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THE SANCTITY OF MUSIC

Is it possible to speak of music as sacred in a day and age, where nothing appears to be sacred? As it is, no one can dictate how we should relate to music. We may be indifferent, choose to drench ourselves in the sounds of music, feel the urge for sensual pleasure, allow our thoughts to wander, sense the music as tidings from a higher sphere, or use music as a casual companion to the routines of daily life. Nothing can limit our choice and ‘use’ of music.

Throughout the ages, music has had an objective and a subjective dimension. However, until the beginning of the 18th century, the subjective dimension was unequivocally linked to music as an objective phenomenon. In his threefold revelation, Hugh of St. Victor (c. 1096-1141) depicts music as a spiritual reality: *musica mundana* (music of the world with planetary movement and the manifold rhythms of time), *musica humana* (music within mankind, linked to the bodily life processes and the moral strength of the soul) and *musica instrumentalis* (music generated on instruments). Here music is linked to its divine nature, as a reverberation of the music of the spheres, and as a path for human beings to catharsis, purification of mind, sanctification.

To Johann Sebastian Bach, music was a praise of God (“Soli Deo Gloria”). On the *basso continuo*, Bach writes: “The *basso continuo* is the most flawless foundation of music. It is executed in such a manner, that the left hand plays the specified notes, while the right hand delivers the relevant consonances and dissonances, resulting in a euphonic harmony, honouring God and fulfilling the mind. The actual purpose of the *basso continuo* is then, as of all music, nothing short of honouring God and honing the mind. If this purpose is not adhered to, it is not music, but a diabolic cacophony and hogwash.”

When we listen to Bach’s music, we sense a devotion to something higher within ourselves. In 1827, Goethe wrote the following to Carl Friedrich Zelter on Bach’s music: “The way in which I formulated it to myself was, as if eternal harmony were conversing with itself – so it must have been in God’s bosom just before the creation of the world. This, too, was how the music circulated in my innermost being, and it appeared to me that I neither possessed nor needed ears, eyes even less, and for that matter, any senses at all.” Bach’s music is here experienced as a state of paradise. And today – 300 years later – Bach’s work lives on, an unshaken testimony the world over to the spiritual dimension of music.

The development of music after Bach is characterized by secularization. Subjectivity dominates, but Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms and countless other masters succeed in upholding the connection to a higher sphere. In Bruckner’s symphonies, we are once again overwhelmed by the unfathomable intensity of eternal, musical tidings.

The 20th century was a time of musical unrest and upheaval. Do we ascend to the music or should the music descend to us? Should we develop a faculty for listening actively, or is the music merely there to tickle our auditory canals? Is it possible for us to assimilate the masterpieces of the 20th century? What revelation, for instance, are we offered in the music of Debussy, Bartók, Webern or Shostakovich? What happens to us when we encounter electronic music? How does popular music affect us? Is music, in its core, objective to the point that it can connect to the higher forces within us? Can music have a destructive impact? Is music the expression of endless longing?

The destiny of music was placed in our hands a long time ago. The inspired traditions that treated the spiritual reality of music as a given, have been missing from our present-day reality for many years now. We stand completely alone, every one of us. We are surrounded by music – pretty much round the clock. We, as individuals, decide whether music is sacred or not. However, if we concede that every human being carries at least a modicum of music inside, we *also* have the possibility of cognizing musical processes within ourselves, if we so desire.

Carl Nielsen says in his book Living Music:

“One must show the oversaturated, that a jump of a melodic third is a gift of God, a fourth an experience, and a fifth the ultimate joy.”

Nielsen’s words remind us that we have the possibility of experiencing music as a messenger from another world. We can do this through our own efforts, by working with musical phenomena, which can be like divine sparks, awe-inspiring to those with an open mind. When we listen with our heart, we can experience the laws of music – laws through which diversity becomes unity – a unity that touches our fellow man. And as individuals, we can absorb what the Danish author Johannes Hohlenberg had to say about the process of music:

”Music is only alive at the instant it is created. It must be created afresh again and again, and can never quite be repeated the way it was. Music lives in time and, true to its being, cannot be torn away from it without losing it. It is an expression of what the living soul harbours at that very moment, and the more sublimely it expresses that, the more alive it is.”

Could music be an impulse for the future of all that is human? Could the ideals ‘The True, the Beautiful, the Good’ be experienced as unity through what we call musicality?

An old Chinese legend recounts the disarray that had befallen the empire: war was all around, revolution and famine looming. The emperor summoned a wise man, Li-Bu-Ve, and commanded that he restore the empire to a state of order. And what did Li-Bu-Ve do? He first set the tones in order. And once the tones were set in order, the souls of the people returned to order. And once the souls were in order, the empire returned to a state of order. Does this legend say anything about our day and age?

In Arthur Honegger’s and Paul Claudel’s monumental work ‘La Danse des Morts’ (The Dance of the Dead), an ostinato 10 bar motif, sung 13 times across a dramatic, increasing intensity, reminds us that we are interconnected with a higher force:

The image shows two staves of musical notation in G major, 4/4 time. The melody is an ostinato motif consisting of ten bars. The lyrics are written below the notes.

Re-mem-ber man that you are spi - rit and the flesh is more than the gar-ment and the spi - rit is more
 than the flesh and the eye is more tha - n the face and love is more mo - re than death

