

One of the most marked phenomena of recent years has been the increasing number of people who have become very famous for no very obvious reason. Thanks to an ever-expanding reach of the mass medias -particularly the internet- and an ever-diminishing consumer attention span, being widely known is no longer something that necessarily emerges from a precocious talent, a unique skill or an amazing discovery: fame is increasingly self-sufficient; all you need is celebrity. Coleen Rooney. Joey Essex. Kim Kardashian. Katie Price. Donald Trump. Though he might have actually done something.

It is of course still possible to become famous for a reason- winning an olympic medal say- though to maintain the interest of the media and thus everybody else past that one flash of brilliance you will probably need to cultivate a troubled personal life, discover a tragic family history or, at the very least, attract some especially unpleasant tweets.

You may not care. After all, not everybody wants fame. Many make their mark without anybody much really noticing, certainly not the purveyors of NowHelloOK Magazine or its equivalents. Throughout history there have been those who have made huge changes in an area of human endeavour and yet remain unknown to anyone outside their chosen field. Bring up the name of Leonhard 'Euler' in a room of mathematicians and the effect will be rather like saying 'Usain Bolt, Little Mix, Andy Murray, Jeremy Corbyn and the Queen are just parking the car and will be with us shortly'. Nobody except extreme number crunchers know Euler's name, but to them it would be difficult to be more important, and more influential than he.

And so it was, for a time, with musicians and a man called Anton Webern. For a good chunk of the last century, all serious musicians wanted to be Webern.

If you've ever heard Webern's music, you might wonder why. There isn't a lot of it- his entire life's work fits on 3 CDs and this is because the main notion behind Webern's music is that it is highly concentrated, like a tin of condensed milk or an extra-strong mint or possibly mild-green Fairy liquid; so heightened and sensitive that he makes a whole symphony from a note. That's the theory anyway. The reality of Webern's music is rather more Marmite. I

couldn't do the whole 3 CDs in one sitting but I quite like it: to his detractors in its claims to do much with next to nothing it is much like homoeopathy: great on paper and in reality a nonsense that doesn't work. A typical Webern ditty will sound something like:

plink. Plonk. Eeeeeee. Ugh.

Nobody goes home from a concert whistling a Webern tune. No West-End musicals have ever been cobbled together from his work. His music is not played at any funerals, not even his own. However, for some 30 years after the end of the war, Webern was the hero of post-war classical music: which is possibly why most people only ever hear music from that period unwittingly on the soundtrack of a horror film. However, after the war everybody who was anybody wanted to create music like Webern, and perhaps the single most compelling reason for doing that was that Webern's music had been ferociously banned throughout occupied Europe by the Nazis on ideological grounds. Webern continued to live in his native Austria throughout the Nazi years: his music was never performed- what music he wrote went straight in a drawer- he wasn't allowed to hold any musical post, he lived in abject poverty as a school teacher in a bleak backward mountainside town. If his life was increasingly wretched, his death was almost pathetically banal. He died tragically a few days after the liberation of Austria, from a little reported danger of smoking: he was shot by a GI while going outside for a fag during the curfew.

The Nazis hated Webern and his music: small wonder he was a hero to the post-war generation, the poster-boy of the aesthetic resistance to one of the cruellest and most inhuman manifestations of Western culture. Even if that doesn't make the music created in his shadow any more accessible, it explains why a generation scarred by the horrors of the Second World War revered him.

Until, that is, the 1970s, when Webern's diaries were discovered. And then it turned out that despite his music being banned and pilloried, himself ostracised and reduced to penury, Webern was a Nazi. Not only had he outwardly conformed in order to survive (as so many did), done the right things and made the right noises (no irony intended). He actually ended up believing the poisonous nonsense the fourth-rate gangsters of the Third Reich spouted.

There may be an obvious lesson about choosing your heroes carefully, feet of clay and so on here. But there is something else perhaps we can learn.

Anybody, despite themselves can become intoxicated by a powerful figure, hypnotised by the sight of naked power powerfully exercised. And so often the victims of bullies can come to believe that might is right.

Bullying is rightly despised: but if we are brutally honest with ourselves, there can be times when we do not hate bullies because bullying is wrong: we hate them because they are bullying us. And so we want the bullies to like us, to shift their attention elsewhere, to do what they are doing to somebody else, to let us experience some of their reflected power, to share that might, to be on the winning side, no matter how that victory is won. It can be almost impossible to stand up to bullies, and so it is easier to agree that we won't. We make a sort of pact with them, play along with their power games for our own benefit, maybe, or at least we acquiesce in the hope that they will leave us alone.

You are a fool if you make a pact with a bully, though all of us at some point do out of fear or just to get along. We are all, in that respect, forced to be fools: there is no way of escaping it. We live in a world that is crowded with bullies, from big-man politicians to little-Hitler clerks, from financial markets to road-hog drivers. We have to come to some sort of accommodation with them just to get by.

Life inevitably means all sorts of compromises with corrupt systems, amoral at best authorities and structures that ingrain selfishness: life inexorably means coming to terms with bullies and it always has. Two thousand years ago, St Paul talked to his about the 'wicked age' they lived in and nobody, believers or not would have contradicted that appraisal of their world. And it would be difficult for us to contradict that appraisal of our world: we need merely to turn on the TV news to see what a barbarous, wicked age we inhabit.

If it is a fool who makes a bargain with a bully, it is a bigger fool indeed that expects the bully to keep his side of the deal.

I'm sorry if this is depressing. It *is* depressing. But there is, happily, a 'but'. Somewhat improbably this happy little 'but' can be found twerking away in one of St Paul's letters

This may be a wicked age, says the letter to the Ephesians but you redeem it.

This may be a wicked age but you redeem it.

You redeem it. You. Christians.

That wasn't just Paul's particular pep talk, it's the story of our faith. It runs right through the Bible like the proverbial writing in a stick of Brighton Rock; from the chosen people and the faithful remnants of the Old Testament, to Jesus' the salt of the earth, the yeast in the dough, the city on the hillside and the light of the world.

Two, three, four thousand years ago. And here & now. The world would be a very different place without you. You make all the difference.

Being a redeeming force in a wicked age is exciting, heady stuff. But there is a real danger there for Christians, that as we have to spend time with the bullies we may, like Anton Webern, come to admire them. A danger that as we have to live in a world of bullies, we will start to use their tools and techniques, their excuses and their justifications and before we know it, we are bullies ourselves. In the 2 millennia since Christ, Christians have been down that road countless times.

But there is nothing inevitable about it. We must always remember that, even if we have to live in a world they have made, bullies *shouldn't* be there, might *isn't* right, and though just to get on with life we may be forced to get our hands dirty, dirt is still dirt however you want to dress it.

The bullies are there, we have to deal with them. There are so many dirty fingers in dirty pies, the tentacles of evil reach everywhere: there is no escaping it. But wherever there are people in the world trying, however falteringly, to be disciples of Jesus; wherever there are people in the world trying, however imperfectly, to love their neighbour and even more imperfectly their enemies;

wherever there are hands reaching into pockets to feed the hungry, supply the thirsty and clothe the naked, reaching out in welcome to strangers, the sick, the oppressed, wherever the man broken on the cross by the unholy coalition of cruel empire and religious bullies is worshipped and emulated; wherever there are true Christians a part of what has been mortgaged to evil has been bought back.

If you didn't know that was your doing, you do now.