# Gresham College Main logo

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**Faith in Women?**

**The changing role of women and girls**

**in the music and ministry of the church**

Rev Lucy Winkett

Give that I am a woman and trained as a singer, given that I am a priest and have committed my life to public ministry, it’s a little difficult right at the beginning of this lecture not to reflect that I will simply spend the next 50 minutes or so saying “yes” to those rather basic questions. I hope that I might say “yes” in an interesting way though, but having set the question, I offer the answer yes in the hope that this might prompt further yeses down the line. But I do want to start by saying that this acceptance is obviously not a done deal. Although girls choirs, three of which are performing together in this Festival on Saturday, although girls choirs are much less controversial than they were, they are still an exception in an overwhelmingly male Christian musical world.

For the first time in 2013 woman conducted Last Night of the Proms. And it is a story about Marin Alsop with which I want to begin as I think it illustrates something of the complex emotional territory we get into as soon as we start talking about women, girls and religion. She and I were on a panel in 2011 organised by the LSO talking about Joan of Arc, as part of a weekend of music about Joan. She had conducted to critical acclaim Arthur Honeggers 1935 dramatic oratorio *Jeanne dArc au bucher* (*Joan of Arc at the Stake*).

We were discussing a variety of topics related to women, religion and music. We discussed the power of public gesture for example in the life of both conductor and priest, and the role of conductor, instrumentalist, singer, priest as having in common our role as interpreter of something from beyond ourselves.

To illustrate some of the struggle that this inevitably brings, she commented that she is a frequent flyer across the Atlantic. Having found her seat and fastened her seatbelt, occasionally, the announcement “Good evening ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain speaking” is a female voice. Despite Marin Alsop being one of the most authoritative women in the world, she says that so striking is it that a woman is in charge of this aircraft, that she has a momentary – a fleeting but real – reaction “God I hope she can fly the plane”. There is a moment of frisson, unsafety, uncertainty, followed by an overwhelming sense of course that “don’t be ridiculous, of course she can, she’s had the training, she’s just as good as anyone else” and so on and so on.

I respected her very much for telling that story because I do think it gets under the skin of some of the issues I hope to highlight today – it gets under the arguing about the presenting issues such as boys choirs and women in cathedrals and finds an emotional connection with something that I do think is more common than we might think.

Today is the feast of the birth of John the Baptist. You will remember that his birth is miraculous to the aged Elizabeth and Zechariah. And so shocked is Zechariah at the impending birth of his son that he loses the power of speech until the birth. The set readings for today from Luke’s gospel (Luke 1) illustrate the themes of silence and speech, male and female, as the man Zechariah is unable to name his son. Elizabeth tells the religious leaders “his name is John”. They refuse to believe her as none of their other relatives have this name. In the end, they simply don’t accept what she says and ask

Zechariah who writes on a tablet “his name is John”. Today is the day for the Benedictus, the matins canticle which celebrates light and peace in a dark and antagonistic world.

As one who presides at the eucharist, whose public gestures, after the example of John the Baptist, are pointing away from myself to a greater reality, as one who sings in that presidential role, I am aware that for most of the 2 billion Christians in the world, the vast majority have never seen a woman do this or have heard a woman pray or sing publicly in the liturgy despite attending acts of Christian worship every week. Even though the subject of this lecture I presume is timed to coincide with the Church of England’s vote this summer on the consecration of women bishops, it’s important to state right at the beginning that we are in a small minority in believing that women can combine their historic role as musicians with a new public role as priest and that this combination is a sign of holiness and the presence of God. In most Christian liturgy, women remain cast as Elizabeth; speaking personally but not heard publicly, waiting for the authoritative male voice to name what they already know to be true.

One more ground clearing point: I guess that the default reaction, the “go to” responses to this subject circle around girls and boys choristers, about women precentors or deans, about the idea of doing Evensong responses “up an octave” and female adult singers in the back row. Although some of what I say might have implications for this, I’m not predominantly talking about these as issues, because what often seems to happen is that the lines are drawn not so much spiritually and theologically as culturally and emotionally. Priests like me who were among the first women to sing the office and the eucharist so publicly all have our horror stories and battle scars: I don’t propose to rehearse these here.

But to return to my core question; the changing role of women and girls is happening, but does it matter? Does it make a difference?

**Freshening the familiar?**

In a recent Radio 4 interview, the composer Judith Bingham, who has written a piece commissioned by this Festival for the concert in Southwark Cathedral on Saturday, noted that she thinks that girls do make a different sound. Boys have what she called a “youthful edginess” and ethereal top notes. Girls have a more mature sound (without the voice change that boys experience), and often have more power in the voice (choristers are often a bit older and are sometimes already having voice training). As a composer who writes for the church, she sees it as part of her role writing for a repetitive and traditional liturgy to what she calls “freshen the familiar”. And girls and women singing in church is part of that freshening.

Of course women music makers have had an honoured place in the practice of ancient public religion. In the Hebrew Scriptures we find women making music: Miriam at the Red Sea leads her people in song, the women of Jerusalem welcome King David back from battle with singing. Deborah the Judge sings in victory (Judges 11) and Jephthah’s daughter first rejoices in song and then instigates an annual lament among the women of Israel. In the New Testament, the women of Jerusalem lament at Jesus’s crucifixion, and ritual mourners weep and sing at the death of Tabitha in Acts. Imaginative writers have given us Mary’s lullaby to her child at Bethlehem, the most famous of which is probably the Coventry Carol of the 16th century, and the song of all songs is given to Mary in her Magnificat, after the tradition of Hannah. This song, repeated at Vespers and Evensong each day is a song of revolution, a new world order. Jesus would repeat this song of the prophet Isaish when he unrolled the scroll in Nazareth to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. We often meditate on and learn from Jesus’s relation with his Father in heaven but in his song of liberation it’s clear he was his mother’s son too.

In the Christian tradition, following the anxieties of St Augustine, Aquinas and others, the association of music with inappropriate enflaming of the passions, and the close association of music itself with the feminine has meant that these early assumptions that women could take a public liturgical role were forgotten.

There were some spectacular exceptions though. One of the earliest is the 8th century abbess Kassia, probably born and was certainly raised in Constantinople; her family was aristocratic, her father served in the emperor's court. We do know that she was in contact with one of the chief iconodules, the monk Theodore of Studium (d.826) because we have their letters, where she is one of those who defends and champions the veneration of images, banned at the time. Sometime after 843 she founded a monastery in Constantinople and there are about 50 hymns of hers that remain. Over 20 of her hymns are used currently in Eastern Orthodox Liturgy, the melodies are evocative and follow orthodox patterns. Her voice is passionate, witty – in one of her hymns she lists the kinds of people she doesn’t like – but writes poignant poetry such as the hymn for the feast of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple:

*"How can I hold you as a child,  
you who hold everything together?*

*"How do I bring you to the temple, who is beyond goodness?  
How do I deliver you to the arms of the elder,  
who sits in the bosom of the Father?*

*"How do you endure purification,  
you who purifies the whole corrupt nature?"*

*So said the Virgin  
the temple who contained God  
marveling at your great condescension, Christ.*

From Kassia in the Eastern Church to the 12th century Hildegard of Bingen in the West. Astonishing in its daring and exuberance, alone in style and content, more recently, Hildegard’s music has found a new audience. Her music stretches the female voice over extremely wide vocal ranges (up to two octaves), large leaps, and florid melodies. She writes the character of Mary in her morality play Ordo Virtutum, the part has a range of 14 notes, soaring and plumbing the extremes of human experience. Her own theology is reflected too: a particular care for the earth and for creation – but also thoroughly local. Her chants and hymns combine the heights of heaven with the concerns of a community of women striving to keep their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. In this way, she gives us music that is both transcendent and immanent; theologically adept and also practical for daily life. Ordo Virtutum is written for 18 female voices and one man – who was Hildegard’s secretary.

In order to model good theological practice, it seemed important to me not just to talk about women singing sacred music or writing it, but to embody it by including live performance in this lecture. And so as I’ve been talking about Hildegard, we should hear from her. Jan Coxwell will sing an extract from Hildegard’s praise of Mary the mother of Christ.

Ave Maria Hildegard of Bingen 12th century

Hildegard has become so popular now that her chants are recorded and played, not only by professional classical singers, but with a modern beat underneath them, fusing ancient and new. The critic John Tusa has commented: 'Who taught Hildegarde of Bingen about marketing? After all, she chose to be a woman composer in a man's world. That was shrewd. She worked in the huge growth area of liturgical music. That was opportunistic. And she devised the best marketing catchphrase of all time: 'A little feather on the breath of God'. Could Hildegarde possibly have scored so brilliantly in such very modern career choices without some professional guidance?" Despite his ironic tone, it seems to me that he is articulating something important about the character of this music which seems to me theologically daring as well as musically daring. Hers is a free and singular voice without parallel at her time.

Some other headline figures stand out: the 12th century "Queen Blanche of Castile (1188-1252); and the 17th century Italian composer and singer Barbara Stozzi; both these women were of noble birth, and their music has survived across the centuries. In Naples in the 15th century, it seems that women minstrels, including one “Anna Inglese” – English Anna – were so popular that special lodgings were constructed for them.

Cathedral musicians are few and far between although the remarkable story of Todora Gines (b c 1600) tells us that she was born of African descent into slavery, but in the first half of the seventeenth century, she and her sister, Michaela, showed remarkable musical gifts, despite a lack of formal musical training. For this reason, they were freed to enter the service of the Cathedral at Santiago de Cuba as musicians. Theodora played bandora (a plucked bass instrument) and bowed bass. Her sister was a singer. Together with a Spanish violinist and a Portugese schawm player, they formed the nucleus of the Cathedral's orchestra. For some women it seems, musical talent was even a route from slavery to freedom. These are exceptional cases but they do also give a sense of history for the contemporary woman finding her voice in today’s church.

**From Silence to Sound**

I am not essentially going to argue for an intrinsic difference between men’s and women’s music. Because I don’t believe that music arrives on a cloud onto a composer’s page. It is the result of individual imagination, inspiration yes but also crucially the context of the commission or performance, the relationships surrounding it that underpin and inform the intensity of the music itself and arguably give it its meaning. At the heart of the composition and performance of music is a mystery, articulated by James McMillan “how is it that mathematically organised patterns of sound are capable of inspiring such great emotion? (*quoted in* Catherine Pickstock *Quasi Una Sonata* in Resonant Witness ed Jeremy Begbie and Steven Guthrie Eerdmans 2011 p 192)

And as Catherine Pickstock observes, any musical tradition contains implicitly views about time, space, eternity, the emotional and the rational, and the individual and the general. (Resonant Witness p 192) Clearly women do not have homogenised views about these things and in that sense, the music that women make will be surely as heterogenous as men’s. Cultural soundscapes which express particular belief systems will be more influential than gender in this kind of intrinsic way.

But one thing that women do have in common is historic silencing. The music we have just heard from Hildegard was banned. In itself it was too much. The music that women make in church is born in the experience of being silenced. For any of us who have spent any time planning liturgy, creating orders of service for various occasions, we know that as a desert father put it, silence is God’s first language. And all music finds its home and origin in silence; one needs the other. But the silence from which all sound comes and to which all sound returns is an uncreated silence. It is not the silence of the silenced. Whenever this kind of silence is present, the Christian theological thrust is to end it. The nature of God is not in the end to remain silent but to utter. God speaks. In the beginning was the Word that sung the whole of Creation into being. On the Cross, Jesus speaks his seven last words. Notwithstanding the meditations on what he said, the fact that he speaks at all is a lesson for all those who suffer, who are constrained, pinned as he was, by the political and religious assumptions of his day.

I want to set the singing of women in English churches in a self consciously global and historical context. There has been much debate in the media in the last month or two about the relationship between women and religion not only in the debates within Christianity about the role of women in leadership but about the education of girls in Nigeria, violent attitudes towards women in India, even the debate about the traditional page three model from the free copy of the Sun newspaper distributed to all UK households a couple of weeks ago. As one commentator has put it, we live in a “half changed world”. Old assumptions about what women can and should do have been challenged but it is not yet clear with what they will be replaced. And alongside this challenge has come a strongly reactionary counter blast which insists that women will remain controlled physically, especially sexually; intellectually, by maintaining illiteracy; and spiritually by reinforcing the social apparatus that often accompanies religion in its definition of the roles of women and men. Religion has a hugely influential role to play for good or ill as we shape the society we live in.

In previous centuries, the action taken against women in England in order to silence them was violent: bridles, physical restraints used too on slaves. Those of us who are women in this generation must count ourselves the most blessed among women because we can sing and speak in places that for generations women couldn’t. The privilege of this is enormous and will remain so for a long, long time. It is startling in some ways how quickly women speaking and singing publicly in church has been “normalised” but In the words of Emily Dickinson’s mystical poem, it is in brokenness that song finds its expression. If we “split the lark” of women’s experience, we find the music buried deep inside their history of silenced singing. Much of the music has been made at a high cost to the musicians in the tradition of Cecilia, the patron saint of music – the “scarlet experiment” of which Dickinson speaks.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Split the lark and you ’ll find the music, |  |
| Bulb after bulb, in silver rolled, |  |
| Scantily dealt to the summer morning, |  |
| Saved for your ear when lutes be old. |  |
|  |  |
| Loose the flood, you shall find it patent, | *5* |
| Gush after gush, reserved for you; |  |
| Scarlet experiment! sceptic Thomas, |  |
| Now, do you doubt that your bird was true? |  |

Emily Dickinson 1924

Does it matter that the lark is split, that women and girls now sing in the liturgy? It matters very much because girls and women are still bridled and silenced in this generation across the world. We sing because we can and we sing as a sign that things do not have to be as they are.

**Theological reflections**

At a recent conference concerning the place of women in the Church of England held at Lambeth Palace, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams was commenting on comments Professor Sarah Coakley had made earlier in the day. Dr Williams commented that what was needed was;

*a prophetic theology of gender that is a way of talking about men and women in the Body of Christ which goes beyond both a rights scheme and a facile complementarity model….. men do this, women do that, and lo and behold miraculously and wonderfully by God’s providence they fit together beautifully.*

*How do we get beyond a secular, rather two-dimensional discourse about rights and what can sometimes be a rather unhelpful mythology about complementarity to something that’s really social, historical, actual, personal, relational etc. And I don’t know but I’d be quite keen to find out.*

**We live in another’s life**

There is a strand in theological thinking that might be helpful here as we consider the changing relationships within the church between women, men, music and God. Dr Williams has been speaking about this recently and although not specifically in relation to gender, it seems to me to be pertinent here.

The theological reflections are centred around the key question of identity. Our starting point for this must be in a recognition that for every person, our identity is not primarily located in our relationships with each other, which are secondary, but in God’s relationship with us.

That transforms the place of women and men together in the public exercise of religion because it changes our perspective from a sometimes rather over-anxious emphasis on what we might call the horizontal relationships; who am I to you? What is my role compared with yours? Who am I in relation to you? It challenges this perspective and restores what we might call a vertical relationship; that our origin and destination, security and purpose rests not in one another but in God. And it is as this person, the person loved by God, that we live ourselves and it is knowing that this is true for others too that governs our relationships with them.

The Russian theologian Vladimir Lossky who was writing in the first half of the twentieth century set the agenda for theological reflection on identity: before we are in relationship with anyone else, before we relate to our environment or other people, we are paid attention to, loved, by God. This is our primary “relationship” and as such we are a person, not a mere individual. The difference between an individual and a person comes when we accept that we, and by extension then everyone else, is not merely the sum of all the things that are true about us (cf Theos Annual Lecture given by Rowan Williams 1 October 2012). When we have listed these, including our gender and even on a deeper level known these things, we are still not us. We are human mystery in relationship with divine mystery which in this relationship knows and is known.

Dr Williams’ conclusions from this assertion are that *we ascribe personal dignity or worth to people – to human individuals – because of that sense that in relationship each of us has a presence or a meaning in someone else’s existence.  We live in another’s life.  To be the point where lines of a relationship intersect means that we can’t simply lift some abstract thing called ‘the person’ out of it all.  We’re talking about a reality in which people enter into the experience, the aspiration, the sense of self, of others.  And that capacity to live in the life of another – to have a life in someone else’s life – is part of the implication of this profound mysteriousness about personal reality.  Deny this, and you are back with that deeply unsatisfactory model in which somebody decides who is going to count as human.* (Theos lecture 1st October 2012)

**We accept difference, expect change, expect death**

A further reflection that follows from this, particularly with reference to our gender is that our identity is embodied. As Dr Williams notes, we notice that our bodies are different from one another, that they wear out, and that we are going to die.

As a result of our noticing our gendered bodies, we could learn to accept difference, we expect change and we expect death. Of course the opposite is also true. As a result of noticing these things about ourselves and each other, we could become more fearful, more determined not to submit ourselves to this sequence of bodily realities. But the potential is there for an attitude towards life, music, religion that would make these differences energising and exciting rather than threatening.

Does this very simple reflection on our own gendered selves give us a starting point for an underpinning theology that recognises difference, expects change over time and accepts death, and that knows ourselves to be ourselves only in relation to others when we know ourselves to be ourselves first in relation to God?

What follows from these two principles is that our own personhood is brought to life in our encounters and I would suggest especially our musical encounters with others. Dr Williams puts it baldly: *we live in another’s life*. (Theos Lecture 1 October 2012). That is, we come to life in another’s life and our personhood is more than the sum of facts that we might know about ourselves. We more than exist, we come to life in other lives.

**We sing in another’s silence**

This, it seems to me, is another way of expressing theologically what happens musically in the dynamics of a choir or a group of instrumentalists. In a choir for example, we as a group, sing music given to us by the composer. As we sing together, we must sing the part we have been given otherwise another will miss their cue. Similarly, we must rest when we are asked to otherwise another’s voice won’t be heard. Sometimes, the voice we are using is in a dissonant relationship with another; that is the composer’s intention. When we use our voices, we sing in another’s silence.

Historically then, the music making of men has been done in the context of women’s silence. That this silence has ended will bring as yet unimagined consequences for the creativity of spiritual expression untapped when women write music as free agents, without constraint.

This mutual recognition of sound and silence means that all of us men and women, are given the chance to find our own voice and use it. We also recognise the imperative for us to be freely silent in order for another’s voice to be heard.

The next piece is a piece by the contemporary composer Judith Bingham written for two sopranos and an alto. To help us reflect on the theme that our primary identity is in God, and also to illustrate that we live in another’s life, we sing in another’s silence, this is God be in my Head by Judith Bingham.

God be in my head Judith Bingham 2007

**Mutuality and Humility**

This brings me to another point about women and girls in the church and that is related to this discussion about identity. One of the cardinal virtues of Christianity is one that was in the past much more prominently taught than it is today and is one that has been especially associated with the feminine. That is humility. The chance that women have now is to re-learn what has in the past been a debilitating requirement of them; that they acquiesce, give way, is one that inspires what we might call a *redeemed humility* that is not based on an unequal power relation or a confining fear, but a life that is lived as a person, a free citizen of our gendered state, accepting difference, expecting change, expecting death and expecting resurrection.

This means too that the discourse about gender can be transformed: we can potentially move from bafflement – I don’t understand you- through tolerance – I accept that you’re different and we’ll agree to disagree – through to respect – still implying distance but with more emotional commitment – through to *attentiveness*. And music can help us in this. Because we must be attentive to one another for music to be made well. For professionals, this attentiveness, this listening while singing, being acutely aware of several voices while using our own, becomes second nature. But for the rest of us, it is a prophetic challenge to live this way, with the potential to point the way to a new way of relating.

I recently went to a women’s prison to spend the afternoon doing a music workshop with the inmates. In the prison chapel, about 30 women assembled, loud, glad to be out of their cells, not sure what to expect and some not a little aggressive. Over a couple of hours, we sang together, learned parts, practised rhythms and while we were at it, told the story of Holy Week and Easter. The atmosphere slowly changed from a highly competitive, combative edgey conversation to what at times was a beautiful harmony and even some measure of peace. I was reminded of the 15 year old Alberta Hunter who ran away to Chicago from home in 1907 aged 12 as she had heard she could make $10 a week singing. Later she wrote this:

*"The blues? Why, the blues are a part of me. They're like a chant. The blues are like spirituals, almost sacred. When we sing blues, we're singing out our hearts, we're singing out our feelings. Maybe we're hurt and just can't answer back, then we sing or maybe even hum the blues. When I sing, 'I walk the floor, wring my hands and cry -- Yes, I walk the floor, wring my hands and cry,'... what I'm doing is letting my soul out…………”*

For women in prison, and some at the workshop had been in prison for the last 30 years, making music together was a transformative way of relating to one another and to the staff also present. It required a level of attentiveness to others unusual in such a combative environment and also a willingness to be heard amidst others, to find a voice that became more beautiful because it was not alone. In some ways, Alberta Hunter had it right; what I’m doing is letting my soul out.

And this finding of a voice, making of music in a sacred context is a way of re-claiming that inspirational but problematic virtue of humility. Humility has been used to teach women that their place as Eve’s inheritors is to be silent and subjugated. Other groups have suffered from this too but the insistence that women remain in the domestic sphere and not in the public sphere has kept women inaudible in public liturgy for almost the whole of the Christian tradition.

But theologically, when we find our voice, and learn to use it, we are free then to make way for others. But our voice has to be found first.

To put it another way, the paradigm of Christian living is the picture of Jesus washing his disciples’ feet. For women, this has been their habitual role anyway. The path to salvation for women is first to learn to stand before they choose to kneel. This is not an enforced or gendered humility but a *redeemed humility* available to everyone that is a principle of living. In our arguably increasingly competitive and combative world, it is a distinctive contribution that Christianity can make.

The last piece is a setting of Scripture: we have already heard an ancient prayer of the church set by the innovative and singular Hildegard. We have heard a vernacular prayer set by a contemporary woman and we finish with the poetry of the Anglican priest and poet George Herbert set by Cecilia McDowall. And to prove that in this lecture inclusion is the name of the game, I’m delighted to say that we are joined by the counter tenor Patrick Craig for this piece.

Rise Heart: thy Lord is risen George Herbert/Cecilia McDowall 2008

**Some concluding observations: what’s the difference and does it matter?**

Does it matter that women and girls are becoming part of the public ritual of the church in this country? For some of the reasons I have sketched out, I hope that I have shown that it matters very much. On a global stage, and in the context of the past 2000 years, women who sing in public liturgy today are still pioneers, however normal it may seem day to day for some.

Women and girls are not taking part in public liturgy because they have an inalienable right to do so, or because they want to join in what the boys are doing, or because they want to spoil things, or be “let in”, or because they’re cross. And I have deliberately not talked too much about equality or justice as I simply assume with this audience at this festival in 2014, I don’t have to make the case that women are irreducibly equal to men. Unity in religion and music is not the same as uniformity. Even if the last 2000 years of official exclusion hadn’t happened, the character of humanity – of men and women - as those created, redeemed and transfigured by God in Christ remains true. In response to this, the human institution that is the church finds a way, muddled and often uncertain, to align itself eventually with these dramatic and soaring truths. Women and girls should have an honoured place in the public practice of religion because in liturgy, in the distinctive practice of the church, the created worship the Creator and offer the best and most of who they are and what they can do.

I want to end with a challenge to the women. In answering the question, does it make any difference? does it matter? At least part of the answer lies with us. The challenge is not simply to put on the clothes we’re given and try to blend in without anyone noticing. It’s very tempting to do that and of course a certain amount of this is advisable if you want to keep your sanity. I suppose it’s right also to note that blending is a key skill for musicians that requires a strong commitment to listening.

But fundamentally, the inclusion of women and girls just as a thing in itself isn’t a box to be ticked on an inexorable path to a better future. Neither is it, on the other side, an inevitable and regrettable sign that the church is “modernising”. Women are no better able to shape a vision for the future of our society and church than men. I hope that music colleges encourage women composers, alongside writing their piano concertos and string quartets, to write for the organ, for choirs and encourage them to find inspiration in the texts of Christian liturgy both ancient and modern. I hope that Directors of Music, Precentors and Deans will commission women, helping them to find their distinctive voice.

For women ourselves, from our historic experience of silencing, with a fundamental recognition that our primary relationship is with God before it is with each other, with the cultivation of attentiveness and redeemed humility, the task for women is to claim the freedom that we have to sing with our own voices and to invite others into this song. It is still a new thing and a brave sound to hear the authentic voices of women raised in praise of God. And so the potential is actually the same for women and for men in finding a freed voice: be brave, find your courage, listen hard and sing.

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