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Is Music Sacred?

Robert R. Reilly

As the most immaterial art, music is often thought to be the most spiritual. By its nature, is music sacred? If so, what is sacred about it? These might seem strange questions to ask in a secular age, but the presumption that there is something special about music pervades even our culture.

Consider the poster on the side of a Washington, D.C., Metro bus earlier this year, which advertised the benefits of the D.C. Youth Orchestra Program. It announced that the happy children shown with their orchestral instruments "are playing their way to a bright future." Why should that be? Does playing music make you a better person? A recent review of a performance of Shostakovich's piano music said that the C Major Prelude "immediately takes us into the pure, sane world that betokens the composer's escape from mundaneness into the higher reality of music." What is "higher" about the reality of music, and how does the composer reach this reality?

Harmony of the Soul

To answer these questions, one must journey back to ancient Greece, to the first writings about music and reflections upon its meaning. This starts with Pythagoras, who is said to have discovered the arithmetical relationships between harmonic intervals. He found a fascinating array of proportional intervals between tones, mathematical relationships that inhere in the very structure of sound. He wondered about the relationship of these ratios to the larger world. (The Greek word for ratio is *logos*, which also means "word" or "reason.") He construed that the harmonious sounds that men could make, either with their instruments or their singing, were an approximation of a larger harmony that existed in the universe, also expressed by numbers, that was exemplified in "the music of the spheres." As Aristotle explained in *Metaphysics*, the Pythagoreans "supposed the elements of numbers to be the elements of all things, and the whole heaven to be a musical scale and a number." This was meant literally. The heavenly spheres and their rotations through the sky produced tones at various levels, and in

concert these tones made a harmonious sound that man's music, at its best, could replicate.

This discovery was fraught with ethical significance. By participating in heavenly harmony, music could induce spiritual harmony in the soul. Following Pythagoras, Plato taught that "rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful." In *The Republic*, Plato showed the political import of music's power by invoking Damon of Athens as his musical authority. Damon said that he would rather control the modes of music in a city than its laws, because the modes of music have a more decisive effect on the formation of the character of citizens. The ancient Greeks were also wary of music's power because they understood that musical discord could distort the spirit, just as musical concord could properly dispose it.

This idea of "the music of the spheres" runs through the history of Western civilization with an extraordinary consistency, even up to the 20th century. At first, it was meant literally, and later, poetically. Music was seen as almost more a discovery than a creation, because it relied on preexisting principles of order in nature for its operation. It would be instructive to look at the reiteration of this teaching in the writings of several major thinkers to appreciate its enduring significance and also the radical nature of the challenge to it in our own time. For a good part of the 20th century, music was decidedly not seen as sacred. The magnitude of this rupture can only be grasped against the background of the two preceding millennia.

In the first century B.C., Cicero spelled out Plato's teaching in the last chapter of his *De Republica*. In "Scipio's Dream," Cicero has Scipio Africanus asking the question, "What is that great and pleasing sound?" The answer comes, "That is the concord of tones separated by unequal but nevertheless carefully proportional intervals, caused by the rapid motion of the spheres themselves. The high and low tones blended together provide different harmonies." Cicero explains in great detail the various movements of the spheres and which tones they produce, ending with "the other eight spheres, two of which move at the same speed, produc[ing] seven tones.

ROBERT R. REILLY chairman of the Committee for Western Civilization.

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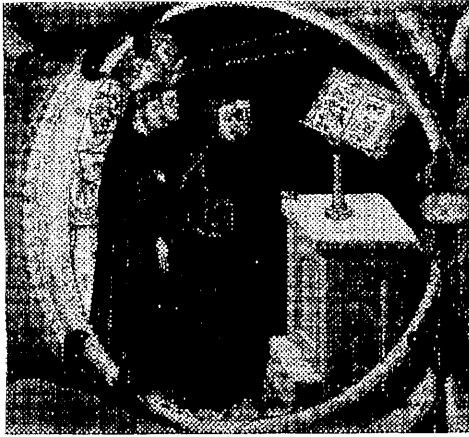
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was lost. Philosophical propositions have a very direct and profound impact upon composers and the kind of music they produce. John Adams, one of the most popular American composers today, said that he had "learned in college that tonality died somewhere around the time that Nietzsche's God died, and I believed it." The connection between the two is quite compelling. At the same time God disappears, so does the intelligible order in creation. A world without God is literally unnatural. If there is no God, Nature no longer serves as a reflection of its Creator. Nature is stripped of its normative power. If you lose the *Logos* of St. Clement, you also lose the ratio (*logos*) of Pythagoras. The death of God is as much a problem for music as it is for philosophy. Tonality, as the pre-existing principle of order in the world of sound, goes the same way as the objective moral order.

If there is no pre-existing, intelligible order to go out to and apprehend, and to search through for what lies beyond it—which is the Creator—what then is music supposed to express? If external order does not exist, then music collapses in on itself and degenerates into an obsession with techniques. Any ordering of things, musical or otherwise, becomes purely arbitrary.

Unravelling Tonality

Music's self-destruction became logically imperative once it undermined its own foundation. In the 1920s, Arnold Schoenberg unleashed the centrifugal forces of disintegration in music through his denial of tonality. He contended that tonality does not exist in Nature as the very property of sound itself, as Pythagoras claimed, but was simply an arbitrary construct of man, a convention. This assertion was not the result of a new scientific discovery about the acoustical character of sound, but of a desire to demote the metaphysical status of Nature. Schoenberg was irritated that "tonality does not serve, [but rather] must be served." He preferred to command. As he said, "I can provide rules for almost anything."

Schoenberg took the twelve equal semi-tones from the chromatic scale and commanded that music be written in such a way that each of these twelve semi-tones is

used before any one of them is repeated. If one of the semi-tones is repeated before all eleven others are sounded, it might create an anchor for the ear, which could then recognize what was going on in the music harmonically. The twelve-tone system guarantees the listener's disorientation.

Schoenberg proposed to erase the distinction between tonality and atonality by immersing man in atonal music until, through habituation, it became the new convention. Then discords would be heard as concords. As he wrote: "The emancipation of dissonance is at present accomplished and twelve-tone music in the near future will no longer be rejected because of discords." Of his achievement, Schoenberg said, "I am conscious of having removed all traces of a past aesthetic." This is nowhere more true than when he declared himself "cured of the delusion that the artist's aim is to create beauty." This statement represents a total rupture with Western musical tradition and is terrifying in its implications when one considers what is at stake in beauty. Simone Weil wrote: "We love the beauty of the world because we sense behind it the presence of something akin to that wisdom we should like to possess to slake our thirst for good." All beauty is reflected beauty. Block out the reflection and not only is the mirror useless, but the path to the source of beauty is barred. Ugliness, the aesthetic analogue to evil, becomes the new norm.

Wine Without Grapes

The loss of tonality was also devastating at the practical level of composition because tonality is the key structure of music. Tonality is what allows music to express movement away from or toward a state of tension or relaxation, a sense of motion through a series of crises and conflicts, which can then come to resolution. Without tonality, music loses harmony and melody. Its structural force collapses. Gutting music of tonality, as Schoenberg did, is like removing grapes from wine. You can go through all the motions of making wine without grapes, but there will be no wine at the end of the process. Similarly, if you deliberately and systematically remove all audible over-



St. Clement said that there is a "New Song," far superior to the Orphic myths of the pagans. The "New Song" is Christ, logos Himself.

This number being, one might say, the key to the universe. Skilled men imitating this harmony on stringed instruments and in singing have gained for themselves a return to this region, as have those who have cultivated their exceptional abilities to search for divine truths." Cicero explicitly presents the case that the right kind of music is divine and can "return" man to a paradise lost. It is a form of communion with divine truth.

In the late second century A.D., St. Clement of Alexandria baptized the classical Greek understanding of music in his *Exhortation to the Greeks*. Using Old Testament imagery from the Psalms, St. Clement said that there is a "New Song," far superior to the Orphic myths of the pagans. The "New Song" is Christ, logos Himself: "[I]t is this [New Song] that composed the entire creation into melodious order, and tuned into concert the discord of the elements, that the whole universe may be in harmony with it." It is Christ who "arranged in harmonious order this great world, yes, and the little world of man, body and soul together; and on this many-voiced instrument he makes music to God and sings to [the accompaniment of] the human instrument." By appropriating the classical view, St. Clement was able to show that music participated in the divine by praising God and partaking in the harmonious order of which He was the composer. But music's goal became even higher because Christ is higher. With Christianity the divine region becomes both transcendent and personal because *Logos* is Christ. The new goal of music is to make the *transcendent* perceptible. The transcendent was a notion alien to the ancient world.

Principles of Music

The early sixth century A.D. had two especially distinguished Roman proponents of the classical view of music, both of whom served at various times in high offices to the Ostrogoth king, Theodoric. Cassiodorus was secretary to Theodoric. He wrote a massive work called *Institutiones*, which echoes Plato's teaching on the ethical content of music, as well as Pythagoras's on the power of number. Cassiodorus taught that "music indeed

is the knowledge of apt modulation. If we live virtuously, we are constantly proved to be under its discipline, but when we sin, we are without music."

Boethius served as consul to Theodoric in 510 A.D. He wrote *The Principles of Music*, a book that had enormous influence through the Middle Ages and beyond. Boethius said that "music is related not only to speculation, but to morality as well, for nothing is more consistent with human nature than to be soothed by sweet modes and disturbed by their opposites. Thus we can begin to understand the apt doctrine of Plato, which holds that the whole of the universe is united by a musical concord. For when we compare that which is coherently and harmoniously joined together within our own being with that which is coherently and harmoniously joined together in sound—that is, that which gives us pleasure—so we come to recognize that we ourselves are united according to the same principle of similarity."

It is not necessary to cite further examples after Boethius because *The Principles of Music* was so influential that it held sway as the standard music theory text at Oxford until 1856. Until this century, it was generally accepted that music approximates a heavenly concord, that it should attempt to make the transcendent perceptible and, in so doing, exercise a formative ethical impact on those who listen to it.

Even in the 20th century this notion was not entirely lost. Three short examples should suffice. Ferruccio Busoni said, "Our Tonal System is nothing more than a set of signs. An ingenious device to grasp somewhat of the eternal harmony." Jean Sibelius, anything but an orthodox Christian, nonetheless harkened back to St. Clement when he wrote: "The essence of man's being is his striving after God. It [the composition of music] is brought to life by means of the *logos*, the divine in art. That is the only thing that has significance." Igor Stravinsky proclaimed: "The profound meaning of music and its essential aim is to promote a communion, a union of man with his fellow man and with the Supreme Being."

However, the hieratic role of music was lost for most of this century because the belief on which it was based

In these ways, I am turning away from what I consider the cultural pathology of my own time toward what can only be called a possibility: that music can be renewed by regaining contact with the tradition and means of the past, to re-emerge as a spiritual force with re-activated powers of melodic thought, rhythmic pulse and large scale structure; and, as I see it, these things are only possible with tonality.

Since 1964, the possibility that Rochberg foresaw has become a reality. There is not space to enumerate the many composers of whom this is true, but one is worth mentioning as symptomatic of the broad recovery and the reasons for it. The before-mentioned John Adams rejected his college lessons on Nietzsche's "death of God" and the loss of tonality because, like Pythagoras, he "found that tonality was not just a stylistic phenomenon that came and went, but that it is really a natural acoustic phenomenon." In total repudiation of Schoenberg, Adams went on to write a stunning symphony, entitled *Harmonielehre* ("Theory of Harmony"), that powerfully reconnects with the great Western musical tradition. In this work, he wrote, "there is a sense of using key as a structural and psychological tool in building my work."

Even more importantly, Adams explained, "the other shade of meaning in the title has to do with harmony in the larger sense, in the sense of spiritual and psychological harmony." Adam's description of his symphony is explicitly in terms of spiritual health and sickness. He explains that "the entire [second] movement is a musical scenario about impotence and spiritual sickness; . . . it has to do with an existence without grace. And then in the third movement, grace appears for no reason at all . . . that's the way grace is, the unmerited bestowal of blessing on man. The whole piece is a kind of allegory about that quest for grace." It is clear from Adams that the recovery of tonality and key structure is as closely related to spiritual recovery as its loss was related to spiritual loss. As one of Rochberg's former students, the late American composer Steve Albert, put it, "it is a matter of trying to find beauty in art again, for art is about our desire for spiritual connection."

Cicero spoke of music as enabling us to "return" to the divine region, implying a place once lost to man. Contemporary British composer John Tavener agrees: "My goal is to recover one simple memory from which all art derives. The constant memory of the paradise from which we have fallen leads to the paradise which was promised to the repentant thief." Tavener, Adams, Rochberg, Albert, and many composers like them, have restored music to its role of recollecting paradise and bringing us ever closer to the "New Song" that shall resound throughout eternity. If you listen closely, you can hear strains of it now. ♦

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"When we sin, we are without music."

—Cassiodorus, sixth century A.D.

tone relationships from music, you can go through the process of composition, but the end product will not be comprehensible as music. This is not a change in technique; it is the replacement of art by an ideology of organized noise.

Schoenberg's disciples applauded the emancipation of dissonance, but soon preferred to follow the logic of the centrifugal forces that he had unleashed. Pierre Boulez thought that it was not enough to systematize dissonance in twelve-tone rows. If you have a system, why not systematize everything? He applied the same principle of the tone-row to pitch, duration, tone production, intensity and timbre—every element of music. In 1952, Boulez announced: "Every musician who has not felt—we do not say understood but felt—the necessity of the serial language is USELESS." He also proclaimed, "once the past has been got out of the way, one need think only of oneself." Here is the narcissistic antithesis of the classical view of music, the whole point of which was to lift a person up into something larger than himself. American composer Philip Glass, speaking of the Paris music scene under Boulez in the 1960s, said that it was "a wasteland, dominated by these maniacs, these creeps who were trying to make everyone write this crazy, creepy music."

Some of Schoenberg's disciples agreed that tonality is simply a convention, but saw that, so too, is twelve-tone music. Unlike Boulez, they asked, quite logically: If you're going to emancipate dissonance, why organize it? Why even have twelve-tone themes? Why bother with pitch at all? Edgar Varèse rejected the twelve-tone system as arbitrary and restrictive. He searched for the "bomb that would explode the musical world and allow all sounds to come rushing into it through the resulting breach." When he exploded it in his piece, *Amérique*, Olin Downes, a famous New York music critic, called it "a catastrophe in a boiler factory." Still Varèse did not carry the inner logic of the "emancipation of dissonance" through to its logical conclusion. His noise was formulated; it was organized. There were indications in the score as to exactly when the boiler should explode. What

was needed, according to composers like John Cage, was to have absolutely no organization and to strive for the non-mental. Cage created noise through chance operations by rolling dice. He drew notes according to the irregularities in the composition paper. He sliced up tape recordings, jumbled them together, pieced them together again, and then played them as "music." His point was metaphysically, if not musically, potent: Nature is not normative. Disfigurement is the means to systematically discredit Nature by destroying form.

Recovering Paradise

In the past several decades, there has been an extraordinary recovery from the damage that was inflicted by Schoenberg and his disciples. Almost without exception, this recovery has been undertaken by composers who were completely immersed in Schoenberg's system, but who rebelled and returned to tonal music. George Rochberg was the dean of the twelve-tone school of composition in the United States and the first to turn against it. In 1964, Rochberg was thrown into a crisis by the death of his 20-year-old son. He came out of it saying, "I could not continue writing so-called serial music. It was finished, hollow, meaningless." He found that serialism "made it virtually impossible to express serenity, tranquility, wit, energy." In his Third String Quartet, Rochberg recovered the world of tonality. The quartet was accompanied by a manifesto in which he said:

The pursuit of art is much more than achieving technical mastery of means or even a personal style; it is a spiritual journey toward the transcendence of art and of the artist's ego. In my time of turning, I have had to abandon the notion of originality in which the personal style of the artist and his ego are the supreme values; the pursuit of the one-idea, uni-dimensional work and gesture, which seems to have dominated the aesthetics of art in the 20th century; and the received idea that it is necessary to divorce oneself from the past . . .