

Psychotherapy

Music, Psychotherapy, and the Soul: Thoughts

on Singing Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*

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The author draws upon the experience of singing Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* to explore the feeling states aroused by religious choral music, especially the Mass. He relates them to working with patients in psychotherapy around issues of dying, death, the "oceanic feeling" of the religious experience, the human quest for knowledge, and yearning for an eternal, intelligent, and all-knowing entity in the ultimate reality. (*Journal of Psychiatric Practice* 2011;17:204–207)

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For several months, the Choral Arts Society of Cleveland has been preparing Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* for performance with the Suburban Symphony. I sing second bass. Although I don't have the timbre of a basso profundo, I can hit the low notes pretty well and, with enough practice, quite accurately. I'll be one of a hundred or so singers from Choral Arts and two excellent church choirs, and I find it one of the most thrilling works I have sung. The astounding progression of surprising chords, the startling rhythms with syncopation a century ahead of its time, the evocation of intense emotional states—all reach something deep inside, that words can't touch. As I sing, I sometimes wonder why Freud never showed much interest in music¹—such an intense expression of things that go beyond words.

Not that it's easy. Whether from deafness or perversity, Beethoven drives singers beyond the top of their range or at breakneck speeds in his intensity. One has to know the music; there is no room for hesitation. Phrases of music now come into my mind at all hours of the day and night. That will continue for weeks after the baton drops on the final chord.

I grew up with music. My mother was a professional-grade pianist, and my minister father's churches rang with the hearty singing of the predominantly Welsh choristers who lived in our coal-mining valley. I sang with my college glee club and all-college octet,

and with great choruses and orchestras ever since. My wife and I were founding members of the Choral Arts Society of Cleveland 36 years ago. It has always been a great means of expression.

A preponderance of great classical choral music is religious. Many composers have tried their hand at a *Stabat Mater*, *Te Deum*, *Ave Maria*, or Gregorian chant—all derived from the Roman or Orthodox Christian liturgy. Others have written glorious settings of the Psalms, the story of Elijah, or the Jewish Sacred Service. But the towering edifice of them all is the Latin Mass with its variant, the Requiem Mass.

The *Missa Solemnis* follows a fairly standard sequence of the Kyrie (a plea for mercy), the Gloria (praise to God), the Credo, the Sanctus, and the Agnus Dei (lamb of God) that ends in "dona nobis pacem" (a plea for peace.) Requiem masses add the terrifying *Rex Tremendae*, descriptions of the Last Judgment, and desperate pleas for mercy and salvation. At the heart of all of them is the Credo—a recitation of the fundamental beliefs of the Christian churches, which in English is the Apostles' Creed.

I often wonder why I find all parts of that music so moving. But the Credo sections of the masses are the most cognitively problematic for me (and the most musically challenging part of the *Missa Solemnis*). When I find myself in a church service, I can no longer bring myself to recite the Apostle's Creed with the congregation; it goes against my integrity to express solemn and literal belief in the declarations of the Credo. I do believe that Christianity at its best, drawing on Jewish traditions, brought about profound forward steps in human civilization through its message of love, kindness, respect for every person, forgiveness, peace, and concern for all humankind. That message is as sorely needed now as it has ever been. Have the currently surging Ayn Rand fanatics ever heard of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount?

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But the Credo is something else. This is not the place for me to detail my issues with literal Christian doctrine or ecclesiastic Christianity. I just can't say the creed as a personal statement of belief. Yet I sing it with great feeling. It's obviously not the words that do that, unless they somehow evoke my family-related religious roots. What catches me is the powerful emotion in the music. Music seems to go straight from my ear to the temporal lobe to the limbic system, perhaps enhanced by memories of the music in my early life. (Freud himself did acknowledge the role of musical phrases in evoking associative memories² and dreams.³) These experiences set me to pondering what deep forces in the human psyche resonate with religious expression, especially when they are reinforced by the musical pathway into the mind/brain?

These forces are no stranger to our work in psychotherapy. Religious themes are a very important part of the issues we explore. We as therapists must approach them with respect and care, but we cannot ignore them.⁴ Themes of conscience are particularly laden with religious overtones: the sadistic conscience that torments some people strikes with the viciousness of the *Dies Irae*—day of wrath of the Last Judgment. That their religion may offer them a path to confession, contrition, and forgiveness matters little to our psychotically depressed or obsessional patients. With some patients, we can work together to find the roots of that sadistic conscience in punitive or seductive parents, teachers, clergy, or nuns—in others, the roots lie in their own childhood fantasies of hateful aggression and self-disgrace. In time, patients may develop a more mature conscience and impulse control that guides and restrains harmful behavior rather than gleefully punishing it after the fact. A more mature conscience separates the thought from the deed so that raw impulses can be dealt with in the light of consciousness rather than through unconscious, defensive distortions. Likewise, in the other part of the superego, the ego ideal, the patient may come to more realistic and attainable expectations of him or herself that lead to success and satisfaction rather than failure and shame.

Religious practices include extremes of idealization, adoration, and awe (as in the *Gloria* and *Osanna* passages of the Latin mass). Music is especially conducive to feelings of high exaltation, along with the solemn sense of being in the presence of

something holy, pure, and transcendent—the *Sanctus*. With this comes an attitude of worship, merging with others in the congregation as part of something that is larger than our petty selves. We mortals relinquish our own self-centered narcissism and individuality in sharing in a collective grandeur that extends far beyond ordinary human failings and mortality—a grandeur that is timeless, eternal, unbounded. For a little while we may feel refreshed, cleansed and whole. (Charismatic leaders know how—and use music—to arouse the same exalted feelings to much less holy political ends, but that is for another discussion.)

As we know from the common idealization of the therapist in a state of transference, idealization can be an impediment to confronting very real problems. Idealization of any sort can cloud one's understanding and makes one ripe for disillusionment. For seriously religious people, the great conundrum is the one posed by the saying, "If God is good, he is not great; if God is great, he is not good." Adoration gives way to disillusionment when horrific natural or human tragedy strikes: how could an omnipotent, loving deity have permitted this? The faithful may ultimately respond with abject submission—"it is God's will." Or in disgust they may reject their God. In psychotherapy, we must deal with the very human state of ambivalence that is likely to affect every important relationship we have. If we are angry with someone we love, we are better off facing it and dealing with it alongside our love (not dissimilar to the Judeo-Christian concept of forgiveness), rather than denying, repressing, displacing, or using any of a host of other defense mechanisms to avoid our anger at the expense of formless anxiety and unhappiness. Religious thinking can be an impediment or an aide to successful resolution of internal conflict in psychotherapy, depending on how open it is to ambiguity, ambivalence, and living in real relationships in an imperfect world.

Religious rites of passage offer great meaning for people of faith. Birth, coming of age, marriage, illness, and death all are laden with potential issues for psychotherapy, which can be very helpful. But the religious ceremonies that attend these passages are a natural part of the culture, and they offer structure, comfort, support, and a sense of something sacred and ennobling. They also offer an opportunity for valuable, supportive counseling if the clergy is attuned to what is helpful. My father was good at

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that, beloved by his flock, which undoubtedly influenced my career choice despite its different path.

Death is the ultimate challenge to us all, and much choral music speaks to that. Not all Requiems are full of hell fire and brimstone. Eschewing the Latin mass, the Brahms German Requiem is a deeply moving musical setting of consoling, uplifting music from the Old and New Testaments, Jewish and Christian. The Fauré Requiem is gentle and comforting despite its Dies Irae. The Credo of Beethoven's Missa Solemnis ends with the jubilant promise of a future life eternal. The ensuing Sanctus and Osanna melt into an ethereal Benedictus—"blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." The final "dona nobis pacem" seems as if all humankind is crying out for peace.

In contrast to the Mass, psychotherapy offers no promise of eternal life, only the hope of attaining some wisdom about the end of life as we know it. In therapy we can try to understand the fear of death and work through the mourning for the loved ones who leave us and whom we, in turn, will ultimately leave. The fear of death often comes down to a fear of the process of dying, rapidly or slowly as it may be—involving damage, pain, and losing our vital faculties one by one. Our true knowledge of the state of being dead is a void, almost beyond comprehension. The suicidal patient's fantasies of experiencing peace, freedom from torment, or wretched triumph over hated others are all a denial of nothingness, the vanishing of consciousness, and the disappearance of a future. So is the dying Christian's belief in Heaven.

One Jewish patient who had always dreaded death finally revealed that her fantasy of being dead consisted of being in a glass box where she could see others but could not touch or cry out to them. After a short silence, she asked—as if it were an unrelated question—"Did I ever tell you that I was an incubator baby?" She had been born 6 weeks prematurely, and the family story was that her mother rarely visited her and then picked up the wrong baby when it was time to take her home. Until her therapist pointed out what her direct associations had linked, she did not connect this with her fantasy of being not dead but alive in a glass box, utterly unable to reach out to another human being. Without having realized it, she had feared an uncanny repetition of a state in which she would relive the primordial first weeks after birth, deprived of the undifferentiated oneness

of the newborn with her mother. Eventually, preparing to terminate therapy by mutual assent, she warned the therapist that she could not say good-bye. In her place in the waiting room at the last session was a plant—a species called a Wandering Jew, according to her note of thanks for their work together. Many years later, dying rapidly of newly discovered cancer, she called her psychiatrist for one last session in hospital and they talked about saying good-bye to her family—and to each other.

Yearning for a future life after death has pervaded mankind's religions as far back in human life as we know. For some the fantasy is very concrete and the soul, or individual identity, is preserved ("My Father's mansion has many houses"; reunion with loved ones; happy hunting grounds; seventy virgins). For others the individual soul is recycled or dissolves into a great universal spirit from which new life is drawn, human or otherwise, without knowledge of the past identity (Nirvana; reincarnation; the final scene of the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*). To me this merger feels like a more extreme form of the loss of oneself in holy worship, with a sense of exaltation, oneness with something holy, and peace (freedom from inner conflict?) I'm reminded of the "oceanic" feeling in Freud's writings on religion, a dissolving of individual identity in the great universal and sacred state of being.⁵ It is akin to what we hypothesize exists in the newborn's (or fetus's?) dawning consciousness as it experiences intimacy with its mother, not differentiating self from other or the great world outside.

The uniqueness of Homo sapiens is knowledge—the forbidden fruit of Adam and Eve. The more we learn about the universe—from the sub-atomic level to the intricacies of the human organism to the remote edges of the universe and the mind-bending hypotheses of quantum mechanics—the more we want to know. Our conscious intelligence carries no first-hand experience of the world before we were born, but it is hard to convince ourselves that we will have no awareness of what will happen in the world after we die. We imagine it in our movies and novels, and we speculate on what our grandchildren will experience, but there is no way to live it first hand. Could Beethoven or Mozart or Bach have remotely conceived of how their music would be electronically reproduced ceaselessly around the world centuries later?

A 90-year-old man always appears in his psychiatrist's waiting room with a book—a current, serious, challenging book that he reads and clearly grasps. He is in remarkably good health for his age despite a major depression, at the core of which is a fear of death. It grieves him that death is not far away for him or his wife. He dreads being alone or her being alone without him to help meet her needs. But he also dreads the unknowable state of being dead. He has no religious convictions about an afterlife or an all-knowing deity. The idea appalls him that his intelligence will cease. It seems inconceivable and he has no feeling of understanding it.

In my exhilaration in singing the *Missa Solemnis*, there is a sense of being merged into something greater than myself, an oceanic feeling. But I know that, unlike this patient, I find it hard to resist believing that there is a transcendent intelligence and order in the universe and beyond, that there is some sentient entity in some sort of reality who knows what it's all about. It's not hard to see that wish as the primary narcissism of the early, emerging sense of self, projected to the larger order—a human creating God in his own image or that of his parents. But it is also the product of a mature mind with a long lifetime of experience. It makes one think that there has to be something grand and eternal that senses and thinks and remembers—doesn't intervene—but knows all. Narcissistically, it's incon-

ceivable that one's own state of knowing or the human race's state of knowing will ever be extinguished and unknown. Is this simply a manifestation of the denial of a hard truth? Is this nonagenarian patient just facing a harsh reality and burdened with his loss and grief? Is there something in his early life that conditioned him to think this way? Fully resolving such concerns is way beyond the capacities of psychotherapy, but the burden of experiencing them can be lightened by recognizing them as part of the existential human condition.

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