

Beauty as a Road to God

By Eleonore Stump



In his article on music and the liturgy in the Fall 2006 issue of *Sacred Music*, Jeffrey Tucker singled out the music of the Saint Louis Jesuits for attack, and I read what he wrote with pain. I honor and admire the music of the Saint Louis Jesuits. It is true that, like Tucker, I find consolation in chant; for that matter, I am at home with classical sacred music, from the two settings of the Passion by Bach, for example, to the complex contemporary setting by Osvaldo Golijov. But the music of the Saint Louis Jesuits is special to me. At Mass, or anywhere, it mediates to me the power and the tenderness of Christ's grace. In very dark times, it has sustained me. At all times, it is deeply moving to me. I find it beautiful. And so I was grieved by Tucker's attack on this music, so dear to me.

Subsequent correspondence with Tucker has shown me that he and I have much more in common than I would have supposed. I share not only Tucker's evident care for Catholic liturgy and the importance of music in the Mass; but I find that I also share with him a concern with beauty, in music at Mass and also in general. Of course, the role of music in liturgy is hardly limited to the sharing of beauty; in liturgy, music also elicits worship, gives voice to prayer, joins people in communion, and many other liturgically important things besides.¹ But, in this paper, I want to explore the role of beauty, especially beauty in music, as a road to God. Tucker and I are both committed, I have come to see, to the belief that beauty is a road to God. And I expect that in this we are each representative of the opposed camps currently embattled over liturgical music. It is my hope that reflection on this shared commitment—to belief in beauty as a road to God—might be the basis on which to build a more irenic understanding, and perhaps even *caritas*, between the different camps.

Introduction

How do people come to God? What draws people who are already believers nearer to God? What moves people toward God when they are unbelievers? When philosophers think about the decision to believe in God or not to believe in God, they tend to talk about truth or even about proofs for God's existence. But, in fact, very few people, maybe hardly any people, come to God because they are convinced by a proof. As far as I can see, people come to God because of something else entirely, not because of some convincing argument for God's existence but rather

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¹The relation between liturgy and music, even sacred music, is complicated, and there are some people who suppose that the only sort of sacred music permissible in liturgy is music which serves somehow to ennoble prayer. (For some early discussion of these issues, see, for example, Karl Gustav Fellerer, *The History of Catholic Church Music*, tr. Francis A. Brunner, C.S.s.R. [Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961].) In this short paper, I do not have space to address these issues. But for present purposes, what I would say is that music can ennoble prayer only in virtue of bathing prayer in beauty of one sort or another. How else would we make sense of the notion of music's ennobling prayer, which is in its own nature as noble as anything human could be? And so, even for those who want to restrict the use of sacred music in liturgy in so radical a way, the issue of beauty as a road to God remains relevant.

because of some desire or yearning in them. Sometimes, maybe often, beauty is a good name for what it is which draws many people to God. And so it has become proverbial that *beauty*, as well as truth, is a road to God. I do not say that beauty is *the* road to God. There are many roads to God, and different roads are appropriate for different people. But beauty is one of those roads; it is a road to God.

Because the music of the Saint Louis Jesuits is at issue for me, in this paper I am going to focus on beauty only in art, and then almost exclusively on music. I will also be thinking about beauty only as it moves the audience for music or art and not as it moves the musician or the creator of art. (Father John Foley, who is one of the founders of the Saint Louis Jesuits and who is also an accomplished theologian, has himself written insightfully about beauty as it moves the artist.²) I need to say, too, at the outset, that I am a philosopher, not a musician. But in the course of many years, I have learned from dealing with my friends who are musicians and theologians. What I have to say in this paper is what I have learned with them and because of them, filtered through the mind of a philosopher with a love of music.

Is there an objective standard of value for beauty? Or is beauty in art only subjective?

If we think of beauty—especially beauty in the arts—as a road to God, there are some questions and perplexities which come to mind immediately. What is beauty? And what is beauty in art? Different people find very different things in art moving. What some people find movingly beautiful, in poetry or music, for example, other people find trite and sentimental, or even off-putting and repulsive. I am generally swept away by Auden, but most of Yeats leaves me cold. For someone else, however, it might be just the other way around. I love Rossini's *Stabat Mater*; but I have a musically sophisticated Dominican friend who rolls his eyes in disbelief when I tell him so. Is there an objective standard of value for beauty? Or is beauty in art only subjective? And what about beauty as a road to God? Is it objective or not? Is there only one beauty which is a road to God? Or could anything which anyone found subjectively beautiful be a road to God for that person? If I found the music for TV beer commercials movingly beautiful, could that music be a road to God for me? And what is it for beauty to be a road to God? How could something beautiful in art, in music, something either objectively or something just subjectively beautiful, be a means of drawing someone further along the road to God? For that matter, what is a road to God? And what is it to come to God? Coming to God is not like coming to town. So what sort of drawing near is coming to God?

The Objective and Subjective Elements in Beauty as a Road to God

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We can begin with the concept of a road. What is a road? A road is a means of getting more easily from one place to another. A road enables you to go from where you are to some other place where you want to be; a road facilitates your travel to a place which is your destination. A road to Oxford is a means for you to get to Oxford; a road to God is a means for a person to get to God.

Now insofar as the destination for a road is fixed and determinate—a road to *Oxford*, a road to *God*—that road has an objectively determinable end. There is one definite place which is Oxford; and if you wind up in the Outer Hebrides and believe that you are in Oxford, well, then, you are just mistaken. It is the same way with a road to God. It has one definite, objective destination. And since this is so, if beauty is going to count as a road to God, there has to be something about beauty which really does move us, in an objective way, to that one destination. If

²John Foley, *Creativity and the Roots of Liturgy* (Portland, Oregon: Pastoral Press, 1994).

Rossini's *Stabat Mater* strikes me as movingly beautiful, but if in fact it moves me only to self-absorption and not to God, then that piece of music does not count as a road to God for me, no matter how beautiful I think it is.

Does this mean that there is nothing subjective about beauty? If I find Rossini's *Stabat Mater* beautiful and my Dominican friend thinks it is just kitsch, does that mean I am wrong to like Rossini? Is beauty a road to God only for the sophisticated, highly trained aesthetes? Here I think we want to look again at the nature of roads.

A road to Oxford has one and only one objective destination. But insofar as differing people begin in differing places, there will be many different roads to that one objective place. If I want to go to Oxford, I will need to begin my trip in St. Louis, where I live. But if you live in Waco, Texas, you can get to Oxford only by beginning your trip in Waco. Something is a road for *you* only if it helps you get to your destination from the place where you yourself are. As things stand, a plane ticket on a flight from Waco, Texas to England would not now get me to Oxford, because I am not now in Texas.

The same thing holds also for a road to God. Something will be a road to God for a person only in case it goes from the spiritual or psychological or moral place where that person is to the one objective destination which is God. And so although a road to God will have one fixed ending point, it will have as many different beginning points as there are people engaged in the process of coming to God.

Insofar as *beauty* is a road to God, it will have these same features. The road which is beauty will have one objective destination, namely, God, but many differing beginning points. So beauty as a way to God is not just one road but more nearly something like a network of roads which come from all over and converge at the same point.

This is an important insight about the nature of beauty as a road to God. It provides for a subjective element in what counts as the beauty which draws us to the one objective destination that is God. It explains why the thing which one person takes as beautiful may really move that person closer to God even if some other person finds the same thing only trivial or boring or repellent. A road to God has to start where the person traveling that road is. So only what *you* find beautiful can be the beauty which is a road to God for you. Even if my Dominican friend does not find Rossini's music beautiful, so that it cannot serve *him* as a road to God in any way, Rossini's music might still serve that purpose for me.

And yet this fact does not mean that there is a completely subjective standard for beauty. It does not mean that just anything whatsoever can count as the beauty which is a road to God as long as someone thinks that that thing is beautiful. That is because it will be an objective fact of the matter whether or not what someone takes as beautiful does in fact lead that person to God. If Rossini's music just leaves me focused self-indulgently on my own emotions, then, however beautiful I think it is, that music will not be beauty which is for me a road to God.

So that is the first thing to see about beauty as a road to God. And here is the second thing. Insofar as God is a person—in *our* sense of the word "person," namely, something able to know and will—the destination of the road of beauty will be not a place but a relationship with a person.

Now, as we all know, there are degrees of relationship with a person. The same wonderful woman has been cutting my hair for the past fourteen years, and we have become friends in that time. But I don't know her nearly so well as I know the out-of-town friends of mine who come to my house for Thanksgiving; my relationship to them is much closer than my relationship to

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my hairdresser. And I know my children and my husband even better than I know those out-of-town friends; my relationship to my family is closer still. So closeness to a person admits of degrees. Insofar as beauty is a road to God, then, beauty can be more or less successful. It can draw a person more or less close to God. Consequently, what one person takes as beautiful and

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what does in fact lead that person to God may connect her less deeply to God than something more really, objectively beautiful would do. And this too will be an objective fact of the matter. If what I pick as beautiful really is shallow or trite, then maybe it will still draw me to God but not so near to God nor so intimately close to him as something which is objectively more beautiful. In other words, for

some person even truly bad art may be a road to God, but it is not likely to be as successful at drawing a person very close to God as, say, Milton's poetry and Bach cantatas could be.

So beauty as a road to God will have both an objective and a subjective component. It will be a subjective matter what a particular person finds beautiful. But it will be an objective fact of the matter whether what is taken as beautiful does actually lead to God and how close to God it brings that person.

Closeness to and Distance from God

I have been talking here about coming close to God, but what does this mean? What does closeness with God consist in? For that matter, what does distance from God consist in? And how is that distance overcome?

On traditional Christian doctrine, as Christians have understood the matter from the Patristic period onward, what keeps people at a distance from God is something that has gone wrong in the will. In this world, a human person tends to prefer his own power and pleasure over greater goods. The tradition has typically called this problem in the human will "original sin." Some wit once remarked that the doctrine of original sin is the only theological doctrine overwhelmingly supported by empirical evidence. Certainly, every period and every place on the planet makes it abundantly clear that human beings do not will what a perfectly good God would will. Post-fall human beings have soaked the crust of the earth with the tears of those suffering from poverty, exploitation, degradation, war, and all the other horrendous evils human beings perpetrate on one another. It is a jarring understatement to say that our wills are not fixed on what is perfectly good.

To the extent that they are not, however, our wills are alienated from God's will, which is perfectly good. Unless this alienation can be overcome, we are at a distance from God. You cannot get personal relationship with another person just by being in the same place as that person. You need also to have some meeting of minds and hearts, and there cannot be any such harmony of wills between a perfectly good God and a person whose will is not fixed in righteousness. It is in this way that there is distance between a human person and God.

How, then, are we to come to God across this distance? How is the problem in the human will to be fixed? This is, of course, an enormously complicated theological question, which cannot be dealt with adequately just in passing here. It has to do with justification by faith and the atonement of Christ, as well as myriad other theological topics none of which, I am happy to say, is on the agenda for me in this paper.³ For my purposes here, it is enough just to sketch the general tenor of the idea at the heart of all that theological complexity.

³I have, however, dealt with all of them in great detail in my book *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003).

The traditional Christian idea, shared by Christians across all the divisions which separate us from each other, is that the problem of the evil in the human will is solved when a person surrenders to God. Aquinas says that the process of coming to union with God begins with faith which justifies a person. For Aquinas, a person's coming to faith is a matter of her hating the sinfulness in herself and longing for the goodness she perceives in God. That longing prompts her progressively to give up her resistance to God and to entrust herself to God for salvation from her own evil.⁴

This understanding of what is needed to remove the distance which separates a person from God is helpful for thinking about beauty as a road to God. Sometimes beauty wakes in us a desire, a great yearning, an inchoate longing for something. Augustine says to God, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you."⁵ There is a strong connection between beauty and the desire which makes a heart restless until it surrenders to God. "Beauty" is a good name for what draws us when we feel such desire, when we feel restless in Augustine's sense.

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When we are in the grip of that Augustinian sort of desire, we often do not know what we are yearning for. But Augustine (as well as many others in the Christian tradition) thought that if both the beauty and the desire for it are real and great, then in effect the desire is a desire which will lead to God. If the desire for that beauty grows in a person, it will in the end bring a person to surrender to God in faith, in the process which culminates in the human will's being united to the goodness of God's will.

And here we are in a position to understand the limits of the metaphor of beauty as a road to God, too. Because the destination of this road is a person, or union with a person, a road to God is different in important respects from a road to Oxford. While you are on a road to Oxford, you are simply not in Oxford; and once you are in Oxford, you are no longer on a road to Oxford. But things are very different if your destination is God. While you are on a road to God, you may find yourself powerfully in God's presence even while you are still on the road. Beauty can mediate this presence to us also, insofar as it helps us open to God's love and grace. And so, even while it is a road *to* God, the beauty of music, sacred music, music of the liturgy, can also be an occasion for a moment of encounter with God, not only in yearning, but also in gratitude, peace, and joy.

The Connection between Religion and Beauty: Questions

This insight into the way beauty works is helpful, but still vague. How does beauty have this effect on us? And why should we be concerned about beauty *in art*? Would we lose anything if we banned all beauty in art from our worship? What would we lose if there were *no* music in the Mass? And what makes a piece of music beautiful in a way which raises desire in us and draws us towards a surrender to God? What constitutes beauty in art, and who is empowered to judge whether a particular piece of art, of music, is beautiful or not?

⁴I have presented and defended these views of Aquinas in the chapters on faith, grace, and atonement in my *Aquinas*.

⁵*Confessions*, I.1.

Connected to these questions is also a twinned worry which is currently exercising many serious people concerned in practical ways with the connection between religion and the arts. On the one hand, we might wonder whether there is something elitist about the arts. If we admit the beauty in music, for example, as part of our worship, will that beauty be only an obstacle on the road to God for ordinary people who are not trained in the arts? On the other hand, if we privilege just that art which is accessible to people who are aesthetically untrained, if we fill the Mass, for example, only with so-called praise choruses, if our hymns are written by the local eighteen-year old who has just taught himself to play the guitar, will the result be something merely shallow or sentimental which does not draw us closer to God? How are we to find our way between Scylla and Charybdis here?

If we think of good taste as a responsiveness to great and sophisticated beauty in the arts and bad taste as untrained responsiveness to art, then we can think of this worry as a puzzle about taste. Are we going to say that good taste is important in the Mass or in religious life generally? Or are we going to say that any taste, however bad, can still serve as a means to God provided that the person who has bad taste is sufficiently moved by what he thinks is beautiful?

Responses to Beauty in Art

In thinking about these questions, it is helpful to look more closely at human reactions to art, at good and bad taste. I have learned a great deal about this subject from my friend Frank Burch Brown, whose books on these topics have been influential on my own thinking as well as that of many other people; and, as the preceding paragraphs should have made clear already, I am especially indebted to his recent book, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*.⁶

To begin with, when we read a poem or listen to a piece of music, we exercise what Burch Brown calls "aesthetic perception." Like visual perception, or any other kind of sensory perception, the ability to engage in aesthetic perception varies from person to person. That ability can also be trained. As far as that goes, even ordinary sensory perception can be trained. When my

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daughter was little, we took horseback riding lessons together, and the instructor tried to teach us how to tell what lead a horse is on. The lead a horse is on depends on the horse's leading forward foot. A horse can have either its right or its left foot as the leading forward foot; depending on which foot is the leading forward foot, the horse is on either the right lead or the left. The problem, of course, is that when a horse is cantering around a riding ring, all its feet are in continual motion. How on

earth, you might say, is anyone supposed to be able to tell what counts as "the leading forward foot" in the horse's movement of its feet? I had a very hard time learning to see which lead a horse is on, but the riding instructor just looked at the horse and saw it.⁷

So "seeing" is something that is trainable in us. Aesthetic perception is too. When the blessing of wealth and the other gifts of good fortune combine to make it possible, then experience and education can train our ability to perceive beauty in art. As a Westerner's first experience of Peking opera will quickly convince him, without certain sorts of training, none of us could see

⁶Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁷Michael De Paul has called to my attention his use of this very example in a different context. He is an equestrian as well as an epistemologist, so his use of the example is more detailed and analytical than mine. See his "Argument and Perception: The Role of Literature in Moral Inquiry," *Journal of Philosophy*, 85 (1988), 552-65.

or hear any of the beauty in music or any other art. In our contemporary culture, some people who have had little training in music cannot hear much of any beauty in Bach cantatas. I myself had to have a lot of help in hearing what is beautiful about Lutoslawski's Cello Concerto. And so the perception of beauty in art will vary from one person to another, depending on the gifts they have been given, of talent, opportunity, health, leisure, wealth, and other things of this sort. The responsiveness to beauty in the arts which goes into good taste is a result of training, and this training is not possible without the kind of good fortune which is definitely not accessible to everyone.

In addition, however, it is important to understand that, even for those who are trained, there are actually two ways in which to respond to beauty in the arts. Another well-known writer in the area of religion and the arts, Albert Blackwell, has labeled these two ways "the Pythagorean approach" and "the incarnational approach."⁸

He names the first of these two approaches after Pythagoras, because Pythagoras taught the Western world about the mathematics of music. Music is constructed out of mathematical ratios of vibrations which produce certain sorts of harmonies, and mathematicians and many musicians delight in seeing the patterns of these ratios.

We can see what Blackwell has in mind with a Pythagorean approach if we use an analogous intellectual analysis on poetry. Ben Jonson's poem about the death of his baby daughter begins with these lines:

"Here lies to each her parents' ruth,
Mary, the daughter of their youth"

and it ends with these lines:

"This grave partakes the fleshly birth;
Which cover lightly, gentle earth."

If we reflect on this poem with Blackwell's Pythagorean approach, then we will notice that the poem consists of rhymed couplets. We might go on to wonder whether we should read the last line as a series of trochaic phrases or as iambic units. We could also point to the use of rhythm to provide emphasis of one kind or another. And so on. We might well feel moved by such artistry, but it would be the abstract beauty of the patterns which would prompt our reactions.

But, of course, if you approached poetry—or music—only in this Pythagorean way, you would be a machine, not a person. To be humanly responsive to beauty, you need to experience something more than the as-it-were mathematical patterns, in a way very hard to explain but easy to illustrate. For example, the pain of the last couplet of Ben Jonson's poem is evident; and it is brought home to us by Jonson's ability to make words sing, so that the combination of the lilting melodiousness of the final line and its pathos bring the shaft of his pain right into us. Hearing the poem in this manner is what Blackwell calls "the incarnational way" of approaching art.

The incarnational approach is a matter of emotion or feeling prompted by more than just the patterned character of the beautiful thing. It is very difficult to explain what sort of feelings these are or how we learn from them. Perhaps there are lots of feelings which are not really full-fledged emotions, or perhaps there are feelings for which we cannot give names or adequate verbal descriptions. But no one doubts that there is something here to explain.

⁸Albert Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1999).

And so we can approach beauty in art largely through analytical intellect, in the Pythagorean way, or largely through non-analytical feelings, in the incarnational way, or through some combination of the two.

Enjoyment and Evaluation

Seeing this shows us that there are in fact two sorts of appraisal which we can make of beauty in art. There is the experiential engagement with art—the enjoyment of art—on the one hand; and there is the judgment of art, on the other. Burch Brown points out that we can judge a work of art good without enjoying it, and it is also true that we can enjoy a work of art without judging it good. So, for example, we are sometimes abashed at the things we enjoy in art. I enjoy Verdi's *Requiem*, but I know that admitting this is a little like saying I really like hot dogs. I know that professional musicians value Mozart's *Requiem* much more than Verdi's—and so do I, really. But I love Verdi's *Requiem* anyway. On the other hand, there are things I judge superb

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works of art, in the sense that I can see how marvelously made they are—but I still don't find much enjoyment in them. I am sure that Duruflé's *Requiem* is one of the great musical settings of the Requiem text, but I still don't enjoy it in the way I enjoy Verdi's. I judge Duruflé's *Requiem* better than Verdi's, and I enjoy Verdi's more than Duruflé's.

Blackwell's distinction between the Pythagorean and the incarnational approaches to music explains how our responses to the same piece of music can be distinct in this way. When I judge Duruflé's *Requiem* better than Verdi's, I am approaching the music in the Pythagorean way. When I enjoy Verdi's *Requiem* more than Duruflé's, I am approaching the music incarnationally. And so, even for one and the same person, there can be a difference between the way in which beauty in art is judged and the affective response which the experience of that art produces. A person's intellect and affect may go their separate ways as regards responsiveness to art. Judging and enjoying can come apart.

Good Taste and Bad Taste

These ways of thinking about our responsiveness to beauty in art are helpful for thinking about the connection between beauty and our relationship to God. Insofar as beauty is a road to God for a person, it will begin where that person is and move him forward. So the poetry or the music which are suitable to be used in liturgy have to reflect the degree to which the aesthetic perceptions of the people involved in that liturgy have been trained. But it is not enough for them to judge art good in order for its beauty to serve them as a road to God. They need also to be moved by it. Beauty which is a road to God has to meet people where they are and move them forward. And for this, they need to be able to respond to the beauty in that art with experiential engagement, that is, with enjoyment.

For this reason, we can recognize that the art or beauty which reaches a person where he is might not be the most superlative of art or the best of beauty. Because enjoyment and judgment of beauty are not the same, a person might enjoy more what is in fact a lesser piece of art, a smaller beauty. But because a greater beauty has more power to move a person once that person is able to perceive it, there is some real point in a person's learning to perceive, and so learning to enjoy, the greater beauty, if the gifts of wealth, leisure, opportunity, and talent make such training possible.

Consequently, on this way of thinking about beauty as a road to God, considerations of good taste should not dictate the way in which we come to beauty in art. Enjoyment should. But learning to perceive the real beauty in art and to enjoy it—good taste, for short—should be a goal for us, to the extent that that goal is available to us. Insofar as beauty is a road to God, greater beauty will be a better road.

So if we start where we are, letting enjoyment and desire draw us, and training our aesthetic perception and learning to discern true beauty better if this option is available to us, we will grow in our responsiveness to beauty.

There are also ways to be or become less responsive to beauty, and I want to say a few cautionary words about those here. If we go wrong with regard to beauty in these ways, beauty will not be for us a road to God.

Sometimes people love beauty and rejoice in it in such a way that beauty ceases to function as a road to God for them. For such people, the aesthetic delight in beauty is an end in itself, and so beauty does not move them further towards God. What is wrong with such people is *not* that they take *beauty* as an end in itself. Taking beauty as an end in itself can be a means to God, in a paradoxical sort of way, just as having final ends can be a means to a good life. It is a mistake to suppose that beauty is one *species* of goodness, on a par with the moral and the useful. Rather, as I will explain below, beauty is a *mode* of goodness; and so, to take it as an end in itself is another way to love what God is. Nonetheless, there are some people who have good taste, but not a taste which allows them to taste and see that the Lord is good. It is common to call such people “aesthetes.”

What has gone wrong in an aesthete is apparent in the description I just gave. An aesthete does not enjoy the beauty in a piece of music. He enjoys his aesthetically sophisticated ability to take in that beauty. What is the difference in these two reactions? The difference lies in the object of the pleasure. In the one case, the object of the pleasure is the beauty in the music. In the other case, the case of the aesthete, the object is the aesthete’s own excellence in accessing the beauty of the music. The primary object of the aesthete’s pleasure, then, is just his own sophisticated access to complicated beauty not available to the untrained.

You can see the difference at issue here vividly if you remember the portrayal of Mozart and Salieri in the movie *Amadeus*. I am not saying that that movie had the biography of either Mozart or Salieri right. I want to call attention to the movie’s portrayal of these composers only because the movie’s characterization of them gives us a vivid portrayal of the difference I am trying to elucidate here. In the movie, when Salieri is portrayed as praying fervently to God for his greatest heart’s desire, what he says to God is, “Please let me be a famous composer.” What Salieri (the Salieri of the movie) wants is that he be famous and that that fame be for musical expertise. In the movie, what Mozart wants is just the music itself. What distinguishes Salieri’s desire from Mozart’s is that Salieri’s desire is in some sense reflexive or higher-order; it is a desire about *himself* primarily and about music only secondarily. And so it has a certain self-regarding character about it, as Mozart’s desire does not.

I do not know how to characterize Salieri-like attitudes precisely, but it seems clear that there are lots of Salieri-like attitudes, which are not hard to recognize. You can want to understand the nature of light, or you can want to write an excellent paper on the nature of light. These are not the same desire. The first one is a Mozart-like desire, and the second one is a Salieri-like desire. It is a Salieri-like desire because the object of the desire is the relative standing of your

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own writing on this subject by comparison with that of others. It is also possible to have Salieri-like attitudes about people. A man can want a particular woman, or he can want to be the husband of that woman. In the latter case, the object of his desire is not the woman but his being her husband, so that something about himself is the primary object of his desire. She herself is not the primary object of his desire.

The difference between Salieri-like desires and Mozart-like desires gives us a way to think about an aesthete. An aesthete, we might say, is someone whose attitudes towards the beautiful are Salieri-like attitudes. The primary object of the aesthete's pleasure is not the beautiful thing itself but rather his own aesthetic ability to access that thing's beauty. And now it is not so hard to see what is wrong with the attitude of the aesthete. The aesthete is focused primarily on himself, and only secondarily on beauty or beautiful things. That is why for the aesthete beauty is not a road to God. You cannot be moved closer to another person if you are focused primarily on yourself.

*Beauty will draw us
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beauty itself.*

Furthermore, insofar as the aesthete is concerned largely with his own highly trained aesthetic sensibilities, he will be indifferent to or even snobbishly disdainful of those others whose sensibilities are less trained than his own. And so the aesthete will be an especial menace when it comes to liturgical music, because in his focus on his own aesthetic reactions, he will tend to suppose (if he thinks about the matter at all) that the few aesthetic elite are the only persons whose worship matters to the Lord of the liturgy.

On the other hand, of course, the same distinction, between Salieri-like attitudes and Mozart-like attitudes, also helps us understand sentimentality, which is another way of going wrong with regard to beauty. Unlike the aesthete, the sentimental person does not care about good taste, provided only that he is able to enjoy what he feels is beautiful.

Sentimentality is not harmless either. In fact, the Nazis have given us some of our most appalling examples of sentimentality. Johann Paul Kremer was the Nazi doctor in charge of Auschwitz,⁹ and we have the diaries he wrote while he was at Auschwitz. In his diaries, he describes his own horrific torture and murder of Jewish men, women, and children. But Kremer was also a sentimental man. In his diaries, sometimes on the same page as his entries about torture and murder, he records his own reactions to beautiful or moving things, and in such places he tends to devote diary space to his evaluation of himself as a man of great sensitivity, as a humane and civilized person. You can see clearly how moved he is at the way in which he is moved by beauty in things.

And that fact helps us understand what has gone wrong with the sentimental person. The primary object of the sentimental person's reaction is just his own being moved by something. He becomes emotional over his own emotions. Sentimentality is thus also a Salieri-like attitude in virtue of having as its primary object not something external to the sentimental person but rather only that person's own emotional states. For the sentimental person, beauty is not a road to God either, because, like the aesthete, the sentimental person is focused largely on himself.

Furthermore, there is a special problem with sentimentality because it is so often self-righteous in its insistence on being allowed to emote, however bad the art or however untrained the taste which produces the emotion.

⁹KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS. Rudolf Höss, Pery Broad, Johann Paul Kremer (Auschwitz: The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 1998).

So not just every response to beauty will let us appropriate beauty as a road to God. Beauty will draw us nearer to God only if what moves us is the beauty itself, not something about our own reactions to that beauty.

Beauty as Mediator

But when we are moved by beauty, in enjoyment of what is rightly judged to be beautiful, how is it that beauty moves us closer to God? I said at the outset that our drawing near to God is a matter of surrendering to him. How does beauty mediate that surrender?

Sometimes a poem or a piece of music will wake in us an ill-defined yearning for we-know-not-what. Such yearning often comes to us with pain and confusion. We have no clear object for the yearning and no explanation for the pain, except that it is somehow the pain of unfulfilled hungriness. It can come to us also as loneliness, even loneliness which is an old, familiar part of our lives. For many people, Schubert's masterpiece, the F-Minor Fantasy, raises feelings of this sort. This music arouses an exquisite delicacy of pain, as if the pain and yearning were fragile and precious. That delicacy alternates with an almost frenetic attempt in the music to escape pain, as if something in the music were rattling the bars of its cage, desperate to get out and away. But that franticness soon subsides into another round of delicate, intimate, fragile intimacy with pain, which is intensely quiet. In those parts of the music, it is almost as if the pain in the music were a deep sea place for the heart, full of rich purples and greens, where one can swim in hidden harmony with pain, away from all that is crude in the world. The more urgent and frenetic parts of the music serve to throw into sharp relief the sweetness of the quieter parts. Something about this piece of music always strikes me as if it were, you might say, liquid pain.

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When art affects us in this sort of way, as I have been trying to describe the effects of Schubert's Fantasy, then we have one sort of explanation for the way beauty draws us closer to God. A person moved as this music moves people will be restless, as Augustine says; and the only thing which will ultimately fill the hunger of this restlessness is the intimate presence of God himself.

Painful longing is thus one way in which beauty in art can be a road to God, but it is not the only way. Bach's *St. John Passion* is an example of beauty in music which draws us in a different manner. The music tells the story of Christ's passion as that story is found in the Gospel of John, but it tells the story meditatively, with pauses for reflection. The scene involving the flogging of Christ is typical. It begins with Pilate's trying to get the crowd to call for the release of Jesus. Instead, the crowd cries for Barrabas, until Pilate gives up and turns Jesus over to be flogged. The music in this part of the work builds to a kind of frenzy, making us feel the mob violence and the hysteria leading up to the whipping. But at that point the frenzied pace of the music stops suddenly, and there is a meditation in music on the thought that the Savior of the world is flogged for the sins of those whom he loves. Bach uses only a single voice and quietly plucked strings for this part of the music. The intensity of the mystical quiet, the inwardness, in this part of the music makes us want to hold our breath so that nothing at all can disturb the stillness.

There is poignant pain in the music at this point, but there is also peace. It is the peace of a newly-weaned child at his mother's side, you might say. The pain is not taken away by the stillness in the music, but it is engulfed in a great sense of being at rest with Christ in this pain. And

so although pain is present in this part of the music, it is present in a completely different way from the way it is in Schubert's Fantasy. In Bach's musical meditation, the pain is not forcing its way out into yearning. Rather the music gives us a sense of peace even in pain. It is, as it were, a redeemed pain. The whole effect is a stillness which is willing to trust God even in pain.

This music thus mediates to us an acceptance of the pain in our innermost psyches. Those griefs, those failures, which might have bent us away from God in shame or anger lose some of their power to do so, in the quiet of the beauty of that music.

But this is not the only way in which beauty can transform pain into something more peaceful and compatible with trust in God. The beauty of Russian Orthodox hymns does so in a very different way. Slavonic hymns from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries are surpassingly beautiful, and there is great peacefulness in them, too. The beauty in that music, however, produces a kind of peacefulness in which pain is present only as transcended. In this respect, the music shares some features with the beauty of Orthodox icons. In this beauty, it is as if we are being taught to feel the sufferings of our lives as transcended in the coming peace and order of the heavenly kingdom. It is not hard to see how this sort of beauty draws us nearer to God in trust and patience.

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Finally, it is important not to forget the way in which beauty in art can be just joyful. The choral part at the end of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, for example, is a great overflowing of exuberance, of gratitude, hope, and joy. Here pain is simply absent, and there is a rush of gladness that lets us forget sorrow and trouble for a time. Gladness and joy in beauty also strengthen us for the road to God and draw us further on it.

Beauty as a Transcendental

And so beauty is a road to God for us because when we approach it in what Blackwell called "the incarnational way," it arouses feelings in us which make us long for God's presence or produce in us peace even in a fallen world or render us joyful in the good we find around us. We are built—our brains are built—to be able to detect the mathematical patterns in the vibrations of air which strike our ears when we hear music. But we are also built in such a way as to be powerfully moved by these patterns of vibrations. Somehow the process of evolution and God's design of us has made us such that we apprehend beauty through our senses; and, having apprehended beauty in this way, we long for an incorporeal God and rejoice in him. It is amazing that there is such a connection. Why should it work this way?

Here it helps to ask what beauty is. Thomas Aquinas had an answer which seems to me brilliant. In his view, beauty is one of the modes of goodness—of goodness which is itself a transcendental, encompassing not just moral goodness but all goodness correlated with *being*. For Aquinas, beauty is goodness perceptible to the senses.¹⁰ This description does not imply that there is no beauty in mathematics, or in the work of art in the imagination of the artist, or in the heart and soul of a person we love. We often say, "I see!" where our corporeal eyes have nothing to do with it. There is also the vision of the mind. When Aquinas takes beauty to be perceptible to the senses, the sense of interior vision is included.

¹⁰Cf. *Summa theologiae*, I, q.5, a.4, ad 1. For a contemporary study of the transcendentals in Aquinas, see Jan Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals. The Case of Thomas Aquinas* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1996).

Aquinas's idea helps to draw together the ideas we have been exploring in this paper. In God, there is true, objective goodness. If beauty is goodness as it is perceptible to the senses, as Aquinas supposes, then there really is something to perceive, the true beauty which reflects the real goodness of God.

I do not mean to say that the idea of beauty as a transcendental solves all the puzzles generated by the notion of beauty as a road to God. For example, we might want to know what accounts for the sense that the beauty in some music acquaints us somehow with holiness, while the apparently equally great beauty in other music does not. The songs of desolation in Handel's *Ariodante* are beautiful but vastly different in character from the sublime beauty of Monteverdi's *Vespers*; and the difference is not just the difference between the secular and the sacred. The difference among the words sung is not sufficient to explain the differing effects of the music. So there are things hard to understand which are not explainable solely by the idea of beauty as a transcendental.

Nonetheless, the notion that beauty is goodness perceptible to the senses is illuminating in many respects. To begin with, it is clear that perceptual capacities can vary. We don't all see or hear the same thing. The idea that beauty is perceptible goodness helps explain the fact that people are able to find beauty to a greater or lesser extent. And that is why the road to the one thing that God is has to have different starting points for different people. The starting point depends on where people are and what they perceive as beautiful. What they perceive as beautiful, as distinct from what they *ought* to perceive as beautiful, is where the road begins for them.

On the other hand, because the beauty which is goodness perceptible to the senses is an objective matter, it is important for us to train our aesthetic perception, if this is a possibility for us, so that we become better able to connect to the real beauty which is really there. We should not just pander to tastes we already have, but we should educate our aesthetic perception, to the extent allowed us by our condition in life, so that we can find enjoyment in what is truly judged superbly beautiful.

Finally, Aquinas's notion of beauty as perceptible goodness helps us to understand the way in which beauty constitutes a road to God for us. We have built into us a kind of hunger for goodness, as Augustine says. Insofar as beauty is goodness as it is available to the senses, the perception of beauty stimulates us to want the goodness beauty lets us perceive. And there is a great advantage for us in having the hunger for goodness be stimulated by goodness which is perceptible to the senses (including intellectual vision), as distinct from goodness which is perceptible to the discursive reason of the intellect.

In our post-fall condition, even with a built-in hunger for goodness, our minds are often enough alienated from goodness, too. We are divided against ourselves in this respect as so many others, like a person so grief-stricken at the thought of his dreadful drinking habit that he has to comfort himself with a whisky. Some people are resistant to the whole idea of the existence of God and the standard of values that go with Christian commitment to the goodness of God. Some people who are religious believers are angry at God. Some are in despair over their sins. Some are shamed at what they have made of themselves and their lives. In these and many other ways, we can cut ourselves off from the very goodness we hunger for. If goodness were presented directly to a person divided against himself, through preaching or philosophical

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argument, in the form of exhortation of any kind, that person might well just turn away in disbelief or despondency. But goodness presented to the senses is a kind of stealth bomber. It flies in under the radar of the reason to have its effect on desire, without a preemptive strike on the part of reason to stop it. By prompting pain in us, even pain of a redeemed or transcended sort, or by giving us the kind of love of goodness which is joy, beauty perceptible to the senses moves us to the goodness of God, who is himself beautiful, if we only have heart to see it.

Conclusion

I am neither licensed nor inclined to preach, and so perhaps the lesson of these reflections can be left to emerge of its own accord. But this much, at any rate, ought to be said. We need to keep clearly in mind what the end of liturgy is. As the word itself implies, it is to serve the Lord, in worship. If we block out of the liturgy music which mediates to some people the power and the tenderness of Christ's grace, as the music of the Saint Louis Jesuits does for me, then we are prohibiting for some people the purpose of the liturgy, as if the Lord of the liturgy cared about the worship of only some of his people and not all of them.

Liturgy is, as the word itself implies, it is to serve the Lord, in worship.

It is true that it is difficult for liturgical music to serve equally well everyone in the mixed multitude of the Church. But it is opposed to the spirit of Christianity for those few privileged enough to have had excellent musical training to put their own needs and tastes first. We need to remember that the Lord served in the liturgy said, "Inasmuch as you have not done it unto one of the least of my brethren, you have not done it unto me." (Matt.25:45) He did not say, "Inasmuch as you have not done it unto one of the most privileged of my brethren, you have not done it unto me." Whatever sacrifices *caritas necessitates* as regards taste are more incumbent on the few who are musically trained than on those many who have not shared their opportunities for musical education.

Finally, it is good to remember that, in Proverbs, sowing discord has pride of place among the seven things God is said to hate.¹¹ The Lord of the liturgy is the God of love. And so there is also a service of the Lord in patience exercised toward others who desire to draw near to the Lord through the beauty of that music which each himself enjoys.¹² ❧



¹¹Proverbs 6:16–19. Sowing discord is the last in a building list.

¹²I am grateful to my friends John Foley and Frank Burch Brown for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.