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Valparaiso University Chapel Church Music Seminar: Job 38:7, 1961

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Job 38:7 "All the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy."

Several months ago at the time of the dedication of our first chancel window I spoke about the intimate relationship between the Gospel and the fine arts. I attempted to show that the Holy Spirit still broods over the bent world with warm breast and bright wings, and that all Christian art is ultimately the work of God the Holy Spirit, a reflection of His creative and sanctifying power in the hearts of men.

Today I should like to recognize the presence of the members of our Church Music Seminar by pointing out briefly that one art—the art of music—is the eternal and inevitable companion of the marching of God through history. From eternity to eternity, from Genesis to Revelation, from creation to the judgment, music is the background for all the mighty acts of God.

It all began at the creation: "All the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy." It flowed through the psalmist's songs in the night, the echo of song and psaltery and cymbal in the hymnbook of a waiting church. Then there was the song of the heavenly host over Bethlehem. The announcement of the harps of the redeemed around the throne became a part of the Christian hope. Always and always, except possibly at Calvary, as we follow God through history we are never far away from the sound of music. This is man's counterpoint to the sound of an acting God. It is sometimes broken and alone, sometimes low and sometimes high, sometimes far and sometimes near, but always a deep, profound and essential part of our Christian life.
There is, therefore, every reason for us to give attention to this companion of our faith. There is, in the sublimest sense of the term, a spiritual music, an interior music, both human and divine. It is a sacramental act by which a gift of God becomes an offering to God who has so honored us by the incarnation of His Son and the redemption of the world. It carries the most personal and the most indescribable reflection of the divine presence in our souls.

There are some strange and mysterious things about this process. The Gospel—the vision of God in Jesus Christ—was given to us in words, in language, in the ordinary symbols by which we touch and hear the world around us, by which we communicate with our fellowmen. God comes to us in words. He speaks in human accents. He talks so that a child can understand.

In an essay on the Bible as literature Henry Van Dyke has written: "The Bible speaks in hundreds of languages to the heart of man. Above the cradle and beside the grave its great words come to us uncalled. They fill our prayers with power larger than we know and the beauty of them lingers on our ear long after the sermons which they adorned have been forgotten. They return to us swiftly and quietly like doves flying from far away. They surprise us with new meanings, like springs of water breaking forth from the mountains beside a long trodden path. They grow richer as pearls do when they are worn near the heart." Now we may say: "All this is true and all this is wonderful. God has really been kind to us in using our language, our limitations of human speech, to tell us His pity, His love, and His heart." What else can there possibly be? What else can be added to so great a revelation?
Mysteriously now, there is something else! After all many of the things said about the Bible can also be said about other great books. They, too, have lifted, inspired and comforted. There is, however, one thing about the Bible that no other book has or ever will have, where it stands completely alone. The Bible in Jesus Christ! In, above and beyond and beneath the words is Jesus Christ. It can, therefore, be understood only on our knees. As we feed upon it, we become aware of great hands, powerful and real, drawing us toward the bleeding and glorious face of Jesus Christ. The final sense of the Bible always lies beyond! Beyond the words, the ideas, the events, which are but signs in which the eyes of faith detect the person of the Only Son, the Holy One, the Redeemer of the world.

And here is the place where sacred music enters the picture. Often the words of Scripture are trying to say the unutterable, the unspeakable, the humanly incredible. Only by clothing them or their ideas in the garment of music can the unutterable become an audible undertone. Music tries to reflect the divine atmosphere with which the words are invested. It opens the heavenly meaning of the words. It weaves a sequence of sounds surrounding the words or ideas which are the direct result of the Holy Spirit's working once more, after all these years, to bring God into human life.

Is all this clear to us? Let us take just one example in which the meaning of the words is made clearer, more powerful, more glorious by the lifting hand of music. Look for a moment at the Mass in B Minor by Johann Sebastian Bach! There is the Kyrie, the outcry of a soul that clutches at the divine mercy from the black edge of despair. Where is there greater exaltation of worship than in the Gloria with its crackling trumpets? Never was the tenderness of divine pity more eloquently set forth than in the "Qui
To the mystery of divine condescension than in the "Et Incarnatus", or the grief of divine passion than in the "Crucifixus" or the victory of divine love in the "Et Resurrexit". In all of these the words are drawn from the limitations of time and intellect to the long light of eternity. There are a few passages like that in Handel's Messiah, and there is always something like that in the Gregorian chant and in the greatest hymns of the Church. Here God can be most fully expressed and all we can do is to let Him utter Himself by the hands and genius of His children, singing and playing and chanting, joining the morning stars and the sons of God in their songs for creation.

With this there is something of eternity in the plainest church, the humblest chapel and the lowliest heart. On Sunday morning we join with the angels in what they are doing all the time.

This is the great task of all sacred music at its highest and best. It forms a holy bridge of sound between the known and the unknown. Someone has said that all history is point and counterpoint, two melodies running side by side, God's and man's. Alone one of them is always incomplete. Even the melody of God—He preferred to die rather than to be without us! Taken together there is meaning and beauty in the rise and fall of these melodies. Their temporal dissonance is resolved into final harmony. This is the task of the music of the Church—to anticipate that final harmony even here on earth—so that singing of God and man, heaven and earth, time and eternity is the prelude to the day when God and man are finally united by sight, and heaven and earth have passed away and time has been lost in eternity and our music has become perfect.
One more observation. Though sacred music is a part of the created universe—all the morning stars sang together—it is also the greatest and highest reflection of the essential unity of the Body of Christ. Men have blasphemyously used the very words of Scripture to divide the Church—but no one has ever used the music of the Church to divide it. What men sing is far more Christian than what they say. Sacred music always unites because at the moment of worship the Church is always one. The singing church is a single living organism in a world of disunity and death. In its music it really becomes the Communion of Saints, the Una Sancta, the Body of Christ, the blessed City of God on earth and in heaven, the Beloved Community whose choir we are, both here and hereafter. And we never sing to Him alone. There are always the saints who have gone before, and the saints who sing by our side, and the saints who will sing over our graves. They are always one, always in unison, always saying and singing that nothing can ever empty the world of the communion of saints.

A final observation! All the music of the Church will be bad and harsh and thin unless we ever and always remember our Lord's words: "Except ye become as little children ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Here is a good and great theology of music. A theology which includes the great works of Christian musicians of all times, and the music in a little white church on the plains of Kansas or Nebraska. At this very moment this Sunday morning about a hundred people are there. There is a little electronic organ on one side and a children's choir. Now what Happens? Something like this: "Behold your children, dear God. We are only little people and glad that You know it. We have come to Your house. See what we have brought for You—a little money, a little music—and our tired minds and lonely hearts.
Other things we have, too. We have built an altar and carved a cross and bought an organ. These things are not much, we know, beside the glories of the outstretched universe. Our music is faint and weak beside the singing of the morning stars and the music of the spheres. We cannot sing as well as the sons of God in the shining ranks of heaven. But, dear God, what we offer is the best Your children can give or do. Accept us in Your pity! Wipe the tears from our eyes, and comfort the lonely fear in our hearts! Help us to sing just a little better!"

And suddenly, very suddenly, God is high and lifted up. There is a glory in the little church, a far but true echo of the morning stars singing together. There is the sound of forgotten trumpets and the music of heaven, the last home of little children who worship Him--sing and play and pray to Him--in spirit and in truth.

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Sermon - April 9, 1961
O. P. Kretzmann