



Sketching a Theology of Song

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Abstract

Music, and particularly song, is an act of love that has to be sustained in being by the love of the singer. Music also moves one to contemplate the Other. Hence it may be appropriated as an analogy for exploring the theology of creation as a sustained loving act of the Triune God. Building on Clement of Alexandria's image of Christ as the New Song, the analogy is further developed to explore the theology of the new creation, in which the gracious work of the sanctification of the human person is also a sustained loving act of the Holy Trinity. The end of this is that the Christian should become taken up into the New Song, and become part of it.

Keywords

Creation, grace, nature, supernature, song

Limitations and Scope

Music is such an important part of our world, and indeed, our humanity. The more time I spend thinking about this, the larger the scope of this theme of music and song becomes. Which is why I begin by saying that this is necessarily, a "sketch", by which I mean a rough outline of a theology of song. No doubt you will find it lacking in many aspects, as it barely scratches the surface of what song does, and how its creativity moves us, and how music is part of the New Evangelization.

Recently, fr. Timothy Radcliffe gave a talk at the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, and he rightly observed that young people today make sense of pain, sorrow, joy etc., through song. For the composers of pop songs have found a way to express what we are experiencing, and these songs help young people to articulate and share with others how they feel. So, Timothy said, we need to learn to sing the songs of the young, so as to empathize and journey with them. I couldn't agree more. But my talk does not really address such issues. Rather, this is the somewhat personal, I suppose, reflections of someone who

is fascinated by the dogmatic truths of the Faith and who also enjoys singing, and I wanted to bring the two together.

Music as the Art of Time

The irony of pop music, and recorded music in general, is that our culture is so immersed in music these days that it is taken for granted; often heard but not listened to. As James MacMillan observes: “Music has become a noise in the background. It may be a soundtrack to our lives, but it is mere background, never the core of our lives. If it were, it would change the nature of that core existence – it would beautify and sanctify it.”¹ Music used to have to be made by oneself, and so music literacy was part of one’s education. But it seems that as music has become more easily available – piped into elevators, buildings, and indeed into our ears and lives through the iPod – so our music literacy and appreciation has fallen. Music has become quite ubiquitous, but it has also become a consumer product. Like so many other commodities in a consumer’s world, we expect music to be available on demand, according to our mood and whim. Music has become something we use, and sometimes, abuse; a tool for us to wield at will.

MacMillan says, for example, that “when you use music simply as background, you lose the essence of what music is.”² So, the result is that we might have lost sight of music as a gift. Because if music is recorded, and available on demand, copied, downloaded, shared, and at hand to be played at any time, repeating the same track or bars over and over again, can we really grasp the essential nature of music as gift?

For, as Etienne Gilson and others have said, music is “an art of time,”³ so that, music’s nature is essentially ephemeral; the song blooms and fades with each note, passing away with every beat and elapsing second. Any structure or architecture to the complete musical form is possible because of our memory, as our brains recall and construct the entire musical shape. Understanding a sentence works in a similar way, and as we shall see, the human capacity for language is linked to our capacity to perceive music.

But although music is time-bound, it is paradoxically, as MacMillan says, able to “expand one’s awareness of the reality of timelessness”, and indeed, make us conscious of God who is outside of time.⁴ Music moves us to experience the Transcendent, as we

¹ Verboven (ed.), *The Dominican Way* (London: Continuum, 2011), 35.

² Ibid.

³ Gilson, *Forms and Substance in the Arts* (New York: Scribner, 1966), 146.

⁴ Op. cit., Verboven, 34.

glimpse what T. S. Eliot calls “moments in and out of time.”⁵ This transcendent, ephemeral art form, Music, is the only kind of art I can think of that has to be constantly maintained in being. Unlike a painting, you can’t just buy it and hang it up, it has to be invested in continually – both in terms of energy and financial resources – in order for it to be. But it is the contingency of the being of music that is the launch pad of my reflections.

For, to my mind, this points to the contingency of all being itself, and the energy, the love, that has to be invested for things to be. And this awesome reality is often ignored. It seems to me more than just mere coincidence that just as our technologically-accomplished modern world has taken music for granted, so it also has a tendency to take being and existence for granted, whence the prevalence of militant atheism . . . perhaps. Perhaps an awareness of the ephemeral, immaterial and contingent nature of music can help correct that. As MacMillan says, “it’s that immateriality [of music] that makes us ask questions about the otherness of things and can open up our lives to being touched by powers that are not visible or physical.”⁶

So I want to develop this idea, using music and song in particular as an analogy for viewing creation and the life of grace theologically. I want to consider how the wonderful truths of Faith about the natural and supernatural life can be explored through the image of song, and to recall that, like music, these are gifts: acts of divine love.

The Music Instinct in Man

The polymath Philip Ball, in his exploration of the musical “instinct” in the human person, contends that there is something uniquely human about our ability to hear and make music; it is “a part of what we are and how we perceive the world,”⁷ and he believes that we are distinguished from other non-rational creatures in having this musical instinct. In fact rhythm and pitch – key building blocks of music – are essential to that distinctively human activity, namely, language. As the eminent language specialist David Crystal notes, in the process of language learning, babies perceive intonation and rhythm and what these communicate before meaning.⁸

It is well known that Man is said to be made in God’s image because Man is a rational animal with spiritual faculties. Like God, Man has both intellect and will. Hence, St Thomas says: “In rational

⁵ Cited in Murray, *In the Grip of Light* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷ Ball, *The Music Instinct* (London: Vintage Books, 2011), 31.

⁸ Crystal, *A Little Book of Language* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2010), 11.

creatures wherein we find a procession of the word in the intellect, and a procession of love in the will, there exists an image of the uncreated Trinity.”⁹ Language, a ‘procession of the word’, is thus typically said to be one of the distinguishing marks of our humanity.

However, music, and especially song, encompasses both spiritual aspects that St Thomas mentions. For the song consists of both a ‘procession of the word in the intellect’, and also, in its musical element, a ‘procession of love in the will’. For as St Augustine said, “only the lover sings.”¹⁰ What this means is that one does not sing because one needs to. One sings because one desires to, as a ‘procession of love in the will’, an expression of love. For love always seeks to do more, to give one’s utmost, to offer something beautiful and prodigal. As Romano Guardini put it: “Music also is the entire lack of practical utility: it is a prodigal waste of precious material. It is a pouring out of unwithholding love.”¹¹ Hence, I would venture to say that song, being a “procession of the word in intellect, and a procession of love in the will” fully expresses that we, singing, musical (and therefore human) beings, are made in the image of the Holy Trinity.

The Lover Who Sings

But of course the Lover who sings, the Prodigal who pours out his unwithholding love, is God himself. And the love song which the Lover sings into being is not just humankind but all creation; the Holy Trinity is thus the divine Cantor. The Father is the origin of the song. One might say, He knows the song in his intellect, just as a Cantor has to know and ‘visualize’ the song and its notes in relation to each preceding note before he begins to sing. He has to have the song in mind. But without words, and without breath to produce the sound, this is not yet a song. When the Father sings, then, it is also by his Word. And simultaneously, the song has to be sustained with breath. So, the Father sings the Song of creation with his Word and with his Breath, which both proceed from him. Once the singer stops singing the song dies. So, too, does creation, with all its polyphonic beauty and variety, depend entirely on God for its existence and development. Thus the entire Trinity is involved in the act of creation singing and sustaining all in being.

Music, is thus perceived by many as a profoundly creative, life-giving act; it encourages, cheers, and soothes. It can drive away

⁹ Aquinas, *ST Ia* 93 6.

¹⁰ cf. Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990).

¹¹ Guardini, *Sacred Signs* (Dublin: Veritas, 1979), 58.

despair and depression, and, as we shall see as the New Song, it counteracts Death itself. In this vein Shakespeare said: “The man that hath no music in himself, Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds, Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils; The motions of his spirit are dull as night And his affections dark as Erebus . . .”¹²

The act of creation, as Genesis presents it, brings order and light out of the chaos and darkness that preceded it. So, as music dispels the gloom and darkness, the divine Song that is creation brings harmonic order and beauty from the chaos. However, before creation, Genesis refers to an absence of “form and void.” Is this void just silence, an absence of sound, into which the song of creation breaks forth? I suggest not. Rather, the void refers to an absence of form and order, the nothingness out of which God summoned all; creation *ex nihilo*. Indeed, this void isn’t silence but noise. For Genesis also says that “the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” And I would say that the Spirit of God is a divine silence and stillness. For divine silence is an absence of noise. It is a very full silence, pregnant with creative potential. And out of this silence is spoken the Logos that orders and brings beauty to creation. Likewise, it is the contemplative silence which we need in order to give birth to the Word. Thus, a Dominican aphorism was that “silence is the father of preachers.” I mention silence because it is a vital part of music. Hence Josef Pieper concurs with C. S. Lewis and says that “music and silence . . . cannot be found in hell.”¹³

The Music of the Spheres

In fact, the intrinsic musicality of the created order is an ancient pre-Christian idea which endured until the Renaissance. We find it, for example, in Shakespeare who wrote (in *The Merchant of Venice*):

There’s not the smallest orb which thou behold’st
 But in his motion like an angel sings,
 Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
 Such harmony is in immortal souls;
 But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
 Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

The medievals called this the *musica universalis*, which is a Pythagorean idea referring to the intertwined relationship between the harmonic structures of music and the mathematical order of the physical world. As such, the planets and stars (the ‘spheres’) moved

¹² *Merchant of Venice*, Act V sc. 1. Erebus was a primordial deity, representing the personification of darkness.

¹³ Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 55.

according to mathematical equations, which corresponded to musical notes and thus produced a symphony which we could not hear. We find a hint of this in Job, where God asks Job if he perceived that “the morning stars sang together”.

In fact, scientists have now discovered that the stars emit audible radio waves, and huge magnetic loops that coil away from the outer layer of the sun’s atmosphere “vibrate like strings on a musical instrument.” So, the Pythagorean theory of the intrinsic musicality of creation isn’t far-fetched fantasy. And it seems to me that this idea of the music of the spheres is profoundly consonant with our theology of music, for all creation is not just sung into being; they take up the divine song and participate in it. The stars actually do sing!

Dissonance and Restoring the Pitch

And of course, it is not just the astral figures that sing. As we’ve already noted, we human beings are singing musical creatures, thus made in the image of the divine Cantor to participate in the Triune God’s Song of creation in a special way. Each of us is a desired, necessary, and vital note in God’s love song that is creation.

But all of us here will know, I’m sure, the vagaries of song, especially in choir. The pitch drops, and the notes are not sounded truly and in key. This, I suggest, is a result of the Fall! For sin results in discord so that we find it hard to sing together without slipping and giving rise to dissonance. Indeed, part of reason why choirs slip is because the singers do not listen to one another, or to the song they are meant to be singing. Viewing this musical phenomenon theologically, I would comment that sin, too, results in a kind of self-absorbed individualism, a concupiscent reluctance to co-operate with others, and the beauty of God’s song in creation is lost; we’ve forgotten the melody and the words of God’s love song.

So, into the symphony of his creation, a solo voice is sounded that, as Benedict XVI put it, is “so important that the significance of the entire work depends on it.”¹⁴ As he says in *Verbum Domini*, “This ‘solo’ is Jesus. . . . The Son of Man recapitulates in himself earth and heaven, creation and the Creator, flesh and Spirit. He is the centre of the cosmos and of history, for in him converge without confusion the author and his work.” So we find that in the Scriptures, the coming of Christ is heralded by a fresh outburst of song that culminates in the new song of the redeemed (cf Apoc. 14:3). For Christ not only adds his voice to the song of creation, but he becomes a part of it and,

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, §13 from <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini_en.html>

by his redeeming work, not only restores the pitch but introduces a new song: the new creation of the Risen One inaugurated by his Resurrection. Hence, the eternal Word has taken on the flesh of music, so to speak, and as St Clement of Alexandria put it, Christ has become incarnate as the New Song.¹⁵

The New Song of the Redemption

A new redeemed creation, rooted in the grace of Christ and his resurrection is sung into being by Christ. But Christ, by both entering into his creation and creating it anew is the Singer and the New Song. Thus, the order of redeemed creation, the supernatural life of grace which has divine life as its proper end, is greater than the first creation, the natural life. As St Thomas put it: “a work may be called great on account of what is made, and thus the justification of the ungodly, which terminates at the eternal good of a share in the Godhead, is greater than the creation of heaven and earth, which terminates at the good of mutable nature.”¹⁶

St Ignatius of Antioch says that Easter Sunday is “the day when life first dawned for us, thanks to [Jesus Christ] and His death [and resurrection]”. Hence, Easter day is often referred to as the eighth day of creation. This is the day which the Lord has made, as we sing several times a day in the Octave of Easter. And it is a day of salvation which God has made. For the work of redemption, and of our elevation through grace, is entirely God’s work. He alone causes our sanctification and brings about the new creation of grace, and allows us to share divine life with him in heaven. So, the liturgical text not only emphasizes the day of redemption itself, but highlights that this day was made by the Lord; He is the cause of Easter Sunday and all it stands for. As he has brought about this great work of salvation for our sake, so we should rejoice and be glad. We have reason to exult, and to sing praise to the Lord – for that is what ‘Alleluia’ means – and in doing so, we participate in God’s new song.

This idea of Easter as the eighth day of a new creation, the eschatological day of salvation and glory is brought out architecturally as well. Baptismal fonts are often eight sided because it is from the font and in the sacrament of baptism that we are born to new life, and become members of the new creation. As Herbert McCabe OP says: “Baptism is for each Christian a re-enactment of the Resurrection. The new birth, the new creation, which it symbolizes and makes real,

¹⁵ Cited in Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 51ff.

¹⁶ *ST* Ia IIæ, 113, 9.

is a participation in the new creation of the resurrection of Christ.”¹⁷ The Church is thus called to take up this new song of a redeemed world, singing her new canticles each day in the Divine Office. Indeed, as the Mystical Body of Christ, she sings the New Song of Christ, proclaiming him in word and deed, and she also sings the new song of the new creation through her sacraments.

As participants of Christ’s new creation, and members of the Church, we are also called to sing a new song, and so to participate in the life of Christ who is the New Song. Hence the book of Apocalypse says that the redeemed “sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. [And] No one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from the earth.” So, we are to learn the new song from Christ, true God and true Man, learning from him how to be truly human, so that, at the same time, we are being divinized by his grace.

Indeed, the end of this process of *theosis*, seen musically, implies that we not just learn the new song by imitation, but rather, we become Christ the New Song. For we “abide in Christ and he in us” (cf Jn 15:4). Perhaps we could envisage this mystery like becoming part of the New Song, each of us a beautiful and harmonious note that constitutes the polyphonic richness that is in God, but without our losing our own distinct identity. T. S. Eliot offers some insight into this when he considers earthly moments of transcendent contemplation, moments of mystically being in God, such as “music heard so deeply/ That it is not heard at all, but you are the music/ While the music lasts.”¹⁸ Is this not an ecstatic foretaste of divine life? Except that, in the eternity of God, the music that is our life with him lasts for ever.

Singing the New Song of Grace

Just as the song of the first creation is sung by the whole Trinity, so the new song of the life of grace, the work of the new creation, is sung in each of us by the Trinity. The Father initiates the song because he knows the tune. So, we might appropriate to him the work preventive grace and of justification. Hence St Paul exhorts the Colossians to give “thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col 1:12). We might say, then, that as the divine Cantor, it is the Father who shapes and gives direction to the new song. He initiates the life of grace, and has its supernatural end, i.e., the divinization of Man in view. In the life

¹⁷ McCabe, *The New Creation* (London: Continuum, 2010 ed.), 40.

¹⁸ Eliot, *Four Quartets*.

of grace we are transformed by the divine Word and take on the form of the Son of God. So, the song takes form and becomes intelligible with its words. And the life of grace, which bears fruit in charity, is sustained by the breath of the Holy Spirit, just as a song is. So, we need the entire Trinity for the life of grace to be melodious and sustained like song.

If we think of songs, what defects might there be in the singing of a song? And how might we relate this to the supernatural life of grace? To begin with, it is possible to just not have the tune. We have the words and the breath to sing, but there is no music. As such, there is no supernatural life of grace. For if one is not justified by God, then, humankind is left with human goods and natural virtues, but these do not merit heaven. But what if we had some notes, and breath to hum the tune, but we don't have the words? This, it seems to me is analogous to the state of those who recognize that Man is spiritual, and who long for heaven. But they do not yet know Christ's Word of salvation, or, they might knowingly reject Christ's Word of truth. Or some may make up their own words to the song, which is like creating one's own spirituality, or a selective version of the Faith. In such circumstances, charity and justice demands that we help them out by giving them the words of the New Song. What I mean by this is that we preach the Gospel, singing the New Song of the divine Word, so that they may enjoy and be a part of the true and beautiful song that is Jesus Christ. This desire to teach the words of the New Song because we have known and experienced its beauty is the only thing that will give impulse to the New Evangelization. So, we Dominicans are called to be singers in this great work. And finally, it is also possible to know the words and the tune, and yet not have the breath to sing; they are asphyxiated. And I think this is probably the most relevant to us. For some may know the doctrines of Christ and his Church, they may know of God. But they may not have charity, or may not draw the essential breath of prayer, and so they cannot sing. So, these questions remain: Do we as a Church, and as individual members of Christ's Body sing a song that is true and good, and thus beautiful? Does our song attract others? Is it an unbounded song that people, both far and near, can listen to, and become a part of?

Because, as we've said, we need love to inspire song. This is to say, we need the Holy Spirit. For as Ratzinger put it: "The Holy Spirit is love, and it is he who produces the singing. He is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit who draws us into love for Christ and so leads to the Father."¹⁹

¹⁹ Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 142.

Hence, for us to sing the new song of the life of grace, we need the Holy Trinity to be active within us, singing the new song into being in our lives. We need, in other words, to be transformed by grace, so that we are transformed into the New Song, that is, re-made in the image and likeness of Jesus Christ, becoming beautiful and mellifluous as he is, drawing others to him through the beauty of holiness.

Conclusion

Therefore, St Augustine says: “Sing with your voices, your hearts, your lips and your lives: Sing to the Lord a new song.” For our lives of Christian sanctity become a love song that makes Christ’s beauty visible in the world because holiness is deeply attractive, and draws others to God, who is the Lover of all that is, and also, as Hopkins put it, “beauty’s self and beauty’s giver.”²⁰ And that holy life becomes a song of praise to God. As St Augustine explains: “Now it is your unquestioned desire to sing of him whom you love, but you ask me how to sing his praises. You have heard the words: Sing to the Lord a new song, and you wish to know what praises to sing. The answer is: His praise is in the assembly of the saints; it is in the singers themselves. If you desire to praise him, then live what you express. Live good lives, and you yourselves will be his praise.”²¹

So, let us breathe, that is, allow the Holy Spirit into our lives, and let us give voice to the new song. It is God’s own work of grace, so we begin by turning to him. As we do every morning at the beginning of the Divine Office, we simply ask the Lord to open our lips, so that, with our very lives, we can praise his name, and sing his new song.

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²⁰ Hopkins, ‘The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo’, cited in op. cit., Murray, 44.

²¹ Augustine, Sermon 34 from The Office of Readings, Tuesday of Week 3 of Eastertide