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The Gift of Music: Common Grace and Common Ground

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Not too long ago, I was browsing in a used bookstore I had never before visited. Since the conglomeration of books was new to me, I had the ridiculously unrealistic goal of viewing every book and purchasing quite a few of them. But my task was halted by the sound of beautiful music. From behind the cashier's counter came the ineffable strains of Puccini's aria *O Mio Babbino Caro*. My book scanning came to an end as I stood motionless and allowed the music to wash over me. I looked at the sound system from which the music came and caught the eye of the only other person in the store, the manager standing next to the speakers. She, too, was captivated and said, "It takes you to another world, doesn't it?"

"It does indeed," I responded in a soft voice, so as not to overshadow the beauty of the moment.

Music does indeed take us to another world. Or, more accurately, it points us there. For me, music is one of those stimulators of desire that reminds me of what C.S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."¹

Before coming to faith in Jesus, I "worshipped" music as my ultimate god. My weekly service occurred every Saturday night at the temple of the Philadelphia Academy of Music. My minister was Eugene Ormandy and sacraments were provided by Beethoven, Dvorak, Tchaikovsky, and other "patron saints." But the repeated pattern of letdown after each and every concert became undeniable and the growing disappointment was palpable.

During that time, I read the New Testament, thinking that perhaps music was an inadequate messiah. God used Matthew's Gospel to convince me that Jesus was the true Messiah, the one who fulfilled the prophecies of Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, and all the other parts of the Old Testament.

C.S. Lewis helped me see that Jesus was the Messiah I was looking for at those devotional times with the Philadelphia Orchestra. He was the one who could satisfy when Brahms could not. His sacrifice provided the open door to "the other world" to which *O Mio Babbino Caro* pointed. I resonated with Lewis's observation from *The Weight of Glory*,

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.²

Music is a great gift but a poor god. As such, it is an example of God's common grace, which He can use for our good. I'm using the term common grace to refer to all those many blessings that God sends to all people, saved and unsaved. Just as He "sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45 NIV), so He provides beautiful music, delicious food, breathtaking sunsets, laughter, friendship, and so many other blessings for all people—whether they acknowledge the source or not. Music can also serve as common ground in our efforts to connect with nonbelievers. They love music too and may be looking to music to provide more than it can. Perhaps they have experienced a similar disappointment to what I felt after all those orchestra concerts.

Common Grace

Here are just four ways music can work as common grace in the lives of all people, both believers and nonbelievers.

First, music can connect us to beauty, which could remind us of the way God originally created the world—good, without the ravages and damages of sin and the fall. For believers, music can prompt deeper worship of the God who created all things merely by uttering words. (Note that God used sound to create!) It can expand our appreciation for God's creative acts and help us see His handiwork in all places—physical beauty, signs of order or design, and many other "natural" things that really are remarkably supernatural.

For non-Christians, music can lift them out of the dominant message of our world, which claims that life is an accident in a random universe as a product of chance. Since God has "set eternity in their heart" (Eccl. 3:11 NASB), music can point people in that direction.

Even some convinced naturalists who have little good to say about religion seem to wax eloquent about music in almost doxological ways. For example, Anthony Storr, an Oxford professor in psychiatry, in his *Music and the Mind* dismisses religious beliefs as mere attempts to "find comfort in supposing that God meant there to be order..."³ But in search of a conclusion to his lengthy naturalistic discussion of music, he proclaimed, "Music is a source of reconciliation, exhilaration, and hope which never fails ... [and] something for the sake of which it is worthwhile to live on earth."⁴ I love music, but I think we need something more substantive to make life "worthwhile." I wonder if we might have some friends who would want Storr to be right about music but wonder why it sometimes does "fail."

Second, music can help us see the richness of life. Put negatively, music can serve as a preventative against reductionism—the tendency to think of anything in just one dimension. For example, we can think of this world as "just" organic matter. We can think of friendship as "just" an alternative to loneliness. We can view work as "just" a means to a paycheck. We can consider prayer as "just" a way to get God to do things for us. The complexities of music force us to see the richness in other things—people, activities, tasks, etc. As we close our eyes and explore the whole of music, which is so much greater than the sum of its parts, we attune our minds to seek similar complexity elsewhere. We become enriched as we appreciate the richness around us.

A great deal of music is built around a theme and variations. The best jazz musicians, like Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, take a basic tune and extrapolate for seemingly endless repetitions without running out of ideas. Many classical works, such as Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*, take a simple motif and expand on it for what seems like hours. Rock guitarists such as Jerry Garcia (was there ever really anyone like Jerry Garcia?) could find nuances in chord progressions that enable them to "compose on the spot" as they allow their



creative minds to explore more and more variations upon a single theme. Careful listening to complex music can prevent us from thinking that life is simple, one dimensional, or boring.

Third, music can heighten our experience of tension and release. It can help us feel the depths of pain and heights of joy that we need to feel. It can protect us against emotional numbness. Certain pieces of music create a sense of “unresolvedness” and then provide the resolution rather quickly. Mozart may have been the best at this. In his *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* the cycles of tension and release are short. The overall effect helps us feel a sense of order in the universe. That’s why some people tell us we can reorder our brains by listening to Mozart. Pregnant mothers are told to listen to Mozart so their developing babies can grow in a peaceful environment.

Other pieces of music (e.g., the final movement of Sibelius’s *Symphony No. 5*) extend the tension for so long that, when the resolution finally comes, the exhale feels monumental. In a parallel way, the Bible creates a tension that is resolved only by the cross. It is the tension between holiness (God’s) and sin (ours). We long for righteousness and goodness, and we resonate with it to a certain extent. But we also feel a tension, because we also resonate with the notion that something’s just not right with the world and with us. That tension is resolved only as God’s judgment and grace meet at Calvary. God’s righteous requirement for atonement is satisfied. God’s love provides that atonement. He is both the just and the justifier. Listening to music that highlights tension and release can help us lament more painfully about the evil in our world, repent more thoroughly from the sin in our hearts, and appreciate the gospel more gratefully for our entire lives.

Fourth, music can increase our longing for a return to home. For believers, this is the longing of the ages, for the final stage of God’s redemptive, four-chapter drama of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation. When a piece of music ends by restating the theme it introduced at the beginning, we find ourselves at home. And that theme’s “at-home-ness” seems even better after having been away. This happens so often in a wide variety of genres—popular music, jazz, folk, and classical—that it suggests a deeply ingrained longing for a return to the way things once had been.

Robert Greenberg, a music historian and brilliant lecturer about music, says that when we hear the return of the main theme at the end of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*,

*though, in its return, the Aria is unchanged, we now hear a world of possibilities and experience implicit within it that we could not possibly have heard at the outset of the piece. We are the wiser at this point of the piece, and the serenity and completion . . . are not unlike those one might feel when looking back across a long and well lived life.*⁵

Common Ground

As mentioned above, music can be the basis for discussions with non-Christian friends that points them toward the gospel. Here are some suggestions for how that can happen.

Many Christians wonder what activities they can share with non-Christians. To be sure, there may be some party invitations we should decline. But music often can provide common ground. Going to concerts together, listening to music together, or discussing which of their iPhone playlists get the most air time can begin deeper discussions about beauty, creation, and meaning.

The question, why do you think music moves us so much?, can launch many conversations that point to a Creator who made life orderly, enjoyable, and rich. But you’ll want to think through how your love for music connects to your faith. You may not be able to come up with an explanation as easily as a jazz musician improvises on the spot.

If your testimony of coming to faith in Jesus has a C.S. Lewisian component of disappointment that led to the “other world” of the gospel, prepare ways to express that in words. Maybe this is something you could share in writing through social media. Or maybe you can post updates about concerts, art exhibits, or movies you’ve seen and share how the experience pointed you beyond.

When people share their wonderings about what life is all about or how random or chaotic our world seems, affirm their suspicion that “there’s got to be more to life.” Maybe you will have opportunity to quote Leonard Bernstein and see what they think of his insights. The great composer of classical and Broadway masterpieces and conductor of the New York Philharmonic once said, “Beethoven . . . leaves us . . . with the feeling that something is

right in the world, that something checks throughout, something that follows its own laws consistently, something we can trust, that will never let us down.”⁶

I believe Bernstein was on to something. Music does indeed make us think that “something is right in the world.” But I disagree with his view that music “will never let us down.” We need to look to Someone greater than Beethoven for that. ■■

Notes

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr. New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone, 1996), 121.

² C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 29.

³ Anthony Storr, *Music and the Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1983), 187.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁵ Robert Greenberg, *Bach and the High Baroque* (Chantilly, VA: The Great Courses, 1998), 279.

⁶ Leonard Bernstein, *The Joy of Music* (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2004), 105.

I have found my musical soul again ... this time in the preludes of Chopin... Aren't they wonderful? ... they are so passionate, so hopeless, I could almost cry over them; they are unbearable. I will find out the numbers of the ones I mean and we will have a feast next holidays.

C.S. Lewis (in a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves)



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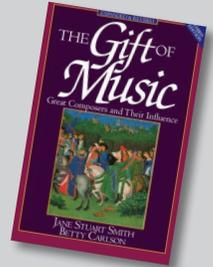
RECOMMENDED READING

Jane Stuart Smith and Betty Carlson, *The Gift of Music: Great Composers and Their Influence* (Expanded and Revised, 3rd edition), Foreword by Francis A. Schaeffer (Crossway, 1995)

One of the finest achievements of Western culture is its brilliant heritage of classical music. *A Gift of Music* looks at the lives of the greatest composers who have given us this heritage, and especially at how their music was shaped by their beliefs.

The result is a remarkable and inspiring book, showing the importance of Christian faith for many composers, and the effect of this upon their music. But it also shows how the lack of faith has brought profound change in the meaning and form of contemporary music.

Thus *A Gift of Music* seeks to open up a whole new world of music—to encourage listening to the finest compositions with new understanding and pleasure, and to stretch our ears and imaginations. It is a book which will be greatly appreciated by those who already love classical music, and by others who want to explore this delightful world for the first time.



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