

Extraordinary Music Workshops - Krakow - August 2022

I - Resonating a Theology of Song

Introducing the themes of the week

Some of us may remember the British film *'Love Actually'* which featured a catchy theme (though slightly annoying) tune by *Wet Wet Wet*: "Love is all around", it declared. However, as we shall discover, love and song are intertwined. And in fact it is music and singing that is all around us, especially in the modern world with the invention of recorded music and then the advent of digital music downloadable to portable music devices. Music in our world is ubiquitous, and songs become the soundtrack of our lives.

My brother Timothy Radcliffe OP thus rightly observed in a talk he delivered at the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin in 2012 that young people today make sense of pain, sorrow, joy etc through song. Hence, I believe that we need to pay attention to these songs, and to write commentaries on their words, and to weave their ideas and lyrics into our sermons. For the composers of pop songs have found a way to express what our peers are experiencing, and these songs help young people to articulate and share with others how they feel. So, fr Timothy said, we need to learn to sing the songs of the young, so as to empathise and journey with them. But I want to add: our accompaniment and our journeying must lead somewhere, or should I say, to Someone.

This is most evident to me when people come to me to plan a wedding or a funeral liturgy – many seem indifferent to the readings from Scripture but they are most enthused about their choice of music. In particular, they want to have recorded songs at the funeral and especially at the graveside or crematorium, or a song by Beyoncé as they come down the aisle, and they can be resistant to my suggestions of live music let alone sacred music and hymnody. For better or worse these secular songs have a significance for them, their melodies – though apparently not their words (since sometimes they can be quite unfitting) – have formed the backdrop of their lives and, like smells, can conjure up memories and emotions.

However, music is so potent that it has at times been considered a threat to the integrity of the Liturgy and to the hearing of the Word of God. Hence we find an ambivalence towards music in Christian worship that goes back to the early Christians. So in one of our sessions this week, I want to briefly survey the attitude of the Church Fathers (particularly St Augustine) and the thought of St Thomas

Aquinas with regard to Church music. Our role as pastors of souls and church musicians is to expand the musical horizons of our contemporaries, to give the soundtrack of sacred song to their lives, but also to give people a chance to be formed by sacred music and the Liturgy. For liturgical music isn't just white noise, as it can sometimes become, nor can it be permitted to dominate the Liturgy so that we use the Mass as a mere framework for a concert of our favourite tunes. Rather, music is to be a beautiful handmaid of the Liturgy stirring us to devotion, just as philosophy, the *ancilla theologiæ*, serves our knowledge of God by strengthening and dignifying and aiding the human intellect to grasp the science of theology. Another couple of sessions this week, therefore, will consider the way in which sacred music and choral singing might form us in virtue as Christians, and there will be an opportunity to speak about this in our own life and experience.

For music is an important and vital part of our lived experience. So music is indeed central to our human religiosity, and hence it is found throughout the Scriptures. Indeed, one of the most important mystical writings of the Bible is called the Song of Songs. So in another of our sessions this week, I will look at the place of music and especially singing in the Scriptures. Thus the early Church particularly emphasised unaccompanied singing, using the unique instrument that is the human voice, and even if it is supported by a musical instrument the Church has favoured that keyboard instrument that best imitates the human voice, ie, the pipe organ. Hence when I'm asked if I play an instrument I have often responded: Yes, the voice, which is the instrument God gave me; it's goes everywhere with me and I can practise it anytime!

So, such is the power of music. And we are here this week to explore and enjoy the power of music, and in so doing to give thanks to the Creator. We are here to expand our repertoire of music, both ancient and new, that is fitting for the Sacred Liturgy and which also engages the imagination of our contemporaries, which has the power to accompany them and speak to the new life they have in Christ. We want to be moved by the Liturgy and its song, but not moved superficially. Rather, we hope to take up the song itself, and indeed to become the New Song. This is my subject for this first talk as I sketch out what I call a theology of song.

Music as the art of time

One sadness of the prevalence of recorded music in general is that our culture has become so immersed in music that it is taken for granted – often heard but not listened to; music as an art has been cheapened, and has even become noise that shuts out silence, which is necessary for contemplation. The Liturgy, therefore, is a space in which modern men and women can encounter silence, and my

experience is that many crave it. It has been observed that John Cage's 4'33" is an eponymous duration of silent prayer – indeed, he had initially wanted to name his piece 'Silent Prayer' – and that it would have taken this length of time for a Priest to piously recite the Roman Canon in the *usus antiquior* of the Mass. That silence having been taken away by the constant chatter of the post-1970 rite of Mass, which is, worse still, amplified through numerous loudspeakers that resonate throughout the church, we need all the more to beware of noise. We need to foster silence, cultivate it, and re-introduce it. It might seem strange to some for us to be speaking about music but for me to begin by drawing attention to silence. And yet, as we musicians know, the silences in a piece of music, those pregnant pauses in a Palestrina motet, for example, must be keenly observed and marked or else the whole work unravels. So, too, in the Liturgy, "silence occupies a place of absolute importance" as Pope Francis said in his recent Apostolic Letter on the Liturgy, *Desiderio Desideravi* for liturgical silence is "a symbol of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit" (para. 52).

Hence the Scottish composer Sir James MacMillan observes: "Music has become a noise in the background. It may be a soundtrack to our lives, but it is mere background, never the core of our lives. If it were, it would change the nature of that core existence – it would beautify and sanctify it"¹. For music used to have to be made by oneself, and so music literacy was part of one's education. But it seems that as music has become more easily available – piped into elevators, buildings, and indeed into our ears and lives through our smartphones – so our music literacy and appreciation has fallen. Music has become quite ubiquitous, but it has also become a consumer product. Like so many other commodities in a consumer's world, we expect music to be available on demand, according to our mood and whim. Music has become something we use, and sometimes, abuse; a tool for us to wield at will.

MacMillan says, for example that "when you use music simply as background, you lose the essence of what music is"². So, the result is that we might have lost sight of music as a gift. Because if music is recorded, and available on demand, copied, downloaded, shared, and at hand to be played at any time, repeating the same track or bars over and over again, can we really grasp the essential nature of music as gift?

¹ Verboven (ed.), *The Dominican Way* (London: Continuum, 2011), 35.

² *Ibid.*

For, as Etienne Gilson and others have said, music is “an art of time”³, so that, music’s nature is essentially ephemeral; the song blooms and fades with each note, passing away with every beat and elapsing second. Any structure or architecture to the complete musical form is possible because of our memory, as our brains recall and construct the entire musical shape. Understanding a sentence works in a similar way, and as we shall see, the human capacity for language is linked to our capacity to perceive music.

But although music is time-bound, it is paradoxically, as MacMillan says, able to “expand one’s awareness of the reality of timelessness”, and indeed, make us conscious of God who is outside of time⁴. Music moves us to experience the Transcendent, as we glimpse what T. S. Eliot calls “moments in and and out of time”⁵. This transcendent, ephemeral art form, Music, is the only kind of art I can think of that has to be constantly maintained in being. Unlike a painting, you can’t just buy it and hang it up, it has to be invested in continually – both in terms of energy and financial resources – in order for it to be. It is this *contingency* of the being of music, its fragility and ephemeral nature, that is the launchpad of my reflections in this talk.

To my mind, music’s passing existence points to the contingency of all being itself, and to the energy, the love that has to be invested for things to be. And this awesome reality is often ignored. It seems to me more than just mere coincidence that even as our technologically-accomplished modern world has taken music for granted, so there is also a tendency to take being and existence for granted. Although we are now more aware of the fragility of nature, and the so-called climate emergency, there is nevertheless still an indifference or even an atheistic antagonism to religion and the notion of the Creator. Perhaps sensitivity to music can help correct that. As MacMillan says, “it’s that immateriality [of music] that makes us asks questions about the otherness of things and can open up our lives to being touched by powers that are not visible or physical”⁶.

So, I want to develop this idea, using music and song in particular as a theological analogy for our doctrine of creation and the life of grace. I want to consider how the wonderful truths of Faith about the natural and supernatural life can be

³ Gilson, *Forms and Substance in the Arts* (New York: Scribner, 1966), 146.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, Verboven, 34.

⁵ Cited in Murray, *In the Grip of Light* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

explored through the image of song, and to recall that, like music, these are gifts; acts of divine love.

The music instinct in Man

The polymath Philip Ball, in his exploration of the musical “instinct” in the human person, contends that there is something uniquely human about our ability to hear and make music; it is “a part of what we are and how we perceive the world”⁷, and he believes that we are distinguished from other non-rational creatures in having this musical instinct. In fact rhythm and pitch – key building blocks of music – are essential to that distinctively human activity, namely, language. As the eminent language specialist David Crystal notes, in the process of language learning, babies perceive intonation and rhythm and what these communicate before meaning⁸.

It is well-known that Man is said to be made in God’s image because Man is a *rational* animal with spiritual faculties. So St Thomas says: “In rational creatures wherein we find a *procession of the word* in the intellect, and a *procession of love* in the will, there exists an image of the uncreated Trinity” (ST Ia, 93, 6). Language, or more specifically, a ‘procession of the word’, is thus typically said to be one of the distinguishing marks of our humanity.

However, music, and especially *song* encompasses both those spiritual aspects that St Thomas mentions. For the song consists of both a ‘procession of the word in the intellect’, and *also*, in its musical element, a ‘procession of love in the will’. For as Pieper channelling St Augustine said, in effect, “only the lover sings”⁹. What this means is that one does not sing because one needs to. One sings because one desires to, as a ‘procession of love in the will’, an expression of love. For love always seeks to do more, to give one’s utmost, to offer something beautiful and prodigal. So Romano Guardini said: “Music also is the entire lack of practical utility: it is a prodigal waste of precious material. It is a pouring out of unwithholding love”¹⁰. Hence, I would venture to say that singing, being a “procession of the word in intellect, and a procession of love in the will”, is a human act that perfectly expresses our Trinitarian likeness. It is also a human act that unites us to the angels in their praise of the Blessed Trinity, thus when we sing the *Trisagion* in the Liturgy,

⁷ Ball, *The Music Instinct* (London: Vintage Books, 2011), 31.

⁸ Crystal, *A Little Book of Language* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010), 11.

⁹ cf. Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990).

¹⁰ Guardini, *Sacred Signs* (Dublin: Veritas, 1979), 58.

the Preface expressly notes that we join the angels in their love song for God. For only the lover – whether of angelic or human nature – sings.

The Lover who sings

But of course, *the* Lover who sings, the Prodigal who pours out his unwithholding love, is God himself. And the love song which the Lover sings into being is not just humankind but all of creation. The Holy Trinity is thus the divine Cantor who, acting in his divine nature, sings all creation from potency into act; God sings all things into being and into existence. Tolkien, in his *Silmarillion* writes that the creation of Middle Earth is caused by the Great Music of the Ainur whose song is given them by Eru, the one Father of all. I only learnt of this idea some time after I first proposed this analogy, so I am pleased that I'm not alone in thinking of this! In my analogy of creation as God's song, I think we can see that creation is caused and held in being by the Blessed Trinity as one act of love.

So, God the Father is the origin of the song. One might say, He knows the song in his intellect, just as a Cantor has to know and 'visualize' the song and its notes in relation to each preceding note before he begins to sing. He has to have the song in mind. But without words, and without breath to produce the sound, this is not yet a song. So when the Father sings, then, it is also by his Word, God the Son, that he sings the song. And simultaneously, the song has to be sustained with breath, God the Holy Spirit. So, the Father sings the Song of creation with his Word and with his Breath, which both proceed from him. Once the singer stops singing the song dies. So, too, does creation, with all its polyphonic beauty and variety, depend entirely on God for its existence and development. Thus the entire Trinity is involved in the on-going act of creation singing and sustaining all in being. Were the divine Cantor to stop, then all would fall into nothingness – not even just silence, but non-being, truly no-thing.

Music, is thus perceived by many as a profoundly creative, life-giving act; it encourages, cheers, and soothes. It can drive away despair and depression, and, (as we shall see) in the New Song, music counteracts Death itself.

The Music of the Spheres

In fact, the intrinsic musicality of the created order is an ancient pre-Christian idea which endured until the Renaissance. We find it, for example, in Shakespeare who wrote (in the Merchant of Venice): "There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st/ But in his motion like an angel sings,/ Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;/ Such harmony is in immortal souls;/ But whilst this muddy vesture of decay/ Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it."

The medievals called this the *musica universalis*, which is a Pythagorean idea referring to the intertwined relationship between the harmonic structures of music and the mathematical order of the physical world. As such, the planets and stars (the 'spheres') moved according to mathematical equations, which corresponded to musical notes and thus produced a symphony which we could not hear. We find a hint of this in Job, where God asks Job if he perceived that "the morning stars sang together".

In fact, scientists have now discovered that the stars emit audible radio waves, and huge magnetic loops that coil away from the outer layer of the sun's atmosphere "vibrate like strings on a musical instrument". So, the Pythagorean theory of the intrinsic musicality of creation isn't far-fetched fantasy. And it seems to me that this idea of the music of the spheres is profoundly consonant with our theology of music, for all creation is not just sung into being; they take up the divine song and participate in it. The stars actually do sing!

Dissonance and Restoring the Pitch

And of course, it is not just the astral figures that sing. As we've already noted, we human beings are singing musical creatures, thus made in the image of the divine Cantor to participate in the Triune God's Song of creation in a special way. Each of us is a desired, necessary, and vital note in God's love song that is creation.

But all of us here will know, I'm sure, the vagaries of song, especially in a choir: The pitch drops, and the notes are not sounded truly and in key. This, I suggest, is a result of the Fall! For sin results in discord so that we find it hard to sing together without slipping and giving rise to dissonance. Indeed, part of reason why choirs slip is because the singers do not listen to one another, or to the song they are meant to be singing. Viewing this musical phenomenon theologically, I would comment that sin, too, results in a kind of self-absorbed individualism, a concupiscent reluctance or even impotence to co-operate with others, and so the beauty of God's song in creation is lost. Deafened by the cacophony of sin, and no longer listening to the Divine Cantor or to our fellow singers, it's as if we've forgotten the melody and the words of God's love song.

So, into the symphony of his creation, a solo voice is sounded that, as Benedict XVI put it, is "so important that the significance of the entire work depends on it"¹¹. As he says in *Verbum Domini*, "This 'solo' is Jesus. ... The Son of Man recapitulates in

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, §13 from <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini_en.html>

himself earth and heaven, creation and the Creator, flesh and Spirit. He is the centre of the cosmos and of history, for in him converge without confusion the author and his work". So we find that in the Scriptures, the coming of Christ is heralded in St Luke's Gospel by a fresh outburst of song – both the Church's canticles at Lauds and Vespers come from here - and this singing culminates in the new song of the redeemed (cf Apoc. 14:3). For Christ not only adds his voice to the song of creation, but he becomes a part of it and, by his redeeming work, not only restores the pitch but introduces a *new* song: the new creation of the Risen One inaugurated by his Resurrection. Hence, the eternal Word has taken on the flesh of music, so to speak, and as St Clement of Alexandria put it, Christ has become incarnate as the New Song¹².

The New Song of the Redemption

A new redeemed creation, rooted in the grace of Christ and his resurrection is sung into being by Christ. But Christ, by both entering into his creation and creating it anew is the Singer *and* the New Song. The Risen Christ desires to teach redeemed humanity to sing the New Song. Hence the book of Apocalypse says that the redeemed "sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. [And] No one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from the earth". So, we are to learn the new song from Christ, true God and true Man, learning from him how to be truly human, so that, at the same time, we are being divinized by his grace.

Indeed, the end of this process of *theosis*, seen musically, implies that we not just learn the new song by imitation, but rather, we *become* Christ the New Song. For we "abide in Christ and he in us" (cf Jn 15:4). Perhaps we could envisage this mystery like becoming *part* of the New Song, each of us a beautiful and harmonious note that constitutes the polyphonic richness that is in God, but without our losing our own distinct identity. T. S. Eliot offers some insight into this when he considers earthly moments of transcendent contemplation, moments of mystically being in God, such as "music heard so deeply/ That it is not heard at all, but you are the music/ While the music lasts."¹³ Is this not an ecstatic foretaste of divine life? Except that, in the eternity of God, the music that is our life with him lasts for ever.

¹² Cited in Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 51ff.

¹³ Eliot, *Four Quartets*.

Singing the New Song of Grace

Just as the song of the first creation is sung by the whole Trinity, so the new song of the life of grace, the work of the new creation, is sung in each of us by the Trinity. The Father initiates the song because he knows the tune. So, we might appropriate to him the work prevenient grace and of justification. Hence St Paul exhorts the Colossians to give “thanks to the Father, who has *qualified* us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col 1:12). We might say, then, that as the divine Cantor, it is the Father who shapes and gives direction to the new song. He initiates the life of grace, and has its supernatural end, i.e., the divinization of Man in view. In the life of grace we are transformed by the divine Word and take on the form of the Son of God. The Word, therefore, becomes flesh in us just as a song takes form, it takes flesh, is concretised, and becomes intelligible, when it has words. And our life of grace, which bears fruit in charity, is sustained by the breath of the Holy Spirit, just as a song is. So, we need the entire Trinity acting in us for the life of grace in our lives to be melodious and sustained and made beautiful, like one great love song.

But if we think of the life of grace as a song, what defects might there be in the singing of a song, and how might we relate this to the supernatural life of grace? To begin with, it is possible to just not have the tune. We have the words and the breath to sing, but there is no music. As such, there is no supernatural life of grace. For if one is not justified by God, then, humankind is left with human goods and natural virtues, but these do not merit heaven. But what if we had some notes, and breath to hum the tune, but we don't have the words? This, it seems to me is analogous to the state of those who recognize that Man is spiritual, and who long for heaven. But they do not yet know Christ's Word of salvation, or, they might knowingly reject Christ's Word of truth. Or some may make up their own words to the song, which is like creating one's own spirituality, or a selective version of the Faith. In such circumstances, charity and justice demands that we help them out by giving them the words of the New Song. What I mean by this is that we preach the Gospel, singing the New Song of the divine Word, so that they may enjoy and desire to be a part of the true and beautiful song that is Jesus Christ. After all, as Pope Benedict has said (and as Pope Francis likes to remind us), evangelisation is about attraction, not proselytism. So, there is a beauty and harmony and deep joy to the song of our Christian lives that draws others to Christ the New Song. We Dominicans are certainly, in this respect at least, called to be singers in this great work. And finally, it is also possible to know the words and the tune, and yet not have the breath to sing – one is asphyxiated. And I think this is probably the most

relevant to us. For some may know the doctrines of Christ and his Church, they may know of God. But they may not have charity, or may not draw the essential breath of prayer, and so they can not truly sing. So, these questions remain: Do we as a Church, and as individual members of Christ's Body sing a song that is true and good, and thus, beautiful? Does our song attract others? Is it an harmonious and inviting song that people, both far and near, can listen to, and become a part of?

Conclusion

And so I return to this point: only the Lover sings. As such, if I have not love, then to paraphrase St Paul, I am like a clashing gong, my song is just noise. The Christian singer, therefore, has to be a lover. As we sing of God's love for us; as we contemplate in music what he has done for us and for our salvation; as we make our song our prayer, so shall we grow in love because we shall know that God has first loved us. The love of God for us, like a Bridegroom for his Beloved, is thus the subject of my next talk. For only the Divine Lover can increase our love. Or as Ratzinger put it: "the Holy Spirit is love, and it is he who produces the singing."¹⁴

Therefore, St Augustine exhorts us, saying: "Now it is your unquestioned desire to sing of him whom you love, but you ask me how to sing his praises. You have heard the words: Sing to the Lord a new song, and you wish to know what praises to sing. The answer is: His praise is in the assembly of the saints; it is in the singers themselves. If you desire to praise him, then live what you express. Live good lives, and you yourselves will be his praise"¹⁵.

So, let us breathe, and breath deeply, filling our lungs. That is to say, let us allow the Holy Spirit to fill our lives, and so let us, in the image and by the power of the Blessed Trinity, give voice to the new song. And that song is "Alleluia", the song of the eternal new day that the Lord has made and in which we Christians are called to rejoice. Thus the great Polish pope, St John Paul II said, "We are an Easter people, and 'Alleluia' is our song!"

¹⁴ Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 142.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Sermon 34* from *The Office of Readings*, Tuesday of Week 3 of Eastertide.