Preface

The remarkable spiritual journey of America jazz musician and Catholic convert Mary Lou Williams (1910–81) is brought to our attention by the Smithsonian Institution’s Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, which has reissued two compact discs of Williams’s stirring jazz compositions composed for liturgical use. Indeed, there seems to be a revival of interest in the music of Williams, as Edward M. Komara notes in his review of a new biography of Williams, the second biography to appear in recent years. Her music and her life integrate her profound musical talent, her Catholic faith, and important developments in the Catholic tradition in the second half of the twentieth century, demonstrating the vitality of that tradition as theological developments and artistic innovation come together in the vocation of a great artist. The subtitle of a recent article about Williams in The Musical Quarterly concisely names some of the elements that come together in the music of Mary Lou Williams: “Vatican II, Civil Rights, and Jazz as Sacred Music.”

Williams proudly describes herself as one of the few jazz artists who was active in every era of jazz, with blues, swing, bop, and avant-garde elements evident in her work throughout the stages of her long career. The spiritual roots of her music came to the foreground for her following a period of spiritual crisis in the 1950s, a crisis that eventually led her to Our Lady of Lourdes church near her apartment in Harlem and to her conversion to the Roman Catholic Church in 1957 at the age of forty-seven. When she released her beautiful jazz hymn, “St. Martin de Porres,” shortly after the saint’s
canonization in 1962, she described what she saw as the religious origins of jazz, origins that she strove to keep active and alive within her music: “From suffering came the Negro spirituals, songs of joy, and songs of sorrow. The main origin of American Jazz is the spiritual. Because of the deeply religious background of the American Negro, he was able to mix this strong influence with rhythms that reached deep enough into the inner self to give expression to outcries of sincere joy, which became known as Jazz.”

The first of the two compact discs reissued by the Smithsonian Institution can be described as a sacred cantata, *Black Christ of the Andes* (originally released as an LP in 1963). Fr. Peter O’Brien, SJ, who first sought out the composer when he was a young seminarian and who became her friend and manager, places this work in the context of the civil rights movement of the 1960s: “in placing the words ‘Black’ and ‘Christ’ together in the one electrifying phrase ‘Black Christ,’ [Williams] unified her own religious belief with the political struggle of the period. This album is the statement of her intertwined beliefs about faith in God, faith in black people, faith in America, and faith in jazz. It was her civil rights statement in 1963.” The opening piece of the cantata, the jazz hymn to which I have previously referred, exhibits a remarkable harmonic complexity as it sets a simple text composed by her friend Fr. Anthony Woods to “bop harmony, with chromatically altered ninths and thirteenths,” according to the analysis of musicologist Gayle Murchison (606). The music beautifully celebrates the Christian charity of the saint and then becomes an urgent prayer of intercession addressed to the saint: “Oh, Black Christ of the Andes / Come feed and cure us now we pray.”

Williams, following her conversion, sought to bring her musical talent fully to the service of the liturgy. Here the developments of the Second Vatican Council, in particular the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” (1963) in the sections dealing with liturgical reform, opened new opportunities for the expansion of musical forms in the service of divine worship. Her development of a jazz
Mass was not without difficulty and controversy—Williams had hoped her Lenten Mass would be performed for the Pope in 1969, but a Vatican official apparently objected to the inclusion of drums in the Mass, so it was performed in a concert in the church after Mass. She did however receive encouragement to persevere with a papal commission to compose a Mass for peace and justice, and her third Mass, originally titled “A Mass for Peace,” has become one of her best known works. Commonly known as “Mary Lou’s Mass,” this work was given the new title by Alvin Ailey, who choreographed a ballet to this music. The work was performed at the Holy Family Church on East 47th Street in New York in 1969 and recorded in 1970. Jazz pianist Marian McPartland, a long-time friend and admirer of Mary Lou Williams, was responsible for a new performance of “Mary Lou’s Mass” at the Washington National Cathedral in 1999, a performance subsequently broadcast by National Public Radio. Williams was deeply attuned to the power of sacred music to heal distressed and troubled souls. This music fully engages the deep well of suffering from which jazz as a musical form emerged and brings that suffering into the healing power of divine love in all the moods of repentance, meditation, and celebration that are experienced in worship.

The grounding insight of a journal such as Logos is that the deep and complex interaction of faith and culture illuminates the continuing vitality of faith in a manner that enriches culture and expands the forms in which the truth and beauty of faith can be discerned. In the music and the life of Mary Lou Williams, we catch a glimpse of the spiritual struggle and spiritual blossoming of a great artist who seems to exemplify the deep mystery of the interpenetration of faith and culture within her life and work. The beauty of her music calls upon us to be open to the work of the Spirit wherever we turn.

The path that leads from these observations to the first work in this issue of Logos is indirect but significant all the same. Just as new musi-
cal forms such as jazz seem to develop in a manner that interacts fruitfully with the truths of religious tradition, so also new developments in Christian devotion seem to call forth the best efforts of artists to incorporate those religious elements into artistic exploration and expression. In an apostolic letter in 2002, Pope John Paul II proposed a development of the tradition of the rosary through the addition of “the mysteries of Christ’s public ministry between his Baptism and his Passion,” called “the mysteries of light” (section 19). Notre Dame historian Brad S. Gregory describes for us the music of singer and composer Danielle Rose who incorporated the mysteries of light into her musical celebration of the rosary. In “A Harvest of Holiness: The Theology of Danielle Rose’s Mysteries,” Gregory provides an appreciative study of the music of Danielle Rose published in a double-album CD in 2003 that was directly inspired by the 2002 apostolic letter and that includes musical settings of the newly announced luminous mysteries within the twenty mysteries of the rosary. Gregory identifies the genre of this music as “Catholic folk” while recognizing diversity in the forms and instrumentation of the music, and he provides an account of the theological richness and significance of the music:

Danielle Rose’s voice is beautiful, the accompaniments are tasteful, and the tone is reverent. Despite its wide-ranging use of popular idioms and instruments, Mysteries is sacred music from start to finish. Indeed, the creative spectrum of musical styles is theologically significant: just as the rosary, like the lives of Jesus and Mary that it depicts, spans the full gamut of human experience, from the joy of Christ’s birth to the agony of his passion, so it is only fitting that this range be expressed in a wide variety of musical forms.

Gregory explores the texts used by Rose, highlights the dramatic form she incorporates into many of her compositions, and suggests in various ways how this artistic accomplishment fits within the context of broader artistic traditions. He concludes by recognizing the
way such music illuminates the development and vitality of religious tradition: “While standing fully within the tradition that she has inherited, Danielle Rose has demonstrated that being a member of the living body of Christ consists not in the mere repetition of what one has received but, rather, in responding wholeheartedly to the living God within it, offering one’s gifts freely to fellow brothers and sisters. She has made thoroughly her own a prayer not of her own making and used it to craft a work of Catholic creative brilliance.”

Some artists such as Mary Lou Williams and Danielle Rose find their way to the integration of art and faith through the powerful experience of faith within their own lives. But there are other paths, and Jeremy Driscoll, OSB, demonstrates that even an artist who undertakes to write without explicit mention of Christianity might nonetheless find himself making a deep connection to the truths of Christian faith. In “‘Inheritor’: A Poem by Czeslaw Milosz,” Driscoll provides an extensive reading of a single poem composed late in Milosz’s career and finds that “the poem is profoundly Christian, even if there is no explicit Christian theme in it.” He goes on to ask, “I wonder even if Milosz himself was aware of how deeply Christian is this poem’s achievement. In any case, the reader admiring it, knowingly or not, is admiring Christian truth in art.” Driscoll focuses especially upon the theme of reconciliation in the poem, pointing to the deep historical and cultural disruptions that Milosz would have known from his own experience of twentieth-century Europe. He finds in the poem a profound affirmation that can be captured in explicitly Christian terms, even if the poem itself does not offer these terms directly:

Into this fallen situation, Christian faith announces the good news that in Jesus, God acts in a new and definitive way to restore the creation by undoing the momentum of evil and hatred unleashed in human history. This restoration and undoing of evil are not accomplished by a flick of the divine hand. Rather, God in Jesus acts within the old creation and the sin-
ful history, playing by its rules and succumbing to its forces. In the midst of this, he enacts a divine work in human flesh.

**Thomas Kass, CSV**, in “Morbid Melancholy, the Imagination, and Samuel Johnson’s *Sermons*” reminds us that the artist’s power of imagination is not always looked upon favorably from a religious perspective. The negative effect of the imagination especially in its relationship with melancholy (and in the context of this preface surely we can think of the musical tradition of the blues as related to melancholy) was something commonplace in the eighteenth century, but Kass finds that Johnson in his sermons offers a much more balanced and nuanced account of the imagination, an account that calls for the imagination to be “regulated but not extinguished.” Imagination left unchecked might cause and exacerbate melancholy, but it also serves an important moral function through its capacity to help us achieve empathy with others: “The imagination can ameliorate the propensity in human nature for melancholy because it can make us kinder and more understanding toward others, as we think what pains they may have; the feelings of sympathy and shared joy are in fact ‘produced by an act of the imagination’ as we put ourselves fancifully into the circumstances of those we see happy or sad and consider how we would feel.” Moreover, the power of imagination to make us dissatisfied with our current condition—the very power through which imagination causes or contributes to melancholy—can also be turned to a spiritual purpose by helping us anticipate the blessings that we can know fully only in eternal life:

The *Sermons* are filled with references to the preparatory nature of this life for the life of the world to come, with the relative insignificance of what happens to us now except as it relates to what we shall be in the hereafter, and with the great blessing of Christianity in bringing immortality to light. This very focus on eternal happiness brings some degree of happiness or, at least, contentment to this life.
James Reidy in “Newman as a Master of the Spirit” picks up the descriptive phrase of his title from a comment by Pope John Paul II and then Reidy himself masterfully demonstrates the profound spiritual insights in Newman’s work. Taking up the theme of obedience, Reidy shows how this theme in Newman is connected to topics such as self-denial and wholeness in conduct, and then goes on to show how the moral demands of such a view are accompanied by the beauty of holiness and emphasizes the importance of this connection. Reidy observes: “Newman sums up the matter thus: ‘Christianity, considered as a moral system, is made up of two elements, beauty and severity; whenever either is indulged to the loss or disparagement of the other, evil ensues.’” The fruit of such spiritual development is detachment that is a “right ordering,” a “right balance of things.” In detachment we are open to the proper enjoyment of the goodness of divine creation. The spiritual progress made possible by the practice of obedience and self-denial, by the proper response of the soul to the beauty of holiness, and by the spiritual openness of detachment is a readiness and watchfulness that serves as “an invitation to contemplate Christ’s presence in anticipation of His returning.”

J. Daryl Charles in “Between Pacifism and Crusade: Justice and Neighbor Love in the Just-War Tradition” takes up the unfortunately timely issue of the just-war tradition and shows that the many violent crises of the contemporary world impose an urgency upon us to carefully consider the just-war tradition again and seek guidance from it. He proposes in particular that justice should be linked to charity but such a link does not rule out the use of force. Justice in the just-war tradition “can be a legitimate expression of charity, based on its concern for the neighbor or third party, and has as its aim the achievement of restitution for those who have suffered as a result of grievous human rights violations.” Such a view does not exclude the possibility that force might sometimes need to be used for humane purposes. The article takes issue with the view that sees the just-war tradition as
establishing a presumption against force and insists instead that the tradition constitutes a presumption against injustice. The failure to respond to evil deeds or to prevent evil deeds when we have the means and the knowledge to do so makes us complicit in those acts, according to Charles’s argument.

Robert A. Ventresca takes issue with certain common simplistic views of history and argues that anti-Catholicism is often implicated in such views. In “Recovering from the Past, Rediscovering History: The Problem of Memory and the Promise of History in Catholic Culture,” Ventresca finds a persistent strain of anti-Catholicism in modern popular culture and suggests that “the loss of memory as a part of everyday experience (what memory scholar Pierre Nora once referred to as ‘a sense of rupture with the past’) and its substitution with what various observers describe as ‘mythic history’” is responsible for much of the anti-Catholic sentiment. His view does not overlook the many errors and sins committed by Christians over the centuries and he reminds us of the emphasis given by Pope John Paul II to repenting openly the many sins committed in the name of the Church. The ecclesiological concept of the way in which the Church exists in history while also transcending it are explored by Ventresca, and he concludes with a call to establishing a “moral and religious memory”: “If we, as Christians, work to create just such a moral and religious memory of historical events such as the Crusades, the Inquisition, or the Holocaust, I think we are that much better prepared to give thoughtful, confident, and compassionate witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ.”

Our Reconsiderations feature in this issue brings to our attention a sharp and witty essay by Dorothy L. Sayers first given as a lecture in 1938: “Are Women Human?” The introduction by Deborah Savage first offers a personal appreciation of the many works of Sayers as she discovered them as a young student of theology and then establishes a thoughtful theological framework within which we can view the essay by Sayers. Savage shows especially that many of
the views advocated by Sayers seem to anticipate (but without any claims to influence) some of the views on gender complementarity and on the role of women in the writings of Pope John Paul II.

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Editor

Notes


4. Mary Lou Williams, “Jazz for the Soul,” excerpt provided in CD booklet for the CD Mary Lou Williams Presents Black Christ of the Andes,” p. 11.