

St. Thomas Aquinas on Music

By David Whitwell

With Thomas Aquinas (1224 -- 1274) we come to the most prolific Church writer of the late Middle Ages. Born to a noble family, Aquinas spent five years at the University of Naples where he came under the influence of the recently rediscovered works of the ancient Greek philosophers. As a result, Aquinas' admiration for Aristotle is apparent on nearly every page of his many books (a number of them based directly on Aristotle) and in his emphasis on Reason. His purpose was to demonstrate that the uncompromising logic of Aristotle could be reconciled to a religion based on unquestioned faith. His "intellectualism" was not well received by the followers of St. Francis, who sought God by Augustine's mystic road of love.¹ John Peckham, who followed Bonaventura in the chair of Philosophy in Paris criticized Aquinas for involving himself in the philosophy of a pagan.

From our perspective, his unrelenting dependence on Aristotle prevented him from developing original thought and when he does launch off on his own, it is so much centered in angels and in the soul as to be difficult in modern application. Before considering Aquinas' comments on music, it seems to us necessary to give the reader some insight into his related philosophical ideas.

First, regarding pleasure, Aquinas took the Church position that the pleasures of Reason and the intellect are far more preferred than those of the senses:

A person gets far more pleasure from knowing something by understanding it than by feeling it.... Intellectual knowledge is more highly prized: a man would rather lose his sight than his sanity....

People will forgo even the greatest pleasures of the body rather than suffer loss of honor; and honor is a good appreciated only by the intellect.²

On the whole, this solemn Churchman saw little to recommend in pleasure for its own sake. Some of his strongest arguments against the

¹ Will Durant, *The Age of Faith* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), 977.

² *Summa Theologiae* (London: Blackfriars, 1971), XX. 17. For the 60 volumes of the *Summa Theologiae*, we will cite the volume and page number of this complete edition.

dangers of pleasure are found in a treatise, “On the Governance of Rulers,” written for the king of Cyprus. Here, he warns:

Indulgence in superfluous pleasure leads from the path of virtue, for nothing conduces more easily to immoderate increase which upsets the mean of virtue, than pleasure. Pleasure is, by its very nature, greedy, and thus on a slight occasion one is precipitated into the seductions of shameful pleasures just as a little spark is sufficient to kindle dry wood....

Also, they who give themselves up to pleasures grow soft in spirit and become weak-minded when it is a question of tackling some difficult enterprise, enduring toil, and facing dangers.....

Finally, men who have become dissolute through pleasures usually grow lazy and, neglecting necessary matters and all the pursuits that duty lays upon them, devote themselves wholly to the quest of pleasure, on which they squander all that others had so carefully amassed.³

Looking at Pleasure relative to the life of the Christian, Aquinas, in his Summa Contra Gentiles, considers happiness from the perspective of the end of man. This includes a series of chapters, the titles of which outline his case:

That Human Happiness does not Consist in Carnal Pleasures
That Happiness does not Consist in Honors
That Man’s Happiness Consists not in Glory
That Man’s Happiness does not Consist in Wealth
That Happiness Consists not in Worldly Power
That Happiness Consists not in Goods of the Body
That Human Happiness is not Seated in the Senses
That Man’s Ultimate Happiness does not Consist in Acts of Moral Virtue
That Ultimate Happiness does not Consist in the Act of Prudence
That Happiness does not Consist in the Practice of Art

³ “On Kingship to the King of Cyprus,” trans., Gerald Phelan (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949), 79.

This extensive pessimism finally reaches the conclusion, “Therefore it is not possible for man to be happy in this life.”⁴

The overall understanding of the emotions by Aquinas is summarized in the following statement:

All the emotions issue from certain initial ones, namely love and hatred, and finish in certain others, namely pleasure and sorrow. In like manner, all the operations that are the matter of moral virtue are related to one another, and even to the emotions.⁵

He then arranges, under these categories, all the remaining emotions as he recognized them:

We are now in a position to arrange all of the emotions in the order of their actual occurrence. First come love and hatred; second, desire and aversion; third, hope and despair; fourth, fear and courage; fifth, anger; sixth and last, joy or sadness, which come after all the emotions. From what we have said it is clear that, within these pairs, love has precedence over hatred, desire over aversion, fear over courage, and joy over sadness.⁶

At this point, however, Aquinas begins to get into trouble. He is contradictory in his statements on where exactly in man the emotions are located, encountering all the difficulties of early philosophers who failed to have our modern knowledge of the bicameral mind. He also made the mistake of associating emotions with the object, not with in the person himself. All of his arguments following this line of thought make no sense today.

Because Aquinas focused on the object, rather than the person, he also failed to realize that the emotions are universal, indeed as we know today, genetic. Interestingly enough, Aquinas acknowledged that Aristotle had maintained that the emotions are universal, then goes on to say this view was now controversial, supplies a contemporary false explanation and, finally, his own incorrect analysis of what Aristotle *really* meant!

There are some who object to Aristotle’s position that passions of the soul, which vocal sounds signify, are the same for all men.

⁴ *Summa Contra Gentiles* (London, Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1923) XLVIII.

⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, XXIII, 183. See also, *Ibid.*, XIX, 49, 51, 57.

⁶ *Ibid.*, XIX, 55.

Their argument against it is as follows: different men have different opinions about things; therefore, passions of the soul do not seem to be the same among all men....

Aristotle's statement should be referred to the simple conceptions of the intellect -- that are signified by the incomplex vocal sounds -- which are the same among all men....⁷

Aquinas also follows the Church position that it is Reason which must control the emotions. It is this alone, he says, which separates man from the animals:

There are two ways of looking at the emotions: intrinsically, or as subject to the control of reason and will. Now intrinsically of course the emotions are simply movements of the non-rational; one cannot therefore ascribe to them moral, good or evil, which we have shown to involve the reason.

But in so far as the emotions are subject to the control of reason and will, moral judgments do apply to them.⁸

.....

Emotion leads one towards sin in so far as it is uncontrolled by reason; but in so far as it is rationally controlled, it is part of the virtuous life.⁹

Having stressed the importance of the emotions being under the control of Reason, Aquinas cautions that strong emotions have the capacity of blinding Reason:

There are degrees in being transformed by passion. It may go so far as to blind the reason completely, as happens when vehement rage of concupiscence makes a man beside himself or out of his mind; this may come also from some physical disorder. Passion, remember, goes with physiological change. In this condition men become like the beasts, driven of necessity by passion; they are without the motion of reason, and, consequently, of will.¹⁰

⁷ Commentary on Peri Hermeneias, trans., Jean Oesterle (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1962), 27ff.

⁸ Summa Theologiae, XIX, 33.

⁹ Ibid., 37.

¹⁰ Ibid., XVII, 91.

In general this is a difficult topic for a Church philosopher who must explain in left hemisphere of the brain terms something which is not located there at all. Eventually, Aquinas engages in a bit of “weird science,” in attributing an influence on the emotions to the planets:

We have already noted that emotional feeling is an act of a bodily organ. Consequently there is nothing to prevent us holding that impressions from heavenly bodies render some people more prompt to anger than others, or to concupiscence, or to some such emotion. Indeed they are such by temperamental constitution. Most men follow their passions; only the wise resist. And therefore in the majority of cases astrological predications may well be verified.¹¹

.....

[The heavenly bodies] may make impressions on our own body, and when the body is affected movements of the passions arise; either because such impressions make us liable to certain passions; for instance the bilious are prone to anger; or because they produce in us a bodily disposition that occasions a particular choice, thus when we are ill, we choose to take medicine. Sometimes too, the heavenly bodies are a cause of human acts, when through an indisposition of the body a person goes out of his mind, and loses the use of reason.¹²

Regarding Aquinas’ discussion of art in general, we find a few ideas which seem to include music. For example, he writes that for beauty three things are required: a) integrity or perfection, b) right proportion or consonance, c) splendor of form.¹³

In another place where Aquinas contrasts Beauty and the Good, he adds the very interesting comment that of all the senses, only sight and hearing also contribute to knowledge in their association with Beauty:

Those senses are therefore chiefly associated with beauty which contribute most to our knowledge, viz. sight and hearing when ministering to reason; thus we speak of beautiful sights and beautiful sounds, but not of beautiful tastes and smells: we do not speak of beauty in reference to the other three senses.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., 79.

¹² Summa Contra Gentiles, LXXXV.

¹³ Quoted in James F. Anderson, An Introduction to the Metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953), 88.

¹⁴ Summa Theologiae, XIX, 77.

A final observation on Beauty is very Aristotelian in character, in that the emphasis is on the observer. Aquinas makes a significant point in associating the perception of Beauty with the inherent quality of the observer himself. It suggests we should not try to use Art to educate the person, but we should educate the person to appreciate Art:

We have pointed out that a thing is called valuable in itself because of its beauty shaped by intelligence. To this shapeliness we respond because of what we are by our nature: each and everything delights in what matches it.¹⁵

There are some more of his views on art which have a relationship with how he perceived music. He places great importance in this kind of knowledge, pointing out that “men who have an art are wiser and more knowing than those who have [mere] experience.”¹⁶ And it is in this same light that he several times stresses that the man who has the ideas is more important than the man who carries them out.¹⁷

For the artist, Aquinas believed the next step was more important, the actual engagement of this technique. In one place he describes the process in the artist as being exactly like that of the speaker:

An artist first intends his work of art, next shapes it in his mind and fancy, and then in his material. Similarly, a speaker first conceives the meaning he intends to convey, afterwards finds a sign for it [language], and finally pronounces it.¹⁸

In several places, Aquinas clearly suggests that Art is in this technique, this carrying out of the Art work, and not in the Art object itself, concluding, “Art does not exist in the thing produced by art but in something else.”¹⁹ Aquinas recognized that a mistake in the technique is not the same thing as deviation from the norm due to genius:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, XLIII, 39, 77.

¹⁶ *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, trans., John Rowan (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1961), 15 (I. L. 1: C 29).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14 (I. L. 1: C 26), 19 (I. L. 2: C 41); *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, trans., Richard Blackwell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 84 (194 a 12 - b 15); and *Summa Theologiae*, I, 23.

¹⁸ *Disputations, IV de Veritate*, 1, quoted in *Theological Texts*, trans., Thomas Gilby (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 63.

¹⁹ *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, Op. cit., 529 (VII. L. 6: C 1381). In *Summa Contra Gentiles*, LXXV, Aquinas explains why the nature of the technique of the teacher to be more comparable to the physician than the builder of a house.

An artist who deliberately breaks the rules of his art is reckoned a better artist, as keeping a sound judgment of what they are, than one who involuntarily breaks them, from a fault, it would seem, of judgment.²⁰

For Aquinas, one characteristic of the fine artist was that the technique, important as it is, should not be apparent in the performance of the art. For illustration, he provides here a rare reference to a musician:

It is obvious that art does not deliberate. Nor does the artisan deliberate insofar as he has the art, but insofar as he falls short of the certitude of the art. Hence the most certain arts do not deliberate, as the writer does not deliberate how he should form letters. Moreover, those artisans who do deliberate, after they have discovered the certain principles of the art, do not deliberate in the execution. Thus one who plays the harp would seem most inexperienced if he should deliberate in playing any chord.²¹

He mentions the harpist again in observing that it is by experience that the artist acquires his technique:

For it seems impossible that anyone should become a builder who has not first built something; or that anyone should become a harpist who has not first played the harp.²²

On the other hand, in other places Aquinas suggests a more modern view, that the purpose of Art to be simply itself -- Art for Art's sake:

The worth of things produced by art, however, does not consist in their being good for human appetite, but in the good of the products of art themselves.²³

²⁰ Summa Theologiae, XXXVI, 29.

²¹ Commentary on Aristotle's Physics, Op. cit., 123 (199 a 34 - b 33). An exception, apparently, is the case of the dancer,

For men who do not have the art of dancing can move about but not in the way in which those men do who have this art. [Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle, Op. cit., 546 (VII. L. 8: C 1439)].

²² Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle, Op. cit., 684-685 (IX.L.7:C 1850).

²³ Summa Theologiae, XXIII, 51.

Aquinas rarely speaks of music as an independent topic and why this is so is a mystery, although it may have some relationship to the fact that Aristotle also wrote relatively little about music. But, when writing lengthy treatises on subjects like the emotions, or pleasure, why does Aquinas never associate these topics with music? Likewise, in a treatise on prophesy and a complete book on the ceremonial aspects of the Jewish religion,²⁴ Aquinas never once mentions music. In this case, since music is closely associated with both prophesy and religious ceremony in the Old Testament, his omission seems deliberate.

There are almost no direct references in the writings of Aquinas to music performances he actually heard and the indirect references offer a mixed view of his sophistication as a listener. In one place it would appear he appreciated fine players, for in a discussion of the soul he mentions the body might be “lissome and agile...like an instrument in the hands of a skilled player.”²⁵ But in another place we would have to question his ear, if not his disinterest, for he says it is no great sin, “when someone brags about his singing, when in fact he was out of tune.”²⁶

All in all, it seems apparent that Aquinas was not enthusiastic about music in general, but why? Was it the competition for the attention of the faithful from the rapidly developing secular music of the civic domain? Was it disgust for the Church music he heard while teaching in Paris -- especially in the example of the callous deception of the Church perpetrated by the 13th century motet? One cannot say.

In his most lengthy discussion of music,²⁷ a discussion of Church music, it is very clear that on the balance Aquinas found little to recommend in it. In this discussion he presents four rather negative perspectives on Church music:

1. Jerome does not condemn singing absolutely, but he corrects those who sing theatrically, or who sing not in order to arouse devotion but to show off or to provoke pleasure.
2. Arousing men to devotion through preaching and teaching is a more excellent way than through singing.²⁸

²⁴ *Ibid.*, XXIX.

²⁵ *Compendium Theologiae*, 168, quoted in *Theological Texts*, Op. cit., 409.

²⁶ *Disputations*, IX *de Malo*, 2, c. & ad 8, quoted in *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁷ *Compendium Theologiae*, XXXIX, 249ff.

²⁸ Aquinas wrote a few hymn texts which are extant and are given in *Selected Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed., M. C. D'Arcy (New York: Dutton, 1950). Perhaps he found his preaching more successful than his composing.

3. Musical instruments usually move the soul to pleasure rather than create a good disposition to it.
4. The soul is distracted from the meaning of a song when it is sung merely to arouse pleasure.

It is in this discussion as well that Aquinas makes his only reference to the rich tradition of music in the Old Testament. It is a comment anti-Semitic throughout:

Old Testament [musical] instruments were used both because the people were more coarse and carnal, so that they needed to be aroused by such instruments as well as with promises of temporal wealth, and because these instruments presaged the future.

In fact, the only enthusiastic vote of confidence Aquinas can make for Church music in this discussion is that it might help the fainthearted!

Vocal praise is necessary to arouse man's devotion for God, and whatever is useful for this purpose is fittingly used in divine praise. Clearly, the human soul is moved in various ways by different sounds of music, as Aristotle and Boethius recognized. Wisely, therefore, song has been used in praising God so that the minds of the fainthearted may be incited to devotion.

Aside from this discussion there is only one significant reference to music used in the Service, but it is an interesting one. Here,²⁹ he not only clearly associates singing with the "mystery" of the Mass, but mentions that there is one reference in the New Testament to Jesus singing!³⁰ He elaborates on neither.

His views on Church music notwithstanding, Aquinas gives evidence of familiarity of the history of early Christian music. In one interesting passage he mentions that the earliest period, when services were held in secret, included only silent recitation, but that singing began "at a time when the faith had come out in the open."³¹

²⁹ Summa Theologiae, LIX, 159.

³⁰ Matthew 26:30.

³¹ Summa Theologiae., XXXI, 53.

Other than on the subject of Church music, Aquinas continued the view held by the writers who commented on the liberal arts during earlier centuries that music “takes its principles from arithmetic.”³²

Aquinas rarely mentions hearing when discussing the senses, and never with respect to music, but in the following passage it is clear that he trusted the eye more than the ear. The exception which he offers here seems little more than a disguised warning to the Christian not to question the Church:

All things being equal, seeing is more certain than hearing. But if one from whom something is heard far excels the sight of one who sees, then hearing is more certain than seeing. An example: a person with scant learning is far surer of something he hears from an expert than he is of any insight of his own. Thus anyone is far surer of what he hears from the infallible God than of what he sees with his own fallible reason.³³

In only one place does Aquinas hit upon the essence of aesthetics in music, which, of course, is the nature of the perception of the listener. In this passage he is talking about the emotions, and not about music, but the point is an important one:

The intensity of a given passion varies, not only with the active power of the agent, but also with the passive capacity of the patient....³⁴

Thomas Aquinas, as a philosopher, was a 13th century regression to the schools of Greek philosophy which trusted only Reason. As a teacher he was no doubt outstanding in his ability to explain this older material, but nowhere in Aquinas is there the slightest evidence that he was aware of the tremendous cultural explosion going on all around him in music and literature, of the rebirth of philosophy or the blossoming of commerce, trade, travel and politics.³⁵ His vision was firmly fixed on the past, while the

³² *Ibid.*, I, 11. See also *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, *Op. cit.*, 12 (184 b 15 - 185 a 19), “Music is subalternated to arithmetic,” and 80 (193 b 22 - 194 a 11).

³³ *Ibid.*, XXXIX, 145ff.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, XIX, 15.

³⁵ Durant, *Op. cit.*, 963, without giving a source, explains,

He became so absorbed in the religious and intellectual life that he hardly noticed what happened about him. In the refectory his plate could be removed and replaced without his being aware of it.

Renaissance was beginning all around him! He must have seen it all, but, for a man who loved Aristotle almost as much as he loved the Church, to acknowledge it was probably a price too high.