

2nd October 2021

Legacy

“The first requirement of a composer is to be dead.”

Arthur Honegger, Je suis compositeur

The renowned artist, Vincent Van Gough, lived with tragedy all his life. We're familiar with Van Gough's self-inflicted ear mutilation and his time in insane asylums. And although pieces such as *The Starry Night* and *The Potato Eaters* are now rightly considered to be masterpieces, he only sold one painting in his lifetime.

Does Honegger's assertion that "the first requirement of a composer is to be dead" stretch beyond music into other artistic fields? I hope not. Indeed, while there are many creative people whose work is only recognised after they've died, Honegger's sweeping statement does not bear scrutiny for most composers, artists and other creative masters.

The recent First Night of the *BBC Proms* contained world premier of a new piece, *When Soft Voices Die*, by the Scottish composer, James McMillan. It was fresh, inspiring, joyful, uplifting, moving. And once the BBC Symphony Orchestra and their Principal Guest Conductor, Dalia Stasevska, had taken their bows, we saw James McMillan in the gallery accepting the applause of the audience. "Dead", Mr Honegger? James McMillan looked very much alive to me – and thank God for it.

Do we have to wait till someone's gone to receive their legacy? Do we have to wait till they'd died to recognise their worth? After the death of a good friend many years ago, I was reflecting on the funeral with a mutual friend. "Lovely eulogy," I said. "Yes," she replied. "But why do we wait till someone'd dead before we say nice things about them?" She paused, and then said, "Indeed, several years ago, I wrote a long letter to our friend with all the good things I needed to say to her and about her while she was alive." A living eulogy? What a gift of love to a friend.

We may never be a James McMillan and take a bow before an admiring Albert Hall audience. But is what we offer of our worth and value right here, right now, not worthy of recognition? A living legacy, perhaps? And when that living legacy is recognised in someone else, might we offer a "living eulogy" in return? Think again, Mr Honegger, think again!

A prayer for today

Let my legacy be love, Lord, and let the beneficiaries make good use of it. Amen

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