



Music Prayer

BARTH'S BALANCE OF DOGMA AND PLAY

Music prayer employs lyrics and notes in a unified expression of both the principles and the playfulness of our relationships with God.

Music prayer often expresses our cries and our praises to the Lord better than verbal prayer alone (Ps 55:1; 92:1). In music prayer the right-brain's creativity combines with the left-brain's sense of pattern. Literal meaning in the lyrics melds with emotional meaning in the harmonies. When we respond by singing along or clapping to the rhythm, prayer rises from voice and movement, as well as from reason. And when we are hearing with this fuller understanding, music prayer broadens our minds to the possibilities of God's response (Ps 81:1–10).

However, even church music is not prayer unless we offer it to God or receive it as though it is from him (Amos 6:4–6). We have all listened to Christmas carols, for example, as a seasonal backdrop, without noticing the person to whom they refer. On the other hand, music that is not strictly sacred can also stretch us beyond ourselves and cause us to reach for the “Other” that is God (Exod 15:11; Isa 55:8–9). This, too, can be considered prayer.

Both the sacred and secular music of Mozart provided just such a vehicle for multifaceted prayer throughout the work of theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968), a man whose life was engrossed with systems for articulating truth and establishing moral order.

Born in Switzerland to a theological lecturer at the university of Basel, Barth spent his own early academic career in Germany. He studied under the powerful liberal Protestant minds of the nineteenth century, but his theology began to change in 1911 when he entered the pastorate of a small Reformed church just over the border in Switzerland.

From that politically neutral vantage, he and his congregation listened in horror as the guns of World War I demolished countless lives and with them, nineteenth century idealism. To Barth's further dismay, many of his former professors endorsed Kaiser Wilhelm's war, claiming that God's will was being worked out in the emperor's war policy¹ (Isa 5:20).

Discouraged by the flimsy beliefs he had learned from these teachers, Barth began to search for a more robust system of understanding the institutional and individual sins that war had uncovered (Rom 3:21–23). He found the popular Protestant theology of Germany, where he was now teaching, too optimistic concerning humanity. It squared neither with the ugly reality of world war, nor with Scripture. Freedom from evil, Barth said, could not be attained in the human experience of truth, but only in God's self-disclosure (2 Cor 3:17–18).

In his prolific writings, Barth insisted that human pride corrupted even organized and personal religion, all of which fell under God's judgment (Rom 2:6–9). The 1930s confirmed his worst suspicions when a large segment of Germany's state church threw its support behind the Nazi movement. Millions of Jews were murdered while the church claimed that God's will was being

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (one-vol. ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1985), 163.

revealed through Hitler's plans. Barth's objections drove him out of Germany and back to Basel, where he continued to write.

Eventually, his writings would radically reform Protestant theology. His multivolume *Church Dogmatics* continues to be the most comprehensive systematic theology since the war. However for Barth, this ardent advocacy of right thinking was more than an academic endeavor. In Barth's mind, sound doctrine actually changed a person. "To know God, to have correct information about him, [was] to be related to him in a salvific experience."²

On the other hand, Barth understood that communing with God was not limited by how perfectly he could conceptualize God (Rom 11:33). To balance his focus on objective moral principles, Barth immersed himself in the music of Mozart though he confessed, "I haven't the vaguest idea of the theory of harmony or of the mysteries of counterpoint."³ Nevertheless, "I have for years and years begun each day with Mozart, and only then . . . turned to my *Dogmatics*. . . . How am I to explain this? In a few words perhaps this way: our daily bread must also include playing."⁴

Unlike Barth, Mozart revealed no doctrine in his music.⁵ Barth wrote, "[he] does not demand that [the listener] make any decisions or take any positions; he simply leaves him free."⁶ Barth understood Mozart's music to independently complement the "objective statements of the sacred texts . . . often in a very surprising way."⁷

Barth could receive Mozart in all his playfulness; he could even play along, because Mozart gave voice to "real life in all its discord."⁸ Freedom could be experienced in Mozart's music because Mozart disciplined himself not to play to the extremes, but called the listener "to see himself as the person he really [was]"⁹ (John 8:31–36). "What then came forth was always, and still is, an invitation to the listener to venture, just a little out of the snail's shell of his own subjectivity."¹⁰

In the midst of Barth's struggle to reintroduce the Continent's churches to unchangeable truth, he found himself moved to prayer by the very subjective tug of Mozart's music. "Does not every *Kyrie*," he wrote, "every *Miserere*, no matter how darkly foreboding its beginning, sound as if borne upward by the trust that the plea for mercy was granted long ago? . . . In Mozart's version . . . *Dona nobis pacem!* [*Grant us peace!*] is a prayer, but a prayer already answered"¹¹ (Ps 51:1; John 14:27).

² Ibid., 163.

³ Karl Barth, "A Letter of Thanks to Mozart," *Luzerner Neuesten Nachrichten* (21 January 1956) repr. in *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (trans. Clarence K. Pott; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 20.

⁴ Karl Barth, "A Testimonial to Mozart," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (13 February 1955); repr. in *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (trans. Clarence K. Pott; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 16.

⁵ Karl Barth, "Mozart's Freedom" (an address delivered at the Commemorative Celebration in the Music Hall in Basel, 29 January 1956) repr. in *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (trans. Clarence K. Pott; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 53.

⁶ Karl Barth, "Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart," *Zwingli-Kalender* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt, 1956); repr. in *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (trans. Clarence K. Pott; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 37.

⁷ Ibid., 39.

⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁹ Barth, "Mozart's Freedom," 54–55.

¹⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹¹ Ibid., 56.

Barth's instinct toward balancing cognitive and emotional understanding was not unfounded. Composing in the eighteenth century for the Catholic church, Mozart himself had challenged Protestantism that it was too much "in the head."¹²

Listening to music filled out Barth's work toward a durable set of doctrines. The music renewed a childlike *delight* in God's grace, and delight brought deep joy to the process of accurately *describing* God's grace. Music aired the longing of his heart in a way that systematics could not.

It can do the same for us. If, like Barth, we are motivated by good behavior and accurate systems that undergird our ideals, we can be tempted to allow the struggle against imperfection to become our only means of interacting with God (Eph 2:8–9). Through music prayer, we learn to play with God, not just study him. Music gives our ideals voice and hope, lifting our heads out of the fight for perfection and reminding us to delight in the process of getting to know God and being known by him (Ps 37:1–4).

If on the other hand, we tend too much toward play, planning the next experience, or partying to drown out hurt, praying through music can ground our gifts of happiness in principles of Scripture (Eph 5:18–20). Music can fill us with the durable joy we find in hearing God's song and singing it back to him. In music, we are able to maintain our childlike outlook, while discovering a deep delight that sustains us in the midst of pain as well as pleasure (Ps 5:11; 131:1–2).

Practice

1. Think about the kind of music that stirs you. Consider your church's style of worship, the tunes you listen to in the car, and music you own or request for gifts. Does this music provide a vehicle for prayer already? Perhaps you will wish to do a little research to find a style of sacred music that is more in keeping with your preferences than whatever your church uses. Or you might want to break out of your listening habits and try something different. In any case, find a piece of music that moves you.

2. Consider the lyrics. If you cannot understand the language, find a translation. Often classical church music is sung in Latin, but the program or liner notes include a translation for English-speakers. If not, you may be able to type the title of the piece into your search engine to find a translation online. Alternatively, you may find that translating the words yourself provides the interaction you need to truly consider the meaning. Even if they are in English, read them from the liner anyway, or write them down as you hear them. What is the composer saying? What is the context of the song? What do the words mean to you? What aspect of your own life do they touch upon? If the music is not sacred music, how do the words nevertheless express your thoughts to God?

3. Pray the words aloud (in English) without the music, listening to the meaning they evoke. Do they praise God's character, offer him thanks, beseech his presence or his promises, make confession? How is it that they speak for you at this time?

¹² Barth, "Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart," 26.

4. Listen to the music again. Hear the words, whether in English or not. Notice how your heart rate and breathing respond as you anticipate the music. Feel the meaning of the words working through the music.
5. Now close your eyes and listen to the piece. Resist the urge to understand or pick out specific words, instruments, or rhythms. Hear the whole music.
6. Listen a third time, allowing the piece and your response to speak to God on behalf of yourself and others. What are you saying to him? What might he be saying to you?
7. The previous steps begin with an analytical approach and move into hearing the whole music and allowing it to become prayer. Over time this process may grow less intentional, more organic. If you find the playfulness of your music time with God turning into background noise again, return to the piece-by-piece process and retake the music as your song to God.
8. Make a written note of how the music, the words, and your own petitions intersected as you prayed. Or share this with your small group or a spiritual friend.

Sample the Prayer

If your time is limited, take a significant piece of music with you throughout your day and repeat it at appropriate intervals, on the train or in your car as you commute, on your headset as you walk the dog or take your daily exercise, piped throughout the house as you dust. With each repetition, practice one of the listening steps (4–6) above. Choose another piece for the next day. Each day, notice how or when the lyrics and music return to you and speak for you or the circumstances in the non-listening portions of your day. What are you saying to God about the situation? What might he be saying to you?

Practice Together

Consider sharing your personal pieces of music prayer with your group. Members can take turns explaining how their music expresses their communion with God. Then as the group listens, they can play a recording of the piece or an excerpt so that the full impact can be felt by all.

Think about using music for a group prayer. Perhaps a musician in the group can lead everyone on a guitar or piano or perhaps a recording can be played. Consider the lyrics and the music separately and then together as above. If it is appropriate, the group may want to sing the piece together. After this time of meditation, share with one another how the words, the music, and your own petitions for the group intersected.

Consider

1. Why do you suppose Mozart thought Protestant prayer was “all in the head”? What differences in the prayer emphases of Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox traditions have you noticed?

2. Have you ever suffered life-altering disappointment? For Barth, the two world wars changed not only the way he thought about God, but the way he interacted with him. What impact did your experience have on your ability, desire, or understanding of prayer? If music played a role, how did it influence your conversations with God?

3. How does the nature of your prayer change as you become more and more familiar with the music and the lyrics? What are the advantages of familiarity in this kind of prayer? How do new pieces of music benefit your communion with God?

4. What is the impact of singing along with recorded or live music? Do you find it more or less difficult to pray with music if you hear it performed live? Why do you think this is? Have you ever performed music either as part of a worship service or in a concert? How does this influence the intimacy of the music as your prayer?

5. How does listening with another person or as a group modify the dynamic of prayer in music? How do watching and listening to other people's "interpretations" of the piece help or hinder you in offering the music to God? Hearing from him?

Study Further

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Foster, Richard J. Pages 110–11, 135–36 in *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992.

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