

Of Birdsong and Baroque Music

By Elizabeth Quinn

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Last Sunday, I went to church, along with a hundred or so others of my flock.

We went to worship at the shrine of Franz Schubert, a 19th-century German composer with a gift for putting music to already profound texts and rendering them close to sacred.

Listening to music is the closest thing to a religious experience I am ever likely to have. I'm currently on a kind of noisy annual retreat; the kind that lets you talk, eat, drink and laugh as much as you like. But most of all listen.

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Every year in January, I head for the **Mornington Peninsula** for two weeks of classical music in a coastal holiday setting amid grapevines, tea-tree and eucalypts.

Birdsong and baroque music fill my days; when I'm not sitting in an audience listening to music, I'm sitting on a verandah writing about it.

I have given a lot of thought to the effect of music on my happiness. Research tells us that listening to music can deliver chemical rewards in the brain equivalent to almost any other activity, including sex.

Two nights ago, I sat on a deckchair under a marquee listening to soprano Sara Macliver singing 'Lascia ch'io pianga' ('Let me weep') from Handel's opera Rinaldo. I never fail to follow its instructions and Saturday night was no exception.

I sat in the blessed darkness of dusk in a pool of tears. But not misery. Quite the opposite. I felt raised up, ennobled, cleansed somehow.

I gathered myself and my picnic basket together and hurried back to my holiday rental to play it over and over and wallow in the endorphins.

'Mache dich, mein Herze, rein' ('Make thyself clean, my heart') from JS Bach's St Matthew Passion has a similar effect on me, although not so much in the waterworks department.

It makes me raise my arms like an elderly ballerina and twirl slowly around the living room. Not knowing what the words mean doesn't diminish the music's resonance, but looking up the translation tells me it is indeed a sad song, sung shortly after Jesus' death on the cross.

It almost makes me wish I believed in the story of the resurrection.

But I don't. Somehow religion passed my family by altogether. I'm neither for it nor against it (unless it's the impetus for acts of violence). But when I listen to the first movement of CPE Bach's Concerto pour flute en ré mineur, I've got the spirit of something in me, filling me with goodwill towards my fellow man. (With the possible exception of those religious extremists I mentioned earlier.)

Last Sunday's musical program at the seaside church concluded with Schubert's An Die Musik, written to express his thanks and love for the art of music. Often called his ode to music, it was a kind of prayer of thanksgiving; a fitting and joyous ending to a celebration of music in this sacred space.

And one for which I am eternally grateful. Forever and ever. Amen.

Elizabeth Quinn is an Age contributor.