

requested

Neil MacGregor chooses John Donne's
**Hymn to God My God,
in my Sickness**

Since I am coming to that Holy room,
Where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy music ; as I come
I tune the instrument here at the door,
And what I must do then, think here before;

Whilst my physicians by their love are grown
Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie
Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown
That this is my south-west discovery,
Per fretum febris, by these straits to die;

I joy, that in these straits I see my west;
For, though those currents yield return to none,
What shall my west hurt me? As west and east
In all flat maps - and I am one - are one,
So death doth touch the resurrection.

Is the Pacific sea my home? Or are
The eastern riches? Is Jerusalem?
Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibraltar?
All straits, and none but straits, are ways to them
Whether where Japhet dwelt, or Cham, or Shem.

We think that Paradise and Calvary,
Christ's cross and Adam's tree, stood in one place ;
Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me ;
As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,
May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace.

So, in His purple wrapp'd, receive me, Lord ;
By these His thorns, give me His other crown ;
And as to others' souls I preach'd Thy word,
Be this my text, my sermon to mine own,
"Therefore that He may raise, the Lord throws down."

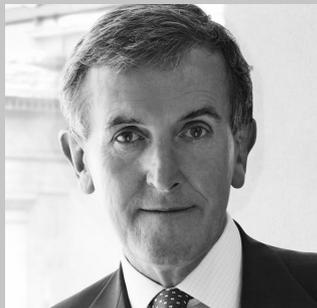
“I shall be made thy music.” I am not sure that Keats is right. The antiquity that most deeply moves us is, I think, foster child of music and slow time, not of silence. The rhythms and forms that give objects their eternity, like those that shape words and verse, invite us to a world that may be still but is not without sound, to a dwelling where there is “no noise nor silence, but one equal music”.

In the British Museum there are many visual invitations to that serene musical world of Donne’s prose prayer. And there are many physical musical instruments: drums of every nation, of course, presumably all communicating in a cosmic, rhythmic Esperanto, but also sistrums and citterns (or is it gitterns?), whose sounds, at least to me, are as elusive as their spelling. Among these instruments, one in particular — a Tibetan trumpet made from a human thigh-bone — takes me directly, inescapably back to Donne, not to the prayer, but to the poem in which he addresses in verse the notion of everlasting music: written in the conviction of imminent death, his Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness:

Since I am coming to that Holy room,
Where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy music; as I come
I tune the instrument here at the door,
And what I must do then, think here before;

“I shall be made thy music”. It is an astonishing leap for a soul on the point of death to contemplate. Not the vision conjured by countless Christian texts and images, where we are elevated into ranks of balloon-cheeked angels praising God by playing an instrument, but a deeper transmutation where we become the very instrument itself, and more startling still, the music it will produce. To be changed not just at the last trumpet, but perhaps into a trumpet, and continue to exist merely as its sound. Donne sets himself as his last task to tune the mortal instrument, his frail, ailing body, for immortal music.

In a different world and a different faith, the Buddhist in Tibet who shaped the British Museum thigh bone into a wind instrument, and fitted it with a carefully crafted mouthpiece, so that it might be played in religious ceremonies, surely also shared the belief that humanity can, ultimately, be perfected, into harmony. Who will make the music — the person or their God? Or will music and musician, God and human, be one? For both Donne and the Tibetan, I suspect the question would be dissolved and resolved in a high Eliotic merging of opposites as expressed in *The Dry Salvages*: “you are the music, / While the music lasts”.



Neil MacGregor OM is Director of the British Museum. He studied at Oxford and the Courtauld Institute of Art and became Director of the National Gallery in 1987. His book *A History of the World in 100 objects* was published in 2010. His latest book is *Shakespeare’s Restless World*.