

Dear all

Apologies for delay in this – we had problems with internet, sorted now.

On Saturday evening, we stayed up for our annual experience of the Eurovision Song Contest. I'm sure most, if not all, of you have seen at least part of one of the contests. It's that bizarre mixture of masochism and disbelief that makes the experience unique. Occasionally there will be an outstanding song, occasionally an interesting one. Often they are formulaic, banal and bereft of interest (but it's still essential viewing!). My own particular interest is in seeing how the performance and the songs manage to reflect their culture and/or language (too often not at all!). And then, occasionally, there are songs that are so barking mad that they are just brilliant.

Saturday's programme was made, obviously, under totally different circumstances. Other than the fact that I think 30 seconds of each country's song was too little, on the whole it worked well. Each artist was asked to give a short message – most avoiding being too saccharine, or self-promoting. Common themes were mutual support, loving one another, stay home and stay safe, and the unifying power of music. There was a refreshing absence of the overtly political, seen most obviously in the way that voting patterns work out.

It is a shame though that there couldn't be voting on the videos of the songs, and that the songs cannot be presented next year (though the artists can perform a different song). We will never know how my 2 favourite songs would have fared...

The Icelandic entry was, in my mind, a serious contender. Quirky, rather than barking mad, it is rather a memorable song – possibly genuinely my favourite. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HU7ocv3S2o>

The Russian entry however was so barking mad it was brilliant. It's certainly not the Russia that we are often presented with in the media! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_dWvTCdDQ4

I am disappointed, however, not to leave the evening with my almost invariable comment... "well, I don't think that one should have won!".

From the sublime to the ridiculous, or, rather, vice versa, I'm listening, while typing, to a recently purchased set of recordings of one of my favourite composers, Mahler. Today is the 109th anniversary of his death. Mahler tends to be a bit of a 'marmite' composer, that you either love or hate. I think that, in some cases, his reputation precedes him to his detriment. (I must confess that I have, in the past, been guilty of the same with, for example, Wagner and Shostakovich – though I still cannot get into minimalist music, or Britten operas!). The possible exception being the 'Death in Venice' adagio from his 5th Symphony.

Helen was never a Mahler fan – until she surprised herself by enjoying something that she didn't realise was Mahler. And then we sang in a performance of Mahler's 8th Symphony, the Symphony of 1000 (because that's how many performers are, allegedly, needed!). Mahler is exciting, and very often unexpected. One moment he can be ravishingly beautiful, the next doom-laden and overwhelming. Symphonies often appear chaotic and disjointed by the sheer range of moods and emotions flung together – just like human life really. And his celebration of the sounds of nature is, in my mind, second to none.

Did Mahler actually worship nature? How religious was he? It's difficult to say. He was a Jewish convert to Christianity. Some might argue that this was a purely practical decision, on order for him to be an acceptable candidate for a prestigious conducting post. And yet, his 2nd Symphony is entitled

'Resurrection', and contains a real hope in it. Even in the depths of despair, hope often flickers (though the end of the 6th Symphony is pretty devastating – the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra were rehearsing this piece when the news of 9/11 broke. The resulting recording is edge-of-the-seat powerful). I'm sure he saw God in nature, and that nature spoke to him – though I doubt he would have worshipped nature itself as a god.

Possibly my love for Mahler is that he is so difficult to pin down and compartmentalise. He is challenging and dangerous, maverick and enticing. Just like life itself. If you are interested in 'getting into' Mahler, for a fairly easy route in, I would recommend Symphonies 1, 4 or 5. Possibly my favourite Symphony is the 6th, though I once did one of those silly online quizzes, and discovered that the 7th Symphony matched my personality best (whatever that means!). If you're mad enough to do it, you can find it here:

<https://www.qzr.com/widget/quiz/fi9xdWl6emVzLzQ2MDU2Mg/result/fi9yZXN1bHRzLzQ5MTc1MTA5MA>

(Having said that, I've just done the quiz again, and got the 2nd Symphony 'Resurrection' – make of that what you will!)

Are there any composers, writers, poets, artists etc. who affect you similarly?

I am trying very hard not to be political in my emails. Politics in this country, over the last 5 years, has been immensely destructive, with much political 'discourse' being a slanging match. The vitriol that has been flung around has been appalling. I have tried to avoid stirring this up as it can often be counter-productive. As Christians we tread a fine line. We worship a God of love, and believe in respect for all – as we are all made in God's image. But we also follow the Servant King, who spoke words of challenge and justice to power, and who spent much of his time with the marginalised and rejected, to the detriment of his own reputation. Should the church be a prophetic voice today? If so, how? Should we worry about being 'political', and about stirring up trouble?

Up until now I have commented on very little specifically, but I am shocked by the recent attack by certain politicians and journalists on teachers, calling them, amongst other things, lazy and cowards, and accusing them of not caring for our children's education. (I'd better declare an interest, having been a teacher for 14 years, and subsequently a school governor for about 14 years). As well as being a blatant lie, just think of the effect that it must be having on all school staff, many of whom are struggling with setting work and managing assessments etc. at a distance, on top of the normal concerns we all have at this time. One top education safeguarding advisor writes To those who know, there has been an unbelievable amount of energy, innovation and care poured into keeping children (and families) supported with their learning, and perhaps, more importantly their well-being. Often at personal cost to their own mental and physical health.

We have a significant number of our members in education in one way or another. I would like to encourage them that not all think this way! We know you are dedicated to the children in your care, and only want the best for them. Thank you.

Finally, if you want to know what businesses in the local area are open, a good link is

<https://www.everlinks.io/fulleveryday/deeping-deals-directory>

Stay safe

Blessings and love

Mark

