

Music in the Great Tradition

What is music? Music is the universal language of truth and beauty. Music is melody and harmony, tension and release, consonance and dissonance, simplicity and complexity.

Strings vibrate and sound waves enter our ears producing emotions and responses. Why is music so powerful? Because music partakes of the harmony of creation, and brings to sound a universal God-given order.

Music began when God spoke beauty into being. The grandeur and splendour of creation reflects the magnificent order of God's handiwork. The sun, moon, stars and planets evoke wonder. Earth's plants, animals, trees and waterfalls summon gratitude and amazement.

Jonathan Edwards wrote in his diary, "Looking up at the sky and clouds I had a sweet sense of the glorious majesty of God. I saw God's wisdom, purity and love in everything: in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees, water, and all nature." All things reflect His beauty and order. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." All creation is to give praise and adoration to God its Maker.

Man As Image Bearer

Why did our Creator love into existence such beauty? Why did He create man in His own image and likeness? So that man, along with the rest of creation, might reflect and radiate the truth, goodness and beauty of God! From the beginning, God made man as His image bearer to gather and focus creation's worship, offering it back to God, voicing creation's praise with all his might.

Tragedy

But tragedy erupted. Life became radically fractured and shattered. The world was plunged into spiritual darkness as man rebelled against His Creator. The catastrophe of the Fall of Adam is that man's vocation as worshiper in creation turned into the worship of creation. Human idolatry replaced gratitude and praise to God. Mankind floundered in alienation and frustration. The result was fruitless and destructive living. The poet, John Milton, writes,

Disproportioned sin jarred against nature's chime,
And with harsh din,
Broke the fair music that all creatures made,
To their great LORD,
Whose love their motion swayed.

Man forgot God and rebelled against Him. But God did not forget man. God sent His only Son Jesus Christ into the world to destroy man's alienation through reconciliation. Jesus defeated sin and death on the Cross. He reformed man so that he was turned around to face God again.

Jesus—Bringer of Cosmic and Human Harmony

Jesus, through His death on the Cross, brought about cosmic and human harmony. He removed the dissonance of sin that the sweet melody of God's grace may sing in our hearts.

This is the surprising generosity of the Cross. Jesus was condemned by His Father and left derelict to take our place, and bear our sins. God's holy wrath fell upon Jesus that we might have peace and new life. The Bible says, "Therefore, if any man be in Christ he is a new creature; old things are passed away, behold, all things are become new."

When we look upon the Cross of Christ, we see God charging our sins to His only Son. Jesus died for us. His sacrifice makes us spiritually alive. We become new creatures in his sight. We enter the joy of communion and friendship with God.

"Hast thou not bid us love thee God and King? All, all thine own soul, heart, and strength and mind. I see thy cross—there teach my heart to cling. Oh, let me seek thee, and oh, let me find!"

The Music of J. S. Bach

An atheist once became a Christian by listening to the music of J.S. Bach. He said, "If Johann Sebastian Bach's music exists, then God has to exist for there is no other explanation for the glory of his music." When Joseph Ratzinger attended a Bach concert in Munich, Germany he said, "Anyone who has heard this music knows that the Christian faith is true. Such extraordinary force of reality and its impact upon our hearts could not have originated from nothingness, but only through the power of God's truth that became real in Bach's inspiration."

Bach believed that music taps into and brings to sound the God-given order of the universe. He said, "A well-sounding harmony results in the glory of God and the delight of the soul. The ultimate end or final purpose of all music is nothing other than the praise of God and the recreation of the soul."

David Hart summarizes Bach's musical worldview in these words, "There is a rich complexity in the simple. Bach's music imparts an expansiveness, an untold profundity of light and darkness, joy and melancholy, levity and gravity which reflects and shares in the life of the Triune God." At the bottom of his manuscripts, Bach wrote the Latin words, "Sola deo Gloria"— "to God alone be the glory."

Music historians suggest that of all Bach's Fugues in the Well Tempered Clavier, the Fugue in E Major captures the mystery of the Holy Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Bach creates a majestic interplay of three voices which is truly transcendental.

Music redirects our eyes and minds to God, the Author of truth, goodness, and beauty. It enables our understanding of the mathematics of the universe. St. Augustine said that God is perfect music—for He is supreme measure, number, relation, harmony, unity, and beauty. Earthly music is but a temporal expression of the eternal music belonging to God.

With such beauty all around us, why is man's mind crowded with deceit, emptiness and vanity? Why do so many people live without purpose and meaning? What is the source of man's hatred and destructiveness? That little, three-letter word "sin." Because of sin, the eternal harmony of the universe has been disrupted. Man no longer joyfully embraces the music of God's mercy and love. But Jesus came. He offered Himself as a final sacrifice to God for sin. The Cross of Jesus is the basis for man's healing. At the Cross we find spiritual, physical, social and psychological wholeness.

God is holy, and he has made holiness the basis of health and harmony in his universe. How can sinful man become holy? Not through education. Not through politics. Not through technology. Only by God's supernatural power. God poured out his holiness upon man as love—the love of Jesus Christ on the Cross. By His grace and mercy, God destroyed sin.

Because of Jesus' death, an invitation from beyond rings our hearts like a bell. A light beckons in the darkness. Each new day God waits to enter our empty, perishing souls. He offers to us life to overflowing—abundant life in His kingdom.

Jesus—Master Conductor

The 2nd century philosopher, Plotinus, describes mankind as, "a chorus grouped around a conductor who allow their attention to be distracted by the audience. If, however, they were to turn towards their conductor, they would sing as they should and would really be with him."

When we surrender our lives to Jesus Christ we become rightly ordered toward God. We abandon the distraction of sin and allow God to direct the symphony of our lives. The music of God's grace teaches us to sing as we should. We learn how to "really be with" our conductor.

The path of inward transformation begins with a simple prayer, "LORD Jesus, I believe you died on the Cross for me. I acknowledge and repent of my sin. I open my heart to you. Come into my soul and forgive my sin. I surrender to your great love and will follow you the rest of my life."

What is freedom? Often modern man has confusing ideas about freedom. Freedom is not autonomy to "do my own thing." Freedom is remembering that stars, acorns, angels and men all operate under a Divine pattern of order. Stars are free to shine luminously in the night sky.

Acorns are free to develop into enormous, luxurious oak trees. Athletes are free to subject themselves to a harsh regimen of discipline in order to win. Musicians practice hour after hour to perfect their craft.

Man discovers freedom when he realizes that he was made to be redeemed. When we take hold of God by faith, and lean hard into him, we discover our true destiny. The fever of life is cooled. We lose our heavy load. Our weakness is made strong. Life beckons where it used to terrify. We rise with reverence each morning to live with expectancy and gratitude in partnership with God.

Glory Ahead

What kind of world do we inhabit? A world crafted by God in freedom and love. A world made to grow and flourish towards a glorious future. And what is that future? It is the renewal of all that has been spoiled by sin and evil. It is the transformation of our bodies to become like the glorified body of Jesus at his Resurrection. It is the final re-creation of all the universe into glory, splendor, harmony, and beauty unimaginable!

At present creation is in bondage to decay. Beauty fades; there is futility and death. Dissonance abounds. But renovation and recreation lie ahead. One day, all creation will be set free from corruption and released into glorious freedom. Our short human lives on earth are simply a “getting ready”—a wise, careful, and eager preparation—for that great Day.

John Donne, the master poet, wrote, “Hymn to God in my Sickness,” after a grave illness. He pictures himself just outside heaven’s door tuning up to the sounds of the throng on the other side, just as a child might sneak into the back of an orchestral rehearsal and try tuning her instrument to the sounds of the great ensemble she hopes one day to join.

Since I am coming to that holy room,
Where with thy choir of saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy music; as I come,
I tune the instrument here at the door,
And what I must do then, think here before.

An Invitation

This is our glorious destiny: to share eternally and completely in the truth, goodness, beauty, and love of the Triune God who created us. Which is why the last words of the Bible are an invitation. “And the Spirit and the Bride say, Come. And let the one who hears say, Come. And let the one who is thirsty come. Let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.”

Will you come? Will you come follow Jesus Christ, your LORD and God? Put your life entirely in his hands. Trust Him as Master Conductor of the symphony of your being. Then join the great chorus of saints throughout the ages singing, “Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.”

