

Life Flows on in Endless Song

Clay Nelson © 2 November 2014

Neurologist Oliver Sacks has said, "Music is the most direct and mysterious way of conveying and evoking feeling. It is a way of connecting one consciousness to another. The nearest thing to telepathy is making music together."

Uwe Grodd, the Music Director of the Auckland Choral Society has described his experience of singing as "the simplest way of communicating the essence of the human spirit, of hope and love across all continents. We sing to energise and calm ourselves, ease stress and pain, socialise, bond or even move ourselves to tears. Time so often stands still during these moments."

When we move outside of time we move from Chronos time, time measured by the ticking of a clock, to Kairos time, measureless time called God's time, we enter into divine mystery, a place where we are integrated into the mystery of Oneness. That is what we anticipate as we listen to the VoiceClub shortly.

Three of the songs they will sing today do that for me: *The 59th Street Bridge*, *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* and *Gloria*.

When I hear *The 59th Street Bridge* I am transported to my freshman year dorm room in 1967. One afternoon my roommate came in with Simon and Garfunkel's new album, *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme*. We put it on our humble record player (stereos were still too rich for our blood) and for the first time I was encouraged to "Slow down, you move too fast. You've got to make the morning last."

While I came late to appreciating the Beatles (I am fundamentally wired to resist fads and going along with the crowd), I bought my first album of theirs that same year, *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Who could resist that album cover! But I probably bought it because *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* was being played constantly on the radio and had become a frequent topic of late night bull sessions. The argument was over what the heck did it mean. There were those who clearly thought it was about an LSD trip (which was the prevailing view), not all were convinced including myself, perhaps because I had not dropped acid. The words invite multiple interpretations. I favour Lennon's explanation that it was inspired by a drawing by his son with a little of *Alice in Wonderland* thrown in. I think the reason *Lucy* has endured 57 years is that it can't be pigeonholed. It prods our imagination. It gives us kaleidoscope eyes to see the world a little bit differently every time we hear or sing it.

I have lived a nomadic life, so when the movie *Footloose* was released in 1984, it resonated with me. It is a classic tale of teenage rebellion. When teenager Ren McCormack and his family move from big-city Chicago to a small Midwestern town, he suffers culture shock. I could definitely relate. Though he tries hard to fit in, the streetwise Ren can't quite believe he's living in a place where rock music and dancing are illegal. At the film's conclusion there is an uplifting scene filled with joyous dancing in celebration of having successfully overcome the town fathers' intransigence. The song they are dancing to is the third song we will hear this morning, *Gloria*. While the words have little to do with the theme of the movie, the tune was perfect for the occasion. Whenever I hear it, I feel the call to shake up the status quo. To speak truth to power. It is music that energises and empowers me.

The fourth song we will hear, Carrickfergus, is new to me, but henceforth will be a touchstone for this day in this place. While the meaning of its lyrics is not always clear, and some believe it is incomplete due to faulty memory of an original text, its sense of sadness and nostalgia coupled with a beautiful and soaring melody embody all such moments in our lives, making them one.

As I reflected on today's programme, I had an image that music in my life is much like the Tao. The Tao is the absolute principle underlying the universe, combining within itself the principles of yin and yang and signifying the way, or code of behaviour, that is in harmony with the natural order. Taoism teaches us to embrace wonder and the joy in living gracefully with style. Music does the same, inviting us to go with the endless flow of the universe.

Think of the Tao as being like a band playing music. The band has always been there, always been keeping the rhythm at a regular pulse. They're accomplished musicians, so they don't make any mistakes. And they always welcome anyone who wants to join them in a jam session.

So on some days, I jump onstage – they're already playing, as they always do. In my fantasy, I pick up a guitar and play. The challenge is to improvise on their music, because I never really know what they're going to play. They don't really know in advance themselves. They just do it.

So the main task is to harmonize with them. Even with my tin ear, I know quite early when I'm playing out of tune. I cannot play faster than they do, even if I wanted to: I've got to follow. Otherwise, this is

not music. It is chaos.

Sometimes, without telling anyone in advance, they increase the beat. So I follow. Sometimes they decide to play in a minor mode. I have to switch also. Then they come back to major, brilliant and lively melodies, and I try to attune to them. At first, my ears are my most useful tool. And after a while, I start to have some idea where they're going. I'm never totally sure, though, but sometimes I do feel it, and I'm not always wrong. All I have to do is follow, and react properly to the tempo and key changes. I have to be accurate, and sensitive to the various moods.

I don't have to always be playing, though. Sometimes I put the volume down, to let some other players in the band take the lead. Sometimes I only listen to them, to immerse myself with a new theme they're just starting to get into. I play when I feel it is proper. I stop when the sound of the guitar is not necessary. I just follow the feeling of the moment. Nothing else really matters, after all.

Unfortunately, there are still many moments where the music requires knowledge of modes I haven't fully mastered yet. Sometimes I try to play on it, just to realize I'm out of tune. It's my little ego trying to impose his selfish ideas upon the natural order of things – which never truly works, as it turns out. I still play, and eventually come to the realization that if I don't stop, I'll just keep messing up the wonderful piece the band is composing.

So I come back to my music theory books to learn how to play in such situations. There I find all the principles necessary to harmonize with this special band. These principles tell me, among other things, not to try to be flashy onstage, not to try to take center stage, not to make things complicated, to let the other members of the group lead, and just to merge into the ensemble. If I respect these few basic principles, the books claim, then I will be able to harmonize with the band.

But it takes practice. Other parts of the books are somewhat more technical: the scales I haven't fully mastered are well described.... Unusual tempos, such as 9/8 instead of the all-too-common 4/4. They say such scales and tempos don't come up often in music, but still, it happens sometimes. So I have to know them in order to react efficiently and skillfully when the band decides to kick them in.

However, as long as I don't take the guitar and practice on my own, I will not improve my playing; I'll only be reproducing the same mistakes. So I repeat over and over the same scales, trying to figure out appropriate places to make them fit when I'll be part of the band again; I close my eyes, and try to concentrate on my fingers. I know that some day these scales will be part of myself, so my concentration will be focused on the feeling I want to give to the music. I will know when I have become an accomplished musician when I no longer think in terms of scales and modes, for instance, but just let the music flow out of me with no conscious effort. At this point in time my concentration will be focused on the purest void, for I will have understood that to follow the unpredictable band I have to empty myself from any expectations, and to fill myself with an attitude of unconditional reception.

Then after some good practice sessions, I'm back onstage with the band. Oh, I'm still not an incredible player. My lines are simple, but sometimes they do have some beauty in them. I realize that some day I'll have to be looking for some teacher to help me overcoming some major difficulties – the main one being playing more with my head than my heart.

For the time being, I just enjoy the jam session.

The only reward I get is the satisfaction of rendering a wonderful part of the endless, anonymous tune. Sometimes such a successful part only lasts a few minutes. And what bliss...

The only motivation I've got is to find this feeling of being part of something greater than I and to have performed at the best of my abilities, and to have been aware of it.

That's the only thing that matters.

All other things are superfluous in this quest for harmony.

It makes me happy, gives sense to my existence and fills well my days. For I know the band will always be playing, whether I decide to join them or not; they will always welcome me, like a caring mother.

I now would like to invite the VoiceClub under the direction of David Tillinghast to draw us into the flow of endless song.