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***Catholic Physics - Reflections of a
Catholic Scientist - Part 35
God's Gift to Man--
the Transforming Power of Music.***



- ♦ 1200's
- ♦ Authority on physics, geography, astronomy, mineralogy, chemistry, zoology, and physiology
- ♦ "The aim of natural science is not simply to accept the statements of others, but to investigate the causes that are at work in nature"
- ♦ He understood that the Church is not opposed to study of nature
- ♦ Patron Saint of Scientists

God's Gift to Man--the Transforming Power of Music.

"Music has power to soothe the savage breast." William Congreve,
The Mourning Bride

"This so-called 'music,' they would have to concede, is in some way efficacious to humans. Yet it has no concepts, and makes no propositions; it lacks images, symbols, the stuff of language. It has no power of representation. It has no relation to the world." Oliver Sacks, The Power of Music *

"Sing unto the LORD with the harp; with the harp, and the voice of a psalm. With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the LORD, the King." Psalm 98:5,6 (KJV)

"Did you write the book of love, And do you have faith in God above, If the Bible tells you so? Do you believe in rock n'roll, Can music save your mortal soul? Don McLean, American Pie

This post is a reflection on how music has shaped my devotion to the Church. There will be links to my favorite music: liturgical, hymns and other. I'd be grateful if readers would note in comments their favorite music. I won't say much about the psychology of music or how music affects the brain. A lot of work has been done in functional imaging, but I'm not sure we know much more now than when Pythagoras noted the beautiful mathematical relations between harmonious intervals. However, for those interested in pursuing the subject, I will give references**.

My first encounter with the power of music in liturgy came at a 40 Hours devotional service. (See Top Down to Jesus) . I had been preparing for entry into the Church and although on rational grounds I had come to believe in the Resurrection and its implications, there were matters of dogma I found difficult to understand, particularly that important one, transubstantiation, the change of the substance of the host into the body of Christ. As the monstrance was carried in during the procession of the 40 Hours service, Tantum Ergo was played, and I



certain amount of play in lippping the reed). However, the biddability of the clarinet and my own talent weren't sufficient to let me do well in junior high school band, so that clarinet was put away until after my retirement, when I took up playing again: bass clarinet, then alto clarinet and the bowed psaltery. Throughout my life from a teenager on, I have enjoyed classical music, folk music and some of the Golden Oldies--no rap, no hard rock, none of the stuff that's played on most radio stations.

From a series of articles written by: Bob Kurland - a Catholic Scientist



read in the missal:

"Præstet fides supplementum, Sensuum defectui."

enough of my high school Latin came back, "faith will supplement the deficiency of the senses", and I realized in my heart, that the wafer, the host, was the body of Christ, that it was mystery beyond science and philosophy, and my eyes filled with tears.

Other liturgical music has struck to my heart in ways no homily or theological text seems to do. During my first Easter Vigil Mass The Litany of the Saints was played, and an overwhelming vision of the history of the Church and all its holy people came to me. During Vespers at St. Vincent Arch abbey (attended during retreat as Benedictine Oblate) or Evensong services at the St. Thomas More Anglican Usage Parish, a great peace and understanding comes over me as I listen to the strong voices chanting the psalms.

Other music, not liturgical--Bach (the B minor Mass, Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring), Mozart's Requiem, Ralph Vaughan William's Dona Nobis Pacem, will bring me to thoughts of God. Hymns that I want to be played at my funeral have made their mark: Amazing Grace, Shall We Gather by the River, Jerusalem my Happy Home, The Lord of the Dance (old and corny pieces from evangelical churches, for the most part). And there are those I play with the instrumental group at Church, It is Well with my Soul, Panis Angelicus, Mozart's Ave Verum, The King of Love My Shepherd Is. Old 100th and so many others. (I play the alto clarinet, not well, but enough to provide harmony--a bass voice, since I can't sing on key.***)

One thing should be clear: it isn't the music by itself that is moving, but the total situation: liturgy, congregation, and the words. I could read:

"Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, Was blind, but now I see. T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear. And Grace, my fears relieved. How precious did that Grace appear The hour I first believed." Liberty Lyrics
John Newton

It would be moving, but it is the combination of the words that reflect my own experience AND the music that brings me to tears of joy. I could read the verses of Tantum Ergo and Pange Lingua, but it would not be meaningful without the presence of Christ's body, the procession, the Benediction, and the congregation sharing this experience.

Am I only being sentimental and not truly devoted to the austere beauty of liturgy in my reaction to this music--too catholic (with a lower-case c)? Some Church liturgists might think so.

"It is not surprising that Church leaders have doubted whether the feelings which music arouses are truly religious. Music's power to fan the flames of piety may be more apparent than real..."Anthony Storr, Music and the Mind

The Hebrews did not worry about music being a distraction from devotion to the Lord. David danced in the procession to the altar and the psalms say "Sing to the Lord a new song, play the lute, the lyre and the harp, sound the trumpets". St. Augustine, entranced by music, was concerned that this power might enable the senses to overcome the intellect in worship:

"So I waver between the danger that lies in gratifying the senses and the benefits which, as I know, can accrue from singing....I am inclined to approve of the custom of singing in church, in order that by indulging the ears weaker spirits may be inspired with feelings of devotion. Yet when I find the singing itself more moving than the truth which it conveys, I confess it is a grievous sin, and at those times I would prefer not to hear the singer. (emphasis added)" St. Augustine,

Confessions

The last sentence in the quote is the foundation for the expulsion of music from the Church in Calvinist sects (read "The Warden" by Anthony Trollope). I cannot subscribe to that view. I am one of St. Augustine's weaker spirits. I believe God gave many many gifts to man in giving him intelligence: language, mathematics, music, art. Music has the power to heal the soul (as Oliver Sacks shows in Musicophilia) and to bring one closer to God. We give joy to God when we rejoice in music, not only to praise Him, but to rejoice in life (!Chaim)

*This quote, to show what a strange gift music is, comes from Arthur C. Clarke's classic "Childhood's End", in which an alien species comes to guide mankind from childhood to maturity. The very intelligent aliens do not understand the power of music. They go to a concert, listen politely and come away wondering.

**REFERENCES.

Robert Jourdain, Music, the Brain and Ecstasy: How Music Captures Our Imagination.

Oliver Sacks, Musicophilia, Tales of Music and the Brain

Anthony Storr, Music and the Mind

***A MUSICAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I am musical but untalented (unlike my younger and older brothers). At the age of 8, I didn't pass an audition at our Temple Youth Choir because I couldn't carry a tune. So, I took up the clarinet as a biddable instrument-- if you put your fingers on the right keys, the right note comes out (given a