

# The Arts in a Catholic University

by Merritt C. Nequette  
Department of Music

The people of one generation were struck by the imagery of a press photo showing the raising of the flag on Iwo Jima. Four decades later, another press photo had a similar effect — a white-T-shirted Chinese youth calmly defying a tank in Tiananmen Square. As one of my professors was wont to say, these pictures "speak volumes." Or as George Steiner might say, they allow one to be taken out of oneself.

The arts are able to operate on many levels, and sometimes simultaneously in almost contradictory ways. They can be playful, provide entertainment, provoke serious thinking, or even be terrifying. Although we may be convinced that pets and plants are affected by some of the arts, only humans have the capability of producing and understanding them.

The arts, by nature, are artificial. They create their own universe. The painter decides how much of the picture we as viewers will see, and gives some clues whether we should consider continuing the image beyond the frame or not. The poet works with language in innovative ways. The playwright works with words also, but assumes that the viewer will see the impersonations of characters acted out, whether on stage, movie screen, or television set. The sculptor provides an entity we may be able to walk around, touch, and see from various viewpoints (and in the case of outdoor sculpture, under different lighting and atmospheric conditions). The dancer, using movements of the body, may evoke sensations of smoothness or angularity, sensuousness or eroticism, gracefulness or impetuosity, skill and athleticism. The architect, in a dual role, presents a functional building with a design that sets it apart from other similar functional buildings. The musician works with one of the most elusive and abstract elements — sound.

The arts in most cultures of the world serve a purpose. They may be didactic or persuasive. They seldom are used for pure entertainment. Even in our own culture, the majority of aural and visual stimuli we receive are probably intended to convince us to purchase some product. Even music videos, which would seem to be pure entertainment, are trying to convince the viewer/listener to buy the CD or cassette, or the music video itself. But the notion of the arts as being primarily entertaining is very likely a 20th-century Western European-American concept.

In our Greco-Roman-Judaeo-Christian heritage, the therapeutic qualities of music are personified by the Greek Orpheus and the Hebrew David. Music is referred to in our literatures as inciting peoples into battle, sorrowing with them for the wounded and fallen, and providing a sense of strength for them in the relatively short peacetimes before the next encounter.

On a much more global perspective, music is associated with religious ritual. The worship of a deity is enhanced by music. The chanting of hymns, psalms, or prayers — whether by a Gyuto Tibetan Buddhist monk, a Muslim muezzin, a Benedictine monk, or a synagogue cantor — is an integral part of the world's religions.

In the Western tradition, music is a great source of contention for religionists. Plato extolled the music of Apollo as ennobling, while the music of Dionysus was declared lascivious. Although each god was in his own way a deity of music, the drunken orgies associated with the worship of Dionysus made music associated with those events secondary to the more illuminating music associated with the worship of Apollo. (One can only assume from the tenor of the argument that more people were attracted to the Dionysian sort of music.) Centuries later, Friedrich Nietzsche would use similar terms to adjudicate the worth of Viennese Classicism (Apollonian) and the German Romanticism (Dionysian).

The Church Fathers were much concerned with music in the emerging Christian church. Basil the Great felt that melody obscured the text, and the singer (or listener) became too enthralled with the melody but paid little attention to the text. However, he also observed that the text was easier to remember if there was a melody attached. Augustine was one of the great supporters of music in the new church, although he too felt that at times he became so transported by the music as to make it an occasion of sin. Most of the Fathers felt that instruments in the service were pagan, and proceeded to allegorize all the noisy references to music in the psalms as metaphors.

The reforming churches a millennium later were still intrigued with the use of music. Luther, in his 57 volumes explaining his interpretations, spent one entire volume on the use of music in his church. He maintained a strong position on the importance of music in worship, which ultimately resulted in the legacy of J.S. Bach. The Anglicans also considered musical traditions as they knew them to be beneficial to their congregations. Other reformers, such as Calvin and Zwingli, were strongly opposed to music in their services (even though Zwingli himself was a trained musician). Recognizing the importance of music in people's lives, however, they did condescend to accept part-singing of psalms as suitable house music.

Music has been a significant part of Catholic liturgy since its beginnings as an offshoot of Jewish cantillation. The singing of psalms was adopted from familiar synagogue practices the first Christians knew. As the Roman Empire eventually split apart politically, the Byzantine east went its own way, and the Roman west began new practices. The plainchant, which probably developed out of the earlier Jewish psalmody, was eventually codified into a Roman rite. Since the plainchant was considered so integral to the ritual itself, it was deemed necessary to incorporate the melodies into the emerging polyphony that began as early as the ninth century in France. As polyphony grew away from the underlying chant and developed on its own, it was still very closely allied with church practices. Although officially demoted to secondary status by the Council of Trent in favor of a return to plainchant, polyphony survived. Composers in the Baroque centuries continued to write voluminously for their various churches, and the Catholic ritual

literature continued to grow. By the end of the 18th century, music in contemporary forms had been written continually throughout the lifetime of the church.

In the 19th century, the texts of the Ordinary of the Mass and others such as the Magnificat and Requiem had become so familiar that they could become the vehicles for a non-liturgical setting, and thus found their way into the concert halls. Numerous forces were coming to bear in the musical world at this time, and the status of music began to change considerably. Concert music became a separate entity, theater music had been somewhat separate for a century, and church music became a poor relation. The Caecilian Movement made a strong recommendation to return to plainchant and Renaissance polyphony, as did the Motu proprio of Pius X in the early 20th century. Churches — not only Catholic — tended to look to the roots of their traditions. Lutherans, Methodists, Anglicans, and others were very content to sing 16th- and 17th-century hymns.

If this quick journey through the history of western music seems to have a heavy reliance on the church, it is not at all accidental. In music-history courses, the question is often raised by students whether this is not a course in theology. There are certainly secular musical forms to be dealt with, but the underlying impetus for new music often comes from providing something contemporary for the church service. As a result, there is no problem connecting this art form with Catholicism. The same would be true for the visual arts, especially in the early centuries, when so much of what is extant is religious.

Having such a rich heritage has been problematic at times. When teaching in a Catholic high school some years ago, I had difficulty convincing choral groups that working on a Mozart or Schubert Mass was valuable. They felt they had been singing these texts under coercion for so many years that they wanted to do something different. Colleagues teaching in public schools (where one might have suspected repercussions because of the religious nature of the music) performed this music, simply because it represented some of the best literature from its time.

Notwithstanding the fact that the material available for many of the arts fits well or was derived from the religious denomination of the university, the arts present a unique form of communication. One form of this communication can be that mentioned at the beginning of this essay. A single image can conjure up an entire chain of events or ideas in the mind of a person. The arts can be a medium for reflective thinking, and this thinking seems to occur in an instant. Students often comment in journals that whenever they hear a particular song, it immediately reminds them of a particular person or event, because that was the first time they had heard the song, or it was "their" song. They are assured that this will probably continue to happen because the associative qualities of music are very strong.

The arts offer one of the more unusual ways to make connections in a liberal arts setting. Artists are often likely to make political statements for their time which can help us to understand more about their time. Some of them, such as J.S. Bach, are deeply religious people and their art form is one way in which they can express their faith. Although their contemporaries were probably more receptive at the first hearing to some of the

underlying meanings, there are those two centuries later who still find the music extremely moving.

In the 19th century, when many European countries were going through various stages of anti-clericalism, the arts became a substitute for religion itself. The concert hall and museum became surrogate churches. This is even reflected in the architecture of most of these structures with their entrance areas separated from the hearing/viewing spaces. This is particularly evident in the spirit of a Gesamtkunstwerk, which is most closely associated with the music dramas of Richard Wagner. He, of course, saw himself and his work as the pinnacle of this movement, because the opera stage incorporated all of the arts in one way or another. However, others at this time would speak of combining various arts, such as viewing walls of paintings while listening to poetry being recited. Before entering into this stage, however, the adherent was encouraged to spend some time in the antechamber preparing oneself before entering the "holy of holies" to participate in the art.

This attitude of "religious" observance, maintaining a silent or at least quiet composure when in buildings such as concert halls and museums, continues into our own time. An audience neatly seated in rows and attentively listening to every nuance of music was probably something that Haydn or Mozart never experienced, since much of their music was essentially intended to be background music, much as we might have recordings playing when we have guests in our homes.

Although we do not read much about the "philosophical implications" of a piece of music much before the mid-19th century, it becomes more common after that time. The music was intended to be listened to, and the iconography available from the 19th century would indicate that indeed audiences for a Schubert, Chopin, or Liszt soirée did indeed have a body of attentive listeners, with much the same rapt attention as one might hope would happen occasionally with a particularly good sermon or homily. It would indeed seem to be providing an uplifting spiritual experience.

If indeed music still has the charisma that was exemplified in an Orpheus or a David, it is possible it (and its sister arts) can still inspire students. Although the Muses have different forms and media with which to work, they can still move souls.