

Music: A Gift from the Lord

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*Sing to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of a psalm,
With trumpets and the sound of a horn;
Shout joyfully before the Lord, the King (Psalm 98:5-6).*

From ancient times music has been with humankind. 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 civilizations, 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 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 sounds of trumpets 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) and 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. Miriam glorified God by dancing and singing to Jehovah (Exodus 15:21). Aaron’s robe had bells sewn around the hem. Their sound enabled the people to know when he was performing ritual duties within the 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 Lord celebrated the last supper with His disciples, we are told that “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 as nothing else can and 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 at times would come under the influence of an evil spirit that caused him to behave insanely, needed something to change him. His servants suggested that someone should play the harp, and 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 distressing spirit would depart from him” (I Samuel 16:23).

Emanuel 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” (*Spiritual Experiences* 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” (*Spiritual Experiences* 1997).

Is this not what happened with David and Saul? Indeed, the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church states 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” (*Spiritual Experiences* 2112). This is how David soothed Saul—his playing 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” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 276).

What is the nature of music that it has so much power, that it can so change a person (although only temporarily) that he ceases doing evil? Why do we turn to music when we are lonely or sad? 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 (*Arcana Coelestia* 8337:2).

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

Singing can have that effect in a special way. When we sing there is a freeing effect on us, “for in song gladness breaks forth as it were of itself into sound” (*Arcana Coelestia* 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” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 279). This is why, when we are feeling happy, it is natural for us to sing along with the radio, to whistle, or just to hum a favorite tune. That good feeling inside bubbles over, expressing the happiness that simply cannot be contained (see *Arcana Coelestia* 418).

This is not to say that music always has such an uplifting effect. All emotions can be expressed by music, both exalting and depressing ones. Dirges do not lift our feelings, so we stay away from them when we do not want their influence. However, the effect of a song or symphony is somewhat relative. What to one person, in one state, is depressing, is to another quite moving.

What of music in the heavens? Many people imagine angels strumming harps (see *Arcana Coelestia* 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 (see *Apocalypse Revealed* 616; *Conjugal Love* 6:5). Music 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 (see *Conjugal Love* 17:2). The finest musicians and composers on earth cannot compare with the quality of music that exists in even the lowest heavens. For the angels whose use it is to produce music are much more creative, skilled, and experienced than any people on earth. Not only are special days set aside for music in heaven, but music is with the angels every day. Early each morning they are awakened by the sweetest sounds (see *Conjugal Love* 17:2). These sounds flow into their very souls, preparing them to enter with a new zest 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 angels who speak together as a cohesive unit. Apparently by speaking together they learn to support and complement each other more effectively. 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 (see *Arcana Coelestia* 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 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. What a perfect picture of heaven! Perhaps this is why we are taught that celebration of the Lord in the heavens is mostly done by choirs (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8115).

Functioning as a choir is also an ideal for human society. Each person has unique qualities and an individual use that cannot be duplicated. As each grows there can be a strengthening of the whole. Harmonious behavior exists when each one tries to support others, bringing out what is best in them. We see this when many people contribute their talents to reach a decision or to build a house. (But we should not be surprised when there are difficulties in working together, for even in the other world groups pass through many stages before they function as a one. Only when selfishness is mastered can a person fully contribute to and harmonize with others.)

In the church, we have the opportunity to make special use of music. The organ represents spiritual good because it can reproduce a wide array of musical sounds, and its flowing melodies can prepare us for worship (see *Arcana Coelestia* 419). Since organs are rarely used except in worship, their unique sound is closely associated with what is holy.

And when we sing about the Lord, His kingdom, and the church, we are drawn into affectional ties with them (see *Arcana Coelestia* 8261:3). It is no wonder we feel so strongly about our hymns. They stir us, make us feel good. Even ones that are not masterpieces hold meaning or memories for us, because they lead us to the Lord. All the good affections we have are embodied in the words and tunes that enable us to express our affection for what is heavenly.

There are also great benefits to singing together in church. Where else can we publicly express such feelings without being uncomfortable? Even if our voices are not well-trained or we do not always sing on key, we still contribute to the overall effect. And the effect is uplifting. 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 worshipping Him. Coming into His house with singing enables us to praise Him and to forget about ourselves.

And the angels are with us in song (see *Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 108; *Apocalypse Revealed* 279). When we set the letter of the Word to music, a communication with the heavens themselves is effected. Think of the anthems which are so beautiful: "You will show me the path of life.... Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.... Blessed is the man who confides in the Lord." They lift up our spirits, moving us to sense the Lord's presence—His mercy and 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, our King.

Amen.

Lessons: I Samuel 16:14-23; Psalm 98; *True Christian Religion* 745:1,2