

Christian Musical Innovation and Changing Ecological Relationships

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Over the course of 2019 I found an increasing number of posts and events crossing my social media feeds attempting to address environmental themes from a Christian perspective, a surprisingly broad range of which seemed to incorporate music in some way: Christian Climate action featured music prominently in a number of events over the course of 2019; a number of different requiems for lost species have been performed or are in processes of commissioning; and Evangelical song-writing collective *Resound Worship* put out a call for new songs centred on creation. In light of the range of activities opening up, in late 2019 I made contact with a number of individuals involved in the different movements described above, as well as Forest Church communities, and conducted fifteen extended interviews. My interest was to begin to explore the range of new musical activity emerging in the groups around me and, in particular, to begin to understand the range of motivations, experiences, attitudes and goals which individuals bring with them when innovating at the intersection of music, Christianity and the natural world.

Such exploration has potential importance for communities seeking to grapple with issues of ecological crisis and faith. In 2011 Michael Delashmutt found that top-down initiatives within religious organisations often struggled to make their presence felt within local congregations, suggesting that “subtler and more diffuse methods of communication” (2011, 79) are needed.

Likewise Maria Nita has drawn attention to the potential of eco ritual as “a promising or even key element in alleviating the ecological crisis” (2016, 74), whilst Sigurd Bergmann has posed the question of “how can rituals, and the ritualization of places work as ecologic homoeostates, in order to catalyze creative modes of cultural adaptation to different environmental conditions?”

(2009, 114) This article, then, seeks to draw upon existing work in this area, but to address itself specifically to recent innovation within Christian musical activity. It draws attention to the range of practices currently taking place, and the various issues that are raised in developing musical practices in this area.

Challenges of Genre and Tradition

The tentative and exploratory attitudes of many of those I spoke to suggests that clearly-established guiding paradigms are largely absent at the current stage of development. Across, and even within the different projects which I began to engage with, it quickly became clear that both the motivations for and the approaches to engaging musically with the environment varied significantly. Indeed, in the attempt to negotiate new territory at the intersection of Christianity and an issue that has, to a large extent, emerged within a secular scientific context there are, to date, few well-trod paths to take.

Resound Worship is a website and collective of songwriters with a broadly evangelical base. The website encourages individuals in different ways to write songs, and provides various kinds of resource to enable this. In 2019 they launched a project entitled Doxecology, a search for new songs written around themes of creation, the environment and ecology, to which individuals could submit different compositions, with the hope that a selection of these would eventually be compiled together in album form. The project itself has a very pragmatic focus on creating songs which might be useful within existing worship communities. One of the key questions at stake within the Doxecology project seems to be how to introduce this change of focus within the limitations of the worship song format where it might not always be the most-obvious fit. This format has particular generic characteristics and expectations, such as the use of a verse-chorus

structure, a focus on the relationship of the individual or group to God, and the need for the singer to engage in direct, feelingful address towards God. Joel Payne, one of the founders of the project, suggested that they tried out a number of different approaches before finding something which seemed to work:

we wrote nine-verse epics because we had so much to get off our chests ... this kind of thing where you name every single kind of “we don’t do enough recycling lord, we spurn the gifts you’ve given, we burn”, we had to sort of get through that process ... and say no-one’s going to sing these (Joel, Interview with the Author, 2nd December 2019)

The challenge with these “nine-verse epics” is particular to this format; within a hymn structure, writing which enumerates climate-issues in significant detail might easily find a more-natural home, however the worship song format is not generally used for articulating large quantities of information. It is not simply on a textual level which engagement with environmental themes contained potential generic tensions, however; the desire to engage with an existing mainstream also manifests in intentional avoidance of other potential avenues:

what we don’t want to be is, oh yeah, these are the eco songs, and because they’re eco songs they’re going to be folky ... because that’s more close to earth and nature ... we want people to say oh this is a great collection of mainstream worship songs that happen to be on ecological themes as opposed to this is a great collection of ecological worship songs (Joel, Interview with the Author, 2nd December 2019)

There is potential tension between generic expectations which needs to be negotiated in some way before these things can be reconciled, and because of his desire to write songs that mainstream evangelicals will sing, Joel attempts to upset as few generic conventions as possible. Other contributors to the project had related concerns. Rick, for example emphasised the importance of keeping scriptural narratives front and centre:

how do you engage environmental issues in music and worship and everything else without letting it become the focus? ... in evangelical circles ... if you think about the creation, fall redemption, restoration, it was all about fall, redemption, and never about creation or restoration ... it's like trying to get back to saying we have to start with creation and get a good understanding of the context there and how it fits into the whole story (Rick, Interview with the Author, 4th January 2020)

Whilst Samuel raised more-pragmatic issues:

in a congregation, if you can only roll it out once or twice a year will people be able to sing it, and I think that's the issue, when you come with these very single-issue songs (Samuel, Interview with the Author, 6th January 2020)

Whilst evangelical priorities serve to guide the range of possibilities available, as Rick suggests, not everything that exists within existing Christian traditions is helpful in navigating these issues, and in approaching the project, Joel emphasises the need to renegotiate relationships of power established in existing traditions of Christian thought:

the community of creation idea is something came out strongly for the writers... how have you viewed yourself in relation to creation? Do you see yourself as above it or separate from it? ... where you go to any church and they'll talk about being good stewards of creation, go to the theologians and a lot of them will say oh, don't use the word steward, that's terrible, that's a hierarchical thing. (Joel, Interview with the Author, 2nd December 2019)

An in-depth exploration of climate change, and a focus on the environment begin to reveal some of the weaknesses of traditional Christian framing of these issues, and, as such, the attempt to creatively engage with these themes provides an opportunity to renegotiate particular dynamics.

A Range of Starting-Points

Regardless of any clear vision which those running the project had for the way in which songs

should operate, different contributors brought with them a range of different priorities. Trevor, for example, had developed a broader project over a number of years in order to integrate faith and science through song. Trevor works largely in a hymn-writing rather than worship song tradition, providing new texts for existing hymn tunes focussing on themes of science, cosmos and creation.

This seems to sit well alongside his desire for rational explanation and elaboration:

For me this work is primarily to encourage people to think about the complementarity of science and faith in revealing the wonders of creation and the glory of God throughout the Universe ... There are many first rate, indeed brilliant scientists and theologians who write and speak on that ... However, it seems to me these authors have to first establish their credentials within their own disciplines before they can develop ideas about the crossover points ... By contrast, poems, songs and hymns have to capture any concept of complementarity very quickly. If they don't, they will fail in their objective. For this reason such work, if well done, should be able to make the idea more accessible to a far wider audience. (Trevor, Interview with the Author, 17th December 2019)

We can contrast such a rational and scientific focus with that of Lizzie, who approached her songwriting from a more-mystical standpoint:

I was thinking about communion, and the connection between God's giving himself as Christ ... in Richard Rohr's book *The Universal Christ*, he talks about 'Real Presence', about the bread ... recognising that it is the body of Christ, but in the same way that everything in creation is the body of Christ ... I think he used the word panentheist, and that felt like a kind of place for me (Lizzie, Interview with the Author, 2nd April 2020)

In her writing, Lizzie draws on imagery of nature as a cathedral and prayers as leaf-mould, meditating on the relationship between God and immediate, and distant space and the relationship between that presence and one's own body. The song which she submitted to the Doxecology project draws on liturgical responses and embodies a certain kind of eclectic

relationship to Christian traditions. At the same time, it becomes almost apophatic in its attempt to reach beyond what words can describe:

I was trying to write a song that didn't give God any gender or any name except "I am" ... thinking about how important is it that God is father and son and holy spirit and thinking well, those are important, but ... there's a whole lot of other stuff going on that I just don't have the words for ... God is so much more than I could ever grasp, but also very present, very loving and very manifest in all sort of ways which I don't really understand (Lizzie, Interview with the Author, 2nd April 2020)

Writing a worship song here is centred around reimagining the relationship between God and the created world, and in doing so it involves a reimagining of God and also of the boundaries of Christian faith. God's presence in the world, for Lizzie, is not built upon a sense of boundaries between God, or Christians and the other; rather, in locating God's presence in everything, these boundaries begin to dissolve.

Whilst Lizzie and Trevor illustrate two different poles in their attitudes towards faith and the environment, other writers tread a slightly more-familiar path in-between. Hannah, for example, presented to me a song written by her children which emerged at the confluence of their broader thankfulness to God, their awareness of environmental issues, and their devotion to faith:

we were just talking about what they've been thinking about and what they've been reading in the Bible ... they have quite strong opinions and want to discuss these issues more in church, and we have a group of adults who ... still have not got the fundamental of the fact that creation is fundamental to our faith ... I actually said ... you guys should speak to the church around it, and ... it came up that they would write a song... they wrote it that morning, went upstairs and sang it ... then they printed the words out and they taught the church... I think all of the songs that they've written ... even if they're not quite as openly about creation ... they all have that common thread through them, but I think ... that's how they thought about God anyway, and how they experience him... they just wanted to write a

joyful song about why they love God ... the three of them ... just wrote down a list of things that we're thankful for, and that's where the first verse came from, because in that order Amelia wrote like moths, flowers, bugs and bees, they all wrote lists like that (Hannah, Interview with the Author, 21st December 2019)

The musical initiative from Hannah's children also had practical consequences in opening up a space for conversation around ecological themes in the community, in potential future opportunities for a teaching series on these topics, and in donations on the part of the community to the local wildlife trust. The frequent human experience of encountering God through the natural world was raised a number of times by other songwriters too in their approach to songs. This existing trope performs a ready-made interface between Christian worship and the natural world, and one that, perhaps, requires minimal tweaking to bring it to bear upon current climate issues.

Samuel's writing also draws closely on existing worship-song paradigms through its prioritisation of the scriptural texts which stand at the heart of evangelical faith. Samuel emphasised that

mostly my writing comes out of taking in a piece of scripture or a scriptural idea and working around there ... I was really fascinated by the passage in, I think Hosea chapter 4 which talks about the land weeping, I'd not come across that passage before ... the first verse I suppose is a wonder at creation, the second verse introduces the idea that we haven't done what we should have done with God's call ... verse 3 for me is about what Christ is going to do and then about what part to now to wait for that to happen, but to be involved in now the kingdom coming through us (Samuel, Interview with the Author, 6th January 2020)

Samuel is keen to understand the environmental situation within a narrative of God's kingdom, emphasising humanity's role as caretakers of God's world, and a gospel message which encompasses not just personal sin and salvation but every aspect of our lives, communities and

the world around us. God will renew everything, and we are called to be a part of that renewal. As a pastor he is aware that his congregation are onboard with this responsibility and awareness to varying extents, some taking responsibility for their own actions, and others relying more on the idea that God will come back and sort everything out. There is sometimes a degree of caution and uncertainty in introducing ecologically-focussed repertoire within worship, a sense that it might, in some way jar with existing emphases, and a need to be cautious in navigating these tensions in an appropriate manner. This, then, is an area which both musicians and pastors are still figuring out, and it is partly this which leads to a sense of fragmentation within the broader scene. The range expands further, however, when we venture into other movements.

Singing, Situations and Movement(s)

In contrast to Resound Worship, who aim to produce music in and for the church, Christian Climate Action are situated within the broader Extinction Rebellion movement in a way which foregrounds interaction with a range of different convictions and belief systems. In the run-up to the faith bridge protest event in London, planned as part of larger-scale extinction rebellion action towards the end of 2019, some members of Christian Climate Action put out a songbook as a resource which would help the group to sing together during the protests (Christian Climate Action, n.d.). The book incorporates a mixture of well-known Christian hymns, songs, spirituals and chants alongside Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic and other repertoire. It is not so much an attempt to create new repertoire as to bring together existing songs that might be of use during the protests. Indeed, some songs have little direct bearing on climate issues but are, instead, included because they are well-known enough to be easily sung together.

Charlie Wheeler, one of the main compilers of the songbook, suggested in conversation that he

wanted to create something that would give the group artistic power and unite them as a movement. He found within this established repertoire that “all of them speak quite well into that crisis and bring both a sense that we must be courageous in this time, and also that there is hope, but only if we’re willing to act with integrity” (Charlie, Interview with the Author, 16th December 2019). Whilst some in the group found the songbook helpful, a gap nevertheless quickly opened up between intentions in compilation and actual usage—some protesters found the song-selection more helpful than others, whilst the practicalities of using a pre-prepared resource ended up having to negotiate the realities of police confiscations and spontaneous activity. Precisely this co-occurrence of musical activity and semi-spontaneous events during the protest often led to interesting or moving moments. Charlie found particular power in the singing of Amazing Grace:

so amazing grace... it seems to be a way of non-violent de-escalation, the idea if you are singing and making a joyful noise, people’s emotions are likely to be stilled a little bit ... at one point we were on one side of Lambeth bridge and we were separated from XR south west ... we went onto the road and up through to Westminster bridge ... and all the time we were singing ...it was quite a powerful experience because firstly there was loads of people from different faiths and we were all singing the same song, and what people experienced on the Westminster bridge is suddenly these voices coming from over yonder ... it was some form of nostalgia to people ... being reminded that you know ... we’re seeking peace, so ultimately we’re seeking the good of the world, and so it’s a reminder of beauty (Charlie, Interview with the Author, 16th December 2019).

In this case the lyrics of the song seem almost irrelevant—Amazing Grace has virtually nothing direct to say about climate change—with the qualities of familiarity and nostalgia combining with a situation in which it became important to set a certain atmosphere. The music provides a means of managing the dynamics of the protest and setting a certain communal dynamic in motion (Saffran 2019, 82).

Emotions and Intersections

Emotion and feeling are often an important part of what music is able to accomplish. A later Christian Climate Action protest outside the Church of England's General Synod meetings also involved a mixture of communal singing and solo items performed by singer-songwriter Samantha Lindo (Christian Climate Action, 2020). The musical dynamics here showcase Lindo's own particular way of drawing together themes of faith, climate, community and spirituality:

I feel we've got so much to lament about and yet we don't do it, we are stuck in mainstream church I think in a you're in control God, you're glorious God ... I feel like we are disengaged in some of the most important social justice issues of our time ... So it was really just ... naming where we are ... and then claiming Jesus in that situation ... lamenting, letting it emotionally sit and then drawing on Jesus to ... guide us into just action (Samantha, Interview with the Author, 3rd March 2020).

Lindo herself sits at the intersection of a number of communities and faith traditions, and this shows through here with some more-evangelical emphases combining with traditions of activism and social justice. The song provides an articulation of truth on an emotional level and, beyond that, both an appeal to God and a plea to be drawn into action. It provides a nexus where these different realities and relationships are expressed and negotiated. Speaking about another song, she suggests that:

it's not a Christian song, but ... I don't like to draw too many distinctions ... it's a worship song, but it's deeply rooted in justice, and that question—could the world be about to turn? it's almost like speaking it prophetically... it just felt so integrated, so powerful, and ... it felt honest in the way of giving space for lament and recognising the death, the damage, the reality of what is happening now, and then also that, that embodying that prophetic calling of the church to speak ... it felt really explosive actually, it felt like a ... radical and true use of liturgy, ritual, music... it's about bringing ... this tuning fork outside of the church building

and allowing people to resonate with that as well, because if people are searching, they won't necessarily look in church (Samantha, Interview with the Author, 3rd March 2020).

Music, once again provides not a clear articulation of one particular reality, but a means for mixing together realities, of crossing their boundaries, and hoping that through acts of musical sounding something can stir or touch people.

Beyond The Boundaries of Faith

As Kate Galloway has observed (2019, 4), climate-related activities can often provoke interaction across traditional religious boundaries. This ended up reflected in some of the musical activity which went on during the London protests:

At one point we had a Muslim call to prayer, I found that particularly powerful ... I just found the prayer ... quite a powerful statement of, and to be in solidarity with their, with the rest of the Muslim world as well as the Christian world (Charlie, Interview with the Author, 16th December 2019).

If there's an aesthetic in music, you know there's a beauty in something then that's a great thing to have in a situation of possible ugliness, you know there's a beauty vs ugly power and police uniforms ... the music is always coming out of some tradition and mixing up with others ... it takes us out of our comfort zone a little bit, it should do all this, music, shouldn't it, it should be a little prophetic (Mark, Interview with the Author, 9th January 2020).

Music, here, provides the vehicle for felt-commonality across confessional boundaries, offering a medium where sonic solidarity takes precedence over concerns of identity or articulated doctrine.

Members of different faiths, alike, have an interest in the sacred and its relation to the environment, and music provides a means for experiencing some of this shared concern.

The Climate Carols project, whilst part of the same Christian Climate Action group, takes a different angle. For Christmas 2019, Grace Thomas decided to re-write the lyrics of a number of

well-known Christmas carols with climate-crisis-focussed lyrics for a protest event outside a shopping centre:

What I had in my mind when I was writing them, was that ... we would look like normal carol singers, and we would sing these ... sentimental, mushy kind of songs that everybody associates with Christmas. But then, when you hear the words, it kind of jars, and you take notice (Grace, Interview with the Author, 3rd December 2019)

Music, here, provides a strategic medium for play, for catching attention, and for hooking into people's feelings. The lyrics often rework existing references to Christian imagery around climate-focussed themes (see also Saffran 2019, 91). Hark the Herald Angels Sing, for example is rewritten beginning "Hark the herald rebels sing! Let the sound of protest ring East to West, and every child Old and young are reconciled" (Christian Climate Action, n.d.). For Grace it is not primarily a theology of creation and the natural world which serves to drive her action and song-rewriting, but rather a more-human-focussed concern for injustice and the effects of climate change on human communities without the resources to easily weather the changes which it brings:

the kind of theology that speaks to me is you know the liberation theology, the theology of the voices that aren't heard, and ...a lot of my climate activism actually is about wanting to raise the voice of those that aren't heard (Grace, Interview with the Author, 3rd December 2019)

The carols were initially deployed in an event outside a shopping centre, however they also took on a broader life of their own. The impact and meaning of these carols is highly context-dependent, and Mark Coleman, who used them as part of a church-based evening of reflection, focussed in particular on the beauty of the church event which they put on: "The beauty, I guess is just not, feeling that we care together, we weep together, we laugh together, we hope together, you know that, I suppose I'm talking about a beauty that is not isolation, and is worshipping a god that

is hopeful and transforms all that is weakness into something potentially good” (Mark, Interview with the Author, 9th January 2020). Similarly to Lizzie, earlier, Mark focusses on the reframing that needs to take place in order to find a form of Christianity that places not just ideas of other humans and social justice, but “a cosmic oneness sort of thing” at the centre, placing the environment not as an added extra but as part of an integrated whole.

Processing Loss

Other events which attempt to process some of the current climate crisis are also beginning to take place within a range of different church venues. The format of a Requiem for lost species is something that has been explored in a number of different locations both as an act to raise awareness and as an act of lament in response to the loss that we are confronted with as a result of human action. The revival of this liturgical and musical form provides a ready resource which can be reworked in a way that provides a locus of meaning not just for Christian communities but for a wider public. The requiem is a form which possess a degree of cultural capital beyond the bounds of Christian community; usage over a period of centuries, combined with treatments by high-profile composers which have entered into repertoire mean that a performance of a requiem is able to be opened up not simply as an event by and for a worshipping community, but for all who are seeking a locus of meaning through aesthetic forms.

Efforts by Canterbury Diocese, in potential collaboration with the WWF and St Paul’s Cathedral, in collaboration with Christian Aid to commission and perform art-music requiems for lost species have yet to come to fruition, having unfortunately coincided with a period of global pandemic (Christian Aid, 2020). Helen Burnett’s Requiem for Lost Species event in Chaldon (Burnett, n.d.) was inspired by the long history of the church where she ministers, and by the historical changes

in local biodiversity that have occurred both over that longer time-period and in the memory of those who currently live there. Her requiem event aimed to “develop a set of resources that help people to process the decline they see around them” (Helen, Interview with the Author, 6th January 2020), using a mixture of poetry, liturgy, ritual action and music in order to provide this space for anyone in the local area for whom these themes were significant, whether they identified with the church or not. As such, despite occurring in the space of the church, it was explicitly crafted without specific references either to God or to Christian narratives. In line, perhaps, with the desire to provide an open space for a range of people at the event, the musical side provided more of an accompaniment than an opportunity for sung participation:

I have a folk group who practice in the church, and I said to them could you provide us with some relatively mournful music, to begin with, and then to accompany us out of the church, because we started inside the body of the church and went out to build the cairn outside, so they then led us with one of those big drums—the tabor things, and so they led us out to the cairn and then they continued to play in a separate spot as the cairn was built (Helen, Interview with the Author, 6th January 2020)

Folk music is often felt to have a close connection with the natural world, and here it occurs alongside the building of a cairn with natural materials, further reinforcing that connection. The deployment of a group who have a connection with the church but who don't necessarily identify directly with the worshipping community itself further reinforces the ambiguous status of the event as church-hosted but not framed or bounded in terms of Christian identity.

Recrafting Liturgical Journeys

The projected event in Canterbury diocese is both much more musical and much more-directly Christian in its framing. A commission for performance in the cathedral draws directly on

traditional requiem texts but supplements these with a range of others. As Jonathan Arnold describes it:

the original aim was that we could commission a classical piece of music for a traditional cathedral choir and organ forces... it will involve a standard requiem text ... but those Latin movements will be punctuated with maybe a sort of Bach-style chorale or hymn for the congregation or audience ... there's also poetry ... So somehow all of these things have to fit together in short movements, some of which can be taken out and used as regular anthems for a church service

... this requiem is ... a bit more like a Britten war requiem, in that it's about bringing people to account rather than just lamenting and saying we're guilty but actually, just as Britten was saying this should never happen again we're saying this generation has to do something about it and actually change the direction of global warming, so it has to be about action at the end of the day (Jonathan, Interview with the Author, 24th January 2020)

The commission is imagined as a resource and a symbol, as something that will raise the visibility of environmental issues within Christian liturgy or as a concert piece and which can be used by regular parishes as much as by cathedrals in order to do so. The awareness of the connection between environment and different moments in the liturgical structure is an important one for Jonathan:

after the welcome and the gathering you go into a period of confession where we feel the guilt for our sins. And at the moment I think that's where the environment is sitting as an issue... but we need to move beyond that now... what we've all recognised is the importance of the requiem is to lead the listener on a journey, which leads them from a sense of confession, perhaps a sense of, with the Dies Irae there's going to be a day of judgment, a day of reckoning, but actually to end on a theme of aspiration and action and hope (Jonathan, Interview with the Author, 24th January 2020)

The requiem, then, serves as a creative form which enables some of this integration with a longer liturgical journey, the space which a new musical commission opens up providing the opportunity

to craft new narratives and lead participants along different pathways of experience from those which they might otherwise have embarked upon. Liturgy, in its movement between different moments of dramatic action is particularly apt at showing the different entry points which issues of climate might have into Christian narratives.

Tuning in to Nature

Not all groups are quite so convinced that Christian ritual practices form the most helpful point of departure and, in line with suggestions from Jeff Todd Titon (2019, 103), that indigenous epistemologies might be an important source of wisdom in grappling with the challenges of environmental crisis, forest churches lean in new directions precisely out of an awareness that something important might be picked up from elsewhere. In comparison to the other groups with which I made contact, Forest church is the least-directly motivated by climate change. Rather, it is part of a broader impulse to reconnect in some way with the rhythms of the natural world.

According to the Mystic Christ website “Forest Church is a fresh expression of church drawing on much older traditions when sacred places and practices were outside – but it is also drawing on contemporary research that highlights the benefits of spending time with nature in wild places” (Communities of the Mystic Christ n.d.). The broader forest church movement is a diverse one, and music is far from ubiquitous. At Ancient Arden forest church, however, music is a regular part of gatherings. *The Song of the Wheel*, a songbook created by community member Alison Eve, focusses largely on a musical tuning-in to the natural rhythms of the year as articulated within pagan calendars (Eve 2015). Alison explained some of the thinking behind the songs:

I had in front of me from my resources a number of pagan rituals that I was looking at, and looking at the flow of the ritual, the elements that were included, and then thought about the

ways in which they could be re-crafted and re-imagined ... so in Wicca it's very much about a sort of a duo-theistic, you know the lord and the lady, the god and the goddess ... I re-crafted it to calling the divine feminine and then calling Christ, so re-imagining the wild lord as Christ the first bit of singing that we usually do is weave the circle, and it's very useful there because you know the whole idea of weaving the circle is that when you go outside you haven't got church walls, so you're creating a temporary temple. It's a very porous one, it's very open, but it's just a space that you create and the songs that we use at that point are very powerful at helping weave that circle along with the use of elements such as water and incense and things like that and walking around the circle ... after that ... we usually have a song for the lighting of the fire ... fire is creating the warmth of our circle of fellowship ... and obviously we included in that fellowship not just the humans that are there, but all, but all the people who share that space, even if they're not human people.

it's marking the seasons in a much more direct way than we do in church ... and very much noting the environment in which you're in and connecting with the space ... you need to go there and ask permission to use the space. ... the importance of paganism in the whole climate change thinking is it's coming from a different perspective, it's coming from the perspective of asking the trees for permission, of recognising our participation in creation rather than being in this place above the rest of creation ... taking time to listen, to the smallness of the space, you know to listen to a leaf (Alison, Interview with the Author, 21st January 2020)

It is notable, here, that song and music are far from self-contained, rather, music becomes a means of relating to the rhythm of the year, an accompaniment to ritual action and a means of establishing relationship. The issue of power and hierarchy is also important, and is one that constantly has to be re-negotiated in understanding Christian relationships to creation. Here, dynamics of dominance and exploitation can sit alongside those of stewardship and care, or of partnership and integration. Music and sound is an important medium through which these relationships of power can be renegotiated. If music is thought of as medium through which relationships and interactions are established (Porter 2017, Todd Titon 2019, 112), then the move towards musical activity in the outdoor world raises important questions as to the significance of

this transition for the kind of ecological relationships which are formed in and alongside music and song.

The movement outdoors carries with it a re-working of musical practices, and these contribute very directly to the changed power-relationships between those singing, the world around them and one-another (see also Ryan 2019). According to Simon, another musician within the community:

musically and instrumentally it's a case of stripping down, which then I think puts an emphasis on ... the vocal line...I think for me the focus really falls on what the voice is as well, when you're outside...

a part of what I think forest church is doing against this background of a reawakening to nature is about saying well not everything about being inside ... it's not the only way to do it, and a lot of the things that we've built up around us to create this sort of indoor lifestyle, are the very things that we're saying we've got to start undoing in order to tackle things like climate change

the singing that we do enables you to concentrate and focus a bit more on the tone of what you're producing, you know, the level of volume at which you're singing, you know, is that appropriate? (Simon, Interview with the Author, 10th February 2020)

This attention to level and to voice is a crucial one, since it precisely this kind of relationship which often configures relationships of power and energy between actors and spaces in the act of singing (Warren Forthcoming). Music becomes a means through which the balance between humans, other humans and the environment is negotiated, and as the climate crisis suggests the need for a rebalancing of this relationship, so in acapella singing in an outdoor environment this rebalancing also takes place in song. This is a concern which was present for some of those in the evangelical project described at the start, however in accepting that existing genres might need deeper re-working in order to address such concerns, forest church goes considerably further, not

simply working within the grain of inherited traditions, but willing to disturb and reinvent them in doing so.

Gauging the Climate

So where does this brief cartography leave us? It is clear, first of all, that musical responses are one of the means that Christian individuals and groups are beginning to turn to in navigating the current global situation. This dimension sits alongside more-practical actions which people take, sometimes as a direct attempt to spur practical action, but sometimes as part of a broader project of integrating practices of faith and feeling with the changing world around them. This is not (yet) something which has entered the mainstream, and it is hard to predict to what extent or in what ways it might yet do so, however, for some, turning to music seems to be an instinctive response which provides numerous potential avenues to explore.

It is equally clear that there is no single common musical route which provides a template. The connections between environmental change and the musical expression of Christian faith are many and varied, and they draw in a range of other concerns which are more or less important within different strands of Christian belief and practice. Some expressions are more radical than others, depending on the extent to which those involved believe existing traditions to need re-working in order to grapple with the issues being encountered. As Forrest Clingerman states “the competition between narratives can be fierce. Some religious narratives emphasize environmental care, while others accuse environmentalism of being an idolatrous worship of Gaia. Some stories promote asceticism, others moderation, and still others material prosperity. And, of course, some say that only God has the power to change the climate, while others say humans are capable of being drivers of global change” (2015, 346). This plays out on a musical as much as on a theological

level, and is something which musicians will need to navigate in positioning themselves in this renegotiation between climate-crisis and faith-tradition. Music participates in a range of familiar tensions regarding faith and climate change which manifest themselves in debates surrounding theological approaches and appropriate Christian responses. But it does more than this, music provides a space for the renegotiation of attitudes and relationships, for re-working or solidifying existing traditions, for the balancing of power and priorities and for the engagement of both emotion and the physical world. It has the potential both to create and to address feelings of alienation between belief and environment, and as such, it should be clear that Christian musical activity is neither a meaningless distraction from the real work of concrete climate action nor something which provides a direct solution to human-induced climate change. Rather, it is bound up as part of the same world of concern as a field of action participating with and alongside a range of others, and with its own contribution to make as part of this wider landscape.

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