

THE MASTER MUSICIAN

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Music is God's gift to us.¹ As believers we offer our gifts of music to him with praise and thanksgiving. It is significant that of all the arts, music has the most continuous positive relation with Christian theology.² This is evident in the allegories found in theological and religious literature depicting Christ the Master Musician playing on the souls of Christian believers like musical instruments. These allegorical writings symbolically present Christ as Master Musician and describe symbolically the role Christians play as musical instruments in the Master's hand. This literature may unfold the formative spirituality of the great saints and other gifted authors.

The early church fathers used their knowledge of music and musical instruments in their theological writings concerning music. Despite their strong convictions concerning music and their prohibitions of musical instruments being played in public worship, they reflected their knowledge of Aristotle and other Greek philosophers, by citing preferences for the *cithara* and lyre in their allegories. These ancient string instruments, ancestors of the harp, were played to accompany the priestly choir during worship at the Temple in Jerusalem until daily sacrifices ceased after the destruction of Herod's Temple in A.D. 70 by the Roman legions.³

It is fascinating to see the depictions of Christ as Orpheus playing the lyre adorn the walls and early Christian *saracophagi* in the catacombs of Rome. Our Savior, Jesus Christ, as musician continues to impart rich meaning for us as a traditional theme in religious art and literature.

When the human voice was considered the complete instrument, all musical instruments were united into the human being by praising

¹ *Luther's Works*, vol 53, *Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 321.

² Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 165.

³ Alfred Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1969), 431-432.

God and leading a life of good works. St. Augustine commented that the lyre or *psaltarium* and the *cithara* are an indivisible idea within the doctrinal concept that “Christ’s body is integer” (*duo organo video, corpus autem Christi unum video*).⁴ In his sermons, St. Augustine explained the Ten Commandments in terms of the ten strings of the lyre or harp.⁵

Besides being functional, musical instruments are also non-functional objects of reflection, symbolizing invisible spiritual realities. For example, Cassiodorus reasoned: The lyre or *psalterium* makes known the incarnation of God and “signifies divine love leading to conversion (while the *kitara* signifies movement, “passion”).⁶

St. Augustine commended music as being “valuable in comprehension of spiritual things.”⁷ An example of this particular symbolism was cited by St. Gregory of Nazianzen, a fourth century bishop in Asia Minor in comparing the spiritual soul of the person to an instrument played by the Holy Spirit: *organum pulsatum a Spiritu Sancto*.⁸ We are aware as Christians that the melodies and harmonies drawn from the well-tuned strings of a human personality are a perfection that the individual could never aspire to in their own strength and will. It is the empowering of the Holy Spirit that can make this possible.

A strikingly similar allegory by St. John Chrysostom expresses his counsel to his readers:

You may yourself become a *cithara*, mortifying the members of the flesh and making a full harmony of mind and spirit, but has submitted to its orders and has been led at length

⁴ St. Augustine, quoted in Margaret J. Kartomi, *On Concepts and Classifications of Musical Instruments* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 138.

⁵ George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols on Christian Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 176.

⁶ Kartomi, 139.

⁷ James McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 165. Many examples of musical imagery and allegory can be found in the psalm commentary of the patristic fathers.

⁸ Tomas Merton, *The Ascent of Faith* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1951), 181.

into the best and most admirable path, then will you create a spiritual melody.⁹

Practically speaking, what part does the believer play in this silent music? The function of the individual is to tune the strings. St. Gregory sees the Holy Spirit as the master showing the person of reason, his servant, how to do this and leaves with this work.

The present day counterpart to these ancient string instruments is the piano with the musician playing the keys and thereby striking the strings with its hammer action. The role of the musician illustrated by Thomas Merton (1921-1968) expands further on this analogy saying if Christ comes to play and “finds the piano still out of tune, he does not bother to play anything on it. He strikes a chord and goes away.”¹⁰ The spiritual person with God’s grace is able to judge what must be done to keep the instrument in tune. The soul of the mature Christian is like the ears of a well-trained musician that can recognize the slightest deviations of pitch in the instrument.

The immature Christian like the beginning pianist does not know for sure when their instrument is out of tune, man-made rules that go beyond those given by God result in an attempt to play or sing truer than the pitch given by God: they have the effect of a loud voice singing sharp in a flat choir, where only the organ is true.¹¹

Keeping an instrument in tune is comparable to each believer’s responsibility in maintaining the spirit of renewal in their hearts. Thomas Merton speaks of the discretion of soul to keep the piano in tune. The tuning of the instrument involves tightening the strings so they will sound at the designated pitch. The individual will and reason must “judge the right measure of self-denial that will keep the soul responsive to the

⁹ Oliver Strunk, *Source in Music History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1950), 70.

¹⁰ Merton, 182.

¹¹ Merton, 182.

keys when they are struck by God.”¹² This is clearly the work of the Holy Spirit since keeping an instrument in tune and in good playing is comparable to each believer’s responsibility in maintaining the spirit of spiritual renewal in their hearts.

Further elaboration on this theme reveals the importance of tuning all the tones since no pure melodies and harmonies will be heard if they are played on an out-of-tune instrument. Carefully tune your individual instrument accurately. Tune your own instrument first before attempting to tune other instruments, or else you will share your discord with others.¹³ The melody of theology, to paraphrase Friedrich Schleiermacher, finds expression in the special calling of a person and is at the same time the melody of that person’s life. However, it remains a simple series of notes unless our religious experience with its endless variety, accompanies it with all its notes and raises the simple song to a full-bodied harmony.¹⁴

In the sixteenth century, St. John of the Cross heard this spiritual music as

silent music,
sounding solitude,
the supper that refreshes, and deepens love.¹⁵

In a series of meditations on “The Spiritual Canticle” by St. John of the Cross,” Susan Muto finds new beauty in this silent music for it “engenders a harmonious symphony.” In the core of her being, the soul enjoys a “symphony of spiritual music so consonant that every sense in her body responds to its melody. Each faculty sounds through with a new spiritual sensitivity.”¹⁶

¹² Merton, 182.

¹³ J. F. H. con Dalberg, quoted in *Music, Mysticism and Magic* (London: Arkana, 1986), 118.

¹⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, quoted in Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology*, 167.

¹⁵ Saint John of the Cross, quoted in Susan Muto, *Deep into the Thicket* (Pittsburgh: Epiphany Association), 66.

¹⁶ Muto, 70, 71.

Our divine Master proves his perfect mastery of men and women by fitting the most imperfect human instruments to sound his praise. The Master Musician finds no perfect instruments ready to play, but with the miraculous skill he triumphs over our sinful imperfections, transforms our social and mental imperfections.¹⁷

As we are formed in the image of Christ, each individual Christian is nourished when he or she is dependent upon the Holy Spirit to guide and direct our spiritual lives. “The most skilled and experienced hands will draw no more from it than vulgar songs if the Spirit does not guide them, nor the Divine Breath embrace the Spirit.”¹⁸

It is then that music may transport us into God’s presence. Indeed, music can draw us to Himself and prepare us for the life to come when we will be with Christ in the New Jerusalem. Heaven may become “the original archetype of all musical instruments, tuned for no other purpose than that the hymns sung in honor of the Universal Father may have a musical accompaniment.”¹⁹ In the book of Revelation, John the beloved Apostle describes his vision of the twenty-four elders falling down before the Lamb, each holding a *cithara* and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayer of the saints. And they sing a new song saying: “Worthy art Thou to take the scroll and open its seals.”²⁰

Recently Pope John Paul II enunciated the meaning of music for us in an address to the International Youth Orchestra:

As with prayer, every artistic expression—especially music—lifts the soul beyond mere earthly existence; it allows us to face life and God who created it with humble devotion, open to the splendor of its truth.²¹

¹⁷ J. Paul Taylor, *The Music of the Pentecost* (Winona Lake, IN: Light and Life Press, 1951), 39.

¹⁸ George Sand, quoted in Joscelyn Godwin, *Music, Mysticism and Magic* (Hammondsworth: Arkana, 1986), 230.

¹⁹ Philo, quoted in *Music, Mysticism and Magic*, 57.

²⁰ Revelation 5:8-9.

²¹ Pope John Paul II, quoted in Basil Cole, *Music and Morals* (New York: Alba House), 98.

The instrument our Lord uses then becomes a means of glorifying God in our prayers and praise offered in heart-felt adoration. Pope John Paul's praise of music reflects Thomas Aquinas' statement that "man is much affected by music; hence its value in exciting devotion at prayer."²²

The allegory of music with its genres, forms and musical instruments is the subject of a remarkable book entitled *The Music of Pentecost*, by Bishop J. Paul Taylor, former bishop of the Free Methodist Church. It is with fond remembrance that I recall his eloquent sermons that form the basis of this book. Bishop Taylor points to the lives of the saints as evidence of God's transforming grace.

The personality that is in the hands of God becomes a source of peaceful harmonies, as the stringed instruments of ancient times. We recall the lives of the Saint Augustine, the John Newton's, who have been lifted from the miry clay to sing the "new song" that was put in their mouths until the world was charmed by their music.²³

A religious poem by an unknown author, "The Touch of the Master's Hand," simply tells the folk-like story of an old violin being sold at an auction and how the price of the instrument increases greatly when it is played by a master violinist. The spiritual application is stated directly for the Master changes us by the touch of his hand on our personal lives.

The Touch of the Master's Hand

"Twas battered and scared, and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth a while
To waste much time on the old violin
But held it up with a smile
"What am I bid, good folk," he cried,
"Who'll start bidding for me?"

²² Cole, 75.

²³ Taylor, 38, 39.

A dollar, a dollar—now two, only two—
Two dollars. and who'll make it three?

Three dollars once, three dollars twice,
Going for three, but no!
From the room far back a gray-haired man—
Came forward and picked up the bow;

Then wiping the dust from the old violin,
And tightening up the strings,
He played a melody, pure and sweet,
As sweet as the angel's sing.

The music ceased and the auctioneer
With a voice that was quiet and low,
Said, "What am I bid for the old violin?"
And he held it up with the bow.

"A thousand dollars—and who'll make it two?
Two thousand dollars—and who'll make it three?
Three thousand once—three thousand twice—
And going—and gone," said he.

The people cheered, but some of them cried:
"We do not quite understand—
What changed the worth?" The man replied,
"The touch of the master's hand."

And many a man with life out of tune
And battered and torn with sin,
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd,
Much like the old violin.

A "mess of pottage," a glass of wine,
A game—and he travels on,
He's going once, and going twice,
He's going—and almost gone!

But the Master comes, and the foolish
Crowd never can quite understand
The worth of a soul, and the change that is wrought
By the Touch of the Master's Hand.

— *Author Unknown*

This poem illustrates the ancient idea of musical instruments, “adapted to making the invisible known.”²⁴ The moral effects of musical instruments consist of their spiritual significance for believers.

Like St. Thomas Aquinas, Adrian van Kaam, contemporary theologian of formative spirituality, writes poetry that sheds light on the transformation we encounter when our lives become a song of praise and adoration in the radiant revelation of Christ’s splendor.

You are the vibration of my soul.
 Make me a priest of the universe
 Blending all creatures inwardly
 Into a song of praise and adoration.
 Let the radiance of your worship
 Shine upon my daily doings.
 Change the world before my inner eye
 Into a revelation of your splendor,
 Shining forth most brightly
 The destiny of all that is.²⁵

Father van Kaam’s poem can be considered a poetic and spiritual commentary on John Milton’s triumphant lines:

And keep in tune with heaven, till God ere long
 To his celestial concert us unite,
 To live with Him, and sing in endless morn of light.²⁶

In conclusion, these examples of musical allegory may unfold the creative use of imagery in the believers response to Christ’s message of spiritual formation and discipleship. In the beloved hymn of consecration, “Lord Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace,” commonly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, we sense that we are as musical

²⁴ Kartomi, 139.

²⁵ Adrian van Kaam, “The Grace of Worship,” in *The Woman and the Well* (Epiphany Association, 1990), 87.

²⁶ John Milton, “At a Solemn Music,” quoted in Murray J. Levith, ed., *Musical Masterpieces in Poetry* (Neptune, NJ: Paganiniana Publications, Inc., 1984), 25.

instruments in the hands of Christ bringing to fruition our Divine Master's call to holiness.

This music of holiness in the testimony of Mother Teresa of Calcutta in her book of daily devotional meditations:

“Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace” is our motto. The most important part is that we keep the work as his work and that we do not spoil it by any claims. It is impossible, humanly speaking, for your young and inexperienced sisters to do what they must do but for the fact that we are just instruments to do God's work. Our task is to allow Jesus to use us. It is he who is doing the work with us, through us and in us.²⁷

As instruments of love, peace and compassion we emulate the virtues of Christ Jesus and are like divine music filling “the inner ear with a spiritual symphony of love for God and one's neighbor; of faith, hope, and charity.”²⁸ In doing this we will echo the words of Charles Stanford's resounding hymn: “When In Our Music God is Glorified.”

When in our music God is glorified
 And adoration leaves no room for pride,
 It is as though the whole creation cried
Alleluia!

How often, making music, we have found
 A new dimension in the world of sound,
 As worship moved us to a more profound
Alleluia!

Let every instrument be tuned with praise
 Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise!
 And may God have us faith to sing always
Alleluia!²⁹

²⁷ Mother Teresa, *The Joy of Loving: A Guide to Daily Living with Mother Teresa*, eds. Jaya Chaliha and Edward Le Joly (New York: Viking, 1996), 413.

²⁸ Adam Scott, quoted in *Music, Mysticism and Magic*, 101.

²⁹ *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), 420.

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