

lost and found

When you lose something you always find something. Sometimes it is just a nice uncovered area of the table where you thought you left your keys. Sometimes it is the discovery that you will not miss the high school friend whose address you can no longer find. Sometimes it is a whole free evening opened up by the absence of tickets to a show you didn't want to go to anyway. I lost the words for my religion, and when I did I found that I didn't need them. The story is really all of my life.

Two years ago I was coaching some singers inside a giant head. It had been built as a recording studio, so from the outside it looked like a house-sized head with earphones. This sort of thing isn't so rare out our way: just down the road there is a fish restaurant in the form of a giant fish, and round the corner there is a veterinarian's office that has the form of a cat with perking up ears. Inside the head it was one large room, and although they probably had not designed it deliberately for this there was an amazing resonance. The echo was uncannily like the sound of your voice in your own head when you are singing. I was the director of a choir, and I was trying to train four of our best choristers to be soloists. We were saving for a church hall and I was hoping to avoid paying soloists for our performance of the Mozart Requiem. The problem was that they had beautiful voices individually but had no idea how to blend with other soloists. They didn't adjust to another soloist's pitch sense and they didn't tune their harmonies so that they worked with one another. It was as if they were just reading the music. So I took them to this resonant place where, if anywhere, they could learn to hear one another.

It worked. I made them stand in a loose circle and sing. When it wasn't going well I gestured that they should listen harder, and gradually they sounded better and better, more and more together. Afterwards the soprano said to me that it was as if she could hear all four voices as if none of them

were hers. And the baritone said that he would will someone else's voice to combine better and then find his own changing. After an hour of this we were all tired but satisfied. I got out my phone, plugged good speakers into the earphone socket, and we all spent an hour listening to the piece on YouTube, while they read their parts silently, singing in their minds, and I conducted them, bringing out the balance and emphases that I wanted, which were not always the same as the recording.

We were about halfway through, and things were going well. It was as if they were singing through the speakers and the recorded choir was following my instructions, when something very strange happened. It was in the offertory, with the words "quam olim Abrahae promisisti". As once You promised Abraham — that you would not send his descendants into utter darkness. I suppose I had never reflected on those words, but suddenly they seemed like a six-year-old whine: but you prommmised. And does God need to be reminded to keep his promises, as if they might just conveniently slip his mind? It wasn't a very startling thought, but within moments I found fifty years worth of belief sliding off me, like an old raincoat you have impulsively decided to put in a charity bin.

I was a very devout child, so much so that I resented church music for distracting from the sermon. But music has been central in my life for as long as I can remember, and as a child I learned both the violin and the piano, picking both up more easily than most of my contemporaries and also singing in a choir, but not a church choir. Then when I was a student I supported myself as a church organist, initially just for the money, but then finding that in my almost adult self the music and the doctrine combined, and almost seemed to fuse. I would rehearse the choir when the choirmaster was busy or couldn't be bothered. I enjoyed that also. Then when I needed a lifetime's employment I found a position in a large rich church as organist and choirmaster, and I have been doing that for thirty years. It seemed suddenly to have ended.

I was committed to coaching and conducting the choir for the Requiem. But I wondered in the next days whether I should quit my job, whether it would be dishonest to continue working for a church. In any case I had the sense to wait, to see whether the feeling passed, or rather whether the feeling of a feeling having passed would end. It didn't. Remembering my self of only a couple of weeks before seemed like talking to someone from far away and ages ago.

In the middle of my indecision the choir was asked to perform at a funeral. Since we had just done the Requiem in public this was the obvious choice. I decided to do just one movement, with my four soloists as the only singers, while I played the organ pretending to be the choir and orchestra. So we did the Benedictus, all by itself, and it sounded fine. The family of the deceased was contented and in tears. This was success, what the occasion was supposed to do. A few days later there was a wedding, and again I was asked to prepare music. I didn't want either of the two standard wedding tunes. And I knew the couple were traditionalists, and in fact one of them had studied music in college. So I adapted Bach's air on the G string for the organ. It was the right combination of seriousness and distraction. Another success, so for a while I felt comfortable in my occupation.

This left me in a quandary. I liked doing funerals and weddings, and christenings and renewals of vows, and the Christmas midnight service. And for that matter pet-blessing ceremonies. I wished we had special occasions with special music for many things. Retirements, anniversaries, restorations of friendship, perhaps even divorces and moves to new houses. I thought I could perform, and commission music for all of these, and occasionally even compose it. But I didn't want to have to assert anything, tell anybody anything, use any words that meant much. This was really bothering me; perhaps that's why I had the fall.

I was doing a ceremony for a graduating Sunday school class. Not an official duty but the sort of thing I was often asked to do. I had arranged for a performance of Handel's *Arrival of the Queen of Sheba*, with a recorder, a Baroque oboe, and a gamba. But because of my churchly role they wanted me to say a few words to make the music into a kind of blessing. Of course I didn't want to. I didn't want to say anything that made sense. But I stepped grumpily forward from the podium — and then my foot slipped. I fell heavily and hit my head on the floor. Perhaps not so very heavily, because I opened my eyes in five minutes or so and began to speak. At any rate sounds came from my mouth, and they sounded like words, though not English words. It was as if I was speaking in tongues: a mixture of nonsense, Hebrew, Latin, Aramaic, and God knows what else. *Drah plitois nunc dimmitis mevarakh lealam v'al kol isra'el v'al kol mengisthi tim Ta wasabi trillium*. The graduating class was in a circle around me, and they smiled when they saw me conscious and speaking. I tried to get up and all I could do was wave my arms. But when the musicians and students saw me do this they thought I was asking them to sing and play, so they repeated the music from twenty minutes earlier, with the words I had just uttered, inasmuch as they could remember them. I staggered to my feet, and delighted with the effect continued to conduct. They continued; they were enjoying it.

When all that was over I tried explaining to everyone what had happened. I found it very difficult; words were not coming easily. I was far from mute or aphasic, but I had to concentrate to speak. This continued the following day; I could say anything I wanted to, but it seemed to take a lot of effort. The day after that I spent in bed, just to see if it was rest that I needed. I didn't get that much rest because I felt fine, but I did do a lot of thinking. I made a decision, a slightly deceptive one. I began to exaggerate my difficulty in speaking. I had an interview with the minister and in halting uncertain terms I asked whether I could remain as music director but not be asked ever to say anything in public. To my surprise, he agreed. But he insisted on one thing, quite a reasonable thing. I should still instruct the choir in the words,

because otherwise they mangled most texts. Even their English wasn't up to much.

The very next day we had a rehearsal. We were working on an old English Christmas Carol, the Coventry Carol. It has always been a favourite of mine, but I find the words pretty silly. Still, it was my job to teach them. So, sitting at the piano, I played all the parts and sang the words, not necessarily in the right octaves. I meant to sing the words, those particular silly words. But what came out of my mouth was another exalted exotic extraordinary exercise in what might have been speech if only it carried a message from someone to someone. *Lux æterna luceat tés another eirenes kai tés soterias gospodi pomiluj sov thade tage em ereb*. That sort of thing. And they learned it! After only half a dozen times through they had in by heart.

We performed it at a Christmas service. The congregation was visibly puzzled, but visibly delighted and moved. We did it again a week later, and this time the church was packed; they had brought their friends. There was a reception afterwards and I spoke to people who said they never went to church but that this stirred something within them. "What does it mean?" they asked. "It means what it means" I told them "but only if you don't understand it."