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Joy, Catharsis, and (Eu)Catastrophe

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The modern experiment in art and culture is growing old. It is simply strange to speak of movements more than a century old as "modern"; it is stranger still to see how strongly many of their core values still persist in various contemporary art forms. The search for the "new" that arrived at abstraction in the visual arts, stream-of-consciousness and psychology in the literary genres, and atonality in music continues to endure in many of the same forms. Modernity was enthralled with what new truth it could construct, and sought often enough to build a new humanity to suit this truth. This new humanity would not be allowed to love certain things from the old world, namely, the catharsis of resolution and the sweeter sentiments. These signs of weakness and decadence held back the revolution that the modern experiment promised to release. An avoidance of resolution had its strongest resonance in both music and any art form with a narrative—the resolution of expectations, whether in the arrival of a final tonic chord after a resounding dominant or the *dênouement*, good or bad, of conflict in a story, would be slowly eroded over time. Catharsis was from here onward to be avoided.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle had first noted this need for catharsis, a cleansing or purification of the passions of the soul, in the *Poetics*, his treatise on drama and poetry. In our modern understanding, this purging of negative emotions can occur whether the typical emotional reception of a musical or narrative work is generally positive or negative. A traditional march in a major key can resolve expectations in much the same way an elegy in a minor key can. One may express triumph and the other lamentation, but both can invoke catharsis at a point when, the passions having been stirred up, they are put to rest and the soul cleansed. Similarly, though some popular conceptions of catharsis hold it to be linked to "happy endings", its origin, at least in Aristotle's explanation, was in *tragic* drama. There is, however, an intriguing connection between the abandonment of catharsis as an aesthetic goal in the modern period and the simultaneous rejection of certain sentimental aspects of these "happy endings".

As the nineteenth century began to wane, the burgeoning middle class turned *en masse* to forms of entertainment that had hitherto been beyond their means. One of the most influential of these was the popular novel. Churned out by the thousands, these long-forgotten (and largely forgettable) books were widely perceived by critics to be produced by (comparatively) uneducated writers for a largely female audience. Featuring predictable narratives and inevitably happy endings, these novels were emblematic for many critics of everything that was

wrong with the bourgeois culture of the time. They sought for an "easy" emotion, an ostensibly "feminine" sentimentality that was sweet, saccharine, and artistically unearned. Not long after, in the early twentieth century, there would be a parallel in the mass production of music in Tin Pan Alley and onward through the popularity of swing music and the rhythm and blues and rock and roll that followed it. The sheer popularity of these lowbrow art forms engendered no small amount of enmity in the growing modern art movements. Few artistic crimes were considered as heinous as that of kitsch, sentimentality, commercialism, or embracing the mainstream. What the modernists failed to see was that by refusing wholesale the sweeter sentiments (and by extension the cathartic resolution that could produce them) they were roping off an entire arena of artistic expression that had seen fruitful exploration in every human generation that had gone before. American philosopher Robert Solomon writes that

> Bad art is one thing and sentimentality is another, and while bad literature [or in our present examination, bad music] in particular may try to prove its redeeming value by evoking tender feelings, its sentimentality is neither the cause of its badness nor a species of immorality. Sentimentality in certain circumstances can be in bad taste, of course, but sentimentality as such is not always (or even usually) in bad taste and bad taste does not always (or even usually) reflect bad character.[1]

Catharsis and the related sentimentality are no more the determinant markers of mediocrity than the use of consonant materials in music or a lack of abstruse vocabulary in literature are. Indeed, works seeking the lonely glory of the high art community can themselves often hide mediocrity by engaging in an aimless and merely significative complexity. Nonetheless, in the twentieth century, the experimental vanguard of art music would increasingly reject both the need for resolution and the desire for the sweeter sentiments of joy, peace, and hope.

During its common practice period from the middle of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, music could be defined by the use of its constituent elements: harmony was teleological and functional; melody was foregrounded, memorable, and often lyrical; rhythmic patterns were periodic and their pulse consistent; both form and texture emphasized balance and clarity. All of these musical elements were leveraged to satisfy expectations, though not necessarily directly. Most composers took great pride in dragging out the process, providing misdirection and false endings, but in the end, the expected balance and the satisfaction of resolution was nearly always reached. The increasing chromaticism of the late romantic period, coupled with the coloristic and largely non-functional harmonies of the impressionists, was bound to lead to a more definitive transformation of harmonic material, first to a wide variety of methods of atonal organization, then more definitively in 1923 with Schoenberg's system of serializing pitch so that all twelve chromatic tones were treated equally. The use of rhythm was changing simultaneously. Regular pulse and periodic patterns were now largely avoided.

Later, works such as Stockhausen's 1960 *Kontakte* changed the role of form, erasing the concept of the self-referent and approaching something like the literary practice of stream-of-consciousness, while works such as Ligeti's 1961 *Atmosphères* changed the role of musical texture, moving it from a background element to the foreground. There was a general intent to denature each component of music, unmaking the normal and constructing a completely new and alien field of possibilities. Furthest from any experimental composer's mind was the desire to satisfy the expectations of a mainstream audience. Indeed, since the riotous premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in 1913, the wholesale rejection of mainstream interest had become the norm. There were exceptions to these pursuits, of course, but they rarely involved composers associated with the *avant-garde* until the late 1960s. Then, a trio of religious composers, Arvo Pärt of Estonia, Henryk Górecki of Poland, and John Tavener of Britain began writing what the critic Josiah Fisk dubbed "the new simplicity". He says of them that

> We're not talking about music as composition, but as an aural-emotional experience. The composer's task in such a situation is virtually the opposite of what a classical composer's job has always been. Instead of

1 Robert C. Solomon, *In Defense of Sentimentality*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 2004, 7.

> creating something dynamic and engaging, he is creating something static and relaxing. Instead of giving us music that requires our own input and interpretation, he provides music that is already pre-interpreted.[2]

Fisk seems here to endorse a kind of Kantian disinterestedness in the contemplation of art, and implies that this new music, which frequently evoked the sweeter sentiments, was therefore "pre-interpreted". Though the weight of modern criticism and most of the *avant-garde* were aligned with Fisk's thought, the common man, the masses whose poor taste helped to drive the early modernists did not.

There is and always has been a fundamental human need for catharsis, for consistency and satisfaction. Joy, whether in action or as evoked in artistic media has never ceased to be a human pursuit. American sociologist Peter Berger notes that "sizable numbers of the specimen 'modern man' have not lost a propensity for awe, for the uncanny, for all those possibilities that are legislated against by the canons of secularized rationality."[3] Indeed, Solomon says of the field of philosophy what could be similarly said for music: "To be a philosopher is to be steadfastly attentive to what it means to be human, to the passions as well as to much-celebrated "rationality'."[4] It is no accident that in many parts of the world still, the masses of men and women are highly religious, while their cultural elites are not. Fisk's trio of composers were tapping into an aspect of humanity more profound than the surface level of music he was criticizing: they were invoking the desire of man and woman to encounter the Divine.

In Christian *praxis*, this encounter is partly facilitated by a number of rituals and behaviours in daily spiritual life that are themselves cathartic in nature, purging the negative from both the self and the community of believers, what in the Jewish-inspired thought of the early church was bringing *shalom* to chaos. These rituals function to re-centre the believer, placing the person of Christ as the main body in a complex orbit of lifestyle, worldview, and purpose. Throughout the daily life of the believer, there piles up in the mind (and weighs upon the soul) a series of mistakes and intentional sins, distractions, and stressors. Every time of study on a passage of scripture or the words of the saints, every recitation of a church creed or form prayer, every improvised confession of weakness to God acts as a moment of catharsis. The negative spiritual elements that have accumulated are purified, the vision for a future that has become blurred is made clear once again, and the life dangerously out of balance is once again centred. Though for the individual this is a daily *praxis*, it has a weekly equivalent in community. The ritual of the Mass, the Divine Liturgy, or the church service is a locus of purification, catharsis, and renewal for both the individual and their community. It is in the climax of the service that this transcendent moment of catharsis arrives in the form of the Eucharist. Each one communes with the very Spirit of God, taking into themselves the real presence of the Saviour and uniting in a beautiful gesture the oft-separated physical and spiritual realms.

Whereas the daily renewal mentioned before is personal and often unregimented, the climax of the Eucharist is both public and finite, a regularly appointed event. It arrives much as the turn in a narrative does. The climax of a tragic story has long been deemed its catastrophe. The Eucharist, however, is a triumph and not a tragedy. English philologist and author J.R.R. Tolkien noted this when he coined the neologism, *eu*catastrophe.[5] He wanted a term that reflected both the narrative-altering nature of the good catastrophe and its fundamentally beneficent character. Though in story this good turn is often unlooked-for, in real life it underlies a faith in the reliability of the Transcendent. In this manner, it is a certainty that establishes hope. As Berger pointed out, in every culture across the globe, the mother comforting her fearful child whispers

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2 Josiah Fisk, "The New Simplicity: The Music of Górecki, Tavener, and Pärt," in *The Hudson Review* 47, no. 3 (1994), 409

3 Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1970, 24.

4 Solomon, *In Defense of Sentimentality*, vii.

5 J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in Christopher Tolkien, ed. *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1984, 153.

to them that everything will be ok.[6] This can be dismissed as a noble lie or wishful thinking, or it could much more significantly reflect a belief in a reality that is just. It is a belief that is held *despite* the historical and anecdotal evidence suggesting the capriciousness of everyday life. This belief, however, is not maintained without effort. As Christian *praxis* serves to re-centre the believer's spiritual walk, it also rebuilds periodically our trust in God's benevolence. The weekly *eucatastrophe* of the religious service and its climax in the Eucharist serve as a cathartic reification of the Divine presence in the believing life.

In this, music plays a special role. Uniquely among the arts, music is visceral – it is quite literally felt within and upon the body, not merely by the performers, but by those listening as well. Music has the capacity to act upon those who receive it, even those who do so passively or unintentionally. Without question, the art music of the twentieth century can impart sobriety. It can speak clearly in tones of horror, ambiguity, or in bouts of confusion. But can it give us hope? Sacred music has always looked to the past. Many of the chants sung a millennium and a half ago are still sung today. Even Protestant hymnody has a legacy several hundred years old. It is natural that newly-composed sacred music, whether liturgical or paraliturgical, should reflect these origins. But Fisk's errant trio, Pärt, Górecki, and Tavener, were unwilling to merely look backward in their music, but they sought to make something of significance that was new, moving beyond the pale of acceptable modernism and into something greater. Referred to often with the somewhat derogatory moniker "holy minimalism", their style similarities include a primarily diatonic pitch vocabulary, a fairly simple and constant rhythmic pulse, and repeated melodic figures. Some of their primary differences from the American minimalists are their consistently slower tempi and infrequent use of polyrhythm. They take as their subject the vast wealth of traditional sacred music and text of both the eastern and western Christian church (and sometimes other religious traditions). In this they fashioned a unique sensibility that united the sacred and the sweeter sentiments to much popular acclaim and some critical respect, though often begrudgingly bestowed.

One particular work of Pärt's, the "Credo" section of his *Berliner Messe*, illustrates this sensibility. The Christian creed is, remember, an opportunity for the believer to re-centre themselves. If music offers a similar opportunity to purge the self of the negative and refresh the spirit, then this particular unity of music and text is telling. The "Credo", written for choir and strings, has the two groups interweave seamlessly throughout. Choir and strings will at times move seemingly together, or sound as if they are just shy of being perfectly aligned. This wavering between something like homophony and an almost antiphonal counterpoint creates a sense of distance; not of a gulf of abstraction, but of seeing some concrete and realized thing as if through frosted glass. The harmonies similarly waver between consonant intervals and implied chords resolving over and over again to a shifting centre and diatonic dissonances that tend to appear at the crest of a phrase just before the cadence. The orchestration of Pärt's "Credo" is very deliberate, with voices and strings "shelved" into precise locations within their tessitura. The overall effect is like a musical sieve, with only a few voices allowed to speak at one time in one compressed portion of the overall range of expression. These voices call and answer to one another, rolling like gentle waves from top to bottom and back again of the available registral and timbral space. At any given time, one only receives a fraction of the total musical picture. Pärt is reifying in musical form the Divine mysteries being sworn in the creed. Even if the Creed is a summation of the core of Christian doctrine, it can only impart a small portion of the total mystery of the Trinity. It is, like this musical setting, at once both within our grasp and removed from our complete understanding.

The sentiments expressed in the music seem to be joy and peace, with perhaps a brief moment of poignancy at the mention of the suffering and death of Christ under Pontius Pilate

6 Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 54.

(indeed, many performances slow here, as if to draw out the moment, though the composer gives no indication to do so). Pärt's stirring of the sweeter emotions is of a special kind. The cathartic nature of resolution is stretched out in the music somehow. The constant repetition, the antiphonal echoes, the profusion of cadences immediately followed without rest by new phrases all serve to take this moment of peace and expand it to the length of the entire setting. It is an extended moment to be lived in, fully inhabited. Berger writes of a particular signal of transcendence, a sign of the divine and the mundane crossing each other's paths: that in the play of a child, he or she enters into a special world of timelessness.[7] The music evokes that same sense of what composer Jonathan Kramer calls the "eternal present".[8] It is the presence of eternity in both the words of the creed and the sentiment of the music, inextricably wed.

There is an obsession in the new music world of a search for the new. It is, then, a supreme irony that most experimental composers spend their lives hashing and rehashing the same sorts of things that were *avant-garde* half a century ago. That which is dogmatically excluded would be, if it were allowed, quite novel. I would argue that it is in precisely the sentiments of tradition, in the manifest transcendence of the liturgy and its accompanying song, in the sacred music of para-liturgical forms that we might instead have a new way forward. This *ars nova* for our present century would not need to forbid the stylistic hallmarks of modernism (thus reproducing the previous error), but it likely would emphasize many of the long-held taboos of the *avant-garde*. It might be foolish to predict outright what the qualities of this new music might be, but if nothing is ventured, nothing is gained.

One can imagine a revaluation of consonant intervals without the need for common practice functionality. One can imagine extremes of complexity in rhythm that are leveraged for comprehensibility instead of alienation to the uninitiated: perhaps by pulling the polyrhythms apart very slowly and then pushing them back together, like a sort of rhythmic pedagogy; or perhaps to reverse a common modern trope of the simple rhythm being transformed into one both complex and arcane, and instead take such a rhythmic figure and allow something gentler to somehow emerge from it. The extremes of non-referential and paratactic forms also offer unique possibilities: If the barest, simplest of musical materials were juxtaposed in a "moment" form or a form generated by indeterminate forces, what new aesthetic experiences might emerge? A lay audience might even be able to wrap their minds around the formal chaos then—a thought that should be tantalizing to those committed to new music. Extremes of texture and technique offer similar possibilities. None of these ruminations are particularly prophetic, as examples of each already occurring can doubtless be found. This is true of many musical innovations. What is more important, I think, is a change in perspective and presupposition. The need for joy and the sweeter sentiments, for catharsis and the satisfaction that comes from the purging of negativity in the self, for *eucatastrophe*, whether in story, song, or life circumstances are all fundamentally human experiences. They are mundane and universal and wonderful. An *ars nova* that valued these things above the latest experimental fad, that found meaningful transcendence instead of meaningless abstractions and searched for revelation over the solipsistic intellectual construction might find itself with an incredible resonance, not only popularly, but critically as well. More importantly, perhaps, it would also be helping to realize the kingdom of heaven here on earth.

7 Berger, *A Rumor of Angels*, 57.

8 Jonathan D. Kramer, *The Time of Music: New Meanings, New Temporalities, New Listening Strategies*, New York and London: Schirmer Books 1988.

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