

# 'BLESSED TENSION'

## Barth and Von Balthasar on the Music of Mozart

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I HAVE NEVER MUCH LOVED the music of Mozart. This might be because I seemed to practise *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* endlessly at school, but his music has always seemed to me overly saccharine and predictable. Like an *éclair* or candy-floss, it seems too sweet and full of air: not a satisfying meal, still less a staple, though pleasant from time to time, no doubt. I certainly did not think his music an interesting source for investigation into theology and spirituality.<sup>1</sup> For these reasons, it has surprised me how frequently theologians trumpet Mozart's work as theologically revealing and spiritually nourishing.<sup>2</sup>

Among these are two of the theological giants of the Christological (and thus Trinitarian) renewal of the twentieth century: Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Both shared an intense love of Mozart's music. Indeed that love was probably what cemented their friendship,<sup>3</sup> a friendship which marked von Balthasar's theology indelibly—although it cannot be said to have had a reciprocal effect on Barth's, perhaps because Barth was eighteen years von Balthasar's senior.<sup>4</sup> One might go

<sup>1</sup> Actually, a number of journals of spirituality have published interesting articles on Mozart's music: Reginald Ringenbach, 'Mozart, chemin de l'absolu', *Vie spirituelle*, 126 (1972), 17-31; Jacques Colette, 'Musique et sensualité: Kierkegaard et le Don Juan de Mozart', *Vie spirituelle*, 126 (1972), 33-45; Günter Putz, 'Die Liebe hört niemals auf: Theologische Anmerkungen zu Mozarts Musik', *Geist und Leben*, 64 (1991), 447-459; Carl de Nys, 'Mozart, musicien de l'incarnation', *Études*, 374 (1991), 73-82.

<sup>2</sup> I therefore tend to agree with Francis Watson, when he writes that 'a musical taste that confines itself to Mozart can hardly be taken seriously' in his article, 'Theology and Music', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 51 (1998), 435-463, at 454.

<sup>3</sup> For their friendship, see the references in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, translated by John Bowden (London: SCM, 1976), and in Elio Guerriero, *Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Milan: Paoline, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> On the differing relations between the theologies of these two men, see most recently John Webster, 'Balthasar and Karl Barth', in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, edited by Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 241-255. See also John Thompson, 'Balthasar and Barth', in *The Beauty of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, edited by



*Karl Barth*

so far as to say that von Balthasar's theology is a brilliant rewriting and amplification of Barth's, captivated by its overriding and thoroughgoing Christological perspective.

Barth and von Balthasar were, and remain, not alone among theologians in their love of Mozart. Such diverse figures as Søren Kierkegaard,<sup>5</sup> Hans Küng<sup>6</sup> and the recently elected Benedict XVI can also be numbered among the writers on theology and religion who are captivated by Mozart. One of the few snippets of personal information widely known about Benedict XVI is that he plays the piano (in addition to

being fond of cats!). We are told that he prefers the works of Beethoven and Mozart, and he writes of how, during his upbringing,

... Mozart thoroughly penetrated our souls, and his music still touches me very deeply, because it is so luminous and yet at the same time so deep. His music is by no means just entertainment; it contains the whole tragedy of human existence.<sup>7</sup>

Bede McGregor and Thomas Norris (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1994), 171-192, as well as Ben Quash, 'Von Balthasar and the Dialogue with Karl Barth', *New Blackfriars*, 79 (January 1998), 45-55.

<sup>5</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, 'The Immediate Erotic Stages or The Musical Erotic', in *Either/Or*, part 1, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987), 45-135.

<sup>6</sup> See Hans Küng, *Mozart: Traces of Transcendence*, translated by John Bowden (London: SCM, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, translated by Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997), 47. For his reflections on the theology of music, see his 'On the Theological Basis of Church Music', in *The Feast of Faith*, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 97-126. It is interesting to note that the then Cardinal Ratzinger organized the first ever performance of Mozart's music in the Vatican: the Berlin Philharmonic under Herbert von Karajan played Mozart's Coronation Mass in St Peter's Basilica at the mass for the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul in 1985.

## Barth and Mozart

That the current successor to St Peter can make such statements about Mozart only underlines the question: what do all these theological types see in Mozart's music? How can Barth happily say, for instance,

I even have to confess that, if I ever get to heaven, I would first of all seek out Mozart and only then inquire after Augustine and Thomas, Luther, Calvin and Schleiermacher.<sup>8</sup>

Or, again, in a piece couched as a letter to Mozart:

... it may be that when the angels go about their task of praising God, they play only Bach. I am sure, however, that when they are together *en famille*, they play Mozart and that then too our dear Lord listens with special pleasure.<sup>9</sup>

Barth exalts Mozart not only above all other musicians, but also above his chief theological sources.<sup>10</sup> He even suggests that the Roman Catholic Church should beatify Mozart!<sup>11</sup> What does he see in this music?<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, translated by Clarence K. Pott (Eugene, Or: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 16. This volume contains all of Barth's occasional pieces (mostly speeches) dealing with Mozart; the original German texts date from 1955/6, a year of celebration for the bicentenary of Mozart's birth.

<sup>9</sup> Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> In Barth's study at Bruderholzallee 26 in Basel—as Barth himself was wont to point out—the portraits of Mozart and Calvin hung at the same height. For a photograph see Busch, *Karl Barth*, 419.

<sup>11</sup> A suggestion he put at an ecumenical meeting of bishops and theologians on 28 February 1968, at which he and von Balthasar spoke. See the letter to Kurt-Peter Gertz in Karl Barth, *Letters: 1961-1968*, edited by Jürgen Fangmeier and Hinrich Stoevesandt, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1981), 284-285.

<sup>12</sup> There has been a certain amount of work on Mozart in the thought of Karl Barth. Most thorough is David Mosley's (as yet) unpublished thesis: 'Parables of the Kingdom: Music and Theology in Karl Barth'. He would disagree with my suggestion here that Barth's thought on Mozart sits uncomfortably with his stated aversion to natural theology. He suggests on the contrary that Barth's reflections on Mozart's music do not suggest an about-turn regarding natural theology, but rather point to his 'Christian theology of nature'. Also interesting is the comparative thesis by Philip Stolzfuß, 'The Theological Use of Musical Aesthetics in Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth and Ludwig Wittgenstein' (unpublished thesis, Harvard University, 2000), which contains a great deal of information on Barth's musical life (145-155), although he seems erroneously to think that von Balthasar was a student of Barth's (140). There are also a number of essays of interest: Sander van Maas, 'On Preferring Mozart', *Bijdragen*, 65 (2004), 97-110; David J. Gouwens, 'Mozart among the Theologians', *Modern Theology*, 16 (2000), 461-474; Colin E. Gunton, 'Mozart the Theologian', *Theology*, 94 (1991), 346-349; Theodore A. Gill, 'Barth and Mozart', *Theology Today*, 43 (1986), 403-411; Jacques Colette, 'Joy, Pleasure and Anguish: Thoughts on Barth and Mozart', *Concilium*, 95 (1974), 96-104; and Arthur C. Cochrane, 'On the Anniversaries of Mozart, Kierkegaard and Barth',

It seems that what Barth hears in Mozart's music is the sound of a good and ordered creation (his main texts on Mozart in the *Church Dogmatics* are found in the volumes discussing this doctrine), an ordered creation which sings and points towards its Creator:

Why is it possible to hold that Mozart has a place in theology, especially in the doctrine of creation and also in eschatology, although he was not a Father of the Church, does not seem to have been a particularly active Christian, and was a Roman Catholic, apparently leading what might appear to us a rather frivolous existence? It is possible to give him this position because he knew something about creation in its total goodness that neither the real fathers of the Church nor our Reformers, neither the orthodox nor the Liberals, neither the exponents of natural theology nor those heavily armed with the 'Word of God', and certainly not the Existentialists, nor indeed any other great musicians before and after him, either know or can express and maintain as he did. In this respect he was pure in heart, far transcending both optimists and pessimists.<sup>13</sup>

This order in creation seems to be marked by balance, and is entirely without exaggeration. This resonates with some of my own reservations about the predictable sweetness of Mozart's music mentioned earlier:

This implies that to an extraordinary degree his music is free of all exaggeration, of all sharp breaks and contradictions. The sun shines but does not blind, does not burn or consume, Heaven arches over the earth, but it does not weigh it down; it does not crush or devour it. Hence earth remains earth, with no need to maintain itself in a titanic revolt against heaven. Granted, darkness, chaos, death and hell do appear, but not for a moment are they allowed to prevail .... What occurs in Mozart is rather a glorious upsetting of the balance, a turning in which the light rises and the shadows fall, though without

*Scottish Journal of Theology*, 9 (1956), 251-263. Barth's theology of Mozart's music has been teased apart from a feminist perspective by Heidi Epstein in *Melting the Venusberg: A Feminist Theology of Music* (London: Continuum, 2004), 71-77. She does not consider von Balthasar's musical thought, nor the relation between the two.

<sup>13</sup> *Church Dogmatics: Volume III: The Doctrine of Creation: Part III: The Creator and His Creature*, 298. Most of Barth's substantive comments on Mozart are to be found in volume III of the *Dogmatics*, or else in his little volume referred to above.

disappearing, in which joy overtakes sorrow without extinguishing it, in which the Yes rings louder than the ever-present No.<sup>14</sup>

Barth seems to extol a placid Mozart; yes always trumps no. He does not emphasize the darkness of the late symphonies, or of some of the quartets. His Mozart composes the music of an ordered universe, evoking life before the Fall, and providing after the redemption a 'parable of the kingdom'. Mozart, for Barth, bespeaks a natural theology—for all that Barth often sounds so hostile to such a thing. For what else is natural theology but the affirmation of the evidence of God's handiwork in creation and its fruits?

There is a question which I shall leave unanswered, but which surely has not escaped you. How can I as an evangelical Christian and theologian proclaim Mozart? After all he was so Catholic, even a Freemason, and for the rest no more than a musician, albeit a complete one. He who has ears has certainly heard. May I ask all those others who may be shaking their heads in astonishment and anxiety to be content for the moment with the general reminder that the New Testament speaks not only of the kingdom of heaven but also of *parables* of the kingdom of heaven?<sup>15</sup>

One might describe Barth's natural theology of music as 'Arian'. Just as Arius believed that Christ enjoyed some kind of intermediate status between the divine and the human without really being either, so the music of Barth's Mozart seems to occupy some half-way position between natural and revealed theology: it is neither the kingdom itself, nor is it not the kingdom, but something between the two. As such, perhaps, it invites us into the contemplation of the reality it bespeaks.

### **Von Balthasar and Mozart**

What about von Balthasar, Barth's good friend and great admirer?<sup>16</sup> What did he think about Mozart's music?<sup>17</sup> The Roman Catholic

<sup>14</sup> Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, 53, 55 (slightly altered).

<sup>15</sup> Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*, 56-57.

<sup>16</sup> The best, constantly updated (if rather hidden), bibliographical source for secondary literature on von Balthasar is to be found at <http://mypage.bluewin.ch/HUvB.S.Lit>. Other websites worth consulting are those of the Balthasar Stiftung (<http://www.balthasar-stiftung.org>) and of the Centro di Studi di Hans Urs von Balthasar in Lugano (<http://www.aventicum.ch>). For a recording of two interviews (in French) with von Balthasar by Marcel Brisebois, follow the links at <http://www.dieu-parmi-nous.com/r.videos.html>. For recordings of Karl Barth: <http://pages.unibas.ch/karlbarth/album1.html>.

theologian has a more developed view of music in general, though he wrote less dealing explicitly with Mozart than Barth did.<sup>18</sup> Mozart seems to act as something of a cipher for von Balthasar's thoughts on music. This is probably because Barth was not really a music theorist himself, although he sang baritone and played the viola and violin—by his own admission 'discreetly, and in the background'. Von Balthasar, on the other hand, was a fine pianist and had had some musical education, both practical and theoretical. This is what his nephew, the Jesuit bishop Peter Henrici, says on the subject:

As von Balthasar himself testified, his childhood and youth were pervaded by music, for which he had a quite extraordinary talent. He had perfect pitch, so that, after the death of Adrienne von Speyr, he was able to give away his stereo system on the grounds that he did not need it anymore: he knew all the works of Mozart by heart; he could picture the score and hear the music in his mind.<sup>19</sup>

And as von Balthasar relates himself:

<sup>17</sup> There is an increasing amount of scholarly reflection on the place of music and Mozart in von Balthasar's thought. See Stephan Lüttich, 'La muse qui est la grâce: A zene Hans Urs von Balthasar Gondolkodásában', *Vigilia*, 70 (2005), 508-517 (I am grateful to Fr Lüttich for kindly making the German original of his article available to me); Mark Freer, 'The Triune Conversation in Mozart: Towards a Theology of Music', *Communio*, 32 (2005), 128-136 (I am grateful to Emily Rielly of *Communio* for kindly making a MS copy of this article available to me); Sanders van Maas, 'On Preferring Mozart', *Bijdragen*, 65 (2004), 97-110; Manfred Lochbrunner, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar und die Musik', *Communio* [German edition], 29 (2000), 322-335; and PierAngelo Sequeri, 'Antiprometeo: Il musicale nell'estetica teologica di Hans Urs von Balthasar', in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Lo sviluppo dell'idea musicale* (Milan: Quodlibet, 1995). This Italian translation not only includes Sequeri's essay, but also his useful notes to von Balthasar's original text. Sequeri's essay can be found in various other (slightly different) forms: "'La musa che è la grazia": Il musicale e il teologico nei 'prolegomeni' all'estetica teologica di H. U. von Balthasar', *Teologia*, 15 (1990), 104-129; 'Prometeo e Mozart: Il teologico e il musicale in H. U. von Balthasar', *Communio* [Italian edition], 113 (1990), 118-128. There is also his lengthy contribution, 'Mozart tra i teologi' in Andrea Torno and PierAngelo Sequeri, *Divertimenti per Dio: Mozart e i teologi* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1991), 40-165. And see the interesting reflections of Francesca Murphy, 'The Sound of the *Analogia Entis*', *New Blackfriars*, 74 (1993), 508-521, 557-565. I am grateful to Wolfgang Müller for the text of the lecture, 'Theologie und Musik im Gespräch', given in Luzern, 20 May 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Von Balthasar wrote two texts explicitly on Mozart: 'A Tribute to Mozart', *Communio*, 28 (2001), 398-399, and 'The Farewell Trio', in *Explorations in Theology: Volume III: Creator Spirit*, translated by Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 523-533. There are reflections on Mozart, however, throughout his works.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Henrici, 'A Sketch of von Balthasar's Life', in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, edited by David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 7-43, here 8-9.

From these first tremendous impressions of music, Schubert's Mass in E flat (when I was about five) and Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* (when I was about eight), I spent endless hours on the piano. At Engelberg College [Benedictine] there was also the opportunity to take part in orchestral Masses and operas. However, when my friends and I transferred to Feldkirch [Jesuit] for the last two and a half years of high school, we found the 'music department' there to be so noisy that we lost our enjoyment in playing. My university semesters in poor, almost starving, post-war Vienna were compensated for by a superabundance of concerts, operas, orchestral Masses. I had the privilege of lodging with Rudolf Allers—medical doctor, philosopher, theologian, translator of St Anselm and St Thomas. In the evenings, more often than not, we would play an entire Mahler symphony in piano transcription .... When I entered the Jesuits, music was automatically over and done with.<sup>20</sup>

Mozart, surprisingly perhaps, entered von Balthasar's life relatively late. By his own admission, however, Mozart became particularly important to him and, along with Bach and Schubert, formed something of a musical constellation. He tells us in the speech, 'What I Owe to Goethe', made when accepting the Mozart Prize in Innsbruck in 1987:

My youth was thoroughly musical; I had an elderly lady as a piano teacher—she had been a student of Clara Schumann. She introduced me to the romanticism whose last stars I was able to listen to during my studies in Vienna: Wagner, Strauss and above all Mahler. All this ended however, when Mozart entered my ear, and he hasn't left it until this day. For all that Bach and Schubert have become dearer to me in old age, Mozart has remained the immobile polar star around which the other two orbit (the Big and Little Bears).<sup>21</sup>

Von Balthasar was not only an avid listener and a performer of music, but also something of a composer. We learn from a letter to his father from Feldkirch that he was composing a setting of the Mass.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, we are unlikely ever to hear his music; von Balthasar

<sup>20</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *L'institut de Saint Jean: genèse et principes* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1986), 29.

<sup>21</sup> Guerriero, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 396, my translation.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from von Balthasar to his father, end of June 1930, cited in Guerriero, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 33.



*A portrait of Mozart by Doris Stock,  
1789*

never published his compositions, and left an embargo prohibiting the publication of works not already brought out by himself.<sup>23</sup>

Music, especially the music of Mozart, was an important component of many of von Balthasar's friendships.<sup>24</sup> This point applies not only to his friendship with Karl Barth, but also to that with Adrienne von Speyr, his longtime inspiration and colleague. Von Speyr debated for a long time whether to follow a career in music or in medicine. And among the sixty or so published volumes that von

Balthasar took down from von Speyr in dictation (most of which are rather hard to find) is this vision of Mozart:

(Can you see Mozart?) Yes, I see him. (She smiles.)

(Does he have a prayer?) Yes, I see him praying. I see him praying something, maybe an Our Father. Simple words, learned in his childhood, which he prays knowing that he's speaking with God. Now he is standing in front of God like a child who brings his father everything: pebbles from the street, special twigs and little blades of grass, and once even a ladybird. For him all these things are melodies, melodies he brings to the good Lord, melodies which come to him suddenly, in the midst of prayer. When he's stopped praying—no longer kneeling and no longer folding his hands—he sits at the piano or sings just like a child. He no longer knows quite whether he is playing the good Lord something, or the good Lord is making use of him to play something to them both at the same time. There is a great dialogue between Mozart and the good Lord

<sup>23</sup> I am grateful to Jacques Servais SJ for confirming this in a conversation, as well as for his hospitality, and that of Sylvester Tan and the students at the Casa Balthasar, 29 June 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Interesting amongst these 'musical friendships' are those with Joseph Fraefel (co-founder of Johannes Verlag), Alois Grillmeier (a brilliant Jesuit patristics scholar), and Josef Pieper (an eminent Thomist). See Lochbrunner, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar', 330, for references.



which is like the purest prayer, and this whole dialogue is made up of music alone.

(And what about the people there?) He loves people. He shrinks from them and loves them at the same time. He shrinks from them a little as children shrink from tough children who might break their toys; but Mozart is actually more worried about the good Lord's toys being broken than for himself. He loves people because they are the good Lord's creatures, and he is glad that he can delight them with his music. In his own way he would like to put the question of God before them, even in his funniest pieces.

(He doesn't distance himself from God in his art?) No. Certainly there are instances where the art takes priority in a way, but it remains enveloped in God. It is as though he had a lasting pact with the good Lord.

(What about sadness?) That's there too. For he knows that God meets with sad and gloomy people as well, and that it is difficult to carry the hardships of the world. There are times when he feels as though there were a mighty weight on his soul; but then he takes everything into his music, and he must point out, through his music, everything which concerns God and humanity.

(And Don Giovanni?) When he depicts pride he does not enter into it; he has no part in it. When he depicts sensuality then he does enter in a little bit, for of course sensuality is close at hand. But even his sensuality is so childlike that it actually never turns rotten.<sup>25</sup>

Music was clearly also important for von Balthasar's apostolate. On the eve of the entry of a group of students from his chaplaincy in Basel into the Society of Jesus, he 'listened with them to a complete recording of *Don Giovanni* and explained the whole work as a ritual of initiation, as a parallel to the nocturnal journey of the soul through the turmoils of passions and sin'.<sup>26</sup> He would also, on Saturday evenings at the chaplaincy, play complete operas by Mozart on the piano from memory for the students.

<sup>25</sup> Adrienne von Speyr, *Das Allerheiligenbuch I* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1966), 310-311, my translation.

<sup>26</sup> Kuno Rüber, 'Sehnsucht nach Führung, Zwang zur Revolte', *Basler Nachrichten*, 189 (13 August 1988), 41. My translation from Lochbrunner, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar', 325.



*Barth and Von Balthasar together*

### **Von Balthasar's Musical Thought**

Von Balthasar's first published work was in two parts, under the general title, *The Development of the Idea of Music: The Search for a Synthesis on Music*. The first part deals with the development of music using three successive building blocks: rhythm, melody and harmony. The second part seeks to develop a philosophy of music under three headings: structure, borders and values.<sup>27</sup> Mark Freer speculates on the various Trinitarian (and indeed Christological) analogies one might draw up using the three elements of rhythm, melody and harmony, although von Balthasar does not do so himself.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Mozart only appears once in this very early work; he had yet to become von Balthasar's 'immobile pole star'.

Two thoughts are very striking here. In his first sentence von Balthasar tells us that 'Music is the most ineffable art because it is the most immediate':<sup>29</sup> plenitude of presence goes with a complete inability to articulate that presence (presence and a certain absence commingle,

<sup>27</sup> The best analyses of this work that I have found are in Mario Saint Pierre, *Beauté, bonté, vérité chez Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Paris: Cerf, 1998), 46-110; and the work of PierAngelo Sequeri, mentioned above.

<sup>28</sup> See Freer, 'The Triune Conversation'.

<sup>29</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Die Entwicklung der musikalischen Idee* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1998), 7 (my translation).

or indeed, are *identified*, in the form of music).<sup>30</sup> Secondly, we see that for von Balthasar music is not only at the threshold between the *apophatic* (saying what something is not) and the *kataphatic* (using positive terms with a sense of God's transcendence), but also (thus) on the cusp between humanity and divinity: 'Music is a borderland of the human, and it is here that the divine begins'.<sup>31</sup> Von Balthasar sees music as *liminal*, between that which can and cannot be spoken, between God and humanity, between Creator and creation. Music speaks ineffably of that which cannot be spoken, or even spoken of.

Indeed, it seems to be the case in von Balthasar's thought that music is the meeting-place of opposites, or at any rate of contraries. Thus music lies at the confluence of time and eternity,

... music's present moment is nothing apart from its tension *vis-à-vis* past and future; each note played only has significance insofar as it successively interprets, unveils, justifies the past and anticipates what is to come. And what is to come cannot be constructed out of the present (even in the case of strict fugue). The present moment—in a Mozart symphony, for instance—is so full to the brim with tension that the genuine listener has neither time nor inclination to think of the past, let alone anticipate the future. With the passing of each note we sense the presence of the whole, which simultaneously comes into being in time and—in some incomprehensible supratemporal realm—always is.<sup>32</sup>

That von Balthasar should take Mozart as an example here is consistent with my own experience of Mozart as *predictable*. In Mozart's music there is a particularly strong sense, at any given moment, of where it has come from and where it is going. A Mozartian melody has the form it has, and that form, the way the melody flows, is bound up in each of its parts; to alter it would be to ruin it. But as von Balthasar

<sup>30</sup> Here, and in other ways, von Balthasar's thought on music proves to be close to that of Denys Turner in his recent *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 108-122. Turner argues that music is at once fully formal and fully material, allowing it to be both immediate and universal. It is 'pure body' (p.109). Music, as such, says nothing, for it has no one object and no one subject, enabling itself to overflow and be more than it is, always pointing beyond itself. It is thus a commingling of presence and absence, sharing the 'shape' of the Eucharist (p.115). See also note 43.

<sup>31</sup> Von Balthasar, *Die Entwicklung der musikalischen Idee*, 57 (my translation).

<sup>32</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Volume I: Prolegomena*, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 350.

points out, Mozart himself had the ability to hear the melody as a whole and thus could alter any part of it if necessary (say when a particular singer for whom a role was designed didn't turn up) without disturbing the whole. So, I suppose, depending on the width of one's viewpoint, his music is either *predictable* or *retrodictable*.<sup>33</sup> The progression of the music feels 'just right' as one hears it, and an accumulation of such experiences enables prediction. The music is in this way bound to freedom: it obeys laws and yet is free. Its freedom cannot be reduced to the sum of the laws it obeys.

For von Balthasar, this *inclusiveness* of music by virtue of its 'both-and-ness', to the extent that it brings together and envelopes opposites, is in fact a quality of beauty itself. Von Balthasar distinguishes between a 'daimonic beauty', which concerns itself with the present, and gets stuck in it, and a richer form of beauty, linked not only to our origins as creatures but also to our ultimate goal in heaven, a beauty which is a memory of our past and our future. It is a beauty which, though not necessarily verbal, sets us within a kind of narrative. Sanders van Maas describes good music in von Balthasar's theology as self-effacing and *iconic*—it points beyond itself (in this way it can be fully inclusive), and hence does not get stuck pointing towards itself in the narcissistic self-reference of idolatry. It is not—to use van Maas' word—*idolic*.<sup>34</sup> Music, because of its iconic quality, is *das Ganze im Fragment*—the whole in a fragment, a microcosm.<sup>35</sup> The fragment is *not* a part of a whole, but expresses the whole in itself, rather as a gene in some way contains within itself the whole reality of an organism.

This leads us to another way of seeing the 'sweetness' of Mozart's music. Could it be that that its sweetness and levity is in fact its *humour*? Humour in its various forms, especially irony perhaps, requires an ability to see the whole, to see the particular within a much broader context and thus to place it in a different light.<sup>36</sup> In a delightful passage

<sup>33</sup> I am grateful to Denys Turner for an enlightening disagreement on this matter.

<sup>34</sup> Van Maas, 'On Preferring Mozart', *Bijdragen*, 65 (2004), 97-110, here 98, 106, 109. The word is borrowed from Jean-Luc Marion.

<sup>35</sup> See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Das Ganze im Fragment: Aspekte der Geschichtstheologie* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1963), translated by William Glen-Doepel as *Man in History: A Theological Study* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968).

<sup>36</sup> See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: Volume V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, translated by Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brien McNeil, John Saward and Rowan Williams (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 153.

on the Catholic 'and' in his book on the Petrine ministry, von Balthasar suggests that it is precisely this ability which marked Mozart and his music, and ensured that he could never become a fanatic of any kind.<sup>37</sup> For fanatics choose a part and parade it as though it were the whole, as the history of heresy illustrates. Factionalism is humourless.

But the saints are never the kind of killjoy spinster aunts who go in for faultfinding and lack all sense of humour. (Nor should the Karl Barth who so loved and understood Mozart be regarded as such.) For humour is a mysterious but unmistakable charisma inseparable from Catholic faith, and neither the 'progressives' nor the 'integralists' seems to possess it—the latter even less than the former. Both of these tend to be faultfinders, malicious satirists, grumblers, carping critics, full of bitter scorn, know-it-alls who think they have the monopoly of infallible judgement; they are self-legitimising prophets—in short, fanatics.<sup>38</sup>

Von Balthasar looks forward to a book on the humour of the saints; he reminds us of G. K. Chesterton's comment that it 'is much easier to write a good Times leading article than a good joke in Punch'.<sup>39</sup>

Karl Barth exalts Mozart's music as the sound of creation's redeemed freedom, in which yes always trumps no, and Adrienne von Speyr celebrates a childlike Mozart united in prayer with God. But von Balthasar's vision of music, and of Mozart in particular, is richer. Taking up Carl de Nys' hint,<sup>40</sup> I would like to suggest that von Balthasar's thoughts about music are actually christologically shaped. The features that he sees in music are consonant with good ways of talking and thinking about Christ and about the relation between his divine and human natures. This is especially apparent in his understanding of music's 'wholeness': the confluence of opposites (eternity and temporality, ineffability and excess of expression, the part expressing the whole), iconicity, his holistic vision of humour.

I would like to suggest that these features share a common paradoxical structure; in other words, they bring together and embrace

<sup>37</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, translated by Andrée Emery (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986 [1974]), 301-307.

<sup>38</sup> Von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter*, 303.

<sup>39</sup> Von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter*, 305.

<sup>40</sup> See de Nys, 'Mozart, musicien de l'incarnation'.

contraries. I would further suggest that this structure, or shape, pervades all reality, both created being<sup>41</sup> and God in His triune existence. The shape of that life is that of the God who is love itself in its radiant beauty,<sup>42</sup> especially as made manifest in the whole figure (*Gestalt*) of Jesus Christ: he is a microcosm of the redeemed cosmic harmony. Moreover it is precisely these features, palely imitated and echoed in our own lives, which embody a theology of the Christian life. The harmony recreated by the perichoretic resonance of Christ's humanity and divinity presents us with the outlines of a musical score by which to play our own parts in the Christic symphony of the universe, drawing ever closer to God, and the love that He is. It is here, I think, that even those of us who are tempted to find Mozart's music a little slight might begin to acknowledge what the theologians discern in it, and thus begin to hear it, and indeed other music, in a new way.

I leave the last word to von Balthasar:

Today, therefore, perhaps the most necessary thing to proclaim and take to heart is that Christian truth is symphonic. Symphony by no means implies a sickly sweet harmony lacking all tension. Great music is always dramatic: there is a continual process of intensification, followed by a release of tension at a higher level. But dissonance is not the same as cacophony. Nor is it the only way of maintaining the symphonic tension. Mozart imparts something winged, buoyant, internally vibrant to his simplest melody—how often he works with simple scales!—so that the power that enables us to recognise him after only a few bars seems to flow from an inexhaustible reservoir of blessed tension, filling and tautening every member. The Church's reservoir, which lies at its core, is 'the

<sup>41</sup> I think, therefore, that von Balthasar would resonate with Rowan Williams' discussion of Jacques Maritain's idea that poets, and artists more generally, are about picking up and re-presenting the 'pulsions' of 'being'. 'It is all to do with things "being more than they are".' (Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Morehouse, 2005), 27.) It is that 'being-more-ness' that Mozart seems to pick up in his music, setting our lives in the broadest perspective, and thus showing us how we are more than we are.

<sup>42</sup> For von Balthasar, love and beauty implicate each other: we are seized by love's radiance, or its beauty. See his *Love Alone is Credible*, translated by D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004 [1963]), 54 and throughout. It is important to remember that the love and beauty which Christ embodies are *wounded*. For some excellent reflections on this theme see the address by the then Cardinal Ratzinger, 'The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty', given to *Communione e Liberazione* in Rimini in 2002, which can be found at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20020824\\_ratzinger-cl-rimini\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020824_ratzinger-cl-rimini_en.html).

depth of the riches of God' in Jesus Christ. The Church exhibits this fullness in an inexhaustible multiplicity, which keeps flowing, irresistibly, from its unity.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism*, translated by Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 15. I am glad to be able to offer this essay in commemoration of the centenary of von Balthasar's birth, and as a first step towards some comprehension of his arresting theology. I am grateful to Philip Endean SJ, Pauline Matarasso and Michael Tait for much assistance in helping me express what I wanted to say.