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# Jazz — and all that liturgy

The musician Ewan King believes that ancient liturgy and favourite hymns can be ... well, jazzed up. Julie McKee takes note

IT IS not the most obvious setting for a mass. A fully pumped jazz band, complete with horn section, Hammond organ, strings, and glockenspiels, propels the ancient liturgical texts along a powerful rhythmic undercurrent with a chorus of rotating singers. You are unlikely ever to have heard choral music like this in church before.

But it is an example of what you might hear from a growing movement of musicians who are seeking to reboot church music and encourage a renewed respect for our sung texts. And one of the places they are finding inspiration is in jazz.

At first glance, it hardly seems the most natural Christian bedfellow — the genre's free-flowing expressionism, not to mention the lifestyle of many of its most popular artists, could not seem more at odds with the thoughtful structures that have evolved in Anglicanism over hundreds of years. But there is something about the ability of jazz to expand and absorb within its cultural environment which might make it more appropriate than it seems.

Ewan King, a musician, arranger, and co-founder of one such venture, the King/Cave project, says: "I want to take the subtlety, texture, and grace associated with the cathedral tradition, and to give it that compulsive energy and demand for attention that comes from rock 'n' roll, some kinds of jazz, and from hip hop — that refusal to be ignored."

King teamed up with a fellow Cambridge University graduate and musician, James Cave, over a shared love of hymns and jazz, and a frustration with the worship-music scene in Britain. Their first "gig", two years ago, was an alternative worship service in a chapel of St James's, West Hampstead, where Cave composed a setting for the mass, and King put new arrangements to the hymns.

THE project has snowballed since then. Cave continues to compose liturgical settings, and King arranges, leading to performances in more than 25 churches, with a set-up that is much like a touring band, using different ensembles depending on the venue.

"We have a set list of about 25 to 30 hymns," King says. "Places also commission us to do things; so we have settings of Psalm 121, Psalm 23, and Psalm 29. And there are original



Group work: left: Alec Harper on saxophone; middle: Ewan King talks jazz to a Greenbelt Festival audience; below: James Cave, the other half of the King/Cave Project

pieces, usually with church liturgical words."

Apart from a few solo sections, the arrangements are mostly sung by the congregation, led by a group of professional musicians with King and Cave. They include Wesley standbys such as "Jesu, Lover of my soul", and

Isaac Watts's "O God, our help in ages past".

But this is not just a jazz supergroup helicoptered in to show the plebs how it's done. "If they're up for it, we definitely also use the musicians in the church, because the more they have invested in it, the

more they get out of it," King says. "The choir often participate, and we collaborate with the director of music, if there is one. It's not like, 'Here's an amazing group of professionals, they're going to do some stuff, and then you hoi polloi can sing some bog-standard hymns with an organ.' With jazz projects, that can be a danger."

One thing is certain: you won't hear any Frank Sinatra-style swing, or interminably long solos, either. The hymns are treated like a template, in much the same way as a jazz musician might take a well-known standard and interpret it in his or her own way. The point is to make the music accessible and fresh. "The project is more jazz in its attitude, in the sense that you can't muck it up," King says. "Anyone can come in and contribute as they can, and we'll make space for them in the band."

It is this openness and lack of preconceptions, King believes, which makes jazz musicians the right choice for a project such as this: "They will approach even the most hackneyed hymn as if for the first time."

KING, who is also training as a Baptist minister, has a passion for the great hymn-writers which goes deep. "I was playing the organ in a strict Baptist country chapel from the age of 13," he says. "That was a big thing, because it was all Watts, Wesley, and Newton. There were some modern things, like Fanny Jane Crosby, but nothing post-1900."

"The hymns have been a real, living part of my tradition. I grew up in a small, suburban, nowhere-kind of town, Royston. There was no jazz club, no classical music scene. . . It was a town without music. Church was the one place where people sang."

He and Cave hope that hearing and singing the liturgy and songs in a different context will underscore the textual content. "Oftentimes in classical music, even some very cultivated audiences can actually use their cultivation as a way of ignoring the music," King says. "You can listen to it, and interact with it on some level, while in some senses you're kind of ignoring it. And there's something about a lot of popular music that won't let you ignore it, I think."

A reworking of "All creatures of our God and King" keeps the original melody, for example, but uses a chant-like pulse that is always pushing forward, towards an extended refrain with a crescendo that is similar to the effect of a Charismatic chorus.

King agrees. "What I think I've drawn from the Charismatic praise tradition is the idea of this 'whack', a shot in the arm, like on steroids."

"In 'All creatures' I'm trying to create that kind of ecstatic, in-the-moment sense of this transcendent Spirit of God moving us. But [we are trying] to get there through a Latin text by St Francis with a quite fun, but not entirely successful, Victorian translation, and a German-Catholic Easter chorale hymn that has passed

**'Jazz musicians approach even a hackneyed hymn as if for the first time'**

into our common ken through Ralph Vaughan Williams, who did the most famous arrangement. So it's tying all those loose ends together."

**T**HE King/Cave project is not the only one of its type, although its peers are more in evidence outside the UK — in the United States, and, unexpectedly, Finland.

The Thomas Mass, named after the Apostle and devised in Finland, is an ecumenical service that combines movement, creative music styles, and flexible approaches to liturgy. It is just one aspect of a burgeoning Christian worship scene that also seems to draw heavily on a more rhythmically driven approach.

"The guys over there who fulfil the function of, say, Graham Kendrick and the like — the fathers of praise music — were missionaries in Africa," King says. "They came back in the late 1970s, with their electric guitars and their drums and their attitude, and fused that with Lutheran hymns."

Of these, Jaakko Löytty stands out. "He sings with a straightforwardness and passion that belie the subtlety of his texts. He's very prolific, very consistent, and in every songbook in every church and school in the country."

The embrace of rhythm by Löytty, and other Finnish church songwriters, is an inspiration for King and Cave.

"The rock 'n' roll beat is such a huge part of our culture, and I think the Charismatic Church has embraced it, but, generally, many of the more nuanced and well-informed traditions have shied away from it," King says. "I think that's a shame, because it's not the beat that lessens intelligence, but it does loosen some kind of energy within us."

In the US, the multi-instrumentalist and singer-songwriter Sufjan Stevens is seen as an important figure. His songs — some of which are peppered with Christian theology — have found their way into Sunday services. His own reworking of church-music culture can be seen in his Christmas albums. These navigate the canon of popular carols, in an attempt to redeem them from their nativity-play, department-store schmaltz, with quirky arrangements that are characteristic of his eclectic, often ornate style.

**A**NOTHER notable recording with the same theme comes from Stevens's pastor, the Revd Vito Aiuto, who leads the Resurrection Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, New York. Stevens produced an album by Aiuto and his wife Monique, a gospel duo creating music under the name Welcome Wagon.

The songs have a mostly religious theme, and, with their mix of originals and covers — such as a country-and-campfire-tinged version of "But For You Who Fear My Name" by Lenny Smith, the writer of the 1970s "Our God reigns" — you could easily imagine them slotting into congregational use.

Another takes James Montgomery's paraphrase of Psalm 72, "Hail to the Lord's Anointed", opening it up with an unaffected vocal, and gently rising layers of banjos, horns, and percussion.

Although Stevens and the Aiuotos may not be considered jazz artists in the strictest sense, their odd time-signatures, polyrhythms, and crunchy harmonies, plus the creative synthesis of musical influences, have much in common with the jazz tradition.

**I**F THIS all seems to be treading dangerously near the territory of hipster faddishness, it is certainly not the view from where King is



**'The latest commission is to provide a jazz liturgy to the texts of the 17th-century mystic Thomas Traherne'**

standing. In fact, one of his and Cave's latest commissions has been to provide a new jazz liturgy to celebrate the texts of the 17th-century mystic Thomas Traherne, whose festival day is celebrated in the Anglican calendar on the anniversary of his death on 10 October.

"Traherne's not a great poetic technician, but, for me, that's part of the appeal," King says. "He's a writer who doesn't have a place on any particular plinth, who didn't make it into Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. That leaves more room for a fresh approach."

The work was commissioned by the Bishop of London, the Rt Revd Richard Chartres; and the King/Cave ensemble is embarking on a year of Traherne projects. The first of these is a eucharistic setting of Traherne



On song: *top*: jazz adds a new element to the choral tradition; *above*: Harriet Lester sings "Amazing Grace"

texts, which takes place on Sunday at 7 p.m. at All Saints', Cuddesdon, Oxfordshire, where the Revd Dr Grant Bayliss, a lecturer in liturgy at Ripon College, will preside.

The ensemble also hopes to do a service of divine worship at Lambeth Palace — complete with vocalists, glockenspiels, double bass, harp, and laptops — where five of Traherne's important manuscripts were dis-

covered in 1997. They also plan eventually to bring the project home to St Mary's, Teddington, where Traherne is thought to have been buried.

The scope for introducing a jazz-inflected approach to our Christian worship appears to be far-reaching and, above all, to be striking a chord.

"People just seem ready for it," King says. "We've done loads of other projects that have been successful to some extent, aesthetically. But the King/Cave project is the first one we've done that has been really popular."

Why? "I think partly because of the way we make space for the congregation to participate. You don't need to be a musician to sing the refrain in 'All creatures of our God and King', for example, but if you

are, and happen to have a 12-piece shimmering jazz-group behind you, you know that you're caught up making some fresh, new music."

Also, he says, "people are aware that the hymn tradition is dying... A lot of them are yearning to see that torch handed down to the coming generations, and their spirit rises up, because they see in a project like this the possibility of a new lease of life."

"I think that's really important for the Church, and it would be a great loss to English Christianity if that connection with these dead men and women was lost."

*Julie McKee is a singer-songwriter based in London.*

For more information, see <http://king-caveproject.com>.