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Good Music, Sacred Music, and Silence

Three Gifts of God for Liturgy and for Life

PETER A. KWASNIEWSKI

Foreword by
Fr. John A. Perricone

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Music lays bare man's inner existential condition, removing veil and façade (and it *cannot* be otherwise), while this same inner condition receives from music the most direct impulses, for better or worse.

—Josef Pieper

It is necessary that one who takes delight in things becomes then similar to the things he takes delight in. . . . If someone makes a mistake in regard to music, he becomes well disposed toward wicked characters and he suffers the greatest harm.

—Plato

Inasmuch as this kind of pleasure [in singing] is thoroughly innate to our mind, and lest demons introducing lascivious songs should overthrow everything, God established the psalms so that singing might be both a pleasure and a help. From strange songs are brought in harm, ruin, and many grievous matters, for lascivious and vicious things in these songs take up residence in parts of the soul, making it softer and weaker; whereas from the spiritual psalms proceed plenty of profit, the greatest benefit, eminent sanctity, and every inducement to philosophy, for the words purify the soul and the Holy Spirit descends swiftly upon the singer's mind. . . . And just as swine throng together where there is mire, but where there is incense and fragrance there bees abide, so demons congregate where there are licentious songs, but where there are spiritual songs there the grace of the Spirit descends, sanctifying mouth and mind.

—Saint John Chrysostom

At the beginning of great sacred music there is of necessity awe, receptivity, and a humility that is prepared to serve by participating in the greatness which has already gone forth. . . . One recognizes right liturgy by the fact that it liberates us from ordinary, everyday activity and returns to us once more the depths and the heights, silence and song.

—Joseph Ratzinger

Be silent before the face of the Lord God: for the day of the Lord is near, for the Lord hath prepared a victim, he hath sanctified his guests.

—Zephaniah 1:7

Contents

Foreword

Only the most myopic would deny that a kind of mushroom cloud has covered the Catholic Church for the past half-century. A small, but quite significant, part of that spiritual nuclear winter has been the profound collapse of sacred music. Votaries of the "spirit of Vatican II" (in today's *au courant* vernacular, "the New Paradigm") knew well the power of music in liturgy. If their "reimagining" of Christianity was to settle its roots deeply in the souls of Catholics, music was the key.

They learned well the perennial wisdom of Plato when he wrote in *The Republic*: "Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul." Or the wisdom of Aristotle, whose view in *The Politics* is ably summarized by Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson: "Emotions of any kind are produced by melody and rhythm; therefore, by music a man becomes accustomed to feeling the right emotions. Music has thus the power to form character, and various kinds of music, based on the various modes, may be distinguished by their effects on character—one, for example, working in the direction of melancholy, another of effeminacy; one encouraging abandonment, another self-control, another enthusiasm, and so on through the series."

Almost eight hundred years later, Boethius echoed these great giants of natural wisdom when he wrote, "Music can both establish and destroy morality. For no path is more open to the soul for the formation thereof than through the ears."

Added to these, they observed the great success that Arius enjoyed in winning the masses by composing hymns. Whole populations found themselves praising the Arian Christ, no longer God, but only *like* God. Stevedores sang these Arian hymns as they loaded cargo on ships anchored in the harbors of Alexandria, Carthage, or Thessalonica. In this way, Arius's poisonous heresy swept over fourth-century Catholicism like a mighty tidal wave. So swift was this heretical deluge that it prompted the now famous,

albeit terrifying, lament of Saint Jerome, "The whole world groaned, and was astonished to find itself Arian."

For all these reasons, we could justifiably add to the venerable theological axiom *lex orandi, lex credendi* a new one: *lex cantandi, lex credendi*. Or, more idiomatically, "We begin to believe, the way that we sing." When Catholics in a typical parish are served lounge music instead of sacred music, their souls suffer a kind of dry rot. They experience not the "fear and trembling" of Calvary but only the wispy breezes of the musical theater. This is no longer religion but vaudeville. Worse still, when the music descends to mimicking the rock concert, the soul undergoes a proportionate excitation. And not to divine things.

If a Catholic, denied traditional music, is not allowed to be struck to the depths by the likes of "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" or Byrd's "Ave Verum Corpus," then he is left to be drowned beneath the indulgent waves of sentimentality. The former hymns steel the soul for supernatural contest, the latter for mindless self-absorption. Sacred music is the indispensable instrument of the Holy Spirit in leading souls in their march toward heaven: it is gravity and solemnity wrapped in the stunning beauty that only music can offer.

Looking at music in general, or sacred music more particularly, we see two principles at work. One has to do with simply being human, the other with being a Catholic. Both reasons go directly to the soul of man and his civilization. For those who think narrowly, music in Church is a kind of mood-setter, cute but irrelevant. An ampler mind recognizes that music acts like an earthquake upon the soul, unleashing powerful forces for good or ill.

On a purely natural level, music is the sheen that glistens over life's quotidian dreariness. It is an art of beauty. Without beauty, man's life becomes flat and self-absorbed. Music lifts man's soul out of its prosaic circumstances and sends it soaring to heights it would not know without it. Or depths. Music's power is so potent that it can arouse passions driving toward heroic actions or debased ones.

Almost twenty years ago, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey decided to play only soft classical music throughout its Manhattan Bus Depot because psychologists had proven it would lower crime. On the other hand, nightclub owners know to play loud, percussive music, piquing the passions and producing the emotional abandon that sells liquor and facilitates sexual license. No human heart is exempt from racing to the

stanzas of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" or any march of John Philip Sousa. Music has its own grammar and vocabulary. Differences of language, age, and race cannot impede its impact.

Once again, such an impact was duly noted by Plato. In *The Republic*, he teaches, "No change can be made in styles of music without affecting the most important conventions of society." It was exactly for this reason that he forbade certain kinds of music in his envisioned city. Plato spoke brilliantly to this subject when he taught that "music does not merely *depict* qualities and emotional states but *embodies* them." A performer singing (or a hearer listening) "about the rage of Achilles, for instance, would not only be depicting the emotional states of anger and violence and the personal qualities of Homer's hero, but he would be experiencing those things himself."[1]

In 1570, France's Charles IX created the Académie de Poésie et de Musique. In his *lettres patents*, the king declared, "It is of great importance for the morals of the citizens of a town that the music current in the country should be kept under certain laws, all the more so because men conform themselves to music and regulate their behavior accordingly, so that whenever music is disordered, morals are also depraved and whenever it is well ordered, men are well-tutored."

Not only is music integral to a full human life, it possesses the power to *shape* human life. Though Plato expresses it with philosophical brio, each one of us already knows this truth. One need only consult one's own experience. Victor Hugo once remarked that a man has the power to make of his soul a sewer or a sanctuary. Music, too, has that power over the soul, and that is why we must be vigilant.

Sacred music builds civilization and ennobles character. It does, however, even more. When music is composed to honor the Blessed Trinity at Holy Mass, it is called *sacred*. Under that purpose, music consummates its highest end. It not only brings man to the heights of beauty; it brings man to Beauty Itself, Almighty God. Man is never so enraptured as when he is surrounded by sacred music. This music transforms him and pierces his soul to the core of his being. Often, it produces a contrition so profound that a man's life can take a wholly different course. Saint Augustine attests to this in Book IX of *The Confessions*: "How I wept to hear your hymns and songs, deeply moved

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[1] See Michael Linton, "The Mozart Effect," *First Things*, March 1999, online at www.firstthings.com/article/1999/03/the-mozart-effect.

by the voices of your sweetly singing Church! Their voices penetrated my ears, and with them, truth found its way into my heart; my frozen feeling for God began to thaw, tears flowed and I experienced joy and relief."

On these grounds, Mother Church has encouraged the most exquisite sacred music known to man. Not only that, she has felt it her grave obligation to *protect* it. The stakes could not be higher. Man's soul hangs in the balance. If the music is wrong, the teaching absorbed from it will be wrong, and men will go wrong. So it is that in this century the popes have devoted such energy to defining and carefully regulating the conduct of sacred music. They also appreciated the corrupting forces in the last hundred years militating against dogmatic truth and trumpeting sentimentalized subjectivism.

It was this awareness that clearly inspired Pope Saint Pius X to promulgate his masterpiece on sacred music: *Tra le Sollecitudini,* whose one-hundredth anniversary Pope John Paul II honored with an appropriate tribute. In that document, Pius X taught that the three properties of sacred music are *universality*, *goodness of form*, and *holiness*. He declared that those properties are perfectly fulfilled in the Church's Gregorian chant, which thereby also becomes the paradigm of all sacred music. Such properties raise it above the idiosyncratic in cultural forms (universality), possess the high marks of the grand music of the ages (goodness of form), and excite in souls a hunger for God (holiness).

Pope Pius X teaches: "The Church has constantly condemned everything frivolous, vulgar, trivial and ridiculous in sacred music—everything profane and theatrical both in the form of the compositions and in the manner in which they are executed by the musicians. *Sancta sancte,* holy things in a holy manner" (*Tra le Sollecitudini* 13). The Church's sacred music is part of the Dove's Pentecostal descent, carrying Christ into man's soul on wings of reverential beauty. Remember: when you hear choirs singing the jewels of the Church's treasury of sacred music, you are witness to a great moment. Culture is being changed, and starved souls are being filled with God.

Dr. Peter Kwasniewski, to whom we owe so much when it comes to the illumination and defense of the Catholic Church's rich liturgical heritage, has given us in this book a thorough, lucid, and persuasive guide to the hard-won truths about the art of music bequeathed to the West by ancient philosophy, the inspired Scriptures, the High Middle Ages's lofty theology, and more recent sources of insight, including the modern ecclesiastical magisterium. The author delves deeply into the themes I have touched on above with his telltale

combination of scholarly calm and polemical dash. In this work, one senses above all the fruit of decades of listening, singing, playing, praying, composing, conducting, thinking, and writing about music. He knows whereof he speaks.

The title exactly matches the content. Part I expounds "good music"—that is, the music of the great Western musical tradition that spans the centuries, from religious chant to the classical masters to such modern composers as Arvo Pärt (and not excluding authentic folk genres)—and explains why today's mass-produced pop music is cultural junk, ethical ennervation, and spiritual poison. Here the author does not remain in the clouds but offers ample and specific recommendations of good music to listen to. Part II, on sacred music, not only articulates with uncommon clarity why chant and polyphony are ideally suited to the liturgy but critiques the false inculturation represented by "praise & worship" and the all-too-common use of guitars and pianos in churches. He offers very concrete pastoral advice, even providing a model circular letter a reforming bishop could send around to his presbyterate to correct musical abuses and reinstate traditional sacred music! Part III, on silence, reminds us that there is an important place for that which goes beyond what we can express in words and melodies and harmonies: it is a mistake, Kwasniewski says, to fill every nook and cranny of the liturgy (or of life) with sound, because our souls need silence too, the expectant "open space" that makes meaningful conversation and art possible.

In short, the book you hold in your hands is an ideal introduction to the philosophy, theology, and spirituality of music from a Catholic point of view. It comes at the right time—a time when many clergy, religious, and laity are rediscovering the treasury of tradition that had been foolishly locked up after the Second Vatican Council, to the immense imperilment of the Church's doxologizing and evangelizing mission. But tradition, being a gift of Divine Providence, shares in His immortal vitality and cannot be extinguished or entirely forgotten. Its roots will put forth green shoots and the tree will bloom again. In these pages, Dr. Kwasniewski eloquently makes the case for good music, sacred music, and silence—"three gifts of God for liturgy and for life." May we rediscover and embrace these gifts to the fullest!

Fr. John A. Perricone
November 22, 2022
Feast of Saint Cecilia

Preface

This book explores the fine art of music and its loftiest category, sacred music for the liturgy of the Catholic Church.

I entered into church music at an early age by singing in the choirs at my local parish. In retrospect, I came to realize that only a small portion of what we sang could be categorized as *sacred* music, but nevertheless, I learned how to read music, how to sing in parts, and how to be punctual for rehearsals and warm-ups. In high school I studied composition and conducting with a teacher who had been trained at the Eastman School of Music; I sang in the boys' schola he led, which performed chant and polyphony, and took voice lessons with his wife, an opera singer. It was at the end of high school that I began to compose my own musical works.[2]

My introduction to Gregorian chant came through listening to recordings;[3] it was something I had never encountered in church. At about the same time, I was invited to a charismatic prayer group, which awakened my prayer life and led to good friendships. I even attended a Steubenville "Big Tent" meeting and wrote a peppy guitar song! That phase lasted for about two years.

By the time I went to Thomas Aquinas College in California in the fall of 1990, I had already fallen in love with great classical music and chant, and it was an enormous joy for me to be in the polyphonic choir and the men's chant schola. In the former, I learned how to run rehearsals to assist the director, and in the latter, I learned how to read square notes, count the rhythm, sing with solfège, and perform the Ordinary and Propers at a Novus Ordo Mass

[2] A discipline I have continued ever since, at varying levels of intensity depending on the demands of my primary career—the primary career being either teaching or writing or some combination thereof. To date, I have composed about 150 pieces of music, nearly all of them sacred choral works. Recordings of many pieces will be found at www.youtube.com/@DrKwasniewski.

[3] In particular, of the Choralschola der Wiener Hofburgkapelle under the direction of Pater Hubert Dopf, SJ.

in Latin.[4] I first encountered the Tridentine Mass at TAC, and to say that it piqued my curiosity would be an understatement.

In graduate school at the Catholic University of America, I attended the traditional Latin Mass more and more frequently, both at Old Saint Mary's in Chinatown and at Old Saint John's in Silver Spring. I directed the Gregorian scholas at both places (though not simultaneously). While immersing myself in the classical Roman rite, with its contemplative, almost monastic atmosphere, I finally understood where chant came from, how it fit into and complemented and completed the liturgy. The connection between chant and the Novus Ordo liturgy was less clear because the latter had been designed along entirely different lines—modular, efficient, and activity-oriented, with immediate rational comprehension as its primary aim. At my first place of employment, the International Theological Institute (then in Gaming, Austria), I continued singing and leading chant, hymnody, and polyphony at celebrations of the Mass according to both the traditional and modern missals. Crucially, I also immersed myself for the first time in the Byzantine liturgy, which I learned how to cantor more or less by osmosis. The Eastern rites, sung in a variety of languages, continued my education about what makes a liturgy traditional and how its customary music is part of its essence.[5]

In 2006, I helped establish Wyoming Catholic College in the town of Lander, adjacent to the Wind River Range, in cowboy country—a very long distance, both geographically and culturally, from the heart of Europe. From the start, and with the co-founding bishop's encouragement, we had a mixed SATB (soprano, alto, tenor, and bass) choir and a men's schola, singing for both "forms" of the Mass (indeed, Benedict XVI's *Summorum Pontificum* had been released only weeks before the first freshmen arrived on campus). Throughout my twelve years at the college, I led the music for the Tridentine Mass and the Novus Ordo, the latter featuring chant not only on Sundays but also on weekdays. The choir sang a rich repertoire of chant, polyphony, and hymnody; all students were required to take a year of introductory music theory, history, and appreciation, in the course of which we studied what the magisterium teaches about sacred music, and, for fun,

[4] For a defense of the allowability of this terminology, see my article "Are We Justified in Calling Paul VI's Creation the 'Novus Ordo [Missae]'?" Full information about all sources cited in short form in the footnotes will be found in the bibliography at the end.

[5] See Kwasniewski, *The Once and Future Roman Rite*, 278–311.

sang rounds, folksongs, and partsongs. It was about as close to a "Benedictine" musical ideal as one could have wished.

At the collegiate Novus Ordo Mass, I was able, to a large extent, to "lose myself" in the chant as a child might play for hours in the woods behind his house, thereby not noticing that the house itself is perhaps falling apart or the neighborhood is derelict. Nevertheless, the nagging sense remained that the chant and polyphony did not harmonize as well with the so-called "Ordinary Form" as they did with the "Extraordinary Form."[6] To be sure, the traditional music *can* be used with the liturgical books of Paul VI, not only for the Mass but also for the Divine Office and so forth; and yet it remains a difficult relationship to navigate. Moreover, during these years, I studied the "liturgical question" more and more intensively, reading authors from many centuries and especially from the decades on either side of the post-Vatican II reforms. Through study and experience, I arrived at the realization that the rites promulgated by Paul VI were in fact deformations of the Roman heritage, inconsistent assemblages of decontextualized and modified ancient material and whole-cloth innovations based on pastoral utilitarianism and, at times, progressivist theological concepts. The bare validity of the rites has never been in serious question, but their authenticity as liturgical forms and their fittingness for divine worship can and must, sadly, be questioned.[7]

I eventually concluded that I must commit myself to a liturgically coherent life. A series of events and opportunities that led to my departure from Wyoming Catholic College initiated this liturgical change. At the time of writing this preface, I have attended only the traditional Mass for the past four years. I sing in a men's schola every Sunday and most holy days, and look forward—if anything, even more than I did before—to the joy of singing these incomparable ancient melodies, so perfectly suited for the rites to which they give musical utterance and shape. Their beauty elevates my mind to God; their tranquility comforts my heart.

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[6] On this terminology, see Kwasniewski, "Beyond *Summorum Pontificum*."

[7] The liturgical question as such is too large and complex for a book dedicated to the subject of music to tackle and, besides, has been the subject of numerous books, including several of my own, to which the notes and bibliography will make reference. In order to keep within bounds and maintain focus, the last century's liturgical reforms are here addressed only to the extent required by the subject matter.

I do not write this short account of my journey to discourage musicians from doing their best in the circumstances within which they wish to work or must work. Not everyone has access to the traditional rites of the Church, and not everyone prefers them. I tell my story to let my readers know where I am coming from and that I can relate to them. In my meandering journey from a liberal parish and a contemporary youth group to a charismatic prayer group to a Latin Novus Ordo with a chant schola to immersion in the Byzantine liturgy to a mixed old-and-new-Mass chaplaincy to parishes run by the Institute of Christ the King Sovereign Priest and the Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter, it is highly likely that I have been, for some portion of my life, in a situation similar to that in which *any* Catholic musician, music director, or music lover may find himself right now.

Dear reader, I believe that I understand you, and I do not despise where you are at or what you are trying to do, even if I may no longer serve at such a post and have taken up my abode elsewhere. I agree with the saying recounted by Father Zuhlsdorf: "A rising tide lifts all boats." I would like great music and the finest sacred music to flourish everywhere, in every situation, to the fullest extent possible. That is why I even include herein some "Reform of the Reform" ideas, giving voice to a perspective that I no longer share. It will be easy for the attentive reader to distinguish between what I am putting forward in my own name and what I am raising as a possible approach, a hypothetical scenario.

In the first part, "Music Fit for Kings: The Role of Good Music in the Christian's Life," I explain why the great "classical" music of Western civilization is morally and intellectually good for us, and that more is at stake in what we listen to than most people are aware. In the second part, "Music Fit for the King of Kings: The Role of Sacred Music in the Church's Life," I explain why the admired sacred music of the Latin-rite Catholic Church, especially her Gregorian chant, is well-suited to divine worship and should be retained or reintroduced for theological and spiritual reasons. In the third and final part, "Giving Way to Silence," I explain why silence is, in its own right, as valuable as, and at times more valuable than, even this great music—precisely because music itself intimates or opens the way to a reality that is ineffable, transcending all that we can say or sing.

In this book, there is no attempt at offering a grand all-encompassing theory of music. For that, one will need to look to such authors as Victor

Zuckerkandl and Roger Scruton.[8] Nor is it meant as a history of, or a guide to, classical and sacred music, or a detailed account of the function of different types of chants or motets within the liturgical rites—tasks, once again, that have been accomplished by those better qualified to do it, such as William Mahrt, Joseph Swain, Edward Schaefer, and Susan Treacy.[9] You will find here a medley of meditations and an arsenal of arguments from my decades of experience as a singer, composer, director, and liturgical scholar and culminating in the conviction—presented in these pages under many vantages and without the slightest hedging or apologizing—that our traditional music is the loftiest of God's gifts to us in the natural order, the greatest artistic treasure the world has ever known, and, in its specifically liturgical manifestations, a vital, indispensable bearer of the theology, spirituality, meaning, and identity of the Catholic religion. We cannot live well without it; we will not pray well without it. Music is the language of the soul, its most intimate and exalted expression. Sacred music is the liturgy's blood and bone, the carrier of its organic life, the architecture of its prayer. If something goes wrong with music, as Plato saw long ago, the culture is lost; if something goes wrong with liturgical music, as Ratzinger saw so clearly, the *cultus* is depressed and devalued. In short: Divine Providence knew what it was doing, as did the great artists in their own capacity. We must become again as little children who receive eagerly the marvels offered to them.

Progressives reading this book may take offense at my musical traditionalism; traditionalists reading this book may be offended by my citations from recent magisterial documents (although there are plenty of older sources too);[10] and conservatives may be offended by my intransigent traditionalist sympathies and sentiments. But keep reading anyhow. Of music and of silence, there is much to learn, much to rejoice in, much to love—and, I believe, much that can unite us. May these good gifts coming down

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[8] Zuckerkandl, *Man the Musician*; Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*.

[9] Mahrt, *The Musical Shape of the Liturgy*; Swain, *Sacred Treasure*; Schaefer, *Catholic Music Through the Ages*; Treacy, *The Music of Christendom*.

[10] Thus, I will quote from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of the Second Vatican Council when it is in manifest continuity with the preceding tradition and also because it is rhetorically opportune for those who wish to promote authentic sacred music to know how to defend their goals on the basis of clear texts from the most recent ecumenical council. Nevertheless, I am certainly not unaware of the problematic aspects of the Council.

from the Father of lights be for you and for me a foretaste of the joy that awaits us in heaven.

The chapters herein began as articles at *New Liturgical Movement*, *OnePeterFive*, *LifeSiteNews*, *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, *Rorate Caeli*, and *Views from the Choir Loft* of Corpus Christi Watershed. Chapter 21 appeared in the journal *Sacred Music* under the title "Blessed Silence." Chapter 8 was developed from a lecture given at a number of places, until it was given in its final form at the Sacred Liturgy Conference in Spokane in May of 2019. I am grateful to the editors, publishers, and organizers for giving me the opportunity to research and express the ideas that have coalesced into this book. I also thank the editors at TAN for their persistence in seeking this book from me.

Sources of the epigraphs: Josef Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings*, 50; Plato, *Laws*, 656b and 669c; Saint John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Psalm 41*, modifying Strunk's translation with reference to the Latin in *PG* 55:157; Joseph Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord*, 158.

Peter A. Kwasniewski
September 14, 2022
Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Abbreviations and Conventions

GIRM	*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*
NLM	*New Liturgical Movement* website
SC	*Sacrosanctum Concilium*
ST	*Summa theologiae*

Psalms are referred to by their Septuagint/Vulgate numbering.

To avoid clutter in the notes, hyperlinks have generally been avoided; instead, the author and title are listed; the site and date are listed in the bibliography, which are sufficient for locating the piece. All internet citations were verified as of August 22, 2022. Full information about *all* sources cited in short form in the footnotes will be found in the bibliography at the end.

The *Summa theologiae* is quoted from the bilingual edition prepared by The Aquinas Institute and co-published with Emmaus Academic.

PART I

Music Fit for Kings

The Role of Good Music in the Christian's Life

1

Music as a Character-Forming Force

In the first part of this book, I will argue that Christians, inasmuch as we are "priests, prophets, *and kings*" by our baptism into Christ the High Priest, Word of God, and King of kings, deserve and require a diet of the most artistically beautiful, most emotionally satisfying, most intellectually stimulating, and most spiritually beneficial music. We need, in short, music that is both *good* and *great*.

Music never lies

In a Christopher Nupen documentary on the acclaimed cellist Jacqueline du Pré,[11] one of her close friends says, "Music never lies." How true this is! People can lie, the lyrics of songs can lie, but *the music itself can never lie*. It contains and conveys, perfectly and purely, the spirit embodied in its rhythms, melodies, and harmonies. We cannot translate this spirit into a sequence of descriptive words; could we do so, music would cease to be music; it would be a vaguer form of poetry. But that indefinable message of the soul contained in every piece of music, great or small, is still present, communicative, formative.

Jacqueline du Pré herself demonstrated the specific and irreducible truth proper to music in the remarkable depth and intensity of her performances. Listening to her play in Beethoven's "Ghost" Trio or a Brahms cello sonata is a revelation of intuitions, feelings, memories, discernments, opportunities, interventions, choices, fates—of all that is distinctively human, yearning for empathy and straining towards immortality. She is described at one point as a person "always striving for beauty, for the most distant horizon." This, indeed, is the noblest measure of man, the animal that can *see and hear beauty*, and not merely see colors and hear noises; the animal that,

[11] *Remembering Jacqueline du Pré* (Allegro Films, 1994).

perceiving the ground, the expanse ahead, and the vault of heaven, knows what a horizon is and then transforms these perceptions into metaphors of its own intentionality.

"Nature and music have the same grandeur," says another person interviewed. They do, because they both speak of the eternal and the infinite to the human heart, which has *the capacity for grandeur.* The human heart has also *the capacity for giving and for suffering.* "Music does not speak of things, but tells of weal and woe": of giving in love, of trials and pains, of a grandeur once beheld but now past, nostalgia for what has been, hope against hope for what might still be, and of a grandeur not of this world, more real than this world, glimpsed like a sliver of sun through the clouds, drawing us on and dispelling our despair.[12] Is it not a miracle that music speaks of all this? Music influences plants only physically; it can sway animals to a degree, but their field of perception comprises no more than the immediate surroundings. But man is finely equipped to perceive the message contained in both nature and music, and resonates with it when he encounters it with a properly attuned ear.

In the same documentary, another person remarks, "Sound comes from our being." What is this mysterious thing called "sound"? Aristotle analyzed well its physico-psychical aspects in his treatise *On the Soul*, but he did not attempt to explain the mystery of *meaningful* sound, which only the higher animals produce, nor the far greater mystery of rational language and the suprarational discourse of the fine arts.[13] The sound that is properly language comes from our unique mode of being in this world—as being *in* the world, due to our physicality, but not *of* it, due to our being made in the image and likeness of God. The sound that is music is the finest flowering of language; no wonder it is the province of worship, loss and lamentation, exultation and joy. For it is a wonder past all other wonders that proceed from the heart of man. In the words of a medieval commentator, Bernard Silvestris:

> Music rules over us, given that we are held together through it. When nature catches in voices what she feels innate within her, she is moved with a deep, wondrous affection, since like rejoices in like. Music endows voices, removes anger, suggests clemency; it

[12] The quotation is from Schopenhauer, commented on by Josef Pieper, "Thoughts about Music," in *Only the Lover Sings*, 39–51; for Schopenhauer's formulation, p. 42.

[13] See Aristotle, *De Anima* II.8; cf. *On Sense and the Sensible* I; *History of Animals* IV.9.

> persuades. And every age, every sex, and the nature of almost all living creatures is moved at the whim of music. For what compels the thrushes, swans, nightingales, and other sweet-songed living things to utter their loquacious comfort? Just as they breathe without labor, so too do they sing. This is a sign that music is innate in souls, since those things which have no free will with which to deliberate, produce (led by nature alone) harmonious voices, or rejoice at [others] doing so. Through the comfort of music the Theban Ismenia used to heal the maladies of the Thebans. And so too did David with the royal madness [of King Saul]. And we even read that Empedocles with a swaying mode calmed the youth who was rushing at his host, since he had accused his father. The Pythagoreans, also by song, caused a light and pleasant sleep to waft over themselves; just as by other modes they used to shake off the stupor of sleep once they awoke. What shall we say about how such a diversity of souls are pleased by a variety of modes?[14]

A character-forming force

The philosopher Roger Scruton observes, "Nobody who understands the experiences of melody, harmony, and rhythm will doubt their value. Not only are they the distillation of centuries of social life: they are also forms of knowledge, providing the competence to reach *out* of ourselves through music. Through melody, harmony, and rhythm, we enter a world where others exist besides the self, a world that is full of feeling but also ordered, disciplined but free. That is why music is a character-forming force, and the decline of musical taste a decline in morals."[15]

In Aristotle's ethical theory, we find this cardinal principle: "According to the character of a man so does the end [i.e., the good] appear to him."[16] Our ability to perceive the good, the true, the beautiful, to *recognize* it

[14] Silvestris, *The Commentary on Martianus Capella's* De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii, 53–54. I thank Jason Baxter for introducing me to this text.

[15] Scruton, *Aesthetics of Music*, 502. On the relationship between music, personal character, morality, cultural change, and social order, see Scruton, *Music as an Art*.

[16] Or, in another translation, "It is by our being the kind of people that we are that we assume such and such as our end." See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III.5, 1114b24; cf. Aquinas, *On Evil*, Q. 6, corp., p. 242.

when we meet it, hinges on the formation our powers have undergone. As a Protestant author, Frank Gaebelein, admits, "The key to better things in Christian music is the habitual hearing of greatness in music not only in school, not only in college and Bible Institute, but in Sunday school also. For the music that younger children hear exercises a formative influence on their taste. Not even the smallest child may safely be fed a diet of musical trash."[17]

A Christian's spiritual maturity is not disconnected from his familiarity with and appreciation for the fine arts. Learning to distinguish between the beautiful or worthy and the ugly or trite is as much an acquired habit as is learning to obey one's parents, being responsible for one's actions, or treating one's siblings well. It is as much a habit as temperance, bravery, justice, and prudence. To think that children will *automatically* mature into adults who have a sense of what is and is not fitting, appropriate, noble, or beautiful is as naïve as thinking that they would behave morally or turn to God in prayer with no discipline and no religious education.

When asked the question "What is the best guardian?" Socrates says, "Argument mixed with music. It alone, when it is present, dwells within the one possessing it as a savior of virtue throughout life."[18] Argument mixed with music: this sounds to me like a description of Gregorian chant, which artfully combines the Word of God, the *Logos*, with the music of the angels. It can dwell within our souls as a savior of the theological virtues, expressing faith, spurring on hope, fueling charity.

Our human potential for the beautiful is vast. In the realm of music alone, consider the stunning masterpieces left to us by the likes of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, Tómas Luis de Victoria, Johann Sebastian Bach, Georg Frideric Handel, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, and to race ahead to our own day, Arvo Pärt. Apart from rare circles, this human potential is nowadays vastly underestimated and underdeveloped. Young Americans are not even *aware* of the artistic potential of their souls, either as makers or as recipients of the gift of art.

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[17] Gaebelein, *The Christian, the Arts, and Truth*, 171.

[18] *Republic* 549b, in *The Republic of Plato*, 226; or, as Paul Shorey renders it: "Reason blended with culture, which is the only indwelling preserver of virtue throughout life in the soul that possesses it." *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, 777.

Let me offer an example of the power of music as well as of the subtlety human beings are capable of when high culture prevails. One of Blessed Columba Marmion's numerous epistolary disciples was a Benedictine monk named Dom Pius de Hemptinne, a selection of whose writings were published in 1935. They make for fascinating reading for all sorts of reasons. In any case, I was struck by a passage Dom Pius cites from the memoirs of his grandmother:

> During the Easter holidays of 1864, fearing lest the light music so fashionable then should be harmful to my dear children, I asked them to limit themselves in the future to music of a style fitted to elevate their souls, as religious music does, instead of such as softens and enervates them. To dear M. this was a real trial. She loved music, and could not make up her mind to part with a number of operatic pieces which I regretted having ever allowed her to play. She protested, and, for the first time was unwilling to do as I wished. I was heart-broken at giving her so much pain, and would gladly have endured far more myself to spare her; but I felt it my duty to insist, and nothing could dissuade me. In a few hours the dear child had calmed down, and she said no more about it. I comforted her as well as I could by undertaking to pay for the lodging of a poor girl whom M. visited and was interested in. This offer on my part made her quite happy again.[19]

The author of the biographical sketch goes on to comment, "It was in this way [that] the supernatural joy of a good deed obliterated the sensuous charms of worldly music in a young girl of eighteen."[20]

This is an amazing passage to analyze. We see a mother who bitterly regrets having allowed her daughter to play at the piano *operatic arias*—light and frivolous music, no doubt, but hardly disordered, at least as far as music goes. (Note, too, the talent taken for granted—it is no easy feat to play the accompaniment to an aria.) What sensitivity of soul must this generation of Christians have had! They could perceive how the frivolity and superficial

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[19] de Hemptinne, *A Benedictine Soul*, 7.

[20] de Hemptinne, 7.

sensuality of worldly music would, over time, weaken or undermine the moral fiber of youths, how it would confuse their moral compass.

And what is the daughter's reaction? A girl of eighteen was unwilling *for the first time* to do what her mother asked her to do. The beauty of obedience shines here, but also the immense power of music over the soul. Music works from within, pulling one's character to itself, and shaping the soul until one feels pleasure only in its embrace and sharp pain in being severed from it. Music alone was the veiled enemy that broke into the girl's gate and began to sap her wonted deference to the will of her parent. This, and more, can music do, and in a way that is scarcely noticed by its votaries. The daughter's mother offers to do a work of charity for a poor friend of hers, and the trauma yields to joy. This vignette offers us a window into a different time, when parent-child relations were healthier, when souls were far more sensitive to the ethical power of music, when a kind of "aesthetic asceticism" was practiced for the sake of virtue, and when works of charity for the poor were a cause of sincere joy. We might consider whether all of this goes together somehow, like a package deal.

The inescapable reality is that we *internalize* the music we sing and listen to—it becomes a part of us, it shapes us in its image. You are what you listen to and look at, more than you are what you eat. What we take into our souls is the food and drink of our souls, and we will be healthy or unhealthy depending on the quality of that food and drink. If our music is that of the Holy Spirit, we will be eating and drinking the spirit of truth, the love of the Father and the Son. If our music is that of the world or the prince of this world, we will be eating and drinking the spirit of worldliness. We cannot be too careful about this dietary discernment.[21]

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[21] Kevin Vost shares a bit of ancient Stoic wisdom: "He [Seneca] praises Lucilius for seeking out what is truly noble and best while trampling under his feet the petty, vulgar things that popular crowds deem good, and warns him of the need to ignore the enchanting voices of the crowd. . . . He warns that while the song Odysseus heard was alluring, it did not come at him from every side. This rings even truer for us in the 21st century as we are constantly bombarded by popular culture from ever newer and more pervasive forms of media. If we are to become what we truly are at our best, we'll need to carefully monitor which voices from the crowd we allow into ears and our souls every day." *Memorize the Stoics!*, 149–50.

What is the depth and breadth of the music you listen to? How deeply does this music delve into your immortal soul and into the reality of God? How well does it encompass and echo the grandeur of the world around us?

The link between art and morality

Surprising as it may seem in light of the foregoing pages, Saint Thomas Aquinas defends the thesis that there is not an *immediate and necessary* connection between good art and good morals. In other words, a morally good person does not, by that fact alone, generate beautiful art, nor must a bad man produce bad art. All the same, as we will see, Aquinas also proves that there *will* be a connection, albeit in a roundabout way: in the larger picture of human life.[22]

In holding this position, he differs from some contemporary conservative critics, like E. Michael Jones, who maintain that bad morals necessitate or result in bad art, or, vice versa, that bad art indicates bad morals. The history of the fine arts clearly disproves that position, which is founded upon a simplistic psychology of the human faculties and the habits that perfect them. In the Renaissance, for example, one can find truly outstanding artists who led morally disordered lives—for example, the painter Caravaggio, who produced spectacular paintings, with true spiritual depth; the composer Carlo Gesualdo, who wrote sublime music, although he had murdered his wife and her adulterous lover in a fit of rage. Similarly, while Wagner was an adulterer and a notorious anti-Semite, his giftedness as a composer is past all doubt: just listen to the *Siegfried Idyll*, the *Meistersinger* overture, or the *Ring* cycle (if you can stifle your distaste at the vapid storyline and pompous libretto). The same holds for Schubert and Brahms—whether they visited prostitutes, as some of their biographers say they did, or not.

The lack of an immediate connection between art and morality is not bothersome provided we understand the kind of intellectual perfection art refers to. Art is a habit of applying reason to artistic materials in an orderly way to produce a definite effect, and an artist who is talented to begin with,

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[22] See *ST* I-II, Q. 57, arts. 3–4 and art. 5, ad 1; Q. 58, art. 5. For a full exposition, see Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*.

and well trained, can develop a high level of perfection in the exercise of this habit, in spite of personal failings.

That being said, many connections exist between the practice of art and the quality of morals *in real life*. An artist who lets his daily life become very disordered cannot be expected to retain the discipline, self-mastery, and concentration required to produce masterpieces—or, in the worst case scenario, to acquire the technical skills in the first place. Picasso is a conspicuous example of a talented artist who fell so much under the sway of his lechery that he could no longer produce great art. He sacrificed his intellect to his libido, and that is why his works are so lacking in intelligibility and beauty. They seem to be efforts, increasingly childish and embarrassing, to represent appetite or feeling divorced from reason—the very principle of form, order, communication.

The openness to "inspiration" that characterizes genius runs the danger of being more or less closed off by licentiousness, by immersion in dissipating and distracting pleasures.[23] To be open to inspiration requires a certain peace of soul and delicacy of sentiment—an ability to *listen and receive*, to await ideas and cultivate them patiently and with self-denying labor. Prudence is the "eye of love," and since the moral virtues are connected through prudence, the artist who lacks self-control lacks the *capacity to see* which is indispensable to conceiving and executing great works.[24]

It seems to me that the otherwise underground link between morals and art comes right to the surface in pop music and modern art in general. Modern art has often been art of unrestrained sensuality or bleak despair, and this is strikingly captured in the two extremes into which it has fallen: pornography and sexual excess on the one side, atonality and abstraction on the other. Men whose minds are in the gutter will transfer that gutter to the canvas, the photograph, the lyrics, or the rhythm, while men whose minds are cut off from nature and its beauty will represent their cold and empty soul-world in a chill abstraction from form or shape, from tonality or controlled and orderly rhythm. We will see a womanizing Picasso painting

[23] The history of art affords many sad examples of how promising artistic careers were derailed by alcohol or drug addictions.

[24] See Josef Pieper's illuminating discussion of prudence in *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 3–40.

prostitutes or a suicidal Pollock splattering paint at random; we will hear Ravel's stupefying *Bolero* or Schoenberg's chilly *Pierrot Lunaire*.

So, it is important to see on the one hand that art, as a virtue of applying reason to materials, is distinct from the moral life, and on the other hand that a man's life, which dictates *goals* for art, necessarily impinges on his products, since he cannot but identify himself with a certain way of life and the pleasures associated with it. In this way, we will understand how it is possible for artists fortunate to be born into a Catholic or Christian culture to produce marvelous works of art in spite of their personal failings, because they received a sound training and adhered, to some extent, to the larger Christian goals of their society, whereas the artists whom modernity has permitted or encouraged to be truly perverse end up producing the most perverse art.

Thus, while art and ethics are distinct, they cannot help influencing one another over time. Hence we should be vigilant, even scrupulous, about the influences we allow into our souls. This would always have been true and will always be true: no matter how "different" modern man may be, he still has a soul to save, and that soul will be saved through the same virtues, the same harmony of faith and reason, reason and passions, as that of premodern man, post-modern man, and any other man there may ever be.

These observations are not limited to certain contemporary genres but extend over the whole history of music in all cultures. There have *always* been deviations in the fine arts, just as there have always been clothing, dances, and language of questionable modesty. Due to the profound influence of Catholicism, a sense of order, decency, and gracefulness generally prevailed for many centuries in Western fine art, and this cultural force was strong enough to carry into the twentieth century, although it was already weakening considerably in the nineteenth. There are hopeful signs of rebirth and renewal in the twenty-first, as Catholic and Christian artists are leaving behind the stale conventions of modernism and the low horizons of populism to seek once again that cosmic and divine grandeur that is the essence of great art.