

Music

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“Sing to the Lord with harp, with the harp the voice of a psalm. With trumpets and sound of a horn; make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King.” Psalm 98:5, 6

From ancient times music has been with us. In the beginning of Genesis we read of Jubal, “he was the father of all those who play the harp and flute.” From the time of the first recorded history there have been musical instruments, giving expression to the affections of the heart. By the time of the Israelitish Church music was woven into the fabric of everyday life. There were songs sung by those who dug wells (Numbers 27:17), by those harvesting the crops (Judges 9:17), and by those treading upon grapes to make wine (Isaiah 16:10).

Music was also used with the military: the walls of Jericho fell with the sound of trumpet and shouting (Joshua 6:4-20); Gideon caused confusion in the enemy’s camp by breaking pitchers and blowing upon trumpets, thus defeating the Midianites (Judges 7:18-20). Music was also used to express joy for the conquering heroes, returning from war (I Samuel 18:6; I Kings 1:29); or to celebrate family festivities, such as the return of the prodigal son (Luke 15:25).

It was natural then, for music to become an integral part of worship. After the Lord saved the Children of Israel by leading them across the Red Sea, Miriam glorified God by dancing and singing to Jehovah (Exodus 15:21). On the hem of Aaron’s robe there were bells. While their sound enabled the people to know he was performing ritual duties within the covered tabernacle, it also produced music that was associated with worship.

By the time of the Lord’s birth, hymns were sung by congregations. After the celebration of the last supper with His disciples, “when they had sung a hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives” (Matthew 26:30). The Lord sang a hymn! Even as He was facing a certain painful death, He joined with His disciples to give voice to music.

Music has power. Its flowing melodies and harmonies play a special part in our lives. It can move us in a unique way. It can give expression to our feelings. It can lift us out of ourselves as our affections are elevated by it.

Nothing illustrates this better than the story of Saul and David. Saul, who came under the influence of an evil spirit causing him to behave insanely, needed something to change him. His servants suggested someone could play the harp. David was called upon. “And so it was, whenever the spirit from God was upon Saul, that David would take a harp and play it with his hand. Then Saul would become refreshed and well, and the evil spirit would depart from him.” (I Samuel 16:23)

Swedenborg saw something of this in the spiritual world where some spirits were soothed by stringed instruments and as it were “transported out of themselves” (SE 1996). Listening to the music affected their behavior, and it is said that “they were in such a state that they could neither think nor do anything whatever of evil, because the delight they experienced penetrated their interiors” (SE 1997).

Is this not what occurred with David and Saul? Indeed, the Writings of the New Church state that those who might act in evil ways can be “carried out of themselves, when they hear instrumental music, and can perceive as it were, heavenly sweetness” (SE 2112). This is how David soothed Saul - by playing it awakened a “confession of the Lord, and evil spirits could not endure it, therefore David by the harp caused the evil spirit to depart from Saul” (AR 276; cf AC 4627; SE 2403).

What is the nature of music that it has so much power, that it can so change a person, albeit it temporarily, that he ceases doing evil? Why do we make music such an integral part of our lives?

It is because music, both instrumental and vocal, is an eloquent expression of affections. “It is known that some natural affections are expressed by certain kinds of musical instruments, and other by certain other ones, and that when a fitting harmony joins in accord, they actually excite these affections” (AC 8337:2; emphasis added).

There is an intimate connection between the spiritual and natural worlds in music. We are aware that when we read the Word we can feel the closeness of heaven, the presence of the Lord. A like thing occurs with music. Harmonious sound and all its varieties correspond and stimulate the joy and gladness of the heavens (AC 8337:2). This is because all music is conceived in the spiritual world and covered with an earthly form expressing spiritual feelings. So when we hear, or participate in, music, our deeper feelings are stirred (AE 1185).

Singing can have that effect in a special way. When we sing there is a freeing effect upon us, “for in song gladness breaks forth as it were of itself into sound” (AC 8261:2). When we sing all our good feelings are allowed to emerge, to arise out of our hearts. Who can remain angry or apathetic while singing? Something comes alive when we sing. It lifts up our feelings, causing them to “break forth out from the heart . . . and show [themselves] intensely in [their] life” (AR 279). This is why, when we are feeling happy, it is natural for us to sing along with the radio, whistle, or just hum a favorite tune. That good feeling inside bubbles over, expressing the happiness that simply cannot be contained (see AC 418).

This is not to say that music always has such an uplifting effect. All emotions can be expressed by music, exalting and depressing. Sometimes music that could be termed dirge-like resonates with a person’s state, affirming and even comforting them.

What of music in the heavens? Many conceive of angels strumming harps (AC 3749). Well, harps are there, along with all other instruments. Angels play and sing, for the purpose of

expressing the innermost joy they have in interacting with others, and it brings them happiness (AR 616; CL 6:5). It is entertainment that perfectly suits their affections for the Lord and their neighbors. On certain festival days grandstands are erected so that there can be concerts all day long (CL 17:2). The finest musicians and composers on earth can not compare with the quality of music that exists in even the lowest heavens. For the angels whose use it is to produce music have developed beyond what we enjoy in this world.

Not only are special days set aside in heaven for music, but it is with them every day. Early each morning the angels are awakened by the sweetest sounds (CL 17:2). It flows into their very souls preparing them to enter with a new energy into their daily activities.

Singing also serves a greater purpose in heaven than entertainment. In each society people are formed into choirs. Often these are not strictly “singing” choirs, but groups of people who speak together as a cohesive unit – a form of chanting. Apparently by speaking together they learn to more effectively support and complement each other. Indeed, Swedenborg heard a noise from a choir of newcomers which was rather harsh and uncoordinated. As they practiced they perfected the sound, learning to live together in harmony (AC 2595).

What a wonderful way to prepare people for harmonious living! We can see how this might work because when people sing together they are led into a one. To produce pleasant music each person has to improve the quality of his or her voice, but also blend in with others. Singing in a choir, or with a congregation, gives one the freedom to contribute one’s all, playing a unique and vital role, while at the same time losing oneself to the overall effect of the choir. What a perfect picture of heaven! And perhaps this is why we are taught that celebration of the Lord in the heavens is, for the most part, done by such choirs (AC 8115).

Functioning as a choir is also an ideal for human society. Each person has unique qualities, an individual use that cannot be duplicated. As each grows there it can strengthen the whole. Harmonious behavior can exist when each tries to support others, bringing out what is best in them. We see this when many contribute their talents to reach a decision or work on a project. (And we should not be surprised when there are difficulties in working together – that uniqueness is a challenge for people to adjust to others!)

In the church, we have the opportunity to make special use of music. The organ can reproduce a wide array of musical sounds, and represents spiritual good. It can prepare us to worship with its flowing melodies (AC 419).

Then, when we sing about the Lord, His kingdom, and the church, we are drawn into affectional ties with them (AC 8261:3). It is no wonder we feel so strongly about our hymns. Many stir us, uplift us. Even ones that are not masterpieces hold meaning or memories for us, because they lead us to the Lord. “Make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King.” All the good affections we have are embodied in the words and tunes, enabling us to express our affection for what is heavenly.

There is also a great benefit in singing together in church. Where else can we publicly express such feelings without feeling slightly uncomfortable? Even if our voices are not well trained, or we do not always sing on key, we still positively contribute to the overall effect. And the effect can be inspiring. It draws us out of the worries or preoccupations that might have filled our minds when we entered the church. Singing focuses our attention on the Lord, on worshiping Him.

And the angels are with us in song (see SS 108; AR 279). When we set the letter of the Word to music, as the Psalms were, a communication is effected with the heavens themselves. Think of the anthems which are so beautiful: "Thou wilt show me the path of life. . . . Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. . . . Blessed is the man who confideth in the Lord." They lift up our spirits, moving us to sense the Lord's presence - His mercy, His love.

Music is a gift of the Lord to us. It draws us out of ourselves in times of trouble. It is a source of comfort. We relax with it and are lifted up by it. When we sing, we contribute to the perfection of the whole. Let us then sing to the Lord with harp and the voice of a psalm. With trumpets and the sound of a horn, let us make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King. Amen.

Lessons: I Samuel 16:14-23
 Psalm 98
 TCR 745: 1, 2

I Samuel 16

¹⁴But the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and a distressing spirit from the LORD troubled him. ¹⁵And Saul's servants said to him, "Surely, a distressing spirit from God is troubling you. ¹⁶Let our master now command your servants, *who are* before you, to seek out a man *who is* a skillful player on the harp. And it shall be that he will play it with his hand when the distressing spirit from God is upon you, and you shall be well."

¹⁷So Saul said to his servants, "Provide me now a man who can play well, and bring *him* to me."

¹⁸Then one of the servants answered and said, "Look, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, *who is* skillful in playing, a mighty man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a handsome person; and the LORD *is* with him."

¹⁹Therefore Saul sent messengers to Jesse, and said, "Send me your son David, who *is* with the sheep." ²⁰And Jesse took a donkey *loaded with* bread, a skin of wine, and a young goat, and sent *them* by his son David to Saul. ²¹So David came to Saul and stood before him. And he loved him greatly, and he became his armorbearer. ²²Then Saul sent to Jesse, saying, "Please let David stand before me, for he has found favor in my sight." ²³And so it was, whenever the spirit from God was upon Saul, that David would take a harp and play *it* with his hand. Then Saul would become refreshed and well, and the distressing spirit would depart from him.

Psalm 98

- 1 Oh, sing to the LORD a new song!
For He has done marvelous things;
His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory.
- 2 The LORD has made known His salvation;
His righteousness He has revealed in the sight of the nations.
- 3 He has remembered His mercy and His faithfulness to the house of Israel;
All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.
- 4 Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth;
Break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises.
- 5 Sing to the LORD with the harp,
With the harp and the sound of a psalm,
- 6 With trumpets and the sound of a horn;
Shout joyfully before the LORD, the King.
- 7 Let the sea roar, and all its fullness,
The world and those who dwell in it;
- 8 Let the rivers clap *their* hands;
Let the hills be joyful together before the LORD,
- 9 For He is coming to judge the earth.
With righteousness He shall judge the world,
And the peoples with equity.

TCR 745

[Angelic spirits explaining some of the joys of heaven to newcomers:]

1. Here there are days of festivity appointed by the prince, to relieve the mind of the fatigue induced by their eagerness to excel in service. On these days there are musical performances and singing in public places, and outside the city, sports and stage shows. In the public places are raised platforms surrounded with lattice-work of interwoven vines, from which hang clusters of grapes. Within the lattice-work in three tiers sit the musicians with stringed and wind instruments, high toned and low toned, loud and soft; and at the sides are singers of both sexes, who delight the citizens with most beautiful hymns and songs, choruses and solos, in varied succession. This music continues on these festive days from morning till noon, and then till evening.

[2] 2. Moreover, every morning from the houses around the public places there are heard the sweetest songs of maidens and young girls, which resound throughout the whole city. Each morning the song, by musical modifications or modulations, expresses a particular affection of spiritual love; and this is perceived in the singing as though this affection were actually present. It flows into the minds of the hearers, and awakens in them a corresponding emotion; for this is the nature of heavenly song. These singers say that the sound of their singing is inspired and given life from within, and is raised to joyous exaltation according to its reception by the hearers.