

Excellence for Its Own Sake:  
Doing Music from a Christian Point of View

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*Introduction*

In Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus tells the story of a wealthy man and his three slaves. This man, in preparing to go on a long journey, divides some of his property between these three: Jesus describes the man as handing out “talents” of silver, five to the first slave, two to the second, and one to the last. The master leaves on his journey, during which the first two slaves double their allotment while the third buries his silver. The four convene upon the master’s return, and the master praises the slaves who invested their talents, but consigns to hell the slave who hid his single talent and gives that talent to the first slave. Jesus ends the story by admonishing his listeners that to those who have more will be given, while those who have not will lose what little they do have.

This parable figures strongly in Christian culture. While Jesus’ use of the term “talent” connoted a numerical unit in his day, modern Christians assign to it a secondary meaning and connect the term to our inborn abilities and inclinations; in other words, our natural talents. With this understanding, Jesus’ admonition to the talent-hiding slave becomes a warning for us to use our gifts and abilities in service to our Creator.

Like the two servants who doubled their allowance, the Christian understands that they have been entrusted with something not fully theirs, that they are only stewards of something that ultimately belongs to God. Regardless of the profession, discipline, or

field of study, the Christian believes that he or she must cultivate his or her gift to the fullest of their ability.

Christian musicians may see this even more clearly than other Christians, for musicians by necessity must discipline themselves in order to hone their gifts. Instrumentalists must master the instrument itself and expand their understanding of the musical literature that their instrument plays best. Vocalists must have a deep understanding of their own body, and how that fits into the various styles of music they might wish to learn. Furthermore, both disciplines include learning about music itself, about its theory or simply how to read and notate it in an efficient manner. Not every musician needs a classical education, but to be an effective musician one must prove mastery in some way.

For the composer of music, the discipline involved is somewhat different. Some composers can create music without any formal training; this is best seen in the formation of many types of world music. However, it is important to note that all great composers have their own version of musical theory worked out in some way, even if that version is not necessarily derived from a formal education. Thus for composers, the mastery of music itself is the first step towards becoming an effective composer.

Musicians feel a need to center their lives on music and furthermore composers are truly driven to create new music. Outside of this, the Christian faith dictates that all a follower of Christ does must be done for the glory and honor of the Savior. The parable of the talents looms large here. Of the three servants mentioned in the parable, these three each entrusted with “talents” by their master, only one refused to use his talent, resulting

in his death; the other two were of course commended by their master for using, and multiplying, their gifts.

While the term “talent” referred to an ancient monetary unit, it is eerily appropriate for other purposes not directly related to money. The parable gives no reason as to why the three servants were given differing numbers of talents; presumably it was an arbitrary choice on behalf of the storyteller. Furthermore, it doesn’t seem likely that the servant with one talent behaved the way he did because he had been given so little; Jesus seemed to use the decreasing number of talents given out as a kind of poetic device. Really, the size of the talents didn’t matter; all that mattered was how the servants used them. This is the Christian problem, to use our talents in a manner that honors the one who gave them to us.

Christians have a peculiar tendency to fear their gifts and subjugate them in favor of more sanctified purposes. Often concerts featuring Christian performers are billed as outreaches to the non-Christian, or a talented artist will only paint subjects related to the Bible. None of this is inherently wrong, and many Christians have genuine crises of conscience over making an idol out of their gift. Additionally, one can look at artists of all types and see that the ones who put their careers first tend to be successful at the expense of their families and friends. Rare is the man or woman who can successfully balance God, work, and family.

So for some complex reasons, musical excellence is frightening for the Christian. But what if by putting “Christian work” before being a great artist (or whatever the discipline happens to be) instead of honoring God we are instead being that last servant, burying our gift for fear of angering the giver? How many of us think of pursuing our gift

simply because we have it, rather than making up elaborate reasons as to how that gift is to glorify God? How many of us realize that to be truly excellent, excellence must be pursued for its own sake?

*Part 1 – On Excellence Itself*

To explore this idea of pursuing excellence for its own sake, it must be established how people decide what is excellent and what is not. This is a question of epistemology, a question answered by one Immanuel Kant. Kant is famous for his categories of reason, a theory of human reason that he developed in response to David Hume. Hume, building on the writings of John Locke, reasoned that if people are born with no preconceived ideas (Locke's philosophy of *tabula rasa*) then everything we know is gained purely through experience and observation. However, Hume realized that there are several concepts that humans cannot really experience and thus we had no way of knowing how any two ideas or concepts were connected. For example, Hume argued that we could not experience causation and know that one act was responsible for something else happening. All that could be perceived was sequence, that incident A happened before incident B. Kant responded that we could indeed know causation; furthermore he radically reconstructed how we saw experience. The human mind, Kant maintained, did not simply absorb data from the outside world. Rather, we absorbed that data and then filtered it through several categories of reason; in other words *we create each experience inside our own minds*. Thus we knew causation because causation falls under the *relation* category of reason. We did not "discover" causation, because causation

is not an empirical concept (gathered from observing the physical world; causation is a rational concept (an idea that is proven true by definition).<sup>1</sup>

The category of reason relevant to the topic of musical excellence is *quality*. As a category of reason, we apply quality to everything we experience and while each individual's definition of quality might change, we cannot avoid applying the category of quality to anything we see or do. Quality (along with quantity, relation, and modality) form the basis for how we construct our experiences. As a side note, Kant's theories on the way people form experiences were able to successfully marry rational and empirical branches of philosophy, two schools of thought that had been more or less opposed for thousands of years. While many have criticized his theories, no one has been able to completely discount them.

Because of Kant, philosophy has been able to answer the question "Why does anything matter?" To a degree, the nihilists are right: nothing has inherent meaning. And divorced from the theology of the Gospel, which states that God is working to restore all of Creation because of his great love for it, the nihilists are right. There is nothing inherent to writing music that makes it better or worse than any other discipline. However, because part of the way we create experiences involves assessing quality, we give it meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, all of this is very theoretical and somewhat academic. How does one make the leap from "I consider this discipline valuable" to "This discipline is worthy of my entire attention and creative energy as an act of worship to my Creator and Savior"?

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<sup>1</sup> A.D. Lindsay, *The Philosophy of Kant* (London: T.C. and E.C. Jack, unknown date), 51.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

Well, it is no leap, though every Christian wrestles with this question to some degree. Fortunately there are a few clues for the Christian to follow. First of all, one must believe that God specially created what Kant called the categories of reason, and that God intended our minds to operate in the way that they do. With this assumption in place then Kant's assessment of human experience must be a part of how God intends us to live. God *expects* that we will assign value to certain things, and elevate them above the rest. Look briefly at one of Kant's other categories: quantity. No one needed to go out and discover numbers; rather they are a universal concept that at most requires translation into a spoken or written language. Because of this, numbers have no intrinsic value; they simply exist. But when God in human form tells his parable of the talents, he acknowledges our propensity for qualification at the end when the unfaithful servant loses his one talent to the servant with ten. Jesus had said at the beginning of the parable that each servant received each according to their ability, thus implying that the one with ten talents was the best qualified to assume responsibility for the extra talent. But by making this connection Jesus acknowledged and furthermore joined in with our human tendency to assign meaning, in this case giving meaning to numbers.

So what one believes about God and how God feels about human nature has a lot to do with how they walk out their faith in everyday life. Certainly God explicitly states that many things found in the human experience are abhorrent to him and thus separate us from him if we partake in these things. The reason we have the Bible is not for us to have a club to beat others or ourselves over the head with. Rather, it is the progressive revelation of God throughout human history, much akin to a distant relative sharing their life with us through letters. We can see how the Jews' understanding of God moved from

an awareness of a powerful Creator to a personal interaction with I AM, and how their religion grew up in relation to that grown awareness. Then Christ stepped onto the scene and changed our understanding of God once again.

By becoming a man, not just corporeal but a living, breathing human being, God validated his physical creation. In the Genesis account, God says multiple times that his creation is good, yet as we can see in the chapters and books that follow, his creation does things that are far from good. So Jesus coming in the flesh is more than just an acknowledgement of our sinfulness, it is an affirmation that there is nothing inherently wrong with being physical. Today Platonism (best embodied in church doctrine as the heresy of Gnosticism) has pervaded the church, with the emphasis of Christian life being on the “afterlife,” whatever one’s particular envisioning of the afterlife may be. Jesus did not come to destroy the world, he came to save it; when he says in John 3:16 that “God so loved the world” the Greek word for world used denotes creation as a whole. God does not want to separate our consciousness from our body and carry us away to some ethereal alternate reality, but rather he wants to restore Creation to its original state – and it just so happens that the first step in that process was removing the barrier of sin from between him and us.

The physical world is good, and furthermore God intends it to continue. His presence here as a man validates our mode of being, and by extension the things that we give value to, excellent music being a large part of that. Though everyone will have a somewhat different perspective on what qualifies as excellent, we have both a Biblical directive and an epistemological precedent to pursue what is excellent. Having given a



broad definition of how mankind perceives excellence, the next step is to decide what musical excellence might be for a musician and composer.

### *Part 2 – Desiring Excellence*

Musical excellence and a composer's desire for it are a subjective experience, so rather than define such a broad subject it might be better to look at what musical excellence is for the Christian. The Bible says several times that we are to worship God with and without music: "Do all things as unto the Lord" (Colossians 3:23), "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." (1 Peter 4:10), "Love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Mark 12:30). The psalmist in Psalm 150 instructs us to worship God with multiple instruments, which could imply diversity in musical style. Ultimately, the Bible calls us to do everything out of a sense of worship for the Creator.

However a musician who also happens to be a Christ follower is affected by not only what God demands but like any musician is also affected by what the audience wants to hear. Though a musician strives to be true to his or her creative impulses, they contend with outside competition in order to be successful.

Returning to the parable of the talents, the story shows two slaves who were interested in using their talents simply because those gifts had been bestowed on them. The gift and the directive to use the gift were one and the same, and this leads to great joy and fulfillment. So there is this Biblical directive to first of all worship God, to devote the entirety of our being to that worship, and to use the gifts we have been given. Certainly the whole-hearted nature of our worship includes the pursuit of excellence. As humans,

our minds work in such a way that we learn from past experiences, even past creative experiences. Thus it is almost impossible for a composer, if they are writing authentically and not outright plagiarizing another work, to remain the same. Intellectual laziness aside, a composer will change by the act of creating. Whether they change for the better is not guaranteed.

Take social trends as an example. One social group might begin to change when it envies some quality or characteristic of another group. Fashion trends are passed between the upper and lower class, as each tries to bridge the social gap. The older generation adopts the mores of the younger generation in order to recapture their youth, while the younger generation adopts certain styles of their elders in order to seem more mature. Additionally, a population minority will effect change in the majority long before their social status rises. Though their political power may be limited, their effect on one aspect of the culture helps create a place for them in a more complete way later on. When ideas are passed around from one group to the other, given the existence of vigorous competition, great diversity will be found. The presence of multiple influences on a culture is shown historically as leading to variety and creative growth.<sup>3</sup>

In Baroque-era Germany, the high number of principalities meant that more composers could be employed, and that those employers were more eager for the music they paid for to be unique and thus make their court stand out. Even during the Renaissance, composers such as Palestrina were able to argue for their use of contrapuntal church music (frowned upon by the Vatican as it made the mass more

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<sup>3</sup> George A. Field, "The Status Float Phenomenon," *Business Horizons* 13 (1970): 45-52.

difficult for parishioners to understand the words being sung) by pointing out that Protestant composers had no such limitations.<sup>4</sup> But sometimes competition comes from internal sources.

Dr. Richard Bing, a modern composer, talks about his early struggles in writing music: “I had to learn to husband my emotions, reining them in and organizing them.”<sup>5</sup> Writing out of personal turmoil and feeling is a long and illustrious tradition in composing. Beethoven is the most obvious composer to struggle so, with his progressive deafness and the despair it caused. His subsequent triumph over this depression led to what we now call his “Heroic Period,” characterized by some of his most emotionally charged music.<sup>6</sup>

### *Part 3 – Reflecting Your Own Self*

Richard Bing, who beside a being composer is also practicing physician, speaks of how he has two loves in his life: music and medicine. Each seems to provide an outlet for emotions and feelings that the other cannot support. He alludes to the fact that man cannot survive on one creative outlet, that if we let our creative forces go in one direction for too long they will turn on themselves. Rather, whenever he grows weary with one discipline, he pours himself into the other. Dr. Bing acknowledges that medicine is his primary calling, but music is a close second. In fact, he has written for full orchestra and

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<sup>4</sup> Roland Vaulbel, “The Role of Competition in the Rise of Baroque and Renaissance Music,” *Journal of Cultural Economics* (2005): 291.

<sup>5</sup> Richard J. Bing, “Composing and the Science of the Heart: How to Serve Two Masters,” *Leonardo* Vol. 41, no. 4 (2008): 365.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Steen, *The Lives and Times of Great Composers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 556.

had his compositions performed. By diversifying his talents and letting these seemingly unrelated sides of his personality flower, each becomes a moral support for the other.<sup>7</sup>

This is an important point to take note of. Human beings are composed of diverse talents and inclinations that cannot be neatly separated into easily definable compartments. The pursuit of excellence is not limited to isolated sections of our day-to-day operations. So the pursuit of excellence in all areas is almost a given, Christian or not.

When it comes to the writing of music, as Dr. Bing does, one operating assumption seems to be that a derivative composer is being unoriginal and thus creating music that is not excellent. Writing excellent music entails writing music that does not steal from other pieces of work, which is of course impossible, so that task is modified into writing music that steals from other composer's work in such a way that it does not seem stolen. But is this "copied" music still musically excellent? Brahms was notorious for his devotion to classical forms<sup>8</sup>, and his first symphony bears more than a passing resemblance to Beethoven's Ninth. Naturally Brahms' works were more or less highly regarded in his own time and remain so to this day, implying that what he derived from composers past in fact improved his compositions.

This is where the study of music theory and music history becomes very important. By studying another composer's music the student can begin to see the thought process behind the musical choices made in the given piece. The student can study the historical context that the earlier composer was writing in, and with this

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<sup>7</sup> Richard J. Bing, "Composing and the Science of the Heart: How to Serve Two Masters," *Leonardo* Vol. 41, no. 4 (2008): 365-366.

<sup>8</sup> Steen, *Great Composers*, 556.

information, make choices about how to use the compositional techniques the earlier composer used.

Dr. Bing brings out in his essay the fact that the urge to create is inherent in all children, but only remains in a few adults.<sup>9</sup> For those who continue to create new things, what they create may be nothing or a masterpiece but they continue to create anyway. They may explore new tonalities, imitating what has come before, or they may attempt to strike out on their own. The key, Bing says, is authenticity. “In order to acquire a style of his own, a composer must create a work that reflects his own self.”<sup>10</sup>

There is no easy dividing line between each area of a person’s life. Certainly each of us has an occupation, various hobbies, and hopefully a circle of friends and family. Each of these areas, distinct as they are in theory, are going to bleed over into the other in practice. We are whole beings, created by God to live a whole life. In order to honor God in a wholesome way, perhaps we need to do less dividing of our interests and more pursuing excellence for its own sake. Defining the various realms in the human experience has its advantages, but it is difficult to translate a theoretical sectarian understanding our lives into a daily life with blurry edges.

Our Christian faith drives every facet of our lives, in theory at least. But how does the devout follower of Christ walk that out? Christians tend to exalt overt evangelism and then subordinate everything else under it. This seems wrong. If a business executive attempted to integrate teaching a kindergarten class into his daily affairs at the office, he would fail at both. Certainly teaching young children is a noble cause, and quite possibly

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<sup>9</sup> Bing, *Composing and the Science of the Heart*, 365.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

more rewarding than simply maintaining a business for many, the but the point here is that combining two interests with the intention of making one more meaningful subtracts meaning from both interests. Like Dr. Bing has done, multiple interests can be pursued but Dr. Bing does not attempt to marry his medical practice with his composing career. He has too much respect for both disciplines to do such a thing.

Richard Strauss, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century/early 20<sup>th</sup> century composer is known for his almost religious devotion to music. A certain emotional distance characterizes his work, and many of his critics complained that his music of leaving them stirred but not uplifted. Yet one of his latest works, *Metamorphosen*, features some of his most emotionally stirring composition. Written in response to Allied bombings of German and Austrian opera houses at the end of the Second World War, Strauss lamented the loss of culture in Germany and the general inhumanity that characterized the time he lived in.

It is typical of Strauss' life that everything he did revolved around music. Even his marriage to his wife Pauline (an operatic *prima donna*), an acrimonious union at best, was saved by their mutual love of music. When comparing himself with contemporary composer Gustav Mahler, he remarked that where Mahler was searching for redemption in composition, he (Strauss) did not know what he needed redemption from.<sup>11</sup>

Strauss came from a musical family, one that was devoutly Lutheran as well. However, while the musicality stuck, Strauss became an Agnostic as a teenager; the writings of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche would feature strongly in his early tone poems. Music was the closest thing he had to a religion, and even the relative coldness of his music can be seen as a testament to this: his music existed for its own sake. Although

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<sup>11</sup> Steen, *Great Composers*, 767.

heavily influenced by Brahms and Richard Wagner<sup>12</sup> Strauss' style advanced throughout his lifetime until it became, as Dr. Bing put it, a reflection of his own self.

The legendary composer Ludwig van Beethoven lived and composed several decades before Strauss. Beethoven was well known for his personal eccentricities. A particular colorful anecdote of his life involved him wading through the royal family in Vienna while out on a walk instead of standing aside to let them pass. His self-determination was beyond question, and this maverick spirit was present in his music as well.

Beethoven was the first well-known composer to compose music simply because he wanted to, and be successful in the endeavor. Though he supplemented his income with commissions (he was always worried about his primary source of income running out), Beethoven was for most of his career not wanting for money. He received allowances from both the state and Prince Leopold of Vienna, which in addition to the royalties and subscription fees he received from the publishing of his music, kept him financially stable.<sup>13</sup>

Though many composers after Beethoven would compose anything they wished, he was arguably the most successful. Certainly his symphonies changed the course of music history, and his general innovation in various musical forms left the generation of composers after him wondering how they could possibly say anything new after all his work had accomplished.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 173-175.

Self-individuation seemed to be Beethoven's hallmark. One of his most complex works was the *Grosse Fuge*<sup>14</sup>, originally the final movement of his String Quartet no. 13. When the work was premiered, Beethoven was livid when the audience requested an encore of a prior movement and not the fugue.<sup>15</sup>

What Beethoven did with the *Grosse Fuge* is in many ways remarkable. Taking the very Baroque form of the fugue, he followed it almost academically but gave it a Romantic-era emotional quality while using a tonal series that almost suggests the serial music that would come a hundred years later. Beethoven's passion for the piece is evident, though it is almost more pleasing on the eyes than on the ears.<sup>16</sup> Beethoven was at his best when he took the types of music that he enjoyed the most and created something new out of them. The piano, the string quartet, the concerto, and of course the symphony are all radically different thanks to his genius, even if his experiments did not always work out the way he might have liked. As Dr. Bing said, sometimes one creates nothing of significance and sometimes one creates a masterpiece.<sup>17</sup>

None of the composers mentioned above had any sort of religious motivation. Johann Sebastian Bach, on the other hand, was a devout follower of Christ and made his faith a large part of his composing. However Bach, unlike Strauss or Beethoven, was comparatively unrecognized during his own lifetime. Though seen as an extremely capable organist and a hardworking composer, Bach struggled to find recognition as an employee of the several churches and royal courts he was employed by. Even at the end

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<sup>14</sup> *Gross Fuge* is German for "great fugue."

<sup>15</sup> Sydney Grew, "The 'Grosse Fuge': The Hundred Years of Its History," *Music and Letters* Vol. 12, No. 2 (1931), 141.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 147.

<sup>17</sup> Bing, 365.



of his life, especially during the premier of his Brandenburg concertos, Bach was seen as a dinosaur, his dense polyphony standing in stark contrast to the new *galant* style that was gaining popularity. After his death his music was known only to music theory students, and while giants such as Mozart and Beethoven admired and emulated his style, it would not be until Felix Mendelssohn revived his music in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Bach became recognized as the innovator and genius that he was.<sup>18</sup>

In truth, all music composition requires a measure of genius. Many instrumentalists, capable of playing long and demanding passages with the utmost precision and delicacy, cannot write a single note of music they can call their own. All three of the composers mentioned above added a great deal to music, though some more than others. Each had complex motivations for why they composed music, and all three made sacrifices for their visions for how music should be composed.

But while Beethoven and Strauss were motivated by a love for music and a desire for self-individualization, and not to say that Bach did not have these motivations, his life was also characterized by deep religious devotion. Each of his works was signed off with *Soli Deo Gloria*: to God alone be the glory. Despite his often prickly and irascible temperament Bach considered his music, both performance and composition, to be worship to his creator.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Steen, *Great Composers*, 69-70.

<sup>19</sup> John Eliot Gardner, *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 126.

*Part 4 – On the Writing and Study of Music*

The great composers in the history of Western music were acutely aware of how music worked, and furthermore why it worked that way. They were students of the music of their compositional ancestors, and made conscious decisions on how to respond to that music. And while various musical styles have come and gone as a result of this process, one musical concept has remained constant over the centuries: counterpoint.

The word *counterpoint* simply means “note against note.”<sup>20</sup> While the imitative counterpoint of J.S. Bach comes to mind, counterpoint first originated with polyphony in the medieval era.<sup>21</sup> Polyphony and counterpoint was for all intents and purposes the same thing in these early times. As medieval and later renaissance music was composed with intense attention to consonant and dissonant intervals, it took several years for the concept of polyphony to separate from the concept of counterpoint. Eventually composers began seeing polyphony as a style of music and counterpoint as a means of attaining that.<sup>22</sup>

What makes counterpoint special is its attention to detail; writing contrapuntally requires a thorough understanding of musical theory. Simply put, counterpoint is the writing of two or more independent musical lines.<sup>23</sup> According to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, counterpoint is “A term, first used in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, to describe the combination of simultaneously sounding musical lines according

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<sup>20</sup> Kurt-Jurgen Sachs and Carl Dahlhaus, “Counterpoint” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (Grove, 2001), 551.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 552.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 561.

<sup>23</sup> Dr. Eric Richards Composition Master Class at Colorado Christian University, 7 November 2015.

to a system of rules.”<sup>24</sup> Polyphony refers to the type of harmony present in a musical piece, whereas counterpoint implies a disciplined approach to writing polyphony. For instance, two singers performing a duet is by this definition polyphony. On the other hand, a jazz band could perform a piece with carefully worked out parts between the brass and the saxophones, with multiple rhythmic structures working against each other throughout the rhythm section. This second example better fits the definition of counterpoint.

Music theorists introduced structured counterpoint to deal with the increasing complexity of the music in their time. Western music in the Medieval era was moving from single line plainchants to something more complex and music theorists wanted to control the dissonance caused by multiple melodic lines sounding at once. Thus counterpoint and polyphony were the same thing at this early time, since writing polyphonic music required an understanding of counterpoint which told the composer which intervals were consonant and which were dissonant. By following the rules laid out, a composer could write a motet and expect that it would sound pleasing to the audience.

In a later portion of Western musical history, imitative counterpoint is perhaps the most recognizable type of contrapuntal writing. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* has gone down in history as the “Old Testament” of keyboard literature.<sup>25</sup> This collection of fugues (and their corresponding preludes) showcases the distinct form of contrapuntal writing that Bach was better at than anyone. But Bach’s use of fugues was far from limited to this

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<sup>24</sup> Sachs and Dahlhaus, “Counterpoint,” 551.

<sup>25</sup> Allen Schantz, *Music, the Arts, and the Bible* (Aesthetic Arts Press), 29.

set; he would often put fugues inside various works, from his masses to his Brandenburg Concertos. Fugue permeated Bach's writing, and it was this style that was perhaps most energetically imitated.

Mozart and Beethoven are two prominent examples of composers who studied Bach's work and attempted to emulate him. Mozart used a double fugue in the *Kyrie* of his Requiem Mass in D Minor, where he wrote two subjects and used them interchangeably as subject and countersubject throughout the movement. Beethoven used fugue in several of his later symphonies, notably the Seventh and the Ninth, and of course devoted the *Grosse Fuge* to the task of bringing the Baroque style of fugue into the Romantic idiom.

It is curious that both Mozart and Beethoven began their study of Bach and their subsequent adoption of his ideas relatively late in their respective careers. At this point in history Bach was largely out of the public memory, and his music was mostly used for teaching music theory. Perhaps these two, having exhausted their normal compositional tricks, wished to find something that would challenge them again and they felt that fugue would fulfill that role.

Counterpoint from its inception has been a highly organized discipline. Music theory in the medieval and renaissance eras was highly organized with several treatises devoted to which intervals were consonant or dissonant. As harmony developed in the renaissance and baroque eras, counterpoint became less of a standard mode of writing and more of a specific technique that the composer could use to utilize. Due to this shift, counterpoint all but disappeared in the standard styles of the classical era. During this time and further into the romantic era counterpoint was a bit of a throwback. Because of

the romantic emphasis on emotional writing, using counterpoint and its strict rules of part writing was a challenge composers would put to themselves. Beethoven especially saw it this way with his *Grosse Fuge*.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its departure from tonality and traditional forms, saw a renaissance in contrapuntal writing. However, instead of using subjects and countersubjects or other traditional methods of writing, composers used rhythm and multiple tonalities. Schoenberg and his twelve-tone system are the best example of this, but many other composers such as Strauss or Holst experimented with bi-tonal harmonic structures in their compositions.<sup>26</sup>

In modern times, composers have turned away from the use and study of counterpoint in favor of experiments with timbre and orchestration.<sup>27</sup> Certainly audience taste has a lot to do with this, and much like Bach's later works, counterpoint is seen as being old fashioned. Modern music looks to the future and not to the past. Why should a composer take the time to study counterpoint then?

Careful study of earlier music, whether from centuries before or from contemporary times, can lead to a sense of respect and wonder. Knowing the music that has come before gives a composer a richer palette of "colors" to paint with. It might inspire competitive feelings as well; however, competition does not in of itself lead to better music. More music, perhaps, but not necessarily better. If composers are competing for a living by working their craft, interpersonal skills have more to do with securing a

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<sup>26</sup> Sachs and Dahlhaus, "Counterpoint," 568.

<sup>27</sup> See Hans Zimmer's *The Dark Knight* score.

job writing music than actually being able to write music, and it almost seems laughable that someone could be fired because another fellow is writing more interesting music.

Musical taste varies, but the reaction one gets from doing a job well does not. If a composer performs their job well consistently, they shall continue in their employment. If one applies the economic game theory to composers, one can see that while composers may be competing for employment, this competition does not extend to music. Musical competition is not as easily quantified in the same way that economic competition can be.

What competition does do well is introduce new ideas into the collective imagination, and if composers are competing for anything, it is an audience's attention.<sup>28</sup> Most composers have to take their audience's taste into consideration, and it is relatively rare that a single composer can dictate what kind of sounds the wider public will accept. Beethoven was such a composer, and even he did not have a perfect track record. But as stated earlier, competition for an audience's attention forces a composer to listen to what the audience is already listening to, and they must choose from there how to proceed. What better way to respond to an audience's desires than by gaining a vast knowledge of musical styles to choose from?

### *Conclusion*

In the parable of the talents, Jesus told of three servants who each received talents *each according to their ability*. For whatever reason, these three servants were deemed worthy by their master to steward a set number of talents. The first servant received the most, and at the end of the parable he received the single talent that the fearful servant

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<sup>28</sup> Vaulbel, "The Role of Competition," 290.

had hoarded. But the other two servants were given comparatively little, two and one talents of silver respectively. Perhaps in our constant reading of the parable we tend to group the second servant with the first, but upon closer examination it is probable that the second servant was more like the third.

The first servant was given five talents, which he doubled into ten by the end of the story. The second and third servants receive much less than this, between them nearly half of what the first servant does. Even at the end of the parable, though both two of the servants double their allowance, the first servant still ends up with eleven talents while the second only has his four. The last servant, of course, lost all he was given due to his own fear.

What message did Christ intend to convey in this parable? He intends for his followers to be diligent stewards of their gifts certainly, but he also acknowledges that each person has a different capacity within them. The last talent was given to the first servant because his master knew him to be not only a diligent steward but also had a greater ability. The second servant was similarly diligent, but clearly had a lesser ability. The last servant had the least ability, but because of his fear could not even rise to the low bar that his master had set for him.

Jesus sets forth two truths in this parable, first that each person receives talents based on their own ability and second that only those who steward and grow their talents will find favor in the sight of the master. Musicians make music a significant part of their lives, if not the dominant part. The study, the practice, and the performance of music take an immense amount of time, and thousands of hours worth of practice are required before a musician can say that they have mastered their discipline. Christians must decide

whether or not this time investment is worth making when there are so many needs in the world that need met. What then is the value in making music that doesn't even have words when we could be sharing the Gospel?

It is because of these questions that the parable of the talents is so important to Christians. God has gifted each and every one of us with worthwhile abilities, and expects to not only use them but to develop them into higher and more refined forms. Whether our abilities are relatively large or relatively small, God expects us to still exercise them.

The servant who received one talent failed to understand this. When accounting for his action of hiding his talent in the ground, this servant cowers before his master and admits that he was afraid. This servant knew that his master was demanding and implies that he feared punishment should the talent be lost; of course he is punished anyway. The servant who received two talents really did not have much more to work with than his fearful and lazy comrade. However, he chose to be faithful rather than fearful, and the result was enjoying the favor of his master and the promise of greater responsibilities to come.

In the end, how many talents the servants were given was irrelevant. Both of the faithful servants are given the same reward: their master's favor and a promise that they shall be put over greater things in the future. The talents were never theirs to begin with, they always belonged to the master and it was up to him to distribute those talents as he pleased.

In the parable of the talents Christ calls us to faithful stewardship of the gifts and talents we possess. For the composer of music, the gift involves an act of will and



imagination. We seek to honor God through the writing of excellent music and this should start by honoring his directive to develop our talents.

Near the end of his life, Johann Sebastian Bach was working as a church musician but took the time to write a set of six concerto score manuscripts and send them to the Mandrake of Brandenburg. What we now call the *Brandenburg Concertos* were not a commission; rather the Mandrake had at one point expressed an interest in Bach's music, and this was Bach's response. The court at Brandenburg did not have an orchestra to play the concertos, and thus the manuscripts sat unplayed there for nearly a century, until they were unearthed when clearing out the court's old papers. Doubtless Bach would have put on his own performances of the concertos, but this complete disregard from the Mandrake must have been disappointing at the time.

The *Brandenburg Concertos* are now considered some of the finest examples of orchestration in the history of classical music. Bach used a myriad of techniques including counterpoint throughout all six concertos and one gets the impression that Bach was pouring the entirety of his musical experience as a composer into these concertos. Indeed, his records indicate that at least some of the concertos had their origins relatively early in his career, and it is possible to see his progression as a composer throughout the set.

No person past or present can control how they are remembered and accordingly Bach found himself sadly out of style even as his own sons advanced into the classical era. "Old Bach" people called him,<sup>29</sup> yet he continued to write what was most dear to his

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<sup>29</sup> Gardner, *Bach*, 533.

heart: dense, complex, and stirring counterpoint. Of course he proved his critics wrong as he is considered a giant in music to this day.

There is much to be learned from Bach. He wrote the *Brandenburg Concertos* as a gift to an earthly ruler, but as with all of his writing he intended it for someone of higher authority at the same time. The lifestyle he lived, constantly improving his skill as a composer and retaining an intense focus on his art even as he made a living with it, is fascinating. Bach considered this lifestyle of music to be his lifestyle of worship. Every manuscript he signed, church music or not, received *solī deo Gloria*. He may have played for princes and written for kings, but he saw every note-against-note that he wrote as existing for God alone. He pursued excellence for its own sake as an act of worship to his Savior.

In the parable of the talents, the master tells his two faithful slaves that since they have been faithful with a little they shall be trusted with more. This is a large part of Christian thought, found in sources disparate as the Puritan work ethic and the health and wealth gospel. Followers of Christ tend to expect that they will receive from God more than what they have given to him. We seek measureable success so reassure ourselves that we are truly doing the Lord's work.

Someday, death will come for all but the follower of Christ knows that death is nothing to fear for one day Christ will return to raise the righteous incorruptible as he was following the crucifixion.<sup>30</sup> On that day the world will be made new, and life will continue in a radically new direction. If we have been faithful with our gift, faithful to

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<sup>30</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, New York: HarperOne, 2008, 43.

grow it and cultivate it, faithful to exalt the Lord to fullest extent of our ability, then like those slaves in the parable we will be told: “You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

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