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# Faith and Music

M. Alfred Bichsel

In Job 38:7 we read these words: "When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy." My task during this quiet evening hour of our Memorial Service is to point out briefly that the art of music is the eternal and inevitable companion of the marching of God through history. From eternity to eternity, from Genesis to Revelation, from Creation to the Judgment, music is the background for all the mighty acts of God. It all began at the creation, as God tells Job: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare if you have any understanding. Who laid the measures of it, if you know? Or who stretched the line upon it? Where are its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone; when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"

It flowed through Israel's history, and first of all we think of Moses, the great lawgiver and hero of the faith. Normally we do not think of him as a musician, but he was, as is attested in Exodus and Deuteronomy. The first of these two books contains Moses' song of deliverance after the successful flight of the children of Israel from the Egyptians. Hear a fragment of it - perhaps its climax: "Who is like Thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?" The book of Judges tells us that Deborah and Barak sang a song of joy at the victory of Israel over the Canaanites. When Samuel was born, Hannah's song of thanksgiving is not unlike the song of another mother who, centuries later on the occasion of the Visitation, sang the words: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour."

This strain of music flowed through the psalmist's songs in the night, the echo of song and psaltery and cymbal in the hymnbook of a waiting church. Muted for months by his unbelief, a high priest named Zacharias suddenly opened his mouth, and this sound of music burst forth: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He hath visited and redeemed His people." A feeble old man held a baby in his trembling arms. His eyes, dimmed by age, grew as bright as the stars in the night, and again this strain of music burst forth: "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy word." The echo of the Song of the Heavenly Host at

Bethlehem still rings in our ears almost two thousand years later. In the Book of Revelation, the announcement of the harps of the redeemed around the throne have become a part of the Christian hope. Always and always, except possibly at Calvary, as we follow God through history, we are never far from the sound of music.

But music that is not related to God and our faith is something less than perfect, no matter how beautiful it may sound to the human ear. Permit me an analogy. Some years ago it was my good fortune to hear a lecture by Father Roland de Vaux, a Dominican priest, who was director of the *Ecole Biblique* in Jerusalem and president of the Palestine Archaeological Museum in the same city. He was one of the world's leading biblical archaeologists and an authority on the Dead Sea Scrolls. In comparing the history of Scripture to secular history, he likened it to the two sides of a tapestry. If you examine the reverse side of the tapestry, to be sure, you see the crude outline of the design - the endings and knotting together of the varicolored threads - this is factual or secular history. But if you turn the tapestry and examine it from its proper side, you see the perfect design or figures intended by the artist - this is history seen in reference to God's perfect plan for man's salvation.

The same can be said of music. Music is man's counterpoint to the sound of an acting God. It is sometimes broken and alone, sometimes low and sometimes high, sometimes far and sometimes near - but always a deep, profound, and essential part of our Christian life. There is, therefore, every reason for us to give attention to this companion of our faith. There is, in the sublimest sense of the term, a spiritual music, an interior music, both human and divine. Music has both sacramental and sacrificial overtones. *It is a gift of God which becomes an offering to God*, the God who has so honored us by the incarnation of His Son and the redemption of the world. It carries the most personal and the most indescribable reflection of the divine presence in our souls.

The church of each age has made its contribution to this noble art, and the sum total of these contributions is what we have in mind when we think of our musical heritage. The Apostolic and post-Apostolic Church received as its heritage the musical concept of the Temple and Synagogue worship. To this Gentile converts brought the strophic hymns of their Hellenistic and Roman heritage. The church of the Middle Ages developed its musical thought around the liturgical routine of the Eucharist and daily office, and the Church of the Renaissance found a new vehicle for the same liturgical concepts in a rich polyphony. The Reformation brought with it the vernacular

hymn, and when Luther speaks of music and calls it the "Handmaid of Theology," he does so not as a dilettante, and not only as a theologian, but he speaks as a sensitive and well-informed practitioner of the art. Much of the music that we have in the church is the result of an attitude such as his.

A moment ago we said that music carries a most personal and most indescribable reflection of the divine presence in our souls. There are some strange and mysterious things about this process. The Gospel - the revelation and vision of God in Jesus Christ - was given to us in words, in language, in the ordinary symbols by which we touch and hear the world around us, by which we communicate with our fellowmen. God comes to us in words. He speaks in human accents. He talks so that a child can understand.

In an essay on the Bible as literature, Henry van Dyke has written: "The Bible speaks in hundreds of languages to the heart of man. Above the cradle and beside the grave its great words come to us uncalled. They fill our prayers with power larger than we know, and the beauty of them lingers on our ear long after the sermons which they adorned have been forgotten. They return to us swiftly and quietly like doves flying from far away. They surprise us with new meanings, like springs of water breaking forth from the mountains beside a long-trodden path. They grow richer as pearls do when they are worn near the heart." Now we may say: "All this is true and all this is wonderful. God has really been kind to us in using our language; our limitations of human speech, to tell us of His pity, His Love, and His heart." What else can be added to so great a revelation?

Magnificently and mysteriously, there is something else! As the Word of Jesus Christ the Bible stands completely alone. In, above, beyond, and beneath the Bible's Word is Jesus Christ. It can, consequently, be understood only on our knees! As we feed upon it, we become aware of great hands, powerful and real, drawing us toward the bleeding and glorious face of Jesus Christ.

And here is the place where sacred music enters the picture. Often the words of Scripture are trying to say the unutterable, the humanly incredible. By clothing them or their ideas in the garment of music the unutterable can become an audible undertone. Music tries to reflect the divine atmosphere with which the words are invested. It adorns the heavenly meaning of the words. It weaves a sequence of sounds surrounding those words or ideas which are the direct result of the Holy Spirit's working and once more brings God's words into human life.

Let us take just one example in which the meaning of God's words is in our perception made clearer, more powerful, more

glorious by the lifting hands of music. Look for a moment at the *Mass in B Minor* by Johann Sebastian Bach! There is the "Kyrie," the outcry of a soul that clutches at the divine mercy from the black edge of despair. Where is there greater exaltation of worship than in the "Gloria" with its crackling and brilliant trumpets? Never was the tenderness of divine pity more eloquently set forth than in the "Qui tollis," or the mystery of divine condescension than in the "Et incarnatus," or the grief of divine passion than in the "Crucifixus" with its excruciating dissonances, or the victory of divine love in the "et resurrexit." In all of these, the music focuses the words on eternity. There are a few passages like that in Handel's *Messiah*. There is always something like that in Gregorian Chant, and in the greatest hymns of the church. We can let God utter Himself by the hands and genius of His children, singing and playing and chanting, joining *the morning stars and the sons of God* in their songs for creation. With this there is something of eternity in the plainest church, the humblest chapel, and the lowliest heart. On Sunday morning we join with the angels in what they are doing all the time.

This is the great task of all sacred music at its highest and best. It helps form a holy bridge of sound between earth and heaven. Someone has said that all history is point and counterpoint - two melodies running side by side - God's and Man's. The Christian knows that God is working in history even though He cannot be observed. Even the melody of God - He preferred to die rather than to be without us! Taken together there is meaning and beauty in the rise and fall of these melodies. Their temporal dissonance is resolved into final harmony. The task of the music of the church anticipates that final harmony even here on earth - so that the singing of God and man, heaven and earth, time and eternity is the prelude to the day when God and man are finally united by sight, and heaven and earth have passed away, and time has been lost in eternity, and our music has become perfect.

Though sacred music is a part of the created universe - all the morning stars sang together - as God Himself told Job, it is also a great and high reflection of the essential unity of the Body of Christ. Sacred music always unites, because at the moment of worship the church is always one. The singing church is a single living organism in a world of disunity and death. In the worship of the church, its unity is heard and confessed. In its music we hear in song the Communion of Saints, the *una sancta*, the body of Christ, the *civitas Dei* - the blessed city of God on earth and in heaven, the beloved community whose choir we are, both here and hereafter. And we never sing to Him alone. There are always the saints who

have gone before, the saints who sing by our side, and the saints who will sing over our graves. They are always one, always in unison, always saying and singing that nothing can ever empty the world of the Communion of Saints.

One of these saints who has gone before us, and who sings with us from there is Walter Buszin who, in this life, dedicated his entire being and devotion to the praise of his Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, by using the gift which this blessed Trinity had bestowed on him. His great and numerous accomplishments have already been documented by others during this symposium, by a *Festschrift* dedicated to him by some of the world's greatest musical scholars, and by a doctoral dissertation written by one of his students. Thus all that we need do now, during this quiet evening hour of meditation and worship, is to thank the Lord of the Church for giving us Cantors like Walter, and an array of others whom he trained and inspired to carry on the solemn task of the Levites of old, the precentors and *scholae cantorum* of the Medieval and Renaissance Church and the *Kantorei* that flourished as a result of the Lutheran Reformation. During these dark and anxious days, all of us know that their task is going to take all the dedication and energy that God can give them, and that it will not be easy. If it is any comfort and consolation to them at this time - neither was it for Walter!

Let us Pray: Lord God, our heavenly Father, Giver of every good and perfect gift, bestower of all worthy talents, we give you humble and sincere thanks for creating the art of music and for endowing some of us with the talent to perform this art, and others to hear it in love and appreciation. Especially do we thank you for having bestowed this talent on your servant, our brother Walter, whose memory we honor today. Through him the love of this art was kindled in the hearts and souls of his students, and strengthened and deepened in the lives of his colleagues, family and friends. Give us a rich measure of your Holy Spirit so that we may be inspired to dedicate our entire lives to praising you through this gift, and may we be worthy servants in your church, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, to Whom with You and the Holy Spirit be all honor and glory through the ages of ages. Amen.

*This sermon was preached at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on March 16, 1978. Dr. Bichsel, former chairman of the Department of Church Music at the Eastman School of Music at the University of Rochester, is now Professor Emeritus of Church Music.*