

# MUSIC MYTH AND METAPHYSICS: A ROMP THROUGH THE SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM AND BEYOND

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What is the use or function of poetry nowadays? Is a question not the less poignant for being defiantly asked by so many stupid people or apologetically answered by so many silly people. The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exultation and horror that her presence excites. But ‘nowadays’? Function and use remain the same; only the application has changed. This was once a warning to man that he must keep in harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born, by obedience to the wishes of the lady of the house; it is now a reminder that he has disregarded the warning, turned the house upside down by capricious experiments in philosophy, science and industry, and brought ruin on himself and his family. ‘Nowadays’ is a civilisation in which the prime emblems of poetry are dishonoured. In which serpent, lion and eagle belong to the circus-tent; ox, salmon and boar to the cannery; racehorse and greyhound to the betting ring; and the sacred grove to the saw-mill. In which the Moon is despised as a burned-out satellite of the Earth and women reckoned as ‘auxiliary State personnel’. In which money will buy almost anything but truth, and almost anyone but the truth-seeking poet.<sup>1</sup>

Thus spake Robert Graves in the foreword to his *The White Goddess*. If I understand him correctly then he is saying:

Firstly, that the function (which is to say the use) of poetry is the same today as before (although the application has changed).

Secondly, that poetry warns that man should live in harmony with all living creatures and that he no longer does.

Although the book was written over sixty years ago I find it mostly applicable to the state of the world today. After all, we do not live in harmony with other species, we see them simply as a resource to be exploited. To the list of beings cited—serpent, lion, eagle, ox, salmon, boar, racehorse, greyhound, and women—we might also add men, or at least other men, who are relegated to the killing fields of war. Since the Moon and the sacred grove are also counted as living creatures I assume that planet earth also counts. And we are surely all aware of man’s reckless exploitation of nature.

Professor Graves’s words have two implications I which would like to point out. Firstly, he suggests that things were not always as bad as they are today. Secondly, he implies that the solution to these problems is to be found in a return to the values of poetic myth. If this sounds rather like a variation of the myth of The Fall of Man then it’s probably because it is. In other myths the world was spoken or sung into being. “And God said” says Genesis. In Tolkien’s *Silmarillion* Illúvatar (the Creator) teaches the angels to make music and the music creates the universe. So I would like to propose that maybe a solution is also to be found in music-making—or maybe, at the mythopoeic level—that both the poetry and the music solution are the same thing.

This essay is about music and myth and metaphysics and the relationship between them. But what is myth? It should be clear, by now, that I do not use the word in the sense often used today to describe a falsity such as “Iraq had weapons of mass

destruction”, or to describe such possible oxymorons as “German efficiency” or “military intelligence”. Myth is usually defined as the history of a culture or worldview usually in the form of fantastic stories. Some believe that myth only applies to other people’s religion or culture—our history or religion (no matter how fantastic) is, of course, simply the Truth. In contemporary thought myth has been upgraded to a universal in that we now concede that we also have myths in our own culture and religion, and that all myths, from all cultures, embody truth. The Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) said that nations must begin by remembering their poetic truths and that these poetic truths are, primarily, mythic. Two examples of this are Romulus and Remus founding Rome and George Washington founding the U.S.

William Irwin Thompson quotes Vico saying that myth is the history of the soul and I would extrapolate from Vico and Thompson and say that myth is the history of Truth. Which is to say that soul is the awareness and cogitations of reality. Soul is reality aware and thinking of itself: the self-awareness of reality.

Therefore soul, in this sense: Firstly, is mind, because it is aware and thinking. Secondly, it is that part of reality that is aware. Thirdly, because its awareness is of reality, its history, as awareness, is the history of reality.

This idea that mind is thinking, rational, logical and aware is close many similar ideas in world religions and philosophies:

The Greek concept of Logos. Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI in a lecture said: “From the beginning, Christianity has understood itself as the religion of the “Logos.”<sup>2</sup>

The Dhammapada (quotations from the Buddha) states: "All things are preceded by the mind, led by the mind, created by the mind."

Taoism connects mind and reality in the idea of Tao, usually translated as “way”: in one sense it means the way one conducts oneself, in the other sense it means the way the universe functions

To recapitulate thus far: Graves says that we are no longer living in harmony with nature and to remedy this should return to the values of poetic myth. From this I have suggested that the values of poetic myth are applicable not only to poetry but to music. Myth, according to Giambattista Vico and William Irwin Thompson, is the history of the soul. I have equated soul with mind and concluded that as the soul is the awareness of all that is myth is the history of all that is.

Time for a limerick:

There once was a man who said; God  
Must think it exceedingly odd  
If he finds that this tree  
Continues to be  
When there's no one about in the Quad.

Is reality simply what we perceive? Does reality cease to exist if unobserved? Does the falling tree in the forest make any sound if there is no one around to hear it? Does reality requires mind in order to exist? If it does (as quantum physics seems to imply) then maybe Graves is correct in claiming that poetry, because it is a creative mind function, is mythopoeic and therefore a part of the creation and continual re-creation of reality.

The second verse of the limerick says:

Dear Sir, your astonishment's odd;  
I am always about in the Quad;  
And that's why the tree  
Will continue to be  
Since observed by yours faithfully, God.

This seems to suggest that God is the totality of mind in the universe and is constantly creating and recreating reality by holding it in mind. I don't know who wrote the limerick but seem to remember reading somewhere that it is attributed to Bishop Berkeley.

How does music fit into this picture? Well, music is a creative mind function too and therefore part of the creation and continual re-creation of reality. In other words whenever we use our minds creatively we are contributing to the continual regeneration of reality.

Of course, some may object to this idealism and claim that mind is simply the product of a physical brain and electrical impulses. Quite apart from any discoveries of quantum mechanics I would argue that the only reality we know is that which our mind/brain interprets from information furnished by our senses, therefore our reality is a mental construct made up of how we perceive reality. In other words the mind creates ideas, which are non-physical, out of physical phenomena: brain matter and electrical impulses, these, in turn create non-physical ideas. It seems that there is a reciprocal relationship between mind and matter, one creating the other—but which came first and therefore originally created the other? More on this latter when we tackle the space-time continuum.

The Graves quotation I began with asks the question 'What is the use or function of poetry nowadays? I would like to replace the word poetry with music and try to address two variations of the question.

The two questions I would like to ask and explore are:

Firstly, assuming myth to be the history of the soul (which is to say the history of truth or reality) is Graves correct in implying that it can be used to solve contemporary problems?

And secondly: if the answer is yes, then can we, as composers, adapt this wisdom for our own use to compose mythpoeic music that will somehow help solve our world's problems? If music and sound was used to create the world, can we use it now to re-create and improve the world? Or if that is too blasphemous then can we allow ourselves to be agents, for whatever higher powers there may be, in the continual re-creation of reality?

My answer to both questions is 'yes'. But it is not an unqualified yes therefore I hope to show that there is at least some evidence to support it. And it is also not an unreserved yes because, at least for the present, I know and understand too little of both the problem Graves implies and of any solution.

#### SOME METAPHYSICS

The soul is the witness of truth as the scientist is the witness of fact. What is truth, where is it to be found and how apprehended? Remember, I'm defining truth as "that

which is," namely reality. We each have a physical sensorium consisting of specialised nerves that relay specific kinds of energy to the brain—the nerves of the eye relay light energy to the brain, the nerves of the ear relay sound energy, etc. The scientific mind perceives then measures and records the facts of the physical/material world, that is the space-time continuum. My hypothesis (and Rudolph Steiner's claim) is that we also have another set of senses, a 'spiritual sensorium' (Steiner's phrase) which is for perceiving Truth. Truth does not belong to the physical world but facts do. In other words, reality may be perceived in at least two different ways—as fact, which is measured and catalogued by scientists; and as truth, which is beyond measurement and reason and can only be perceived by 'higher' or 'spiritual' senses.

Another difference between fact and Truth is that Truth is permanent whereas facts are ephemeral. Facts deal with measurement and number: that I have exactly two parents is a fact, that I have certain feelings toward and affections for them is true and cannot be measured. Truth cannot be measured for it is eternal, that without end cannot be measured: "How do I love thee, let me count the ways," Elizabeth Barrett Browning can only count the ways of loving, the ways of loving are the expressions of love, they are numerous and temporary, the flowers that are an expression of love will fade by tomorrow, but love itself is eternal. Facts relate to the space-time continuum and truth relates to that which is beyond time and space. If truth is eternal then it not only has no end but it also has beginning, because to have either a beginning or an end requires time. If ideas are non-physical then they are outside of the space-time continuum and therefore have no beginning or end. It follows that when physical matter came into existence at the Big Bang then mind must already have been there because it had no beginning.

What are the 'spiritual' senses? According to Christian doctrine we have a spiritual counterpart for every physical sense but the spiritual senses are dormant and exist only as potential until they have been developed. Rudolf Steiner says much the same and adds that we must not think that spiritual sight is like physical sight—it is more like insight, I sense of interior knowing. Islam teaches that by using the five physical senses for acts of devotion we develop the five 'Pillars of Islam' which are the spiritual senses. It seems that developing the spiritual senses is a matter of practise. The materialist will object here and say that intuition is unreliable, only accurate scientific measurement is reliable. The answer to that is that the physical senses may also be unreliable. How many times has science lingered in a blind alley? In the 19th century science believed that women's brains were inferior to those of men. Science has improved by scientists learning to perceive and measure and use their physical senses more accurately, it's a matter of practise. Religion tells us that the spiritual senses improve with practise too. The spiritual senses are every kind of internal faculty that allows us to know Truth.

Myth is the language of Truth and mathematics is the language of fact. Which is more accurate? In order to understand what  $E=MC^2$  means one has to know what energy, mass, and light are. Einstein's equation tells us nothing about any of these in themselves, only about the relationship between them. Stravinsky's Rite of Spring tells us about the violence that is inherent in each of our souls. In order to understand what the music tells us we need to know the musical language that Stravinsky uses and we need to know ourselves well enough to recognise violence in our own souls. Einstein is accurate in terms of fact and Stravinsky is accurate in terms of Truth. Surely, in order for our composing to be part of that greater creativity which is reality continually recreating itself we need to experience not only the facts of creativity but also the truths. Stravinsky says that he had no method for writing his Rite, he simply sat at his out-of-tune piano and

experimented with chords and rhythms until it sounded right. It seems to me that the Rite is a masterpiece because it speaks truth and that when Stravinsky was composing it he was exercising his spiritual senses.

There was a time in human history when the priest and the poet had the same vocation and one shamanic being could be both. Robert Graves speaks of this in his *The White Goddess* and claims that the single 'grand theme of poetry' is 'the life, death and resurrection of the Spirit of the Year, the Goddess's son and lover.' Is this not simply an expression of the truth that we all live, and grow old and die? Is this not the same truth that Tennyson states in his "In Memoriam A.H.H." when he says:

I held it truth, with him who sings  
To one clear harp in divers tones,  
Than men may rise on stepping-stones  
Of their dead selves to higher things

When Stravinsky reminds us of the atavistic past which lingers in our souls he is documenting the history of the soul and providing a stepping stone.

The argument that great music is music that speaks truth can, of course, be applied to all artists and their work. The corollary is that when great music is listened to and understood then the listener is also exercising spiritual senses and perceiving truth.

Music, poetry and art are not the only expressions of Truth. Truth may also be expressed in a religious sacrament. Art and religion appear to be the major forms of mythopoeic expression today, at least in the western world. In former times mythic forms of communication were developed to express Truth. Graves's *The White Goddess* is subtitled "A historical grammar of poetic myth." Thompson and Levi Strauss would say that myth is process (as is the continual recreating it records) and that Graves's book is part of the process and part of the myth, as is this essay. This again highlights the difference between Truth and its expressions: myth as history is a fact that deals with Truth, and as fact it takes place in time and is therefore a process. Those with a Catholic education will doubtless be reminded that a sacrament is defined as an outer and visible sign of an inner and invisible truth. One question is whether the invisible truth may have more than one sign. If all roads lead to Rome and if all roads are sign-posted then are there not many signs, all pointing in different directions, pointing to Rome? For one the road leads east, for another south. Only from a higher perspective can one see that they all point to the same place. As to why is truth invisible and requires myth and sacrament, we may answer that multiple signs all pointing to different places and all pointing to the same place is certainly confusing because although the opposite of a fact is a falsity, the opposite of a truth will often be another truth.

Myth is not only a history of reality, it is also a part of the Great Re-creation of Reality, just like modern physics where the observer is part of the experiment. In exploring the question of how music not only expresses myth or truth but influences reality I turn now to the English composer and author Cyril Scott. In his book called simply "Music" he describes how the music of various composers has affected people throughout history by affecting the minds of those who listened to it.

Scott says that Handel wrote music that invoked awe and reverence. Handel's technique was based on repetition of single chords, two and four bar phrases, and sequences. The results of combining awe and reverence with formalistic procedures resulted in the glorification of formality, imitation, and conventionality. Based on this

Scott contends that Handel's music was, at least partly, responsible for the Victorian age and its characteristics.

On the other hand J.S. Bach's music is characterised as inventive rather than imitative and intellectual rather than formal. Therefore "while the youths and men of England preferred to gossip about cricket, football or golf, the German youths were earnestly preoccupied with the 'why, whence and whither' of human existence."<sup>3</sup>

Beethoven (according to Scott) was born to express every human emotion in music, which explains why he had to do a great deal of suffering. His music induced sympathy and compassion and later paved the way for public acceptance for psychoanalysis. When Victorian women played his music on the piano, or even just listened to it, they would often cry as emotion was released. Emotion otherwise was forced inward to caused fainting or an attack of the vapours.

Mendelssohn and Chopin (according to Scott) continued the job of sympathy in that whereas Beethoven allowed for the emptying of emotion, they provided music to fill the resultant void. Mendelssohn's music has "gentle sweetness", which is "happy but never boisterous" with "exquisite tenderness." All of which are characteristics admirably suited to fill the void created by Beethoven's music in the female Victorian soul. Chopin was born in the same year and month as Mendelssohn, February 1809, and the role of his music was to express refinement and sadness and all the many moods of the emotions. The sadness due to fact that the Polish folk-song is sad. Not only did Chopin's music influence Pre-Raphaelite painting and literature but it was admirably suited (along with Mendelssohn's music) to filling the vacuous female soul (although one wonders what Victorian ladies thought of his relationship with George Sands).

The role of Robert Schumann's music (according to Scott) was to reform the Victorian attitude toward children from little criminals in need of punishment into the more humane and naturalistic view that children have to play, romp and shout: it's part of their nature and part of growing up. Schumann's music is full of simplicity and innocence:

...he was the true poet of the child-soul, of the child nature, of the child-life. With his tenderness, his whimsicality and his humour, with his questionings, his fancifulness, his pleadings and his dreaminess, he implanted in the mother-heart the true likeness of the child—and she understood.

Doubtless there were many Victorian mothers who needed no such implanting but whose hearts would, never the less vibrate in sympathy. There follows a paragraph I cannot resist from quoting for I find it a perfect critique of contemporary institutional practises:

Children were not all alike, they were as varied as adults; there was only one similarity between them—that they were all children. It was our treatment of them that made them appear all alike; we allowed them no self-expression, we trampled upon their individualities, we silenced their questionings, we never tried to understand them, to foster their latent talents. When they were naughty we punished them and put them to bed, but we never sought to find out the true cause of their naughtiness and wisely to remedy it; on the contrary, we resorted to the expedient of frightening them. Was there no better way...?

Maybe Schumann should be required listening for all politicians.

And so we turn to Wagner (according to Scott) whose music has and has had both a good and a bad influence. Wagner's music is truly spiritual in that he combines so many themes, both musical and literary, into a single unified whole. It is the prototype of cooperation and a symbol of the soul unified with the All-soul. If this sounds like

Buddhism that's because it is. Indeed Wagner planned but never got around to writing an opera based on the life of Buddha's principle disciple Ananda. The bad news is that his operas are also full of a rather unhealthy hero worship which gave rise to such ideas as Herrenrasse, the Nazi Master Race ideology. Love of power also plays an important role in the Nibelungen Ring. These two combined to give rise to German nationalism and the Deutschland ueber alles idea that contributed to making the world wars of the twentieth century possible.

Richard Strauss was the Apostle of Freedom and Individuality (according to Scott). He was the continuation of Wagner: more so technically speaking and less so spiritually speaking. His daring and anti-conventional harmonies inspired humanity to break its bonds and become free but he never attained the spiritual heights of Wagner. Where Wagner is spiritual Strauss has Teutonic religious sentimentality and patriotic tunefulness. Both composers are advocates for freedom and therefore accused of eroticism and libertinage. Scott repudiates this and says this has more to do with the nature of the individuals in question than the music. A case of "Honi soit qui mal y pense" as Edward III once said.

It remains to be said that Scott considered other composers, those he doesn't mention at length, as either having little or no influence outside of music itself or as having the effects mentioned but to a lesser extent. Brahms, for instance, belongs in the same category as Beethoven as a liberator of emotion. Scott also believes that the effect on society is in proportion to the exposure. The more music is listened to, the greater its effect.

So here are multiple examples of how music has influenced the history of the soul and thus the history of reality. But all this begs the question: is Scott right? This is a two-part question:

Is he right in supposing the various effects he ascribes to the music of various composers and;

Is he right in supposing that repeated exposure increases the effect?

Generally speaking the Victorian era is known for snobbishness and intolerance and generally speaking Handel's music is more formalistic and imitative than Bach's. Whether one caused or contributed to the other is another question. I can't prove it scientifically and my higher spiritual senses, such as they are, are inadequate to perceive it beyond reasonable doubt although my gut tells me that there is some truth here even if it isn't the whole truth. Scott, of course, claims to know all this by means of observing and comparing with his spiritual senses, which I suppose includes his gut feelings, and constitutes a sort of spiritual 'scientific method.'

As to the second question: does repeated exposure increase the effect? The answer surely has to be yes, for this is the principle on which mass marketing and politics both seem to work. With a quick trip to Google I discovered that \$1.88 billion was spent on TV advertising in 2004 (PQ Media, October 2005), and that U.S. spending on online local advertising will grow 26% to \$3.2 billion in 2005 and is expected to reach \$5.3 billion by 2010 (Jupiter Research, September 2005).

I also recently read a speech by Bill Moyers who said that Washington lobbyists spend \$220 million each month on lobbying Congress. My initial reaction to this was that I had misread the number and then that it was a misprint, but that's what he said: \$220 million each month. But a little thought showed me that this may very well be correct: \$220

million per month equal about two point five billion a year. Exxon Mobil corporation's profits for 2004 were over \$298 billion so it alone could be funding all lobbying just out of its spare change.<sup>4</sup> The point is that billions of dollars are spent on advertising and politics, both of which work on the principle of repetition. If you don't believe this then visit Google and type in "repetition and truth". If it works for politics and advertising then maybe it works for music as well.

Summa summarum. Let me now recapitulate after rambling from metaphysics to marketing.

One line of thought:

Firstly, I hypothesised that myth is the history of the soul, which I equate with mind, and that the soul-mind is the history of reality, the soul-mind is the universe aware of itself.

Secondly, reality is in a constant process of re-creation (every cell in the body gets replaced every five years, except brain cells, that sort of thing). It follows from this that when we compose (or paint a picture, or write a novel etc.) our soul-mind is participating in the Great Re-creation of Reality because myth is not only a history of reality but an agent for changing reality.

Another line of thought:

Firstly, reality comes in two flavours, the physical, material space-time continuum that can be measured and catalogued as facts; and the spiritual, immaterial and immeasurable world described by truth.

Secondly, that we have senses appropriate for both flavours, but our truth sensors and our fact sensors are like our piano playing—they're only as good as we've made them through practise. It follows from this that in order to compose, be creative and take part in the ongoing Great Re-creation of Reality we need to practise awareness of both fact and truth, of both physical and spiritual. We need to be able to see that although at ground level the signposts all point in different directions from a higher, birds-eye view all roads lead to Rome.

So have my two questions been answered?

First question: is there any evidence that we can use music to improve the world? Because everything is connected and related the answer yes. The real question is to what extent can we influence. Obviously, if we teach, we influence our students, and because we compose, we influence anyone who hears our music. Influencing students affects the future indirectly whereas our music influences directly every time. Whether Cyril Scott is correct in his assessment of how composers have influenced is open to debate, as it should be, what isn't open to debate is whether there is an influence. Because of this I conclude that we have a responsibility to think about what kind of influence our music has and will have.

Second question: if we can influence, how do we do it? The answer is that we already are. So the question becomes how can we improve what we're doing. My answer to that is by becoming more aware of what we are doing and by deciding how we wish to, or how we think we should, influence. We become more aware by practise, by exercising our physical and, if we believe we have it, our spiritual sensorium. As to what our

influence will be that will depend on how we think history needs to be influenced, or maybe not influenced, or maybe, if we believe in a higher being, it will be part of our vocation. In today's world I think we need to seriously consider if our music has an influence on violence or thoughtlessness. It isn't enough to merely reflect our present culture, we have to remember that we are also shaping future culture.

In conclusion here are three a propos thoughts with relevant quotations.

Firstly, we may conclude that not everyone is cut out to be a composer and therefore those of us who are may very well decide to be responsible for writing music that both reflects and creates truth, for as Mark Twain said: "All of us contain music and truth, but most of us can't get it out."

Secondly, we can't all be Beethovens and Bachs but we can all make a small but significant contribution because, to quote Khalil Gibran: "I discovered the secret of the sea in the meditation upon the dewdrop."

And lastly, if we admit that there are problems in the world then we must also admit that we are responsible. When GK Chesterton was asked by The London Times to write on the subject "What is wrong with the world", he responded with a short letter:

Dear Sirs:  
I am.  
Sincerely yours,  
G. K. Chesterton.

I thank you for your kind attention.

ENDNOTES

1. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: a Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), p. 14.
2. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Benedict XIV, in the convent of Saint Scholastica in Subiaco, Italy, the day before Pope John Paul II died.  
<http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=74864>.
3. Cyril Scott, *Music: Its Secret Influence Throughout the Ages* (London: Rider, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1950).
4. [http://www.democrats.org/a/2005/05/record\\_prices\\_r.php](http://www.democrats.org/a/2005/05/record_prices_r.php).