

Choice!



Unless you are a funeral professional, you may not yet be aware of how changes are taking place at Crematoria up and down the country. Everywhere you look, you will see the addition of computer controlled music such a **Music Engine** in chapels and some now have the technology in place to create video streaming possibilities at crematoria across the country and around the world.

The potential which such innovations present to mourners is considerable. The technology in fact provides an infinite variety for mourners to choose from, or as infinite as the world wide web is, or will become one day!

Few will doubt the benefits which such innovations offer, although it will take time for these benefits to become well known to mourners who may well be taken by surprise by what is on offer, and initially need more time than the normal build-up period to a funeral in order to organise their thoughts and make up their minds about their requirements.

Recently, I did a spot of (not very scientific) research at one or two of my local Crematoria and was not really surprised to hear that despite the vast array of potential, mourners were most likely to choose from the same old stuff, with "My Way" "Wind beneath my wings" "We'll meet again" and around ten other frequently chosen popular songs dominating the play list. This left the offer of thousands of other great songs and music languishing in the Music Engine's back room!

Music Engine is a system more normally associated with Night Clubs and dancing venues and at first, it seemed odd to find one sited in the crematorium. But as William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army once said, "Why let the Devil have all the best tunes?"

Nothing much changes. In yesteryear, when all the mourners had was the choice of an organist or no organist, it was the same old hymns that appeared, such as "All things bright and beautiful" and "Abide with me" and "The old rugged cross." For funeral professionals, the boredom of such frequent hymns was not just a daily burden to bear but sometimes an 8 times a day burden to bear, and especially for those brave souls who play the organ at crematoria, often stuffed away in some tiny room and curtained off.

In the 1960s, the arrival of recorded music at crematoria provided a little relief from the organ monopoly, but looking back now, it also perhaps heralded the dawn of the demise of the live musician at the local crem?

Which brought me in mind of an article which I wrote back in 2007, and entitled "Unsung Heroics". In that year, I was bemoaning the banal musical and hymn choices made by mourners (in my opinion, of course!) and praising the patience of the organists whose lives must be very dull and who don't get paid a fortune for their

valuable and increasingly rare skills. The arrival of the new technology will probably mean that in a short space of time, mourners will either have to find their own organist to come and play for them at the crematorium or the crem staff will source one from a list of former regulars and employ their services on a one-off basis.

Does that matter? In one sense, it doesn't matter because so many people today are not in any kind of real touch with churches and rarely hear hymns except at weddings and funerals and just before they hit the OFF button as Songs of Praise starts up on a Sunday evening! The threat to organists which the new technology represents is in fact an inevitable consequence of the wider social trends which we observe all around us.

In another sense, it may not matter because it may kick-start a new relationship between mourners who desire some religious aspect for a funeral and so need to talk to clergy and musicians and so make more of the preparations. This preparation could be a fruitful time for all concerned.

On the subject of video streaming of funerals, I feel slightly uneasy. Funerals are not about "Reality TV" but actually, real life. Whenever we have people trying to photograph or even video funerals in my church, I wonder why they are doing it. They try to get up as close as possible to the poor deceased person who is not in a position to object. Do they really need to send footage or stills of a dead person to overseas relatives? I never object to this activity in church, of course. We are all different and deal with grief individually, but there is some sense in which if you miss a funeral, you miss a funeral, and that is that. You just need to know it happened and you don't need an action replay. There is perhaps something of the immodest in the demand for recordings and photographs of what, after all, is a very solemn occasion, despite the humour which often attends a funeral. It would make more sense to record the eulogies and the prayers, but when on earth would you watch a funeral video again after the first viewing?



I suppose the argument is that if you have the technology to stream footage of a funeral live to the other side of the world, then it makes sense to some people to do it, but personally, I wouldn't want to watch a streamed video live in the middle of the night, but rather be quiet with my own thoughts and memories, and enjoy an emotional link with relatives on the other side of the world.

