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Job 38:1–7; Psalm 147; Revelation 4:6b–11

IN PRAISE OF MUSICAL ETHICS

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

. . . .

when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

God tells Job that the first response to the great venture of creation was music. I suppose that would make music the oldest profession, older even than priesthood. Archaeology can't confirm quite this great an age for it, but, in human terms, it certainly goes far, far back. In recent years, we have read about 40,000-year-old flutes from Hohle Fels, made from the wing bones of griffon-vultures and from mammoth bones. Music-making is way old.

And it is, primordially, a shout of joy. It *originates*, according to Job, in a shout of joy. But it's not limited to that. It gives voice to everything in life, everything in our humanity from highest delight to deepest distress. Perhaps the morning stars and the heavenly beings know nothing but joy; perhaps that is all their music embodies. But not us. We are more complex than that and our music takes up the whole of our life.

Rainer Maria Rilke, in his *Sonnets to Orpheus*, famously wrote, *Gesang ist Dasein*, sometimes translated, rather cheerfully, “Singing is being.” But far from being an exaltation of our human music making, it is a criticism of it. In Stephen Mitchell's translation, the passage runs thus:

Song, as you have taught it, is not desire,
not wooing any grace that can be achieved;
song is reality. Simple, for a god.
But when can *we* be real?

Well, one obvious answer is that we can never be real *without* music. It is integral to who we are.

So integral, indeed, that we cannot avoid thinking of it as part of that “image and likeness” that God molded into us from the beginning. To be real means to grow into what we already are by God's gift, the very gift of *being*—and of being in God's image—that prompted the stars and the heavenly powers to sing and

shout for joy. Our own singing points toward God's participation in it. God, too, sings. That's why we sing.

Our readings today have stressed above all these joyful and thankful capabilities of song. They do an excellent job of that and don't need the preacher's help. I should like, instead, to draw attention to something else in them—something assumed more than explicit. There is, in music, a kind of ethos, even an ethic, a model for being human in the presence of God, a sense of direction for our musical life.

In the most fundamental sense, music is its own justification. Faced with the wonder of being, the supreme beauty and splendor of God's creation, what can we do but sing? But I notice, too, that what we have here are choruses: morning stars, heavenly beings, worshippers in the Temple, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders. Music arises out of community and creates community.

This doesn't rule out the contribution of individuals. We all know that musical gifts are not distributed evenly among humanity. Perhaps in the age to come things will be different, but here and now we have special people whom we call "musicians."

May you have much joy of your music. But, like all the gifts of the Spirit, this one is not given simply for personal delight. It is given to be shared with others, for God's gifts are given not to be consumed by the recipient alone but to be multiplied and shared. Music follows the pattern that Paul found to be at the very foundation of all human life—and the life of the church. All graces are given to be shared. And like the manna in the desert, they cannot be hoarded without rotting (Exod. 16:19-20).

In a world that sometimes seems to know only conflict between the rights of the individual and the power of the larger whole, music is one sphere of life where the necessary interchange between the two is still vibrantly alive. Those who are most blessed with musical gifts offer them to the larger community. Those barely blessed at all with such gifts receive them with gratitude and give thanks for them. Neither manages very well without the other.

Music is a model of human community; it even has a power that can bring it into being and maintain its life. Those of us who participate in making music together know what I mean, but even the listener who would never herself dare try producing music has at least an inkling of it. To be stirred by music, to be moved by it, brings the listener into harmony with a broader community. It creates a communion of hearts and minds.

In the ancient Greek Church, this experience even supplied a word for its opposite, for the moments when we fall short of true musicality: *plemmeleia*. It is normally translated "sin." But it is richer than that; only half-hidden beneath its surface is its etymology: "singing the wrong note." Our disharmonies, our

breaking of the music, our willful refusal to sing with the choir serves to sum up what goes wrong with human society. The renewal of music is a sign of what can go right.

Music is a mystery. Not just a puzzle, but something that we begin to know only as it transforms us. Like the ancient mysteries, we come to know it only by experiencing it, by following the path of initiation deeper and deeper into it. As we do, we find in it a life-giving grace.

I don't mean to make light of the challenges that musicians are facing just now in a time of ecclesiastical decay in the West and financial peril across the world. I mean rather that you are not just victims. You have at your disposal gifts essential to the restoration of the human community.

Our music is not just a tradition to be maintained. It is not just a profession to be defended. It is a gift that musicians make to the renewing of the world. May your gifts and your labors be blessed with exactly such results. And the morning stars will sing together with you, and all the heavenly beings once again shout for joy.

The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, edited and translated by Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage International, 1989) 230-31.