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Song and Dance and Faith and Prayer: The Case of J. S. Bach's MAGNIFICAT

I.

This lecture will deal with the subject of words and music. It will examine what words can do for music and, more importantly, music for words -- and both, in the case of a sacred text, for believers and unbelievers.

Words are needed as a vehicle for the human voice -- unless the singer is content to sing, and the composer to compose, just hummed notes or nonsense syllables. The singer has the obligation -- which not all singers fulfill -- to enunciate the text clearly and with a sense of its meaning. Some singers quail before the meaning of some texts. The question is: should they sing them? They may have to impersonate someone who does believe the message of those words. What will not do is slovenly diction, disrespect for the words -- treating them as though only the voice of the singer (or the vocal line of the composer) matters. Singers who have no respect for the words -- their sound *and* their meaning -- should confine themselves to singing "lalala" or "mimimi," but preferably not in public.

What can music do for words? That is a vast subject. A good poem is not necessarily made better by being set to music. Different composers can set the same text quite differently. Sometimes the same composer sets the same text in different ways at different times. There are such examples in Bach's Passions, cantatas, and motets, and in his Latin and German Magnificats. For example, he set even a famous phrase like "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" differently in the *Matthew Passion* and in Cantata No. 70 (Watch ye! Pray ye!), where it gets quite cursory treatment in a tenor recitative about heavenly aspirations and the body as the jailor of the spirit. The *Matthew Passion* is the more memorable, and no wonder: there Bach gave it his full attention. He was setting Holy Scripture. It comes in its biblical context, as part of a

pronouncement by Jesus when he finds his disciples sleeping, instead of, as he had asked them, watching with him while he prayed. So Bach illustrated and musically embodied it, imitated, if you will, the willingness of the spirit and the weakness of the flesh.

I do not have time to discuss the question of singing translations -- it would require at least a whole hour to itself. We can, if you want to, discuss it in the Question Period.

But there is a more profound question, and one that worried church authorities and reformers: Does music detract from the word of God? Popes and church councils have at various times issued edicts about how sacred texts should be set: for instance, not floridly, in a display of the voice, but on the principle of "one syllable one note." Martin Luther, who was very musical, was determined not to let the devil have the best tunes and welcomed music into the church service and himself wrote hymns. He said that the notes make the words come alive. The Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli, who was even more musical, banished music from his church as too distracting; there was the vanity of the singers and the concentration of the congregation on their performance rather than on the Word. Calvin came somewhere in the middle. He allowed the sober singing of metricized psalms.

Augustine had been torn in two directions. In chapter 33 of Book X of his *Confessions* Bishop Augustine of Hippo had this to say about sacred words and music, or music in church:

> The pleasures of the ear did indeed draw me and hold me... but You have set me free. Yet still, when I hear those airs, in which Your words breathe life, sung with sweet and measured voice, I do, I admit, find a certain contentment in them, yet not such as to grip me too close, for I can depart when I will. Yet in that they are received into me along with the words which give them life, such airs seek in my heart a place of no small honour, and I find it hard to know what is their due place. At times indeed it seems to me that I am paying them greater honour than is their due — when, for example, I feel that by those holy words my mind is kindled more religiously and fervently to a flame of piety because I hear them sung than if they were not sung: and I observe that all the varying emotions of my spirit have modes proper to them in voice and song, whereby, by some secret affinity, they are made more alive. It is not good that the mind should be enervated by this bodily pleasure. But it often ensnares me, in that the bodily sense does not accompany the reason as following after it in proper order, but having been admitted to aid the reason, strives to run before and take the lead. In this matter I sin unawares, and then grow aware.

> Yet there are times when through too great a fear of this temptation, I err in the direction of over-severity — even to the point sometimes of wishing that the melody of all the lovely airs with which David's Psalter is commonly sung, should be banished not only from my own ears, but from the Church's as well: and that seems to me a safer course when I remember often to have heard told of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, who had the reader of the psalm utter it with so little modulation of the voice that he seemed to be saying it rather than singing it. Yet when I remember the tears I shed, moved by the songs of the Church in the early days of my recovered faith: and again when I see that I am moved not by the singing but by the things that are sung — when they are sung by a clear voice and proper modulation — I recognize even more the usefulness of this practice. Thus I fluctuate between the peril of pleasure and the profit I have found: and on the whole I am inclined — though I am not propounding an irrevocable opinion — to approve the custom of singing in church, that by the pleasure of the ear the weaker minds may be roused to a feeling of devotion. Yet whenever it happens that I am more moved by the singing than by the thing that is sung, I admit that I have grievously sinned, and then I should wish rather not to have heard the singing....

Time marched on, and with composers like Monteverdi and Bach church music began to add instruments and to dance.

II.

Now let us look at the specific case of the *Magnificat*. The story, the text, comes from the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Here we have it in the wording of the Latin Bible, the Vulgate, which was kept even in Bach's Protestant church for especially festive services. The pregnant Virgin, Mary, is visiting her cousin Elisabeth, whose pregnancy is sufficiently advanced for the babe in her womb -- who will become John the Baptist -- to leap for joy at the approach of the unborn Saviour. And Elisabeth blesses Mary and the fruit of her womb. Then comes Mary's song of praise. The Magnificat became a liturgical part of the daily Vespers. Bach wrote his Magnificat first for Christmas 1723, his first year in Leipzig. That first version was in E-flat and was interlarded with Christmas songs. The later and deservedly better-known version is in D. It is leaner and sticks to the pure text of Luke. Bach gives the opening number, verse 46, to a five-part chorus and festive orchestra, with three trumpets, flutes, oboes, and kettledrums. I won't play the

whole of it, just enough to give you an impression. (Ex.1)

The next verse, the next number, is given to one of the solo sopranos: "And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my saviour." Again, let us hear a part of it. (Ex. 2)

The next verse, minus the two last words, is given to the other solo soprano, with an oboe d'amore to emphasize the humility (or low estate) of the handmaid whom all coming generations will call blessed. Listen to those two linked numbers, especially the cunning preparation of the boisterous entry of the generations and their proliferation. Some of the cunning lies in the way the solo voice leads up to it, some in the build-up of the chorus, starting with eighth notes, then splitting into sixteenths, and ending with a final flourish for all the voices together. It makes you think. I think Bach means to make you think, not just to be exhilarated. (Ex.3)

After all that tumult comes the solo Bass with verse 49 or No.5: "For he that is mighty hath done to me great things...." Is there something incongruous in these words in the mouth of a booming Bass? Clearly he is not impersonating Mary -- despite the pronoun "*mihi*" "to me." Does the incongruity -- if that is what it is -- affect the message? To me that aria is one of the less thrilling, but not necessarily for that reason, in an otherwise consistently compelling work; but I know that there are people who are particularly fond of it. It has such a jolly bounce. Is that just a matter of taste?

It is clear why that verse had to go to the Bass: because of its mention of the "might" of the Lord, the words "*qui potens est*". Bach was that literal. Might belongs to the mightiest voice. (Ex. 4) The later word "power" or "might", "*potentia*," goes to the chorus, in No. 7.

There will be no further distractions of that sort in this work. With No. 6 begins what I call the revolutionary sequence. It extends to Nos. 7,8, and 9, and possibly -- this is discussable -- to No. 10. It speaks, it sings, it dances of God's mercy for them that fear him and his humbling and punishment of the proud. It is very explicit -- musically as well as verbally. But it is not a call to revolutionary action. God does it all.

No. 6 is a lovely Siciliano, in 12/8 meter, for Alto and Tenor and two flutes and muted

strings, singing of God's mercy on generation upon generation of those that fear him. The "fear," the words "*timentibus eum*," get very special musical treatment. (We will have copies of the notation in the Question Period, for those who are interested in it.) The "*timentibus*" starts harmlessly enough, but then builds up to a cry of a diminished fifth (on $\overset{\wedge}{2}\text{-}\overset{\wedge}{6}^{b}$!) and just before the peaceful close a trembling in the Tenor. He quakes as he descends. The instruments maintain the peace, almost an air of Paradise, throughout. (Ex. 5)

No. 7 is another loud chorus, with trumpets and kettledrums, on the power of the Lord's arm and his scattering of the proud. Their dispersal is described quite graphically before the challenging shout on "*superbos*" (the proud), in a chord as startling as the "Barrabas" in the *Matthew Passion*. It is followed by a shocked silence and then, and only then, for "the imagination of their hearts," the "*mente cordis sui*," a broad *Adagio*, a double cadence, first on b-minor, then on the relative D-major. (Ex. 6).

The electrifying Tenor aria, No. 8, in f$^{\#}$-minor, elaborates the Lord's putting down the mighty, with one of Bach's favourite, strings only, whiplash accompaniments; and then there is the audible lifting up of the humble. (Ex.7) That verse is the revolutionary heart of Mary's song. The outcry against the proud prepared it, with its interlocking tritones in the diminished seventh chord.

Relief comes in No. 9, which is given to the Alto and two flutes. The flutes hug each other in mellifluous parallel thirds and sixths, occasionally imitate each other, and at the end have a most eloquent, a downright punitive, perhaps even vindictive silence. Why? Because "He hath filled the hungry with good things and the rich he hath sent away <u>empty: *dimisit inanes*</u>." The alto also sounds gleeful about it. They play

$\overset{\wedge}{1}\ \overset{\wedge}{2}\ \overset{\wedge}{3}\ \overset{\wedge}{4}\ \overset{\wedge}{5}\ \overset{\wedge}{3}\ \overset{\wedge}{4},$ or do re mi fa so mi fa

$\overset{\wedge}{1}\ \overset{\wedge}{7}\ \overset{\wedge}{1}\ \overset{\wedge}{2}\ \overset{\wedge}{3}\ \overset{\wedge}{1}\ \overset{\wedge}{2},$ do ti do re mi do re

then NOTHING. Only the continuo sounds a discreet 1 below; an empty plate with a vengeance, if you will. (Ex. 8)

After that bit of wit, that dangling silence, that broken-off cadence -- and Bach can speak

volumes in a bar, even a beat -- after those four numbers against the proud, powerful and rich, and for the lowly and humble, there comes, at last, the traditional tune of the Magnificat, the 9th Psalm Tone, also known as the *Tonus Peregrinus*. Here it is given, wordless, but instantly recognizable, to two oboes playing in unison and slow motion, while a trio of upper voices delivers No. 10: "*Suscepit Israel, puerum suum...*": "He hath helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy." A quiet and most moving quartet. (Ex. 9)

It leads to the movement most of you know and have sung, the fugue "*Sicut locutus est,*" the reference -- or appeal? -- to God's promise to our fathers, to Abraham and his seed. (Ex. 10)

And that ends the Virgin's song in Luke. But in the Vespers liturgy this canticle is followed by the doxology, the "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit." It is in common time, 4/4, dominated by triplets, and then, with a switch to 3/4 for the words "*Sicut erat in principio...,*" "As it was in the beginning...", we return to the *musical* beginning, once more with all the instrumental splendor of trumpets and kettledrums and flutes and oboes. And a single, lapidary "Amen" concludes the work. (Ex. 11)

III.

It is an amazing work. So rich, and so economical. It has no da capo arias, no symmetrical structures that take time to repeat their first section after a contrasting middle section. The whole thing takes half an hour or less. Just think of the very different pace of the *Matthew Passion*, whose da capo arias, especially in the second part, where they interrupt the trial and execution, can at times strike one as excessively ruminative, so that one may wish that Bach would get on with the story. The burden of getting us back to it, and to the biblical text, then always falls on the Evangelist, with his recitativic account of what happened. Nothing *happens* here: God has done it all, and the baby will be born in due course. The listener is kept constantly on his toes, so to speak, and never has to be dragged back to the action from a soulful excursion into commentary,

beautiful music, but with texts that can strain credulity and patience. True, the Passion scores with interspersed chorales, hymns known to all, with great dramatic and homiletic effect, inserted at suitable moments in the plot, bringing in the congregation. And they, of course, have texts that are next in distinction to those of the Gospel itself. But the Magnificat is pure, unalloyed scripture.

IV.

The musico-rhetorical devices *serve* the text, are its handmaiden if you will, willingly subordinated to the message. But what uncanny skill she displays! Bach's music makes words come alive that have suffered from misuse or neglect or inattention.

There is the wordless eloquence of instruments and there is the eloquence of silence -- the appalled silence after the outcry against the proud, the silence of the flutes leaving an empty space in the last bar of the "*Esurientes*" (for the rich that are "sent away empty") where they refuse to conclude their cadence; or the oboes with the Magnificat tune, as wordless *cantus firmus* in the "*Suscepit Israel.*"

V.

What about the "dance" in my title? The song and *dance*? Take the slow, rocking "*Et misericordia*" in 12/8 meter, with its muted strings. You could dance a slow waltz to it. You could cradle a child with it. Is it not perfect to bring home the peace of the Lord's kindness or the motherliness of the Virgin? Yes, but there is a condition: fear of the Lord -- which, as we know, is "the beginning of wisdom"; and so we have the special attention Bach gives to the words "*timentibus eum.*"

The "*Esurientes*" dances too, in slow duple meter with some syncopation. The flutes lead; and then the singer comes in with his (or her) "*implevit,*" the plenitude, the *filling* with good

things, the liberality, the generosity of the Lord, with melismatic flowing sixteenths, three and a half bars of them, 53 of them on one syllable.

There is something *physical* in such flow, especially if it is, as here, highlighted by off-beat, detached, wordless monosyllables in the flutes. This physicality has a message -- just as, for instance, David's dance before the Ark had a message. It is up to us to listen to those messages. When the instruments dance, there is a message in that, too, as there is in the human voice when it makes the very words dance. In the Alto and Tenor duet "*Et misericordia*" the music rocks and sways against the "natural" or prosaic declamation of the words: instead of "*Et misericordia*" we get "*et misericordia*." Such verbal and physical rhetoric (you might almost call it body-language) does seem to me to do something that mere words cannot do. If it does not inculcate faith, it does at the very least suspend disbelief.

VI.

If you sing it, do you express that faith? The music certainly fixes the words in the mind and will keep bringing them back to you -- often out of the blue, when you may be thinking of something else or nothing in particular or, most interestingly, in answer to a question in your mind.

What about the "*prayer*" in the title? If you utter such words, are they a prayer? If you are incapable of prayer, or have been put off by some "free," preachy, opinion-conveying, non-liturgical prayers in church, is it not a good thing to *sing* what you cannot say? Like the stammerer who cannot get a sentence out but can sing it? Or is such singing a mere substitute that gives you an illusion of piety, or, as Augustine put it, a *feeling* of devotion?

If you refuse to make the message your own, even for the duration of rehearsals or performances, you may have to refrain from singing it. But by refusing to sing, or even to listen, you are depriving yourself of the bulk of the best of Western vocal music. Some people have

suggested changing the texts, some have even done it. I may as well say here that I am against doing that. (In the case of Bach's *St. John Passion* it would mean changing the *Gospel* text).

It just is a fact that the world would be immeasurably poorer without church music -- and that deprivation would affect unbelievers too, perhaps them especially; likewise believers who may be shaken and alienated by what goes on in their churches. They have the refuges: the concert hall or recordings or choir rehearsals.

There they can magnify the Lord to their heart's content. Or they can, if they like, belittle or insult or deny him. Bach just makes that much harder. It was no empty formula or flourish when he ended all his works with the letters S.D.G.: *Soli Deo Gloria*: "to God alone the Glory."

No. 1. Magnificat anima mea dominum
Magnifies my soul the Lord

No. 2. Et exultavit spiritus meus
And rejoiced my spirit
in Deo salutari meo
in God my Savior

No. 3. Quia rexpexit humilitatem
For he has regareded the humility
ancillae suae;
of his handmaiden
ecce enim ex hoc
for, behold, from henceforth
beatam me dicent
blessed shall call me

No. 4. omnes generationes
all generations

No. 5. Quia fecit mihi magna
For he did to me great things
Qui potens est et sanctum nomen ejus.
who is mighty, and holy his name

No. 6. Et misericordia a progenie in progenies
At his mercy from generation to generation
timentibus eum.
of them that fear him.

No. 7. Fecit potentiam in brachio suo,
He made strength with his arm,
dispersit superbos
he scattered the proud
mente cordis sui.
in the thinking of their hearts.

46 (And Mary said.) My soul doth magnify the Lord.

47 And my spirit hath rejoiced

in God my Saviour.

48 For he hath regarded the low estate

of his handmaiden:

for, behold, from henceforth

all generations shall call me blessed.

49 For he that is mighty hath done to me great things;
and holy is his name.

50 And his mercy is on them that fear him
from generation to generation.

51 He hath shewed strength with his arm.

he hath scattered the proud

in the imagination of their hearts.

No. 9. Esurientes implevit bonis
The hungry he filled with good things
et divites dismisit inanes
and the rich he dismissed empty.

53 He hath filled the hungry with good things;

and the rich he hath sent empty away.

No. 10. Suscepit Israel puerum suum
He protected Israel his servant
recordatus misericodiae suae
mindful of his mercy

54 He hath holpen his servant Israel.

in remembrance of his mercy;

No. 11. Sicut locutus est ad patres nostros
As he spoke to our fathers,
Abraham et semini ejus in saecula.
To Abraham and his seed down the ages.

55 As he spoke to our fathers,

to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

No. 12. Gloria Patri, gloria Filio
Glory be to the Father, glory be to the Son,
Gloria et Spiritui Sancto
Glory be also to the Spirit;
Sicut erat in principio,
As it was in the beginning,
et nunc, et semper
and now, and always
et in saecula saeculorum.
down the ages.
Amen.
Amen.

Glory be to the Father and the Son,

and to the Holy Ghost;

As it was in the beginning,

is now, and ever shall be,

world without end.

Amen.