

## DON BOSCO AND MUSIC

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*La musique creuse le ciel  
La musique souvent me prend comme une mer.*

I trust that these lines from Baudelaire may not appear an inappropriate opening: in the course of this short talk I hope to justify their use.

I am not here to tell you things that you know better than I do about Don Bosco's natural talent for music, the way he developed it and used it in his work with others. I wish rather to share the reflections and comparisons that have been suggested to me by Don Bosco's passion for music. These reflections could appear somewhat partisan, an example of drawing water that rises from our interest in Don Bosco to the mill of my personal musical philosophy. Nevertheless, I assure you that I shall speak in all good faith, trying only to discover the basis of the passion I have referred to and the irreplaceable role that Don Bosco assigned to music in his view of human formation.

I have read somewhere or other that music was one of the seven [*sic*] secrets of education for Don Bosco. It seems to me that, in actual fact, it was somewhat more important than that, and that it had for him something of the all-embracing significance that it had in the teaching of the romantics.

It would not be surprising if such were the case. Don Bosco lived in the heart of the century of romanticism and it could well be that the inaccessible Alps brought to him a breath of the grandeur found in German music and the enthusiasm for that music that spread through Europe and the world through men like Hegel, Wackenroder, Hoffmann, Heine, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Schumann, the Beethoven of the *Books of Conversations* and, finally, Wagner. Music of that kind is something more than Marcel's *ébranlement nerveux*: it is a supreme source of awareness and a gateway to salvation, allowing one, somehow, to experience the absolute and the wholeness of things in a way which eludes objective reasoning. Such music attains a «universality which does not belong to the conceptual order and which is the source of the secret power of musical language».

Don Bosco, then, belonged to the 19th century, the century of great music and of profound reflection on the nature of music (I am happy, incidentally, to be able to point out the error of Hegel in his *Aesthetics*: it seems that the song bird of Minerva did not have to wait for sunset before taking to flight). He breathed the music of the time into which he was born. Beethoven was then at the height of his creative powers; the infant Wagner was about to draw inspiration from the music of Beethoven and to push such music almost to the limits of the possible, while Verdi had also entered the world to contest the musical supremacy of the son of Leipzig. That no breath of this creative fervour reached John Bosco is unthinkable: one cannot readily escape the kind of atmosphere of which I have spoken. His philosophical and theological convictions would, obviously, not allow him to elevate music into a temple of the veiled goddess Isis, to whose priests alone it was granted to gaze on the naked truth and penetrate to the heart of the mystery. This would not, however, prevent him from honouring music as a handmaid of Faith: and few of the mistresses's secrets are hidden from the handmaid!

«*Ne impedias musicam!*». Bosco seems to have been convinced that, just as education and life are part of one whole, so too are education, music and life inseparable. He admittedly feared the demonic power of music, as is proved by the episode when he smashed his violin; but really it was not music but its abuse that he feared: music has to be treated not as a means but as an end. It should elevate the soul, not pander to baser passions; but if it is real music it will exalt and purify passion. And if it is *great* music, how can the Tolstoy of *The Kreutzer Sonata* be so lost in despair as to judge sinful one of the purest creations of Beethoven?

«*Ne impedias musicam!*», therefore, because «an oratory without music is like a body without a soul».

Pietro Braidò considered this affirmation to be so strong and radical that he felt it necessary to place it in context and tone it down. I have examined the context and it seems to me, thank God, that there is no need to tone anything down. Don Bosco's various biographers bear general witness to the fact that all his work was informed by his faith in music, not as one amongst several useful tools, but as a style, an atmosphere which was indispensable if any truly educative exchange were to take place.

Don Ceria in the *Annali* affirms that if we seek the justification of this statement «in the healthy influence which Don Bosco considered music to exert upon the hearts and imaginations of the young by refining, elevating and improving them», then we fall short of the truth. Don Bosco went even further, declaring that music is the *soul* of the oratory and the oratory sums up his entire approach to education: therefore music is, if you will permit the phrase, the essential form, the prime principle of education. Without music education cannot breathe and asphyxiation brings all growth to a halt: the

goals of authentic education, especially that of «unveiling the realms of the wonderful and the immeasurable, and the longing for the infinite» (seen by Hoffmann as characteristic of Beethoven's music) became, in consequence, unattainable.

The high regard that Don Bosco had for music explains why he wanted it to be taught seriously. The rough and ready approach so common in certain religious surroundings was not something he approved of. For him recreative music did not mean inferior music. He understood that no music can be recreative unless it is also creative; that only great music has the power to renew. The Oratory, a place of joyful and, I would add, of musical learning, was also a place whose large choir could tackle the works of Cherubini, Haydn, Gounod and Palestrina; a place where Gregorian was taught according to the great Solesmes tradition of Dom Pothier and Dom Mocquereau, who visited the Oratory and gave classes there. It was also a place that could muster a large group of instrumentalists, who soon became sufficiently expert to perform during religious services, thus attracting prohibitions from the archbishop. The Oratory achieved that union of instrumental and vocal music in which language and sound are mystically wedded together, as if born of light itself, to quote the *Fantasia for Choir, pianoforte and orchestra*, Opus 80:

*«Wenn der Töne Zauber walten  
und des Wortes Weibe spricht  
muss sich Herrliches gestalten  
Nacht und Stürme werden Licht».*

The Oratory could boast «maestri» like Cagliari, Costamagna, Dogliani, who not only wrote fine music themselves, but introduced such composers as Donizetti, Verdi and Rossini. The «Academies» were occasions of great spiritual exaltation, thanks to the excellence of that art which seems to be the daughter of God and not a mere descendant (pardon the free adaptation of Dante). If music is not the daughter of God, it is at least his ambassador: and whenever Don Bosco sent off missionaries, those ambassadors of God, he always made sure that one of them was a musician of worth.

Don Ceria tells us: «If one does not know anything about those who lived at the Oratory in those days, *one cannot have any idea of the passion that ruled there for anything concerned with music*». The italics are mine and the statement deserves to be thus emphasised: music was «a passion that ruled». This is an extraordinary statement; extraordinary and alarming. I am surprised that the *promotor fidei* did not seize upon this «ruling passion» in Don Bosco's oratory and make use of it in his *animadversiones* during the process of beatification!

Jokes aside, the truth is that Don Bosco was helped towards sanctity by

music, just as the young boy who was destined to become the patron saint of the *Pueri Cantores* was also set on the path of holiness with the help of music. Don Bosco stated: «Music is a most efficacious aid to morality and holiness». As Mazzini witnessed of Goethe, he assigned to music the task of assisting sanctity: «the discovery of a whole life which cannot be expressed through the senses».

Piety, humility and availability are fundamental to the ascetical life and Don Bosco also demanded them of those who wished to pursue music. In his *Regulations* he laid down that no one was to be trained in music «who neglected the religious functions of the Oratory, or who was notorious for bad behaviour». This may rightly appear to be contradictory (was not music suppose to tame and refine behaviour?), but it serves to show the esteem Don Bosco had for music as something so pure and lofty that it could not be pursued or comprehended by those who lacked spiritual sensitivity or were morally coarse.

For Don Bosco music was prayer: not in the sense of Leibniz's *raptus animae se nescientis numerare* and in a much deeper sense than Schopenhauer's *exercitium metaphysices occultum nescientis se philosophari animi*; for him it was a question of *raptus animae* being *se scientis orare*.

For Bosco singing comes from one who loves. God's lover is God's cantor: he praises, adores and exalts God, and shares in his mystery. Just as the sacred is where we enter into mystery, so sacred chant is the most exalted form of musical expression, even though all great music is essentially sacred. Amongst the musical "genres" sacred music is proper to those «who are filled with wonder, who smile and are glad at heart because God is so much greater than they are» (Wackenroder). *Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam*. It is no mere chance that the few compositions of Don Bosco that we know something about grew out of praise and wonder: *Ab si canti in suon di giubilo*; *Lodato sempre sia*; *Gloria*; *Magnificat*.

Similarly his greatest concern was for Gregorian chant and the polyphonic music of Palestrina, both monumental examples of sacred emotion that reaches rare heights through the beauty of the human voice. We are told that «he enlivened his teaching with lessons on Gregorian chant, and later saw to it that the boarders were taught "canto fermo" [...], nor would he allow anyone to be involved in the study of music unless he had first learnt Gregorian chant». (There is also reason to believe that he asked Pius IX for a special indulgence for the teachers and singers of Gregorian). The performances of Palestrina's polyphony that were prepared by himself and his helpers were so good as to attract the following press notice: «Such execution of music and of the religious chants can only be heard in Rome in the world's greatest Church. Apart from Rome only Don Bosco is capable of providing Church music of such quality, of helping the faithful to acquire a taste for it, and of so embellishing Catholic worship» («L'Unità cattolica»).

«Remember that it is with sacred chant that you praise God, and that the angels in heaven join in your praise. [...] A cantor should have no other desire than to praise God and to unite his voice with that of the angels».

To sing is to pray, and to pray is to be filled with wonder. Don Bosco understood this, like the soul of whom Rilke wrote, «whose ears had been closed by God so that they might hear no sound save his voice», and who «crowned the world with a cupola of music», the person for whom «*zum Erstaunen sind wir da*»: «we are here in order to be filled with wonder».

*Short bibliography:*

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