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***Catholic Physics - Reflections of a
Catholic Scientist - Part 37
God's Gift to Man, Redux - 2:
Music, Sacred and Profane***



- ♦ 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, Redux - 2: Music, Sacred and Profane

"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* *

"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*

INTRODUCTION

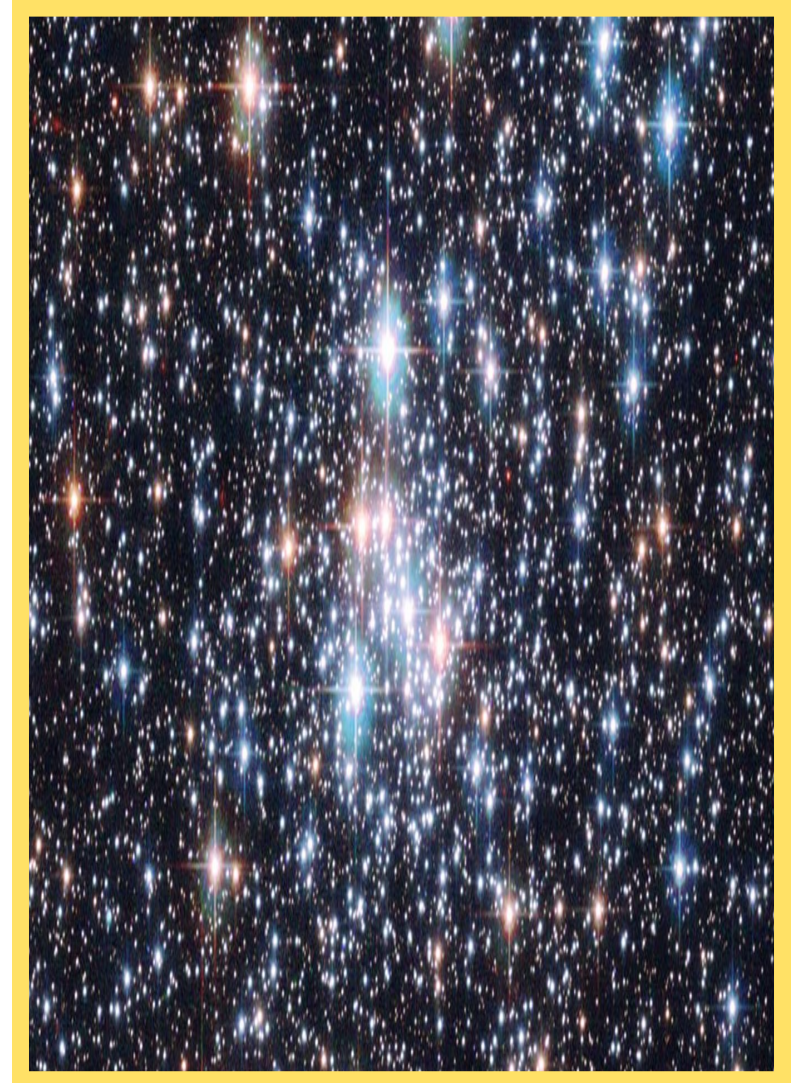
As I listened to the NY Philharmonic's New Year's eve concert, "La Vie Parisienne", a post I wrote some time ago came to mind: on the power of music to shape our devotion in the Church. Now, the music I had been listening to was not by any means sacred music; Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld Overture*, including the beautiful love song to Eurydice and that infamous "Can Can". Nevertheless, the love song evoked emotion, as did *Can Can*, but of a different kind.

The week before I had been immersed in Christmas Carols, playing the alto clarinet for our parish instrumental group (harmony, tenor line of chorus or cello part). Before the Christmas Vigil Mass, we played "Child of the Poor/What Child is This", beautiful counterpoint with tenor/baritone, tenor/soprano duets. While playing *Silent Night*, I thought "what a change from my childhood", when as a Jew, I had believed that I would betray my people by listening to the carol, even though it sounded so beautiful.

But back to what this post is about. I'm going to repost the earlier material and add some thoughts on how music has been corrupted by a modernist hedonist culture. Let me preface these remarks with an

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.

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



AND THE PROFANE

I'll not say much about that music which leads us away from God--Gangsta Rap, Hip-Hop, and all the perversions of popular music--other than to curse it and its practitioners to an eternity of Gregorian chant. (As with Fr. Groeschel's prayer for the singer Madonna, that she be reverted and go to a cloistered nunnery.) I was forced to bear with milder versions of such during a trip, carrying a grandson back to college. Is this music a cause or a symptom of what's wrong with our society?

This music appeals only to an immediate gratification, to the brutish impulses to dominate, to have that which we desire without thought of consequences or morality. It leads away from God, not to Him. I'm not a proponent of censorship, but... So, is there a Gresham's law of music? Does bad music drive out good? At concerts the age distribution is weighted heavily to those with white or no hair. On the other hand, I was happy to see at a chamber music concert at a local university a high proportion of undergraduates. There may be hope.

Perhaps what we need to do as parents and grandparents is to introduce our children to the joys of good music. We can't assume that their musical taste is totally corrupted. Trade a half an hour of hip-hop for a half-hour of light classics and bring them to concerts at an early age. And finally, bring good, serious music to the Liturgy.

A FINAL THOUGHT

In music, as is in all else, God has given us Free Will: the freedom to make a choice between good and evil.

NOTE

*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

apology--I'm not a musician and not an expert in liturgical music; for a more informed view, there are other sources; the one I prefer is The Chant Cafe.

MUSIC, THE OTHER ROAD TO ADORATION

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 as I 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", for me to realize 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. St. Thomas Aquinas wrote great works of theology and philosophy, but perhaps his hymns are the most effective way he has led people to God.

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 Archabbey (attended during retreat as a Benedictine Oblate) a great peace and understanding came over me as I listened to the strong voices chanting the psalms.

Other music, not liturgical--Bach (the B minor Mass), Ralph Vaughan William's Dona Nobis Pacem, will bring me to thoughts of God. Peter Kreeft's saying "If Bach exists, there must be a God" is echoed by many.

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 tenor or 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. 'Twas 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

SING A NEW SONG TO THE LORD

"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)

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 (I'Chaim)