Music and Silence

Music impacts all our lives in numerous ways, some for the better and some for worse. These thoughts will look at this effect of music on people's lives. Not touched upon will be any prejudice, prejudgment, or preference for particular kinds of music. Neither will the composition of the music (or lyrics), or the lives of the composers be explored (which in some cases may say something about their music). Instead, the focus will be on the effect of different kinds of music on us.

We can see that music achieves a kind of organizing principle within us. It provides structure to our inner psyche in ways that we find beneficial, entertaining, inspiring, or enervating. It can help us regain a semblance of inner balance, a sense of peace, or a sort of inner healing. Music that we find enjoyable resonates with our inner selves and promotes within us a sense of well being. Furthermore, it comes as no surprise that different people prefer different kinds of music. Music that one person may find inspirational may drive another person crazy.

Appreciation of some types of music can be a learned or acquired taste. There was the writer who was assigned to do a feature article on classical music. Formerly, his music library was all rock and roll, today it is 50% classical. Music can give us a sense of identity and rootedness, such as Celtic, Dixie, country western, or blue grass music.

Music can be inspiring and even deeply prayerful. Liturgical music has the capacity to move us deeply. And then there was the atheist who came to believe in God after hearing Bach's music. He said for there to be such beautiful music, there had to be a God.

Otherwise, we enjoy music because, well because we enjoy music. It gives us a sense of well being and happiness, however we define it. It can lead to a deep experience of beauty and inner peace. And that is simple reason enough. But there are other observations to be made that don't necessarily apply to everyone but still might be useful.

We know that music can help lift us out of depression, to "boost our spirits." It can combat boredom, the bane of our age among younger people. Some find they need it for required background "noise" to whatever we are doing.

Obviously, on the negative side, some kinds of music (and their lyrics) lead to an undeniable degradation of oneself or others. It causes a deadening of our moral conscience and leads to a hardness of heart toward God and others. Our hearts were made for beauty, but this music creates a kind of numbness and dissonance within our soul.

At times, there may be compulsive or addictive aspects to music listening. It can help us to escape from a here-and-now which we might find painful or traumatic. In a recent Runner's World article on running and meditation, a runner expressed disbelief that she had to run without her headphones. Music helped her ignore the pain of running and to pump up her adrenaline. Music can also be seen as an escape from restlessness or

anxiety, a desperate seeking for inner peace. Sometimes it can be a fleeing from a sense of loneliness, a flight from silence. It can become an anesthetic to the pain of living.

But when the last note of the final stanza dies out, what then (or when the battery on the ubiquitous iPod goes out)? Are there times to set our headphones aside and lift our eyes to the horizon? Is there a time to turn off the car stereo and turn within to hear His voice?

Can we look within ourselves and be comfortable with silence for a time. Blaise Pascal said, "All men's miseries derive from not being able to sit in a quiet room alone." Another time he said, "All human evil comes from a single cause, man's inability to sit still in a room." It takes practice to spend time quietly and alone. Can we take time to seek to hear as Elijah heard, the "still small voice" of the Lord? Can we take to heart the words of the Psalmist, "Be still, and know that I am God?" Mother Teresa tells us, "God is the friend of silence. Trees, flowers, grass grow in silence. See the stars, moon, and sun, how they move in silence."

Music can delight and uplift; it can be a significant joy and comfort in our lives. But it can protect us from what God might want to say to us. Before we can hear His voice, we must take time to listen. As God becomes more and more marginalized in our culture, it becomes a truly countercultural act to consciously make space for him in our lives. And if it is hard to do this, or if we begin to sense a deep loneliness, then do as Hafiz (a Persian poet) suggests:

> Don't surrender your loneliness
> So quickly
> Let it cut more deep
> Let it ferment and season you
> As few human
> Or even divine ingredients can.
> Something missing in my heart tonight
> Has made my eyes so soft,
> My voice
> So tender,
> My need of God
> Absolutely
> Clear.

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