

The Disappearance of Melody

There is a detail on the logo of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that we may never have noticed. The logo depicts Christ the Good Shepherd leading and protecting his faithful (symbolized by the lamb) and exercising his authority (the staff). The detail that may have escaped our attention is the musical instrument he is holding on his right hand—the panpipes. The panpipes evoke the image of the kind of shepherd who leads by going ahead of his sheep and moving them from towards himself by pulling at their heartstrings. As a pastor of souls, the Good Shepherd is one who draws the sheep to himself and into the sheepfold freely rather than forcefully—e.g. by beating or hurling stones at them. The dimension of the paschal mystery captured by this bucolic image is that of the risen Christ drawing his disciples to himself by the melodious symphony of the truth (the panpipes) and inviting them to rest in the shade of the “tree of life” in paradise opened by his redeeming Cross.

Sir Roger Scruton, an English writer and social critic who specialised in aesthetics and political philosophy, once pointed out that there is a connection between the monotonous repetition typical of most of contemporary culture’s popular music, and addiction. Scruton argued that most young people don’t even notice this connection because they demand too little of themselves. Their easy-going ways of listening to music renders them incapable of emancipating themselves from the enslaving rhythms and oppressive chord progressions that surround them. Next time you are listening to Electronic Dance Music or Billie Eilish or Lady Gaga, ask yourself whether you are enjoying their cyclical beats and monotonous melody lines because they are reinforcing and driving you deeper into the inescapable loop of addiction that contemporary culture has already immersed us into, or whether they are really and truly transporting you into higher and freer psychological and spiritual spaces.

Melodies are not merely catchy tunes. In general, melody refers to a musical line or phrase expressed in terms of motion. They typically have an internal logic of their own depending on the particular theme a composer may want to express. In great symphonies with several movements such as those written by composers like Tchaikovsky, the melodies tell a story. Depending on how sensitive a person is to sound, when they hear a well-structured melodic line, they might also feel a corresponding empathetic movement within themselves. Good melodies have range, character and movement, and they tell some sort of expressive story.

In Namibia, in southwestern Africa, the Himba tribe is one of the few that counts the birth date of the children not from the day they are born or conceived but the day the mother decides to have the child. When a Himba woman decides to have a child, she goes off and sits under a tree by herself, and she listens until she can hear the song of the child who wants to come. And after she’s heard the song of this child, she comes back to the man who will be the child’s father, and teaches him the song. When the child is conceived, they sing the song of the child as a way of inviting the child. When she becomes pregnant, the mother teaches that child’s song to the midwives and the old women of the village, so that when the child is born, the old women and the people gather around him/her and sing the child’s song to welcome him/her.

This story conjures up in our minds the powerful idea of the story or “pre-written melody” assigned to each person even before they are born or conceived. It reminds us that the world as a whole is not just made up of inanimate stuff but of the coming together of the songs and stories of a host of characters, both human and divine—stories and songs that with time, coalesce into one huge epic symphony.

[...] we can compare the cosmos to a “book” – Galileo himself used this example – and consider it as “the work of an author who expresses himself through the ‘symphony’ of creation. In this symphony one finds, at a certain point, what would be called in musical terms a ‘solo’, a theme entrusted to a single instrument or voice which is so important that the meaning of the entire work depends on it. This ‘solo’ is Jesus.

Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 13

The imagery of the Good Shepherd’s panpipes comes back to mind. Our faith teaches us that each of us has a divine vocation. Each of us is called to play or dance along to the tune of the melody written for us before we were conceived in their mothers’ wombs (cf. Jeremiah 1:5). Creation itself as a whole, has its proper melody and step-pattern. If we have forgotten our theme-songs or sound-tracks within this whole, it may be because we have gone astray like sheep without a shepherd. We have turned, everyone to his own way (cf. Isaiah 53:6). If contemporary melodies have become bland or non-existent, it may be that, in the grand scheme of things, we have lost our existential bearings ... and this because, way back when, we lost track of the music of the good shepherd which alone contains within itself, the overarching meta-narrative that gives full meaning to our individual mini-narratives.

It is the Good Shepherd who recapitulates in himself the melodies of both earth and heaven, creation and the Creator, work and Author, flesh and Spirit. He IS the centre of the cosmos and of history. All history is His Story.