
Rhapsody in Blue

The Rev. Canon George M. Maxwell Jr.
The Cathedral of St. Philip
Atlanta, Georgia
March 21, 2010
The Fifth Sunday in Lent - Year C

I went to Trinity School last Thursday night for an evening of music.

A friend of mine was playing a Bach double with another girl in her class. I have had the privilege of watching her learn to play the violin, so I was eager to see her perform this piece.

And, of course, I had some extra time. Carolina played on Tuesday night this year!

My friend performed perfectly. Seeing the two girls read each other as they worked out their parts, I felt as if I was watching them grow up right before my eyes. They were learning as much about each other as they were about the music.

But, I soon realized that there was another reason that the evening was going to be special. The concert was orchestrated by a guest pianist, Alpin Hong.

Alpin has the kind of resume that we have come to expect of child prodigies.

He grew up in an affluent Michigan suburb. He began taking piano lessons when he was three. He made his professional debut with the Kalamazoo symphony orchestra when he was ten.

He won more piano competitions that I can name. He earned a masters degree in piano performance from the Julliard School. He made his Carnegie Hall debut the following year.

Now, he travels the world, giving thirty or more concerts a year.

Interestingly, though, his musical talent may not be his greatest gift.

Alpin's parents were killed in an automobile accident when he was twelve. He had to leave his home in Michigan and move to California to live with relatives. And, there, his life began to fall apart.

He says that he felt betrayed by the world and would have been lost, if he hadn't had music to guide him.

Now, he wants other kids to know what he has learned. Every time he goes to a city to perform, he visits the local schools to work with kids. That's where the real magic happens!

Alpin's kind of Peter Pan, Elvis and Mozart all rolled up into one.

"It's not about training musicians," he says, "it's about opening their imaginations. It's about teaching them how to listen."

On Thursday night, we jumped to our feet to applaud his opening. He revealed both brilliance and sensitivity in his rendering of Mendelssohn's Rondo Capriccioso.

And then, we marveled as he took our admiration and showered it on the other performers. He engaged each of them in a different way. But, he always seemed to know exactly what they needed. And, of course, he always seemed to know exactly what we needed.

He always seemed to be showing us something that we hadn't seen before.

He called one girl back for another bow, making sure we understood how well she had mastered a part of one of Beethoven's sonatas.

He took an original composition of several fourth grade boys and, with a little harmony, played it with the dignity normally reserved for Rachmaninoff.

Between these performances, he talked about the magic of music. He talked about how being at Trinity that night made him feel like he was with Harry Potter, walking into Hogwarts on the first day. He talked about the need to practice. And, he laughed.

He closed the evening with Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue. It seemed fitting - part classical and part jazz, part nostalgic and part adventuresome. It's a piece that seems to transcend musical categories. And, perhaps because of that, it's a piece that always seems to leave you more alive than it found you.

"I have to meet them where they are," he told me later. "I have to start with something that they already know and love, and then I have to show them how that thing can lead them into a deeper appreciation of music."

In the Gospel story for today, Mary takes a pound of costly perfume, anoints Jesus' feet and then wipes them with her hair.

Judas challenges her. "Why did you not sell that perfume and give the money to the poor," he asks.

But, Jesus defends her. "Leave her alone," he says. "She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

To understand this passage, I think it helps to start with Judas. We tend to demonize him - often projecting onto him the evil that we see in ourselves. Here, the writer of the Fourth Gospel calls Judas a thief, and claims that Judas doesn't really care about the poor. Judas wants the money for himself.

Most scholars, however, are not quite as hard on Judas. They tend to see him as being more politically aggressive than morally deficient.

Perhaps Judas will betray Jesus because he believes that Jesus really is the expected Messiah.

Perhaps Judas thinks that Jesus is misguided in his focus on nonviolence and that, if he can force Jesus to use his divine powers in his own defense, then they can establish the new kingdom that they have been talking about.

I don't know.

But, I do know that, if we allow ourselves to be a bit more sympathetic to Judas, then we will see that he is only saying what we would all be thinking.

Jesus had been spending his time on the margins of society. He has shown a special empathy for the least and the lost and the last. It seems reasonable for Judas to have been taken aback by Mary's extravagance.

You don't invite Mother Theresa to dinner and serve her an \$800 bottle of wine!

Interestingly, I don't think Jesus is arguing with Judas's logic. I think Jesus is trying to get the disciples to think about things in a different way. He is trying to get them to see the world the way that he sees the world.

He is using Mary's extravagance to show them something that has been hidden from their view, something they hadn't seen before.

He wants them to understand the standpoint of the one persecuted, who is so often either innocent or chosen

arbitrarily.

They are the ones who will have to remember it. They are the ones who will have to witness to it. They are the ones who have been with him from the beginning.

And, when they do, they will be inspired to care about the poor even more than they are now. Jesus knows that his disciples will see him every time that they look into the face of the oppressed, every time that they look into the face of the downtrodden, and every time that they look into the face of a scapegoat.

It's the ontological equivalent of telling the disciples to put on their own oxygen masks before they try to help the person sitting next to them.

Devotion to Jesus doesn't take the place of caring for the poor. It is the thing that creates the desire to care for the poor.

The cost of the perfume seems like a small price to pay for the hidden truth that Jesus used it to reveal.

On Friday afternoon, Alpin went over to Grady High School.

He traded in his coat and tie for a T-shirt and blue jeans. And, he traded in his Harry Potter references for stories about skateboarding and playing video games.

He told them that he wanted to create an arrangement for a video game theme one day. They challenged him to play some of the game soundtracks on the piano.

And, when he did, they asked him for more. He played arrangements based on the music used in Zelda, Halo and the second level of Super Mario Bros.

They tell me that the second level of Super Mario has a soundtrack different from the first. Who knew?

He showed the kids how music is used in the movies to get your heart going. He contrasted the soaring tones of the "Star Wars" anthem with the menacing notes used to announce the presence of Darth Vader.

He played with the light hearted melody of the theme from "SpongeBob SquarePants" and the rolling rhythms of the stormy music in "The Pirates of the Caribbean."

By the time he played Mendelssohn's rondo, you could have heard a pin drop in the auditorium. He had everyone's attention.

No one wanted to leave when the program ended. Alpin just hung around talking to who ever wanted to talk to him.

Finally, there was just one student left. The teachers told Alpin that this student lived on the piano bench every minute he wasn't required to be somewhere else. They talked for a minute.

Then, the boy handed Alpin a Sharpie and his new MacBook Pro laptop computer. "Would you sign this for me?" he asked.

Alpin declined. "It's too expensive," he explained. "It's like getting a tattoo. It's permanent. I would be defacing a valuable piece of equipment."

"No, please," the boy pleaded. "This has been the best day of my life and I want to remember it every time I look at my computer."

Alpin took the pen and wrote on the top of the computer - "Jay, one of the greatest honors ever bestowed on me. May the force be with you! Alpin."

"Why did you not sell that perfume and give the money to the poor?"

"Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

AMEN.

You might be interested to know:

* You can find out more about Alpin Hong by going to his web site, www.alpinhong.com. His recordings are now available on iTunes.

* The Bach double was the Concert for Two Violins, Strings and Continuo in D Minor, BMV 1043. The girls played the first movement from the concerto.

* The wonderful image of Alpin as a combination of Peter Pan, Elvis and Mozart came from an article by Anthony Violanti in the Ocala Star-Banner titled "Alpin Hong: Classical for the "iPod generation." Violanti describes Alpin as a "long-haired Peter Pan mixed with Elvis, Mozart, Victor Borge and Billy Joel." A copy of this article was available on Alpin's web site as of March 8, 2010.

* The Mendelssohn piece that Alpin played at both Trinity and Grady was Rondo Capriccioso Op. 14. It also appears on Alpin's CD, "friend taskmaster teacher."

* The Beethoven performance was the third movement of the "Pathetique" sonata.

* The insightful quip about Mother Teresa and the expensive bottle of wine came from Gil Bailie, as quoted by Paul Nuechterlein at http://girardianlectionary.net/year_c/lent5.html (as of March 8, 2010). It appears in the context of an interpretation of John 12:1-8 using the mimetic theory of Rene Girard. I have followed their take on the passage in suggesting the "new consciousness" that I believe Jesus was trying to instill in his disciples.

Comments? Contact George Maxwell at: GMaxwell@stphilipscathedral.org