

In 1977 NASA launched *Voyager 1* and *Voyager 2* to explore the galaxy. A golden record called *THE SOUNDS OF EARTH* was affixed to each of the twin spacecrafts – a message from earth to anyone out there in the universe who might be listening. It contained both music and the sound of a human heartbeat.

Annie Druyan served as the creative director of NASA's famous Voyager Interstellar Message (VIM) Project. Along with Carl Sagan and a few others, she was entrusted with the task of coming up with earth's message to the rest of the universe. Reflecting on the experience in a 2009 interview, she recalled: "The first thing I found myself thinking of was a piece by Beethoven from Opus 130, something called the CAVATINA MOVEMENT....When I first heard this piece of music....I thought....Beethoven, how can I ever repay you? What can I ever do for you that would be commensurate with what you've just given me? And so, as soon as Carl said, "Well, we have this message, and it's going to last a thousand million years," I thought of....this great, beautiful, sad piece of music, on which Beethoven had written in the margin...the word *sensucht*, which is German for 'longing.' Part of what we wanted to capture in the Voyager message was this great longing we feel."

A song of human longing launched into space....It's all the more poignant based on the Latin root of the word 'desire' (*de sidere* – 'from the stars'). It's as if NASA's scientists were saying to the rest of the universe: "This is who and what we are as human beings: creatures of longing, creatures of desire." And hidden in the basic "Introduction to who we are" seems a question for extraterrestrials, almost a test to see if we can relate to them: *Do you feel this too? Are we the only ones? Are we crazy?*

Perhaps even more we wanted to say to any other intelligent life out there, "*If you feel this longing, this ache for something too, what have you done with it? Have you discovered anything that can fill it or cure it?*" As Annie Druyan relates, "We were hoping that, you know, maybe things like passion and longing....are not just limited to our narrow experience but might be something....felt on other worlds." Of course for us as disciples of Christ, we see our longing as pointing us to God. As Augustine so famously phrased: "Our hearts are restless, O God, and they will not rest, until they rest in you." Theologically, we would believe that other rationale creatures would feel the same deep longing.

And how best to communicate that longing we feel? Music. "We thought that the vibrations of the music would speak for us in ways that the machine itself and maybe the pictures and the other things that we had to offer wouldn't," explained Druyan.

When Bruce Springsteen inducted U2 into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2005 he said: "A great rock band searches for the same kind of combustible force that fueled the expansion of the universe after the big bang. They want the earth to shake and spit fire, they want the sky to split apart and for God to pour out." Then he paused and said a bit sheepishly, "It's embarrassing to want so much and expect so much from music, except, sometimes it happens."

Yes, sometimes it happens. Sometimes we hear a certain song or piece of music and it awakens something inexplicable at our core...an ache, a burning, a throbbing, a yearning....Beneath our rather surface-y contentment with the workaday world, beneath our desire to earn money and live until Friday, there's a much deeper desire, isn't there? We've all felt it. Indeed, that collective cry that arises from the depths of our humanity for something to fill these hearts is what makes us human. We know in our depths that it is God that we seek. And yet it is music that often gives the most profound expression to that desire. (adapted from Christopher West, *FILL THESE HEARTS*, p. 3-6)

And so we have come tonight. To express some of the deep desires of the human heart. To have an experience of beauty in the gift of sound. To lift our voices in sung prayer – a prayer of gratitude for the sublime gift of the human voice – and for instruments to help us sing our praise. This is how we give voice to our faith – our gratitude that we have been given this brief moment in this spectacularly beautiful universe. And to bless and dedicate a new instrument to help us give expression to our desire and our love for God – and our gratitude for His immense love of us.

Second, I realize that some of this congregation are not used to organ music – and not particularly enthralled that we now have an organ. Some have told me ‘It’s not our style.’ But the reality is that the Catholic Church is a church of tradition. One theologian said that the Catholic Church has the greatest attic in the world – and each generation rummages around through it – finds what it needs, uses it, perhaps discards it or returns it to the attic for future generations. This is why we still sing psalms from the Old Testament, hymns from the letters of St. Paul, Gregorian chant, many European hymns, Spirituals which expressed the longing for freedom, hymns based on American folksongs, and music written in the last 50 plus years. As Catholics we discard little, we accumulate a lot. The attic gets more treasures with each new generation.

Throughout church history, great theologians have put God’s truth to the musical style of their day. The tune of Martin Luther’s A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD was borrowed from a popular song of his day. Which made one commentator suggest that Luther would probably be borrowing tunes today from karaoke bars. Charles Wesley used several popular tunes from the taverns and opera houses in England. John Calvin hired two secular songwriters of his day to put his theology to music. The Queen of England was so incensed by these ‘vulgar tunes’ that she derisively referred to them as Calvin’s ‘Geneva jigs’!

Songs that we now consider sacred classics were once as criticized as today’s contemporary Christian music. When ‘Silent Night’ was first published, George Weber, music director of the Mainz Cathedral, called it ‘vulgar mischief and void of all religious and Christian feelings.’ And Charles Spurgeon, the great English pastor, despised the contemporary worship songs of his day – the same songs many now revere. (adapted from THE PURPOSE DRIVEN CHURCH, Rick Warren, p. 282-283). I find that the advice of Perry Farrell gives us sound footing for our music. He uses the analogy of bread and wine on a picnic: Bread tastes the best when it is freshly baked, and wine is good only after aging. So when considering the alchemy of music, never exclude the ancient, but make sure to also include the fresh. That’s a good picnic. It’s a balance. In fact, it’s a feast. (PARTY 2000, ROLLING STONE, quoted in HOMILETICS, Dec 2000, p. 26)

Third, I suggest that we follow the critique Thomas Long offered in his book BEYOND THE WORSHIP WARS (Alban Institute 2001). Long was alarmed by the conflicts that have arisen in many churches around the question of traditional vs. contemporary worship and music. He studied 20 local congregations that most observers would agree were thriving. Although their worship styles ranged all over the spectrum, he found some common denominators. His list included such qualities as warm hospitality, excellent music, commitment to mission outreach and thoughtful preaching. Number one on Professor Long’s list, though was that all of those thriving churches “make room...for the experience of mystery.”

Their leaders realized, in other words, that worship is a place – *perhaps the place par excellence* – where human beings encounter God. The services are more than just musical concerts, or edifying lectures, or lively social gatherings. They are an event to which people come, expecting to be touched, somehow, by the divine presence. (And I immediately thought of what our homiletics professor told us: “Gentlemen – you must be good homilists and work hard at this craft. But always remember – no one ever left church humming the homily! You need to see to it that your parishes have beautiful music!”)

It's impossible for any musician, liturgist, or pastor to create such a divine-human encounter – for the wind of the Spirit, as Jesus told Nicodemus, “blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” (Jn 3:8). Yet, we can approach worship in such a way that we are watchful and hopeful and attentive. Homilists spend time reading and praying and writing and reflecting. Musicians practice in order to sing their best and play their best. All of us we need to pray for a blessing from God beforehand, and be our welcoming best. Most of all, we can come to God's house, expecting that “surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.” If I'm asked the question of how do we worship God best? An organ certainly isn't the answer – but it is definitely part of it. May God give us ever more worthy hearts – that we might sing the desire of our restless hearts – as part of the praise of all creation. Amen. (last point adapted from HOMILETICS, July-Aug 2008, author not specified)