

Sing my Tongue the Saviour's Glory: Theological Musings on Music

The homestead of my mother and father is located at the top of a mighty hill in the wilderness of Ontario in Canada. The main road in these parts, Highway 62, runs straight up this hill as it heads northeast towards Combermere, then to Barry's Bay, and then on towards Ottawa, my country's capital city. This highway passes right by my family's house just a few meters beyond our front yard. Throughout the years I have witnessed the smoking and belching of not a few cars that have struggled to reach the top of our huge hill. Of these, there have been a few that have not made it more than a few meters beyond my family's driveway before coming to a sputtering, wheezing, steaming stop. There have been a few times when I heard a car approaching our house—after having made the big climb up the hill along the northeastern journey—and wondered what kind of damage the hill must have inflicted upon it, as a very audible knocking and banging came to my ears. It always used to catch me by surprise when the vehicle in question would whizz past our house, without any signs of trouble at all. The very audible knocking and banging was not from pistons misfiring, but from loudly emphasized rhythms pounding through the car's stereo system. What I apprehended as engine trouble was really the pounding music of our age. It is a sign of a problem that engine trouble can be mistaken for today's music. When I reflect on this incident, a few questions come to mind pertaining to the place and purpose of music in human life. What follows from here are little bits and pieces of wisdom regarding music that I have encountered while reading the thoughts of various wise men. I am not attempting a grand exposé on the essence of music, but rather putting out some select food for thought.

Josef Pieper calls music “a secret philosophizing of the soul.”¹ One reason for this is that of all the works of art that humans makes, music is the one that enters most effortlessly and discreetly into the deepest recesses of the inner being of the human person, namely what is the heart and soul of a person. While the eyes can be closed to what is visible, it is well nigh impossible for one to turn off the sense of hearing to the sounds that enter the ear. One has to be merely conscious to experience sound. This is indicative of the huge role that hearing plays in the overall formation of the individual. By hearing, the spoken word enters into the intellect, a word

¹ Josef Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 39.

which carries with it the truth of reality by means of statements and propositions. By hearing the truth-filled word, one comes to a knowledge and understanding of reality. It is in hearing the words of the wise that one discovers meaning and purpose in human existence and thus receives formation to become all that is within him or her potentially. While the spoken word is an *upfront* communication to the soul, music is a *secret* philosophizing of the soul. It is *secret* because it forms the soul without the listener being entirely aware of it. A vocal word can be judged as true or false, but a musical phrase enters the soul with no process of discernment. It is a *philosophizing* of the soul because music disposes the soul for the reception of higher things.

How does music form the soul? Music itself has order and structure within it. When the soul—which, as Aristotle teaches, is potential to all things²—experiences the order and structure of good music, it is brought into a fuller existence through encountering its harmonic content. As the soul becomes more actualized, it becomes more capable of participating in the highest wisdom. Music can have such a strong impact upon the soul that different kinds of music can move one to tears, make one rejoice, give one peace, or stir one up with patriot love for one's country. As Aquinas teaches: "the human soul is moved in various ways according to various melodies of sound."³ The best of music will move the soul in the direction of man's highest good, which is to know and love truth. Music then can play a significant role in forming the soul and in making actual the potential of a person. Catholic wisdom teaches us that one can only discover one's self by making a sincere gift of self to others.⁴ Music has the power to orient one to the fulfillment of such wisdom, or to deviate one from this true path of human life. With the intimate link between music and the formation of the soul, the kind of music that one listens to will make him or her either an altruistic self-sacrificer, or a servile self-seeker.

How does one distinguish good music from bad? One way is to analyse music objectively according to the mathematical proportions inherent in the overtone series. This method is argued quite convincingly by Molly Gustin in her excellent book *Tonality* (Gustin, by the way, is the only living author incorporated into the *Great Books* series). The other, and simpler, way is to judge the tree by its fruit. If the music of today attracts its listeners to becoming body-pierced tattooed freakish rebels, it is a sign that there is something wrong with what is being listened to. Music is not some kind of neutral amusement, but a powerful force to effect the best or worst kind of change. Plato saw this so well that in the *Republic* he warns about introducing new forms of music into society (see Bk. IV, around 424c). He understood music to have the power to influence the listener to become virtuous and civilized, or savage and barbaric. He saw that the kind of songs listened to in society eventually affects the very structure of the state itself

² Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 591. On the Soul, 430b 29-430a 2.

³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Benziger Bros. edition ed. (1947), II-II Q. 91, art. 1.

⁴ Vatican II Fathers, *Gaudium Et Spes: Pastoral Constitution: On the Church in the Modern World*. (Proclaimed By His Holiness, Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965.), par. 24.3.

especially regarding its laws and customs. For this reason he saw it as essential to have only the best music in his ideal state.

It is alarming to see that much of the music in today's youth culture orients young people towards what John Paul II identified as a culture of death.⁵ Music in the culture of death seems to sully what is pure, good, and truly unique in the individuals who soak it in. Tyrannical and dominating elements in the music assault and do damage to the listener. How does this happen? One characteristic element in today's music is its deafening volume that practically forces the listener to surrender his being to the crashing and obliterating tidal wave of sound. The level of sound makes it difficult for the listener to think logical thoughts. In this way the sheer volume of the music assaults the listener as a rational being. Another characteristic element of the music is its emphasized pulsating rhythms. All music has rhythm, but loudly emphasized rhythm has the power of violently penetrating into the sacred interiority of the listener and numbing the individual's consciousness as a unique 'I'. The lyrics from Mentor Williams' famous song *Drift Away* should not be taken lightly in this regard: "Oh, give me the beat boys and free my soul, I wanna get lost in your rock and roll, and drift away." The lyrics indicate the effect of the beat: the surrendering of the unique 'I' to the controlling influence of the rhythm. The tyrannical volume level and dominating rhythm in much of today's music doesn't appear to affirm what is good in the individual who is the listener. Rather, it appears to effect in the individual a most disturbing disintegration.

What is the music of today about? What makes it to *be* what it is? Musicians, like all artists, are formed by the ideas and attitudes of the times in which they live. Their works will, by and large, be a genuine reflection of the world view of their age, a microcosm of what is perceived to be the macrocosm. Since we live in a fragmented age dominated by a scientific and materialistic world view, where "the real" is limited to what can be numbered, weighed, and measured, music—by and large—will reflect this world view. There is no place in this world view for what transcends the material, such as truth, goodness, and beauty, but there is only the useful. The doctrine of materialism leads to the creed of utilitarianism. By their music, musicians of our age sound forth the materialistic utilitarian creed. Musicians proclaim this creed, even unknowingly, by incorporating into their music the sounds produced by our materialistic culture, namely the whirring, humming, whining, thumping, and grinding of the machines that we surround ourselves with. It is therefore not surprising that many of the elements in the music of our times can be related to the sound structures of a running machine. Elements such as monotonous chord progressions, continuous repetition of sound bits, loud banging, clashing, and bashing of rhythm, and other harsh and jarring sounds: all these imitate the noises emitted by a running machine. It does not seem possible that such a combination of elements could dispose the listener to realities that transcend the material. It is more likely that they close off this horizon to the individual altogether.

⁵ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), par. 21 and 24.

It would be impossible for musicians to sound forth the materialistic utilitarian creed without the aid of very specialized musical machines. The most astonishing thing about the sounding of an electric guitar is its hugely disproportionate relationship of cause to effect. The musician's minuscule activity of strumming on strings has the explosive effect of producing a tidal wave of sound that far surpasses what hand and string ought to acoustically produce. Electricity has not only boosted the volume of sound that the musician can make, but it has also boosted his ego. The successful musician becomes like a god. He is the rock star who becomes larger than life, an idol of power and prestige. He is practically worshipped by his most zealous followers. With his godlike status he does not feel bound to what is normal and common, but he aggressively asserts his identity as a rebel to tradition and authority. The rock star is not far from the wizard that we meet in Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* who makes himself appear so terrible, powerful, and all-knowing by the aid of machines, but in reality, he is just a very small and even hurt man who creates an aura of mystery about him so that he can control and manipulate those who encounter him.

Is the rock star and his concert the epitome of the art of music? No, for the purpose of all art is to awaken in the human being a longing for what is beyond the material, to what transcends what the eyes can see and what the ears can hear. Art is to "raise us up,"⁶ as John Paul II says in his letter to artists. The best works of art become signs of what is above. They are signs that function a little like a sacrament: they do not simply point to transcendent realities, but make them present to some extent in the here and now. Sacred wisdom tells us that "man does not live by bread alone" (Deuteronomy 8:3); he also lives by what is beyond bread. The arts, especially music, ought to point us to what is beyond bread. St. Paul tells us that from what has been made, the invisible nature of God can be perceived (Rom. 1:20). Following the example of the divine artist, the human artist is called to make works that point mankind to the invisible realities that are beyond bread. In this regard John Paul II says: "With loving regard, the divine Artist passes on to the human artist a spark of his own surpassing wisdom, calling him to share in his creative power."⁷ The vocation of the artist is related to that of a prophet in that the purpose of his work is to draw attention to the hidden and mysterious things of God. Just as there can be true and false prophets, so also can there be true and false artists. The task of the artist is to make works that awaken in his audience a hunger for the final end to which all men and women are called. And what is this final end? It is found in a Kingdom and in the presence of a great King where "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (I Corinthians 2:9). Our entrance into this Kingdom has been purchased at a great price! The King has granted mankind unfathomable mercy through his son Jesus Christ. Each one of us must only approach the overflowing font of mercy with sincerity, trust, and humility to be transformed into his very own son or daughter. The task of the artist is great: he must awaken in mankind a longing for a reality that no eye has seen nor ear heard. Yet, through his work, it is possible to catch a glimpse of this reality, if only as if in a mirror dimly (I Corinthians 13:12).

⁶ ———, *Letter to Artists* (1999), par. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, par. 1.

Pieper says that music is “one of the most amazing and mysterious phenomena of all the world’s *miranda* [beautiful things],” because it “make us wonder.”⁸ Because of the very intimate connection of music to the inner being of the person, music is the most powerful of the arts in orienting one towards the wonder of wonders, namely what is spiritual and divine. Good music opens the human being up, like a blossoming rose, to an awareness of what is profoundly mysterious. It orients the listener towards a contemplation of the deeper aspects of human existence. Jozef Ratzinger, before he became Pope Benedict XVI, recounts an experience that relates to what I am talking about. This took place while he was attending a Bach concert that Leonard Bernstein conducted in Munich after the sudden death of Karl Richter. Ratzinger writes:

I was sitting next to the Lutheran Bishop Hanselmann. When the last note of one of the great Thomas-Kantor-Cantatas triumphantly faded away, we looked at each other spontaneously and right then we said: ‘Anyone who has heard this, knows that the faith is true.’ The music had such an extraordinary force of reality that we realized, no longer by deduction, but by the impact on our hearts, that it could not have originated from nothingness, but could only have come to be through the power of the Truth that became real in the composer’s inspiration.⁹

What Ratzinger relates reveals the power of good music: it raises the soul up to contemplate higher things. St. Faustina relates a similar experience that happened to her while listening to the hymn *Good night, Holy Head of Jesus* on the radio one evening: “when I heard the hmy[n [...]] my spirit was suddenly swept away to God’s mysterious bosom, and I knew in what the greatness of a soul consists and what matters to God: love, love, and once again, love.”¹⁰

The Catholic Church has always recognized the extraordinary value of music. The Fathers of the Vatican II council made a most stunning statement regarding this: “The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art.”¹¹ This means that if a conquering philistine gave the faithful a choice between his army destroying *St. Peter’s Basilica* in Rome with all its glorious art in including Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, or the sacred chants of the Church, the faithful should choose to save the chants. Why is this the case? The Fathers continue: “The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as a combination of sacred music and words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy.”¹² What is the link between music and the words? The truth of salvation is contained in the words, while the singing arouses the person’s devotion towards God.¹³ The purpose of the

⁸ Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation*, 39.

⁹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *The Contemplation of Beauty: A Message to a Meeting of the Ecclesial Movement Communion and Liberation* (Rimini, Italy 2002).

¹⁰ Maria Faustina Kowalska, *Divine Mercy in My Soul*, third ed. (Camberwell, Australia: Divine Mercy Publications Pty. Ltd.; reprint, 6th), 382.

¹¹ Vatican II Fathers, *Sacrosanctum Concilium: The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (1963), Ch. VI, par. 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, par. 112.

¹³ Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, II-II Q. 91, art. 1.

song is to dispose the singer (or the listener) to receive more deeply the truth that comes from God. This means that sacred song is not something superficially tacked onto Catholic liturgy; it is, as the Fathers say an “integral part” of it because of its capacity to condition the soul to enter more deeply into the sacred mysteries of the faith.

This role of music in preparing one for divine things has been made manifest ever since the birth of Christ with the tradition of angels singing¹⁴ to the shepherds the glories of God in the highest at the conclusion of their announcement of the new born king (Luke 2:14). George Frideric Handel has done a supreme interpretation of this in his *Messiah*. With their hearts aroused by the Angels' praise, the shepherds see no other option but to go to Bethlehem to see “this thing that has happened.” The example of the shepherds indicates that song prepares one to encounter God. There are other angels who sing too, such as the ones from *Revelation* who sing the Thrice Holy Hymn to the Lord God Almighty (Rev. 4:8). What both groups of angels reveal to us is that the more closely one approaches what is divine, the more appropriate becomes song as a way of relating to the divine. This is not because God needs to be sung to, but because the creature becomes more disposed to divine things through song. To put this in a better way, the creature cannot help but singing when he or she encounters the glory of the divine. As the Psalmist proclaims: “O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things!”¹⁵ A new song does not arise from a dull and sluggish heart, but from a heart that burns with the fire of love. A lover professes his love in singing because it better expresses his ardour for the beloved. But there is a deeper reason why lovers sing. Love is of divine origin, as St. John tells us,¹⁶ and what is divine is deeply encountered by way of song. The lover of God can profess his love to God in words, but if he sings them, then ah!, it is a very different experience. It is for this reason that the Church keeps alive the tradition that singing is praying twice.¹⁷

Who knew this better than St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274). He is usually associated with dry intellectual arguments defending the matters of the faith, but he also wrote beautiful hymns that the Church still uses to this very day. His sublime *Pange lingua* is frequently sung during benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Many know the familiar words: “Pange, lingua, gloriosi Corporis mysterium” or what is translated as “Sing, my tongue, the Savior's glory, of His flesh the mystery sing.” For Thomas, the Saviour's glory is not something to merely think about, it is something to sing about. He sings about it because he is a true lover of God. Love compels Thomas to sing the truth which his intellect has grasped. The words of St. Augustine get to the heart of what I am saying: “he that singeth praise, not only singeth, but also loveth him of whom he singeth” (Commentary on Psalm 73, 1). One can only love what one knows. In his hymns,

¹⁴ Luke 2:13 in the RSVCE reads “praising God and saying.” Only the shepherds know if the angels were actually singing or simply speaking.

¹⁵ Psalm 98:1

¹⁶ “God is love” I John 4:8.

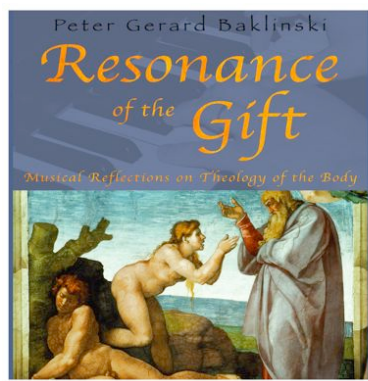
¹⁷ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, trans. United States Catholic Conference (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), par. 1156.

Thomas is not doling out mushy sentimentalism, but he is imparting teaching in song so that the singer can love all the better the truth that is conveyed in the words. Etienne Gilson gives us some insight as to what Thomas is doing in the hymns:

He is teaching because to him there is nothing nobler than to impart the truth of the intellect, and he is singing his teaching because no theologian can teach the saving truth, in the full realization of what it means to man, without experiencing a deep-seated emotion for which poetry is a more suitable form of expression than prose. At that moment, the theologian's love of God becomes vocal.¹⁸

We are drawing to the end of our reflections. I will bring to the front some of the ideas we have been musing on. Music has a profound connection to the soul. It can raise the soul up to meditate on what is divine, or it can drag it down to the very entrance of hell, to meaninglessness and despair. One way to tell the difference between good and bad music is by examining the fruit it produces in the listeners. The fruit rarely lies. The Church greatly values its musical tradition and offers it as a way of assent to the higher things. For this reason it would be extremely naive to write off the traditional Chant in the Church as trite and boring. There is so much more within this tradition than what the adherers to ersatz liturgical music might realize. In the end, it is love alone that knows best how to sing. St. Faustina puts this well: "I am singing within my soul an unending hymn to You, and no one will suspect or understand this. The song of my soul is known to You alone, O my Creator and Lord!"¹⁹ May we all rise in song to the praise, honour, and glory of God.

Peter Baklinski is a husband, a father of three daughters, a student, and a composer. He grew up in Combermere, Ontario. He earned a BA from Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, CA in 2004. He earned a masters degree in Theology with his wife Erin at the International Theological Institute in Gaming Austria in 2006. Currently Peter is writing his PhD thesis at the John Paul II Institute in Melbourne Australia. You can contact Peter by email: peteanderinbaklinski@gmail.com.



Peter has released an album of original piano compositions called *Resonance of the Gift: Musical Reflections on Theology of the Body*. You can listen to samples of his album at www.resonanceofthegift.com

¹⁸ Etienne Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 178-79.

¹⁹ Kowalska, *Divine Mercy in My Soul*, 42.

Bibliography

- Aquinas, St. Thomas. *The Summa Theologica*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Benziger Bros. edition ed1947.
- Aristotle. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Edited by Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941.
- Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Translated by United States Catholic Conference. Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994.
- Gilson, Etienne. *The Arts of the Beautiful*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965.
- John Paul II. *Evangelium Vitae*1995.
- . *Letter to Artists*1999.
- Kowalska, Maria Faustina. *Divine Mercy in My Soul*. third ed. Camberwell, Australia: Divine Mercy Publications Pty. Ltd. Reprint, 6th.
- Pieper, Josef. *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation*. Translated by Lothar Krauth. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990.
- Ratzinger, Cardinal Joseph. *The Contemplation of Beauty: A Message to a Meeting of the Ecclesial Movement Communion and Liberation*. Rimini, Italy2002.
- Vatican II Fathers. *Gaudium Et Spes: Pastoral Constitution: On the Church in the Modern World*. Proclaimed By His Holiness, Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965.
- . *Sacrosanctum Concilium: The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*1963.