

So To Honor Him . . . When we come . . .

Isaiah 35: 1-10 (5-6)

***<sup>5</sup>Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped; <sup>6</sup>then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.***

Thank you to the choir and Maria for the beautiful presentation of music for this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent.

For those of you who don't know, I am finishing my dissertation for my Ph.D. in Ethnomusicology, which is the study of music in and as culture. In Ethnomusicology, we borrow from anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and any other "ology" you could name. For my dissertation, I am analyzing CCM texts to determine how they function in their cultural context. One of my specializations is semiology, which is the study of signs and symbols. Since music is a language, not universal, but a language nonetheless, we can analyze it using principles from linguistics.

I would like to share with you a semiological excursion of one of my favorite Christmas Carols – THE LITTLE DRUMMER BOY.

Although artists such as Josh Groban, Bob Dylan, and Pink Martini have covered the song, written in 1958 by Katherine Davis, Henry Onorati, and Harry Simeone, I have an affinity for the 1981 Punk Rock version by Joan Jett and the Blackhearts. Strangely, this was before I began studying music, but it was my first cassette tape and I wore it out by listening so many times. I discovered if I fast-forward the other side, it will rewind the one I actually want to listen to – so there I am, listening, flipping, fast-forwarding, flipping, and listening again. Sometimes I think it was pointing me toward music so I could meet my future husband – a percussionist/drummer.

Recently I saw the 1968 stop-action movie based upon the song – I have a vague recollection of seeing it during my childhood.

Ok – so here we go!

First thing – identify the song form – it's a VERSE – VERSE – VERSE. This means that each set of lyric uses the same music – one of the pros of this song form is it encourages congregational singing!

Second thing – the Title – what does it tell us? THE LITTLE DRUMMER BOY = a young boy who plays the drum. Thinking about a drum and how it functions, it keeps time, and can be closely associated with a heartbeat. When we summarize each verse, we can understand that:

1<sup>st</sup> verse – **Invitation** – Come they told me –  
wise men/obedience

2<sup>nd</sup> verse – **Presence** (as in being present) vs.  
presents (things we wrap up)

3<sup>rd</sup> verse – **Reception** – Mary nodded; Baby Jesus smiles

To give you a sample of how I would further analyze this song, I will reference the text that resonates the most with me - I HAVE NO GIFT TO BRING . . . THAT'S FIT TO GIVE OUR KING. What seems so striking to me is its simple, yet profound message of WONDER and AWE for GOD cradled in the middle of the song. It aurally positions BABY JESUS in the center of the Nativity wrapped in swaddling clothing. The overwhelming symbolism of GOD's word (something heard) becoming FLESH (something seen) by entering the world in the

most fragile state – as a baby - fully represents the power of LOVE through the power of SACRIFICE. (Hat Tip to the BIBLE CLASS – the Lamb Power)

In today's reading from Isaiah, perhaps we can understand it as a metaphorical representation of the blind able to see and the deaf able to hear. Often people who can physically see are literally blind to what is in front of them, those who can physically hear are literally deaf to the sounds around them, and those physically able to leap are bound by their own perceived limitations. In the story of THE LITTLE DRUMMER BOY, he is stricken with similar ailments. As he perceives, HE HAS NO GIFT TO BRING . . . FIT TO GIVE OUR KING, he becomes metaphorically blind, deaf, and mute. Until he has the courage or fortitude to leap, he will not be able to see, hear, or speak. Fortunately, he gathers his strength and steps forward to ask the question, "SHALL I PLAY FOR YOU ON MY DRUM?"

MARY NODDED, as if to grant THE LITTLE DRUMMER BOY permission, and THE OX AND LAMB KEPT TIME. All the while, we

are aware of the PA RUM PA PUM PUM – initially, it resembles the heartbeat, perhaps taking the form of adrenaline or excitement, but after the following text:

Verse One - to lay before the King  
Verse Two – that's fit to give our King  
Verse Three – I played my best for Him

the PA RUM PA PUM PUM, repeated in a musical sequence, signifies the TRIUNE GOD – FATHER, SON, and HOLY SPIRIT.

Although the song form is VERSE – VERSE – VERSE, artists tend to insert a BRIDGE section between the second and third verses. During the BRIDGE we usually hear the replication of THE LITTLE DRUMMER BOY playing the drum for BABY JESUS. If performed this way, it aurally illustrates THE LITTLE DRUMMER BOY as he becomes PRESENT (as in being present), able to see, hear and speak, foreshadowing the third verse text: I PLAYED MY DRUM FOR *HIM*, I PLAYED MY BEST FOR *HIM*.

After his presentation, the Little Drummer Boy receives confirmation of his gift when he sees BABY JESUS smile at him. THE LITTLE DRUMMER BOY, perhaps through reflection of what he actively participated in, acknowledges that he does have a gift to bring that is fit to give our King when his last words are ME AND MY DRUM. Those last words of the song remind us, it is not material gifts, but the gift of JESUS as LOVE and SACRIFICE. Is the message to remind us that sometimes our presence (as in being present) is more of a gift than our presents (the things we wrap)? As BABY JESUS shows us in the song, a smile can do wonders . . .

During this Advent season, may we recognize in ourselves how we can share our own time and talents, and conversely, may we acknowledge how others share their time and talents with us. As we go forth, perhaps we can march to the beat of the little drummer boy . . . so our eyes may be open to see . . . our ears unstopped to hear . . . and may we lift up our voices to the Lord – singing words of joy and praise. AMEN.