

The Function of Music in Worship

SIR ADRIAN BOULT tells ⁽¹⁾ how some years ago he took a friend to a Henry Wood Promenade Concert, where they did not fail to watch the expressions of "Young Promenaders" cheerfully standing up to the two hours' music, after a similar period in the queue outside. "This is the next thing to an act of worship", confessed the friend afterwards.

The remark is the epitome of the confusion which today besets so much of our thinking about music and its relationship to worship. The *Greek* in us predisposes us to seek for beauty in our worship forms, but we are haunted by the memory of the Servant who "hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him". ⁽²⁾ The god of aesthetics tells us persuasively that his harmonies are heavenly, celestial, divine, the way back to a lost paradise; and Jesus says bluntly and disconcertingly: "I am the way". ⁽³⁾ The *Roman* in us endeavours in a pragmatic way to keep the music of the music-lover and the music of the worshipper apart, banishing the one to the concert hall and determining the standards of the other by what the majority can sing in Church, or like to sing in Church; what makes for hearty singing or what creates the right atmosphere. The inscription on the Cross, written also in Latin, shames us into confessing that there is no independence or isolation for anything in the world, nor for the world itself; that Jesus Christ is King in the concert hall and in the manoeuvres of our pragmatic apperception. When the majority want to sing sad old songs, how we blush under the judgement of the "new song". When Jesus says, "I will draw all men unto me", ⁽⁴⁾ how foolish we seem who thought we could push them with the right kind of music. The *Hebrew* in us, in turn, wants to bring more of the concert hall into the Church, to make a more perfect sacrifice, more music, better music, nothing but the best. We forget that the veil of the Temple was rent in twain and the whole Temple system and attitude is abandoned, the perfect sacrifice has been

⁽¹⁾ *Preface to the Divine Quest in Music*: R. W. S. Mendl.

⁽²⁾ Isa. liii. 2.

⁽³⁾ John xiv. 6.

⁽⁴⁾ John xii. 32.

made, we have a new song, a new liturgy, a new ground for our liturgy: "the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth".⁽¹⁾

In such confusion of thought many people are content with a vague philosophy of music with Christian affinities. The purpose of this article is to indicate in which direction a specifically Christian understanding of music, and music in its relationship to worship, may be sought.

The Liturgy of Jesus Christ

The model liturgy is the liturgy of Jesus Christ at the right hand of God, the "Lamb as it had been slain"—"in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts and in the midst of the elders",⁽²⁾ "Jesus the mediator of the new covenant".⁽³⁾ Here is the inspiration of the liturgy of angels and of all created things. If there is any original music, any heavenly harmony, it is in the perfect liturgy, in the mystery of the divine economy. Is it of such music that the Book of Proverbs speaks⁽⁴⁾ when it puts into the mouth of wisdom these words: "when he prepared the heavens, I was there. . . . Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him"? If there is any original music, then is it not this rejoicing, this delight of the Father and the Son in the mystery of the Trinity? Is not all other music in the nature of analogy, belonging to the realm of the created, (even angels are created beings) and not itself revelation? Revelation is through Jesus Christ the Word, historical and contemporary; and Christ taught us no melodies.

The Music of Heaven

Around the throne of God John saw heavenly beings who rest not day nor night, saying, "Holy, holy, holy".⁽⁵⁾ It is fashionable in certain quarters to make fun of the heavenly choral societies; but for angels, as we understand them, there would seem to be no option. Given the phantasy and the poetry which is necessary in angelology, it would seem we cannot do other than relate them to:

⁽¹⁾ John iv. 23.

⁽²⁾ Rev. v. 6, ff.

⁽³⁾ Heb. xii. 24.

⁽⁴⁾ Prov. viii. 27-31.

⁽⁵⁾ Rev. iv. 8.

“ That undisturbed Song of pure concent,
 Ay sung before the sapphire-coloured throne
 To him that sits thereon

With Saintly shout, and solemn Jubily ”. ⁽¹⁾

They are witnesses. Their service is the service of “ primary, authentic, constant, unchangeable and infallible witnesses ”. ⁽²⁾ The adjectives would serve also presumably to describe their music. And just as they themselves in their witness point away from themselves and shun “ the earthly creature’s attention, veneration and gratitude ”, ⁽³⁾ so their music cannot be a pattern and prototype of the music of the Church or of any other person in itself. It can never be separated from its function. It has no existence apart from its function, its liturgy, service, witness. Barth is insistent, and fascinating in his insistence, that the angels are characterized by “ a holy want of independence ”. ⁽⁴⁾ He points out that in the Gospel narrative their witness is heard at the beginning, and they are there again at the end ; but we do not read of them in the middle. They announce, they bear witness, but they retreat where Jesus appears. So, too, if in the Church as part of our liturgy we seek to echo their music, it will be music in witness, music in acclamation ; for truly their music is a song, and the music of our echoing song, however glorious, will be modest, where Jesus Christ the Word is present in our midst. The liturgy of the Church, of course, differs from the liturgy of angels, as we shall see. God did not become an angel, but a man. Nevertheless they sing the “ new song ”, as beholding directly what we know by faith ; and their praise is the perfection of spontaneous praise and the fulfilment in which the Church is now through Christ permitted to share, the Church in heaven, and in its way, also the Church on earth.

The Music of Creation

Under this heading we do not include angels (though they are created beings), nor do we include men. But “ there is a language of flowers ”, says Christopher Smart ; and Shakespeare is likewise unforgettably eloquent on the subject :

⁽¹⁾ Milton, *At a Solemn Musick*.

⁽²⁾ Barth, *Dogmatics* III3, p. 540.

⁽³⁾ *ibid.* p. 537.

⁽⁴⁾ *op. cit.*, p. 587.

“ . . . Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold ;
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-ey'd cherubims.
Such harmony is in immortal souls ;
But, whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.” ⁽¹⁾

The Psalms are full of references ⁽²⁾ to this music, and the Book of the Revelation (Rev. 5 : 8-14) gives it a history and a clear function within salvation-history. When the Lamb takes the book from God's hand ⁽³⁾ as the One able, by reason of His Cross and Resurrection and Ascension, to solve the riddle of the universe, the heavens resound with the new song : “ Thou art worthy. . . . And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing and honour, and glory and power be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever ”. ⁽⁴⁾ All creation, excepting man, joins the eschatological jubilation, as Isaiah and the Psalmists had foreseen. It is in the nature of Creation to praise God, as it is in the nature of angels. Creation can do no other. The earth is full of the glory of God. Creation, in being creation, reflects God's glory. The stars in their courses sing His praise, not of choice but in obedience. Their existence, which they owe to God's creative word, is their response of praise. The sun, in being the sun, praises its maker ; and so do sparrows and fritillaries, in being sparrows and fritillaries. And men, who come late and blushing with shame to join this choir as new creatures in Jesus Christ, are true men when, through Christ, they evince a like spontaneity. Not a spontaneity that is in any way of man himself, but a spontaneity of response to the Word of Grace.

The music of creation is again a hidden music, though some may hear echoes of it as some may hear echoes of the music of heaven. Barth believes Mozart was such a one, that he heard the praises of creation authentically because he heard creation in its totality, with its dark side and its bright side, praising God for its goodness, with a dominant “ Yes ” of the Gospel, over the Law. It is thus a confident

⁽¹⁾ *Merchant of Venice*, V. 1.

⁽²⁾ e.g. Ps. 8, 19, 76, 148.

⁽³⁾ Rev. v. 7.

⁽⁴⁾ Rev. v. 9-13.

and glorious music—this music of creation—though not being of free choice, it will reach its true fulfilment only when it is caught up into the eschatological jubilation of the Church. Then, truly, it will become the song of Revelation ⁽¹⁾.

Music in the Christian Life

Now we come down to earth, so to speak, to music less cosmologically “highbrow”, which the average man can listen to, or at least can hear; to the music of the concert hall, wireless, television, or the music one makes by oneself, perhaps only “for fun”. For the sake of simplicity, let us speak only of what we call secular music for the moment. Has this music any distinctly Christian significance within the Christian life? If music has such an important part to play in our conception of the liturgies of our other partners in the hierarchy, it will be strange if it has not. Is it possible, then, to assign to secular music a place which is so distinctive that it will avoid for ever the confusion suggested by that remark of Sir Adrian Boult’s friend,—“the next thing to an act of worship”? Can we thus avoid contounding the true worship of God and the “pulling of one’s leg” about worship before the little Lares and Penates of aesthetics? I submit that it is possible to do this, and I refer back now to the passage quoted from *Proverbs*. That passage spoke of One who was brought up with the Father and who rejoiced before Him, daily His delight. This seems to suggest an original play, perhaps music, certainly a harmony; and by a kind of analogy that is what our music is, our music making, or our enjoyment of it. As Christians, we play; we alone among men have a right to play in this distracted world, because we alone know of Christ’s victory. Even in the midst of the world’s distraction we, who will not forget to succour it in love, can also rejoice and enjoy its delightful things, as sons of God by adoption. Our symphony concert is our play. We may play riotously or rapturously, we may move with a composer through all the gamut of emotions, as at the “play” (theatre), and take delight. And if in our delights we find what men call greatness or sweetness, or anything suggestive of glory, then let us clasp it fearlessly to our Christian hearts for what for us it is, but for nothing more,—a pointer to God’s glory, like the sun and the stars and the language of flowers.

(1) Rev. v. 3.

Wladimir Weidle ⁽¹⁾ borrows a term from Leibnitz to describe the catacomb paintings of early Christian centuries. He calls them signitive as distinct from symbolic, reckoning a sign as a thing in itself indifferent and only concerned to pass its meaning on, not to express it. The form in these paintings simply carries their content. The forms are borrowed often from the vast storehouse of classical tradition,—Hermes Criophoros for the Good Shepherd; a sleeping Endymion for Jonah under his gourd. This is not fear of art, or narrow-minded suspicion of beauty. It is a wholesome Christian indifference to art, as such, in enthusiasm for that of which it is signitive.

Let the Christian, then, enjoy secular music, let him "play"; and if the delight ravishes his soul, then let him reckon it signitive of that love, holiness, glory of God, in the presence of which truly our art forms are a matter of indifference. If the Christian can adopt this attitude to music, then it scarcely matters that Beethoven was fool enough to promise perpetual bliss to those who understood his music. The Christian can count it a sign, and thank God for it. Music is man's play; it is not revelation.

The Liturgy of the Church

When we come now to speak of worship in Church, we are dealing with something unique. Undoubtedly, the music we employ in Church will have affinities with the music of the cosmological hierarchy. When the Christian truly worships, in Spirit and in truth, in virtue of the eschatological dimension of his worship he is granted to share in the worship of heaven, and yet he is *simul justus et peccator*, and therefore his worship is different from the worship of heaven. In heaven also there is only acclamation, and no further need for proclamation. In heaven there is sight, and no further need for faith without sight. Similarly, no doubt, we shall carry over into our worship echoes of the positive praise of creation, and emulate their spontaneity; but we have a higher calling than creation, and God has dealt, and does deal with us, quite differently. And as for our play, of course we shall make use of the arts and skills we learn at play, and all the rules of the game; but what happens in the liturgy of the Church is surely rather different from what we do in one pleasant out-quarter of the Christian life.

(1) *The Baptism of Art.*

In the liturgy of the Church it is not only we who act ; it is also, indeed predominantly and in a quite prior and unique way, God who acts. It is difficult to determine at any given moment in a service whether man or God is the chief actor. A service of worship is God's gift to us, His action upon us. It is part of His continuing salvation—history. In worship the Christ-Word is amongst us, and the Word is also event, unique event. In the Word and in the Word alone, there is revelation ; through the Word and through the Word alone, heaven intersects earth and things earthly are caught up into things heavenly. If music has a function in our worship it can only be to serve this mighty mystery, the Christ-Word in our midst. Music is to be the handmaid ; and we remember one such who said just this : " Be it unto me according to Thy word ". It is not necessary that the handmaid be beautiful ; it is necessary that she be able to do her job. If ardent musicians feel it is too humble a task, let them call it cross-bearing and do it gladly. This is the nature of music's cross and of her service in worship ; the vertical of God's speaking to man and man's response, and the horizontal of proclamation to the neighbours on both sides. " Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom ; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord ". ⁽¹⁾ Music has to serve the Word that God speaks, with the intensity of a great preacher tempered with the modesty of angels. However it interprets its task, whether in plainsong or in Passion music, it must at all costs make intelligible and eloquent the Word that is directly or indirectly present in the words. " For ", as Christopher Smart says, " the trumpet of God is a blessed intelligence and so are all the instruments in heaven ". It has to serve the words which the Christian sings in response, and to serve them in such a way that they ascend with all the passion of a lover or a penitent emulating the new song of heaven, and yet also in such a way that echoes of their eloquence roll from soul to soul in any congregation, and the neighbour on either side is taught and admonished.

If, however, we take this function of music seriously, then probably we shall have to call in question a great deal that is now familiar in our worship. We have seriously to ask what purpose is served, or ought to be served, by organ voluntaries. As concert items they are to be deplored. As the organist's act of witness they are to be respected ;

⁽¹⁾ Col. iii. 16.

and yet surely this is speaking with tongues, and "I would rather that ye prophesied : for greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues, except he interpret, that the Church may receive edifying." ⁽¹⁾ At least in Bach's chorale preludes there is a semblance of obedience. They were elaborations of melodies suggesting a definite set of words to the congregation. Until this principle is re-established in the writing of organ music for use in worship, it would seem that, at the beginning of a church service, a voluntary can only serve as a modest aid to worship, not in any positive or attractive way, but rather to help to dispel distraction. Likewise, within the liturgy, organ music by itself should never obtrude, unless the language or the action of the liturgy make it abundantly clear what the organist means (e.g. acclamation). At the close of worship, when unfortunately few people listen, we might well be impressed by the organist's "speaking with tongues," in response to the Word ; although there is a finality in the Benediction which tends to make his music seem secular again. If, however, the Church would abandon its present apology for part-singing in hymns and psalms (with perhaps ten altos, two tenors, and eight basses in a congregation of 500) and could have tunes written in a key which makes for effective congregational *unison* singing, the organist could have a really exciting part in serving the Word in the variety of accompaniment that would then be possible.

Again, if in an anthem or even in a hymn the music arrogates to itself a pre-eminence and predominance over the words, then even if we do avoid the obvious temptations of its beauty and entertainment value, even if the singer and the musician claim to understand the composer's confession of faith contained in the music, nevertheless it remains to the congregation as a whole a speaking with tongues, and they are not edified.

Above all, if we take seriously the ancillary function of music in worship, ancillary even to a kind of preaching (teaching and admonishing one another), then, clearly, we must expect music to use the right language to commend the "text". If the "text" concerns the love of God, then the language dare not be the language of sickly sentimentality, and, under the judgement passed by the Word, some of our dearly beloved "Victoriana" must go. If the "text" concerns the royal dignities of our Lord, it is blasphemous that the musical language should make Him

⁽¹⁾ I Cor. xiv. 5.

seem merely pompous. If the "text" concerns His Passion, it is wrong that our musical language should be sadly subjective, when the heavens resound with "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain. . . ." (even Bach nods!) It may be that the Church "does not pay the piper" enough; in obedience to the Christ-Word, she must insist on "calling the tune".

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