

Music to Know More Deeply and Act More Deftly

by Ralph C. Martin

Why do so many people dedicate a good portion of their time and their life force to make beautiful music? Why do we assemble to listen to it together or immerse ourselves in solitary cocoons of music? Music caressing our souls, is perhaps more necessary today, than ever before.

In April, the University of Guelph choirs and the Guelph Chamber Players Orchestra, under the astute direction of Marta McCarthy, performed *The Armed Man: A Mass for Peace*, recently composed by Karl Jenkins. This was not an ordinary musical experience. Those of us who were fortunate enough to sing in the choirs wrestled with the odd mix of traditional themes, tunes and tempos interspersed with jarring ‘musical’ techniques, to arrest attention.

War is so often approached with singular attitudes and music has been used to reinforce glory and anticipated or past victories or in some cases to mourn losses or in other situations to energize protests. *The Armed Man* explores all of these ways of knowing international conflict and evokes our awareness and understanding of where we have been (*The armed man must be feared the earth is full of anger, the seas are dark with wrath*) and the stark sadness engendered (*silent, so silent, now the guns have stopped ... but now you are not here*) and how we might choose to evolve (*better is peace than ever more war ... ring out the old, ring in the new*).

Music, regardless of genre, is an art form to engage our total beings to be present to life as it is and can be. Music, infused in Creation for millennia, is our birthright. When merged with poetic lyrics, music affects how we see ourselves in the past, present and future.

Frequently, the three pillars of the environment, the economy and the social sphere are seen to encompass how we will sustain our lives and communities. However, without the arts, and especially without music, it ain't going to happen. To sustain and survive, given the current challenges, we need to know ourselves at depth, while revealing some of the unconscious.

In 1991, I was one of the lucky ones to perform with the Cantabile and Camerata choirs and Symphony Nova Scotia, under the choral direction of Jeff Joudrey, to prepare for the world premiere of Celtic Mass by the Sea. An insightful and talented Nova Scotian duo, Scott Macmillan and Jennyfer Brickenden researched Celtic traditions of the pagans, Wiccans and Druids and then composed this modern mass with its spiritual call to know and love our Creation.

As I write, I am listening to the recording and my soul indeed is blessed. However, the lyrics go beyond a feel-good glimpse of nature. Along with the music that seemed so strange when we first learned it and now seeps into my interior knowing with liquid embraces, the lyrics implore the “God of the elements to have mercy on us” and warn us that “he who tramples on the world, tramples on himself.” In the course of the mass we play with sportive seals and crafty sea urchins and finally are dismissed with the blessing, “The peace of great seas be for you.”

The lyrics you are reading cannot possibly evoke the depth of response experienced with both lyrics and music. I urge you to listen to the recording.

I also appreciate our young musicians, who share their talents in schools, music festivals and elsewhere and who agree to be tested. They realize the deal is to be vulnerable while performing in front of the same audience which may hear the adjudicator’s criticisms.

Musical literacy and beyond that, the capacity to perform music with talent honed by instruction and practice, are skills we dare not lose, in my opinion. Let me go further and urge more funding for music programs in schools. We need them more than ever.

Many of our youth will have to deal with the consequences of how those of us, longer in the tooth, have lived upon the Earth. In order to do so, they will need more than technology and science, as important as these may be, to redress harms to resilience. They will also need spiritual, emotional and psychological acuity. Our Creation is our home and to live in partnership with Her, we will need the awareness of whole human beings.

Beyond awareness derived from music and other arts, there is action. Action, tempered with whole-being knowing, may be more deft. Research and data can inform

appropriate actions. Music can motivate actions and instill patience to persist through the fog of disappointments and accomplishments, in a complex world.

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