often betray strong themes of individualism and eroticism, in particular in the way they express “love for Jesus”. As one blogger has written of Kari Jobe’s song “The More I Seek You”²

“... the entire song plays as homage to spiritual eroticism. The might and power and love of God has been reduced to a song about a mystical and sensual exploration into the forays of requited love to the Jesusboyfriend.”³

All of which is a long way from “Ye Gates Lift Up Your Heads on High”!

But all hymns, whether anthems drawn from the Psalms, lyrics built on evolving theology, or worship songs purporting to safeguard theological orthodoxy, all work to socialise their singers into particular worlds as they codify and normalise their version of core Christian values.

And this is as it should be. Hymns of praise are in the business of shaping values, defining how we are to interpret our experience and consequently effectively creating the world we live in. We should be clear: this is quite deliberate. It is one way the church cultivates its own counter-culture, an ethos alternative to society’s status quo.

1 <http://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-1993/whom-bell-toils-interview-john-bell-iona-community>

2 “The More I Seek You”, Kari Jobe, © 1999 Gateway Create Publishing (Admin. by EMI Christian Music Publishing)

3 <http://thepaperthinymn.com/2009/09/05/the-more-i-seek-you-kari-jobe/>

And, of course, it's not the only alternative community to sustain its life through song.

2. Dark Star – The sound of a new community

// Dark Star (excerpt)

“The Counter-Culture” was one of the names the media gave the hippie movement of the 1960s which rejected the values and mores of modernist America. A number of communities within that movement rose and fell. One that has endured – so much so that 50 years later it is half a million strong and still growing - was generated by the music of the Grateful Dead.

The Grateful Dead was formed in San Francisco in 1965 and the band's music and lifestyle epitomised the place and time. “In order to gain a clear perspective on the cultural impact of the Grateful Dead”, writes Rachel Wilgoren, “it is necessary to examine the community that has arisen up around them: a community of fans with its own traditions and rituals, morality [and] philosophy...”⁴

Wilgoren goes on to observe that most communities are forged by common interest, perhaps political or religious, or the shared experience of marginalisation. But the community of Deadheads, as they are known, was created by nothing other than a shared commitment to the Grateful Dead's music.

Elizabeth Carroll, writing in *Americana: the Journal of American Popular Culture*, agrees. While hippie values remain a defining feature of Deadhead culture, “no prerequisite to Deadhead identity exists other than a passionate connection with the music of the Grateful Dead; beyond that, generalizations about what constitutes Deadhead identity are difficult to make.”⁵

She goes on to say that “as many Deadheads have turned on to the music of the Grateful Dead, their lives have been utterly changed, as they actively reject values, beliefs, and [life]styles associated with their backgrounds and US mainstream culture in favour of a bohemian, hippie life characterized by liberal or radical views and alternative forms of community and family.”

It's perhaps no surprise that not everyone was happy about the Grateful Dead, nor with their cultural heirs, the Deadheads.

⁴ The Grateful Dead as Community, Rachel Wilgoren, in *Perspectives on the Grateful Dead: Critical Writings* edited by Robert G. Weiner p191
http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2007/carroll.htm

⁵ Elizabeth Carroll, “The Answer to the Atom Bomb: Rhetoric, Identification and the Grateful Dead”, *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture*, Spring 2007, Volume 6, Issue 1
http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2007/carroll.htm

The Grateful Dead was born in the midst of a cultural and sexual revolution. The hippie movement in general, and the Dead among them, championed the use of hallucinogens, in particular marijuana and LSD, linking them to creativity, playfulness and peace. A rejection of the post-war American lifestyle of the 50s and 60s – along with the ready availability of the contraceptive pill - opened a new age of alternative lifestyle and so-called sexual freedom while helping push closed the door on the Victorian cult of virginity.

And then there was the music. Spearheaded by demons like Bob Dylan – who has, of course, since become a cultural icon - the anthems of the counterculture were riddled with themes promoting anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment views, peace and free love. For many the Dead incarnated all these alleged evils.

On the other hand, for many others the music and lifestyle of the Grateful Dead embodied a number of virtues – notably improvisation, participation and freedom from structure – that easily trumped conservatives' concerns.

The Dead's concerts could be anything up to 5 hours long. They were spontaneous events. As guitarist Jerry Garcia told ABC Nightline in 1995, "We don't do a show. So it's not one of those things you can put yourself on automatic pilot and just do. For us you have to be there. You have to pay attention."

Their music is built on attentive improvisation. In many ways it's a form of jazz, the whole band constantly listening and responding to the leads and opportunities offered by other musicians within different song frameworks.

This lack of structure enabled the Dead to break down the barrier between the audience and the band. A blogger on the website "Spiritual Humanism"⁶ noted that "as the band played audiences responded, providing a mood or vibe that then affected the way the band performed and the songs they chose. The event was something created collaboratively, a dynamic work in which everyone played a part. ..."

In the work of the Grateful Dead and the life of the Deadhead community we see the creation of an alternative world: the cultivation of one set of values over another, a preference for one style of life over the status quo, an invitation to reject an inherited world and live in a new one.

While the Grateful Dead largely shunned conventional political life in favour of their post-mainstream world, other musicians have been much more overt in linking music and politics.

⁶ <http://www.spiritualhumanism.org/forum/religion-the-grateful-dead-t1328.html>

3. Music and Politics - Aaron Copland

// Appalachian Spring, Section 7, Doppio Movimento

The seventh section of Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, borrowed - as the critics euphemistically describe melodic theft - from a 19th Century Shaker hymn, "Simple Gifts", written by Joseph Brackett⁷, and perhaps best known to many as the tune to Sydney Carter's "Lord of the Dance"⁸.

Copland was an interesting figure. *Appalachian Spring*, which premiered in 1944, was an empathetic response to American Vice-President Wallace's ardently socialist proclamation announcing his intention to balance America's "Bill of Rights" democracy with the economic democracy of the Soviet Union. This grandly declared new order lies behind Copland's vision, one he worked out through his music.

Copland's idealism would lead him into conflict with Senator Eugene McCarthy in the 1950s. He appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1953 and, while he was able to deflect his inquisitors' questions skillfully enough, he didn't manage to convince the Senator that he was not "Un-American". And perhaps, given Copland's track record, that's no surprise.

In 1934 Copland had been active in his support for Communist farmers near Bemidji in Minnesota. He even shared a podium with the communist candidate for governor there. Two years later he was to support Earl Browder, the communist candidate for President of the United States.

After his appearance before the House Committee, the FBI continued to try to build a case against Copland but, despite considering charges of perjury and fraud, there was insufficient evidence to warrant a prosecution.⁹

Ironically, in the end, the political establishment buried the accusations against Copland as it did with those against so many other artists. Copland's music was prominent at the presidential inauguration of Joe McCarthy's colleague, Richard Nixon and he received citations from Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. As Bill Morelock has noted, "the House of Representatives, which called him "un-American" in 1953, gave him the Congressional Gold Medal, its highest civilian honour, in 1986."¹⁰

⁷ Brackett, a lifelong resident of Maine, first joined the Shakers at Gorham, Maine, when his father's farm helped to form the nucleus of a new Shaker settlement. The tune was written in 1848. See Hall, Roger L. (2006). *The Story of SIMPLE GIFTS*. PineTree Press.

⁸ Carter adapted the Shaker tune for his hymn, first published in 1963.

⁹ See *Conscience vs. McCarthy: the political Aaron Copland* by Bill Morelock, Minnesota Public Radio, May 3, 2005.
http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/2005/05/03_morelockb_unamerican/

¹⁰ *ibid*

Hero or villain, there's no doubting that Copland and his music had an agenda. As early as the 1920s he had been looking for ways to combine social critique with mass appeal.¹¹ “[His] ballet “Hear Ye! Hear Ye!” (1934) uses a distorted version of “The Star-Spangled Banner” to convey, in Copland’s words, “the corruption of legal systems and courts of law.”

Much of his music contained a left-wing agenda. But irrespective of the politicians’ concerns, Copland ended up being embraced by the general public, possibly because his radicalism was seldom visible on the surface. Rather, the public warmed to the tone and tenor of music that was at once populist and confident, idealistic, even utopian.

Appalachian Spring was intended to portray a mythic picture of life on the American frontier. It was to become an “all-American music icon”. As Alex Ross observes in his wonderful book on 20th Century music, “The Rest is Noise”, “Like so many other Copland works [Appalachian Spring] offers images of an ideal nation, the America that could have been or might still be.”¹²

Copland badly wanted to write music with mass appeal. And, at the same time, he wanted to inspire those same masses to offer the mainstream listener a vision of an alternative future. By providing images of a society built on values derived from a mix of romanticism and socialism, he wanted to invite people into the world he had created, “the American that might have been”.

In the end Appalachian Spring succeeds as an offer, an act of evangelism. It portrays, perhaps even invents, the America Copland hoped for and believed in. As Alex Ross puts it, “Copland conjures a perfect American Sunday... when the music of all peoples streams from the open doors of a white-steeped church that does not yet exist.”¹³

This desire to bring into being a world that is not yet can find expression at a populist as well as a political level. In New Zealand, biculturalism continues to be one theatre in which the tension between what we are and what we might yet become is played out.

11 Ross, Alex. (2009). *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*. Harper Perennial. p297ff

12 Ross op cit p331

13 Ross, op cit p332

4. Singing a Bicultural Nation – Living in Womad’s New World

Womad, the World of Music, Arts and Dance, is a platform of festivals hosted throughout the world. They feature so-called “world music”, musicians “you may have never heard of but who are world famous in their own country”¹⁴. Founder Peter Gabriel has said of Womad:

"The festivals have always been wonderful and unique occasions and have succeeded in introducing an international audience to many talented artists... Equally important, the festivals have also allowed many different audiences to gain an insight into cultures other than their own through the enjoyment of music."¹⁵

One of the groups playing at Womad in 2012 was a New Zealand band called The Yoots, formed in 2006 by Joe Lindsay, trombonist with Wellington’s internationally acclaimed Fat Freddy’s Drop. Initially the group went down a calypso-ska route with a healthy dollop of country and soul thrown in. But by 2010 traditional Maori songs, waiata like “Hine E Hine” and “E Papa Waiari” started making an appearance on the Yoots’ set-list. By Womad 2012 the Yoots played nothing but reconfigured waiata.

Joe Lindsay recalls the genesis of this change.

“I remember being away with [Fat] Freddy’s doing a gig at a super yacht conference in Majorca, and a London based kapa haka group were performing...

“Afterwards we were all drinking beers and singing songs, remembering the songs from growing up in Northland and tunes from primary school like ‘Nga Iwi E’, ‘Tutira Mai’... such great songs!

“So when I was back in Wellington and thinking about repertoire I decided to have a go with [mixing together] some of these tunes and some Yoots flavour.”¹⁶

These songs are buried in the playground memory of many New Zealanders, Maori and Pakeha. The release of “Sing Along with the Yoots” in 2011, a CD filled with these nostalgic waiata set to a ska beat, caught the imagination of listeners in a surprising way.

¹⁴ Womad Taranaki Business and Site Operations Manager Chris Hurlihy interviewed in “The Womad Wangler”, *New Zealand Stories*, TVNZ, 2011

¹⁵ Peter Gabriel, www.womad.org/about

¹⁶ Ren Kirk, www.3news.co.nz/The-Yoots-interview/

Lindsay recognised early on that The Yoots and Womad were a perfect fit as long as, “people bring their singing voices and get into the whole spirit of it.” He says “we want[ed] everyone to sing, and sing with their kids.”¹⁷

Which, in 2012, they did. The outside venue was completely packed with people from all backgrounds and cultures standing and dancing together, singing along with every line. The Yoots went so far as to provide the words in Te Reo on a huge flip-chart monitored by a well-known local actor with a wooden pointer to guide the hundreds of amateur singers through each verse!

In a country that both prides itself on its race relations, and at the same time nervously wonders whether we really are on the right track, it was remarkable to see such a diverse group mining individual and corporate memory for words and melodies from another time that somehow were enabled to speak of both present and future.

This was an unlikely celebration. The music itself was satisfying but hardly ground-breaking, always better than competent but never threatening virtuosity. But the quality of the music was never the attraction. Too much expertise may well have detracted from what bordered on a community sing-along with an emphasis on participation. It was a shared experience that fed on itself and multiplied.

At least as remarkable, in a country that is self-consciously one of the most secular in the world, when Lindsay invited the crowd to sing the Maori hymn “E Te Ariki”, there was neither a silent secular voice nor a disingenuous dry eye in the house.

Music, childhood memory, lyric and perhaps even religious connotation all combined to fuse together past, present and future as a new reality was created.

A sense of fun quickly evolved into glimmers of joy as people realised they were in the midst of the community they wanted their nation to be: bicultural, participatory, celebrating. The shared song was giving birth to, and breathing life *into*, the new world. It was, as the theologians like to say, an experience of realised eschatology, the hoped-for future already present, alive and in our midst.

Of course, sometimes several alternative futures are offered to us, and we have to choose. This is, in effect, a choice between competing spiritualities.

17 *ibid*

5. Lorde – Competing spiritualities

// Royals (excerpt)

North Shore's queen of pop, Ella Yelich-O'Connor, Lorde, burst onto the music scene in March 2013. "Royals" quickly gained international success, topping the US Hot 100, the UK Singles Chart, and the Canadian Hot 100. It won two Grammys. Her career has been nothing short of volcanic.

In a strange way, her appeal in the United States was sharpened by the alternative she offered to Miley Cyrus.

As Disney product Hannah Montana – average schoolgirl by day but famous recording artist by night – Miley Cyrus was America's sweetheart. She was a teen idol, the epitome of the idealised American teenage girl, the best of 1950s conservatism re-versioned for the new century. But as Cyrus grew up she wanted her public persona to be allowed to grow with her.

In March last year Cyrus posted a video of her performing a twerking routine on Facebook. Twerking was born in the hip hop culture of 1990s New Orleans. It involves provocative dancing, thrusting hip movements, often using a low bouncing sexually provocative squatting stance. This video was Hannah Montana's breakout. It was followed by a more sexually explicit performance at the Video Music Awards that left many of her former admirers in shock.

As Laura Halferty has written, "She's lost America's trust because she played a joke on us: She led us to believe she was one thing, an innocent country girl, and then made a mockery of the very values we thought she represented."¹⁸

Lorde explicitly expressed concerns about Cyrus' new pop persona. The criticism was clearly not around Cyrus' desire to be her own person, or even the apparent betrayal that has devastated middle America. It is rather that Cyrus' performance crossed a line. It promoted values Lorde is uncomfortable with. As she's said:

"I'm a feminist, so certain things about music I find frustrating. I think pop is scarily powerful... There are a lot of shock tactics these days... I try to keep my blinkers on and focus on making music."¹⁹

Cyrus isn't the only one Lorde has critiqued.

She said publicly that rappers Drake and Micky Minaj create music that "doesn't relate to most people's lives. They all sing about such opulence... I began thinking "How are we listening to this? It's completely irrelevant."²⁰

¹⁸ Laura Halferty, "Miley Cyrus: The Anti-Lorde" in <http://www.popmatters.com/feature/182368-miley-cyrus-the-anti-lorde/>

¹⁹ Lorde, quoted in <http://hollywoodlife.com/2013/11/05/lorde-miley-cyrus-diss-feud-robin-thicke-vmas/>

She criticised singer Taylor Swift for being too skinny commenting, “Taylor Swift is so flawless and so unattainable, and I don’t think it’s breeding anything good in young girls.”

She called Selena Gomez’ single “Come and Get It” anti-feminist. She said: “The theme of her song is “When you’re ready come and get it from me.” I’m sick of women being portrayed in this way.”

What’s at stake here is the worlds these musicians’ different musical visions create, and the spiritualities they generate.

If Lorde’s analysis of her musical colleagues is right we need to be conscious of the power music has to seed and sustain the values – the spiritualities - she is criticising, just as we should be aware that her own music is offering alternatives.

- Does Cyrus’ twerking promote commodification of sex?
- Is the lavish world of luxurious wealth conjured up rappers Drake and Micky Minaj a credible or even desirable aspiration for young people?
- Is Taylor Swift, in the name of fashion, promoting an unrealistic image of women that is both physically and mentally dangerous?
- Does Selena Gomez’ “Come and Get It” lyric help instil a culture where women are viewed as sex objects?
- And, if so, do we want any of these values created and nurtured through pop music?

Lorde’s music offers a different world. Her megahit “Royals” promotes one that isn’t obsessed or overwhelmed by materialism, escapism or royal love but affirms the value of “ordinary” life. It looks beyond the sexism of celebrity culture to female autonomy and reflects a refreshingly open embrace of feminism.

Nothing less than competing spiritualities are at play here. They are different ways of interpreting and sustaining the world we live in, which is to say they create different worlds. They offer different possibilities, different futures. How will we decide which to choose?

²⁰ this and the following comments are sourced from entv Hollywoodlife.com <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNoyHHtCJmk>

Music as Evangelism

One way forward, building on the capacity the music we have considered so far has to create the worlds we live in, is to give some consideration to the way music exercises an evangelical role.

From a theological perspective the examples we've looked at underscore the way music triggers and accompanies a four-fold process through which our realities are constituted and in which we are then invited to share. This is a process of *imagination, establishment, proclamation* and *sustenance*.

First, this new reality is *imagined*. The music envisages and sings of the world it experiences and, at the same time, hopes for. So the Psalms speak of the now of the believer while at the same time announcing a future hope for the world, Lorde reclaims and proclaims an often unfashionable feminism, Copland invites us into a world of social solidarity, the Grateful Dead imagines life as part of an alternative community, the Yoots a bicultural nation.

Second, the performance and celebration of this music constitutes a prophetic presence of the new reality it proclaims. That is to say the music *establishes* this reality in a tangible way. For the life-time of the performance at least, the new world is created, embodied in the musical event itself. As long as The Yoots play we can live in the promised bicultural land. To be part of this musically created event is to live in a new reality, in effect to inhabit a fleeting state of grace.

Third, music also *proclaims* the values it carries, its new reality, to the wider community. It actively witnesses to the possibilities within the music – good or bad. That is to say it promotes the possibility that the music and its values may find a home in the lives of others who have not yet heard it. In this sense music is evangelical. It invites new participants into the new order: “Taste and see”, the Grateful Dead announce, the Psalmist declares, Aaron Copland is saying. “Listen to this. It's not a bad place to live”.

And finally, music *sustains* these new worlds. It nurtures the seeds of promise (and dread) that fly from the singing and the song and take root in the fertile ground beyond the club, concert hall, or festival. In some small way the Yoots lure Aotearoa's identity toward a vision of what it may yet become and, with each performance, reinforces the reality of this new world. Their music offers a taste of messianic possibility.

This is what music does: it creates the worlds in which we live. It celebrates what is and what might be, present and possibility.

This leaves us with a question. Is the world music has created and the future it offers something we actually want, or not. How do we decide when this act of creative musicianship is positive and when it is destructive? Which music prepares us to live the best life?

We know, for example, that some hymns invite us to live in a world long past, to celebrate a narrow morality tied to a different and less inclusive time. We know, too, that some contemporary music evangelises on behalf of sexism, violence and the objectification of women. What criteria do we use to decide which songs promote a positive spirituality and which are damaging?

The answer is in the question. Music which promotes a positive spirituality holds open the door to hope. It celebrates values at the heart of the good news.

It seems to me we *can* draw a distinction between music that nurtures life and music that limits it. And let's not be mistaken. Music that nurtures positive spirituality isn't all in a major key. It's not all happy and clappy celebration that refuses to embrace the world's pain. It will acknowledge loss and hurt, brokenness and injustice as well as hope, peace and hospitality, compassion, vision and the transformative power of love. Significantly it will determinedly eschew violence, xenophobia, false triumphalism, and obsession with material wealth, especially at the expense of the vulnerable.

The good news is that our future is bound up with music that celebrates positive spirituality. These songs call into being a world of possibility where we are invited to live and to make room for others.