

Music Makers: Keep Silence/ Silence Keepers: Make Music

Psalm 100

A sermon by John D. Thornburg

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So there I was, a sixteen-year-old chorister, sitting with members of my high school choir in the Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center in New York. We were there to hear the St. Olaf Choir under the direction of Kenneth Jennings, who was taking his very first tour with the choir that year.

Accustomed as I was to the standard dynamic of the high school choir, double forte, imagine my fascination when the choir concluded their program with their signature rendering of “Beautiful Savior.” I had never heard a choir sing mezzo piano, so consequently, I had never heard a choir that had anywhere to go when they sang a crescendo.

When Dr. Jennings gave the cut-off, the audience was silent. Again, the only reactions I had ever heard to choral singing were the polite but tepid applause that followed our mediocre renderings, or the totally undeserved whooping of the student body if we sang something uptempo. But the silence was intriguing and wonderful. And so was the hearty applause that finally erupted all through the hall.

So there I was, a 53 year-old pastor/song leader, sitting with other church musicians in the Basilica of Saint Louis, King of France in St. Louis listening to Felix Hell playing the Barber Adagio. Before he played, he stood before this crowd of overweight, under-appreciated Methodist choir directors and told us that every time he walked the hallways of Peabody Conservatory, he felt humbled by the knowledge that people like Barber had walked the same hallways. He then stood to his full 20-year-old height and said, “Just as I will be thanking God for Samuel Barber as I play, I invite each of you to close your eyes and thank God for the people in your life who have done the most for you.” When he lifted his hands from the keyboard at the end of the piece, the silence lasted well beyond the 7 second decay of the sound after the final notes. It was a silence not unlike the silence after the Adagio at David Davidson’s memorial service.

To an outsider, it may seem the height of irony to urge a group of musicians to observe and appreciate the power of silence. Titling a sermon for church musicians, “Music Makers: Keep Silence” may strike an outsider as oxymoronic, kind of like Baptist unity or Presbyterian indecency. But I would wager that no group in Dallas has a keener awareness of the complementarity of sound and silence

. No less than the great mime Marcel Marceau, one of the more extraordinary architects in the landscape of silence, said, “Music and silence combine strongly because music is done with silence, and silence is full of music.” Though both music and silence can effect people in dozens of different ways, I think there is one very deep similarity between them; a similarity which is at the centerpiece of who we are as people of faith. They both remind us that it’s not about us.

Both music and silence can place us at the exact center of God’s love and power and at the same moment make us feel like specks in a universe infinitely larger than we can imagine . They both clarify our thoughts, heighten our sensitivities, make us sober, remind us of our dependency on God and each other, and evoke our strongest emotions.

The poem just read and sung invites us not to be afraid of the Silence, ‘for Wisdom’s Voice is heard there.’ This is a piece of poetic advice that I can now affirm, but it was not always that way. There was quite a period in my own life when silence was not my friend, and I stayed away from it as best I could. The reason for this is that I was operating under the view that silence is nothing more or less than absence; the absence of sound, the absence of words, the absence of expressive emotion. I thought that silence was a deficit; it’s what was there when other stuff is missing.

But some intense life experiences taught me differently. I came to see silence not as a black hole, not as a vacuum, but rather as a mirror.

Now, I can imagine some of you saying, “Of all the things in my life that I cherish, I would not put the mirror on the top of my list, especially not those ultra-illuminated cosmetic mirrors.” And I’m with you in that; I don’t need another zit finder in my life.

No, the kind of mirror I’m talking about is the one that does nothing more or less than to show you who you actually are right now. It doesn’t judge you; it doesn’t critique your looks; it doesn’t point you elsewhere. It just shows you clearly who you are right now. And though it can be challenging to see who you really are, I testify to you that the single most frightening place in the spiritual life is precisely when you have no idea of who you really are, and are driftly aimlessly because of it.

I want to think about what it’s like when you’re looking into a mirror but one of your loved ones is standing behind you. Some of what you’re looking at in yourself may still not be completely pleasing. There may still be some hard stuff, some life zits that you wish would go away. But somehow, the presence of the one standing behind you calls you into the deeper reality; the reality that you are loved. That’s what silence in God’s presence can be. God made the mirror, and God lovingly holds it up so we can see who we actually are.

In the silence following the Barber Adagio in St. Louis, God held up the mirror and said, “Felix Hell isn’t the only one in this room who walks in someone’s footsteps.” The day after that concert, I called several people to tell them how important they are to me. God didn’t say, “You miserable ingrate. Go home and call the people who are important to you.” No, there is grace in the mirror. It only tells us who we are right now. We have to figure out what to do about it.

Marceau is right in saying that there is music in silence. Maybe it’s how much more clear the crescendo and decrescendo of daily emotions are when it’s quiet enough to notice them; maybe it’s the fact that the different leitmotifs of your life really do harmonize in ways you hadn’t seen (or heard) before; maybe the syncopation of nature’s sounds make you painfully aware of the quarter-note-after-quarter-note drone of your own life. Maybe the quiet reminds you that you used to do music for the joy of it, and now you do it for the paycheck, and you want the joy back. Maybe even after the performer lifts his or her hands from the console, you need the treble clef of silence to see what doors the music opened, what rooms need exploration.

One of the profound ironies of silence is that even though it gives you a much more intense encounter with yourself, it also shows you that there’s something huge underneath you, on each side of you, around you.

But doesn’t great music do just the same thing? Doesn’t it give you an intense encounter with yourself and also invite you into the huge reality around you? And I don’t just mean big oratorios or symphonies. Even the soloist lives in this reality. Yes, you have to focus on your vocal production or on your bowing technique or on whether you remembered to re-set all the registrations. But it’s so much bigger. You’ve got the encounter with what’s on the page and what you’ve discerned about what the composer was up to. You’ve got the encounter with this instrument with all its particularities. You’ve got the encounter with this room with all the oddities of its acoustics. You’ve got the encounter with these people, some of whom can’t wait to praise you and some of whom can’t wait to gossip about you. And, believe it or not, you’ve got the encounter with the God who gave you the ability to be there in the first place.

And among the people who’ve come to hear the music you are part of creating, someone out there is days away from delivering a baby; someone out there is a few disappointments away from taking his own life; and someone out there has aging parents who are declining; someone out there has shattered self-esteem; and someone out there feels that with one and half billion people wandering the earth in search of fresh water it’s pretty silly to be arguing over which type font to use for an invitation to an event that nobody cares about. It’s all out there; all that energy, all that

indecision, all that wonderment, all that yearning for something better.

And then something in the music speaks. Some crescendo in the Barber *Adagio* speaks to somebody about hope rising out of despair. One of the mordents or appoggiaturas in *O Mensch Bewein* actually makes someone consider how fallen he or she is, even if he or she doesn't know that the text of the chorale speaks of fallenness. One among the buffoonish *Variations on America* of Ives reminds someone of the intense love/hate relationship she or he has with America. We're lifted from the insubstantial and the trivial. We're jack-hammered out of the mesmerizing effect of consumer culture. We hear a message that comes from something other than a video screen. And somehow, life is deeply real and compelling. There's preciousness in the simple act of drawing a breath. That's what music can do.

There's biblical language for this. It starts with imperative and then turns to indicative. The psalmist says, "Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his." That's what silence and music have in common. They both bring us to this wonderful news. We didn't make ourselves. It's bigger than us. It's so much bigger than us that you can't even fit it in the new Cowboys Stadium. The news is so big that it won't even fit on the Godzillatron hanging over the Godzillaturf.

So, music makers, keep silence! And silence keepers, make music!