

Music and Religion in Gilson's Philosophy of Art

Ralph Nelson

It surely would be difficult to find two metaphysicians as different as Georg Hegel and Étienne Gilson. Nowhere is this more evident than in Gilson's important study *L'Être et l'essence*,¹ or in the later version, *Being and Some Philosophers*.² What a difference between the concrete or absolute idealist, on the one hand, and the Thomist noteworthy for the emphasis given to *esse* or *actus essendi*, on the other. For Gilson often remarked that the notion of *esse* was a central feature of Aquinas's philosophy which many so-called Thomists had managed to ignore. Of Hegel's thought, he said, "This doctrine which recognizes nothing more lowly than being, unless this be existence itself, seems to announce the most extreme devaluation of the act of existing that is conceivable."³

And yet there is a similarity in the way in which they both approach the philosophy of art, even though that truth that is in the details reveals that behind a somewhat similar terminology, there are vast differences related to incompatible metaphysical orientations. What I refer to as a similarity or, perhaps better, an analogy is the fact that Hegel begins his *Lectures on Aes-*

¹ Étienne Gilson, *L'Être et l'essence* (Paris: Jules Vrin, 1948).

² Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949).

³ Gilson, *L'Être et l'essence*, p. 210. "It is probably not by chance that Germany is the country of both idealistic metaphysics and of music. Hegel, Schelling, Fichte can assume a metaphysical theme and weave it into a world with no less freedom than Bach can write a fugue. Such metaphysical fabrics are far from lacking beauty, but Bach was right because, as an artist, his end was to achieve beauty, whereas Hegel was wrong because, as a philosopher, his end should have been to achieve truth" (*Being and Some Philosophers*, p. 213).

*thetics*⁴ by distinguishing between the philosophy of art and aesthetics, and Gilson does that as well.

Although Hegel finally decides to use the popular term aesthetics to describe his course, he wants to distinguish between the philosophy of art or the philosophy of fine art and aesthetics. The former term "denotes more accurately the sciences of the senses or emotions."⁵ The latter has as its object "to unfold the essential nature of the beautiful, and—apart from any intention to propound rules for the executant—how it is illustrated in actual work, that is, works of art."⁶ This study "must combine metaphysical universality [the idea] with the determinate content of real particularity,"⁷ the famous concrete universal.

The problem in Hegelian aesthetics is that art within the system is a moment in the development of absolute spirit, that is, art in some sense is seen as a form of consciousness and knowledge, albeit inferior to religion and philosophy. Such an acute observer as Benedetto Croce maintained that the autonomy of art was lost in the dialectical series.

The artistic activity is distinct from the philosophical only through its imperfection, only because it apprehends The Absolute in a sensible and immediate form, whereas philosophy apprehends it in the pure medium of thought. . . . Art is practically reduced (whether he like it or not) to a philosophical error, or an illusory philosophy.⁸

Attempts have been made to show that the validity of Hegelian aesthetics holds up even if one rejects the ontology, but it is hard to see how this is so.⁹ If the ontology is the basis of Hegel's philosophy of art, then a rejection of that ontology entails a rejection of that philosophy of art as well. What might remain of value would be his insights and observations on art and its history, but not the philosophical science he aspired to construct. I have mentioned Hegel at some length because he represents an interpretation of art vehemently criticized by Gilson, the position that art consists in a kind of knowledge.

⁴ Georg Hegel, *Lectures on Aesthetics: The Philosophy of Fine Art*, vol. 1, trans. F. P. B. Osmaston (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1975).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁸ Benedetto Croce, *What is Living and What is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (New York: Russell and Russell, 1969), p. 129.

⁹ Jack Kaminsky, *Hegel on Art: An Interpretation of Hegel's Aesthetics* (New York: State University of New York, 1962), pp. 3, 27. See also Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity from Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 9–10.

And now to Gilson. The issue of defining and understanding the philosophy of art is considered in the three volumes—*Painting and Reality* (1958), *The Arts of the Beautiful* (1963), and *Forms and Substances in the Arts* (1966)—dedicated to the arts of the beautiful.¹⁰ He raises doubts as to whether aesthetics is a science, and proceeds to distinguish between the philosophy of art and aesthetics. The former “considers the work in its relation to the artist who produces it, the latter considers it in its relation to the spectator, the listener or the reader who perceives it.”¹¹ It is evident that Gilson’s focus is primarily on the former consideration. Like Maritain, Gilson was a pioneer in developing a Thomist-inspired philosophy of art. They ventured into a “zone of free exchange,”¹² for no such philosophy of art existed; there is no precedent to be extracted from the works of Thomas Aquinas, so we may happily avoid that perspective in which a doctrine is judged as to whether or not it conforms to Thomas’s thought (*ad mentem divi Thomae.*) In short, Thomistic metaphysics provides the means for the development of a philosophy of art, not a matter of recovery, but of discovery.

There are several important negations at the heart of Gilson’s approach: the refusal to identify art as a particular mode of knowing—and Kant and other philosophers are singled out for criticism on this point¹³—and, secondly, the rejection of art as imitation. There are other negations, such as the critique of expressivist or expressionist theories, but these two seem to be salient. The contention that art is a kind of cognition is characterized as the “‘sophism of misplaced knowledge,’ for which idealism is but another name; for indeed idealism ultimately consists in saying that everything is knowledge, even reality itself.”¹⁴ This negation means that, contrary to Keats’s famous lines: “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’—that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know,”¹⁵ the concept of truth is not really relevant to art.

¹⁰ Étienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959); *The Arts of the Beautiful* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965); *Forms and Substances in the Arts*, trans. Salvator Attanaseo (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966).

¹¹ Gilson, *Forms and Substances in the Arts*, p. 25.

¹² Henry Bars et al., *Jacques Maritain et ses contemporains* (Paris: Desclée, 1991), p. 304. The phrase is Bars’s. He compares Gilson and Maritain briefly, pp. 304–07.

¹³ Locke and Leibniz are mentioned. *The Arts of the Beautiful*, pp. 142, 149–50.

¹⁴ Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful*, p. 13.

¹⁵ John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” The example is mine. Gilson refers to Boileau, the famous critic, as having made this identification, in *The Arts of the Beautiful*, pp. 25–26.

The relation of the arts of the beautiful to the good is another matter. At the end of the nineteenth century two opposing positions about art were developed. Tolstoy the stern moralist had excised beauty from the realm of art and replaced it by the notion of the moral good, so that the older Tolstoy, as moral scold, condemned the great novels of his earlier self. Effectively good art serves moral and religious truth.¹⁶ Nietzsche, in contrast, must be taken at his word when he speaks about going beyond moral and ethical categories, elaborating an aesthetic view of life in which the self is both potter and clay, the self envisaged as a work of art, self-making.¹⁷

What Gilson wants to do is recognize that the beautiful, while not a species of knowledge, "is the good of sense knowledge for the sensibility of an intelligent being."¹⁸ He wants to recognize the autonomy of the arts of the beautiful without denying that there are other tribunals to which they may be subject, since art is not the one thing needful.

This does not mean that works of art are not subject to other tribunals judging them on the strength of other rules, such as those of religion or of morality; but it does mean that, if it is a question of judging a painting precisely *qua* work of art, the principles to be followed in judging it should be borrowed from the notion of art understood as the creative activity that has just been defined.¹⁹

What he objects to is the substitution of "knowledge for art,"²⁰ the tendency to "discuss art from a viewpoint other than that of its essence."²¹ Hence, the importance of the definition of the philosophy of art as "a meta-

¹⁶ "The best works of our time transmit religious feelings urging towards the union and the brotherhood of man" (Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, trans. Aylmer Maude [London: Walter Scott, Ltd., 1899], p. 189). Both Beethoven and Wagner are criticized, the former surprisingly for the *Ninth Symphony*, whose "Ode to Joy" is often used today as an anthem of brotherhood, the latter for the *Ring Cycle*. His summary of the plot of the *Cycle* is satirically exact. It was a similar reading, no doubt, which encouraged the popular takeoff by Anna Russell, a routine which held her in good stead in concert halls for a number of years.

¹⁷ To cite just two of Nietzsche's works relevant to aesthetics: *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Walter Kaufmann in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: The Viking Press, 1954) and *The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967). For a very interesting examination of Nietzschean aesthetics by an important contemporary French philosopher, see Luc Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus: the Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age*, trans. Robert DeLoaiza (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 148–91.

¹⁸ Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful*, p. 28.

¹⁹ Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, p. 134.

²⁰ Gilson, *Forms and Substances in the Arts*, p. 130.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

physics of Art, that is to say, an ontology which considers the works in their substantial structure and in their relation to their cause."²²

The second important negation in Gilson's philosophy of art concerns the classical conception of art as the imitation of nature. He is categorical: "Art's essential purpose is not the imitation of nature."²³ Greatly influenced by French commentators on the arts such as Delacroix, Baudelaire, Focillon, and Valéry, Gilson stresses the goal of the artist as creating beauty. For "the specific distinction of art lies in its *proper end*, which is to make things of beauty."²⁴ The contrast is made in *Painting and Reality* between "an art of imitation" and the creation of "a new world of forms."²⁵

There is a third negation, no doubt of lesser importance than the other two, which bears on the idea of art as expression, or the expressionist theory, not referring to a school of painting. This would construe art as expressing "the affective states by which man is ordinarily moved"; Gilson seems to dispose of the expressionist theory when he says of music, for instance, that while it "may not express these feelings, it causes them."²⁶ So, by implication at least, he would oppose this kind of theory.

Having now indicated certain general characteristics of Gilson's philosophy of art, I turn to his discussion of music. Even though his most notable work in the philosophy of art was the Mellon lectures on painting, we find an abundance of material, even in *Painting and Reality*, on music. The method followed here will be first to note some of Gilson's principal comments on music and then, subsequently, to note what he has to say about church music, sacred music, concluding with some personal observations about the current state of sacred music.

In modern philosophy there are a number of significant figures who have had a good deal to say about music. The list would include Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, of course; Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School, Vladimir Jankélévitch, and, most recently, Roger Scruton, whose essay on

²² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

²⁴ Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful*, p. 133. In *Forms and Substances in the Arts* Gilson says, "For in contrast to knowledge which takes cognizance of its object, the function of art is to create its own object in freedom and for beauty's sake" (p. 278).

²⁵ Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, p. 226.

²⁶ Gilson, *Forms and Substances in the Arts*, p. 174. For a valuable résumé of Croce's expressionist aesthetics and its underlying dualism, see H. Wildon Carr, *The Philosophy of Benedetto Croce: The Problem of Art and History* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1917), pp. 162-72. Charles Taylor interprets Hegel's philosophy as expressivism, a term he thinks avoids the ambiguity of expressionism, in *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 13, n. 1.

the aesthetics of music is due to be published this year.²⁷ With the notable exception of Jankélévitch, who was mainly interested in Bergson and existentialism in philosophy, and modern French music—Ravel and others—the other philosophers may all be situated in the German philosophical and musical tradition; Scruton, for instance, has been greatly interested in Hegelian philosophy, and is a fervent Wagnerite.²⁸

Unlike Maritain who only speaks of music in asides, in passing as it were, Gilson from his youth was passionately interested in music.²⁹ His good friend and successor in the chair of the French Academy, Henri Gouhier, in the traditional *discours de réception*, in which the new member eulogizes his predecessor, said that music had played a great part in Gilson's life, but not as a pastime or distraction.³⁰ For him it was a form of expression of the ineffable *par excellence*. What cannot be expressed otherwise is expressed by music. Recalling Gilson's predilection for music, Gouhier recounts that Gilson was present for all the performances of *Pelléas et Mélisande* when a student at the Sorbonne. What Bizet's *Carmen* was for Nietzsche, *Pelléas* was for the young Gilson.³¹ *Pelléas*, I suppose, is what is often referred to as an acquired taste, meaning in common parlance that one will be relatively alone in its appreciation.³² We know that

²⁷ See Arthur Schopenhauer on the metaphysics of music in *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), vol. 2, pp. 447–57. For an overview of Nietzsche's views on art and music, see Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Adorno wrote on Wagner and Mahler in addition to *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Seabury Press, 1973). On Jankélévitch, see Guy Suarès, *Vladimir Jankélévitch, Qui suis-je?* (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1986). Roger Scruton discusses music in *Art and Imagination: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Methuen, 1974) and *Modern Philosophy: An Introduction and Survey* (New York: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1994).

²⁸ Roger Scruton, "On the Way to Extinction," a review of Michael Tanner, *Wagner* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 March 1997, pp. 18–19.

²⁹ For some of Jacques Maritain's remarks on music, see *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), p. 17n., pp. 45, 57; and *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 293.

³⁰ Henri Gouhier, "Discours," in Marie-Thérèse d'Alverney et al., *Étienne Gilson et nous: La Philosophie et son histoire* (Paris: Jules Vrin, 1980), pp. 156–57. Cf. Henri Gouhier, *Étienne Gilson: trois essais* (Paris: Jules Vrin, 1993).

³¹ On Nietzsche's passion for *Carmen*, see Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, *Wagner and Nietzsche*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), p. 179.

³² Cf. Karl Haas, *Inside Music: How to Understand, Listen to, and Enjoy Good Music* (New York: Doubleday, 1948), p. 338, and A. L. Bacharach and J. R. Pearce, eds., *The Musical Companion: A Modern Guide to Classical Music* (New York & London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 415.

the passion was not exclusive, for Gilson might also be called a Wagnerite.³³ This is not to ignore numerous references to other composers.

The influence of Bergson on Maritain has often been mentioned, some seeing it in the inclusion of intuition, whether intellectual or creative, in Maritain's philosophy. Gilson has told us in memorable terms what Bergson meant to him, as well as the reasons why he lost interest in the former's philosophy.³⁴ In what, I believe, is Gilson's earliest venture in the philosophy of art, "Art et métaphysique," which appeared in 1916,³⁵ one finds pervasive references to intuitions, be they metaphysical or aesthetic, terminology completely foreign to what we may call the later or definitive Gilson. No doubt some of what he has to say anticipates themes to be developed in the important treatises appearing half a century later. Significantly, he stresses that it is in music, more than in painting, that we find an independence from the given physical world. This suggests that music is a higher, more spiritual art.

The relevance of musical experience to his evaluation of Bergson is perhaps best illustrated in a postface he contributed to a Gilson *Festschrift*. Bergson in his metaphysics maintains that the intellect following its natural slope or tendency is adequate to deal with matter analytically by a process of decomposition: "It is made to utilize matter."³⁶ Metaphysics, on the contrary, involves "a reversal of the habitual work of the intellect," it is "an effort to re-ascend the slope natural to the work of thought, to place oneself immediately, through a dilation of the mind, in the thing that one is studying."³⁷ Metaphysics, then, consists in going against the natural grain of the intellect itself.

Now Gilson objects that such a contortion was not required and significantly it is through music that he opposes Bergson, even while recognizing him as a metaphysician of genius. He refers to Bergson's disciples as "brothers of Jean-Christophe [the composer-protagonist of Romain Rol-

³³ Comments on Wagner are found in "Art et métaphysique," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 23, no. 1 bis (1916), pp. 257, 264; *Painting and Reality*, p. 347; *The Arts of the Beautiful*, pp. 45, 57, 90, 97, 99, 121, and 124; *Forms and Substances in the Arts*, pp. 156, 175, 180n., 183, 244, 245n., 247n., and 269. There is also Gilson's chapter on Wagner and Matilda in *Choir of Muses*, trans. Maisie Ward (London: Sheed and Ward, 1953), chap. IV.

³⁴ Étienne Gilson, *The Philosopher and Theology*, trans. Cécile Gilson (New York: Random House, 1962), pp. 107–31, 133–52, and 156–73.

³⁵ Gilson, "Art et métaphysique," pp. 243–67.

³⁶ Henri Bergson, *La Pensée et le mouvant*, 47th ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), p. 35.

³⁷ Henri Bergson, "Introduction to Metaphysics," in *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), p. 216.

land's *roman fleuve*], their life carried on under a musical enchantment of which they were the passionately consenting and happy victims."³⁸ He goes on to say for "those of us who knew from daily experience how a theme contained its development, no twisting on ourselves was necessary in order to attain a mobile continuity, free from any spatial morcellation. Through music we were in becoming as fish in the sea."³⁹ To say the least, it is an unusual refutation, or correction, of Bergsonian metaphysics.

In *Forms and Substances in the Arts*, the analysis of music reminds us of the Bergsonian enhancement of memory. It is commonplace to say that music is a temporal art, while painting obviously is not. Gilson says: "The fluid and successive being of musical substance entails its intellectuality since the work, inasmuch as it forms a whole, requires that it be structured in the memory by the mind."⁴⁰ Hence it is "an art of the moment" for "music, being essentially ephemeral, is the art of that which is to die."⁴¹ He goes on to say that "what is inconceivable is a music without form, because this would be a music without being, and one which has reverted to the status of noise."⁴² The keynote of the analysis, which recalls his general comments on art, is to emphasize "that music's function is not to signify or express anything any more than its function is to imitate something in nature."⁴³ He admits that any kind of music may make us think of something, but "musical sounds do not have a signifying function."⁴⁴ This is the case as long as the focus is on pure music as opposed to musical drama.⁴⁵ Once you bring in a text, of course, you have apparently significant sounds. Gilson quotes the famous critic Edouard Hanslick as having been right about the essence of music, though he does not by any means accept his well-known polemic against Wagner. Pure music having no signifying function is bound to be depreciated by those, like Kant, who judge art by knowledge. For them music has "the lowest place among the fine arts,"⁴⁶ while for Beethoven, music, because of its transcendence, might well be awarded the highest place. The denial that pure music has a signifying

³⁸ Étienne Gilson, *Étienne Gilson: Philosophe de la Chrétienté* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1949), p. 282.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁴⁰ Gilson, *Forms and Substances in the Arts*, p. 145.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁴⁵ "Music is pure to the degree in which, existing only for its own sake, it is at one and the same time, its own cause and its own end" (*ibid.*, p. 177).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 182, n. 17.

function is accompanied by the denial, once again, of the expressionist conception of art.⁴⁷

Secondly, Gilson objects to the idea that musical art is an imitation of nature. First of all, one has to distinguish between music and natural sounds or noise. Musicians do introduce natural sounds into their works, and *The Pastoral Symphony* is mentioned in this regard as is *La Mer*, yet "the attempts of musicians to insert natural noises, or their imitation, in the web of a musical dialogue merely ends up as anecdotal and picturesque curiosities."⁴⁸ After examining the concept of imitation in music, Gilson concludes that actually music succeeds only in imitating itself (use of French horns, bands, dances, etc.).

However, the situation is quite different if it is a matter of musical drama, rather than pure music, in which "the song [is] wed to spectacle in which case it becomes theatre, free to organize itself according to the system of leitmotif."⁴⁹ In this way it becomes a kind of language and makes possible a musical "lexicon in which sonorous forms *signify* personages, situations, objects and even intelligible notions such as the curse of gold."⁵⁰ The reference is obviously to Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. (It would also be true of the popular *Peter and the Wolf*.) Roger Scruton makes the same point.⁵¹ Moreover, Gilson recognizes that there are those who enjoy a referential aspect to music, and that "those [who] would like a musical composition to suggest precise images to them and, if possible to recount an intelligible story, are entirely within their rights and no objections can be raised."⁵² Indeed, the symphonic poem and all kinds of program music "are there to grant them satisfaction."⁵³ In regard to Debussy's *La Mer*, if one concen-

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 171–72.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172. In *Webster's New World Dictionary*, leitmotif is defined as "a short musical phrase representing and recurring with a given character, situation, or emotion in an opera: first developed by Richard Wagner."

⁵¹ "We certainly speak of music as though it had representational powers: indeed the whole theory of the *leitmotif* is based on this supposition. The woodbird's music in *Siegfried* can certainly be heard as the song of a bird, just as passages in *La Mer* can be heard as the sound of waves or the call of seagulls. But if this were all musical representation amounted to then it would be of little interest" (Scruton, *Art and Imagination*, p. 208).

⁵² Gilson, *Forms and Substances in the Arts*, p. 224.

⁵³ *Ibid.* The *Dictionary* defines program music "as instrumental music that depicts or suggests a particular scene, story, etc." and the symphonic poem as "an extended musical composition for full symphony orchestra, usually in one movement, programmatic in nature, and freer in form than the symphony; also called *tone poem*." Of imitative music, Gilson says it contains "A more or less remote analogy

trates on this kind of picturing, one misses the point about music taken in itself. The lesson is that the essence of music is to be found in pure music, not in these other forms.

Let us now summarize Gilson's points: (1) What he centers on is the musical work itself, its form, structure, and duration. He rejects the idea that music is essentially significant, expressive, or imitative. (2) He identifies contexts in which music is integrated in drama and when it is used for other purposes as, for instance, therapy or religion.⁵⁴ In such instances it is not the rule of beauty that is primary but another end to which music is subordinate. Music is no longer an end in itself, but a means.

So when he reflects on sacred music, Gilson recognizes another tribunal, as he said earlier, for this kind of music is "subservient to the ends of Christian worship."⁵⁵ More specifically, sacred music is there "to teach, to remind, and to affect worshippers with religious emotion."⁵⁶ Of the *Lauda Sion* of Thomas Aquinas, he says that it "has an austere beauty of its own. It is the beauty of didactic poetry in the service of Christian worship. It is poetry absorbed by religion."⁵⁷ To which if suitable music is added, we may rightly say that "he who sings prays twice."⁵⁸ Speaking of liturgies for the common people, he observes:

The liturgy which consists in ceremonies and prayers regulated according to a certain order is the religious art par excellence. For there is no art that may not make a contribution . . . everything is mobilized or can be mobilized for the ends of the religious cult.⁵⁹

But the church is not interested in literature or philosophy as such, but in view of its proper ends.

The main lesson one draws from these remarks is that sacred music is not defined by its source, nor simply by its content, but on whether or not it

of which the listener would not even be aware if the composer and program did not tell him by a literary title or an explanatory note what he was being invited to imagine" (*Forms and Substances in the Arts*, pp. 168–169).

⁵⁴ Katherine Le Mée, *Chant: The Origins, Forms, Practice, and Healing Power of Gregorian Chant* (New York: Bell Tower, 1994), pp. 8–9, 139–42.

⁵⁵ Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful*, p. 163.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 179. Compare with the comments of F. J. E. Raby, *A History of Christian-Latin Poetry from the Beginnings to the Close of the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), pp. 402–09.

⁵⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori Publications, 1994), p. 299.

⁵⁹ Etienne Gilson, *La Société de masse et sa culture* (Paris: Jules Vrin, 1967), p. 108.

serves religious purposes. It may be the case that some who have composed excellent church music have not themselves been believers. In regard to content Gilson points out that it is not enough for a composer to produce an arrangement for the Ordinary of the Mass, for the aim of the artist is beauty and the aim of the liturgy is worship; so an antinomy may arise between these two aims. For

a Mass written by Haydn or Mozart is the product of an art conceived by musicians anxious to create beautiful sound structures willed for the sake of their own beauty, whereas plain-song is an art willed for the sake of the religious end which is its function to serve. Mozart submits religious worship to the end of his own art; plain-song submits its art to the ends of religious worship.⁶⁰

Gilson refers to those "liturgical monstrosities" produced by great composers which "are badly suited to the religious purpose of a priest bravely attempting to say [M]ass during the performance."⁶¹ It is thus his contention that properly sacred music is such by the purpose it fulfills, a purpose different from beauty alone. However, having said that, is it not also true that beauty serves better than its opposite?

To illustrate Gilson's point, I use three instances of Masses in which the music either detracted from worship, was considered apart from its religious function, or was successfully in tune with the liturgy. I recall a military Mass in which we were treated to as many brass instruments as are found in those famous marches in the first part of Verdi's *Aida*. The effect was just to overwhelm the celebration of the Mass. In a second instance—Gilson's point about the possible opposition between musical beauty as an end and music in church worship—I was invited by a musician friend to sit in the choir loft of an Episcopalian church to hear a performance of Haydn's *Nelson Mass*. Whether that particular composition was chosen because of the British connection, I know not, but as a non-participant in the service, my focus was almost completely aesthetic, which presumably would not have been right had I been a parishioner. One would then have to determine through one or more of the parishioners whether the music served religious purposes, or whether they had the feeling of being at a concert.

The third instance involved a Schubert Mass—I forget which one; he wrote six—on the feast of the Epiphany in the Franziskaner Kirche in Salzburg when the participant had the feeling that far from a competition between the celebrant and the choir, there was a harmonious relationship.

⁶⁰ Gilson, *The Arts of the Beautiful*, p. 175.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* As a case in point, there is the syncretism of Paul Winter's *Gaia/Earth Mass*.

While Gilson does not opt for a return to plain-song as a remedy for what ails the liturgy, he does note that "its main quality is precisely to be *plain*, that is to say not to indulge in musical beauty willed for its own, but rather to put itself entirely at the service of the liturgy and of its properly religious meaning."⁶² In the Eastern Orthodox Church the use of chant remains extremely important and the deacon has a special place in the liturgy. "In the Orthodox Church today, as in the early Church all services are sung or chanted."⁶³ With some rare exceptions singing is unaccompanied and the organ has been viewed askance, a fact highlighted in Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, whose score is a cantata by Sergei Prokofiev; the organ-supported chant of the Teutonic Knights is mocked by the use of harsh dissonance. Plain-chant is also widely used in the Church of England which has a rich choral tradition.

Gilson's main theme is quite simple, though its actualization is far from being so. The music used in the liturgy should be suitable to, appropriate for Christian worship. Appropriateness is a concept easily recognized in other musical spheres. It has often been remarked that "The Star Spangled Banner" is easier to abuse than to sing, and some have suggested the pacific and pastoral "America the Beautiful" as more suitable because more singable. On the occasion of the bicentenary of the French Revolution, many queasy republicans in France thought it was time to eliminate the more sanguinary lines of the eminently singable "La Marseillaise," such as "let an impure blood water our furrows." In Canada we are blessed with a national anthem singable and available in a bilingual version.

In martial music it is recognized, at least in the United States, that John Philip Sousa's works are more appropriate for marching than, say, the "Radetsky March" by Johann Strauss, Sr. In academic processions, intended to be slow and stately, dignified if you will, Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance" ("Land of Hope and Glory") and the "Trumpet Voluntary" are deemed more appropriate than Dmitry Kabalevsky's entrance of the "Comedians." And the point is that what is true in these spheres is also true of sacred music.

In closing this summary account of Gilson's reflections on music, pure, mixed, and sacred, the reader of Gilson's impressions on what was happening in the church in the 60s is struck by his pessimism. The essay entitled

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Paul Verghese, *The Joy of Freedom: Eastern Worship and Modern Man* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1967), p. 274. Cf. Katherine Le Mée, *Chant*, p. 38.

"Ramblings in the Ruins" says it all.⁶⁴ In it he looks askance at what is happening in the church. Furthermore, in a book based on a series of lectures he gave on mass society and culture, he is apprehensive about mass-culture where "the only universal form of taste is bad taste."⁶⁵ He decries bad religious art. He leaves the impression that the coincidence of art for the sake of beauty and art for the propagation of the faith is only accidental and that it is unlikely to occur in the present situation. That pessimism was not Gilson's alone.

Adopting Gilson's leading ideas, I now propose to extrapolate with some comments on the contemporary use of music for religious purposes. Two interesting studies on church music in America provide points of comparison in the attempt to understand the current situation: Paul Hume, *Catholic Church Music* (1956) and Thomas Day, *Why Catholics Can't Sing* (1990).⁶⁶ The latter work may be supplemented by reading the journal, *Sacred Music*. Paul Hume, a distinguished music critic, based his reflections on studies of church music—and in parentheses, such studies would be welcome today—and examines "the principles regulating sacred music in the functions of public worship"⁶⁷ for "music in the church exists only for the purpose of serving the liturgy, a circumstance which puts its position in a very clear light indeed."⁶⁸ Hume was particularly concerned about those pastors who allow "atrocities to run rampant in the choir loft." When I read what Hume next said, I felt the shock of recognition.

What do you do with dear old Miss Tessy Tara who has been singing in the choir for fifteen years and whose piercing soprano now assaults the ear like the song of a steel gimlet? What do you tell Mr. Cassidy, your favorite insurance salesman, whose basso profundo, penetrating as the foghorn off Sandy Hook, dominates the ensemble?⁶⁹

For in my adolescence I was well acquainted with Tessy and Cassidy, whose performances convinced me that church music was part of the cross to be borne, that just in case you did not have a Pauline thorn in the flesh, one would be provided for you at the High Mass. I suppose there is something to be said for the solidarity of suffering, to discover that many others

⁶⁴ Étienne Gilson, *Les Tribulations de Sophie* (Paris: Jules Vrin, 1967), pp. 139–69.

⁶⁵ Gilson, *La Société de masse et sa culture*, p. 115.

⁶⁶ Paul Hume, *Catholic Church Music* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1956); Thomas Day, *Why Catholics Can't Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

⁶⁷ Hume, *Catholic Church Music*, p. 7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23. See Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, p. 272.

had also suffered, and that was a kind of consolation, for one was not alone. But it was some time before I discovered that liturgical music need not be painful. One also discovered why silence can sometimes be golden.

Hume, alluding to papal norms on sacred music, indicates the influence of the Victorian sentimental ballad on church music and finds a typical example "Bring Flowers of the Fairest"—still flourishing today—as among the objectionable hymns.⁷⁰ He articulates the conviction—we also find it in Gilson—that only the beautiful will serve religious purposes well. He recalls the use of the chant in the Church, and observes that "once its primary rules have been mastered, it is the easiest of music to sing . . . the supreme model of Church music."⁷¹ However, "the quaint old custom of singing the 'Tantum Ergo' to the music of the Sextet from *Lucia*" we can do without.⁷² He has a good deal to say about weddings and the use of the old chestnuts. He recounts the mistake made by the bride who wanted "Liebestod" (love-death)—she meant "Liebestraum" (love's dream)—which "seemed a bit on the morbid side for a wedding."⁷³ Hume should be writing today when so many couples apparently believe that matrimony is indeed *Liebestod*.

Hume's was but one of many voices in the fifties who were attempting to identify appropriate sacred music, mindful of papal encyclicals on the subject, to eliminate music with clearly secular connotations, and to return to practices that had served the Church so well.

However, in the sixties something rather different occurred in the Church, the introduction of the guitar or folk Mass. For roughly beginning in the fifties, there was a folk music craze with an international flavor as witnessed by the performers who made their reputation at that time. Furthermore, folk music had always provided a reservoir for sacred music, a fact illustrated by the hymns of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Initially the guitar accompaniment had the merit of simplicity, the kind of simplicity we find in Franz Gruber's "Silent Night." Granted the limits of the performers—put down by professional musicians as three-chord guitarists—or strummers, if you prefer, it seemed a good means to insure participation, a liturgical singalong. However, the pieces composed for the folk Mass were often insipid, uninspiring, and some of dubious orthodoxy (one I always thought of as a hymn for agnostics), and it turned out that the guitar was not enough, so you had combinations that began to sound like McNamara's

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Band. The greatest objection, however, was that the older tradition was seemingly forgotten in many places. Where were the snows of yesteryear?

In some fortunate instances, the parishioner had a choice between the folk group and more traditional church music, but the impression one had as one travelled was of considerable disarray. That is why Thomas Day's book coming after decades of experimentation is salutary, for it should raise the issue once again of the role of music in the liturgy for the choir and the congregation.⁷⁴

I shall conclude by indicating a tendency that I think runs contrary to the whole notion of appropriate sacred music as understood by Gilson, Hume, and Day. This tendency is not completely novel, though it has a peculiar contemporary flavor. I refer to the contention that in order to attract the youth, the Church should adapt to their tastes and customs, rather than expecting young and old alike to recognize significant musical differences. Once the introduction of operatic numbers was used for the purpose of raising the tone. In my parish, for example, they indulge in de-Masonizing Mozart by giving a new text to his aria which originally invoked Isis and Osiris. I think it still does. Music has contexts and connotations and is not easily transferred from one setting to another. So much of what is now called Christian music, as sung by Amy Grant and others, is simply popular music with a more or less explicit reference in the lyrics to religion. Christian rock, like rock in general, reinforces the conviction that lyrics really don't matter, even if you could make them out. Whether sentimental or hard, there is no guarantee that such sounds might cause an attention to religious ceremonies rather than summon up memories of last night's secular gig. Again it is not content alone that determines liturgical suitability. Remember the liturgical monstrosities.

Another sample is taken from the musical theater. A recent comparison of diocesan life in America, using two instances, said this of the music used in Saginaw, Michigan: "The music is modern and attractive with the Andrew Lloyd Webber/Stephen Sondheim sound that characterizes much of the newer Catholic church music."⁷⁵ You may agree depending on how you feel about Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar*. On the contrary, you may find choral renditions of the title song vulgar and the idea of the Savior as per-

⁷⁴ Catherine Dower, "Why Catholics Don't Sing," a review of Thomas Day's book in *Sacred Music* 118, no. 4 (Winter 1991), pp. 23-25.

⁷⁵ Charles Morris, "A Tale of Two Dioceses: From Lincoln to Saginaw," *Commonweal* 124, no. 11 (6 June 1997), p. 16.

former even sacrilegious. But in our world in which being a star was not enough, so there were superstars, and that still was not enough, so there are now megastars, Jesus of Nazareth at least deserves some upgrading. If this kind of music is seen as attractive, the latest development in church music would only inspire dismay. It is as if we have learned nothing and have forgotten a great deal. There is a rich treasury of sacred music that includes plain-chant, polyphony, great classical compositions by Bach, Schubert, César Franck, Gabriel Fauré, and Ralph Vaughan Williams, to mention but a few; there is the fund of folk songs adapted for religious purposes, and there are the spirituals. A variety of kinds of music have indeed been reckoned suitable for the liturgy. The point I believe Gilson was trying to make, and that I have been elaborating, is a simple one: sacred music should be different, it should be appropriate, and happily, it should be beautiful, for beauty too serves in a way that ugliness cannot.