

The Third

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

delivered by

Dame Janet Baker

at King's College London

on Wednesday 1 June 1988

The Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Lecture Trust was endowed by friends of Eric Abbott to provide for an annual lecture or course of lectures on spirituality. The venue for the lecture will vary between London, Oxford and Lincoln.

The Trustees are: the Dean of King's College London (Chairman); the Dean of Westminster; the Warden of Lincoln Theological College; the Chaplain of Keble College, Oxford; the Very Reverend Dr Tom Baker; the Reverend John Robson and the Reverend Canon Eric James.

©1988 Janet Baker

Spirituality and Music

In his Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Lecture of 1986 - the very first one - Cardinal Hume opened by saying that he did not know Dean Abbott well.

I did not know Dean Abbott at all, but one of the delights in preparing this address has been to read about this remarkable priest and man, and to feel as though I have begun to know him, even if only just a little.

We actually share a name: his surname Abbott is my middle name. Many of the remarks attributed to him strike a most sympathetic chord in me; I really wish I had heard him preach in the Abbey.

I think he would have understood very well why I could not bring myself to stand in his pulpit and talk to you from there. He would have understood my reluctance to usurp the territory of the professional.

He must have been a man of enormous influence; there must be many who treasure his counsel and who hug to their hearts his personal words of wisdom and insight.

During his last years he destroyed almost all his sermons because he said, "My ministry is essentially a living ministry - living person to the living". I revel in that - it is exactly what music is for me - a communication of the moment, living performance for living audience - and I say this while having the greatest respect for recording which has its own very different value.

Dean Abbott knew from first hand experience what it was to suffer from limitation in the physical sense and the frustration it caused in forcing him to lighten his workload. I want to speak about limitation as we experience it in both musical and spiritual life.

People often ask me questions. They are usually the same questions: When did you first know you could sing? or, Do you come from a musical family? But I was once asked a most unusual thing: What would I like to feel I had given to the world? My answer was, "A truly original thought".

Talking here this evening I especially wish that I could produce even one completely new idea but I am made up of a range of influences, beginning with those of my parents, my teachers, my colleagues, and of the innumerable books I have devoured since the age of four. What I have to say will therefore have the ring of familiarity. You will have heard it all before, said from a slightly different viewpoint of the musician, but nevertheless, not a new vision. Just as interviewers seem unable to come up with unique questions, I seem unable to give unique answers!

Two things crop up with regularity: Are you religious? Are musicians religious? Both of them questions too enormous to be discussed with a journalist and I usually refuse to be drawn on either. Tonight is a marvellous opportunity since we are remembering a man whose vocation was communication through the priesthood, and it is in just those terms that I feel able to reply.

Yes ... I do feel music is a religious calling and I do feel artists are called to a very special

priesthood in the sense that we ‘minister’ to those who need us. Particularly performers; we are the mediators: the priest mediates between God and his people. Performers do the same between the creative genius and the listener.

I believe every artist is, in some sense, involved in this priesthood - even if perhaps unconsciously. We serve something greater than ourselves: one is made very much aware of that every time one re-creates a work of a great composer. At the inner core of music is the possibility that performing can touch and change the human heart. This is not an attribute over which musicians have the slightest control. We know that it is there; we know that sometimes it appears. We know that when it does, we the performers are as much in its power as the audience is, and I believe that a power which can touch and change can only be divine.

Some years ago, Hans Keller, the brilliant musicologist who worked for the BBC, wanted to do a series of broadcasts and asked me if I would take part. It didn’t sound my cup of tea and I said I hadn’t the slightest idea what I could talk about. He advised me to think of one thing I felt really passionately about and talk of that. After much anguish I kept coming back to one idea: I think it came out of persistent reaction to people who have told me all my life that artists are ‘special’ - that the gifted person is in some sort of special category apart from others. My strenuous denial of this attitude eventually made me realise that the thing I felt most passionately about was the uniqueness of the individual.

It is an idea to which I have remained faithful. The emphasis on individuality has coloured my work. Although the words and the music I perform are not mine, the human personality through which they pass undoubtedly is, and to be individual in my terms of reference as a musician, is better to serve my art, not in order to impose that personality onto the music but so to come to terms with and understand it that I can better learn how to stand aside and allow what is not mine to use me.

This process applies particularly to the inner journey which some of us decide to undertake, that spiritual quest to find our true selves. True individuality, or at least some idea of it, is necessary before we can place ourselves at the service of our fellows. We must attempt to know ourselves before attempting the even more difficult task of knowing others.

In a letter to Eric James, Dean Abbott once said, “The passion of our Lord was derived from willingly accepted limitation, inherent in incarnation”.

I respond strongly to that statement. Limitation is a familiar word to performers. We know at the outset that our talent is a gift and has nothing to do with us. We know, however hard we try, we can never hope to live up to the divine potential implanted in us; we are human vessels and fallible.

We spend much of our working lives facing constructive criticism from colleagues and trying to bear up under not-so-constructive criticism from the media. We are confronted at every turn with our physical, mental, and spiritual limitations. Yes, I can identify with Dean Abbott’s implication that bearing our very small share of suffering is inherent in incarnation. The enormous difference between us and the example of Christ is in the word ‘willing’.

One of the most crippling limitations and one which the great majority of musicians share, in my experience, is fear. Performers are riddled with it and spend a lot of energy in the attempt to conquer or control it. We need every ounce of energy for the job itself so there is a tremendous amount of leakage through fear. It is generally assumed that a certain level of excitement and anticipation is necessary for the adrenaline flow; what many performers suffer is far more than that.

We try to conquer it in various ways. Some of us pretend we aren't frightened at all; some have a quick puff on a cigarette to calm the nerves; others a stiff whisky to deaden them; yet others resort to the odd tranquilliser. My own drug was reading.

I read everything I could lay my hands on in the attempt to understand what performing was really about and how I could come to terms with it. My reading led me to people like Carl Jung, Ouspensky, Gurdjieff, the Christian mystics, comparative religion, ideas which opened new worlds to me and launched me upon my own inner journey, a journey which has deepened my faith and given me endless opportunities to try to make sense of this strange paradox we call human existence.

For some musicians another kind of limitation arises. Nature occasionally gives the burning desire to perform. She gives the temperament and even the opportunities, but finally withholds talent of the same intensity.

On the other hand, some people have wonderful talent but do not have the luck and the opportunity to use it.

We also have to cope with rejection. We are inevitably in competition with others in the same category from the moment we become professional. A failure, for instance, at an audition is particularly hard for singers because rejection applies to the whole person in a way that it does not to any other kind of performer, since our instrument is within us. We feel it in a more subjective sense, and our consequent vulnerability is of a special kind.

So then, when anyone asks me whether singers are 'religious' or not I remember the many pains and difficulties we have to face. I don't know how any performer can actually be a performer and not also 'religious' in the widest sense.

We are engaged in a terrific struggle with human limitation; with fear; with the continual battering of self-confidence which public criticism brings; with the attempt to hold on to one's sense of worth while giving full due to someone else's - and to do it - in order to give out a talent and to serve our art as unselfishly as possible.

All this seems to me to speak of spiritual life.

People often want to know if performers need to experience in real life the emotions we have to play on stage or re-create in songs, or whether it is necessary to have a faith in order to sing sacred works.

All human beings carry within them common ground. We all have the same feelings. AT our extremes we are capable of the best and the worst kind of behaviour. Perhaps it is better that most of us never know the outer limits.

When an artist like Maria Callas sings the role of Medea it does not automatically follow that she must first *have* children and second have murdered them in order to convince her audience.

The artist in such circumstances brings the faculty of imagination to bear. It is easy enough to recall moments in our own lives when we could quite cheerfully murder either our own children or someone else's: murder in the heart, murder by the spoken word is, I suggest, common to us all. So are the other great passions: anger, fear, hatred, ecstasy, love. They are all part of the common ground we share and why, when we see them portrayed on stage by a great artist, they have such an

effect on us.

Imagination, then, is the key word. It is a tremendously useful quality - a tremendously useful spiritual quality.

Those who have it also have the vulnerability which is its close companion, the limitation, the price we have to pay for the positive gift of imagination.

Although performers have great powers of influence over an audience, in wielding them we also find ourselves at the mercy of those very powers. In a very real sense, we are controlled *by* the music and words we perform, not in control *of* them except in a very basic technical sense.

We are equally at the mercy of that other power about which I spoke before: that mysterious ingredient, that divine magic which descends, or does not, as it wills. We wait and hope for it but have absolutely no control, no say in the matter. Yet without it, no artist has the remotest chance to touch the hearts of the audience or to influence at any real depth. All we can do is to be as well prepared technically and physically as we can. The rest is out of our hands.

Since Hans Keller's invitation to me all those years ago, I have not seen any reason to change my position on the idea that individuality is of tremendous value.

I would change one thing, however, and say that now it is not so much individuality which concerns and interests me as the individual who professes it. I have said that the search for my own individual expression as a musician was the starting point of my inner journey and the search to find myself. It can be regarded as a rather selfish preoccupation but I believe it is the only way to make any sense at all of Our Lord's second commandment ... to love our neighbour as we do our self. There is no possibility to love, understand, and forgive our neighbour unless we are first able to do these things for ourselves.

As a singer I have been employed to question each note of every phrase, attempting to find my own response; to weigh my own ideas of interpretation, gradually sifting and refining until I have felt ready to portray a role on stage or on the concert platform.

It can be a dangerous exercise to be responsible for a character. One opens up areas of emotion which can overwhelm. The great emotions, the passionate utterances, are made for the benefit of the audience, but the artist, in passing through the psychological upheaval they produce, discovers in the process a little more about himself than he knew before. But as I have just said, if one is willing to be a servant of the muse, then one places oneself at the mercy of very powerful forces indeed.

The safeguard in this labyrinth is the same guiding light the soul leans upon as he journeys to God, purity of intention - and miserable, lonely and unfulfilled can be the life of the musician who imagines fame and fortune are the only goals to strive for. But if what we want more than anything else is to serve, to serve our profession, to serve the gift we have been given, then there is a chance of surviving the pitfalls a sane and whole person.

To achieve and to keep the fruits of achievement for selfish ends is dangerous: it is unhealthy. To achieve in order to pass on something to others means health. It is a sharing in the creative act. To struggle, to suffer to bring forth at great personal cost, this is a natural act.

So many people say to me, "Oh, it's easy for you: you're special, you have a special gift. It's all much harder when you aren't outstanding in any way; you don't know which road to take."

I can readily accept that the choices are made easier if you can do one thing outstandingly well, but what if the one gift is thwarted, what if the circumstances are wrong and that one gift fails to come to fruition? What then? If there are various roads to travel, a number of talents to develop, there are more safeguards when something doesn't turn out too well, more chances to try again.

I simply do not believe there are 'special' categories. There are no 'special' people: there are only unique individuals each with his or her own unique part to play, and we all matter equally if we matter at all.

The mess we see around us, the chaos, the upheaval, may cause us to abandon hope *en masse*, the human race may look like a dismal failure. If we look not at the whole, but at single individuals, we see those who shine out like beacons; those who have made and are making this world, this planet, a better place to live in.

One of Dean Abbott's strengths, and he had many, was the ability to confront the world 'as it is'. When we begin to train a voice, we are confronted by the raw material of talent 'as it is'. The instrument is a given quantity.

There is a parallel here: a human being is also a 'given quantity'. We may find it extremely difficult to accept ourselves 'as we are' at this moment: we may not be the kind of person we think we ought to be; we may not like ourselves very much.

The singer may not be too happy with the kind of voice he has. He might yearn to be a great Wagnerian tenor and yet might be at his best in much lighter roles. He could learn to be content or he could spend his career unsatisfied, longing to be something he is not.

I spoke of the priest as an intermediary between the divine and other people and of the musician as the priestly intermediary between composer and audience.

I now speak of another priesthood: that of the individual. Each one of us has within a spark of divinity: we can choose either to serve it and transmit it willingly to the world or refuse to acknowledge it and hide it in the earth as the man did in the parable of the talents.

If we do accept our priesthood our lives gain a most sacred and holy meaning. We are precious atoms in the greater whole. Each person has an equal, although quite unique, responsibility, importance, and contribution to make.

There will be a difference in our spheres of influence, in the size of our personal ministry, a difference in quantity, but certainly not necessarily of quality.

At first, just like the student learning a vocal technique, we will need to develop our technique as priests, discovering where our strengths and weaknesses lie.

We will find, as we slowly learn, that we have the ability to transmit our strengths to others; that we need to allow others to minister to our weaknesses.

Sometimes we will be the active ingredient in a given situation, sometimes the passive one. We shall learn to give and we shall learn to receive from others.

As we go about our daily lives, we may not feel in the least like 'priests' but each time we are able to think of ourselves in these terms, as the student practises his scales, we will gradually get

better at it.

Just as music is a great sharing and communication, the personal ministry is only possible when we are open enough to give ourselves and humble enough to allow another to see inside our hearts and minds and minister to us in return. It can never be a one-way affair.

As we try to be content with ourselves the way we are, so should we try to content with others the way they are; not trying to 'change' them, not wishing they could be different in order to suit our own view of how they should be, but in our personal acceptance, accepting the other, particularly those whom we find 'difficult' or hard to like, because it is often from those very people we can learn our most valuable lessons, hard though they may be.

Some of the most valuable services we can offer to others may seem trivial and unimportant.

As the performer draws on his imagination to portray his roles, we must use this same faculty in our relationships, attempting to put ourselves in the shoes of another in order to try to understand his difficulties and problems.

There are those who have this gift to a marked degree. It is precious and it is rare. The sympathy we can give if this is the case, reaches very deep.

A human being is a mysterious thing: we can never claim to 'know' another person. There are always aspects to the character of a person which we can't understand; the imagination to enter into an experience which we have not shared is a talent.

In music, one of the most amazing influences on the audience is silence. The moment of complete silence in between two sounds can have an indescribable impact.

Most of us are talkers; we are eager to express our thoughts and opinions. The listener is in the minority. The one able to offer silence is often the shy person, the one who thinks he has nothing to contribute to a conversation. Where would we talkers be without them, I wonder?

The ability to listen, and listen non-judgementally, to someone who urgently needs a sympathetic ear is a vitally important aspect of personal ministry. Some of the most grievously sick people are people who, even in the midst of a loving family, are never properly heard, never listened to with compassion and understanding. So many of us are crying out for this kind of attention. If you are the sort of person who can give it, even though you may not feel able to advise, you have a talent and an avenue of personal ministry.

Every performer in the cast of an opera is an essential part of the whole. Some singers will never be 'stars'. But in their smaller roles they can still give the best of which they are capable. Again it is question of accepting themselves as they are, accepting that what they can do is of value.

It is exactly the same in human relationships: we are different, we have talents, we are all absolutely necessary in the scheme of things; we balance each other out; we need each other's positive and negative aspects.

There is tremendous dignity and fulfilment in the interchange which can take place between us, each one of us giving and taking from one another as our talents dictate.

I once worked with a Bulgarian colleague who had been a great *prima donna* in her own country for many years. As her abilities diminished through age, instead of leaving the stage

altogether she stayed on, because, she told me, she loved the life so much she couldn't bear not to be part of it. Her roles grew smaller and smaller, until, when I first met her, she had only about five minutes of actual singing time and spent most of the evening listening to me, since our scenes were played together. I will never forget the spiritual dimension of the support and empathy that woman poured out on me. What she gave immeasurably enriched my own performance; she was totally unselfish. The humility and beauty of her silent generosity was awe-inspiring and deeply moving. She enriched the whole performance and yet she had the smallest part in the cast.

Because we, in our ministry, do not happen to be spiritual healers, inspired preachers, trained counsellors, we may feel we have little value. I wonder if the gifts we do have are fully recognised as such? The gifts I have mentioned, of imagination, the ability to sympathise, the ability to listen, are not small things: they are fundamental needs.

Perhaps the most fortunate gift of all is the ability to judge our capabilities correctly and to be content with whatever place destiny chooses to give us. Singers who gradually become aware of their own unique value to, and place in, the profession and learn to be content with that place, even though it may not be the one they had hoped for at the outset, eventually achieve a great peace of mind.

In that marvellous story of the talents it has always struck me that if the man with least had just managed to do what the other two did, in other words, had managed to make the best of what he had, his reward would have been exactly the same: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord. But he imagined himself inferior in some way and gave up.

In my job, the biggest, that is, the loudest voices, are generally considered to be the most sought after. They are rarities and much in demand for the Wagnerian, Verdi, and Puccini roles. The majority, those of us with medium and smaller instruments, while we may long to play and sing the 'big stuff' know that we can have perfectly satisfying and fulfilling careers, accepting our limitations and making what we can of what we have been given.

When I spoke of accepting limitations a moment ago, it may have sounded defeatist: there was no mention of self-improvement or of struggle to overcome short-comings.

As musicians, there is nothing you can do about the actual instrument. A voice is of a certain type. It does grow in training, but the wise singer will not want to push it beyond its natural limits. We can work hard and we can try to grow into artists, but the boundaries are set.

I have found the same applies on the spiritual journey. My personal limitations remain much the same: I do not find that I get 'better'. I do find that I begin to understand myself more. I am one of those people who have an extremely short fuse-wire. It just might get a little longer as time goes by, but I fear it will always be on the short side, however hard I try. But in trying to accept myself, as I am, I see that my short fuse stems from a highly developed imagination and I realise I need this for my work. In desperately trying to be a calm and patient person, I may well be interfering with a necessary mechanism which my personality needs for my job.

It seems to me a great waste of energy, the over-concern with what we think we should be. As I stand on the platform the real work, communication, is done by some inexplicable and indefinable power working through me and I think this is the same in life.

God uses us as flawed, imperfect human beings for His own purposes and in His own way. The only thing we really can do is allow.

It takes great courage to do this; to go out onto a stage or a platform not knowing what the end result will be, knowing the power is not our own. It takes great courage to live like that too: and it takes great faith.

As performers we soon get used to the idea of falling flat on our faces. Peter Pears once gave me some good advice. We were working together on one occasion when I forgot my lines. It distressed me terribly and I couldn't put it out of my mind. He told me afterwards how important it is to do precisely that, put the mistake behind and go on so that the rest of the performance does not suffer. He said this to me rather ruefully, because he himself had had a good deal of practice but he wanted me to learn that it was simply no good to dwell on mistakes.

One of the most helpful and hopeful promises of Christian belief is the encouragement to pick ourselves up off the floor and start again, in the knowledge that our burdens of guilt and self recrimination are lightened by Christ's assurance of forgiveness.

I said some moments ago that the performer's life is dogged by one overwhelming emotion, fear. I do not know any singer who does not suffer from it to a marked degree. I think people in their daily lives are also dogged by it, I think we are frightened of each other.

We are frightened of showing what we feel. We are afraid to say, "I love you". We are afraid to touch each other. We are afraid to say what we really mean. We do not have the courage to look someone in the eyes as we speak to them. Like performers, we are playing many different roles, and our nerves, our fears, cause us to forget to speak the right words at the proper time, or to interact at specific moments in the best way. We are afraid to live in the moment, playing our roles with honesty and sincerity, trusting in the divine magic which can guide us to act and speak as is right for the moment.

As artists on stage and as artists in life, how deep and rich and meaningful we could be if we only had the courage to abandon ourselves to each moment and trust that all that is necessary will be given.

How free we would be, if only we could trust in the promise that no matter how many times we fail, we can begin again with a clean slate, accepting our failings and our fallibilities as part of the human condition. Perhaps God can only work through us when we have enough humility to admit we can do nothing and only when we do realise this can He, then, do everything.

If changes take place within us, we then know it is nothing we ourselves have achieved, it is all done for us.

In our human situation of paradox and contradiction, perhaps we simply do not have enough knowledge of ourselves to be able to say what is 'good' or 'bad' about our personalities.

Perhaps we do not have the wisdom to set about trying to change certain aspects of our characters, even if we could. Perhaps we really need our light and our dark sides. This is certainly how we are created, hard though this may be to accept, and harder still though it may be to understand.

I come back to the word 'mystery'. I have said how mysterious it is when suddenly performer and audience are bound together by that 'something' transmitted *through*, but not *by*, the performer. It is awesome, and we carry on year after year in the faith that this grace will, every so often, descend; content to give of our talents but knowing the divine magic won't be there every time.

Faith is a great gift. These are years during which we need faith in abundance to withstand the onslaught of our senses at the mercy of instantaneous information about what goes on in the world around us.

We could easily despair. It saddens me particularly when someone publicly condemns the arts and artists as parasites, unnecessary factors in a society which accepts profit-making as the only right for survival.

Painting, literature, music, sculpture, as an expression of contemporary life, act as a reflective mirror. Our business in portraying the entire spectrum of emotion is to act as a safety-valve; like a volcano with molten liquid for the earth, a way for society to let off steam without destroying itself.

We are light-bringers, pointing the way to hidden areas of the human spirit. Artists in their suffering, their vulnerability, their emotional commitment, express collectively the journey of the individual soul. To deny the race the opportunity to witness this universal symbol is to deny the necessity of the individual expression of it: we are saying the individual does not need the idea of a soul.

Contemporary expressions of art can be difficult to understand. Modern music is not easy to grasp, neither is some modern poetry. Perhaps a heap of bricks in a gallery does not speak to us or suggest to us an ideal of beauty; the claim that the collection of refuse is a work of art may make us irritated, even angry, at what we might consider a wasteful use of public money. The emotion and energy such anger causes might also inspire us with enough determination to look for a sculpture or a painting which we *do* think beautiful and can relate to. Perhaps the questionable aspects of art are just those factors which enable us to form our taste and opinions and, like the limitations and faults we have to suffer in ourselves, are vital and necessary parts of the whole.

Our judgements are not always reliable because creative people have always lived ahead of their time. We can't enter their world but we can be influenced by what they bring back to us from it, opening doors for us, trying to expand our vision just as the great saints do, forming a living link, a bridge for us to cross.

Few of us are called to be pioneers of the race; fewer still, to be saints. We can be bridges, though. During the production rehearsals of my final opera, *Orfeo*, at Glyndebourne in 1982, we reached a point in the second act where Orfeo arrives at the Elysian fields, abode of the Blessed Spirits, who will return to him his beloved wife, Euridice. At this point there was no singing, just ballet music. Our producer Peter Hall, a great believer in allowing things to happen naturally on stage, often waited to see what would emerge, without having to tell us every move and every gesture. I always found this approach an inspiring and tremendous freedom, and on this day and at this moment I began unconsciously to move slowly among the members of the chorus, taking the hand first of one and then another. The gesture gathered momentum and as the chorus watched me touching their hands, they turned towards, and touched, each other. Gradually the stage was filled with people reaching out, a human bridge across the spiritual and human worlds. The scene was allowed to remain and at each performance proved to be a deeply affecting and moving spiritual experience.

Life can be like this. Life is a divine communication; everyone can share in it. All we need to is simply stretch out our hands to one another.