

**Per Harling's Chapel talk at Bethany College
September 1, 2010**

“What is music?”

I am honoured to have been asked to come to Bethany College as a Pearson distinguished professor. I just wonder why? Maybe it is due to the fact that I love music, and that some people wanted me to come to share that love with you here at Bethany. Therefore I would like to share with you a different story of the music, which is a love story. Let me begin with one very personal experience.

I remember how I started to cry – on the subway in the rush hour - one winter day in the mid 90's. I could not stop the tears from coming to my eyes. It was remarkable, because I started to cry over a loss of something that I even did not know existed! I had just read a small article in the daily newspaper about the phenomena of *singing sand*, which appears in many parts of the world, be it sand by the shores of the world seas or in the far away deserts. The singing has been heard in different parts of California as well as in far away deserts in China, on the shores of Japan, Hawaii and Brazil and many other parts of the world. I had never heard of this phenomena, even though it has been known to mankind since a long time. In fact it might even be the oldest music on our earth. Now – said the author of the article – is the singing sand dying more and more around us, due to the spilling oil in the seas, air pollution, waste products and human folly. The sand sang for more than 4 500 million years, since the beginning of creation, but it took only a few decades to silence it. No wonder I started to cry in the middle of the rush hour of the world. I missed the singing sand, which I never had heard or even had heard of.

All through the human history the question has been asked: What is music? Many have come up with an answer. The shortest answer may be Bach's: “It is what pleases God”. Claude Debussy gives a more down-to-earth answer: “Music is an expression of the movements of the water and the play of the winds”. And he adds, thus being a little critical to his own colleagues: “Musicians do not read enough in the book of Nature”. Maybe he is right, because it is in the creation it all started. Music might be an address from cosmos itself, or rather from the Creator of cosmos. In 2003 astronomers actually detected the deepest tone ever generated in cosmos, a B-flat flying through space like a ripple on an invisible pond. No human being will ever be able to hear the note though, because it is 57 octaves below the keys in the middle of a piano. So there it is; a 2.5 billion years old sustained drone, giving a profound base tone to the music of the creation. In many cultures the music of the people is based on such a sustained tone that gives ground to the melody. Often the drone leads the musician and the listener into a state of contemplation, of healing, of awareness of the great universe, slowly clearing the mind to a state beyond thoughts and emotions.

For a long time in the history of the earth nature was deaf though and silence prevailed, despite all sounds. Meteorites roared down on the young earth for hundreds of millions years without anyone hearing them. Volcanoes rolled, earth quakes made continents split. Yet nothing was heard. There were no sounds because nobody could *hear* them...

After a **long** time in the history of the earth creatures were developed that – for the first time - could HEAR the sounds of the creation. There – in the hearing – music touched the life of creation for the first time.

Probably the auditory organs have had something to do with balance from the very beginning of hearing. Still we carry our organ of balance in our ears. The mechanism for the sense of balance is physically the same as the mechanism behind the hearing: that impulses from the outside world make something to vibrate within the organism. Maybe it is the combination of hearing and balance that make music being a language of healing and of encouragement.

Researchers say that we share this musical experience with many animals. The human being is not unique in the creation in that sense. Maybe you have heard that the best music for cows being able to produce milk is the music of Mozart. The worst is supposed to be hard rock. Someone said to me though that it might depend on the cow's age! Feelings and perceptions through sounds and music, which are dear to us may also be dear to many other creatures on this earth in the universe. We still do not know if the starling and the nightingale are able to perceive their own music in their singing. But we have many reasons today to believe that they actually may perceive it, and enjoy it, being the language that brings us together.

Probably singing preceded the ability of speaking in the history of the human being. The Neanderthals, dying out 30.000 years ago, and followed by the speaking *homo sapiens*, did not communicate with each other through speech. Probably they sang, using tones like the whistling dolphins, in their communicative behavior. Maybe it was a way of communication that was more related to the feelings and the senses rather than to the intellect. As human beings we actually still use this kind of communication, relating ourselves to the very beginning of life. When we communicate with our babies we use a singing language. We babble, hum and sing with them, giving them comfort, security and love. Language researchers have found out that this kind of language/sound/music is very much the same all over the world. It is the most original sound of intimacy, of love and of hope.
Share lullabies with each other...

There is power in music. In our churches we know that, because the Christian church has always been a singing church, giving voice to the pain and the joy of life, shifting back and forth between the *Kyrie eleison* and the *Gloria* as well as between the *Agnus dei* and the joyful *Sanctus*. And our liturgical singing is always prayers to the *Holy One*. Maybe the songs of the church may not change the world, but they will always give hope in hopeless situations, they will always empower the powerless, and they will always give words and tones to the wonder of life, to the praise to the Triune God.

So: While the earth and all life on earth now is exploited by short-sighted interests and greed, where singing sands, birds, whales, dolphins and many more species more and more are under the threat of extermination, we need to raise our voices, groaning with creation, humming with our children, singing songs of hope and joy in order to find the kind of healing balance that makes "the world go around" for many more years ahead. There is power in the music. There is music in the air. There is love in the music.

The sand slowly runs through the hour-glass reminding us of the time flow, and I am not sure, but I think the sand actually sings... still!

Per Harling