

Book Review

'Our Sound is Our Wound: Contemplative Listening to a Noisy World'

by Winkett, L.

London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group (2010)

Review by Dr Christopher Findlay, Consultant Psychiatrist.

The study of spirituality can become an activity akin to exploring the phenomenon of wine tasting without actually tasting the wine. In reading this book you do get a chance to taste the wine and savour its flavours. As such it is a book that needs to be read slowly; time is required to discern what is being said. It is personal and subjective while meditating on themes of established Christian facts and beliefs. It is not a story but a collection of observations, short accounts and reflections on city life, traffic, church music, secular music, laments, hospital experience, disability, global warming, football, the stock exchange and ordinary life. The title is bold and striking. It is not immediately obvious what it means. You have to reflect to discern its essence. It is not clear from the beginning where the book will lead, but there is pleasure and challenge in the journey and the style of writing is comforting.

This is Lucy Winkett's first book. As Canon Precentor of St Paul's Cathedral, she has particular responsibility for music and liturgy. As a self-confessed sufferer of tinnitus, she is aware of how disability can refine competence. She is clearly a pastor and through the pages someone you feel you could trust with the sound or silence of your own pain.

The book is billed as an aid to contemplation and devotion during Lent, but it is worth reading at any time of year. The book is rich in its evocation of past and vicarious experiences and it is impossible to read without digressing into personal reflection. I could not read it all at the first attempt. After reading it I was more mindful of the sounds around me, 'the soundscape', including the sounds of my dog slaking its thirst in a tin bowl after a long walk, lashing tongue on water, clanking collar-brass on aluminium. It is hard to summarise, as the discourse meanders through topics united only by the theme of sound or absence of sound. The sounds are visceral embodiments of wounds, spoken or unspoken. Silence is noisy and music can be discordant without resolution; rules can be broken and tones can bend to find the sound between. The Archbishop of Canterbury's foreword draws attention to the biblical truth that creation begins with the uttering of a Word and in making sounds we become vulnerable and put ourselves at the mercy of others.

There are some interesting facts. Bird song is getting louder at night in London as the noise of daytime traffic increases. There are predictable references to Evelyn Glennie's embodied listening and Daniel Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra bringing Palestinian and Israeli musicians together, but the text is unpredictably wide-ranging in its references to different musical genres, mystics and the varieties of human experiences. The prose is not always easy to follow and my concentration often wandered, but you do not have to be a believer to benefit from the insights that are exposed through the pains of such careful observation and listening. These are, after all, essential clinical skills for psychiatrists.