

“All music is a means of searching out the sacred.” ~ James MacMillan, *composer*

There is a trend gaining momentum that voices the links between art and faith.

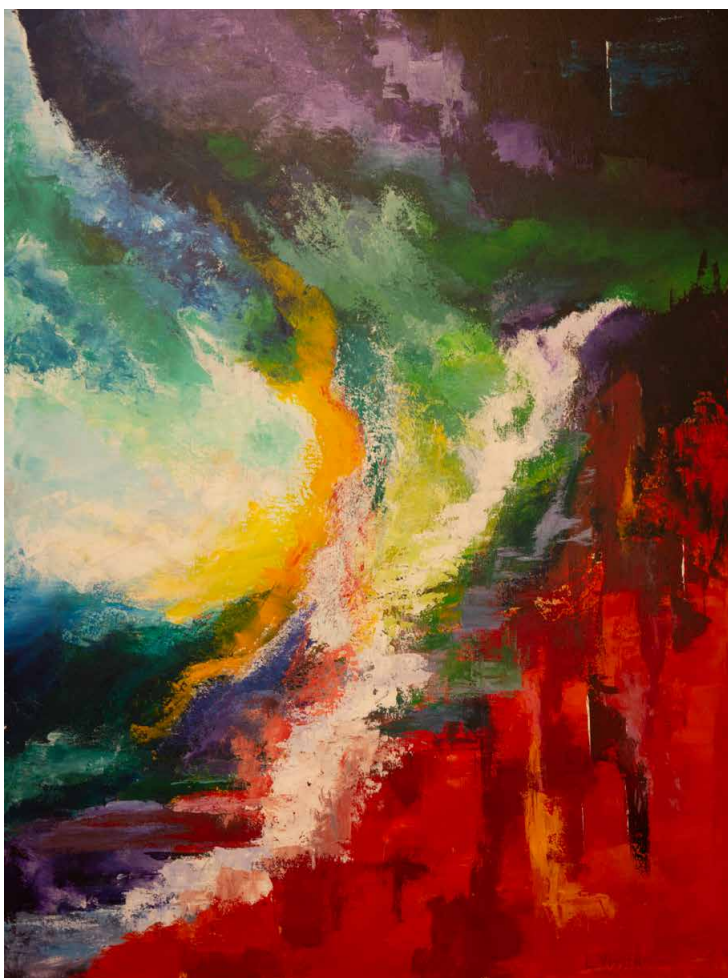
On matters of religious faith, silence has been the practice in mainstream discourse about the arts. In the world of visual art for example, a dividing wall was built restricting any significant religious presence in conversations about visual art. The folly and falsehood of this division is currently being unmasked. Many authors and critics are opening the way to fresh recognition of the close connection between religious and artistic sensibility as well as the role of religious belief and experience that influences both artists and their art.

For some time now I have been dabbling in a book titled *Sacred Music in a Secular Society* by Jonathan Arnold, that has provided much food for thought. (See book review page 3.) How is it that in a “post-Christian” secular society where church attendance is on the wane and religious belief is marginalized, that sacred music remains consistently popular? The book focuses on music out of the Western Christian classical tradition.

Of all the arts music has the most obvious affinity with spirituality. Some have contended that music has a “sacramental” quality about it meaning its a finite temporal reality through which the divine is disclosed and communicated. This does not require that the music has either a religious theme or religious intent.

Music in human civilization has served to foster community whether through the practice of playing instruments, singing together or as part of our rituals of celebration. These embodied activities keep us in touch with one another and with the world

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Breath of God, Winds of Hope
By Lynn Visser
30" x 40"

“Art springs from the soul – sometimes from a place of light or joy, sometimes from a place of darkness or despair. My art is derived from those places of deep emotion. It comes out of the body and onto the canvas, and I often do not know where my painting will take me,” says Lynn Visser. In her painting “Breath of God, Winds of Hope,” we are reminded that it is God who first breathed life into us, and God’s Spirit continues to breathe life (and hope) into us.

Lynn has been painting for over twenty years. Her works display a broad array of styles and media, yet the core of her artwork

is emotion lived out in colour and shape. As a Spiritual Animator for over 13 years, working with at-risk children in Montreal, Lynn used art as a means of expression and a tool for God to bring about healing in the face of tragedy. This emphasis continues in her paintings today, as cold and warm colours abstractly fuse in a cruciform light at the centre.

To see more of Lynn’s work go to:
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***Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus*, Fleming Rutledge, Eerdmans 2018, 400 pgs**

Advent is a time that invites us to the discipline of reflection and contemplation. It is the first season in the Christian calendar and sets the tone and direction for the rest of the year. The author of this book is an Episcopal priest and a well-respected preacher. Her writing is theologically rich and well grounded in scripture. This book consists of a collection of her writings related to Advent most of which are sermons preached in various locations in America. There are a couple of exceptions one sermon was given at Wycliffe College and another one preached at Little Trinity Church Toronto.

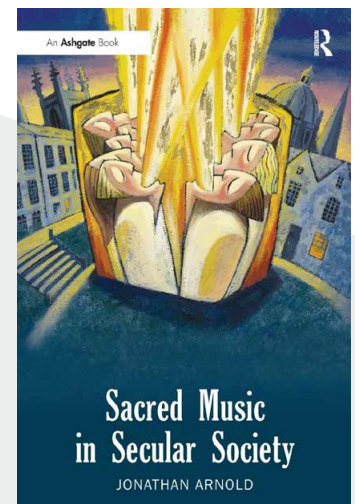
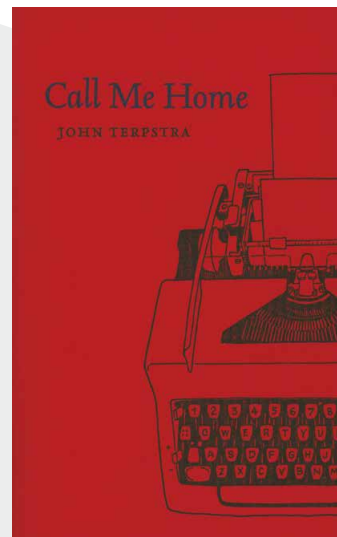
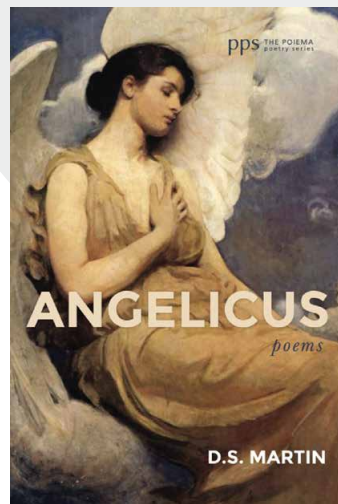
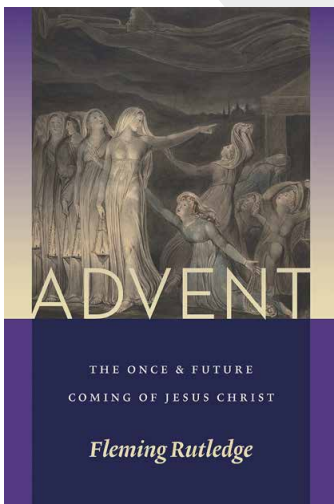
This is a book that will reward careful and repeated reading. It is an eloquent bringing together of theological depth with devotional meaning. Though not a book for beginners it will serve well those who are keen to learn and have some familiarity with the landscape of Christian theology. It articulates well the meaning of Advent and for every reader it will deepen their experience of the profound story retold during the Advent season.

***Angelicus*, D.S. Martin, Cascade Books, 2021, 86 pgs**

The subject of angels, though it receives attention from time to time, remains elusive and mysterious. What is it we believe about these celestial beings and what role might they have in time and history? The

these angels and hear their voices. This is not poetry about angels but poetry “spoken” by angels. The author’s rich imagination takes the reader on a memorable journey in which we find insight, humour and prophetic critique from these celestial figures.

The range of topics is impressive not all are what you might expect. Intervening angel, guardian angel, liberating angel, avenging angel – yes, but also an angel of the church in Toronto, one who asked about William Blake, one who is annoyed by a pop song and another who puzzles over Dorothy Sayers and one who laughs about laundry and another that comments on that ever-popular Christmas film “It’s a Wonderful Life”. There is much in this collection that



The work begins with a 33 page introduction in which the author articulates her understanding of Advent and sets the stage for the writings and sermons to follow. She notes the contrast between Medieval Advent themes and those of contemporary focus. The former considered death, judgement, heaven and hell, while the latter speaks of peace, joy love and hope for the Sundays of Advent. In both cases “hope” is a central theme.

The sermons draw on a variety of biblical texts and provide valuable insights that take the reader deeply into the meaning of Advent. Reading the sermons allows one to take time to reflect in a way not possible when hearing the sermon in church.

biblical narrative has many examples of angelic presence. One thinks of the story of Abraham and Isaac, of Jacob’s wrestling match, of the Annunciation, of the “fear not” moment for the Shepherds, and their presence at the empty tomb.

Today we witness a good deal of dissatisfaction with a flattened world consisting of only what we can see, analyze or explain. Humanity is dissatisfied with a disenchanted world. Our instincts tell us there must be more. Don Martin’s new collection of poetry *Angelicus* invites us not only to entertain the possibility of angels but to attend to what they have to say. These mysterious beings seem to bridge the gap between the world we know and the world we do not know, between time and eternity. In this new collection we are invited to meet some of

is poignant and thought provoking and much to make you smile and wonder afresh about the mystery of the angelic world and its possible intersections with temporal life.

***Call me Home*, John Terpstra, Gaspereau Press, 2021, 94 pgs**

This is the latest publication from this prolific poet with now eleven books of poetry and five non-fiction works. And once again it is a collection that engages ordinary experience framed for our special attention. There are brief narratives that give us glimpses of how we negotiate life, what strikes us and how we respond.

The poetry in this collection nudges the reader to see all of life as sacred in some sense. When we attend to the ordinary we

enable the possibility of seeing what we so often overlook. We capture a glimpse of how life is a gift, replete with meaning, ready to be discovered and appreciated if only we would pause to observe. Terpstra helps us pause and observe.

Building a deck seems an unlikely topic for a poet but in *Evan and I* the opening poem in the collection we read a moving reflection on a journey together that had a significance easily missed. A poem that rehearses a story of stolen bicycles, or construction on Mulberry Street allows us to see the ordinary in our own lives in a fresh way.

Human relationships are of great importance to this writer. The poem *Dante Park* provides an occasion for him to speak of his family in a transparent and compelling narrative.

These are gentle eloquent poems which in their own unique way remind us of who we are and teach us the importance of slowing down and looking more intentionally at what is around us and within us.

Like the poetry within it, the book is beautifully crafted.

Sacred Music in a Secular Society,
Jonathan Arnold, Ashgate, 2014, 154 pgs

This book was the inspiration for the brief reflection in this newsletter. Arnold, an ordained Anglican, is Chaplain and Research Fellow at Worcester College Oxford. As one who has been a member of many early music ensembles he is well qualified to address the topic of the book. However he draws extensively on interviews with performers, composers, theologians and philosophers to deepen his exploration of this fascinating topic.

In the opening chapter titled *Composers – Midwives of Faith* he engages contemporary composers who make no secret of their faith. The sacred he observes is no longer confined to insiders of the church-going few but is now available to a much wider audience in part because of technology. It is understood that Medieval and Renaissance music was by and for Christians. What we are less likely to know is that some of the greatest composers of the twentieth century were writing from a faith perspective and their music is being performed in non-church contexts. The Scottish Catholic

composer James MacMillan gets considerable attention in this book. His music is performed around the world and he has no hesitation to speak about the influence of his personal faith on his artistic work. He acknowledges that all that he does is a kind of witness, including his music. What he writes, both instrumental and choral music, posits something in the secular culture and not everyone will approve of its religious quality. It is interesting to note that for MacMillan that plainchant remains an important musical element. What we know as Gregorian chant has a certain timelessness

about it. Rowan Williams comments that “Plainsong doesn’t expect you to come up with required emotions... Because its repetitive it assumes that you are prepared to take time... liturgy [is] something that takes time, requires a measure of attention, physical settling, patience ...”

A question that emerges in this conversation is the universality of the music. It has been said that worship songs are expressive of nothing universal — while great music does express something universal. It is

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Imago Dei

He stands before a rough-hewn marble block, there sees
Within a hidden beauty well before his chisel strikes the stone.
The rest is craft and work. These can be taught, yet to please
His maker’s eye requires more—a gift, sublime, not his alone.

The canvas on the easel still is blank, black washed it waits
Upon the painter’s palette, spread with hues, the colored oils
And ready brush, bright bristling with high purpose, translates
Invention we can’t see, the light and dream for which he toils.

A composer at the keyboard hears some far-off note, a phrase
Not drawn from memory, and is moved to play, to improvise anew;
A poet ponders portents, or music in words themselves, in ways
Most others miss; these kiss to life fresh insights for a few.

Thus, in some mystic ear or bright mind’s eye made known
Before art can reveal it, creation wakes, as in Creation shown.

David Lyle Jeffrey, August 2022

Two events drew my interest, one in the summer and one in the fall. Linlathen is a small “boutique conference” with about 25 attending held near Ottawa in a lovely farm setting. (It’s an IMAGO project.) This year the guest speakers were David Lyle Jeffrey and Micheal O’Siadhail (Mee-hawl, O Sheel). The theme was poetry. A public session was held where Micheal spoke about his book of poetry, *The Five Quintets* while *Scripture and the English Poetic Imagination* by David Jeffrey was a backdrop for his talks and interviews at the conference. It was an informative and inspiring time and revitalized my interest in poetry.

A few weeks after that event I received an email from David that contained a poem he had written for me in response to the work that Marion and I do through IMAGO.

David, a Canadian, knows about IMAGO and stepped in to give a talk as part of a series IMAGO hosted in 2001.

The second event I attended was in late October at Baylor University in Waco Texas. David was one of the organizers of this conference on the theme: *Art Seeking Understanding*. It’s a common view that art has nothing to add to our knowledge, it is simply purposed to bring us pleasure and appeal to our emotions. For some time my own work has advocated for art as a resource of knowledge and understanding and support for that view was well in evidence at the conference. About 200 attended the event and there were nearly 80 papers presented. The poem David sent to me appeared in the printed program for the conference.

All music is a searching

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around us. And I think its not an exaggeration to say that music of every culture has been engaged as a means to encounter the supernatural.

It is not easy to give an account of what is meant by “sacred music”. Arnold suggests three possibilities. First the intention of the composer which can include music written for devotional practice or to be employed in a liturgical context. However some sacred music such as Brahms Requiem has neither devotional nor liturgical intent. Second the context in which the music is performed such as a church service to accompany community worship. In this case both text and context make clear it’s sacred music. The third option gets to the heart of the matter. Music that was so consistently connected

Sacred Music in a Secular Society

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perhaps impossible to explain this difference but you can experience it.

In Chapter 4 there is a conversation with Rowan Williams on the subject of listening. William has said that: “To listen seriously to music and to perform it are among the most potent ways of learning what it is to live with and before God.” Some sacred music translates readily to the secular age because it is not liturgical but is more theatrical. Arnold observes that a Mozart Mass may be very charming but it may lack the more profound quality found in a Palestrina Mass or one by Wm. Byrd.

Arnold asks about the future of sacred music and it seems the prospects are good. The interest remains high and with ensembles like *The Sixteen*, *The Tallis Scholars* and *The Monteverdi Choir*, live and recorded performances become widely available. (I might add here a new project under IMAGO, *Trinity Bach Project* is intent on bringing sacred music – particularly Bach – to a wider audience.). For those with an interest in sacred music this is rich and rewarding book providing a wealth of insights on the fascinating subject of sacred music in a secular society.

with religious belief in times past found new settings in the concert halls where the religious function was left behind. Since that shift we must now consider sacred music in terms of its nature. That is, music that has the capacity to turn our attention toward mystery, transcendence, forgiveness, love or hope and is able to reach deeply into the human heart to express our longings. (A good example of this is *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* by Vaughan Williams). It has been noted that Western culture owes an enormous amount to ... the Judaeo-Christian tradition and its shaping influence on our music. Sacred music in particular carries something of the spirituality of the times in which it was composed and more specifically the spiritual sensibilities of the composer. In our secular society the strains of sacred music from past (Palestrina, Byrd, Bach) or present (Part, Tavener, MacMillan) nurture the human spirit and bring consolation and hope.

Sacred music is deeply human in what it expresses and so can be meaningful whether faith is present or absent. Many of those who champion sacred music are not themselves people of faith but they discern the value and importance of great music in the genre of the sacred. What sacred music is able to do is to connect with spiritual longings that have been neglected, or covered up because of the values and practices of our secular society. It is as though sacred music provides nurture for a hunger we didn’t know we had. It discloses a spiritual quality to life easily missed in our fast-paced technological world.

At this season of Advent and Christmas sacred music looms large in well-known carols and performances of choral music including Handel’s *Messiah*. The lyrics are explicit: “joy to the world the Lord has come, let earth receive her King,” “veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate deity”, “I know that my Redeemer liveth ...” “The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ” all of which can be overlooked as we engage the power of the music or the pleasures of the season. It could said that however much one ignores the lyrics the music itself carries something of the spirit and meaning of those words and that’s part of its appeal. Music as an art form does not “denote” but is able to “connote”. It is not specific but

suggestive. In our secular society it seems we value what sacred music suggests but don’t wish to engage with what the lyrics so clearly declare.

If we pay attention, Advent is able to lift us out of our day to day routines and place us in an alternate time, a time of waiting of expectation and of hope. The sacred music of the season has the capacity to deepen our experience of Advent themes. Whether listening or singing together we foster a sense of community and of belonging as we remember the story we are called to live in and note afresh its transforming power.



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IMAGO at 50

The activity and influence of this creative initiative was made official in 1972 when it acquired charitable status and was launched under the leadership of Wilber Sutherland. My sojourn with IMAGO began officially in 1998. I don’t have an accurate count of how many project have been done under IMAGO but know that since 1998 there have been about sixty artistic initiatives that have come under the IMAGO umbrella. Beyond the projects there have been scores of meetings and events that have brought together artists and audiences all intended to affirm the intimate connection between faith and art. The Crossings exhibition, the largest project in IMAGO’s history was done this year to great acclaim.

Our plan is to host some public events in 2023 that will celebrate the work of IMAGO and we hope that you will be able to join with us. IMAGO has been able to sustain its work for five decades because many of you have chosen to provide the financial support needed to carry on. We are deeply grateful. Your support keeps us going. I hope you may consider a year end gift for 2022 that will help us mark our 50 years in 2023.