

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST: REFLECTIONS FROM THE PERFORMER'S STUDIO

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There is a story about a musician who, when asked to explain a particular composition, responds by performing it straight through from beginning to end. Similarly, Paul Valéry writes:

Nothing beautiful can be summarized. Tasteless pedagogues summarize and have their pupils make résumés of works whose very essence is the absurdity of 'resuming' them. Their skeleton digests of the *Æneid* and the *Odyssey* are drained of the movements, potencies, and graces which give them their whole value in the eyes of real people.¹

As an artist-teacher who specializes in the Western classical tradition, being asked to write about beauty in my discipline makes me want desperately to make my points through music rather than verbiage. However, having been asked for a paper, and encouraged by Jeremy Begbie's contention that music has something within its very nature to teach theology, I want in this essay to consider how musicians engage and wrestle with the concept of beauty as we pursue our art-form. I will reveal some of what we actually mean when we talk about beauty in the studio or the concert hall, and will ponder ways in which beauty can be for us an inspiration, icon, or even an idol. In looking at what goes on when we practice and teach, I hope to give my readers, especially those for whom the activities of the practicing musician are alien, a sense of the various aspects of tone color, tonal relationships and qualities of musical idiom and personal expression that, when considered individually or in combination, cause a musician to say, "Yes, that's beautiful." I want to convey something of the performer's struggle to coax beauty out of whatever beast is his or her chosen medium, whether it be the big ebony and (formerly) ivory contraption I play, the wooden boxes used by string players, or the singer's own throat. In considering the broader aspects of the musician's relationship with beauty, I wish to suggest something of how the beauty of God, in His holiness and in His created order, inspires a lifetime's devotion to the art of sound, and how the sounds a musician makes, or perhaps the very act of music-making itself, can serve as a window looking out onto something greater and more meaningful than the either the sounds or the maker of them. I will contend that beauty, at least in some of the romanticized and popular senses of the word, can be a trap for the musician: the mere pursuit of beauty can distract from the pursuit of artistic integrity, and draw one into self-absorption and other deadly sins. In this sense, the beast of my title is the darkness in the soul of each individual musician, regardless where that individual may be along the path to damnation or redemption. I will argue that, in a very real way, an artist of any sort best achieves beauty when least seeking it -- that it should perhaps be thought of as a byproduct of work done with integrity, and that the quest for true beauty is ultimately impossible without community.

My thoughts are themselves byproducts of many years spent as a student, performer, and member of an academic community. They grow principally out of experiences along the way, and only secondarily out of scholarly work. Some of those experiences are easy to articulate; others continually defy my efforts to impose meaning on them, although I know that they somehow add to my understanding of how God, the artist, and beauty fit together.

BEAUTY, THE PRACTICE ROOM, AND THE MUSIC LESSON

Having outlined this essay, I now lead you into the strange, claustrophobic world that I have inhabited most of my life. It is a world whose denizens spend hours alone in a tiny room furnished with only a piano; once a week they move to a larger, more imposing room to show an authority figure what they have learned in isolation, and to be directed towards the next stages of their solitary pursuit. (If images of caged animals and their trainers have occurred to you as you read, you are probably not alone.) This disciplined regime is supposed to produce musicians who are masters of their chosen medium, understand the music of a great centuries-old tradition, and perform that music reliably, even beautifully. Somehow, the desired results are sometimes achieved, although complete success (or a steady income) is never guaranteed. What exactly are the goals towards which student and teacher strive? When musicians say that someone's playing is beautiful, what do we mean?

Sometimes, that remark may be little more than a nod to tradition. Much like the Seven Last Words of the Church -- "We've never done it that way before," musical tradition, which Arturo Toscanini allegedly defined as "the memory of the last bad performance," often becomes a crutch on which lazy musicians rely in place of seriously considering how they hear and think about music. However, most musicians, whether intuitively or more analytically, find themselves listening for a number of qualities that make for beauty in performance.

1) THE MEDIUM: BEING IN COMMAND OF OUR INSTRUMENT

The first of these qualities is the performer's mastery of a performing medium. This may seem a strange place to start, as musicians and critics often speak scornfully of empty, soulless virtuosity. As an undergraduate at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, I spent much time with my peers heatedly debating whether it was more important to have good musicianship or good technique. Being somewhat of a snob, who was also secretly jealous of players with brilliant "chops," I always fought hard for the cause of good musicianship. Now, older and perhaps wiser, I see that the debate revolved around a nonsense question of the sort C. S. Lewis declared impossible for even God to answer.² The content of music must be heard through a medium to be heard at all; if that medium is an unreliable conduit for that content, the possibility of hearing it will be compromised or even lost. In political discourse, it is similarly possible for a public figure to employ sophisticated oratorical resources in the

service of saying nothing, or conversely, to fail to communicate profound truth through sloppy or unsure public presentation. While technical mastery does not guarantee beauty, it is necessary if the multi-faceted richness of music is to be experienced in its fullness. I personally delight in the playing of an artist like the pianist Marc-André Hamelin, whose disturbingly complete lack of technical deficiency allows him do impossible things with unimaginable clarity and speed. It is an even more beautiful thing when technical resources are humbly and thoroughly committed to the service of musical profundity, and ability to produce infinite shades of volume, touch and tone color illuminates the inner radiance of a work like the last sonata of Schubert.

For most of us, mastery is never an arrival point, but a lifelong process involving struggle. The goal usually remains more elusive than attainable. Our instruments can be intractable beasts, whose mechanical workings often frustrate all efforts to actualize the characteristics of the music we perform. Take my instrument -- please. Playing it involves battling endless contradictions. We are asked to realize the endlessly singing lines of a Chopin nocturne on a massive box of cast iron, wood and metal strings whose sounds immediately begin to fade as soon as they begin. To reveal a dirty little secret of the pianist's trade, we play a percussion instrument, and indulge in massive amounts of fakery and make-believe in order to create the illusion of *bel canto*. Although unlike pianists, string, wind and brass players can generally take their own instruments with them wherever they go, reliability is never guaranteed -- changes in temperature and humidity will cause even the finest Stradavarius to behave temperamentally.

We also struggle with our own bodies, beasts and earthen vessels that we are. Years of training go into making hands supple, reflexes quick, and coordination effortless -- and then our bodies age. Singers deal with the vagaries of vocal maturation, and the fiendishly unpredictable ups and downs of colds, flu, and countless other maladies that can come between them and thier best.

Having argued that there is a distinctive beauty in the marriage of ideal mastery of medium to the projection of the stuff of music, and having acknowledged the elusive nature of the struggle to achieve it, am I suggesting that our efforts are futile? Some musicians might answer affirmatively, but in so doing they condemn themselves to lives of unquiet desperation. While absolute perfection in any sphere is not granted to any of us in this life, thankfully, great beauty can be found in very imperfect circumstances. (In this connection, consider the etymology of the word Baroque, which derives from a Portuguese word for "imperfect pearl.") When working for the right reasons, a truly committed musician can turn even imperfections and shortcomings into artistic raw material. One of my most treasured recollections of this from many years of concert-going comes from a New Year's Eve, 1983 performance of Beethoven's *Fidelio* at the Metropolitan Opera House. The legendary tenor Jon Vickers, then about three years away from his Met retirement, portrayed the central character

Florestan, who at one point sings an impassioned aria about freedom while imprisoned in a dungeon. The aria ends with a punishing high B-flat. Knowing that he would probably not be able to hit it cleanly, Vickers lunged forward as the moment came, as if forgetting that his leg was chained to the floor, and fell face-down onto the stage as he sang the B-flat. The dramatic and vocal result was riveting, authentic, and far more memorable than a perfect high note would have been. Just as all of us bear the image of God in broken vessels, artistic beauty can shine through imperfection, or even because of it. Nonetheless, good stewardship of one's gifts demands honing them to the highest possible degree, and in the quest to do so, one can experience great rewards, beauty being one of them.

2) EMBODIMENT

Clearly, mastery of one's musical medium is inextricably linked to our physical being; indeed, it's not merely about the physical, but involves every facet of body, heart and mind. Music has everything to do with "embodiment." In the medieval *quadrivium*, the study of music was a speculative, mathematical discipline; but the experience of music in every culture is based on singing, dancing, or both done together. Indeed, until the advent of electro-acoustic means of sound production, every act of music-making was necessarily a physical act by a human being. The primal musical instrument is the singer's body, a resonating chamber through which the vocal chords project sound when activated by breath. From our birth, we experience rhythm through the binary cycles of breathing and heartbeat; we experience another increasingly steady two-beat pattern as we learn to walk, which we eventually elaborate into the endless variety of dance. Vital music-making must remain connected to its physical roots. What does this mean for practicing musicians? As we work with melody, it will mean that we remember the singing voice. The temporal stretching required to vocally execute a large interval will reflect itself in our approach to such leaps; as we shape phrases, we will always remember the centrality of breathing. Pianists, who are essentially button-pushers, can easily forget both of these things, and in so doing leave an artificial, inflexible impression. As we work with rhythm, we will not divide time in an abstract, cerebral way, but will strive to feel it as gesture involving the whole body. One thinks in this context of that contemporary description of Johann Sebastian Bach, not only

singing with one voice and playing his own parts, but watching over everything and bringing back to the rhythm and the beat, out of thirty or even forty musicians, the one with a nod, another by tapping his foot, the third with a warning finger . . . full of rhythm in every part of his body . . . "3

As we deal with issues of musical form and dramatic structure, we will remember that the body responds to joy, fear, anger, longing and other emotions in a variety of ways -- the heartbeat accelerates, breathing may become quicker, heavier or shallower, and the feet race to avoid or meet what is coming. Thus, when appropriate in a given style of music, we will adjust the pace and pulse of our performance in ways that reflect those changing states. We will also be willing to take risks in our

music-making, both physical and otherwise. Risk-taking is one of the things that many people enjoy about participation in sports; many more of us enjoy the perception of it in watching sports from the comfort of a living room couch. Only the most stubborn aesthete would deny that there is a sports-like aspect to our participation in music, as performers or audience members. This is true whether we are talking about a brazen virtuoso stunt, or the most serious of Beethoven sonatas, in which physical struggle is an integral part of the composer's communicative intention. In risk, there is the ever-present danger of failure and shame. But as the pianist Lili Kraus once said, "the performer who does not risk shame will never move anyone."⁴ One can choose quite literally to play it safe, but a willingness to take physical and personal risk in music-making can speak powerfully, as it did when I heard Jon Vickers, of both our physical limitations and our striving and yearning for something greater than we can easily experience or grasp. In short, human beings respond to music-making that doesn't merely present a work, but seems somehow to inhabit it and animate it in a fully embodied and aware manner. When we have sensed the presence of such embodiment, we are likely to perceive the presence of beauty.

3) RELATIONSHIPS

In the abstract, without the help of words or visualization, music presents us with a complex web of relationships. Tones relate to each other linearly and vertically, blocks of sound move across our aural field of perception at varying rates of speed, and through repetition, variation, contrast and transformation, musical ideas work in our memory to create a sense of coherent form, to which we react much as we do to the progress of a theatrical drama. Much of what we call beautiful or effective performance has to do with the performer's capacity to understand these various relationships, and to clarify or obscure them to most effectively project the music at hand.

I have already alluded to the linear relationships between tones that are the building blocks with which we construct melody. Also vitally important in music are the vertical, simultaneous relationships which, in their simplest form, create intervals, and, in more complex combinations, produce harmony. Derived from the natural overtone series, intervals are understood, at least in Western common practice, as possessing greater or lesser degrees of consonance and dissonance. In common practice harmonic procedures, dissonant tensions cause the ear to long for consonant resolutions. These tensions and resolutions work both on the local level and, as in works of nineteenth-century Romantics like Schumann, Wagner and Mahler, can control the entire course of a large-scale structure. Effective, beautiful performance of music relying on the dissonant/ consonant polarity requires an awareness of how the ear and the emotions can be affected by the predominance of one or the other, just as an actor needs to be aware of the loaded quality of certain words in order to project the right effect. One can perform a piece of music with accurate precision, and yet leave

the audience could if one minimizes or overlooks these tensions and releases. In like manner, awareness of the relationships between louder and softer sounds can have a powerful bearing on a listener's response. In music with interplay of multiple voices, there are constant decisions to be made about which voice to bring forward. As in a Bach fugue or a Handel oratorio, there is much beauty in exchange and dialogue between voice parts; a sensitive interpreter can make these relationships come to life.

As we examine ever-larger units of musical discourse, we begin to consider how an interconnected system of antecedent and consequent phrases form musical metaphors for sentences, paragraphs, sections and whole chapters. For a listener to be aware of the beauty, humor, drama, or psychological impact of large-scale musical structure, with its repetition, unfolding variation, contrast, and recall, a performer must first grapple with these manifold ramifications. Given that many of the greatest and most beloved works in the repertoire contain enough wealth of detail to reward repeated listening, re-learning, and re-playing, there is always hidden beauty to be revealed when a performer discovers and illuminates a relationship that others may have overlooked, or where a performer hears that relationship in an unexpected way.

4) THE MESSAGE: TEXT, INTENTION, MEANING AND COMMUNICATION

It should be clear that we have now entered the realm of text, interpretation, meaning and communication, and face highly complex and nuanced concepts such as hermeneutics. A thorough treatment of these topics would require a completely different essay by a different author, so I will touch on them only briefly. Nonetheless, it must be said that, even without knowing the word, a musician working in the literate traditions must deal with the hermeneutics of musical text in order to allow a score to be heard rather than merely seen.

The notation of music is at best a highly inexact art, utilizing remarkably limited, ambiguous tools -- black dots, connected with straight and curved lines, interspersed with occasional words, abbreviations, and symbols, all of which are meant both to instruct the performer as to which pitches and rhythms to play, and to convey something of the emotional, dramatic, and psychological depths within any given work. Some scores are intended to be comprehensive guides to performance; others, such as lead-sheets, chord charts, and the unadorned slow movements of Corelli and Mozart concerti, may give only an outline from which to elaborate. Discerning the requirements and intentions of a given score can require considerable knowledge, research, and informed imagination. The struggle to understand and interpret musical notation can give rise to a peculiar form of musical fundamentalism. I have frequently encountered serious musicians who, while priding themselves on being free from all illiberalism, succumb to an intellectually rigorous, inflexible form of legalism when it comes to

understanding a score. In their sincere, often scholarly attempts to present a work in strict accordance with the composer's wishes, they produce results that are the aural equivalent of what would happen if a builder, given a blueprint, merely produced an exact replica of the blueprint rather than creating a three-dimensional structure from it. This is precisely the kind of issue that any biblically-minded seminarian or Sunday-School teacher faces when trying to discern the difference between a fearfully wooden literalism and a reading of Scripture which accurately discerns the meaning of the text and sheds light on the Mind of God. While misreading or misinterpreting Beethoven may not be as deadly a sin as misconstruing the Scriptures, in both cases, communication of the essence of the text is at risk, and our choices can radically affect the listener's understanding.

A performer's job is not confined to giving an accurate account of the received text. It also includes discerning, interpreting and projecting the meaning implicit in the music. Here again, we find ourselves on hotly contested intellectual turf, over which much ink has been spilled. Ask what music means, and chances of ending the ensuing debate so that music can be made greatly decrease. As with notational practice, theories of meaning have shifted over time; the historically aware performer will benefit from understanding the approach to meaning that prevailed at the time a given piece of music was composed. The eighteenth century saw a shift away from an earlier understanding of art as connected to the imitation of Nature (*mimesis*) towards an understanding based on feeling or personal expression. By the early nineteenth century, critical writers on music such as E. T. A. Hoffmann began to assert the supremacy of purely instrumental music over music connected to text.⁵ Given the degree to which human beings have always been curiously uncomfortable with abstraction and ambiguity in music, and in particular, the ambiguity inherent in music without words, it is unsurprising that personal expression joined together with reliance on extra-musical texts and images colored much of the concert music of the Romantic era. (Such ambivalence about non-texted music also lurks behind the suspicion, sometimes found in our churches, that without a clear, didactic, evangelistic message, music is at best a waste of time, and at worst a dangerous wile of Satan.) By 1851, the influential German critic Eduard Hanslick was vigorously arguing against the feeling theory, and proposed that the content of music did not strictly signify anything outside itself, but was instead to be understood as "tonally moving forms."⁶ This insistence on music's abstract character strongly influenced thinking about musical meaning, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century, and is behind Arturo Toscanini's famous assertion that the opening movement of Beethoven's Third Symphony is not "about" Napoleon, nor Beethoven's struggles against deafness, but is merely about *Allegro con brio*.⁷

As with most descriptions of reality, there are shortcomings and potential pitfalls in all of these approaches. The Baroque use of musical symbols, called *affektenlehre*, and Wagner's use of *leitmotifs* to clarify action and meaning in his operas, require knowledge of the composer's private symbol system for full appreciation. Musical self-expression is likewise highly subjective, and open to

multiple understandings and misunderstandings. While Hanslick's objectivism offers a useful description of the abstract nature of music, and helps free it from the tyranny of always having to be explained by means of another discipline, it can if misunderstood lead to a clinical detachment from the motions of the musical forms he describes, and has certainly led to some of the more self-referential experiments of post-World War II musical modernism. Even if Hanslick is largely right in his analysis, the motion of tonal forms in music does reach out in metaphorical ways towards the dynamic inner motions of the spirit, the patterns of language and the shapes, sounds and images of God's created order. Among the greatest attributes a musician can bring to all of this is a healthy, questing, playful imagination, informed enough to probe characteristic thought processes and modes of expression from times long past, insightful enough to make connections, and vivid enough to bring musical motions to life within his or her own being while allowing others to catch something of that vividness within themselves. Just as a great actor can make an audience believe that Lear or Lady MacBeth stands before them, so can a musician cause the motions of music to be so redolent with the rhythms of speech, the gestures of dance, the great abstract patterns of the natural world, and the inner movements of the heart that the beautiful joining together of all these things cannot help but resound with meaning, even if that meaning defies words. After all, no less a Renaissance man than Felix Mendelssohn once wrote in a letter, "The thoughts which are expressed by me in music are not too indefinite to be put into words, but on the contrary, too definite . . ." ⁸

FINDING REASONS FOR MAKING MUSIC: BEAUTY AS INSPIRATION, ICON AND IDOL

I trust that all of this gives the general reader a better sense of what musical artists and artist-teachers value in performance; however, I'm not sure that they have clarified the central term of my title. In many respects, my use of the word "beauty" has been virtually indistinguishable from my use of other words, such as "brilliance," "perfection," "profundity," "sensitivity," and "coherence." As I have used it thus far, and as it is commonly used, "beauty" can be a weasel-word that evades precise, meaningful definition; we all think we know what it means, but seldom bother to question its true significance, if it indeed has any. (It is perhaps worthwhile to point out that our use of the word "musical" to praise performers whose work we happen to like is very similar to our habitual use of the word "beauty.") There have been many attempts give beauty a clearer definition, including this from Thomas Aquinas:

[B]eauty includes three conditions, integrity or perfection, since those things which are impaired are by the very fact ugly; due proportion or harmony; and lastly brightness, or clarity, whence things are called beautiful which have bright color. ⁹

This helps, and as we turn to the relationship between the artist and the beauty of God, we can at least see that God, in His infinite truthfulness, perfection, and integrity, in the everlasting harmony among the Persons of His Godhead, in His unmatched brightness, and in the beauty of His holiness, ¹⁰ is

the best of all possible definitions of beauty -- indeed, better than anything we could possibly imagine. To paraphrase the Apostle John, we can only be engaged with beauty because He has been Beautiful from before the foundation of the cosmos. There is no question that the journey of the artist into the mystery of beauty begins with God Himself.

Throughout my sojourn as a Christian artist, I have been drawn repeatedly to a passage from C. S. Lewis's insightful little book *The Great Divorce*, which speaks to me more deeply about the nature and peril of æsthetic life from an eternal perspective than anything else I've ever read. At the risk of committing the peculiarly American Evangelical sin of treating Lewis's writings as Holy Writ, I will make it the focus for a series of reflections on the complex, even contradictory ways in which performing artists confront the concept of beauty as inspiration, icon and idol. In this passage, two professional painters meet, one now dwelling in the Heavenly Country and one visiting from the nearer regions of Hell. The bright spirit attempts to persuade his ghostly friend to stay with him, and to learn once again to look first rather than paint.

When you painted on earth -- at least in your early days -- it was because you caught glimpses of Heaven in the earthly landscape. The success of your painting was that it enabled others to see the glimpses too.¹¹

The bright spirit continues to contend with his ghostly counterpart that art is not an end but a means: "Light itself was your first love: you painted only as a means of telling about light." When the ghost replies that he grew out of that to become interested in paint for its own sake, the painter-spirit utters these profound words:

One does, indeed. I also have had to recover from that. It was all a snare. Ink and catgut and paint were necessary down there, but they are also dangerous stimulants. Every poet and musician and artist, but for Grace, is drawn away from the love of the thing he tells, to love of the telling till, down in Deep Hell, they cannot be interested in God at all but only in what they say about Him. For it doesn't stop at being interested in paint, you know. They sink lower -- become interested in their own personalities and then in nothing but their own reputations.¹²

The ghost reluctantly considers a journey with the spirit further into the Heavenly Country, asking if he will meet any distinguished artists, and is told:

But they aren't distinguished -- no more than anyone else. Don't you understand? The Glory flows into everyone, and back from everyone: like light and mirrors. But the light's the thing . . . They are all famous. They are all known, remembered, recognized by the only Mind that can give a perfect judgment.¹³

The ghost then learns that he and his artistic partisans on earth have been completely forgotten in the shifting currents of fashion. This is news too grievous to bear; he vanishes from sight after declaring:

Let me go! Damn it all, one has one's duty to the future of Art. I must go back to my friends. I must write an article. There must be a manifesto. We must start a periodical. We must have publicity. Let me go. This is beyond a joke!¹⁴

I love Lewis's description of catching "glimpses of Heaven in the earthly landscape," because it captures the experience many of us have had of seeing or hearing something so extraordinary that it inspired us, compelling us to spend time exploring the ramifications of that experience. Whether or not we knew it at the time, it was a glimpse or echo of Heaven breaking into our world because God made it. It was only a glimpse, and we claim too much if we claim that because we have seen some of God's beauty we can comprehend it in its entirety. From our finite perspective, we easily misunderstand what we think we see, and fall back on the sloppy, lazy definitions of beauty that are commonly part of our everyday speech. Too often, we are like the religious people described by Charles Williams who:

. . . liked their religion taken mild -- a pious hope, a devout ejaculation, a general sympathetic sense of a kindly universe -- but nothing upsetting or bewildering, no agony, no darkness, no uncreated light.¹⁵

The uncreated light of God is incomprehensible; His unmediated beauty is dazzling, blinding, causing John on Patmos to fall down as one dead. It is very likely to be other than what we expect, and in our sinfulness and pride, we can easily be drawn to something other than the genuinely Beautiful. Speaking prophetically of Jesus, Isaiah told us that "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him;"¹⁶ meanwhile, Paul tells us that "Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light."¹⁷ True beauty is not necessarily pretty. An artist of integrity will acknowledge and name the darkness in the world and within each individual, and be able to consider how light reveals darkness for what it is, and makes everything we think we know pale in comparison to it. If a musician is to create a sonic metaphor for the weird, monumental, otherworldly realities of the Book of Revelation, the bland formulaic musical fare of the average Christian radio station can't even begin to suffice. Far closer is the mesmerizing power of Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*. I have never performed this work without being moved very close to tears by it. That it does not fit the stylistic norms of beauty prescribed by the common practice of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, norms that continue to pervade much of our popular culture, does not negate the very real possibility that, on its own terms, it possesses a genuine beauty of its own, perhaps enhanced by the way in which it takes on darkness and convincingly overcomes it. I would argue, at least provisionally, that when Paul proclaims that, on the Last Day, every knee shall bow "and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father,"¹⁸ every tongue can be understood to include every musical vernacular, even those that do not provide instant gratification to the casual listener. The Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer Charles Wuorinen, a believer and self-described musical "maximalist," whose musical idiom is largely based on a very sophisticated handling of twelve-tone techniques derived from the school of Arnold Schoenberg, was asked in a radio interview about his use of those techniques for a large-scale setting of the first chapter of Genesis. After mentioning the current vogue among composers for neo-tonal, neo-Romantic writing, he said that he would not take the easy way out, declaring that, "Like David, I will not render unto the Lord that

which costs me nothing.”¹⁹ For Wuorinen, who declares that art as self-expression bores him, beauty is found in elegant intellectual manipulation of pitches and rhythms that results in “music that reveals its riches gradually rather than all at once and that rewards attention and effort.”²⁰

Returning to Lewis, I’m glad that he doesn’t claim too much for the power inherent in sharing those glimpses; while the heavens certainly declare the glory of God, they do not save us, and neither do our attempts to share glimpses of that glory save anyone. They can only point toward the One who will. God’s grace can turn them into icons, and can turn our very vocation into a sign, but neither our work nor our handiwork should ever be mistaken for Ultimate Reality. While for the Christian, work, worship and witness are all bound together, they should never be confused. The artist must understand that Art is not the Great Commission; neither the artist nor the Church should force it to be so, although from very different angles and misunderstandings, both camps repeatedly try.

Lewis makes some trenchant observations about artistic materials and tools. There is genuine beauty in the materials and media of art. A carefully imagined combination of pigments can make the ocean in an oil painting appear to be fathoms deep; a perfectly judged vibrato can make a violin seem to weep with emotion. Like the materials in God’s creation, artistic techniques are good; but like wood, stone and precious gems, these techniques easily become objects of idolatry. As Lewis says through the bright spirit, the focus must always be on love of the thing about which we tell, lest it become fixed on the artwork and the artist.

I am willing to argue that beauty itself, at least as the term is casually used in popular discourse, can be an idol. If you have ever heard a performer whose music-making indiscriminately applies a surface gloss to everything, be it a profound musical utterance, a simple folk-tune, or a witty musical joke, you have heard the kind of beauty of which I write. It is a beauty that draws attention to the tools of the trade, and reflects back on the performer rather than either shedding light on the work being performed, or granting a glimpse of something beyond the performance itself. It is the beauty of Narcissus in the ancient myth; as in the myth, one can lose one’s bearings and drown in it. In this sense, beauty can be the darkest and most fearsome of beasts. I strongly suspect that beauty is best understood as not being an end in itself. Rather, I believe that beauty is best achieved when it is least self-consciously sought. A performer who works at his or her craft with humility and integrity, looking to uncover and disclose to others the many-faceted nature of a work of art -- the sensuality of sound itself, the elegance of proportion and form, the drama and power of an inner journey, the sheer rightness of something perfectly suited to the purposes for which it is designed -- will produce beauty as a byproduct of the work being done. Indeed, the act of stewardly commitment to artistic work can be a beautiful thing in its own right. As Kevin Vanhoozer points out, a proper understanding of artistic

work as vocation rather than career is a key to pointing our artistry away from the false beauty of narcissism towards the other-directed beauty that plays out as much in our daily lives as in our craft.²¹

Lewis suggests another thing about beauty and the artist -- it is achieved in community. Lewis contrasts two kinds of community here. One is the pseudo-community to which the ghost returns when he rejects the offer of Heaven. It is the community of pamphleteering, partisanship and pride that is all too familiar in the business of art. The other is community in which there is no room for personal ego because the Glory comes not from any one person, but shines forth from above and reflects from person to person and back again towards its Source. One may well ask who makes up this community.²² I maintain that it includes all whom the Glory of God has transformed. Artists need each other, regardless of their specific discipline or particular aesthetic stance. Artists need the Church. They need its accountability, and they need to be anchored among people from all walks of life. Finally, the Church needs artists, not for utilitarian purposes, but because artists can illuminate aspects of both the human condition and the divine order that others don't as easily see or experience. The artistic task, including within it the quest for beauty, is ultimately not a trivial pursuit for a few, but is an integral part of the journey that all of us make toward the Ultimate Light and Beauty ahead.

As I stated at the outset, this is only a preliminary *essai*, an attempt to articulate realities and challenges met in the pursuit of beauty by performing artists. There is much more to add, and much to be reconsidered. If my remarks have encouraged better understanding among those who do not get up in front of others to make music, or if they can stimulate discussion, then my exercise in writing words will have been worth it.

CONCLUDING NON-ACADEMIC POSTSCRIPT

I close with a memory from 15 summers ago, of one of those experiences that defy my attempts to impose meaning on them. It was an inconclusive moment, capable of being taken in any number of ways by those who were present. I remain uncertain exactly why it still moves me, but I think it may say something about beauty as inspiration and icon, and about beauty as a byproduct of music-making.

Back in 1991, as an untenured assistant professor, I spent five weeks at a summer music festival in Tennessee, teaching and performing at a frenetic pace, while dealing concretely with my position as an inhabitant of two worlds. I had chosen to participate in this festival largely as an experiment to see if I could still function as a Christian in a pagan environment, after seven years at Wheaton College. That a similar experiment three years earlier had gone badly, leaving me with severe doubts about my ability so to function, made me all the more anxious about the outcome. In

the earlier situation, I had worried quite self-consciously and often about **MAKING A BIG IMPACT FOR GOD**. That summer ended with my unwitting involvement in major conflicts with leading personalities of the festival; as a result, I despaired of having made a contribution of any kind, and wrestled with guilt for having failed my Lord.

This time around, I determined to quietly practice the Presence, practice my craft, and let God alone worry about what my presence in the festival might do for His Kingdom. By summer's end, I was in one sense unsure of the result, since it was God's business, not my own. I had felt more freedom to speak about my faith in lessons with students, and in rehearsals and casual encounters with colleagues. Such moments seemed to come as an organic part of the conversation, and in making less of a conscious effort to control the moment, the moment seemed at times to take on a life of its own.

My final festival assignment was to perform in the chamber version of Aaron Copland's *Appalachian Spring*. I had been anxious about it, as the work is more difficult than it sounds, but the performance went well. The piano part ends some minutes before the actual end of the piece, at the conclusion of a section based on the Shaker tune, "Simple Gifts." The final portion of the score is a quiet hymn of thanksgiving. Reflecting on the beautiful colors coming from my colleagues in the violin section, and on evidences of God's grace throughout the summer, I found myself bowing in silent prayer at the piano bench. At the post-concert reception, the conductor, with whom I had had only the most casual conversations, spotted me. I thanked him for his fine work, and told him that the last part of the performance seemed quite special. "I was crying," he said. "Actually," I heard myself answer, "I was praying." "That's what moved me to tears," he replied. "I was listening to the sounds of the orchestra, and then caught a glimpse of you facing upward, and suddenly the whole scene became very moving. Sometimes, in moments like that, I say my own prayers. That's what it's all about."

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Paul Valéry, *Analects*, p. 213.
- ² C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, p. 81.
- ³ Johann Matthias Gesner, quoted in David and Mendel, *The Bach Reader*, p. 231.
- ⁴ Quoted by Kenneth Drake in *The Beethoven Sonatas and the Creative Experience*, p. 5.
- ⁵ See David Charlton, "Hoffmann as A Writer on Music," pp. 10-12, in E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Musical Writings*.
- ⁶ Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, p. 29.
- ⁷ See Joseph Horowitz, *Understanding Toscanini*, p. 102, for the actual quote and Wilhelm Furtwängler's response.
- ⁸ Quoted by R. Larry Todd, "Piano Music Reformed: The Case of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy," in ed. R. Larry Todd, *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music*, p. 193.
- ⁹ *Summa Theologica I*, Q. 39, art. 8, as quoted in Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action*, p. 162.
- ¹⁰ See Psalm 96: 9.
- ¹¹ Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, p. 80.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Charles Williams, *The Place of the Lion*, pp. 74-75.
- ¹⁶ Isaiah 53:2, NIV.
- ¹⁷ II Corinthians 11:14, NIV.
- ¹⁸ Philippians 2: 10-11, NIV.
- ¹⁹ Author's note: this quote is a recollection of an NPR interview, ca. 1989. I could not locate the exact quote, but in a March 2006 email message to the author, Wuorinen wrote that while he does not remember the specific interview to which I refer, it does sound like something he very well could have said.
- ²⁰ Michael Steinberg, program notes for Koch International Classics CD 3-7336-2 -- Charles Wuorinen: Genesis; Mass.
- ²¹ Kevin Vanhoozer, email to the author, March 18, 2006.
- ²² *Ibid.* My thanks to Dr. Vanhoozer for raising this question with me.