

Music and Spirituality: To the Tune of St. Thomas Aquinas | Fr. Basil Cole, O.P. | Ignatius Insight

The early Fathers of the Church became exceedingly critical of their contemporary musical situation for reasons of morals and religion. Many spoke against the music of their times because it was essentially either idolatrous or licentious. Music of the theater was but an extension of the pagan cults and so to attack music was indirectly to uphold the fledgling faith of Christ in a people still filled with the dregs of their old ways, i.e., sexually stimulating marriage parties, singing to their gods in homes or, on the occasion of pagan festivals, celebrating with their non-Christian neighbors. On the other side, we find the Church Fathers waxing eloquent about the many effects of their "new song" (the chant of the liturgy) inculcating the Christian virtues of patience, kindness, peace, joy and charity, bringing the assembly together in ardent and humble worship. That they likewise teach that music is subordinated to the words of the psalms is due partly to the influence of Plato's philosophy of music, and partly because some of them had composed or commissioned musicians to write hymns which contain the hard sayings of faith and morals made delightful in sound.

Today's contemporary musical scene is quite mixed (some would say mad). Certainly throughout the world, American rock music holds in its grip the cultural sensibilities of the majority of radio listeners, at least. Is rock music bad for one's spiritual life? Much of it may be because if the lyrics suggest an anti-gospel message (and many do), then the melody, harmony and rhythm share in that negative influence. But music can only suggest, encourage with its delights, not force anyone to act contrary to their best convictions. Yet, many suggestions can undermine felt and reasoned convictions over a prolonged period of time.

The analysis of beauty by St. Thomas Aquinas helps us appreciate the value of the musician because for Aquinas, the beautiful stimulates not only the pleasure of the ear but the delight of the mind. The three characteristics or properties of beauty—clarity, order and proportion, splendor of form—cannot be simply reduced to any laws of music or the supposed laws of the other arts. These properties transcend any laws, which is the key to appreciating the openness of Aquinas's thought to artistic evolution within any of the arts, notwithstanding the misunderstanding of the critics. Given his hints about

the possibility of a virtue regulating the pleasure of the arts, there is a virtue of music appreciation which regulates one's choice and attitudes about the music one listens to. As music lovers grow in the ability to distinguish beautiful music, they are able to turn the aesthetic experience of music into a preparation for contemplation of other things that may answer certain important questions regarding the meaning of life. Likewise, the virtue of music appreciation will lead them to know when to get refreshment from music and when someone feels he is becoming too attached to this pleasure and so must moderate its use in the overall life of virtue.

Aquinas used the notion of beauty to help understand that the creation of the world is shot through with beauty. [1] Looking at his commentary on Pseudo- Dionysius we discover that the reason for God's creative act is reduced to his beauty. [2] God wanted to make things like to himself who is Beauty per se. Hence the beauty of creation is spoken of in the following manner: "The beauty of the creature is nothing else than the likeness of the divine beauty participated in things"; [3] ". . . whence it is evident that from the divine beauty is derived the existence of all things." [4] So, it follows that each thing is beautiful in its own way. [5] Aquinas also says that this divine beauty gives unity, mutual adaptations, agreements in ideas and friendship. [6]

From another point of view, beauty of spirit consists in conversations and actions which are well formed and suffused with intelligence. [7] Therefore, from the point of view of morals and spirituality, the beauty of an entire life is founded upon the virtuous life which consists in the co-ordination of many human acts and emotions according to reason. [8] Because the instincts and emotions are brought under the order of reason, this inner activity of the human person, like a musician's, harmonizes, and sets in proportion the human life of the person. [9] On the other hand, immoderate pleasure sought for its own sake" . . . dulls the light of reason, from which comes all clarity and beauty of virtue." [10]

But the life of virtue is not only suggested by good music, it also helps one for contemplation. What is contemplation? For Aquinas, it means many things from the point of view of thinking about and loving God. But looked at entirely from a natural perspective, it is "a simple gaze upon the truth." [11] In the same citation, he relies on Richard of St. Victor's notion that "contemplation is the soul's penetrating and easy gaze on things perceived." This definition is easily transferable from philosophy to all the arts of the

beautiful including music. To listen to music is to contemplate something beautiful which is a structured truth of a made thing itself and may also (if allied with poetry) contain extra-musical truth either from faith or reason.

For St. Thomas, happiness itself consists in part (he does not exclude the delight of the moral virtues) through the contemplative act, most of all when it is infused by the Holy Spirit. [12] But happiness ensues when contemplation is done by one's own efforts as well, [13] so long as this activity does not interfere with one's responsibilities for then it will be pure escape. [14] To the extent that music brings one to the taste and joys of contemplative activity and life, it leads one to the purpose of the virtuous life. For the moral virtues themselves anticipate and dispose everyone and look toward the meaning of contemplative life, both naturally and supernaturally.

Thus, listening to beautiful music may dispose one to the contemplation of faith, since it mirrors the infinite beauty of God himself. [15] Could it not be the case that the strife and struggle to fasten onto ideas "by reason of the weakness of the intellect" [16] is eased somewhat by a love and appreciation of all the fine arts, which in turn strengthen the natural power of concentration on spiritual things? Might listening to the inner relationships of a work by a Bach or a Mozart, to use some classic examples, exercise and strengthen the intellect to more easily contemplate divine things? Likewise, might not the beautiful as contemplated dispose one to realize that there is more to life than simply or exclusively the material goods of the senses? Could not a sonata or concerto, or Benny Goodman's big band music of the 1940s suggest, through the intricacies of a well skilled melody joined in a deep relationship to harmony and rhythm, that one desire a life of more virtuous perfection? [17] These questions flow from the whole idea of contemplation as seen by Aquinas. [18]

From the Trinitarian and purely supernatural perspective, Jesus Christ merits the title of beauty since he is the perfect image or art-work of the Father, a metaphor and real analogy borrowed from epistemology and originally used in the fine art of painting. [19]

Also, in passing, St. Thomas says grace is something beautiful. [20] Like the moral good, the beautiful in this life does not fully satisfy. There are intrinsic defects to some degree in all music or all of art, as well as human beings themselves. These deficiencies are changeableness and limitedness or finiteness. [21]

From another perspective, however, Thomas rejoins himself with Augustine's famous problem of whether or not it is good to enjoy the pleasure of sacred music. Aquinas understands the perplexity better:

The soul is distracted from the meaning of a song when it is sung merely to arouse pleasure. But when one sings out of devotion, he pays more attention to the content and the meaning, both because he lingers more on the words, and because, as Augustine says, each affection of our spirit, according to its variety, has its own appropriate measure in the voice and singing, by some hidden correspondence wherewith it is stirred. The same is true of the hearers, for even if they do not understand what is sung, they understand why it is sung, namely for God's honor, and this is enough to arouse their devotion (S. T., II-II, 91, 2 and 3).

Clearly, Thomas has no problem with meaning and emotion, but merely taking pleasure in sacred music is not enough to justify listening to it in the context of the liturgy. This more clearly solves Augustine's dilemma. Also, these two very short paragraphs contain an entire spirituality for the sacred musician.

Since pure instrumental music, of all the arts, abstracts the most from concrete situations in reality, the emotions and joys that flow from it can more readily lead one to pose the deep questions about life. A famous Beethoven scholar, speaking of listening to and appreciating that composer's works, once said:

They [compositions which express spiritual experiences] stir elements in us; they reverberate thought in a larger part of our being. Certain emotions and expectations are aroused besides those that accompany our reactions to pure music. [22]

Taking many hints from St. Thomas, listening to music is more than simply sense pleasure and it needs to be integrated as part of life. [23] Its potential connection for good or bad with so many parts of life becomes clearer when seen in light of the contemporary experience of too much music linked with a major philosophy of life that is antithetical to the life of virtue. The problem with the contemporary scene may be characterized not so much by bad taste, as by too many consumers enjoying lovely melodies and rhythms

while accepting the anti-gospel way of life concomitantly promoted attractively by the sounds of beauty flowing from the now wealthy high priests of the contemporary musical world, rock stars.

The musically beautiful cannot be fixed in a mold for it is not static but changing. That is its nature. [24] Because of music's recognized ability through the ages to get down into the depths of one's consciousness very easily and quickly, it is necessary that theology take this art more seriously, instead of viewing it simply as a means crafted within a long liturgical tradition. Unlike our predecessors in China, Greece and ancient India, contemporary theology has completely ignored the profound effects of music for harm or good on the human spirit. As St. Thomas once said himself (perhaps in a pastoral mood): "While the appetite terminates in the good, true and beautiful, this does not mean that it terminates in different goals. [25] In other words one's spiritual life and music can deeply influence one another, if we take the time and effort to do so.

ENDNOTES:

[1] De Potentia, IV, 2c; S.T., I, 65, 4; 66, 4, ad 2; 70, 1; 73, 1; 93, 1.

[2] In Div. Nom., c. 4, lect. 5, nn. 352 & 353.

[3] In Div. Nom., c. 4, lect. 5, n. 337.

[4] Ibid. n. 349.

[5] § 44, 2; In Div. Nom. IV, 5.

[6] In Div. Nom., c. 4, lect. 5, n. 337.

[7] S. T., II-II, 145, 2c.

[8] II-II, 145, 2 & 4.

[9] Cf. S.T., II-II, 180, 2 and 3 where Thomas says that the moral life is beautiful insofar as it participates in reason see also Contra Gentes, III, 37.

[10] S.T., II-II, 145, 2c.

[11] S.T., II-II, 180, 3 ad 1.

[12] S.T., I-II, 147, 3 & 4.

[13] Com. in Eth. X, Lect. XI, n. 2110.

[14] Ibid. n. 2092.

[15] Leonard Callahan, Theory of Aesthetics: According To The Principles of St. Thomas, Catholic university Press, Washington D.C., 1928, p. 55, speaking of the subjective elements of beauty also suggests that behind emotion, there is something deeper: Finally, we grasp the true secret of beauty only by a comparison of the work with the ideal which has inspired it,

and since this is largely a personal matter which each one interprets for himself, it follows that appreciation will vary according as one approaches or falls short of the ideal behind the work. The adage "de gustibus non est disputandum" is valid in the sense that countless factors such as character, temperament, education, age and sex enter into the form and mold our taste; but it is not absolute, for since all men are influenced in some ways by what is beautiful, there must be some universally accepted appreciation of beauty. [16] S.T., II-II, 180, 7.

[17] As Kevin Wall, O.P. articulated so well: Thus morality, thought and art all converge upon the same terminal goal which must thus be the good, the true and the beautiful at once. Virtue, it (traditional Thomism) held, makes contemplation possible and vice makes it impossible in the full sense. Moreover, both virtue and contemplation are furthered and fostered by properly understood aesthetic activity. What contemplation on the way to self-possession shares of its quality is insight but that insight contains the knowledge that the distance yet to be covered is infinite. This leaves it restless. Morality is similarly restless since it is not brought to rest in the possession of the ultimate good. Aesthetic experience alone has the sense of rest of that possession, the sense of satisfaction and being at an end (A Classical Philosophy of Art: The Nature of Art in the Light of Classical Principles, University Press of America, Washington D.C. 1982, pp. 4-5).

[18] Jacques Maritain has written from another perspective: Art teaches men the pleasures of the spirit, and because it is itself sensitive and adapted to their nature, it is the better able to lead them to what is nobler than itself. So in natural life it plays the same part, so to speak, as the "sensible graces" in the spiritual life: and from afar off, without thinking, it prepares the human race for contemplation (the contemplation of the saints) the spiritual joy of which surpasses every other joy (S.T., I-II, 147, 3, 4) and seems to be the end of all human activities. For what useful purpose do servile work and trade serve, except to provide the body with the necessities of life so that it may be in a state fit for contemplation? What is the use of the moral virtues and prudence if not to procure that tranquility of the passions and interior peace which contemplation needs? (Art and Scholasticism, p. 62-63).

[19] S.T., I, 39, 8; In I Sent., d. 31, q. 2, a. 1.

[20] S.T., I-II, 109, 7c; III 87, 2 ad 3; In IV Sent., 1, 1, 2, obj. 1.

[21] In Div. Nom. c. 4, lect. 5, n. 345. Here Thomas complements Plato's reflection in the Symposium 211c where Plato develops the idea that absolute goodness and beauty must exist and must impart something of what it is to other things. This notion will find its way into the fourth "proof" or way of Question 2 in the Summa concerning the existence of God.

[22] J. W. N. Sullivan, *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*, Jonathan Cape, London 1927, p. 49.

[23] E. T. Gaston brings out the holistic question involved in the listening of music in his article, "Factors contributing to responses to music": To each musical experience is brought the sum of an individual's attitudes, beliefs, prejudices, conditionings in terms of time and place in which he has lived. To each musical response, also, he brings his own physiological needs, unique neurological and endocrinological systems with their distinctive attributes. He brings, in all of this, his total entity as a unique individual . . . (Music Therapy, ed. by E. T. Gaston, The Allen Press, Kansas 1958 p. 25). Also, A. P. Merriam's ten functions of music help us realize what goes on in the art of appreciating music: emotional expression, aesthetic enjoyment, entertainment, communication, symbolic representation, physical response, enforcing conformity to social norms, validation of social institutions and religious rituals, contribution to the continuity and stability of culture and contribution to the integration of society . . . (The Anthropology of Music, Northwestern University Press, Illinois 1964, p. 156).

[24] ". . . novelty is fundamentally necessary to art, which, like nature goes in seasons" (J. Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, p. 37).

[25] *De Ver.*, 22, 1 ad 12; Truth, trans. by James V. McGlynn, S.J., Henry Regnery Co. 1953. Leonard Callahan calls to mind the why of beauty which of course is involved in all the arts: It is in the resemblances which exist between the mind and beauty that we find the true cause of feeling of beauty; the apprehension of the beauties of nature and of artistic works brings with it a keen delight, because in their perfections the mind discovers an image of its own perfection, and the complement of its aspirations. There is in the human mind an innate and unquenchable desire for knowledge, of effecting through an ideal assimilation the union of other beings with ourselves. This tendency is naturally directed with greater force towards those objects which are most easily known, in which the object of the intellect stands out in greatest prominence. Precisely such is the case with works of beauty: their form, that essential, constitutive element which makes them what they are, shines forth with a peculiar brilliancy, manifesting the perfection, order and unity which are closely analogous to our own, in that it possesses in fact or in symbol, a soul dominating and bursting through matter . . . (ibid., p. 53).