

Mary's Exclamation
Luke 1: 46-55
Advent II

It's chanted every evening Vespers in monasteries across the world.

It's been set to music by Rutter, Vaughn Williams, Bruckner,

Mendelssohn Schubert, Mozart, Tchaikovsky, Bach, Vivaldi, Pachelbel,

Buxtehude: 217 and counting. In the 17th Century, no text, other than the

Mass, was set to music but the Magnificat-Mary's Exclamation..

It's popular across the Christian world: Nicaraguan peasants carry it in

their pockets as a sign of their devotion and piety.

It's not just words, it's a song.

Why? Why does Luke introduce songs into his story—as if he were the Andrew Lloyd Webber or Lin Manuel Miranda of the Bible?

I asked our Music Director Chuck Norris this question and he introduced me to the philosopher and educator Suzanne Langer, writer of "Philosophy in Another Key". Gotta love the pun-iness of that!

Music, she writes, is the “tonal analog of the emotive life”. In other words, language alone fails to communicate forms of feelings that music does. Chuck added that this is the common argument for music education in the schools—it’s not just to give skills in reading music or singing on key, or learning a classical musical genre, it’s to increase the capacity for the human being to experience new forms of feeling. Listening to, playing, singing music, grows the emotional capacity of a human being.

More simply said, you and I feel emotions through music that mere descriptive words can not convey.

I believe Luke knew this subconsciously.

What emotion of Mary did Luke intend to convey through this particular song, on the occasion in her story in which he placed it? When you and I hear or read the words of the Magnificat, how does the fact

that they are musical affect our understanding of Mary's emotional state? How does key, (the major, or minor or dissonance), the tempo , the style in which they are sung affect the emotion they evoke?

Why do I keep referring to Luke instead of Mary as the composer of this lyric? It's very unlikely that Mary actually composed these words or actually sang them. She didn't just warm up her vocal cords and burst out into the well composed aria. Most scholars believe this was a song circulating in the early church, composed of phrases taken directly out of the Hebrew scriptures, especially from the Song of Hannah—another pregnant woman with an uncommon birth story.

So: the Magnificat. (Turn to Luke 2 if you wish to follow along). It begins with praise, magnificent praise of God for considering her worthy to be the Mother of the Messiah

My soul magnifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior.
My God has done great things for me. I name God holy".

It moves to thanksgiving for God's attributes: strength, faithfulness, mercy.

And in the body of the song, we find a declaration of the personal and societal reversals God has and will continue to accomplish:

The proud are scattered, the high are removed from their thrones, the humble lifted up; the hungry are satisfied and the rich are sent away empty.

This is not the first nor last time we hear these upside down descriptions in scripture. Think the beatitudes: those who mourn will dance, those who are poor will be rich. And Jesus' words, the first shall be last, the last shall be first. This is the way of God's Coming Reign and is very popular among the poor, not so much among the privileged. A few get it:

A young family gave elf ornaments to each of their three sons each Christmas. They began a yearly context to see who could place his

ornament highest on the tree. The oldest son Tom won for several years. When he finally got his elf on the top of the tree, the parents believed the contest was over. Wrong. The next year, the middle son, Kevin, taped his ornament to the ceiling above the tree. End of contest, they thought. Wrong again.

The next year the parents couldn't find the ornament of their youngest son, Mark. It must be on the roof, they decided. Wrong again. They finally found son Mark's elf on the very lower branch of the tree—with a note attached. "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." Needless to say, that ended the contest. (Mrs. Bill Campbell Denton, Texas p. 116n in McKenna.

I come back to my question: What emotion did Luke intend to convey when he gave Mary the Magnificat? What did he want it to add to the story?

Composers throughout the centuries have chosen a range of moods.

Some more imaginable in Mary's mouth than others.

Along with Chuck on the piano, we're going to explore three styles or moods suggested by the context or composers through the centuries.

"Lullaby Magnificent" I listened and watched a You-Tube video of John Michael Talbott's voice singing Mary's Song accompanied by images of babbling brook, sun beams streaming into a woods, clouds wafting over a robin's egg blue sky. The mood is devotional, sentimental, sweet. This is Mary mild, praising God in a thin airy voice:

(Chuck illustrates at piano)

Does the music fit the tune? Are the words of the Magnificat words of a timid teenager? The words are those of praise and of God's plan for an upside down world of reversals which Mary herself illustrates: an

unimportant, uneducated, peasant girl without a pedigree carries in her body and will become mother to, the Messiah.

Contrast this with the “Protest Magnificat”: The Magnificat sung as an act of Resistance. Resistance against the oppression of the weak by the strong. Resistance from abuse. Resistance which praises the God who stands on the side of the marginalized and sings out with confidence.

African slaves knew this. When they sang their spirituals they were both praising God and protesting their masters who locked them out of worship but who couldn't lock them out of Biblical promises. Marchers at Civil Rights demonstrations in the 60's sang “We Shall Overcome” when all indications were that they weren't overcoming much at all. They sang what they heard God promising, which had already begun.

For several months preceding the fall of the Berlin wall, citizens of

Leipzig gathered every Monday afternoon around St Nikolai church (where Bach composed many of his cantatas) to sing songs of hope and justice. Over two months, their numbers grew from about 1000 to more than 300,000, over half the citizens of city. Eventually, the songs “shook the powers of their nation” and helped change the world. This Sinatra Doctrine contributed to the resistance, (recall the Frank Sinatra song “My Way”.) That’s what the East Germans were looking for... governance, their way. When asked why they were unable to crush this protest the officer of the Stasi said, “We had no contingency plan for song”.

Kathleen Norris writes that during the 80’s Civil War in Guatemala, the military regime banned reading the Magnificat. It was perceived as dangerously supportive of the peasants.

Is Mary’s mood one of a rebel’s resistance?

Instead of retreating or apologizing or despairing about her

predicament—an unmarried woman at risk of scandal, she sang: of her

confidence in God's power, of God's reversal of winners and losers, and her trust in God's mercy.

This Mary has backbone. Don't mess with her.

(Chuck illustrates at piano)

The Protest Magnificat exchanges a courageous, bold, gritty Steel Magnolia for Gentle Mary sentimental meek and mild of the Lullaby Magnificat.

And then there is the Playful Paradox Magnificat.

In Medieval Europe, Christmas was a time of festive reversals of status. In Constantinople in the 9th Century, a mock patriarch, sometimes a young choir boy, rode through the streets on a donkey, burlesquing the Eucharist. As late as the 17th century, Franciscan monks in Southern France put on their vestments inside out, wore spectacles made with

rounds of orange peel, blew ashes from the censers on each other's faces, carried foul smelling "incense" of manure, and wore animal masks chanting the liturgy in gibberish.

Weird? It began as a literal acting out of the Magnificat! A playful demonstration of God's seemingly absurd inclination to topple human power structures and raise the downtrodden, (which was just about everyone), to a position of honor and feasting. You can imagine the popularity with the peasantry of participating in this parody who, for just this short period prior to Christmas, pretended sportingly that this reversal was in progress.

Mary's subversive message so resonated with the peasants of the day that it gained traction, migrated to post-Christmas and eventually in later centuries became the festival we now know as Carnivale or Mardi Gras. Think parades in New Orleans pre-Lent.

What if Mary sang her song, the Magnificat, as a Playful Paradox, an Absurdist Aria, a Chuckling Chorus, embracing with nearly giddy joy, the fantastically ridiculous but welcome gift which she had been given. How does imagining Mary's singing in new ways change the feeling of the story for you?

(Chuck illustrates at piano)

The Songs of Christmas: The Canticles of Christmas, Written into Luke's Story of the Birth of Christ to evoke a particular mood or passion. What is that for you? Is the Magnificat sung as a Lullaby, a Protest, or Holy Paradox? My hope is that as you read these songs—Zachariah, Mary, The Angels, Simeon, you will read them with not as boring extensions of the text but as songs with mood, with passion,

