

## **Are you a conspirator?**

Do you remember “Allo, ‘Allo”, that classic TV sit-com set in occupied France? Where ridiculous characters in full-length coats and dark glasses would sidle up to René at the bar and produce messages, or even dynamite, for the Resistance hidden in sausages or jars of pickles!

There was always a conspiracy afoot. In our day the most likely use of the word conspiracy surrounds suspicious goings on in the world of politics or organisations wielding power. Either it involves plotting (conspiring) to topple a leader or a cover-up (conspiracy of silence) to hide something.

The Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of the word conspiracy reveals pretty negative connotations. It is “a secret plan by a group to do something unlawful or harmful.” Other words associated with it are cabal, collusion, connivance, frame-up, insider dealing, intrigue, machinations, plot, racket or scheme.

So is it ever possible to have a good conspiracy? Is it possible to be a conspirator for the good? Is it possible to have a secret plan by a group to do something that brings life, that tackles injustice, that allows for a fuller life. Can we who are urged to go to our Father in secret to pray be seen, perhaps, as God’s co-conspirators?

The idea that we are God’s conspirators was sown in my mind following a wonderful concert a group of us from St Hilda’s went to in mid-January at Birmingham Town Hall. It was a performance by the New English Orchestra and Singers - who, by the way, will be performing in St Hilda’s Church at the beginning of Advent 2010.

Nigel Swinford, the artistic director and principal conductor of the New English Orchestra, describes the role of a conductor this way: “I think conducting is the gift of creating conspiracies. It is not merely about beating time or putting in louds and softs, or even ensuring that everyone plays the right notes. After all, who wants to pay good money to hear music that is merely correct.

“No, the person who has the gift of conducting stands up with a piece of music in front of the performers and says, in effect, shall we paint a picture together? It is going to look like this. Here is the landscape of emotions we are going to pass through, and when we arrive here this is what we will have said.

"If the players and singers buy into this vision, a conspiracy has been formed. So that when it comes to the performance, each person agrees how every note fits into the whole concert. Such a conspiracy, when it is well formed, produces a live performance that can leave an audience overwhelmed... by the true meaning of the picture.

"But the conspiracy we ultimately long for is the one which includes the conductor, performers, composer, audience and most importantly of all Jesus himself."

Well, those of us who witnessed the conspiracy of the NEO were overwhelmed, we were taken on a journey, we were lifted up and sensed great joy in the truth that was sung and played. The programme included a Mozart Mass, two Vivaldi violin concertos (extraordinary), a collection of lively foot-tappingly good Scottish reels and some incredibly moving spiritual songs from across the centuries and the continents.

"Wow! How do they do that?" said my neighbour. "They are all singing without music. They know it all by heart. But there is something else too - they are singing from the heart!"

"Wow," continued my neighbour in the next door seat. "Wow," he repeated again and again after each song or orchestral piece.

One of the most striking parts of the conspiracy of music was that the singers sang the programme **by** heart. No copies of words or music to hold. Just the singer, the voice and the whole song to sing. But what was happening before our eyes was not a performance really. It was more than that. It was true worship. For these singers were singing **from** the heart. They were singing with their eyes, their faces, their lives - their whole being. It was not just notes and words on a page, it was life in music. It was God the creator and tender redeemer and inspiring spirit let loose!

I confess that as a former member of the NEO, I am a huge fan and have never found worship as uplifting as when I have sung with my brothers and sisters in that choir. Somehow, for me, singing with fellow conspirators who really mean what they sing dethrones fear, despair, hopelessness and joylessness. Fellow conspirators who in their suffering and lives have discovered the rich seam of God's mercy, faithfulness and tender saving love create a most treasured fellowship.

Conspiring together to bring God the praise God is due is one of the great disciplines of Christian worship. During the Prayer Vigil on January 13<sup>th</sup> we sat in a circle in the sanctuary and read out simple fragments of psalms praising God. As we went round, each of us reading our psalm fragment, it seemed like a new conspiracy was occurring. In the gentle silence and the generous words of praise and prayer there was a raising of spirits and a real sense of the presence of God drawing near.

So, are you a conspirator? Are you conspiring with God to do a new thing merciful and generous thing this day as you lay your life open before our merciful and tender Lord? I like the idea of being a conspirator in our bland and dulled media-driven world so hemmed in by cynicism, targets, league-tables, injustice and 'Oh well, this is how it has always been' hopelessness. Will you join the conspiracy of praise, hope, joy and faith?

As a footnote I want to add a note of sad realism. At the end of the NEO concert I wanted to get up and give a standing ovation. But I didn't. Why not? Because no-one else did. Fear held me back. How silly of me. But, how true of us all. Conspiracies need conductors. Are any of us brave enough to show leadership in a conspiracy of praise today?