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Tutorial

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Sacred and Profane: The Degradation of Church Music

A seismic shift in music has occurred since the Baroque Era ended, and though not alarming to many, it should be. This era, which lasted from around 1600 to 1750, was an era of thinkers, people who searched for beauty and truth, especially in music. Bach, Purcell, Händel, Pergolesi, and Vivaldi all produced reflective, ordered, diverse, and beautiful music for the glory of the God who gave them their tremendous talent. The genius of their work causes the contemplative modern listener to marvel at their music and ask the question of how sacred music ought to be. Sacred music is music written especially for the Church, but it has become common, or profane, in recent decades. This degradation of the quality of Church music has corresponded to the increase of secularization. The composers of sacred music in the Baroque Era knew that there was no music without order, and they strove to create music that expressed this divine order. The English author Sir Thomas Browne said that “There is a musick where ever there is harmony, order and proportion. . .it is an Hieroglyphical and shadowed lesson of the whole World, and creatures of God; such a melody to the ear, as the whole World, well understood, would afford the understanding,” (Donington 2). To Browne, music and order are one and the same. But the musical order that Western civilization took so long to discover has nearly disappeared. Robert R. Reilly says in his book, *Surprised by Beauty*, that “Igor Stravinsky proclaimed, ‘The profound meaning of music and its essential aim is to promote a communion, a

union of man with his fellowman and with the Supreme Being.’ However, the hieratic role of music was lost for most of the 20th century because the belief on which it was based was lost,” (21). Church music, especially in the Evangelical context, has degraded to a point where it is little but a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure that satisfies the desires of the individual. Ultimately, the problem is this: Western civilization’s concept of beauty and order in music has vanished. This concept of beauty is rooted in God’s mathematical and musical ordering of the world, in which consonance, or agreement, between tones is based on whole number ratios. We no longer categorize any music as “ugly,” or untrue, and thus, nothing can truly be categorized as “beautiful,” or true. There is no longer a musical standard, or objective truth, and therefore no beauty or absolute order—there is nothing to which we should aspire musically.

There are two generic categories of sacred music. These two types of sacred music are both suitable and necessary for musical worship in a liturgical context. The first is music to which the congregation sings along. This music should be simple, accessible, and easy to learn, so that the tune of the music helps root theological knowledge in their souls. The second is that which is sung and played by the musically gifted, never as a performance, but as a central component to the liturgy that deepens the congregation’s understanding of the topic it concerns. Both types are important to the individual’s faith, and both types are falling apart. This presentation will focus on the second type, but all of its arguments, except for the argument about complexity, apply also to congregational sing-along music.

Does the Church need beauty? Many Christians today think this question doesn’t need an answer, and churches who find the question of music unimportant settle for ugly, theologically shallow, and egocentric music. But to become aware of its importance, one should first answer this question instead: “Does ugliness belong in the Church?”—and it would seem safe to concede

that ugliness, which I will refer to as untruth, does not belong in the Church, because the God we worship is not a God of ugliness or untruth, but a God of truth and beauty, and a beautiful God would not want the untrue defiling his holy Church. However, many churches today think it is perfectly fine to use the music of a profane culture in their sanctuaries, so long as it is done with the right attitude. This leaves the term “ugly” in need of a definition, especially in the context of music. If ugliness is to be opposed, we need to determine how ugly music comes about, and then how beautiful music comes about. Excessive dissonance, or music that employs notes that clash without resolution, belongs to the hedonistic pleasure in what is profane and unordered. Many congregations have rejected the tradition built by the Church before them and allowed the staged performance of pop-style songs with catchy but musically and theologically uninteresting tunes. Equally important, the quality of the language within Christian music has declined to the point where the congregation no longer learns about theology or the Bible. Shouldn't these things alarm us? Shouldn't we be concerned that the music in the Church has degraded to a point of embarrassment, where many of the songs used today contain little that benefits the congregations they are supposed to serve?

Today, a disproportionate emphasis is put on the beat in music. The beat is the easiest element of contemporary music to discern, and it is a more superficial element than harmony and dynamics. Interestingly, though, we *enjoy* such a superficial aspect in our music because it takes no effort to understand: it tells us what we want to hear when we want to hear it. We have become satisfied with the almost animalistic commitment to the beat. Of course, there is nothing bad about the beat in and of itself. The beat is just an emphasis on rhythm (and all music has rhythm), but the real concern rises from how the pounding beat appeals to us. It responds to an instinctive animal desire that overrides rationality and the intellect. It doesn't challenge the

intellect, but it satisfies an innate desire for an earthy, rhythmic, loud, and repetitive pounding.

When the intellect is degraded, it no longer takes much to satisfy that intellect. In response to this desire, modern music-makers produce meaningless music that only provides a rhythmic, sexualized beat.

Most Evangelical churchgoers would object to any one of these things being ugly with a statement like this, “I enjoy listening to that particular type of music, and I can relate to the situation of the singer; therefore, it is beautiful and beneficial to me.” However, the beautiful and true is not that which gratifies our personal pleasures and desires, or that which satisfies us, but that which takes us beyond our individual preferences and draws us toward something greater. Saint Thomas Aquinas upheld three criteria for beauty: *integritas*, or perfection, *consonantia*, or harmony, and *claritas*, brightness (Aquinas 201). He bases each component of beauty on God’s nature, because beauty is part of God, and God is beauty. If God is beauty itself, then is He a person who exists to pleasure us, to satisfy our desires? I should think not! By defining beauty as whatever makes us happy or whatever keeps our hips moving, we are saying that God exists, at least in part, to make us happy and keep our hips moving, since He is the only person who is fully beautiful. Wisdom 13:1-3 says that

All men are vain, who are not under the knowledge of God, and who, from these good things that are seen, were not able to understand he who is, nor, by paying attention to the works, did they acknowledge he who was the artisan. Instead, they had considered either the fire, or the air, or the atmosphere, or the circle of stars, or the great sea, or the sun and moon, to be gods that rule the world. If they, being delighted by such sights, supposed them to be gods, let them know how great the Lord of them is in splendor. For he who created all things is the author of beauty.

God is beauty, but we don’t have God to give us pleasure, but to draw us out of ourselves and toward him. Saint Augustine says in *De Trinitate* that

[the soul] sees some things intrinsically excellent, in that more excellent nature which is God: and whereas it ought to remain steadfast that it may enjoy them, it is turned away from Him, by wishing to appropriate those things to itself, and not to be like to Him by His gift, but to be what He is by its own, and it begins to move and slip gradually down into less and less.” (X, 5, 7, 16)

Man in his corruption can wrongly perceive the ugly to be beautiful, because he wants to seek beauty without seeking God, but it is God’s divine *attractiveness* that makes music beautiful, and sacred music can deliver a little slice of that to those beholding it. Similarly, listening to music for the sake of relatability does not draw us out of ourselves, but it instead draws us into ourselves. The modern music industry, including the Christian music industry, has begun to focus almost exclusively on that which entertains the listener. Georg Frideric Händel said after the first performance of *Messiah*, “I should be sorry if I only entertained them; I wish to make them better,” (Hogarth 67). Entertainment should not be music’s sole purpose. Entertainment is an enjoyable side effect, but when music focuses only on finding new ways to entertain the listener, it seeks only to gratify our desire for pleasure, not helping us understand God and the world he created. This profane standard of individualism and personal pleasure has invaded the Western world and ruined our concept of what true beauty is.

In Baroque music written for the Church, especially vocal music, everything—from instrument choice to the length of time a singer holds a syllable—has a higher, sacred meaning. When we listen attentively and thoughtfully to a Bach aria, we cannot exhaust its supply of knowledge and inspiration. Every time we listen, we learn something new. It never becomes old and boring. Beautiful music, like that of Bach, Purcell, Händel, and Pergolesi, demonstrates that truth is never exhausted. A well-considered work can influence the soul as intensely as it can influence the senses. An analysis of the beginning of one of Bach’s more obscure, but beautiful and theologically dense, arias will help us understand how meaning works in Baroque music, and

also why the Church needs music that helps its congregations actually learn about the Lord they worship. There are of course, degrees of beauty, and contemporary music cannot be considered a completely degenerate form of music that is useless to the congregation. The problem is that it uses things that have potential for beauty in unbeautiful ways, and it is simply something that ought to be improved upon. We consider a two year old's scribbles beautiful, because, disregarding the cuteness factor, those scribbles are his best work at producing something that edifies him and others. He is not yet capable of more, because his rationality is limited by the fact that he is a two year old. However, as we become mature, our standard for beauty should also mature, and most contemporary music displays an immature understanding of beauty and meaning. We should continue to aspire to something greater, because Christianity is a religion of aspiring to the greater. An older person can have the musical understanding of a two year old, but this is most likely not his fault, but a result of not being exposed to greater types of music. To show the Church the value of greater music, it first must be exposed to it.

The brief aria "Heiligste Dreieinigkeit," Most Holy Trinity, from Johann Sebastian Bach's BWV 172, is scored for three trumpets, timpani, a cello and bassoon playing the same part, and a bass singer (Dörffel, 54). Bach uses the three trumpets to represent the Holy Trinity as royalty. The confident nature of the aria, manifested in part by the deep, authoritative voice of the bass—who often represents the voice of Heaven or the voice of authority in Bach's music—and the kettle drums, which signify warlike triumph, allow for a sense of victory that cannot be accomplished through other types of music. The song begins as the cello and bassoon, both of which play the part known as *basso continuo*, or "continued bass," produce a single, short, indecisive note, while all the other instruments remain quiet. Then the bass line is silent for a short time while the piercing sound of the three trumpets and timpani—all in unison—bursts

onto the scene. In Baroque music, everything is centered around the *basso continuo* part. It is the solid ground for the music, and whenever it is absent, even for a short time, its absence has at least one of many symbolic meanings. In this case, when the *basso continuo* disappears for the trumpets to make their initial call, it is representative of humanity in awe of the united Trinity. After humanity catches his breath, the *basso continuo* returns and plays in between the parts of the trumpets. The first trumpet begins a second call with a complex train of short notes, while the other two trumpets come in a beat later together but playing separate parts. Bach's skillful ordering of the trumpet parts is reminiscent of the Son and Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father. When the singer enters, he begins with "Heiligste dreieinigkeit," *most holy Trinity*, going down a scale in a reverent tone, almost a tone of defeat, but then the sequence of the notes changes abruptly as he says "greatest God" and takes instead the path of an upward scale. When each note sung is higher than the last it portrays a certain emotion on that syllable—in this case, confidence. "Greatest God" is repeated three times in the first section of the aria, and on the third time, the vocalist settles on "greatest God of honor." The word "honor" contains one of the largest note intervals in the song. The singer plummets almost a full octave from an F# to a low G, right at the bottom of the bass's audible range. This plummet is another sign of reverence that is quite suitable for the word "honor." The aria is the singer's plea to God to enter his heart, and only a vocalist singing quite loudly can sing over three trumpets and a set of kettle drums. This enhances the urgency of the singer's request, and the volume of his voice portrays a spirited appeal that his heart may be filled by the Lord.

In pop, rap, and Christian rock music, we listen, understand immediately, bob our heads, listen again, become bored, and move on. There is no depth, either lyrically or musically. We wrongly conceive of meaning in music as what we can relate with or be entertained by, what we

can respond to, or what pleases us hedonistically, and an excessive amount of emphasis today is placed on one thing: the repetitive, loud beat that deliberately appeals to the bodily desires, instead of loudness and softness, notes and intervals, or even the words, which appeal to the intellect. Nicholas P. Wolterstorff says in his essay, "Thinking about Church Music," "on those occasions on which I have been confronted with [contemporary Christian praise music], I have found those who use it bafflingly insensitive on this point of fittingness. I also find the words painfully prosaic and sometimes even shudderingly inappropriate... The only conclusion I could come to is that those who had put these words to that music had never asked the question of fittingness," (14). This ignorance of fittingness greatly reduces the power that music can have to shape us into sensitive, artistic people by using musical symbolism to animate the music with meaning.

We see beauty in order. When a thing has structure and complexity of some kind, we find it beautiful, because that thing offers a glimpse into the order and complexity within the world that God created. The same applies to music. Music cannot be beautiful if it does not express order, because disorder is not a part of the divine nature, but beauty is. This leaves the question of what disorder is in music. One example is excessive dissonance. Dissonance, the clashing of notes (imagine an entirely out-of-tune orchestra, and you know how dissonance sounds), is also a form of disorder when it remains unresolved. Limited dissonance is a good thing: It allows for a larger capacity for musical expression, because dissonance resolved into consonance can be used to portray a host of things musically, especially in the context of the Christian faith. But what about dissonance should cause us to avoid using it excessively? In Plato's *Timaeus*, the character Timaeus produces a "likely story" about the creation of the universe. He points out that God ordered the universe in an obviously musical fashion, based on whole number ratios that define

the consonance of the universe, where stars and planets whirl about in a remarkably ordered fashion. These whole number ratios correspond to consonant chords, which operate upon the same ratios. Thus, dissonance, or deviation from the ratios of consonant music, violates the divine order of the universe. Even though Plato is a pagan, his insight through *Timeaus* applies to Christians also, because our God is a God of order, a God of beauty, and a God who created a universe that is clearly governed by very well-ordered mathematical and musical ratios. This disorder actually contributes to the disordering of our souls, because by continuously violating the order God created, we are in effect disregarding his holy wisdom in ordering the world the way he did (Kalkavage).

The early 20th Century was an era that birthed extreme individualism, the unsavory desire to rebel against all the tradition and culture of the eras before, and the composers who were a part of this revolution were some of the fathers of the idea of entirely subjective beauty—that the beautiful is whatever *I* am aesthetically satisfied by and whatever *I* enjoy. Beauty ceased to be common ground. Because of this revolution in the arts, dissonance became a common occurrence, and it seems to correspond rather uncannily with the decline of the Church.

Complexity belongs to order. It discriminates between greater and lesser. Complexity is what allows variety, so pieces of music with higher levels of complexity can be more varied and diverse in every way. God created a world of variety, which means that He saw value in variety—which is why it is a source of beauty. In a pop song, there is very little complexity at all; in fact, most pop songs operate upon the exact same beat and only a few sequences of chord progression. In other words, the material and historical resources pop musicians draw upon is minimal, and that is reflected in their music. Isn't it strange that we become entranced by the beat of a pop song, without knowing that it is the exact same beat used in every other pop song?

While pop songs appeal to the bodily desires with their excessively repetitive, cacophonous, and sexual beat, beautiful music appeals to the intelligence and the yearnings of the soul. John Eliot Gardiner says in his biography of J.S. Bach that

The specific task of music, as defined by Luther, is to give expression and added eloquence to biblical texts: *Die Noten machen den Text lebendig* ('the notes make the words live'). As two of God's most powerful gifts to humanity, words and music must be forged into one invisible and indivisible force, the text appealing primarily to the intellect (but also the passions), while music is addressed primarily to the passions (but also the intellect), (129).

Thus, people display their ignorance when they denigrate classical and Baroque music by saying that it all sounds the same or is boring, because, in reality, it is, from a mathematical perspective, the music that allows for the most variety of all.

What then, does ordered music look like? Ordered music has an intelligible structure that isn't impaired by appeal to the body only, lack of a tune, a dearth of meaning, and inconsistency in tone. Therefore, these two things, complexity and order, should be a part of music, at the very least the music used in the Church. When the music is disordered, it only contributes to a further disordering of our souls (as if they aren't already disordered enough). Church music should contribute instead to the ordering of our souls through teaching us, enlightening us, and shedding light on the unknown by bringing the Biblical text to life inside of us.

"The aim and final end of all music should be none other than the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul," (Gregory 1) said the beleaguered young Johann Sebastian Bach, who had been tasked with writing a 30-minute cantata every week for two years for the church in

Leipzig. Bach's quote, in a way, applies to all things, because the purpose of all things should always be to glorify God. However, art has a special status in the world of activities that can be used to glorify the Lord, because it allows humans to use the individual creativity that was given to them by God Himself to worship Him. Thus, people who have musical talent are obligated to use that unique gift, because nobody else in the world has it in a similar form. They are called upon by God to use beauty in music to express the infinite divine beauty of the One who endowed them with it. Unfortunately, in a fallen world, it is hard to preserve our perception for true beauty when we interact with the arts. Beauty has been corrupted and needs rediscovery, because humans are fallen and corrupt themselves. As the standard for tasteful music degrades, we lose sight of the purpose of music, which results in even worse music being produced and consumed. When we neglect beauty in music, the music we create can no longer be used to point toward the greatest Creator of all.

Music and the Church have always been closely connected. In fact, the entire glorious history of classical music is rooted in the Church. The reason for this inseparable bond between music and the Church is that music enhances our spiritual experience. The philosopher Roger Scruton says in *Modern Philosophy* that "this very timebound experience [of music] presents me with an 'intimation of immortality': a glimpse into the eternal, and into the joy of residing there, outside space and time," (Scruton 380). The act of making or listening to music—ordered by time—can introduce us to a world that can teach us and make us better Christians by showing us eternity's delights.

How do we effectively glorify God in our music-making? We can certainly know that there is a right and wrong way to produce music, because we are already aware that some things glorify God, while others do not. This rules out music that is blatantly sinful (for obvious

reasons), but what about profane and ugly music? Couldn't profane music apply to the human condition of depravity by functioning as a cry to the Lord from our ugly, ruined selves? Frankly, no, because if we produce music that is ugly, we are accepting that ugliness and profanity within ourselves and not aspiring to any level of purity in the work we produce for God.

Now that we have an idea of what music in the Church should look like, we should return to the purpose of music, because without knowing music's purpose, there is no use in defending any type of music in particular. Perhaps it is best to start with an analysis of the effect music has on us. Henry Purcell begins his cantata for Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music, with a moving recitation:

[Music] tis nature's voice; through all the moving wood
of creatures understood:
the universal tongue to none
of all her numerous race unknown.
From her it learnt the mighty art
to court the ear or strike the heart:
at once the passions to express and move;
we hear, and straight we grieve or hate, rejoice or love;
in unseen chains it does the fancy bind;
at once it charms the sense and captivates the mind. (30)

Purcell's music is a testament to the fact that music can change us by appealing to our emotions, and this recitation puts that reality into words. Few people can say that they have never been affected in an emotional way by a piece of music. The Baroque composers took advantage of this, calling the different emotions a musical piece can evoke *affects*, and emphasizing that a quality musical work must demonstrate consistency in its affect. The emphasis Baroque composers placed on the ordering of the affects in music is relevant to the Christian faith,

because we, as fallen, sinful humans, need our affects ordered as well. Music can be used as a tool that orders our affects through symbolism and emotional impact. Certain chord sequences can inspire or discourage us. In Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*, about Mary's grieving at Christ's death, the countertenor aria "Quae Moerebat et Dolebat" expresses Mary's grief in an all-too-real way: Every time the singer says "nati poenas inclyti," ([weeping at] the death of her legendary son), the word "nati" (son) is sung on a note right at the upper end of the countertenor range (8). The note can easily sound strained, and Pergolesi meant to use this as a piercing, even frightening, musical scream that helps us build an image of the pain in Christ's death. Because music can so beautifully and precisely enhance our experience by interpreting the text being sung, giving clarity to the text, it is appropriate for the Church to use music in the liturgy.

This raises the question of what type of music belongs in the Church and why. Should there be limits to the mediums through which we can spiritually express ourselves? We should answer these questions by prioritizing one thing, and that is the benefit of the music for the congregation, manifested in confession and praise. In praise, the congregation should receive theological nuggets through the music, and these nuggets can be passed to them most easily by using music that is consistent with divine beauty and helps unravel the meaning of the words. Most unfortunately, "Jesus, yeah!" music has infiltrated the modern Evangelical Church, and this theologically sparse music that makes little to no sense and only satisfies our desire for musical encouragement and a sensory experience has replaced the theologically dense music that was used before. Further, the musicians who produce this music clearly do not understand how to match the tone of the music with the tone of the words. Wolterstorff says in his essay that "fittingness...is the basic consideration to be introduced when thinking about music in the

liturgy...I have never heard any rock music that struck me as fitting the action of confession,” (14). It isn’t appropriate to be slamming away at a drum set and screeching out a horde of indistinguishable notes with an electric guitar for a song concerning the death of Christ or the peace of the Holy Spirit. There needs to be a better concept of musical reverence in Church worship, because if there is no musical reverence and tonal consistency, the meaning of the music to the congregation is only blurred, whether they are aware of it or not.

Adopting newer styles of worship without pause shows everyone how willing the Church is to conform to what modern culture appreciates. Conforming or blending in, however, should certainly not be the purpose of the Church. It is better instead for the Church to stand out as something different and unique. Otherwise, Christianity is just another religion for non-Christians to brush off their shoulders and forget about.

Thus, music in the Church should be suited to what benefits the congregation most theologically and spiritually. Church music should aspire to something greater than what the rest of humanity aspires musically. It should not only encourage us, inspire us, and evoke emotion in us, it should also teach us and give us revelation about God’s holy Word. Only when music accomplishes this will its purpose in and influence on the Church be most realized.

It takes courage to turn away from the pervasive influence of pop culture and its music, and even Christians have become so inebriated in pop culture that they have a hard time giving up the music to which they feel attached. Defenses arise such as “This music taps into my emotions more than classical music” and “That music is boring and all sounds the same,” but these assertions come from an ignorance of the truth that can be found within thoughtful and carefully composed music. The benefits for us as people and the benefits for the Church would be great if we chose to listen to music not for what seems to satisfy our superficial, fleshly

desires, but what satisfies our spiritual desires, our craving for something deeper and more fulfilling. Perhaps if more people realized this, they would come to appreciate music from the classical tradition after all! The solution to this dilemma is exposure. Christians need to be exposed to great music, taught about it, and challenged intellectually to seek out meaning that can enrich their praise and clarify theology in a beautiful way: by bringing life to text to bring the text to life in our souls.

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