

Extraordinary Music Workshops - Krakow - August 2022

IV - The Power and Pleasures of Music

The 150th psalm exuberantly exhorts us: "Praise God in his sanctuary... Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with timbrel and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Alleluia!" This psalm, beautifully and onomatopoeically set to music as a virtuosic aria for an upper voice by Monteverdi (SV 287), might give us encouragement to praise God with musical instruments within the Sanctuary, that is to say, in liturgical worship.

Caution about musical instruments in pagan rites

So, permit me to restate the historical circumstances, as presented by Giordano Monzio Compagnoni (from the Pontifical Ambrosian Institute of Sacred Music): "From the beginning", he says, "singing was one of the peculiar features of Christian customs" that was "exclusively vocal" in character. "Even though we have little knowledge about the Jewish liturgy of that period, either in the temple or in the synagogue, the general opinion is that from AD70 on, the Jews had banned all forms of musical instruments in their worship as a sign of mourning for the destruction of the second temple—a decision that, in the liturgy of the synagogue, would have fostered the development of exclusively vocal expressions." However, given that Christ is the living Temple, and moreover one that was raised up in three days (cf Jn 2:19) it seems odd to me that the Christians did not adopt the use of musical instruments, in contradistinction to the Jewish ban, in order to make the polemic or pointed assertion that the Christian Liturgy contained the true Temple, Jesus Christ. Therefore, it seems improbable that Christians merely continued the Jewish practice they had become accustomed to in the synagogue, even if, as Page has argued, there was a fluidity of influences between the church and the synagogue in the first few centuries.

As such, the early Christian aversion to musical instruments in their worship must have another cause. Compagnoni says that some scholars "attribute [it] to a concern about resisting phenomena of apostasy and idolatry", a certain fear of the pagan influence of instrumental music because the Greek-speaking mystery cults at the time of the early Church and other pagan religious rites consisted of "orgiastic music performed by flutes and tambourines and with dancing." And these rites were thought to be therapeutic, or propitiatory, or epicletic or apotropaic. Musical instruments, therefore, and the rituals they accompanied were associated with pagan rituals that invoked (evil) spirits. In the Latin-speaking world, songs performed with instruments were used "to beg the favour of gods for the military forces of the Roman people", or in fertility dances honouring Juno. It was believed that "every rite was endowed with its own efficacy to bring the

worshippers into communion with the divinity behind it." Therefore, the injunctions of St Paul, albeit with regard to food, come to mind: "Therefore, my beloved, shun the worship of idols... I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons." (1 Cor 10:14, 20) The sense, then, is that anything that can associate us Christians with pagan worship and rituals should be avoided, lest we be caught up in the worship of idols. However, while this argument seems sensible with regard to sacrificial foods which are ingested, can the same be said to apply to musical instruments?

Instruments as a Vicious Distraction

St Thomas Aquinas takes a different tack, about the moral quality of musical instruments and its effect upon us, which he gets from Aristotle: "Teaching should not be accompanied with a flute or any artificial instrument such as the harp or anything else of this kind: but only with such things as make good hearers." The concern seems to be that instruments are too distracting so that we no longer listen well to the teachings contained in the sacred texts. Or musical instruments would make us less than "good hearers" because they tend to disturb the soul and arouse the passions.

Hence Cicero, Quintilian and Seneca had written against the rise of new spectacular music in every sphere of Roman life in the 1st century. They observed "in the newfangled music [of their time] signs of moral as well as of artistic degeneration [and they looked back] nostalgically to a time when music was more serious or more sacred... Under the Empire, it appears, a more sensual quality came to pervade both vocal and instrumental music, the songs and dances of private feast and public spectacle alike." Suetonius gives a famous account of the emperor Nero who gave concerts and took part in singing contests because of a vainglorious love for the stage and public applause. This was the age of public singing competitions, not dissimilar from our own it seems. Think, for example, of *The Voice* which is a fine display of talent but when these voices are made to duel vocally, it becomes spectacle, and alas, noise. It is in this context that we can look again at the polemic of the Fathers of the Church when it comes to instrumental music. They did not aim their critiques at the "nobler art music or the folk music of the day", the kind that Seneca and Quintilian had alluded to. Instead, they took aim at "the music of the popular public spectacles, the music associated with voluptuous banqueting, the music associated with pagan weddings, and the music of pagan religious rites and festivities." In doing so they joined their voices with those of Roman senators and philosophers, and emperors like Tiberius, Marcus Aurelius and even Julian the Apostate.

St Thomas, of course, may not have known this particular context when he wrote his *Summa theologiæ*, but he reflected the concern of the Fathers in the early Church, and

an on-going concern that music and a good tune could powerfully distract us from the lessons contained in the words of the songs that we sing and hear in church. Hence St Basil instructed "while your tongue sings, let your mind search out the meaning of the words, so that you sing in spirit and sing also in understanding." St Augustine, therefore, famously said, "He who sings prays twice" because he offers a thing of beauty and harmony to God, but also because his mind is meditating on the words he sings. St Thomas in turn would observe that "the soul is distracted from that which is sung by a chant that is employed for the purpose of giving pleasure. But if the singer chant for the sake of devotion, he pays more attention to what he says". And so this concern continues down the ages, with a fear that instruments and a good melody will bring so much pleasure that we merely enjoy the song but do not pray nor render praise to God. And this is a real concern - very many church musicians and composers for the Church claim to be atheists or agnostics who are apparently impervious to decades of preaching and teaching.

Ironically, one of the most popular worship songs, written by the British musician, Matt Redman, in the 1990s has these lines: "When the music fades/ All is stripped away/ And I simply come... I'll bring You more than a song, for a song in itself/ Is not what You have required. You search much deeper within through the way things appear/ You're looking into my heart." But Matt is such a good song writer that these words are married with a great ear-worm of a tune! And the music, played with warm instrumentation, elicits emotion, but this does not always form us in virtue, nor necessarily create a lasting disposition of worship. Hence the worry is always with us that good music does not make us good nor does it surely lead to God. It seems to me that an ambivalence towards beauty as a transcendental, and about the power of art and the *via pulchritudinis* is born out of this worry about the subject's disposition.

Distraction in Prayer and in performing Music

However, distraction in prayer and worship is by no means limited to the musical sphere unfortunately. As bodily creatures, our minds are quite easily distracted and we lose our focus on spiritual things and heavenly thoughts, whether we're singing psalms, or reading the Bible, or listening to a Bach cantata. So, if the objection to instrumental music is that it distracts us from the words, then we have to confess that even when we have the bare text without any music at all, or any pleasant melodies, we can still find our minds wandering. How often have I prayed the Rosary or sang the Divine Office and found my thoughts to have wandered off?

St Thomas Aquinas, with a typically humane outlook comments that "the human mind is unable to remain aloft for long on account of the weakness of nature, because human weakness weighs down the soul to the level of inferior things: and hence it is that when,

while praying, the mind ascends to God by contemplation, of a sudden it wanders off through weakness." (ST IIa IIæ, 83, 13 ad 2) This kind of wandering of the mind is excusable, but not if we allow our minds to wander on purpose. St Thomas quotes St Augustine, "When you pray God with psalms and hymns, let your mind attend to that which your lips pronounce" but then he adds: "to wander in mind unintentionally does not deprive prayer of its fruit. Hence Basil says: "If you are so truly weakened by sin that you are unable to pray attentively, strive as much as you can to curb yourself, and God will pardon you, seeing that you are unable to stand in His presence in a becoming manner, not through negligence but through frailty." So, for St Thomas Aquinas, the fruitfulness of our prayer depends on our interior disposition: Do we pray with devotion, out of love for God, and with a desire to give our time, our efforts, our attention to God? Failure to give 100% of our focus to God because of human weakness is excusable, so long as we began praying (or singing) out of love for God. Hence he says, "it is not necessary that prayer should be attentive throughout; because the force of the original intention with which one sets about praying renders the whole prayer meritorious, as is the case with other meritorious acts." There's a subtle but humane nuance to St Thomas's doctrine of prayer and distractedness – he's interested in our intention and our interior disposition, and this carries over to an interesting observation he makes about choral music in our worship.

In ST IIa IIæ, 91, 2 the objection is raised that "the praise of the heart is hindered by singing, both because the attention of the singers is distracted from the consideration of what they are singing, so long as they give all their attention to the chant [music], and because others are less able to understand the thing that are sung than if they were recited without chant." The point about distraction I have already considered, and St Thomas defends those singers who sing with devotion and who, therefore "pay more attention to what he says" because through song he lingers over the words, and the music corresponds to the depth of his devotion or love for God. He then says: "The same applies to the hearers, for even if some of them understand not what is sung, yet they understand why it is sung, namely, for God's glory: and this is enough to arouse their devotion." It is interesting to consider that St Thomas would have lived and taught in Paris (from 1245-1248, then 1252-1259) at a time when the School of Notre Dame was developing early polyphony, and perhaps his thoughts on the hearers of sacred song applies to their reception of the new music being tried out in Notre Dame de Paris.

John of Salisbury, Bishop of Chartres who was in Paris a generation before St Thomas also commented on 'organum' as it was called, and he showed the ambivalence we are now accustomed to. He said: "Bad taste has, however, degraded even religious worship, bringing into the presence of God, into the recesses of the sanctuary a kind of

luxurious and lascivious singing, full of ostentation, which with female modulation astonishes and enervates the souls of the hearers. When you hear the soft harmonies of the various singers, some taking high and others low parts, some singing in advance, some following in the rear, others with pauses and interludes, you would think yourself listening to a concert of sirens rather than men, and wonder at the powers of voices... Such is the facility of running up and down the scale; so wonderful the shortening or multiplying of notes, the repetition of the phrases, or their emphatic utterance: the treble and shrill notes are so mingled with tenor and bass, that the ears lost their power of judging. When this goes to excess it is more fitted to excite lust than devotion; but if it is kept in the limits of moderation, it drives away care from the soul and the solitudes of life, confers joy and peace and exultation in God, and transports the soul to the society of angels." If St Thomas is referring to the same kind of music in his *Summa theologiæ*, he comments less on the music and its effect on the hearer and more on the intention of the singers at the sacred Liturgy: it suffices that they give of their talent and song for the glory of God, and this sacrificial act, an act of love on the part of the singer, should move us to devotion.

Music and Bodily Pleasure

So, it would appear, if we look at John of Salisbury's comment, that the issue isn't so much that instrumental music distracts us but rather it is the fear that ostentatious music "astonishes and enervates the souls of the hearers". The concern, therefore, is that, as St Thomas put it: "musical instruments move the soul to pleasure rather than create a good disposition within it." (ST IIa IIæ, 91, 2 ad 4). Are St Thomas or the Fathers of the Church killjoys that they should want us to shun auditory pleasure, or pleasures of any kind?

St Thomas states that not all pleasures are evil for human beings. On the contrary, bodily and intellectual pleasure is given by God, for we "have from God [our] natural appetite, which is moved to that which is naturally suitable to them." As such, it is good and fitting that human beings should delight in the good, including the natural pleasures of food when hungry, drink when thirsty, and in the rational pleasures of study and contemplation when seeking truth, and the virtuous man, therefore, finds pleasure and delight in doing good and in acts of virtue. Pleasure, in fact, is a vital pull factor moving us and driving us to love the good and to desire it. So, too, there should be a certain pleasure in prayer and in contemplating God, so that we love God and desire God. For "pleasure is a repose of the appetitive power [desires] in some loved good, and resulting from some operation" by which that good is attained. However, pleasure can be evil when it is sought for its own sake, or in a way that is contrary to reason. A problem arises, therefore, when our sung prayer is so powerfully pleasurable that we seek not God but the pleasant music. As a wise Dominican sister once said to me: we

can love the consolations of God more than the God of consolations. When it comes to musical instruments and powerfully affective music, therefore, St Thomas's worry is that it moves the soul to pleasure, meaning that it affects us in a bodily way.

We know the power of music to move us emotionally, and we feel it in our bodies. Certain tunes and instruments can induce fear or panic, and certain chords can move us to feel happiness or experience the thrill of romance or to remember and relive past experiences. Composers of movie soundtracks rely on the power of music, especially instrumental music, to move us in a bodily way. So Michael Kurek says that "music seems very strongly to present us with aural analogs or sonic symbols for the 'shapes' and states of being that are already familiar to us from our own catalogue of bodily and mental-psychic states, or else with analogs to human speech patterns. We tend to *objectify* - that is, recognize as objects - these physical (though invisible) shapes in the air and vicariously identify with them. We allow them to express back to us, or on our behalf, what we ourselves have felt as humans, echoing and affirming our own experience." St Thomas's point about instrumental music, therefore, is that the bodily pleasure that comes from such music can "hinder our reason or destroy prudence".

In the first place St Thomas distinguishes between intellectual and bodily pleasures. The former, he says is proper to Man as a rational creature and so "accordingly there is a certain pleasure that is taken in the very act of reason, as when one takes pleasure in contemplating or in reasoning: and such pleasure does not hinder the act of reason, but helps it; because we are more attentive in doing that which gives us pleasure, and attention fosters activity." (ST Ia IIæ, 33, 3) It is crucial to note that the key to understanding St Thomas on this point is that the human person is set aside from other animals because Man is a *rational* animal, and so his actions and moral decisions should be determined by the ordered use of reason; rationality is the distinguishing characteristic of the human person. Bodily pleasures, he says, can "hinder the use of reason in three ways. First, by distracting the reason. Because, as we have just observed, we attend much to that which pleases us. Now when the attention is firmly fixed on one thing, it is either weakened in respect of other things, or it is entirely withdrawn from them; and thus if the bodily pleasure be great, either it entirely hinders the use of reason, by concentrating the mind's attention on itself; or else it hinders it considerably." So, when it comes to instrumental music, the pleasure of the music is so great and moves us emotionally and in our bodies to such an extent that we are distracted from the goal, which is to stir up devotion of God, or to draw our attention to the words of the psalms or liturgical texts which would instruct us.

We can think, perhaps, of an observation made by Dietrich von Hildebrand about aestheticism, which he thinks is in evidence when a person shops around for the Mass

he will attend on Sunday based on his musical preferences, so he will opt for Hadyn over Monteverdi, or a polyphonic Mass over a plain Gregorian chant Mass, and so on. His concern is that one attends Mass not for the Sacrament or for the virtue of religion by worshipping God and giving God his due, but rather one attends Mass for the music.

Secondly, St Thomas says that "some pleasures, especially those that are in excess, are contrary to the order of reason: and in this sense the Philosopher says that "bodily pleasures destroy the estimate of prudence." What this means is that excessive bodily pleasure can prevent us from making the right moral choices and acting well. This is certainly true of excessive pleasure from alcohol, or from sexual pleasures, and we can see this in the nightclubbing music that accompanies nights of excess and sinful indulgence. Under the influence of throbbing music and other sensual pleasures, one can lose the power to make prudent decisions.

Thirdly, St Thomas says that "in so far as bodily pleasure is followed by a certain alteration in the body, greater even than in the other passions, in proportion as the appetite is more vehemently affected towards a present than towards an absent thing. Now such bodily disturbances hinder the use of reason; as may be seen in the case of drunkards, in whom the use of reason is fettered or hindered." Does music do this too? Perhaps in certain cases, as in the case of the use of instrumental music by the mystery cults. Nevertheless, I have witnessed the use of music in Pentecostal settings, in which the drums and guitar chords are played in such a way as to arouse the emotions and heighten a sense of a 'religious experience', to create a kind of religious fervour that may be said to hinder reason.

St Thomas's opinion of instrumental music and its power to hinder reason, it seems to me, is thus a summation of all the objections and concerns we have surveyed so far, and they do have a point because music can powerfully grasp our attention and hinder us from truly seeking God.

Music as an Instrument Cause of Conversion

But if it can this, then it can also do the opposite. As St Augustine famously said, when he first encountered the music of Milan (albeit as unaccompanied song), he said: "How I wept, deeply moved by your hymns, songs, and the voices that echoed through your Church! What emotion I experienced in them! Those sounds flowed into my ears distilling the truth in my heart. A feeling of devotion surged within me, and tears streamed down my face - tears that did me good." This Father of the Church was clearly comfortable with being physically moved to tears by the sacred music he heard, although, as we have seen, he later says that it was the words that moved him!

Ratzinger also attests to the apologetic power of music. He writes that "The encounter with the beautiful can become the wound of the arrow that strikes the heart and in this way opens our eyes, so that later, from this experience, we take the criteria for judgement and can correctly evaluate the arguments. For me an unforgettable experience was the Bach concert that Leonard Bernstein conducted in Munich after the sudden death of Karl Richter. 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."

The key to Ratzinger's anecdote, I think, is that our initial encounter with beauty becomes something that we reflect on later that leads to a deeper conversion. Beauty, as it were, plants a seed, a desire in our hearts, for more beauty, and so, for God who is Truth as well as Beauty. As human beings, with intellect and will, rationality and appetitive desires, we need both truth and beauty. Thus Michael Waddell says: "Truth as such merely commands our intellectual assent, but this does not automatically mean that it provides us delight or joy, which is what we have in the contemplation of the beautiful." Sometimes, one's encounter with the beautiful and the joy it engenders becomes a Damascus moment. The French diplomat and poet Paul Claudel recounts entering Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris during Vespers on Christmas day in 1888. He listened to the psalms and the Magnificat being sung and then, he says, "In an instant, my heart was touched and I believed. I believed with such a strength of adherence, with such an uplifting of my entire being, with such powerful conviction, with such a certainty leaving no room for any kind of doubt, that since then all the books, all the arguments, all the incidents and accidents of a busy life have been unable to shake my faith, nor indeed to affect it in any way." Incidents like this remind us that the final cause of a conversion, of the gift of faith, is God. God alone converts human hearts. However, the instrument cause of that conversion may well be a song, or choral Vespers, or a great Bach cantata. Consequently, we build beautiful churches, sing our love songs to God, and preach sound homilies, and we strive to do these things with devotion, making of all our actions a prayer that is pleasing to God and which brings pleasure because it directs us towards God, our final good.

Logike Latreia

So, how are we to praise the Lord as psalm 150 tells us to? What kind of music and instruments (if any) does the sacred Liturgy require? Ratzinger sums up the concern that we allow music to lead us into an emotive religion, and I think he explains well the

ethos of Christian liturgical music. He points to St Paul's appeal that we "present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (Rom 10:1) As we have seen, only the lover sings, and only the lover can offer sacrifice. Therefore, we are exhorted to sing to God with love, sacrificially giving our bodies to the making of music, to the singing of the love song that the Church, the Bride has for God, the Bridegroom. This song, St Paul says, is *logike latreia*, which Ratzinger says is "divine worship shaped by the word". This doesn't mean a rationalistic, iconoclastic worship such as the primitive Calvinists or Puritans tried to impose. Rather, Ratzinger argues, "'word' in the sense of the Bible is more than 'text', and understanding reaches further than the banal understandability of what is immediately clear to everyone and can be accommodated to the most superficial rationality. But it is correct that music which serves worship 'in spirit and truth' cannot be rhythmic ecstasy, sensual intimation or anesthetisation, subjective sentimentality, or superficial entertainment; instead it is ordered to a message, to a comprehensive, spiritual and in the fullest sense rational statement. In other words, it is correct to say that music in a comprehensive sense and deep down inside must correspond to his 'word', and indeed serve it." To paraphrase Matt Redman's lyrics, the music must fade so that we can be led to the heart of worship, which is all about Jesus.

Music fit for the Liturgy

My final question today, then, is: What does this music orientated towards the Word of God sound like, then? *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states that "The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as specially suited to the Roman liturgy: therefore, other things being equal, it should be given pride of place in liturgical services." (116) Why is it especially suited to the Liturgy? Because it has certain qualities that are conducive to prayer, divine worship, and the teaching of Christian virtue. I recall a decade or so ago, I visited the Jacobin church in Toulouse where the relics of St Thomas Aquinas are enshrined under the altar. The church, sadly, is in the hands of the State, and it is a significant tourist attraction. However, with permission, it is possible to arrange to offer Mass on the altar, and I was very blessed to be able to do so when I went on pilgrimage with a group of Dominican Sisters. We struggled, though, to hear the readings and so on because the tourists milling around were talking, tour guides were speaking over them, and children were running around. I don't generally mind the latter during Mass, but it was hard to establish a sacred space for the Mass in these circumstances. So I decided to start singing the Mass. I chanted all the dialogues and prayers – even the Eucharistic Prayer – and we sang the *Missa de angelis*, and our singing soared and resonated in the beautiful acoustic of that church and the music enveloped us and seemed to create a cathedral of sound that sacralised the space. At the end, when the Mass was finished, there was utter stillness in the church, and you could hear a pin drop. This experience

has stayed with me because it taught me that chant was powerful and created the conditions for sacred silence, for prayer, and for attentiveness to the divine Word.

I will speak more about this in our final session, but I just want to name those qualities of Gregorian chant that make it so suitable for the sacred Liturgy. It is chaste, unemotive, and focussed on the words of the Liturgy; the music is formed by the Word rather than the other way round. So, what can be said about instrumental music in our worship? As I indicated in my last talk, we must make a concession for music that stirs our emotions because ours is an age that is ruled by feelings and which tends to think with the heart rather than with the head. As such, a strong emotional experience, which instrumental music creates – and we can think here of ‘live’ performances by Hillsongs etc – is an important hook to draw people in. We evangelise, after all, by attraction not by proselytisation and so sometimes we must begin by attracting people through beauty, through a sound that they are familiar with, and these are potentially instrumental causes for one to come to Faith in Christ. However, this cannot be the end point. The goal is a deeper conversion, a growth in virtue and maturity in the Christian life, an increase in grace which, I believe, will lead people to the *logike latreia* spoken of by St Paul, and expounded by Pope Benedict XVI.

For all sacred music, and the Liturgy itself, exists for the glory of God and the sanctification of his people. Thus, the Second Vatican Council, although it cautiously permitted the use of instruments other than the organ, also laid down this condition: “that the instruments are suitable, or can be made suitable, for sacred use; accord with the dignity of the temple; and truly contribute to the edification of the faithful.” (SC 120) For, as so many have warned over the millennia, not all instruments and, indeed, not all music or song will truly build us up in Faith and in virtue. In my final talk, I will try and consider how music can do this, and so enable us to sing a new song to the Lord.