

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER FORTY

Élisabeth-Paule Labat, OSB

The Song That I Am

On the Mystery of Music

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An Essay by

Élisabeth-Paule Labat, OSB

Translated by

Erik Varden, OCSO



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*SEDI SAPIENTIÆ
OMNIS HARMONIÆ MAGISTRÆ
VIRGINI MARIÆ
HOC AMANTER DICATUR*

Translator's Preface

IN *CAPRICCIO*, HIS FINAL OPERA, Richard Strauss presented a sophisticated reflection on a problem that has exercised composers since the end of the Renaissance: how can one define the relationship between music and speech, *logos* and *melos*? It was Stefan Zweig who had prompted the composer to address this issue musically, having discovered a precedent in Antonio Salieri's 1786 operetta *Prima la musica, poi le parole*. Being Jewish, Zweig was prohibited from publishing work in post-*Anschluss* Austria. Strauss, however, found a collaborator in Clemens Krauss, who composed the libretto for *Capriccio*, presented as a "conversation piece for music in one act."

In a setting that cleverly mixes allegory and earthy realism, we follow two suitors, the poet Olivier and the composer Flamand, as they woo Madeleine, the lovely Countess, with a joint declaration of love: a poem written by one and set to music by the other. Madeleine is invited to choose him whose statement is truest and most essential. "Music or poetry? Olivier or Flamand?" "She will decide," we are told, and the colorful cast assist Madeleine with more or less helpful advice. "The cry of pain preceded speech!" exclaims Flamand, only to hear Olivier retort, "Yet only speech can give pain *meaning*." The Countess remains torn. She sees that her two suitors complement one another; each on his own seems incomplete. "What one of them did not suspect is brought out by the other," says she, sensing a need for both in order to satisfy the requirements of a "heart yearning for beauty."

The drama of *Capriccio* may strike us as agreeable but useless drawing-room chatter, designed to show off overwrought sensibilities. What is more, if we approach the problem it raises from a Christian, biblical viewpoint, the entire to-do is likely to seem superfluous. For, surely, it is beyond doubt that the *Word* “was in the beginning”? So staunch is our adherence to this Johannine dictum that the rebuke of Edwin Muir’s poem “The Incarnate One” is often pertinent enough:

*The Word made flesh here is made word again
A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook.*

The poet’s words ring out as a challenge and a provocation. And in the logic of the Incarnation, can we in fact be so sure that theological truth unfailingly follows the principle of *Prima le parole*, that is, that words come first? This is the chief question addressed in this book by a most discerning commentator.

Élisabeth-Paule Labat, a Benedictine nun, was a musician of the highest caliber and a woman of enviable intellectual culture. Throughout her life she sought to grasp what might be the *meaning* of music. She formulated her mature reflection in what remains, perhaps, her most original work, the present *Essay on the Mystery of Music*. When it first came out in 1963, the book was received with delight by, among others, Hans Urs von Balthasar, who recognized in it a “Teresian flight” of the spirit. It is, however, a dense and, to be frank, a difficult work. That is why it has seemed desirable to offer a synoptic analysis of its argument and scope by way of introduction. I shall begin with an outline of Labat’s biography, which has a clear bearing on her work. Second, I shall expound the central concern of the *Essay*, namely, the status of music as “language.” Is it realistic to maintain that music “speaks” to us? And if so, to what in us does it speak? These questions do not of themselves presuppose faith, and they are treated at first in absolute, neutral terms. Labat goes on, though, to expound them theologically, and this development will take up the

third part of my introduction. Finally, in a fourth section, I shall consider the *Essay* as evidencing a peculiarly monastic theology; or better, as orchestrating a monastic testimony. My purpose throughout will be to show how the monastic, contemplative life can facilitate a fruitful dialogue between cultures when the insights of a venerable spiritual tradition are brought to bear on phenomena cultivated in contemporary spheres that it would be too reductive to brush aside as simply "secular." Indeed, certain aspects of a self-proclaimed "sacred" culture may turn out to acquire new splendor from encounters with the unexpected.



Paule Labat was born at Tarbes in 1897 into a family of artists and intellectuals. A conventionally religious upbringing left her unequipped to negotiate the pain of life, which soon imposed itself. An encounter with death at the age of five or six left a deep impression, consolidated a little later when a friend of her elder brother's committed suicide. A sense of duty made the little girl pray for him, and this intercession made up the spiritual discipline of her childhood. Meanwhile, she was entering an "irremediable solitude," a growing sense of being "a closed world" from which she yearned to break out. Her intellect demanded to know what underpinned this predicament, and she sought answers in Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Claudel—even Renan. Here and there Paule found intimations of a presence, but one that was vague and featureless. The Bible remained a closed book, even when the discovery of Ruusbroec indicated a bridge to link experience and faith. By contrast, the language of music seemed accessible and real.

After the Great War, Paule moved to Paris and enrolled at the Schola Cantorum. There she displayed exceptional promise. Not only was she a brilliant pianist; she wrote music of beauty and originality. A career was opening, yet Paule remained dissatisfied, haunted by the fragility of life. The

death of a colleague threw her into such despair that her equilibrium was under threat. It was in this frame of mind that she began the study of Gregorian chant and so discovered an aesthetic and spiritual ambiance that allowed her to breathe. She was impressed by the unsentimental character of this music, by the serenity with which it embraces realities that seem incommensurable. The Offertory *Recordare Virgo Mater* first gave her a sense that fractured lives can find wholeness, that even solitude such as hers need not be final.

Still, with regard to organized religion she remained aloof. If she consented, one day, to look up a local priest, it was simply to humor a pious friend, little suspecting that the encounter would prove decisive. An inner darkness lifted. Paule's cool objections to the Gospel melted before an outpouring of light. The presence that had drawn yet eluded her since childhood had acquired a face at last. She later remarked that there had been "no shadow of exaltation or even surprise, only the impression of total liberation, of a simple, limpid entry into a world that was quite new, yet intimately attuned to me."

In 1922 Paule Labat entered the abbey of Saint-Michel de Kergonan, receiving the name Elisabeth. Many years passed without notable incidents. Sr. Élisabeth became an inspired organist. She was awkward at manual work, absent-minded during ceremonies, generous in community, and uncompromising in fidelity. From the mid-1940s, she produced theological work of substance: at first incidental pieces distributed among friends; later, sustained studies in the form of articles and, eventually, books. Sr. Élisabeth suffered a mild stroke in 1968, five years after writing the *Essay on the Mystery of Music*. A second attack, in June 1972, deprived her of mobility. Conversation became difficult, reading impossible. All at once, she became both dependent and isolated. It was a mode of living to which she did not take easily, certain though she was that it corresponded to the essence of her monastic oblation. Shortly before being struck with paralysis, she made this observation in a notebook:

It is a terrible, terrible thing to feel so utterly estranged from one's surroundings, from creation, from oneself; to be without any consolation human or divine, with a profound sense of impurity and total powerlessness. . . . Everything is falling to pieces. I live without knowing how or why, while my human sensibility has grown ten times more acute. It seems that my vocation to solitude has now reached its fullness—and yet I have never loved others more tenderly. You, Lord, are my boundless desert. I join you in your solitude, which you occupy at the heart of this world that, though you love it with infinite love, remains estranged from you.

She entered the heart of this desert as a place of encounter. Asked whether she was bored, she would answer, "No." Asked whether she missed music, she replied with vigor, "Not at all!" This woman of penetrating intelligence and rare supernatural gifts, of whom it was said, only half in jest, that she "inhabited the stratosphere," was reduced to the most embodied level of existence. On 24 July 1975 she slipped away, into the bright dawn of eternity.¹



From this brief evocation of a life, we may retain two salient features: the recurring experience of solitude and a sense that the mystery of our human condition exceeds comprehension, that it must be received blindly, in darkness, as a gift which only retrospect will reveal as an expression of love. A person refined by such insight will become sensitized to instances of *encounter*, and it is as such that music is first presented in Labat's *Essay*.

In 1943, the requisitioning of Kergonan by German troops obliged the nuns to seek refuge in the nearby manor of Coët-Candec. One evening, as Labat, by then forty-six, was strolling

¹The above information is drawn from an obituary notice of Élisabeth-Paule Labat put together by her monastic community, extant in manuscript only. The archivist of Saint-Michel de Kergonan has kindly put it at my disposal.

in the autumnal splendor of countless shades of gold, music suddenly erupted. This is how she later recalled what took place:

I had begun to walk beneath the arcades of that enchanted path when I perceived the distant sound of a violin. The more I advanced, the clearer the melody became, and I recognized Mozart's Sonata in E-Minor. From the bow of a proficient performer, the song soared alone with a resonance that seized me to the depth of my soul. . . . Never shall I forget the brief moments I then experienced. I knew that masterpiece by one of music's purest minds of genius. In my youth I had often accompanied it. . . . Yet never had its simple melody seemed charged with such lyricism, such depths of tenderness. Having finished the first movement of the sonata, the violin started again from the beginning. I was still listening.

What had happened? Labat was at pains to say, but even twenty years on she was unafraid to speak of the experience in strong terms. "This exceptional music had torn me quite away from the created world and from myself." It had communicated "contact with the pure essence of music." Indeed, it had been "a revelation of music," imparting both satisfaction and longing. The "revelation" had engaged her intellect as well as her emotions yet "seemed to reveal more of me than feelings woven on the warp of everyday experience and exposed to the clear light of the interior gaze." It had been a presence, a call, a sign—categories that recur throughout the *Essay* as so many signposts.

Labat's engagement with the status of music as language thus arose from a personal experience of being "addressed" by music. For it is of the essence of a "revelation" not to be cast into a void, but to extend from one subject to another. A revelation is "of something" and "to someone." It is fundamentally communicative. If we apply this paradigm to music, there are certainly cases in which we can posit it as transmitting a definite message. We may think of Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, in which each piece evokes a clearly indicated character or mood.

Likewise, we are on reasonably safe ground when dealing with settings of texts, whether in the *Sanctus* of Bach's B-Minor Mass or in a *mélodie* by Fauré. The composer may render the words more or less in accordance with their author's intention (this is the crux of the quarrel between Olivier and Flamand); yet there can be no doubt about his or her intention to communicate *utterance*. Matters become more complex when we enter the realm of pure composition and are left without any attribution of subject. Certainly, we have Cortot's commentaries on the Chopin Preludes (in the Ninth he recognizes the Victory of Samothrace) or Planté's on the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which charmingly present the B-Flat Minor Fugue as a meeting of drinking companions. Such interpretation can be helpful to performer and listener alike, yet cannot claim the least degree of authority. It is, and must remain, no more than the articulation of suggestive *impressions*.

And music demands more. Labat cites Stravinsky saying, in his *Chronicle of My Life*, that we depreciate music if we love it because we hope to find in it "emotions of joy, pain, or sadness, an evocation of nature, the stuff of dreams." In Stravinsky's vision, music wants to be "a construct of sound, nothing else." Does it then make sense to think of it as a "language"? Does a construct of sound *speak*? Yes, says Labat, but not in ways that accord with commonplace notions of speech. The "language" of music originates in a dimension of consciousness that precedes and transcends articulate reason. We cannot, therefore, expect it to conform to the laws of discourse. Indeed, it is because it draws on *other* registers that it can, without paradox, express the ineffable. Where speech is hampered by its intrinsic linearity, music has means to express opposing themes at the same time and can even unite them in harmonization and counterpoint. Music, then, *is* a language, but a language of signs, not of propositions. Only by approaching it as such shall we find in it a bearer, not just of beauty, but of sense.

These key notions, "sign" and "sense," require some elucidation. Let us begin with "signs." Labat cites Plotinus's vision

of the world as εἰκὼν ἀεὶ εἰκονιζόμενος [*sic*], an “ever-imaged image,” an *icon* that never ceases to be formed. “Here on earth,” she maintains, “everything is a sign.” This is not to say, in a vulgar caricature of Plato, that the things we see and hear and touch are somehow not *real*. What Labat is anxious to show is that what we see and hear and touch can never fathom the whole truth of any given thing, which will always, with regard to its origin, for example, or its association with other things, carry messages that elude us. It is the prerogative of poets and contemplatives to intuit this universe of signs and to sense in it (and beyond it) an invisible reality, as in the burning exclamation of Francis Thompson:

*O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!*

Any phenomenon is potentially a sign. But may we perhaps say that music displays this quality to a supreme degree? Its claim to preeminence resides in its imprecision. “Through combinations of sounds that first address our senses, we touch the heart of music only *beyond* realities susceptible of definition.” At first hearing, a Debussy Prelude, say, may evoke for us a landscape or a buried emotion. Yet, on analysis, associations evaporate. We are left with nothing but an inexorable “construct of sound,” “a few scattered notes cast into the air without leaving more trace than the flight of a bird.” Music compels us, after a first appeal to our senses, to seek a more interior reality, the “fulguration of intelligence” from which it springs and which it has power to communicate. Labat is categorical: Anyone who has not been seized by this light—she calls it a “divine” light—“has not yet gained access to music.” “Revelation” gives way to “possession.” Feeling and understanding are both exceeded. They are portals that may receive music but cannot contain it. That is why genuine music

leaves us at once full and dissatisfied. It points beyond itself to a *greater* beauty. And this, precisely this, is the "sense" it communicates, that "the sign of the beautiful is not the beautiful itself, however much it may be bathed in its glory."



So far we have reached the following position: our experience of being "addressed" by music makes it legitimate to maintain that music "speaks" to us; insofar as it constitutes a "language" it does not, however, convey logical, linear discourse; its power depends on ambiguity and on a capacity for the simultaneous sounding of opposites; this language of harmonized contrast engages both our intellect and our emotions but cannot be fathomed by either; the fact that music inspires at once satisfaction and hunger shows that it points beyond itself to the source from which it springs; in this respect it is a "sign."

How do we absorb this language? How do we hear it? We *hear* much in the way that we *see*. In a vast perspective, we *look at* one point while *seeing* the rest. Likewise, with music, we may *hear* all the voices but *listen to* one. Labat spells out the implications of this fact by citing a sharp observation made by Georges Duhamel:

What reaches the deepest, most intimate parts of our being is probably not what lies along the straight line of our attentive understanding, constituting the . . . principal voice. The most delicate phenomena, the ones that defy definition, or better, the *ineffable* phenomena, occur on the margins, in the region of twilight. What we listen to may be sublime, but remains for the most part natural. What we hear, on the other hand, is easily magical and supernatural. The great mystery of music is accomplished outside the scope of direct attention, at the limit of consciousness.

The word "supernatural," aligned to "magical," is here intended literally. It indicates "unconscious" or "beyond the reach

of attention." Labat, however, picks it up and develops it theologically. In a passage that makes us think of Pico della Mirandola's vision of man as *contemplator universi* ["beholder of the universe"], she envisages him as *universi auscultator* ["listener of the universe"]. "Man is both spiritual and carnal, both rich and poor, enclosed in himself yet supremely receptive. The gathered voices of the whole earth rise toward him: he listens to them, understands them, and makes them his own." This is the call of music, "to bring together the totality of voices in the universe and constitute a cosmic act of praise." "Music makes us cantors on behalf of all creation." We occasionally wake up to catch a fragment of this doxology. Such moments confirm our intuition that all things aspire to ultimate unity in a beauty that is perfect and personal. That is when music fills us at once with joy and sadness. For as soon as we try to seize hold of what we hear, we are left bereft.

Our present consciousness is not equipped to contain the message borne to us. It perceives it at its limit as a tantalizing possibility, as a call from without that corresponds, remarkably, to waves of yearning surging from within. Appositely, Labat cites Hildegard of Bingen: *Sed et anima hominis symphoniam in se habet et symphonizans est, unde etiam multotiens plancus educit, cum symphoniam audit, quoniam de patria in exilium se missam meminit.*² Such tears, provoked by music that is truly a "sign," are not "the effect of our exasperated sensibility." They are "tears of wonder, born . . . of a recollection that borders on adoration." In a flash of recognition, they show us where we come from and where we are going. They indicate a fugitive homecoming that inspires a more intense longing for home.

²"Even the human soul carries symphony and is of its nature symphonic. That is why it is often moved to tears on hearing the symphony [of music]. It suddenly remembers that it has been sent forth from its homeland into exile."

In this way the sign-value of music permits it to function as an intermediary. We find it voicing sensibly the "symphony" we carry within. When this occurs, music gives us a sense of belonging. Yet our initial shock of delight turns to grief when we find that the security is not ours to keep. Time and again, Labat speaks of music as a "foretaste" and "promise." A promise of what? Of the *patria*, to speak with Hildegard, or, more specifically, in the words of Augustine, of the "house of God." In his *Enarratio* on the Forty-First Psalm, that great lover of music speaks of the angelic hymn rising everlastingly before the face of God and overspilling into the perplexed muteness of creation, when of a sudden "a mysteriously sweet and musical echo resounds in the soul." "Tickled with delight," says Augustine, the ear thus gifted is drawn irresistibly toward the fullness of sound, like the deer to the spring of water.

The fact that music is a feature of eternity is a *datum* of divine revelation. We have it on biblical authority that angels sing, yet we are unable to imagine *how*. As Labat observes, "Their song is of pure intelligence and could only, it would seem, become sensible through an intervention by the angels themselves, in a gesture of condescension to our carnal condition." Even so, their song would be perceived only by the most interior senses of the soul, duly refined by grace. In his brief, intriguing treatise on *The Song of Angels*, Walter Hilton gives some idea of how such hearing comes about. Labat cites him:

This song cannot be described by any bodily likeness, for it is spiritual, and above all imagination and reason. It may be felt and perceived in a soul, but it may not be showed. Nevertheless, I will speak of it to you as I think. When a soul is purified by the love of God, illumined by wisdom, and stabilized by the might of God, then the eye of the soul is opened to see spiritual things, as virtues and angels and holy souls, and heavenly things. Then, because it is clean, the soul is able to feel the touching, the speaking of good angels. This touching and speaking is spiritual and not bodily. For when the soul is lifted and ravished out of sensuality, and out of mind

of any earthly things, then in great fervor of love and light (if our Lord deigns) the soul may hear and feel heavenly sound, made by the presence of angels in loving God.

To such testimonies, persons vowed to monastic life should pay close attention. For monks, says Labat, are especially conditioned to hear such singing. It represents the essence of their calling, which an ancient tradition rightly defines as “angelic.” “Without wanting to become an angel himself, [the monk] understands that he must become as like one as possible, to share not only in the angels’ song, but in everything that constitutes their life and calling.” The self-transcendence to which he is committed reaches beyond the moral order:

Its goal is to bring man to praise God, in song and silence, by a cry welling up from the innermost core of his being, giving voice to his being. Being thus made a “praise of glory,” he will, in the harmony of his soul, himself become pure music. He will gain access to the mystery of music, though without ever fathoming it. . . . As man approaches the source of music, not as a distant, indefinable *abstractum* but as Someone—a someone who is All—he realizes that, even here on earth, all is music and all tends towards the music of eternity.

It is insofar as we *become* music that we shall penetrate its mystery, discovering that what it signifies is not a *Quid* [“what”] but a *Quis* [“who”]. This *essential* music is perfectly compatible with the “concert of silence” spoken of by the mystics. For the present, however, while still *in via*, we must content ourselves with scattered fragments of that eternal symphony as it reaches us through the inspired strains of earthly music. With Baudelaire, we must be resigned to “our inability to grasp *now*, wholly here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys of which *through* the poem, *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses.” It is in this sense that Labat, in a tentative

conclusion, speaks of music as a language signifying "another language," which is itself a sign. If we truly love music, we know that we shall one day have to leave it behind, to hear and sing in a new way, as of yet inconceivable. The mystery of music dimly sensed in the present "region of twilight" will sooner or later require *us* as its instruments, using our "soul's movements" to make "a jubilant sound." The language of that *new* song will no longer convey its message "at the limit of consciousness." Once we have made it our own, we shall perceive beauty with the concentrated force of all our faculties, in an encounter face-to-face that is no longer a promise but an eternal possession.



The *Essay on the Mystery of Music* was written by a woman with forty years' experience of monastic living. It explicitly states that it is not the work "of a philosopher or theologian, even if its author is not altogether ignorant of philosophy and theology." It is, we are told, a "testimony" inspired by other testimonies. And so it belongs in a genre that, for not being the exclusive property of monks, has always been congenial to them. In this final section, I shall indicate two characteristics of this peculiarly monastic approach to theology.

A first salient feature is the *Essay's* autobiographical nature. It records an effort stretching over two decades to make sense of a precise moment in the author's life. Yet it does not thereby become a mere chronicle. Apart from the initial account of the encounter with the Mozart Sonata, we are told nothing at all about the circumstances of Labat's life. The experience on which the *Essay* builds is altogether interior and developed with such discretion that we must strain our ears to follow it. When music ceased that evening, nightfall had covered creation with a shroud, leaving the solitary listener bereft, yet radiant with joy. She carried this paradox with her into the dusk, where, we might say, she stayed. The motif of the night

recurs throughout the book, where Sanjuanist allusions sometimes make of it a technical term, as when we hear of the "succession of nights" by which receptive souls are conditioned for a share in divine light; or of the "purifying night" that is the mystic's searing pain. At other times the conventional idiom is appropriated, almost subverted, with such force that a personal urgency is evident. The language of Scripture merges with that of Rilke and other "poets of the night" to convey the longing of the Bride who seems to be abandoned in darkness yet knows that the Bridegroom is there, invisibly present beyond the lattice wall, his hair moist with nocturnal dew. Once his presence is perceived, the night is a "night without darkness"—yet night all the same.

We sense something of the stakes involved in a solitary, familiar reference to "*my night*," pierced once as by lightning in a shock of beauty through music. This is appropriate enough, for music is "a call in the night." Only the night can teach us to hear it as we ought. Such coded references tell us more about the drama of the author's life, I think, than any list of biographical data, though what we know about her life confirms the code. What might we learn from this? Above all, the reverence due to any shattering experience of beauty. The "revelation" of music through Mozart provided Élisabeth-Paule Labat with a hermeneutical key to her life and vocation. She applied it perseveringly to the culture that had formed her mind, excited to find corresponding values in sources that might appear disconnected: the theological argument of the *Essay* owes no less to César Franck and Paul Claudel than to Augustine and Gregory Nazianzen. The treatment that results is eclectic and makes few concessions to the reader. But it is indubitably a "witness," exercising great fascination and possessing, in the Gospel sense, "authority."

The second feature I should like to stress is the eschatological character of this monastic theology. I do not mean by this that it reeks of sulphur but that it is resolutely oriented toward the

finality of things. The incident with the E-Minor Sonata is important not for its impact there and then but because it remains a valid pointer toward a greater and final reality. "Today I consider it, that music at once intoxicating and chaste, in the light of the divine realities whose obscure foretaste it was." These realities are by definition beyond our reach, inviting us always to go *further*. We have recognized the autobiographical imprint of the *Essay* in the image of the night. Its eschatological thrust might reasonably be associated with characteristic reference to the sea. From the outset, Labat confesses that she loves the mystery represented by music "too much to forfeit getting out of my depth in the great sea of the unknown into which it plunges me, in order to remain there always, without ever finding my way back to the shore." Music is apt to evoke this mystery because it rests in an immensity of silence that "envelops and suffuses it like a great sea." The beauty we find in it refreshes us and sets us free "like a great gust of sea-breeze instantly sweeping away our earthbound attachments." Yet the full force of these realities will appear only in the life to come, when we shall respond to it in the angelic language of which music is, here below, a sign. It is a language of silence, but a "*positive* silence, a silence which indicates not absence but presence." At that point we shall no longer need signs, being "bathed in the sea of reality, . . . in the presence of him who *is*." The tensions that constitute earthly music will be resolved in a new song in which

serene transparency and the balance of repose will be at one with the vital, vehement energy rushing forth from the depths of divinized being. . . . The symphony of the saints will be marked by neither tragedy nor pathos. Yet all that is truly great in tragedy and pathos will resonate within it, bathed in perfect peace, like an immense surge that rises from the bottom of the sea yet spreads upon the surface in gentle ripples. This, I think, is what the music of eternity will be like.

The promise heralded by Mozart will be redeemed in that concert, under the direction of Christ, “the great harmonizer of the visible and invisible cosmos.” We shall no longer experience music. Music will be what we are.



As a final point, it may be useful to recall that *The Essay on the Mystery of Music* was written in 1963, while the Second Vatican Council was in session. The “inculturation” of monasticism was a priority on many a monk’s and nun’s agenda. Labat’s book stands for a complementary, not contradictory, trend. We might call it a “monastification” of culture. With intelligence and reverence, she approaches the mystery of music in the light of the monastic mystery, assimilating it within the parameters of a rich spiritual tradition. This procedure contributes to the book’s status as a “testimony.” Yet it is also an “essay,” and we are entitled to interpret this term quite as Montaigne intended it. What Labat holds out to us is a sketch, a work-in-progress, an offering that invites response. This dialogic, nondogmatic trait is an attractive aspect of monastic theology, which enjoys a more flexible range than that imposed by the austere requirements of the schools. Precisely because it *is* free and off-beat, it can come up with insights that are fresh and illuminating.

In the grandiose monologue that brings *Capriccio* to a close, the Countess expresses her inability to perform the task set before her. Word and music, Olivier and Flamand, appear so intrinsically connected that the composer’s plea—*Prima la musica!*—fills her with consternation. “Can there,” she asks, “be a conclusion [to this problem] that is not trivial?” Élisabeth-Paule Labat shows us that, yes, there can. She presents *one* answer, not *the* answer, but it is one that deserves (and repays) consideration. The category of “sign” allows her to go beyond juxtaposition, to *articulate* the mystery of music in a way that is both coherent and profound. And it could be that the quan-

dary of Madeleine ultimately rests on insufficiently defined terms. As Cardinal Newman reflected as an old man, in a letter cited in the *Essay*: “Perhaps thought *is* music?” And if so, would it be so far-fetched to think that the *Logos* of “the beginning” is present and manifest also as *Melos*? After the death of Élisabeth-Paule Labat, Louis Bouyer wrote of her as follows in his preface to her posthumous volume *Présences de Dieu*:

The harmony of this monastic soul, so profoundly delicate and sensitive, overcame the dissonances of this present life by assuming them, presaging the peace of eternity—the faithful echo of a Presence sensed and acknowledged that claimed her entirely for itself.³

It is striking that Bouyer, a man of such profound intuition, should evoke Labat by means of a musical metaphor. The “essential music” to which she aspired had taken possession of her even before she plunged fully into the “sea of God.” It had resounded in the “night” where, if we will, we can hear it still.

Erik Varden, OCSO
Feast of the Transfiguration, 2012⁴

³ *Présences de Dieu*, par une moniale bénédictine, préface de Louis Bouyer (Paris: Fayard, 1979), 2.

⁴ This preface is an adaptation of a paper printed in *Monasticism between Culture and Cultures*, ed. Philippe Nouzille and Michaela Pfeifer, *Studia Anselmiana* 159 (Rome: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 2013). The material is reproduced here by kind permission of the editors. —Ed.

Introduction

IT SEEMS OPPORTUNE to introduce this *Essay* by revealing not only the goal it pursues but the circumstances that caused it to be written. Its point of departure was an apparently fortuitous adventure that occurred during the war of 1940–45 when, fleeing the German occupation, I found refuge in a vast old château near Vannes, in that wonderfully undulating forested region defined from afar by the bell tower of Grandchamp.

One fine October evening, I was, as so often, making my way through a rickety side gate toward the rampart, accessible by a small stairway. To take in the narrow circular avenue that wound its way through a double row of beeches and chestnuts passing from every shade of brilliant to pale gold was, as every day, a wonder. I had begun to walk beneath the arcades of that enchanted path when I perceived the distant sound of a violin. The more I advanced, the clearer the melody became, and I soon recognized Mozart's Sonata in E-Minor. From the bow of a proficient performer, the song soared alone with a resonance that seized me to the depth of my soul. I understood that it issued from a massive watchtower rising before me, its enormous base rooted in the moat. Never shall I forget the brief moments I then experienced. I knew that masterpiece by one of music's purest minds of genius. In my youth I had often accompanied the dear sonata, which one never tires of playing and which, for me, will always carry memories of home. Yet never had its simple melody seemed charged with such lyricism, such depths of tenderness. Having finished the first movement of the sonata, the violin started again from the beginning. I was still listening.

It was already late, and at that hour when, as if with a pre-sentiment of approaching nightfall, nature appears to recollect itself and become immaterial, this exceptional music had torn me quite away from the created world and from myself. When the voice of the violin fell silent and the spell was broken, it seemed that those few minutes—more than hours (in themselves unforgettable) spent listening to performances by the very greatest musicians—had been to me, through contact with the pure essence of Beauty, a revelation of music.

What was the mystery which this enchanting music conveyed? What secret message disclosed itself through a few scattered notes cast into the air without leaving more trace than the flight of a bird? Was it the loving heart of Mozart that, through the chasm separating life from death, spoke to my heart, thus surviving itself here below? Or was it the echo of a paradise lost of happiness and innocence that reached me, the unspeakable language of something divine akin to my innermost being, permeating me with an obscure feeling at once of satisfaction and longing? How to account for a joy that, for being pure, was heartrending, for an emotion felt beyond the clear consciousness of self, which nonetheless seemed to reveal more of me than feelings woven on the warp of everyday experience and exposed to the clear light of the interior gaze?

These questions were pressing on my mind as I walked back, wrapped in the peace of that lovely autumn evening. And I remembered a phrase read long ago: "Music is not the sum of written scores. It is something eternal to which they allude." I conceived then the desire to make some humble effort to understand the mystery of music, a mystery all the more arresting for touching other facets of the unknown on which it may, perhaps, shed light: the unknown of our soul, which is its subject; and the unknown of the invisible world where our deepest being is rooted, concealed from us here below by the veil of created things. Any design to scrutinize this mystery to the point of dispelling mystery would, of

course, be absurd, a rash and foolish enterprise. Would we not, to the extent that we entered its secrets, be bound to see it elude our grasp and retreat to an inaccessible Beyond? Yet I love the mystery too much to forfeit getting out of my depth in the great sea of the unknown into which it plunges me, in order to remain there always, without ever finding my way back to the shore. And may we not hope that a clearer, deeper awareness of the implications of the mystery of music will attune our soul to realities that, though exceeding our capacity, touch what is highest and most sacred in the life of the mind?

The present essay does not claim to be the work of a great thinker, of a philosopher or theologian, even if its author is not altogether ignorant of philosophy and theology. It is merely a personal testimony. As such, it would be worthless were it not based on other testimonies of greater authority, from that of Saint Augustine to those of Marcel de Corte, Erik Peterson, and Jacques Maritain; were it not, further, calling on eternal truths that are simple, profound, and too often neglected. It is also a testimony of love. I am conscious of all that I owe to this sovereign music, which, like the air I breathe, has surrounded and penetrated my entire life with its mysterious influence. From childhood music has, more than the wonderful world found in books, been for me supremely the land of poetry and dreams—dreams at one with a reality that, though hidden, is the greatest there is.

During long hours spent at the piano rehearsing, music held me captive. It mattered little whether it was sad or joyful, spirited or calm. I suspected that the gamut of feelings vibrating within it, springing from a range of souls, from many kinds of genius, expressed only superficial modalities, swirls of an ocean of life and love whose depths I wished to plumb in order to immerse myself in them. The universe of Bach was closed to me still. My favorite composer was Beethoven. I tirelessly reread his *Life*, as well as Romain Rolland's study of him. My ambition was one day to play all the sonatas. I dreamt naïvely of being the woman who, by understanding

this tormented genius, might by a love stronger than fate have brought a light of joy and supernatural grace into the life of a titan distressed.

After Beethoven, I came to love Schumann best. It was at the time when Ravel and Debussy formed the avant-garde and when the dissonances of Claude de France struck me as deliciously bold. Dear music! How it consoled me in suffering! What a friend it was in solitude! With its capacity for interiorization, unmatched in the created order, it was, I think, thanks to it, to its slow, sweet penetration, that a distaste was born in me for all that is superficial, vulgar, and false, accompanied by the desire for a spiritual paradise of an ideal presence, before which every earthly presence would wear away. Yes, music was truly, before the dawn of grace, the distant but persuasive voice of a supernatural something that points the way without revealing, portends without yielding its secret, leaves one saturated with happiness yet unfulfilled. Today I consider it, that music at once intoxicating and chaste, in the light of divine realities whose obscure foretaste it was. Even as the world of grace lets us understand the world of nature, of which it is the crown, allowing us to discover nature's splendors, it is with the limitless, transparent perspectives of the kingdom of God, of God living among us and within us, that I glimpse the meaning of art and the grandeur of its message.

To this observation, however, something else must be added. When it does not betray its mission, music leads us, by a grace preceding grace, beyond ourselves to the land of oneness and life only at the price of separation and death. Music is indeed remembrance of an earthly paradise, for which it can inspire only useless nostalgia. But its real purpose is to draw us toward a heavenly paradise that can be entered solely at the cost of boundless detachment. That is why its call at once represents soothing and disquiet, joy and pain. When received by an attentive, receptive soul, its message inaugurates a new life of renunciation. The true design of this sov-

ereign music is to tear us away from the world while leading us—at the heart of the world, by it and through it—toward him by whom the world subsists, who lives infinitely beyond the world yet is constantly present to it: toward God. Let us not forget that we inhabit a universe of sin, that God, infinite Holiness, Beauty, Goodness, and Light can only be reached by those who pass through the great waters of death like Christ, our Pasch. We are part of his body as much in its humiliation as in its glory, as much in its suffering as in its joy.

My testimony is also a testimony of love. I have written and published it on the advice of friends because I thought it might be of use to certain souls. It is indeed the testimony of one heart speaking to another: *Cor ad cor loquitur*. Certainly, it makes no claim to perfection. May its very shortcomings and the criticism it will raise incite minds clearer by their vigor and learning to complete it, to sharpen its focus for the good of souls and the glory of God, who is Love, the Love that created music and finds in music possibly its purest means of self-expression.

A certain number of repetitions mark this work. For these I apologize. I have let them remain in the conviction that some, if not all, may serve a purpose. Certain truths need, by virtue of their importance, to be called to mind again and again; others, which to begin with are only indicated, are set in deeper relief and acquire greater significance as our perspective either broadens or narrows. They are intrinsic to the development of a line of thought that is ceaselessly seeking itself. The present essay is the record of such seeking. That is how it is offered, in testimony, to the public.

On Music Considered as Language

MUSIC CONSTITUTES A UNIQUE, IRREPLACEABLE LANGUAGE. In Malègue's novel *Augustin*, one character remarks after hearing a masterpiece: "How one would love great musicians to speak of the feelings they carry in their heart!" His interlocutor responds: "If they could, there would be no need for music." There are in man, in the secret of his soul as well as in his relations with both the invisible and the visible world, depths and nuances that words are powerless to express. It is the mission of music to convey them. Like the spoken word, music draws from the wellspring of silence. But the silence whence it springs and toward which it leads us never leaves it; it envelops and suffuses it like a great sea. Thus music is the homeland of mystery; the echo of an unknown world beyond clear ideas and defined feelings.

It is likewise a unique, irreplaceable language by virtue of the effectiveness and suddenness with which it seizes, charms, and arrests us. It seems to bring about a real dispossession of self by stealing into the innermost recesses of our soul. It wants us to collude with it, yet does not lord it over us in the manner of a despot. If this sovereign music invades us, gently and forcefully, it is to take us not only beyond ourselves but beyond *itself*.

I propose that we begin our enquiry by considering music as a language communicating an ineffable spiritual content. From there we shall proceed to the threshold of what Saint Augustine, at the end of his treatise *De musica*, calls the *secretissima* ["most hidden recesses"], the *penetralia* ["innermost

shrine”), the *cubilia* [“marriage bed”] of music, to the most hidden sanctuary where dwells the sovereign Unity, the *unum principale*, from which every number, and therefore all music, pours forth. For as the great Doctor declares, numbers indisputably reign over music. Sound is, so to speak, the light of these numbers that, without it, would remain silent.¹

¹*In hoc igitur quarto gradu sive in rhythmis sive in ipsa modulatione intellegebat regnare numeros totumque perficere (De ordine II.14). Cf. De musica VI.13: . . . in ipso sono qui quasi lux est talium numerorum cui sic est contrarium silentium ut colores tenebrae.* It should be pointed out that the word *musica* meant something other to Saint Augustine than it does to us. He considered *musica*, which he defines, probably following Varro, as *scientia bene modulandi*, as a technique based on notions of number rather than as an art in the modern sense of that word, that is, as a sensible expression of the beautiful. Augustine’s conception of *musica* was primarily rational, and when he speaks about it in order to integrate it into his vision of culture, it is as a philosopher of the Neo-Platonic cast (cf. H.-I. Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* [Paris: Bocard, 1938], 197–204). This is why an uninformed reader launching into the treatise *De musica*, even the sixth book, which is the most accessible and most profound, suspects a kind of misunderstanding between himself and the author. Everything becomes clear once he grasps the difference between Augustine’s notion of music and that of a modern musician, for whom music is a matter of aesthetics, not of reason or morals. We should further bear in mind the author’s pedagogical aim, which is clearly stated in the first chapter of the same book. Then, if we attentively follow Augustine as he differentiates between different kinds of “numbers,” passing from sensible numbers to spiritual and eternal numbers; if we see a general notion of “number” implying relation, harmony, order, and tendency to unity expand and free itself from anything created to the point of reaching the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, the perfect Unity from which, in the world of spirits as in our own world of bodies, every harmony, every relation, every order, every tendency to unity springs (*De musica* VI.17), we glimpse horizons that are surely far from alien to our aesthetic notion of music, provided we pass beyond the signs to the reality they signify, discovering the deepest meaning of music’s language and mission. Finally, we may remark that Augustine’s fine sensibility did not escape the attraction of music, as many passages in his works (including *Confessions* X.33) testify. The word *cantare* often recurs, notably in the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*. For Augustine, it aptly

Without pretending to trace here the origin and development of music, we can point to its first manifestations and ask how, as a primordial element of sound, it came to claim man's attention. Would we not say that it was first discerned in the varied inflexions of human language no less than in the innumerable sounds of the natural world? Words are made to express ideas. That is why man alone among the beings that inhabit the earth has the privilege of possessing them. Created in the image of the likeness of God, he takes after his Creator (who has but one Word, substantial and perfect, by which he speaks himself entirely) in communicating verbally. On account of his imperfection, however, for he is always in a state of becoming, it is not with a single word that he translates the world of his thoughts and feelings, but by a succession of multiple and ephemeral words. If words are made to express ideas, the human voice that utters them has the power, in itself magnificent, to invest them with fervor and conviction. By its many nuances it reveals the movements of our heart and sensibility, the promptings of our will in dialogue with clear reason. Is there not a potential music in the dynamic and tonal variations impressed on simple speech by the emotion that carries it, whether discreetly or with vehemence?

Cicero observed that there is in speech a *cantus obscurior*, which is to say that words contain the seed of a melody that is capable, through art, of expansion and freedom. Man is instinctively drawn by beauty. He is pressed by the need to exteriorize as adequately as possible that which lives in him. He is attentive to the noblest ways in which beauty beckons him. It is not strange, therefore, that he should soon draw a distinction between sound itself and the ideas expressed by sound.²

renders a soul's irresistible need to pour forth in praise all the feelings to which deeply experienced religious emotion may give rise: enthusiasm, desire, regret, discreet or overflowing joy, etc.

²The remark comes from Augustine's treatise *De ordine*, dating from before his baptism, where he attempts to account for the genesis of

At the same time, man perceived sound throughout the humblest and most familiar voices of nature, in the solemn, persistent chant of the sea and in the twittering of birds rejoicing to be alive, the nightingale's airs, or the song of "crickets beginning, with little chirps, to burn" (Jules Laforgue). Although these voices are evocative for any soul with a sense of poetry, they are not properly speaking music, for music arises in the exteriorization through sound of the secret vibrations of a soul. Yet it is through the datum of sound that man, equipped not only to listen but to discern—to distinguish intervals, rhythms, harmonies, and pitch—lays hold of these elements, combines them, and is able to make from them a language suffused with his own mind and heart.

Let us consider the effect of sound on our capacity for attention. Any sound, especially one endowed with beauty, will keep us listening, as if to call forth in us an interior silence to echo itself, beyond what is sensible. Think of a bell sounding in the peace and harmony of the evening. Does it not invite recollection? It has been correctly pointed out, too, that the phenomenon of sound as simple interjection constitutes the most immediate expressions of the soul, the voicing, we might say, of its Ohs! and Ahs! It presents us with an objectification of the soul by and for itself, an expression that occupies the middle ground between unconscious concentration and the return to self by means of deliberate interior thought.

If this can pertain to isolated sounds, how much more will a succession of sounds, following the creative movement of the mind and the laws of melody and rhythm, be endowed with the twofold potential to express and interiorize the soul, still in the undefined domain of a zone that sits deeper than that in which clear ideas are elaborated? The spoken word itself, when it is warm, harmonious, and supple, possesses

music: *At ista [ratio] potentissima discernendi cito vidit, quid inter sonum et id, cuius signum esset, distaret* (II.14).

penetrating power. Think, then, what can be wrought when melody raises the word into flight by espousing it, conforming the word to its own color, to its movement, ardor, and peace? Melody surrounds the word with an atmosphere of soul that is intimate and communicative, from which one heart of flesh gains the power to touch another, to make it vibrate in union with itself. "Song," said Thomas Carlyle, is "the Heroic of speech."³ It is the aspect of speech that not only touches and convinces but ennobles, exalts, and empowers.

By way of example we may (without yet considering the admirable Gregorian cantilena, which possesses a special charism as much through its sacred character as through its mission) recall certain popular songs that are wonderfully expressive in their simplicity: that of the Volga boatmen, for example, with its nostalgic, almost savage beauty, or any number of Celtic or Breton chants imbued with exquisite tenderness and otherworldly melancholy.

At this point, we cannot fail to mention the reciprocal role of the two elements of music: melody and rhythm. It would be futile to enter upon technical considerations. But we can go a step further. Concerning rhythm we should note, first of all, that man finds it and submits to it everywhere, both within himself and around him. Only the force of habit can blunt our awareness of the universal force of rhythm regulating our physical being and the exercise of our faculties, even as it regulates every other circulating and evolving thing, everything that endures, from the alternation of hours, days, and seasons to the bowing down of a branch bent by the weight of its fruit or by a gust of wind. Rhythm is imprinted on our body in our heartbeats, in the alternating inhalation and exhalation of our breathing, and in our movement when we walk or otherwise

³ *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* [a reprint of the "Sterling Edition" of Carlyle's Complete Works, in twenty volumes] (Middlesex: Echo, 2007), 58.

use our members. What we have here is rhythm in time. But there is also a spatial rhythm that informs the structure of our bodies.⁴ Everything on earth is subject to the power of rhythm, even animals. The Bedouin journeying through the desert marks the camels' slow pacing with his singsong.

Finally, in a hidden but nonetheless real way, rhythm presides over the vital manifestations of the human soul. Saint Augustine has magisterially shown how there is a spiritual rhythm submitted to the laws of numbers, even if these numbers escape the control of our senses. This is important. The soul possesses a hidden rhythm of its own at its most secret depths, where it is unknown to itself and seen only by God and his angels. There it lives in communion with the invisible world, not through any sensible contact but in the highest point of its being, in total dependence on its Creator. There are other rhythms whose progress and cadences the soul can more or less perceive in that region where its thoughts and acts of will are worked out, where it is subject to reactions of desire or aversion prompted by its relations to people and things, where it expresses itself successively as tension and possession, energy and rest. If the soul did not have within itself an intelligible rhythm derived from the rhythm of uncreated Wisdom "reaching forcefully from end to end and gently arranging all things" (Wis 8:1), it could not appreciate or judge the rhythms it perceives outside itself. Saint Augustine teaches us that these mysterious numbers of "discernment" have greater dignity than sensible numbers. Thus the soul's intelligible rhythm exercises its sovereignty over poetic or musical rhythms. This is not the place to insist further on that immanent rhythm, which, by informing a melody that is likewise intelligible, creates an ontological, existential music whose mysterious, silent resonances any true music is called to awaken.

⁴More precisely, corporeal movements develop rhythmically in both time *and* space. Dance provides a striking illustration.

Rhythm, then, constitutes the masculine, active element in music: an “ordering of movement” in Plato’s definition; “proportion in time” according to Vincent d’Indy. It exercises its influence on a melody that represents the feminine, passive element. When melody appears with its all-embracing mobility and graceful inflexions, with the pondered or spontaneous variety of movements gently led or broken, with the charm of its timbre, rhythm is there to embrace it. Whether its touch is domineering or delicate, it is always sure and precise, manfully ordering and coordinating sounds. It infuses them with life through working their synthesis. The melody’s curves may be capricious or austere; rhythm follows, maintaining balance and discipline while bestowing definite form and beauty. Without rhythm, melody would be but a dust of sounds. The melody in its turn flows out upon rhythm and frees it from possessiveness, raising it above the earth. At one moment, it may give rhythm wings, granting it access to regions of fantasy, of the ideal; at another it brings it to depths more akin to silence; it incites energy, then calm; and sometimes it hardly stirs at all, asking rhythm to keep it in a sphere of rest, discretion, and recollection where it is pleased to dwell.

Thus the opposition and interpenetration of the masculine and feminine elements—one of the great laws of life that ensures its flourishing, completion, fecundity, and joy—is imprinted on the heart of music. It presides over that which is most essential, most at one. Surely we can locate the foundation of all music in this encounter of an element of proportion and balance with an element of spontaneity and grace: a first manifestation of the alliance between order and love that characterizes all true art, any truly great work of poetry or music.⁵

⁵ The law of union between the masculine and feminine elements in music can be recognized in certain forms of composition, notably in the first sonata movement, where two themes of different character engage. Once presented, they enter into a kind of battle whose character is sometimes grandiose and charged with pathos, leading to the victory of the

Combining their resources at the service of man's creative faculties, rhythm and melody prepare the emancipation of music. For why should it remain bound to words? Of course, it will always be able to bestow on words an unsuspected impetus, to become one with them in the composition of great works of art. But music is awakening to its autonomy. It knows that it constitutes, by itself, a language that transcends all others.

Even when reduced to a single voice, music possesses remarkable means of expression. We may think of any number of solo pieces for the violin or flute, or of Henri de Régner's humble reed pipe, able to express the soul of all nature's harmonies:

*A single reed sufficed for me
To make the tall grass sing,
Likewise the field
And the gentle willows.
A single reed sufficed for me
To make the forest sing.*

In a higher sphere, let us think of some ornate Gregorian piece where the cantilena suddenly seems to leave behind the text that first inspired it in order to become pure vocalization. Such remarkable purity in adoration, supplication, and praise is charged with a spiritual density that can hardly be surpassed. We find it in many an Alleluia jubilus overflowing

masculine motive, enriched by the meeting with its counterpart. By way of example, who has not been struck by the gripping opposition between the opening beats, as implacable as fate, of the initial theme of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and the profound acquiescence, gentleness, and surrender of the succeeding feminine theme? The drama played out in that immortal monument is based on the contrast. It is a drama profoundly human, yet touched by eternal resonance. One thinks likewise of the vicissitudes, successively insinuating or passionate, discreet or majestic, that define César Franck's Third Organ Chorale, which ends with the triumphant affirmation of the initial theme.

with grave or exultant happiness, in Offertories such as the admirable *Recordare*, the *Stetit Angelus* of the Mass of Saint Michael the Archangel, or the great *Iubilate* of the Second Sunday after Epiphany, indeed in all pieces where at a given moment, delivered to its own inspiration, music takes wing and soars.

Music is not content, however, with this emancipation from the word, and here a new stage opens with vast implications. To express its message to the full, music needs not only a single voice but a combination of voices that, either moving together like a marching column of troops (harmony) or simultaneously pursuing their progress with a mixture of solidarity and independence (counterpoint), effect the full unravelling of its riches, whether in a simple duet or in a full symphony of combined choir and orchestra. The development takes place because the soul is simultaneously one and complex. While it remains ever the same in its deepest identity, what a multitude of voices vibrate and sing within it! Man is both spiritual and carnal, both rich and poor, enclosed in himself yet supremely receptive. The gathered voices of the whole earth rise toward him: he listens to them, understands them, and makes them his own. His innermost core also resounds with the voices of heaven and the invisible world. These he attunes to the voices that sing within him and about him. All that sounds in the depth of his mind, in the less hidden sphere of his sensibility, all that echoes within him, must be set in motion through the horizontal and vertical simultaneity of voices. Often, a symphony's most moving beauty is found in the region of mystery where the gentlest voices let themselves be heard, accompanying the sovereign melody. Georges Duhamel accounts for this phenomenon in a few striking lines. Even as in a vast perspective, he says, we look at only one point while seeing the rest, so, when exposed to polyphony, "we hear all the voices but listen to one."

There follows a remark that merits attention:

What reaches the deepest, most intimate parts of our being is probably not what lies along the straight line of our attentive understanding, constituting the essential message or, in music (as students would say), the principal voice. The most delicate phenomena, the ones that defy definition, or better, the *ineffable* phenomena, occur on the margins, in the region of twilight. What we listen to might be sublime, but remains for the most part natural. What we hear, on the other hand, is easily magical and supernatural. The great mystery of music is accomplished outside the scope of direct attention, at the limits of consciousness.⁶

We now have before us the language of music equipped with all its elements. The music of this earth has become, as it were, the prelude, the foretaste of the mighty voice of great waters that flows into the canticles of the Apocalypse because the very highest and the very deepest voices are enabled to melt into a splendor of unity; because this music will give rise to cathedrals of sound like the major works of Bach or Beethoven's Ninth; because vast orchestras will at once combine and contrast the timbre of their instruments as if to bring together all the voices of the universe in a cosmic act of praise.

Because music is essentially a living art, it will always move toward new forms and new means of expression based on the foundations of melody, rhythm, and harmony. In the measure that mankind matures and becomes more conscious of itself, of the poignant, complex character of its destiny, it seeks in music—of all the arts most fit to convey its defining aspirations—ever new resources to express human life, love, and desire. Thus, from the primitive yet perfect art of the Gregorian cantilena and the early motets to the art of Honegger and Stravinsky, music will always be looking for something more supple and subtle in its rhythm, for new colors of modality, for more suggestive voicing, for harmonies that are richer, bolder, more immaterial.

⁶*La Musique consolatrice* (Monaco: Le Rocher, 1989), 153, 155.

It is time to make a preliminary but essential observation. The artist's genius creates brilliance of form through rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic combinations of sounds. These combinations are of their nature indefinite. We thus find that the sounds are essentially signs of another language in whose regard we shall see, later, that it is itself a sign.



Let us stay with the question of "signs." It will open perspectives that we shall only have to follow step by step in order to gain access to the mystery that is signified. What do I mean by speaking of sounds as signs? Only this: that sounds, like the lines and colors of a picture or the words of a poem, should not merely be considered in themselves, as so many *things*, but also as means destined to reveal something else, something that, as signs, they spontaneously represent.

When sonorous signs first address and captivate our senses, it is not in order to keep us on their level but to obtain the senses' permission to free our mind, to make it apt to receive the message of a mysterious beauty that tends to carry the soul beyond the created order. The composer's special calling is to create and combine signs so that, with the help of sonorous symbols, he may lead fellow human beings to communion with the music that springs forth, by inspiration, from the silent wellspring of his being.

The signs are endowed with a twofold power of expression and impression. They are expressive insofar as they translate what stirs and sings in the depth of the artist's heart; they are impressive because they possess a penetrating, possessive power by means of which the musical idea steals into a receptive soul, not only to touch and delight it, but also to give rise to an interior music like that dictated by inspiration to the artist's heart *before* he translated it through signs.

Thus, thanks to sonorous signs, a mysterious communication is established invisibly between the artist's soul and other

souls: the artist, moved by creative inspiration, puts all the resources of his genius and learning at inspiration's disposal, not to be constrained by it, but in order not to betray it; his audience will be more or less receptive according to their natural capacity for beauty, their aptitude for appreciating art, their level of interiority. While the signs pass through our senses toward the soul, the soul itself opens. This does not occur by any process or effort of abstraction, but passively, intuitively, as the soul receives the persuasive power of the signs and delivers them of their spiritual content so as to make this content its own.⁷



What makes up the spiritual content of musical signs? This question has often given rise to controversy. The problem does not, at first sight, seem to admit a simple solution. Some think that music exists to express feelings, even as speech is destined to convey thoughts. "While reason speaks, love sings," said Joseph de Maistre. Others point out, not unreasonably, that music, on account of its imprecise character, is unfit to render this or that feeling considered in its substance, and that its mission is rather to express the dynamic, kinetic aspect of feeling.⁸ And surely it is true that our various passions are marked by different modalities? Love, for example, may be calm or impetuous, joyful or sad without ceasing to be love. Being an art of movement, music is apt to render those movements of soul that are not the substance of a feeling but rather expressions of the infinity of nuances a feeling may assume.

⁷On the question of the beautiful, of the impact of form that, while in itself intelligible, is seized through and by the senses, see Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. J. F. Scanlan (London: Sheed & Ward, 1946), 21, 124ff.

⁸See P. Ferreti, *Esthétique grégorienne* (Paris, Tournai, Rome: Desclée et Cie, 1938), 125–26.

For this reason it happens that an emotion arising out of a piece of music may be attributed to more than a single passion, for it is not exclusively bound to any one. Who could tell me, say, the defining feeling behind a Bach chorale breathing sheer joy and serenity if I were unacquainted with the text that had inspired it? Does it reflect a tender soul's rest in the beloved? Or rather the solemn, supremely calm joy that follows a great act of detachment, savored in solitude of heart? How can I know whether the triumphant impetuosity that marks the finale of a Beethoven symphony expresses a superhuman energy, owning itself and raising itself up to the realm of the sublime in order to subdue a tragic destiny; or whether it evokes, rather, the invincible enthusiasm of faith founded on the very ruins of despair, beyond the bounds of human possibilities?⁹

But let us look at another, quite different interpretation of the language of music. In his *Chronicle of My Life*, Stravinsky, a musician of genius, declares that we depreciate music if we love it, as most people do, because we hope to find in it emotions of joy, pain, or sadness, an evocation of nature, the stuff of dreams, or a means to escape our prosaic existence. Music would not be worth a great deal if reduced to such a purpose. In Stravinsky's vision, expounded by A. Gasco, "music is incapable of expressing any feeling whatever, and it is madness to harbor illusions in this regard. Music wants to be a construct of sound, nothing else."

⁹This imprecise character of music explains why great composers—Bach or Mozart—did not hesitate to apply a melody written for a given text to other words and how the melody lost nothing in the transfer. It likewise legitimates the frequent adaptations we find in Gregorian chant. If some invite criticism (such as the adaptation of the Communion of Pentecost to that of Corpus Christi), others are so felicitous that it is impossible to discern the type from subsequent versions. A good example is the adaptation of the Offertory chant *Stetit* for Saint Michael to the words of *Iustorum animae*, the Offertory for the Common of Martyrs. One likewise thinks of the Graduals of the type *Iustus*.

We may find this perspective disconcerting and rather brutal. Yet Stravinsky is surely not wrong to react against a conception of music that lowers it beneath itself through failing to recognize the authentic message of music, whose source lies beyond human feelings, even the noblest, in an unfathomable absolute. But is it necessary, in order to safeguard the profound and mysterious meaning of music, to deny it any potential to express the soul's emotions? Are we obliged to opt for one theory at the expense of the other? I think not. Between these points of view there is no contradiction but a movement below the surface of music toward its heart, toward the *secretissima* to which we have already alluded. While music does render feeling, or rather, the kinetic aspect of feeling, it *is* at a deeper level a pure construct of sound that transcends any stirring, any disposition of the heart. In its unity, it constitutes a language that is remarkably rich and complex, simultaneously distant and immediate. As we shall see later, music springs from the depth of the soul, where the soul itself, alongside all other beings, is in communion with Being, Beauty, Life. But in order to reach us and take us back to its hidden source, it must pass through the mind and heart of man. Therefore it brings us not only a message from a mysterious beyond but also the most intimate inclinations, the most delicate vibrations of man's own sensibility and interior life.

For this reason, any work of genius will maintain an anonymous or universal character while nonetheless bearing the imprint of its author. The waters of different currents mingle in it: of a race, a history, a landscape, a line of descent, a temperament, a destiny. All are in evidence, and knowledge of these elements may help our understanding of the whole. But beyond them dawns the eternal human soul, transfigured by the divine light that passes through it and surrenders its secret through the color of earthly contingencies. Is it not precisely insofar as a work of art is at once personal *and* pregnant with life transcending its author that it will endure, that it will be great and endowed with what we think of as "character"?

And is it not because the movements of soul expressed by music rest on a reality that transcends, surrounds, and quickens them that they cannot be rendered in any other language except that of sound? Beyond the gamut of emotions and feelings there is something essential: an access opening onto the invisible and eternal; contact established with a world that corresponds to our innermost aspirations. Is this not why music captivates us and invades us with an indefinable impression of fullness, with a solemn, essentially unique joy?



To help us better understand the spiritual content of musical signs, it will perhaps not be vain to draw a comparison from a sphere that is higher for being, in the strict sense of the term, supernatural. In Dante's phrase, "art is the grandchild of God." We shall not, therefore, be lacking in respect for Holy Scripture, for God's revelation of himself and of the realization of his eternal plan of love and salvation, if we identify in it a procedure to which the message of music bears some resemblance. In addition to its literal meaning, the Bible text has one or more spiritual meanings; or, if we follow a modern, more exact view, it presents something like the gradation of a single light: at first sensory and dimmed, it becomes as one advances in depth ever brighter, ever more immaterial and far-reaching in the splendor of its effulgence. The ancient Jews' Jerusalem, for example, the Zion that was at the heart of theocratic religion under David and Solomon, is first and foremost a type of Christ's Church, heir to the synagogue and realizer of the promises of Judaism. But in a deeper sense it prefigures the Christian soul, in which the mystery of the Church is alive in its entirety. Finally, the reality-type deepens and expands so as to signify the heavenly Jerusalem, that is, the company of elect souls perfected in glory, of whom Saint John in his Apocalypse gives us some idea. Thus we move from a material but already holy city to a city that is at once corporeal and divine. This in turn finds fulfilment beyond time and space,

under the breath of the Spirit, in the eternal homeland of the elect established in the vision of God.

We can now turn again to music. Through combinations of sounds that first address our senses, we touch the heart of music only *beyond* certain realities susceptible of definition. Think of some work by Schumann or Debussy. It may at first evoke a landscape, a familiar vista, a more or less definite setting, a forest, a garden in the rain, a child playing or going to sleep, or a picturesque evening in Granada. Beneath the surface, however (though always in conjunction with it), the same music is suggesting a state of soul, the vibrations of a sensibility more or less ardent or discreet. It offers access to a more interior reality. Finally, beyond a halo of images and impressions, "at the end of everything," as Maurras would say, sovereign beauty arises. That is where we touch the ray of the eternal and divine which is the essential element of music, its definitive and indefinable reality. We are captivated by this sudden flash; in Scholastic terms, by a "fulguration of intelligence shining upon the proportionate parts of matter." It runs through the whole work as a sap of life. It bestows on every composition its proper value and makes of it an authentic creation. Because of it, there is more music in a single one of Schumann's *Kreisleriana* or *Kinderszenen* than in an entire opera by Massenet, or in a brief Bach chorale charged with mysticism than in the complete organ works, in themselves not uninteresting, of Pachelbel.

Anyone who has not been seized by this divine light has not yet gained access to music; he knows only its forecourts. In this perspective of an essential, divine element, it is quite true that music is "a construct of sound, nothing else." All our feelings have been exceeded. We stand before an absolute of truth and love shining forth in beauty. Whatever the modalities of its appearance, this absolute touches us beneath the surface of our soul. The pure beauty that transpires beyond the signs invites us to transcend music and go beyond ourselves in order to join it in its sanctuary.

We may draw one further parallel with Holy Scripture, which also speaks through signs and symbols. Even as the sacred text contains unveiled utterances that are endowed with a unique, purely spiritual meaning offering boundless perspectives (for example: "Before Abraham was, I am"; "God is love"), there are musical compositions so free of human alloy, so directly joined to their creative source that they effect our communion with the mystery of an invisible world without the mediation of definite thoughts or emotions. They are simply the ineffable song of supernatural light and tenderness. By stirring what is most secret in us, many such works at once enrich and purify our sensibility, which is touched but not exasperated by the sonorous signs, responding with a shock of emotion so deep that it defies analysis. I think of certain works by Bach or Mozart, like the beginning of that violin sonata in E-Minor to which I have already referred.

Mozart! Could anyone whose taste has not been corrupted by the artificial or falsely sublime, anyone whose heart has at least in its wellspring remained virginal, hear this song issuing from an exceptionally pure and loving soul without being moved to the point of bursting? A grace of innocence must have touched that soul unaffected by any concern to please, exteriorize, or astonish, aspiring only to sing. A few fugitive notes from a great broken chord falling back to their point of departure—and suddenly we are at the heart of music. We shall see later how, by virtue of its limpid message, this creation of a true genius of music breathes at once such happiness and such nostalgia.

However, let us be neither exclusive nor systematic. It matters little, after all, whether a more or less vague context of feelings and images envelops the pure essence of music, as long as we find it, as long as we present it with a soul that is open and ready to perceive its divine influence.

The *Kyrie eleison* and *Sanctus* from the Mass in B-Minor were made to carry a given text. The *Kyrie* evokes the universal aspect of a cry of supplication; the *Sanctus*, the immaterial undulations

of angels in adoration. Have they for that reason less spiritual density than one of the same Bach's great Preludes and Fugues for organ, simple edifices of sound where there is only an elusive grandeur? When, even a long way away from an opera house, I look at the score of *Pelléas*, I can easily imagine the mysterious ambiance of sets and characters. Does it therefore have a less authentic musical value, for me, than Franck's symphony or his quartet, which evoke nothing definite? We *should* distinguish the popular repertoire from pure music, but it would be unjust to underestimate the former. Nor should we *a priori* condemn certain procedures that, by appealing to the imagination or sensibility of the listener or student, can occasion in him an awakening by which he is enabled to enter the depths of music.

In support of this assertion we may think of Cortot and the often suggestive commentaries with which he introduced performances of Chopin's twenty-four Preludes, the Preludes Schumann once described as "eagle's feathers." They seem, with their concentrated character of expression, the most sincere part of Chopin's works, the part most charged with pathos. "This piece," the Fourth Prelude, "must be played carrying a veil of mourning upon the face, with tears behind. . . . In the right hand, nothing but a groan, the groan of a being with no strength to raise its voice." On the Ninth: "Give the impression of a great curtain withdrawing to reveal, at the fortissimo, the victory of Samothrace, in full formation." On the marvelous Seventeenth: "The diction should be expressive enough to enable one to put a syllable under each note. At bar sixty-one, let the expression of your chords evoke an ideal embrace clutching some great happiness." And finally, on the dark, dramatic Prelude in C-Minor: "Show us a retreating funeral procession bearing away what is dearest to us, tearing it irrevocably from us."¹⁰

¹⁰I have likewise heard the great pianist Francis Planté use this procedure of suggestion by images and ideas. The Prelude in D-Minor from

It is self-evident that this kind of procedure, to be effective and not to risk vulgarizing music, must be exactly performed and used only with discretion. It is a matter of suggesting by awakening attention, nothing more. Any mere chatter in this area would be quite odious. Yet it cannot be denied that the approach, used discerningly, has pedagogical value. It can grant access to a depth where there is no longer any question of joy or sorrow or any precise image, but only the silent beauty which is at the root of all art. Here signs and symbols have finished playing their part and leave us enraptured in the pinnacle of our mind: the place of contemplation and love, the place of encounter with the essence of Beauty whose reverberation and resonances within us defy measurement.



If the sonorous signs are *only* signs, that is, transmitters of a hidden reality, it is easy to understand that the way in which they are chosen and used reveals not only the composer's depth of inspiration but also the purity of his genius and intentions. At one extreme we find an extenuation of sound material that, on the pretext of spiritualizing music, is inclined to disregard the normal conditions of its action on the senses and to render it elusive; at the other extreme, there is a kind of intemperance, even debauchery, in the manner of manipulating the signs that is no less deadly. If combinations of rhythm, melody, and harmony are ruled by a concern to impress the listener, to do him a kind of violence, if they seek to

the Well-Tempered Clavier represented for him a procession of bishops moving with great pomp; the brisk Fugue in B-Flat Minor, the meeting of three drinking companions. The *andante* movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, which he played impressively in Liszt's piano transcription, he called the March of Saints, etc. On this point, cf. Maritain, *Art*, 124f. The author stresses that the presence or outline of a concept, however vague, apt to suggest ideas, is in no way formally constitutive of the perception of beauty.

affect his nerves more than his soul, if they occur merely to fill a gap or to bring out the performer's virtuosity, then they do not answer to their value as signs: they become an end in themselves, at the service of a prostitution of art.

There are, alas, great geniuses who are not pure geniuses. Here I think of Wagner, of the pernicious commotion, the sonorous showiness that, in an overheated atmosphere of passion or false mysticism, bears a philter that can fetter us as magically as the one which bound Tristan to Isolde. Art of this kind forces emotion by stirring the troubled regions of our sensibility. It sublimates them without purifying them. At times, grace is needed to reject its pernicious charm. With Wagner, we are at the opposite extreme of Mozart and also of Bach, whose technical transports and most lively outbursts are always at the service of a truth that is authentic, healthy, and profound. They are bearers of an energy that does not crush the listener's heart but rather causes it to open out, that exalts without communicating any artificial intoxication to the dubious and superficial regions of our soul.

But between these two types—that of Bach and that of Wagner—what a more or less proportionate mixture of purity and impurity, sincerity and insincerity, true inspiration and simple craftsmanship we find even in true artists, notably in the “Romantics”! I do not think that Schubert, the transparent Schubert, whose soul, I would say, is akin to Mozart's, ever dabbled in falsehood, nor that incomparable artist, Schumann. But without speaking of Weber, Mendelssohn, or Liszt above all; did Chopin not cede more than once to the allurements of virtuosity? A simple ballad whose opening idea seduces us by its fresh simplicity can leave us disappointed when the initial theme gets excited to the point of carrying us away amid technical acrobatics into some kind of tormented dream.

Beyond Schumann, Mozart, Bach, and Palestrina, I suggest that we find the model purity of musical art most fully realized in the Gregorian cantilena of ages past. It is its prerogative to achieve the very highest, densest expression by minimal means.

Charged with incomparable spiritual truths, it never sets out to impress, it never seeks to excite our emotions. It is the voice of the Word, of the Spirit. The Spirit that regulates the Church's heartbeat is its quickening breath and, like the Spirit, Gregorian chant treats us with great respect: *cum magna reverentia*. It is not lacking in humanity, for it does respond to the demands of our senses. But it does so with such sobriety and penetration that we are led into the sphere of the most sacred realities. As we have already noted, Gregorian chant is a truly matchless music, steeped in grace and divine tenderness.

From the performer's point of view, too, the notion of music as "sign" is of great significance. What should be the object of one who has for his mission to perform a work in order to reveal it to himself and others, if not to deliver the signs of their spiritual content? For sure, it is a weighty enterprise to unravel this element of the eternal and divine, to enable it to blaze through signs that at once conceal and reveal it, to make it shine out by passing it on, for the joy and ennoblement of one's fellow human beings. To bring about such disclosure, to let it saturate one's being and then to pass it on, certain basic conditions must be met, apart from the technical mastery that ensures the material performance of any work.

First of all, perfect objectivity is called for. It is not the work that should adapt to us but we who should partake of its mystery and make it our own. To this attitude, we must add a susceptibility to beauty that, in order to be effective, requires self-emptying and a degree of purity to which the orientation of our being does not normally incline us. Beauty, as an object of contemplation, addresses that which is greatest and most profound in us, and we can say with Keats: "The most difficult, to keep heights which the soul is competent to gain." Finally, the spiritual content of a truly beautiful work is not generally delivered right away. It requires calm, slow, faithful, and silent familiarity. In order to harvest its riches and myriad nuances, we must invest patience and hard work, work that will perhaps never be finished.

At this point, it is fitting to say a word or two about attention, about the "attention" that is utterly different from "tension," being an attitude more passive than active, even if its immobility is more fruitful than all our agitation here below. Attention is like the gaze of a soul that, in order to receive, empties itself and waits. It has been well said: "Art is spontaneous like love, but it is cultivated like friendship." The beauty it lets us touch through sensory signs has manners, niceties, and depths (above all) of its own that can only be discovered little by little, on condition that we let ourselves be conquered and shaped by beauty. Beauty calls us. It makes demands that are certainly always agreeable but that may, if we attend to its voice, require sacrifices. Beauty's appeal to our heart, its influence over us, is such that we cannot treat it as if it were an abstraction, leaving us nothing but emptiness or fleeting consolation. We should not underestimate the graces of interiority available to a pianist, if he is truly an artist, in the solitary and recollected hours during which he works (while striving to listen in inward silence) on some great work that issues from beauty and develops, little by little, in the pure wake of beauty. I think, for example, of Opus 110, perhaps the most admirable of Beethoven's sonatas for its mournful serenity. It is the fruit of spiritual conquest and is crowned by a peace that surpasses every feeling. I think of some partita or toccata by Bach, marvels of invention and balance that invite endless meditation; of Schumann's wonderful Concerto in A-Minor; or of Franck's Prelude, Chorale, and Fugue, in which the religious imprint that marks any authentically beautiful work makes itself felt fully, for the work resembles, in Cortot's words, a long prayer brought to a close by a large sign of the cross. These are old works forever young that will never completely reveal their secret. Their language is as inexhaustible as the source from which they spring.

As Plato said of truth, we must come to beauty with all our soul. It is made to be contemplated by us, who were made for contemplation. How indeed could we resist its attraction as

long as we have not found that other contemplation enjoyed by the perfect and by saints in the secret of God's kingdom? Who knows if on the human level, where in any case grace is never absent, the beauty of art may not direct us toward the supernatural horizons of which it is a foretaste? Even as it is a symbol of mystical contemplation, the contemplation of beauty has its own degrees and modalities. Most often, the beauty of a work of genius surrounds and penetrates us like the sea. We bathe in it, though without losing our foothold, without diving into the depth of its abyss. Rare, fleeting, and truly mysterious is the perception of beauty in its pure, luminous essence. It assails us like lightning. It imposes itself suddenly after the manner of some unexpected grace and projects us beyond self-awareness toward an unknown in which every fullness is contained.

I would appeal to a recent experience I myself had while playing a composition for organ by Nicolas de Grigny, a piece that is simple, majestic, and amazingly calm in its development. Suddenly, after a well-defined ascent, a long thetic movement ends in one of the composer's masterful *appoggiaturas* and opens onto an ineffable depth of adoration. It was as if a flash of lightning sprung from inaccessible light had pierced my night, leaving me dazzled and overwhelmed by such grandeur. When out of ecstasy I returned to myself, it seemed that this sudden immersion into the royal domain of beauty justified Simone Weil's remark: "[The] movement of descent, the mirror of grace, is the essence of all music. All the rest only serves to enshrine it. The rising of the notes is a purely sensorial rising. The descent is at the same time a sensorial descent and a spiritual rising. Here we have the paradise which every being longs for: where the slope of nature makes us rise towards the good."¹¹

¹¹ *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 137.

It is beyond doubt that alongside our noblest aspirations music carries within itself the fundamental inclinations of our soul. And it is precisely on account of its expressive way of conveying our most intimate self that it constitutes, for those capable of understanding its language, an ever living, ever new source of emotion and delight. This aspect of its message will progressively impress itself on us as we attempt to unlock its mystery. Before closing this chapter, we may content ourselves with stating a fact of capital importance that flows naturally from our considerations so far: if music uncovers for us a spiritual reality that eludes our grasp beyond the signs it employs, beyond every idea and every feeling, it is because this reality is itself a sign and has the value of a sign.



Here on earth, everything is a sign. Everything reveals an element of mystery that we must unravel, for the sign itself is a veil that hides what it covers but at the same time lets it show through in the process of transmission. Some Greek philosophers, Plato above all, and some ancient religions had an intuition of this truth. Plotinus, who brought their strands together so remarkably, considered the world an image of immaterial things, an image that never ceases to be formed: εἰκὼν ἀεὶ εἰκονιζόμενος [*sic*] (2 Enneads 3:18). It is the poet's prerogative to see nature as a vast universe of signs and to sense behind them a world of invisible realities. In Baudelaire's famous formulation:

*Nature is a temple whose living pillars
At times give voice to obscure words.
Within it man passes through forests of symbols
That watch him with a knowing look.*

Those who are brought by visible things to suspect an infinitely desired Beyond entertain the dream—the mad dream—to seize what they sense, in spite of the veil that keeps it from us. As Francis Thompson wrote:

O world invisible, we view thee,
 O world intangible, we touch thee,
 O world unknowable, we know thee,
 Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!

What would our amazement be if all creatures here below would reveal to us their secret, from the countless chasms of incandescence that stud the universe of stars to the smallest grain of sand? We should undoubtedly be like the Bride of the Song of Songs, described by one of the greatest souls ever to contemplate her mystery as “struck to the heart by the beauty of things and pierced by the brilliance of their splendor as by a choice arrow, truly wounded and consumed by a blessed love.”¹²

It is in this perspective, which places creation at the confines of two worlds, one visible, the other invisible, in a luminous center that envelops the totality of beings, that the contemplative recognizes a host of signs. He is situated on a supernatural plane irradiated with superior brightness. The signs thus perceived are to the contemplative so truly bearers of spiritual reality that he does not hesitate to consider nature, after the Bible, as a book that reveals divine and hidden things. “These two books,” says Richard of Saint Victor, “produce the same sound, and harmonize to tell the wonders of a secret world.” Nature and the Bible combine to uncover the presence of the First Cause that is humbly hidden behind created things, calling us with so many signs.¹³ Both nature and Scripture indicate the presence of God, the One, of whom Louis

¹² [The translation follows the author’s version, which takes some liberty with Origen’s text, cited in a footnote:] *Ipsa rerum venustate percussus, et splendoris magnificentia ceu iaculo, ut ait propheta, electo terebratus, salutare ab ipso vulnus accipiet, et beato igne amoris eius ardebit* (*Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Prologue 17).

¹³ At this point one could refer to several noteworthy testimonies in the works of Saint Bonaventure, Hugh of Saint Victor, and Cardinal de Cusa. Closer to ourselves, Cardinal Newman, influenced by the Alexandrian fathers and himself a poet gifted with remarkable intuition,

Massignon magnificently says that he is not an invention but a discovery. But what are they made from, these signs seen or heard, if not from states and vibrations of matter? "The totality of matter itself becomes a sign," said Michel Carrouges, "as soon as it becomes pervious to spirit by all its pores." Is there in our world any matter more pervious to the spirit than sound, the fundamental element of music, than the human voice of which it has justly been said that it springs forth from man as if by necessity, without any mediator other than itself? In the unity of the person, the voice is always united to the soul, always available to express its tenderest, most intimate motions. Further, may we not be permitted to think that music, among the prodigious constellation of signs that make up the universe, is particularly apt to lead us back to the source of life and beauty, particularly fit to function as a conduit toward the spiritual realm whose life in us, in God, and in the invisible world has its own rhythms, melodies, and harmonies? Is music not the sign that, more than any other, exercises overwhelming persuasive power over those able to hear its voice, delighting our senses in order to make them convey their message to the depths of the soul? Is it not, finally, the natural order's most revealing sign of a hidden God insofar as it implies a sovereign unity, the sovereign harmony of Being and of all beings in Being?

Hopefully our enquiry will shed some light on these issues by broadening and deepening our perspectives in the pursuit of mystery. If at this point we attempt to define our position, we find ourselves before a given fact, which is the imprecise language of music, saying nothing yet saying all; and before an experience, which is the perception of beauty and of the emotion it arouses. The experience implies a subject, which is our soul, and an object, which is beauty, the created beauty

developed perspectives on the invisible world as seen through the visible in a profound and pleasing way, above all in his sermons.

that, beyond the sign in which it is embodied, leads us to its uncreated source, the *secretissima* and *penetralia* of music, to the mysterious sanctuary we recognize as the ineffable, eternal, and divine reality in which all art originates and from which it acquires its worth.