

## Preface

CISTERCIAN PUBLICATIONS offers a remarkable, newly translated book that provides a deeply Christian meditation on the liberating power of music, *The Song That I Am: On the Mystery of Music*.<sup>1</sup> The author, Élisabeth-Paule Labat, OSB (1875–1975), was both a brilliant musician and a Benedictine nun who entered the abbey of Saint-Michel de Kergonan in 1922. In the true spirit of the contemplative and the mystic, Labat’s essay engages profoundly but also humbly with the transformative power of music that, assisted by grace, opens us to the call of beauty. Indeed, Labat’s essay presents a discerning account of the experience of beauty especially as achieved through listening to and performing music and a theologically well-grounded account of the Christian significance of beauty in the contemplative life.

Labat positions the musical composer in relation to both the mystic and the saint while also emphasizing important distinctions. The great composer shares with the mystic a highly developed openness to the inner world and a realization that “our soul contains unexplored depths attuned to an invisible reality” (28). This depth is discerned not through our faculties of perception or knowing, but

is experienced as the origin of all of our faculties, as their source, and Labat draws upon a theologically informed sense of the spiritual center of the human person to acknowledge such a center as “a mysterious sanctuary where we are inseparably joined to God and maintained by him upon the abyss of void, posed as a living mirror of his life and being” (32). But she insists that we must not lose sight of the difference between the mystic and the composer or poet, even if the possibility exists that one person might in a remarkable instance be both mystic and artist. The mystic, through God’s love, has been, in Labat’s words, “conformed . . . to God’s nature” (30). Contemplative union with God through grace effects a renewal of the mystic that divinizes the faculties of knowing and loving, “leading them back through a kind of reflux in our innermost self toward the Father” (33). The mystic, like the saint, is transformed by grace through “the extravagant love of a personal God and by Christ’s redemptive incarnation” (77). The mystic and the saint cooperate with God’s grace and allow themselves to become a new creation, to live the life of Jesus Christ, to be molded or sculpted by the presence of God within so that they manifest the redemptive and creative power of God’s love in themselves and exhibit that power through their participation in love in the world.

The artist shares with the mystic and the saint a deep attunement to the spiritual center of the human person, but the artist is gifted with the power of recognizing the affinities and resemblances throughout the created order that radiate from God’s creative love. Through this gift the artist can discern the levels of analogy, resemblance, and correspondence through which the inner unity of the created order and its connection to its divine origin can be artfully traced and sounded. The artist labors to bring these affinities to appearance in a painting, sculpture, poem, or musical composition, and it is the conformity of the work of art to the truth of the artist’s vision to which the artist aspires, and not the conformity of the artist’s self to God’s inner call.

This is why a great work of art, and according to Labat especially

a great work of musical art, can enable us to follow the pathways embedded in the work of art that lead through the multiplicity of sensory and conceptual experience to the inner sanctuary in which God is mirrored. It is not through the artist—as personality transformed by Christ as occurs in our encounter with the mystic and saint—but through the work of art in which the artist manifests the human power of co-creation that we experience the beauty that brings us back to God. And this is why, I believe, Labat emphasizes as repeatedly as she does what I would call the ascetic nature of our experience of beauty, especially through music, because it is essential that we not lose ourselves in the world as we experience the pleasure of art but that we be awakened in our responsiveness to such pleasure to the deep resonance that indicates its ultimate source.

As is proper and necessary for ascetic and spiritual experience, Labat emphasizes the importance of spiritual freedom that marks a distinction between great music and music that is manipulative. While every art form through its sensory material can be used to captivate in the sense of arousing instinctual cravings (and perhaps the art of advertising most clearly exemplifies this possibility of the debasement of art), music with its access to the neurological and instinctual energies of the human person is especially susceptible to such uses. According to Labat, “art of this kind forces emotion by stirring the troubled regions of our sensibility” (20). This is not to admit only coldly sober music to serious consideration—I am reminded of the biblically noted resemblance of the effects of new wine and the enthusiasm of Pentecostal celebration, and Labat does speak several times approvingly of “the intoxication and ecstasy of music” (115). Great music, and all great works of art, somehow respect the dignity and freedom of the human spirit even when proffering transport.

What I have called the ascetic nature of the experience of beauty through music in Labat’s account can be seen in several key concepts throughout the essay. One such term used early in the essay

is renunciation. Music, says Labat, is “remembrance of an earthly paradise” (xxx) in its Edenic nature, “but its real purpose is to draw us toward a heavenly paradise that can be entered solely at the cost of boundless detachment” (xxx). It is to a “new life of renunciation” (xxx) that the responsive soul is called by the encounter with beauty through music. And music is especially well suited to evoke such a call and to cultivate such renunciation, because music detaches itself from representational expression of the external world more readily than painting, sculpture, or poetry (42). Labat also expresses this renunciation as a “dispossession of self” (1) in the way in which music inhabits the soul of the responsive listener, and here again she marks the necessary element of respect and freedom as she suggests that, although music “wants us to collude with it” (1), it “does not lord it over us in the manner of a despot” (1).

Such an experience of renunciation can also be seen in the manner in which music seems to have its origin in its emancipation from the word, or perhaps through the way the expressive voice can liberate itself from the spoken word and its conceptual anchors as music emerges naturally from speech. Music seems ideally suited through this emancipated origin to enable the responsive listener to trace the interpenetration of our material and spiritual nature toward the spiritual center. Attending responsively to beauty is a kind of spiritual discipline, because there are urges in our nature that surround the call of beauty with static, distraction, and impatience. Labat points to this spiritual discipline by reminding us that to be truly receptive to beauty “requires self-emptying and a degree of purity to which the orientation of our being does not normally incline us” (21). Great music blossoms for the listener especially when received with such practiced and repeated spiritual discipline.

The beauty of music heard within the practice of disciplined spiritual listening has a liberating power for the listener, and it effects a “liberation” by “drawing us out beyond our limitations and banal selfishness” (28). Labat also describes this power as “a freeing force” (42) and even suggests that music can “tear us . . . from the

exterior world" (42) as it enables us to turn to our spiritual center. The encounter with beauty enables us to overcome both "the poverty of our intellect" (43) with its habit of relying on discursive reasoning and "the poverty of our heart" (43) that is susceptible to withering through preoccupation with self. Beauty is therefore life-giving as it renews both intellect and heart and restores to each its fundamental orientation.

This understanding of the experience of the beauty of music in the context of spiritual discipline prepares Labat to recognize and delineate with rare perspicacity the particular intermixture of pleasure and a certain kind of pain in the intensity of our response to such beauty. Such pain has a double origin in this account. On the one hand, our response to the call of beauty requires us to struggle out of the attachment to self and the attachment to the created order and our temporal existence and there may be a kind of tearing that results from such detaching that serves as a background note to the experience of beauty. At the same time, according to Labat, that toward which we are drawn by the beauty of music is not entirely delivered over to us through such beauty. The contemplative gaze with which we encounter beauty also includes a certain distance. "Music draws us toward that of which it is the call and premonition but which it cannot itself bestow" (83). The beauty of music can "acclimatize souls to invisible realities" (87) and can "facilitate the Spirit's work in us" and become "a coadjutor of the spirit" (87), but transformation in music is not yet entirely the same thing as transformation in Christ.

This is not the final word of Labat's magnificent essay, but I will allude only briefly to the last two chapters: "Music and Liturgy," in which liturgical celebration can be understood as fulfilling what musical beauty can only promise; and "The Music of Eternity," in which Labat brilliantly speculates on the music of paradise in the light of which earthly music can serve only as an "echo of paradise lost" and "a foretaste of an incomparably lovelier paradise" (118). The theological and mystical context within which musical beauty

is considered and in relation to which it is assigned its due place does not diminish the importance of beauty but illuminates its mystery.

This issue of *Logos* begins with an article by **Jeffrey L. Morrow** titled “**Secularization, Objectivity, and Enlightenment Scholarship: The Theological and Political Origins of Modern Biblical Studies.**” Morrow takes up the call of Pope Benedict XVI to delineate the “secularized hermeneutic” broadly at work in many instances of modern biblical studies by providing what he calls a “genealogical account” of the development of modern biblical studies. The article calls attention “to the secularizing framework within which the field operates,” and it identifies both political and theological sources for these secularizing tendencies, with important links to the development of modern European states and with roots in Enlightenment universities. The article shows that the “quest for objectivity” within modern historical consciousness called upon the biblical scholar to set aside nonscientific commitments but left the field open for political assumptions and concerns to be imported into the discipline, especially in relation to the colonial practices and aspirations of modern European states.

In “*Pacem in Terris, Fifty Years Later*,” **Roland Minnerath** offers a refreshing appreciation of Pope John XXIII’s 1963 encyclical. After establishing the necessity of approaching the encyclical within a “hermeneutic of continuity,” Minnerath identifies the purpose of the document as addressing “the reconciliation between the teachings of the Church and the world, the latter understood as the liberal democratic society inaugurated by the European Enlightenment and the American experiment.” The encyclical was addressed “to all men of good will” and was written in a style meant to facilitate its broad reception, and it was received with unusually far-reaching acclaim. But such broad reception also introduced a certain blindness toward the long-standing heritage in Catholic social teaching of many of the ideas in the document, and it was therefore sometimes misconstrued as a break from the past. Minnerath carefully sets out

the lines of continuity in light of which the proper development of doctrine introduced by the encyclical can be justly appraised.

**James Matthew Wilson**, in “**John Paul II’s *Letter to Artists and the Force of Beauty***,” calls attention to the apostolic letter as part of John Paul’s typical energetic engagement with the contemporary world and then focuses on the special challenge posed by the letter’s emphasis on beauty and the relative neglect of that concept in much modern art. After careful consideration of the importance of the expressive and cultural dimensions of contemporary art, Wilson highlights the challenge to artists provided by John Paul’s emphasis on the importance of beauty. The article then offers a carefully articulated understanding of beauty intended to facilitate the openness of contemporary culture to the concept. Wilson builds to an important conclusion: “The artist in our age, if he is to serve any purpose at all . . . must strike the intellect with the full ontological force of the beautiful and, then, let that beauty do the rest. This may require the cultivation of modes of art that appeal to beauty, even in opposition to the merely immanent expressivity of the artist or imagination of the audience.”

In “**The Nature of Woman in Relation to Man: Genesis 1 and 2 through the Lens of the Metaphysical Anthropology of Aquinas**,” **Deborah Savage** draws upon the metaphysical anthropology of Aquinas to illuminate an enriched understanding of the nature of man presented in the creation accounts of Genesis and suggests a development of the teaching of John Paul in *A Theology of the Body*. Savage carefully guides us through the exegesis of the two stories of creation in Genesis and finds in the narratives an account of the differences between men and women that recognizes their complementary natures without compromising their fundamental equality. By rooting the theology of complementarity more clearly in the biblical accounts of creation, its importance as a response to the many contemporary social ills that stem from the failure to recognize the principles of equality and complementarity becomes more fruitfully available.

**Shanthini Pillai** provides a rich sociological understanding of religious practices in Malaysia in her article **“The Intertwining Vines of Liturgy, Ethnicity, and Nationhood: The Nativized Imaginary of the Malaysian Catholic Community.”** In particular, the article identifies ways of practicing religion “as intimations of Catholic spirituality in harmony with the nation” in Malaysia, showing the distinctiveness of certain local expressions that nonetheless preserve “a harmony and unity with the tenets of the Sacred Liturgy of Roman Catholicism.” The inquiry illuminates the global nature of Catholicism, which comes to appearance within the local variations through which liturgy and doctrine can nonetheless be seen to preserve their identity.

**Robert St. Hilaire**, in **“Aquinas, Enchantment, and the Wonders of Nature,”** provides a reading of Aquinas according to which we can recapture what it means to recognize that he lived and thought within an “enchanted age,” that he “hailed from an era that took quite seriously a wide range of spiritual beings, otherworldly occurrences, and magical powers.” The article first establishes that Aquinas speculated about “miracles, the worldly activities of angels and demons, magic, fortune-telling, curses, and ghosts, all of which . . . he takes to be realities of his present day.” St. Hilaire then shows that this understanding plays a part in the writings of Aquinas on the natural world, that he believes “inherent to nature is a certain degree of unpredictability, spontaneity, incomprehensibility, and awe.” The broader implications of this recognition in reading Aquinas are thoroughly brought to bear in the conclusion.

**Carolyn F. Scott**, in **“Beyond Hope He Saved Us: Trinitarian Analogies in *The Lord of the Rings*,”** demonstrates how, throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien makes use of the Trinitarian analogies that are at the heart of the medieval understanding of the world. An examination of these analogies makes evident the Catholic vision with which Tolkien’s novel is infused. Scott carefully avoids a reductive allegorical reading, concentrating instead on structural features

of the novel through which Trinitarian analogies can be recognized. According to Scott's account, "Tolkien's sub-creation is Trinitarian because his Catholicism reveals to him that the true world is Trinitarian."

In "**What do I not owe you?: An Examination of Gratitude in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice***," Thomas W. Stanford III provides an insightful reading of Austen's great novel, highlighting the deep significance of the concept and practice of gratitude in her fictional world. The novel, in Stanford's view, "reveals and celebrates the profound idea that gratitude is the proper response to the gift of self that is love, and, further, that gratitude is a sign and effect of authentic humility." Stanford approaches the topic by developing an account of the concept of gift giving, bringing out the essential connection between gift giving and gift receiving and humility, and exploring the Christian dimension in particular of this understanding. This reading of the novel articulates with perspicacity and sensitivity its Christian resonance and richness.

Michael C. Jordan  
Editor

### *Note*

1. Élisabeth-Paule Labat, *The Song That I Am: On the Mystery of Music* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).