

If you were to provide a narrative about the life and music of Bach you might expect that some comment would be made about the composer's faith. I attended a concert that featured the music of Johan Sebastian Bach and included images and a narrative about the composer. It was a fine concert and an interesting narrative but there was virtually no mention of the faith of this great composer.

In a post-enlightenment culture it is common practice when speaking of the work of an artist for whom faith was a key component of life – to simply ignore the faith element and speak only of the art and the artistic genius. Van Gogh would be an example in visual art and this is what happened at the concert I attended. This marginalizing of faith has inspired me to look again into the life of this composer and I offer here some observations.

It is assumed that Bach got a good amount of religious instruction as a youth and was from his early days well acquainted with both scripture and Lutheran theology. He was hired as Cantor at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig and remained in Leipzig from 1723-1750. Most of his Cantatas were composed in this period and of the 300 or so that he likely wrote only about 200 remain today. These are liturgical works carefully crafted around the scripture readings for the Sunday for which they were written. One can think of Bach's Cantatas as musical proclamations of the gospel and they lie at the heart of his extensive corpus of compositions. Bach lived

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Tongues of Fire installation

"Tongues of Fire" is a large installation made up of hundreds of small oil paintings. It is a work in which the artist is able to capture something of the energy and dynamism suggested by this rich image used to describe what happened at Pentecost. It consists of one large Flame comprised of scores of smaller Flames. Each aspect of the installation is a painting with each painting, painted differently. This work serves as a reminder of our diversity and of energizing power of our languages. It also calls us to think afresh about what it means to experience the presence of the Spirit in the world.

"Tongues of Fire" is installed by randomly placing these of small paintings into the shape of one large flame. It can be installed at various heights or widths to conform to a space, which it is located in "situ". It can therefore reach a height of up to 4 metres (12 x 9 ft.) or be compressed to fit any wall: the width varies accordingly. The first exhibition of this work in its entirety took place at a show titled "hEaVEN n eARTh", at the London Regional Art and Historical Museum in the Spring of 2001.



"I made the work to try and convey a spirit of hope and healing. It's a piece which reflects loosely on the story of "Pentecost." Every person in that room had a Tongue of Fire over his or her head, as the Holy Spirit descended and they began to 'Speak in the tongues of angels and men/women'. So too are these works: hundreds of small Flames making up the whole, all working collectively towards the whole."

Fire cleanses and purifies, burning away the chaff. Fire allows new life. Fire provides light and warmth. Yet fire also kills and destroys and can symbolize judgement. This work will hopefully present many different facets and perspectives to its interpretation and of course as the artist, it means all of the above and none of the above.

Gerard Pas (www.gerardpas.com)

Subway Stations of the Cross

Ins Choi, House of Anansi Press, 2015

Many of you will have heard of the very successful play *Kim's Convenience*, by actor/playwright Ins Choi. It was recently announced that the play will become a TV series to be launched on CBC in 2016. While this work has been getting attention across the country there was another dramatic piece taking shape with the pen of this gifted writer.

Subway Stations of the Cross provides a glimpse into the mind of a homeless individual who floats easily from one subject to another. There is a wonderful unpredictability in the meanderings of the mind of this individual which arrest the listener and call them to think again – to ask some important questions. This play is now in book form and it is hard to describe what you have in this book. It's a story – its poetry, it has a prophetic edge, and is not without keen insight into life and what it means to be human. It also notes how some important aspects of our humanity are being undermined in our culture.

*I am afraid we are all being played
We are being praised to embrace the
insatiable race of chasing tasty security
I am afraid we are all being played
We are being erased of the capacity to hear
To see
By being raised in captivity...*

Or who can forget those lines:

*...Repent
Hell bent
Repent
Heaven sent
Repent
From Advent to Lent
This is the main event
Repent.*

The book is lavishly illustrated by Guno Park a childhood friend of the author who were raised together in the same church. This is a book that's funny, sad, arresting, convicting, challenging and invites you to think about life a little differently. It would serve well as a focus for discussion.

Subways Stations will be performed by Ins Choi at the Winnipeg Fringe, July 15-26, 2015 and at the Edmonton Fringe, August 13-23, 2015.

Taking it to the Streets

J. Nathan Corbett & Vivian Nix-Early, Baker Books 2003

It is often thought that art is only for contemplation and one imagines a solitary individual standing before a work of art – usually in a gallery setting. We do an injustice to the power of art if we overlook its capacity to impact communities. *Taking it to the Streets* is not a new book but its message remains relevant. The authors speak of their intent “to be a gospel presence in the tough place of the world and in the margins of our society”. Their interest in social change or transformation is threefold: “personal empowerment and responsibility, community revitalization and societal transformation”. It is assumed throughout the book that the arts have a vital and effective role to play in bringing about social change.

The role of the arts is set out in three typologies: prophetic arts, agape arts and celebrative arts. The first is directed toward justice, the second to the role of personal and social change in relation to the needs of others and the third is art expressing and acknowledging the core values of the community and in the context of faith is essentially praise. The book unfolds the meaning of these expressions of creativity by providing details of meaning and practice of each. It draws on many projects to illustrate the power of art to make a difference in difficult life circumstance. It is a sustained account of “art in action” building, shaping and transforming community. Things are different in the streets to what we find in the sanctuaries but art is able to speak into each setting not least because it is such an essential part of what it means to be human. Among the themes discussed are, arts as the voice of justice, arts and economic development, arts in human relationships, arts as education and the celebration of renewal – dancin’ in the streets.

This is a provocative and engaging work that takes up a topic too often neglected in the world of art.

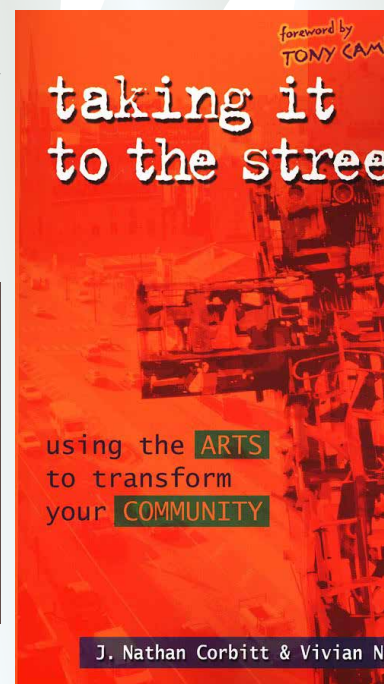
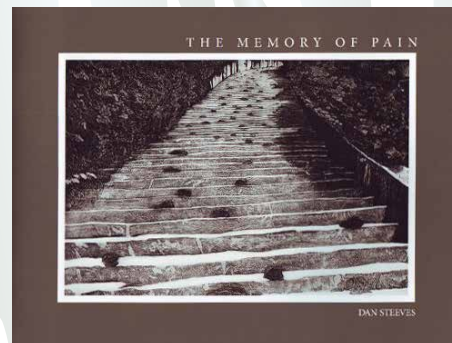
The Memory of Pain/Le Souvenir de La Douleur

Confederation Centre Art Gallery, 2013

Dan Steeves, who resides in New Brunswick, is a master printmaker who has been plying his craft for over three decades. Unlike many artists he works in a world of black and white and is able to capture not only what is seen but to lead the viewer into an unseen world. His images evoke a spiritual presence sometime dark and unsettling and at other time hopeful and reassuring.

I have been looking at the catalogue for his 2013 show “The Memory of Pain” held at the Confederation Centre Art Gallery at Mount Allison University where he teaches. It is a fine suite of engravings inspired by a deeply personal journey. For this artist life is marked by a struggle between good and evil, order and chaos. The prints are generated out of a twofold trauma. The first is a return to his ancestral home in Germany where he visited Mauthausen one of the sites of the Holocaust. The other was the more immediate reality of his wife being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness discovered just before their departure to Europe.

Curator Tom Smart who writes the introduction to the catalogue notes: “Steeves’ hold on reality was deepened by the power of faith and by art as a means to order the chaos of the human condition.” These prints speak to the stark reality of facing death and open the way for a redemptive response to the dark and difficult realities of ordinary life. For Steeves “The familiar holds the potential for transcendence.”



Notes

The music of French composer Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) is not well known to most of us. Perhaps his best known work is *Quartet for the End of Time* written while a prisoner of war. He was a devout believer of the Catholic tradition and much of what he composed was inspired by religious themes. He served as organist at the Église de la Sainte-Trinité, Paris for more than sixty years and he was an avid ornithologist. Recently I had the opportunity to attend a performance of the *Visions de l'Amen* which is a set of seven pieces scored for two pianos.

An “amen” is understood as an affirmation, a gesture of acknowledgement, an endorsement or a voice joining in praise. Space constrains me but let me offer a brief comment on each of the seven Amens. It begins with the Amen of creation, let there be light and creation voices its praise, then the Amen of the stars – all ceaselessly spinning – all shout amen, the Amen of agony Jesus in the garden – knowing the intensity of God’s verdict on the world’s wrong-doing, the Amen of desire, where divine love evokes a longing in the human heart for communion with God, the Amen of the angels, the saints and the birds, all in a chorus of adoration, (Messiaen commonly included birdsong in his works), an Amen of judgement for

those who spurn God’s love and an Amen of consummation, the dazzling culmination of the created world – a new heaven and a new earth – a final let it be.

Having an awareness of the context of the Amens deepens the experience of the work as the two pianos dialogue together and jointly express the mood and meaning through the power and sensitivity of the music. The performance I attended was completely captivating in its expressiveness and virtuosity.

Not unlike Bach the music of Messiaen is born out of a deep faith and thoughtful understanding of the biblical story and the theology it entails. There is a very long tradition of connection between religious belief and music where music becomes a conduit for expressing the heart and soul of the faith. Our post-enlightenment world is inclined to at least diminish if not erase the faith component in creative works of art but that’s an agenda doomed to failure. There is a natural alliance between music and faith as the art opens the way for the experience of the transcendent.

I met Kutter Callaway of Fuller Seminary at a conference several months ago and heard him give an engaging presentation on film. He has written a book with the intriguing title *Scoring Transcendence: Contemporary Film Music as Religious Experience*. (Baylor University Press 2013) I will not provide a review of the book but only offer a few observations. The first two chapters examine films done by Pixar Animation Studios – *Toy Story*, *A Bug’s Life*, *Finding Nemo* and *Ratatouille* where he argues that music offers an interpretative clarity to the story. He goes on to write chapters on the form and the feel of film music as well as presence and spirit in film.

These last two themes are clearly theological as Callaway discusses divine presence through music and the activity of the Spirit in the context of film. The underlying question is whether and how film might be a revelatory experience and so ultimately religious. The book merits more attention than I can give it here, but let me note in conclusion the author’s belief that music found in film demands a theological response. (p.11)

Imago’s plan to host a public forum on faith and contemporary film comes out of

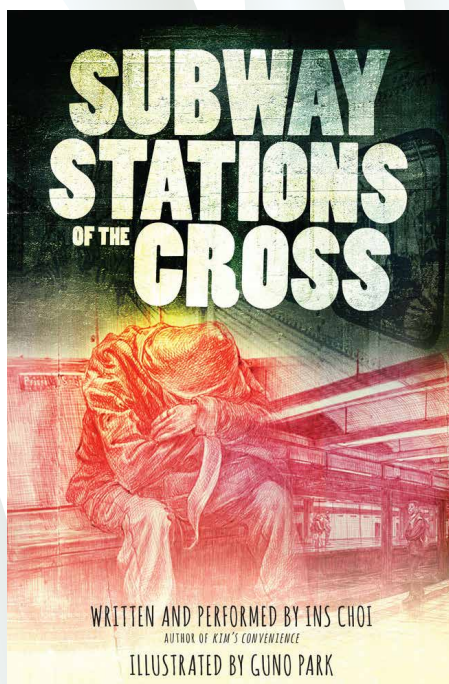
the conviction that film is a location for theological and biblical reflection. Not just through music but also narrative, character and values. Signals of transcendence show up in a wide variety of places in human culture and not least in and though the arts – film included.

The seasoned and accomplished Toronto visual artist Paul Fournier will have a show of his work at Han Art in Montreal May 28 to June 28, 2015. The title of the show is *Realms of Being/ Univers de L’Existence*. Fournier’s paintings capture the threshold between representation and abstraction and are masterworks of colour. *Capriccio Red* is one of the paintings in the show.



I have just received an email from a Christian artist who quite literally travels the world. He attached a brief document detailing his recent personal journey with regard to the church. He recounts the story of meeting with a Director for the label under which he records his music. What ensued was an invitation to play at an event hosted by the Church of Scientology. In fact the Director had in mind all along how he might draw this talented artist into the Scientology circle.

The travels of this artist have meant a much diminished contact with the church. However his experience of an enthusiastic response to his art from the Church of Scientology provoked the question of what is or is not happening among those in the body of Christ regarding artists. His call is for a “Repatriation of the artists into the Body of Christ.” At this time I am not sure what that means or just how it would work –but it is a timely alert realizing there are many artists out there who have lost or are losing their connection with the faith communities to which they belong. Gratefully this is not the whole story as many are well connected to a supportive faith community. I will be in conversation with this artist in the days ahead and hope that some clarity and perhaps some strategy will emerge.



The life and music of Bach

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at a time of great transition in European culture and he gave voice to one of the main currents of the Protestant Reformation. In addition to the Cantatas there are the Passions, St Matthew and St. John and the rich and beautiful Mass in B minor. These religious works evidence a strong Christocentric understanding of theology and provide a powerful coming together of word and music.

The canon of Bach's music extends well beyond these religious works and includes a varied masterful collection of instrumental music. He had a clear sense of the goodness of creation and of his own vocation to create and to do so as a divine calling. It was common practice for him to write SDG (*Soli Deo Gloria*) at the end of his scores. He understood that the writing of music was an offering to God and there was no requirement that it have religious content. Such works as the Brandenburg Concertos, English Suites for piano, the magnificent Goldberg Variations or the Art of Fugue all capture something of the beauty and orderliness of creation. They are echoes of the beauty of the world around us and speak forth a hopefulness that is found in the story of the gospel.



Bach was both well versed in his Christian faith and committed to Christian practice. Great art it seems requires that one live in a great story. I am not suggesting that Bach's faith is what made his music great – many composers and artists of distinction stand outside a faith tradition. But there is no doubt that what Bach believed contributed profoundly to both the shape and quality of his music. It is impossible to do justice to considering Bach's work without also attending to the faith he professed that was woven into the fabric of all that he did as a composer.

I have been putting together this newsletter as Pentecost approaches and have featured three images by Gerard Pas that are part of his "Tongues of Fire" installation work. "Tongues of Fire" is an engaging linguistic

*Great art it seems
requires that one live
in a great story.*

image and in its original context speaks of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the hearing of the gospel each in their own language – essentially a reversal of Babel. At the latter

the interest was to "make a name for themselves". At Pentecost the invitation was to proclaim the name of the One who has come to redeem and transform all creation.

I have long been thinking about links between art and the Holy Spirit. I wonder if it might be acceptable to think of art as akin to "tongues of fire" symbolizing the presence of the Spirit and a dynamic movement that has the capacity to bring change and transformation to our lives and our communities. Could it be that in those many places where the music of Bach is played we have the presence of a tongue of fire – that speaks to the dynamic reality of the Spirit at work in the world? Might the art work that you do be like a tongue of fire that opens a way for an experience of divine presence in the world? Is the dance, the drama, the poetry oppor-

tunity for some to discern in their own language what they have not been able to discern before? I am thinking of course about art not as mere entertainment but as something – that engages us, arrests us and leads us to take time to reflect, to mull over and to discover. But it is art that may also energize us, inspire us and move us to unprecedented action. And it may feed us, nurture us, comfort us and give us hope. In

these possibilities we have an account of the work of the Spirit. We must of course not confuse aesthetic experience and the Spirit but it seems there is a connection which merits consideration. I have offered here only a beginning.

Please note just to the left of these words the announcement of a Public Forum on Faith and Contemporary Film to take place September 19, 2015.

We are grateful for your support and it is especially important for us in the summer months.

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Imago Evening Enoch Turner Schoolhouse Thursday, June 18, 2015 at 7:30 p.m.

Timothy Schmalz, Sculptor
(Homeless Jesus)

Kaili Kinnon, singer

Arthur Wachnik, actor

John McCormick, piano

and more....

Reception to follow.

Imago Presents A Public Forum on Faith and Contemporary Film

Saturday September 19, 2015
9:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m., 7:00 – 9:30 p.m.

Film and panel discussion

Cameron Hall, Yorkminster Park Baptist
Church (Yonge and Heath)

Robert K. Johnston, Professor of Theology
and Culture, Fuller Seminary, Author of *Reel
Spirituality*

Peter Chattaway, Film Critic, Vancouver

Watch the Imago website for further details.
www.imago-arts.org