

Silence is ... Filled with Sound

Even with the fullness of science at our disposal, there is so much we don't know about the world around us. Could it be, a Wisconsin farmer wondered aloud in a recent radio interview, that the sun rises because birds sing, and not the other way around?

From where I sit on this early June day, at this moment there is "peace and quiet" around me. The air is still, a lone bird is chirping, and the busy world seems far away.

Only one place on earth, however, is truly quiet. That is the Anechoic Test Chamber at Orfield Laboratories in Minneapolis, which is 99.99 percent sound absorbent and was ranked a few years ago by the Guinness Book of World Records as "the quietest place on earth." Other than in that stark environment, creation is singing all around us. In summer the chorus of birds joins with the swishing of tall trees swaying in the wind. In autumn the rustling of leaves as they are shaken loose from their moorings intertwines with gentle plop-plops as each leaf finds the ground after its swirling journey. In winter the crackling of ice beneath our feet sparkles in the midst of a landscape softened by snowfall. And in spring the chirps, chattering, and chuckles of new life bursting forth come together in complex rhythms as a massed choir composed of countless voice parts.

But inanimate creation sings, too. Scripture tells us that the

entire created order is constantly in song, and we must consider that these are not merely poetic images. Psalm 96 exhorts "all the earth" to sing to God. There and in Psalm 98, the rivers clap their hands and the trees and hills sing for joy. In Isaiah 55:12, the prophet proclaims that "the mountains and hills. . . shall burst forth in song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."

Here science comes to our aid, for string theory supports the song of creation. Physicist and accomplished author Brian Greene wrote in the January, 2015 issue of *Smithsonian Magazine* that "much as the sonorous tones of a cello arise from the vibrations of the instrument's strings, the collection of nature's particles . . . arise from the vibrations of the tiny filaments described by string theory." The same idea applies to the forces of nature as well, Greene argued in an article for *Nova* a decade earlier. "Force particles are also associated with particular patterns of string vibration and hence everything, all matter and all forces, is unified under the same rubric of microscopic string oscillations—the 'notes' that strings can play."

We musicians are in the business of organizing vibrations in such a way that God in Christ through the Holy Spirit enters into our worship and takes root in our parishioners' hearts. We do this through a deft combination of grasping the intent of the notes on a page (or those that spring

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into our minds as we improvise) and interpreting that meaning in a way that keeps us, the performers and their predilections, out of the picture.

What about silence in worship? We know how important silence is to the experience of God, and often we feel pressured by the demands of the service to keep thing moving from one to the next. But at certain junctures we are in the driver's seat, and we know that silence is never empty. Dare yourself to extend the few moments of silence following the sermon, for example, a bit longer than you sense your congregation is comfortable with. Increase this incrementally. Or allow for periods of silence during communion; no one need cover the keyboard when you commune. Over time people may learn to tune their hearts to the symphony of sounds around them—breathing, creaking, rustling, noises from the outside world. Perhaps this mode of being will become a sacred invitation for them to experience God directly. As with so much else in life, it's easy to talk, but much more difficult to learn to listen.

Peace—and quiet—be with you!