

Meeting Margaret Rizza

Margaret Rizza



A chance find in the recordings section of the SPCK shop in Chichester, and after just one hearing I am hooked on a CD entitled *Reflections for Peace Chants*. This is my first encounter with the music of Margaret Rizza, and I find this simple mantra-style chant with its varied instrumental descants a powerful aid to personal prayer. Its appeal is wide: our own congregation in Anglesey puts in multiple orders for the CD after we use it as part of a series of reflective evening services, and a sick friend finds it particularly soothing. *Reflections for Peace*, brought out by Alliance Music, combines some of Margaret Rizza's simplest chant-style compositions with arrangements of existing Taizé chants, but she has also released five other recordings featuring more extensive works. Much of the music accompanies her own texts. All of her work is deeply embedded in prayer and Christian meditation. She sees daily prayer as the bedrock for everything. 'All of my music is underpinned by prayer – which can consist of doubts, anxieties, desert stones ... but also deep joy and gratitude and glimpses of something that I can't quite put my hand on ... something not of this world.'

Her story is a fascinating one. Astonishing to discover that this articulate, elegant, modest lady, who welcomes me to her home in Sevenoaks with such warmth and hospitality, is in her early seventies; even more astonishing to learn that she came to a really active

'A music birthed through silence'

Sally Harper talks to Margaret Rizza about music, meditation and prayer.

Christian faith only in her fifties, and to composition barely six years ago. She laughs a little over the God of surprises. 'In old age anything can happen ... people say what a pity you didn't start in your thirties, but I wouldn't have been ready for it earlier.' The earlier years were in any event given over to a high profile singing career: Margaret Lensky the opera singer sang on many of the international operatic stages (La Scala Milan, Glyndebourne, Sadler's Wells), and worked with Britten, Stravinsky and Bernstein, before settling as a teacher of vocal studies at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, London.

A 'head conversion' to Roman Catholicism came in Italy in 1967, when she felt an urge to become part of an established church. But she acknowledges that that was without real depth. 'I paid lip-service to being a Christian, but only as a duty.' However, her life of prayer continued as it always had done since she was a tiny child: 'it is as natural to me as breathing.' What she describes as her 'real' conversion (radically different from the Italian experience and much more confusing at a personal level) came in 1983. Wandering outside in the garden one summer evening, she received something that she now interprets as 'a strike of fire'. On one level life was good, with all the external signs of fulfilment – a successful career, public recognition, a beautiful home, a wonderful marriage and children – but something was missing. 'Part of me

was somehow dying: at one level I was grieving and anguished.' The call came as if in a vacuum: she experienced a deep need to pray, but had no idea of what to pray for or even of how to pray. Oddly, it was an encounter with a homeopathic doctor that showed a way forward. In discussing energy levels and death and dying, the conversation turned to meditation, and the homeopath lent her a book, replete with exotic Hindu and Buddhist images. She turned the pages with considerable scepticism, but to her astonishment began to experience 'a sense of being led in the most extraordinary way, a feeling of unconditional love that I had never come across before ... something to do with eternity.'

In the time of searching that followed, Margaret explored Buddhist meditation as a way of prayer, but then George, her husband, brought home a book on Christian meditation by the Dominican Matthew McGrettrick. This led to fortnightly meetings at St Mary Abbot's, Kensington, and she was introduced to the writings of the Benedictine monk John Main (1926–82), 'in many ways a coming home'. Main's work focuses on the Spirit of Jesus dwelling within and the silent saying of the mantra as a way to simplicity – as a way of being open to the spirit of love deep within our being. All of this was by now provoking growing unease with the relentless 'competitive bandwagon' of professional singing, and in 1990 she took a sabbatical from the Guildhall, in part to

visit St Beuno's, near St Asaph in north Wales, for a six-week silent retreat. Here she followed the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius Loyola, a series of Scripture-based Christ-centred meditations designed to help discover the 'hidden self'. The resulting epiphany led her to wonder about leaving her musical career to work with the poor, but then came the realization that God was not calling her to change vocation. 'We must bloom where we're planted.' But how to justify making music in a fractured world? The answer lay partly in the power of music to heal and to communicate where words so often fail. 'Music can bring us together as a community or as a church; it can release deep inner feelings which are essential for freedom and growth.'

St Beuno's, then, marked a new chapter in her life story. Her return to the Guildhall was on a part-time basis, and for four years she worked with music therapists and on community-centred projects with Live Music Now, taking some of the most talented students on the brink of a professional career to share their gifts in a variety of unconventional environments. Together they visited hospitals, inner-city schools, homes for those with learning difficulties or disabilities – in short, those who would otherwise have had little or no opportunity to be touched by music at such a level. She also began voluntary work at Maidstone Prison, leading the men in weekly singing sessions: 'great fun

– but always the sense that I was receiving far more than I was giving!' Within the Anglican and Catholic communities she was asked to lead prayer retreats and prayer days, and she began building the idea of prayer accompanying, a form of friendly spiritual direction for those who otherwise have no-one to talk to about their prayer life. The professional framework at the Guildhall remained, but there was a new fulfilment as never before.

The 'bombshell over the business of composition' exploded a little later. Pamela Hayes RSCJ, a sister of the Sacred Heart Community with 'a deep spirituality but also a profound humanity', whom she first met at the Christian Meditation Centre in London, asked Margaret to write the music for an international conference. At this stage she had only ever produced a couple of tiny pieces for the music group at her local church of St Thomas of Canterbury in Sevenoaks, and she felt that more ambitious composition was simply beyond her. Her response to the challenge crystallizes much of the personal journey up to that point. For two days she struggled to compose and nothing came: 'my mind was just filled with the old ego right out in front.' But on the third day she turned to silent meditation, and in the silence the Spirit was allowed to speak, and the music began to 'bubble up'. Six pieces resulted. She is adamant that this is the only way she can compose. 'My music is birthed through silence. It is rooted in



Rizza in rehearsal

this way of prayer, even though each piece I compose can be a challenge, and sometimes it is an uphill struggle to write down what the Spirit is trying to express.'

The conference members were predictably delighted with the results, and keen to lay hands on the pieces. Kevin Mayhew consequently suggested a CD, which was soon followed by a whole series of commissions. She is, however, utterly modest about her capabilities, lamenting her lack of 'musical grammar' and her uncertainty over technicalities such as modulation: 'my music can look so odd on paper!' Some of the composition is very clearly influenced by the Taizé style, not least because she has learnt from her own prayer life the value of hooking onto a single phrase and using it over and over, until it is able to make that longest of journeys – from head to heart. The music usually comes to her 'complete' in that she hears harmonies rather than just a melody, and the texts, surprisingly, often take shape only when the musical setting is complete. The CDs are recorded by the St Thomas's Music Group from Sevenoaks, which Margaret herself founded in 1989, augmented by one or two young professional singers and instrumentalists. 'The music group is a wonderful group of people from all walks of life. We pray together, we have fun together, and we work hard together. The group gives me tremendous support and inspiration and is intrinsically bound up in the compositions.' Reflecting on the

growing success of her music, she identifies a huge thirst for spirituality in the modern world – the realization that there is more than a mind and a body. 'There is so much more deep down. "Religion" is often a turn-off, but "spirituality" says something to people.' In this she acknowledges the associated dangers of the appeal of 'the cult way' rather than 'the Christian way', and feels that in time she would like to try to write something that might appeal to non-Christians while yet addressing spiritual values, if not in an overtly 'Christian' way.

The disciplines of prayer and meditation are utterly central for her, and she has a strict routine of twice daily prayer; in this she feels she has learned much from the monastic discipline of St Benedict's Rule. The mystics – Julian of Norwich, Master Eckhardt, St John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila – she speaks of almost as old friends, finding in the surprisingly contemporary flavour of their writing great hope. She describes her own prayer life as resting on two pillars: first, the Ignatian and Benedictine ways of praying over scripture, using dialogue with rich biblical scenes to enable the words to take fire; second, the more difficult method of meditation. She speaks about this with great lucidity, seeing it as a way of stilling the mind so that deeper levels of unconsciousness can be uncovered and acknowledged, healed and befriended. 'My mind is like monkeys in a tree, chattering... it must be stilled, be cleared, to open up to

the Other to be changed and transformed, and then the most exciting things can happen.' Meditating over one word or phrase, whether sung, spoken aloud or in total silence, 'enables the mind to let go of all the things it longs to think about, until it experiences total dependence on the Other.' Such meditation can release a force of creative energy, where unconditional love can start surfacing. 'We listen in a different way for what we are created for and for what we are called to do. It focuses on emptying yourself in order to enter more fully into a relationship with Jesus.' Meditation can be phenomenally difficult since 'the ego gets out in front', but it is at the same time a wonderful way of striking back through humility. 'It lets God speak, enabling us to listen to what is going on at a deeper level of consciousness.' The mantra-style repetition that is so central to this style of meditation, and in turn so evident in her music, is crucial. 'I need a lot of repetition in my life for the penny to drop!'

About 150 participants join together to consider some of these issues at a day on music and prayer organized by the Centre for Spirituality at Westminster Cathedral in March. Margaret speaks about some of her experiences, we listen to some of her music in silence, and then we sing. She explains carefully her thoughts on each phrase of the well-known prayer for peace, 'Lead me from death to life, from falsehood to truth', said in many places throughout the world at midday. We are then invited to sing her own setting of the

prayer over and over, sometimes in unison, sometimes in harmony, one side and then the other, allowing half of us to pray silently as the other half sings. It is a beautiful experience, and Margaret tells us movingly: 'I'm such a believer in prayer . . . I feel there are vibrations of goodness and peace coming from our singing, giving healing for those who do not have peace.' Her need to compose is closely linked with a fundamental yearning to share somehow her faith with others. 'I need through music to share my prayer life . . . this God who has no name . . . this creative energy within us . . . I need to connect music with everyday life.' There is the anguish of living as a Christian in a privileged first-world country with such infinite choice, way beyond our needs, and at the same time seeking a way of sharing with those who have absolutely nothing. In our earlier conversation, both of us had talked about how hard we find the sense of helplessness when confronted with the needs of the third world, and how this inevitably brings prayer problems. For Margaret, music can be a way of bringing comfort, 'not through me, but the Spirit working in me. Music is a way of saying I care. I need to share in the struggle for peace and justice through music . . . It brings about anguish and frustrations and doubts – a longing and yearning for that which needs to be resolved.' This desire to be transparent and to open the heart to those who have suffered, who are starved of human affection, those who

are terminally ill, perhaps accounts for a certain vulnerable quality in her music. Through her composition, then, Margaret Rizza is not only providing material that is already assisting many Christians to pray and reflect; she is doing something much greater. The deep prayer that shapes her work reaches out to a much larger group of people: not only those who are in general difficulties, but also those who are simply seeking peace. Here is a real model for church composers: a music shaped directly from prayer, but in turn a music that can shape and transform the prayers of others.

Margaret Rizza was made an Associate of the Royal School of Church Music in November 2001. Her music and recordings are available through RSCM Music Direct on 01306 872811, musicdirect@rscm.com or www.rscm.com