



...enedictus es in  
...icto gloria tua



Sancta Cecilia



...et sup  
...gloria



## A NEW SONG FOR A NEW EVANGELIZATION

BY CAROLYN PIRTLE

# SANCTIFICATION THROUGH SONG

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Phil 4:8)

This passage from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians opens the section of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* devoted to the virtues (§§1803–45). Notice that nowhere in this passage does St. Paul exhort the Philippians to think of *themselves*. In order to grow in virtue, one must in fact *cease* thinking about the self and think instead about God, so that the

inverse relationship sought by John the Baptist may also take place within one's own soul: "He must increase, I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). The less we think about ourselves, the more we are able to think about God; the more we think about God, the more God will dwell within our hearts, the more we will become like God.

Edward Burne-Jones, *St. Cecilia and Two Angels*; Oxford Cathedral

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merlaudabilis et  
bens in secula

This turning of our attention toward the good, the true, the honorable, the just, the pure, the lovely, the gracious, the excellent, and the praiseworthy does not happen in the abstract. It happens in the world of nature and in the world of human culture. When we turn our gaze toward authentic beauty, we discover it to be a manifestation of the invisible, hidden presence of God. This holds true whether the beauty we encounter comes from the natural world or, for our purposes in this column, the world of human culture. Cultivating virtue, then, is simply a matter of choosing well when it comes to what we think about, gaze upon, or listen to; virtue is determined by where we bestow our attention.

Twentieth-century French philosopher Simone Weil was famous for her writings on attention, especially noting a strong connection between attention and virtue in her personal notebooks, later published as a collection entitled *Gravity and Grace*. One passage from Weil in particular resonates with the aforementioned words of both St. Paul and John the Baptist: “Attention alone—that attention which is so full that the ‘I’ disappears—is required of me. I have to deprive all that I call ‘I’ of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived.”<sup>1</sup> Weil realizes that she herself must decrease—that she must turn her attention to “whatever is true, whatever is honorable,” for, she writes, “if we turn our minds towards the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Weil continues, “With time we are altered, and, if as we change we keep our gaze directed towards the same thing, in the end illusions are scattered and the real becomes visible.”<sup>3</sup>

The beauty of art and music points beyond itself to the beauty of God, and this beauty has the capacity to form us in some way, for it is not simply a one-way experience. When one experiences beauty, there is in reality a mutual encounter taking place: we are led to

God through beauty, and, perhaps more astonishingly, *God comes to meet us in beauty*. In the case of visual art (particularly iconography), the image acts as a point of mediation in which the invisible gazes at the viewer through the visible, and when we gaze back at the image, we in turn are able to penetrate through the visible to “see” the invisible. Yet, according to Jean-Luc Marion, there must be a “purification of the gaze”<sup>4</sup> that enables us to see aright. Marion asserts, “The painting must train us to see it.”<sup>5</sup> This training to see is a formation in virtue. Engaging with visual art cultivates within us the ability to see past the visible and enables us to think about the One who is truth, honor, justice, purity, loveliness, graciousness, excellence, the One who is “worthy of much praise” (Ps 145:3).

How can this assessment of the visual be translated to the realm of the aural? How can music be considered an aid in the cultivation of virtue? To begin with, beautiful music—liturgical and otherwise—opens up within us a longing which, to the Christian imagination, is ultimately a longing for God. Often, when we hear music we would describe as beautiful, we experience a mysterious phenomenon described by C.S. Lewis in “The Weight of Glory”: “We do not merely want to *see* [or hear] beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.”<sup>6</sup> Put simply, faced with beauty, we are filled with the desire to *become beautiful*. Yet as previously stated, it is not merely beauty that we encounter when we hear beautiful music; rather, we encounter a beauty that points beyond itself to the Source of all beauty, to God. Thus, when we hear beautiful music, and when we desire to enter into the beauty we experience by becoming beautiful ourselves, in truth, we are experiencing a desire to become like God, which is in essence a desire for *virtue*, for, as the

*Catechism* reminds us, “The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God” (§1803).

What is so striking is that it is not simply music’s intrinsic, aesthetic beauty that can lead a person to thoughts of the lovely and gracious, but that the very *act* of listening to music itself has the potential to form the heart and mind. Thoughtful, attentive listening necessarily entails that we are focused intently on the music—in other words, on that which is *other*, that which is not ourselves. Through the physiological phenomenon of active listening, we enter into the logic and time of music, and in so doing, we open ourselves up to—even *give ourselves over* to—being changed by what we hear, as Jeremy Begbie explains:

We are led into a kind of ‘gravitational field’ which draws us in, we participate in a process, a journey in and through sound. . . . As far as the emotions are concerned . . . they are exercised. . . . Moreover, we are emotionally educated—our emotional life is enriched, deepened, and perhaps even re-formed. Hearing music can mean ‘the reordering of our sympathies.’<sup>17</sup>

This “reordering of our sympathies” is a turning of our attention, fixing our gaze on that which is Other, allowing ourselves to be formed into a greater likeness of that Other. Listening to music is a concrete practice of turning the mind to that which is pure and lovely, and as such, it can serve as a first step in turning the mind to God, which is the first step on the road to virtue.



## NOTES

- 1 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 118.
- 2 Ibid., 117.
- 3 Ibid., 120.
- 4 Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. James K. A. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 43.
- 5 Ibid., 33.
- 6 C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 42.
- 7 Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 18.



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