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Music's Mystery

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Abstract: Our experience of being 'addressed' by music makes it legitimate to maintain that music 'speaks' to us; in so far as it constitutes a 'language' it does not, however, convey logical, linear discourse: its power depends on ambiguity and on a capacity for the simultaneous sounding of opposites. This language of harmonised contrast engages both our intellect and our emotions but cannot be fathomed by either; the fact that music inspires at once satisfaction and hunger shows that it points beyond itself to the source from which it springs and is, in this respect, a 'sign'. How do we absorb this language? How do we hear it? In this chapter, the author discusses questions like these related to the thinking of Élisabeth-Paule Labat (1897–1975), a French pianist and composer. In 1922, Élisabeth-Paule Labat entered the Benedictine abbey of Saint-Michel de Kergonan in Brittany. In 1963 she published her *Essai sur le mystère de la musique* (translated from French by the author of this chapter), where she discusses the decisive role that great music can play in the spiritual life.¹

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In *Capriccio*, his final opera premiered in 1942, Richard Strauss presented a sophisticated reflection on a problem that has engaged composers since the end of the Renaissance: how can one define the relationship

¹ This essay was printed as a preface to my translation of Élisabeth-Paule Labat's book, *The Song That I Am: On the Mystery of Music* (2014), from which all quotations from Labat's work are taken. Copyright is held by the Order of Saint Benedict. The text is repurposed here with the publisher's gracious permission.

between music and speech, *logos* and *melos*? It was Stefan Zweig who had prompted the composer to address this issue musically, having discovered a precedent in Antonio Salieri's 1786 operetta *Prima la musica, poi le parole*. Being Jewish, Zweig was prohibited from publishing work in post-*Anschluss* Austria, so he could not be involved in the groundwork for an opera. Strauss, however, found a collaborator in Clemens Krauss, who composed the libretto for *Capriccio*, presented as a 'conversation piece for music in one act'.

In a setting that cleverly mixes allegory and earthy realism, we follow two suitors, the poet Olivier and the composer Flamand, as they woo Madeleine, the lovely Countess, with a joint declaration of love: a poem written by one and set to music by the other. Madeleine is invited to choose him whose statement is truest and most essential. 'Music or poetry? Olivier or Flamand?' 'She will decide', we are told, and the colourful cast assist Madeleine with more or less helpful advice. 'The cry of pain preceded speech!' exclaims Flamand, only to hear Olivier retort, 'Yet only speech can give pain *meaning*.' The Countess remains torn. She sees that her two suitors not only complement one another: each on his own seems incomplete. 'What one of them did not suspect is brought out by the other,' says she, suspecting a need for both in order to satisfy the needs of a 'heart yearning for beauty'.

The drama of *Capriccio* may strike us as agreeable but useless drawing room chatter, designed to show off overwrought sensibilities. What is more, if we approach the problem it raises from a Christian, biblical viewpoint, the entire to-do is likely to seem superfluous. For surely it is beyond doubt that the *Word* 'was in the beginning'? So staunch is our adherence to this Johannine dictum that the rebuke of Edwin Muir's poem 'The Incarnate One' is often pertinent enough:

The Word made flesh here is made word again
A word made word in flourish and arrogant crook.

The poet's words ring out as a challenge and a provocation. Following the logic of the incarnation, can we, in fact, be so sure that theological truth unfailingly follows the principle '*Prima le parole*'? This is the chief question addressed in an essay written by a most discerning commentator that

has accompanied me throughout my adult life. Her name was Élisabeth-Paule Labat. She was a Benedictine nun, a musician of the highest calibre and a woman of enviable intellectual culture. Throughout her life, she sought to grasp what might be the *meaning* of music. She formulated her mature reflection in what remains, perhaps, her most original work, her *Essay on the Mystery of Music* (1963).

When it first came out in 1963, this book was received with delight by, among others, Hans Urs von Balthasar. He recognised in it a 'Teresian flight' of the spirit (private correspondence preserved in the archives of Abbaye Saint Michel de Korgonan). It is, however, a dense and, to be frank, difficult work. That is why I shall attempt to offer a synoptic analysis of its argument and scope, hopefully to encourage you to read the book for yourself. I shall begin with an outline of Labat's biography, which has a clear bearing on her work. Secondly, I shall expound on the central concern of the *Essay*, namely, the status of music as 'language'. Is it realistic to maintain that music 'speaks' to us? And if so, to what in us does it speak? These questions do not of themselves presuppose faith, and they are treated at first in absolute, neutral terms. Labat then goes on to expound on them theologically. This development will take up the third part of my chapter. Finally, in a fourth section, I shall consider the *Essay* as evidencing a peculiarly monastic theology or, even better, as orchestrating a monastic testimony. My purpose throughout will be to show how the monastic, contemplative life can facilitate a fruitful dialogue between cultures. The insights of a venerable spiritual tradition can be brought to bear on phenomena cultivated in contemporary spheres that it would be too reductive to brush aside as simply 'secular'. Indeed, certain aspects of a self-proclaimed 'sacred' culture may turn out to acquire new splendour from encounters with the unexpected.

Biography

Labat was born into a family of artists and intellectuals at Tarbes in 1897. A conventionally religious upbringing left her unequipped to negotiate the pain of life, which soon imposed itself. An encounter with death at the age of five or six left a deep impression, consolidated a little later

when a friend of her elder brother's committed suicide. A sense of duty made the little girl pray for him. This intercession made up the spiritual discipline of her childhood. Meanwhile, she was entering an 'irremediable solitude', a growing sense of being in 'a closed world' from which she yearned to break out. Her intellect demanded to know what underpinned this predicament and she sought answers in Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Claudel – and even Renan. Here and there, Labat found intimations of a presence, but one that was vague and featureless. The Bible remained a closed book, even when the discovery of Ruusbroec indicated a bridge to link experience and faith. In contrast, the language of music seemed accessible and real.

After the Great War, Labat moved to Paris and enrolled at the Schola Cantorum. Here she displayed exceptional promise. Not only was she a brilliant pianist: she also wrote music of beauty and originality. A career was opening, yet Labat remained dissatisfied, haunted by the fragility of life. The death of a colleague threw her into such despair that her equilibrium was under threat. It was in this frame of mind that she began the study of Gregorian chant and so discovered an aesthetic and spiritual ambiance that allowed her to breathe. She was impressed by the unsentimental character of this music, by the serenity with which it embraces realities that seem incommensurable. The Offertory *Recordare Virgo Mater* first gave her a sense that fractured lives can find wholeness – that even solitude such as hers need not be final.

Still, with regard to organised religion she remained aloof. If she consented, one day, to look up a local priest, it was simply to humour a pious friend, little suspecting that the encounter would prove decisive. An inner darkness lifted. Labat's cool objections to the Gospel melted before an outpouring of light. The presence that had drawn yet eluded her since childhood had acquired a face at last. She later remarked that there had been 'no shadow of exaltation or even surprise, only the impression of total liberation, of a simple, limpid entry into a world that was quite new, yet intimately attuned to me'.

In 1922, Labat entered the abbey of Saint-Michel de Kergonan. She was given the monastic name Élisabeth. Many years passed without notable incidents. Sister Élisabeth became an inspired organist. She was awkward

at manual work, absent-minded during ceremonies, generous in the community, uncompromising in fidelity. From the mid-1940s, she produced theological work of substance: at first, incidental pieces distributed among friends; later, sustained studies in the form of articles and, eventually, books. Sister Élisabeth suffered a mild stroke in 1968, five years after writing *Essay on the Mystery of Music* (1963). A second stroke, in June 1972, deprived her of mobility. Conversation became difficult, reading impossible. All at once, she became both dependent and isolated. It was a mode of living to which she did not take easily, certain though she was that it corresponded to the essence of her monastic oblation. Shortly before being afflicted by paralysis, she made this observation in a notebook:

It is a terrible, terrible thing to feel so utterly estranged from one's surroundings, from creation, from oneself; to be without any consolation human or divine, with a profound sense of impurity and total powerlessness. [...] Everything is falling to pieces. I live without knowing how or why, while my human sensibility has grown ten times more acute. It seems that my vocation to solitude has now reached its fullness—and yet I have never loved others more tenderly. You, Lord, are my boundless desert. I join you in your solitude, which you occupy at the heart of this world that, though you love it with infinite love, remains estranged from you.

She entered the heart of this desert as a place of encounter. Asked whether she was bored, she would answer, 'No'. Asked whether she missed music, she replied with vigour, 'Not at all!' This woman of penetrating intelligence and rare supernatural gifts, of whom it was said, only half in jest, that she 'inhabited the stratosphere', was reduced to the most embodied level of existence. On 24 July 1975 she slipped away, into the bright dawn of eternity.²

2 The above information is drawn from an obituary notice of Élisabeth-Paule Labat put together by her monastic community, extant in manuscript only. The archivist of Saint-Michel de Kergonan has kindly put it at my disposal.

Genesis of the work

From this brief evocation of a life, we may retain two salient features: the recurring experience of solitude and a sense that the mystery of our human condition exceeds comprehension, that it must be received blindly, in darkness, as a gift which will only be revealed as an expression of love in retrospect. A person refined by such insight will become sensitised to instances of *encounter*, and it is as such that music is first presented in Labat's *Essay*. In 1943, the requisitioning of Kergonan by German troops obliged the nuns to seek refuge in the nearby manor of Coët-Candec. One evening, as Labat, by then forty-six, was strolling in the autumnal splendour of countless shades of gold, music suddenly erupted. This is how she later recalled what took place:

I had begun to walk beneath the arcades of that enchanted path when I perceived the distant sound of a violin. The more I advanced, the clearer the melody became, and I recognised Mozart's Sonata in E Minor. From the bow of a proficient performer, the song soared alone with a resonance that seized me to the depth of my soul. [...] Never shall I forget the brief moments I then experienced. I knew that masterpiece by one of music's purest minds of genius. In my youth I had often accompanied it [...]. Yet never had its simple melody seemed charged with such lyricism, such depths of tenderness. Having finished the first movement of the sonata, the violin started again from the beginning. I was still listening. (Labat, 2014, p. xxvii)

What had happened? Labat was at pains to say, but even twenty years on she was unafraid to speak of the experience in strong terms. 'This exceptional music had torn me quite away from the created world and from myself' (Labat, 2014, p. xxviii). It had communicated 'contact with the pure essence of music' (Labat, 2014, p. xxviii). Indeed, it had been 'a revelation of music' (Labat, 2014, p. xxviii), imparting both satisfaction and longing. The 'revelation' had engaged her intellect as well as her emotions, yet 'seemed to reveal more of me than feelings woven on the warp of everyday experience and exposed to the clear light of the interior gaze' (Labat, 2014, p. xxviii). It had been a presence, a call, a sign – categories that recur throughout *Essay* as so many signposts.

Labat's engagement with the status of music as language thus arose from a personal experience of being 'addressed' by music. For it is the essence of a 'revelation' not to be cast into a void, but to extend from one subject to another. A revelation is 'of something' and 'to someone'. It is fundamentally communicative. If we apply this paradigm to music, there are, certainly, cases in which we can posit it as transmitting a definite message. We may think of Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, in which each piece evokes a clearly indicated character or mood. Likewise, we are on reasonably safe ground when dealing with the settings of texts, whether in the *Sanctus* of Bach's B Minor Mass or in a *chanson* by Fauré. The composer may render the words more or less in accordance with their author's intention (this is the crux of the quarrel between Olivier and Flamand); yet, there can be no doubt about his or her intention to communicate *utterance*. Matters become more complex when we enter the realm of pure composition and are left without any attribution of subject. Certainly, we have Cortot's commentaries on the Chopin Preludes (in the Ninth he recognises the Victory of Samothrace) or Planté's on the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which charmingly presents the B Flat Minor Fugue as a meeting of drinking companions. Such interpretation can be helpful to performer and listener alike, yet cannot claim the least degree of authority. It is, and must remain, no more than the articulation of suggestive *impressions*.

Music demands more. Labat cites Stravinsky as saying, in his *Chronicle of My Life* (reference), that we depreciate music if we love it because we hope to find in it emotions of joy, pain, or sadness, an evocation of nature, the stuff of dreams. In Stravinsky's vision, music wants to be 'a construct of sound, nothing else' (Labat, 2014, p. 13). Does it then make sense to think of it as a 'language'? Does a construct of sound *speak*? Yes, says Labat, but not in ways that accord with commonplace notions of speech. The 'language' of music originates in a dimension of consciousness that precedes and transcends articulate reason. We cannot, therefore, expect it to conform to the laws of discourse. Indeed, it is because it draws on *other* registers that it can, without paradox, express the ineffable. Where speech is hampered by its intrinsic linearity, music has the means to express opposing themes at the same time and can even unite them in

harmonisation and counterpoint. Music, then, *is* a language, but a language of signs, not of propositions. Only by approaching it as such shall we find in it a bearer, not just of beauty, but of sense.

These key notions, ‘sign’ and ‘sense’ require some elucidation. Let us begin with ‘signs’. Labat cites Plotinus’s vision of the world as εἰκῶν ἀεὶ εἰκονιζόμενος, an ‘ever-imagined image’, an *icon* that never ceases to be formed. ‘Here on earth,’ she maintains, ‘everything is a sign’ (Labat, 2014, s. 24). This is not to say, in a vulgar caricature of Plato, that the things we see and hear and touch are somehow not *real*. What Labat is anxious to show is that what we see and hear and touch can never fathom the whole truth of any given thing, which will always, with regard to its origin, for example, or its association with other things, carry messages that elude us. It is the prerogative of poets and contemplatives to intuit this universe of signs, and to sense in it (and beyond it) an invisible reality, as in the burning exclamation of Francis Thompson:

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!

Any phenomenon is potentially a sign. But may we perhaps say that music displays this quality to a supreme degree? Its claim to pre-eminence resides in its imprecision. ‘Through combinations of sounds that first address our senses, we touch the heart of music only *beyond* realities susceptible of definition’ (Labat, 2014, p. 16). On first hearing, a Debussy prelude may, for example, evoke for us a landscape or a buried emotion. Yet, on analysis, associations evaporate. We are left with nothing but an inexorable ‘construct of sound’, ‘a few scattered notes cast into the air without leaving more trace than the flight of a bird’ (Labat, 2014, p. xxviii). Music compels us, after a first appeal to our senses, to seek a more interior reality, the ‘fulguration of intelligence’ (Labat, 2014, p. 16) from which it springs and which it has the power to communicate. Labat is categorical: Anyone who has not been seized by this light – she calls it a ‘divine’ light – ‘has not yet gained access to music’ (Labat, 2014, p. 16). ‘Revelation’ gives way to ‘possession’. Feeling and understanding are both

exceeded. They are portals that may receive music, but cannot contain it. That is why genuine music leaves us at once full and dissatisfied. It points beyond itself to a *greater* beauty. And this, precisely this, is the 'sense' it communicates, that 'The sign of the beautiful is not the beautiful itself, however much it may be bathed in its glory' (Labat, 2014, p. 74).

Learning to hear

So far we have reached the following position: our experience of being 'addressed' by music makes it legitimate to maintain that music 'speaks' to us; in so far as it constitutes a 'language' it does not, however, convey logical, linear discourse; its power depends on ambiguity and on a capacity for the simultaneous sounding of opposites; this language of harmonised contrast engages both our intellect and our emotions but cannot be fathomed by either; the fact that music inspires at once satisfaction and hunger shows that it points beyond itself to the source from which it springs; in this respect, it is a 'sign'. How do we absorb this language? How do we hear it? We *hear* much in the way that we *see*. In a vast perspective, we *look at* one point while *seeing* the rest. Likewise, with music, we may *hear* all the voices but *listen to* one. Labat spells out the implications of this fact by citing a sharp observation made by Georges Duhamel:

What reaches the deepest, most intimate parts of our being is probably not what lies along the straight line of our attentive understanding, constituting the [...] principal voice. The most delicate phenomena, the ones that defy definition, or better, the *ineffable* phenomena, occur on the margins, in the region of twilight. What we listen to may be sublime, but remains for the most part natural. What we hear, on the other hand, is easily magical and supernatural. The great mystery of music is accomplished outside the scope of direct attention, at the limit of consciousness. (Labat, 2014, p. 10)

The word 'supernatural', aligned to 'magical', is here intended literally. It indicates 'unconsciousness' or 'beyond the reach of attention'. Labat, however, picks it up and develops it theologically. In a passage that makes us think of Pico della Mirandola's vision of man as *contemplator universi*, she envisages him as *universi ascoltator*. 'Man is both spiritual and carnal,

both rich and poor, enclosed in himself yet supremely receptive. The gathered voices of the whole earth rise towards him: he listens to them, understands them, and makes them his own' (Labat, 2014, p. 9). This is the call of music, 'to bring together the totality of voices in the universe and constitute a cosmic act of praise' (Labat, 2014, p. 10). 'Music makes us cantors on behalf of all creation' (Labat, 2014, p. 66). We occasionally wake up to catch a fragment of this doxology. Such moments confirm our intuition that all things aspire to ultimate unity in a beauty that is perfect and personal. That is when music fills us at once with joy and sadness. For as soon as we try to seize hold of what we hear, we are left bereft. Our present consciousness is not equipped to contain the message borne to us. It perceives it at its limit as a tantalising possibility, as a call from without that corresponds, remarkably, to waves of yearning surging from within. Appositely, Labat cites Hildegard of Bingen: 'Sed et anima hominis symphoniam in se habet et symphonizans est, unde etiam multotiens planctus educit, cum symphoniam audit, quoniam de patria in exilium se missam meminit' (Labat, 2014, p. 52).³ Such tears, provoked by music that is truly a 'sign', are not 'the effect of our exasperated sensibility'. They are 'tears of wonder, born [...] of a recollection that borders on adoration' (Labat, 2014, p. 48). In a flash of recognition, they show us where we come from and where we are going. They indicate a fugitive homecoming that inspires a more intense longing for home.

In this way, the sign value of music permits it to function as an intermediary. We find it voicing sensibly the 'symphony' we carry within. When this occurs, music gives us a sense of belonging. Yet our initial shock of delight turns to grief when we find that the security is not ours to keep. Time and again, Labat speaks of music as a 'foretaste' and a 'promise'. A promise of what? Of the 'patria,' to cite Hildegard, or, more specifically, in the words of Augustine, of the 'house of God'. In his *Enarratio* on the Forty-First Psalm, that great lover of music speaks of the angelic hymn rising everlastingly before the face of God and overflowing into

3 'Even the human soul carries symphony and is of its nature symphonic. That is why it is often moved to tears on hearing the symphony [of music]. It suddenly remembers that it has been sent forth from its homeland into exile.' From the *Liber vitae meritum* IV.46.

the perplexed muteness of creation, when all of a sudden 'a mysteriously sweet and musical echo resounds in the soul'. 'Tickled with delight', says Augustine, the ear thus gifted is drawn irresistibly towards the fullness of sound, like the deer to the spring of water (Labat, 2014, p. 99).

The fact that music is a feature of eternity is a *datum* of divine revelation. We have it on biblical authority that angels sing, yet we are unable to imagine *how*. As Labat observes, 'their song is of pure intelligence and could only, it would seem, become sensible through an intervention by the angels themselves, in a gesture of condescension to our carnal condition' (Labat, 2014, p. 100f.). Even so, their song would be perceived only by the most interior senses of the soul, duly refined by grace. In his brief, intriguing treatise on *The Song of Angels*, Walter Hilton (Labat, 2014, p. 101) gives some idea of how such hearing comes about. Labat cites him:

This song cannot be described by any bodily likeness, for it is spiritual, and above all imagination and reason. It may be felt and perceived in a soul, but it may not be showed. Nevertheless, I will speak of it to you as I think. When a soul is purified by the love of God, illumined by wisdom, and stabilised by the might of God, then the eye of the soul is opened to see spiritual things, as virtues and angels and holy souls, and heavenly things. Then, because it is clean, the soul is able to feel the touching, the speaking of good angels. This touching and speaking is spiritual and not bodily. For when the soul is lifted and ravished out of sensuality, and out of mind of any earthly things, then in great fervour of love and light (if our Lord deigns) the soul may hear and feel heavenly sound, made by the presence of angels in loving God. (Hilton in Labat, 2014, p. 101)

To such testimonies, persons vowed to monastic life should pay close attention. For monks, says Labat, are especially conditioned to hear such singing. It represents the essence of their calling, which an ancient tradition rightly defines as 'angelic'. 'Without wanting to become an angel himself, [the monk] understands that he must become as like one as possible, to share not only in the angels' song, but in everything that constitutes their life and calling' (Labat, 2014, p. 102). The self-transcendence to which he is committed reaches beyond the moral order.

Its goal is to bring man to praise God, in song and silence, by a cry welling up from the innermost core of his being, giving voice to his being. Being thus made a 'praise of glory', he will, in the harmony of his soul, himself become pure music. He will gain access to the mystery of music, though without ever fathoming it. [...] As man approaches the source of music, not as a distant, indefinable *abstractum* but as Someone—as someone who is All—he realises that, even here on earth, all is music and all tends towards the music of eternity. (Labat, 2014, p. 104)

It is in so far as we *become* music that we shall penetrate its mystery, discovering that what it signifies is not a *Quid* but a *Quis*. This *essential* music is perfectly compatible with the 'concert of silence' spoken of by the mystics. For the present, however, while still *in via*, we must content ourselves with scattered fragments of that eternal symphony as it reaches us through the inspired strains of earthly music. Like Baudelaire, we must be resigned to 'our inability to grasp *now*, wholly here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys of which *through* the poem, *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses' (Labat, 2014, p. 53). It is in this sense that Labat, in a tentative conclusion, speaks of music as a language signifying '*another* language', which is itself a sign (Labat, 2014, p. 11). If we truly love music, we know that we shall one day have to leave it behind, to hear and sing in a new way, as of yet inconceivable. The mystery of music dimly sensed in the present 'region of twilight' will sooner or later require *us* as its instruments, using our 'soul's movements' to make 'a jubilant sound'. The language of that *new* song will no longer convey its message 'at the limit of consciousness'. Once we have made it our own, we shall perceive beauty with the concentrated force of all our faculties, in a face-to-face encounter that is no longer a promise but an eternal possession.

Monastic Theology

Essay on the Mystery of Music (1963) was written by a woman with forty years' experience of monastic living. It explicitly states that it is not the work 'of a philosopher or theologian, even if its author is not altogether

ignorant of philosophy and theology'. It is, we are told, a 'testimony' inspired by other testimonies (Labat, 2014, p. xxix). And so it belongs to a genre that, though not being the exclusive property of monks, has always been congenial to them. In this final section, I shall indicate two characteristics of this peculiarly monastic approach to theology.

A first salient feature is *Essay's* autobiographical nature. It records an effort stretching over two decades to make sense of a precise moment in the author's life. Yet, it does not thereby become a mere chronicle. Apart from the initial account of the encounter with the Mozart sonata, we are told nothing at all about the circumstances of Labat's life. The experience on which *Essay* builds is altogether interior and developed with such discretion that we must strain our ears to follow it. When music ceased that evening, nightfall had covered creation with a shroud, leaving the solitary listener bereft, yet radiant with joy. She carried this paradox with her into the dusk, where, we might say, she stayed. The motif of the night recurs throughout the book, where Sanjuanist allusions sometimes make of it a technical term, as when we hear of the 'succession of nights' by which receptive souls are conditioned for a share in the divine light (Labat, 2014, p. 36); or of the 'purifying night' that is the mystic's searing pain. At other times, the conventional idiom is appropriated, almost subverted, with such force that a personal urgency is evident. The language of the Scriptures merges with that of Rilke and other 'poets of the night', to convey the longing of the bride who seems to be abandoned in the darkness, yet knows that the bridegroom is there, invisibly present beyond the lattice wall, his hair moist with nocturnal dew. Once his presence is perceived, the night is a 'night without darkness' – yet night all the same (Labat, 2014, p. 41). We sense something of the stakes involved in a solitary, familiar reference to '*my* night', pierced once as by lightning in a shock of beauty through music (Labat, 2014, p. 23). This is appropriate enough, for music is 'a call in the night' (Labat, 2014, p. 119). Only the night can teach us to hear it as we ought.

Such coded references tell us more about the drama of the author's life, I think, than any list of biographical data, though what we know about her life confirms the code. What might we learn from this? Above all, the reverence due to any shattering experience of beauty. The 'revelation'

of music through Mozart provided Élisabeth-Paule Labat with a hermeneutical key to her life and vocation. She applied it perseveringly to the culture that had formed her mind, excited to find corresponding values in sources that might appear disconnected: the theological argument of *Essay* owes no less to César Franck and Paul Claudel than to Augustine and Gregory Nazianzen. The treatise that results is eclectic and makes few concessions to the reader. But it is indubitably a ‘witness’, exercising great fascination and possessing, in the Gospel sense, ‘authority’.

The second feature I should like to stress is the eschatological character of this monastic theology. I do not mean by this that it reeks of sulphur, but that it is resolutely oriented towards the finality of things. The incident with the *Sonata in E Minor* is important not for its impact there and then, but because it remains a valid pointer towards a greater and final reality. ‘Today I consider it, that music at once intoxicating and chaste, in the light of the divine realities whose obscure foretaste it was’ (Labat, 2014, p. xxx). These realities are by definition beyond our reach, inviting us always to go *further*. We have recognised the autobiographical imprint of *Essay* in the image of the night. Its eschatological thrust might reasonably be associated with a characteristic reference to the sea. From the outset, Labat confesses that she loves the mystery represented by music ‘too much to forfeit getting out of my depth in the great sea of the unknown into which it plunges me, in order to remain there always, without ever finding my way back to the shore’ (Labat, 2014, p. xxix). Music is apt to evoke this mystery because it rests in an immensity of silence that ‘envelops and suffuses it like a great sea’ (Labat, 2014, p. 1). The beauty we find in it refreshes us and sets us free ‘like a great gust of sea-breeze instantly sweeping away our earthbound attachments’ (Labat, 2014, p. 28). Yet the full force of these realities will only appear in the life to come, when we shall respond to it in the angelic language of which music is, here below, a sign. It is a language of silence, but a *positive* silence, a silence which indicates not absence but presence. At that point we shall no longer need signs, being ‘bathed in the sea of reality, [...] in the presence of him who *is*’ (Labat, 2014, p. 112). The tensions that constitute earthly music will be resolved in a new song, in which

serene transparency and the balance of repose will be at one with the vital, vehement energy rushing forth from the depths of divinised being. [...] The symphony of the saints will be marked by neither tragedy nor pathos. Yet all that is truly great in tragedy and pathos will resonate within it, bathed in perfect peace, like an immense surge that rises from the bottom of the sea yet spreads upon the surface in gentle ripples. This, I think, is what the music of eternity will be like. (Labat, 2014, p. 115f.)

The promise heralded by Mozart will be redeemed in that concert, under the direction of Christ, 'the great harmoniser of the visible and invisible cosmos'. We shall no longer experience music. Music will be what we are.

As a final point, it may be useful to recall that *Essay on the Mystery of Music* (1963) was written in 1963, while the Second Vatican Council was in session. The 'inculturation' of monasticism was a priority on many a monk's and nun's agenda. Labat's book stands for a complementary, not contradictory, trend. We might call it a 'monastification' of culture. With intelligence and reverence, she approaches the mystery of music in the light of the monastic mystery, assimilating it within the parameters of a rich spiritual tradition. This procedure contributes to the book's status as a 'testimony'. Yet it is also an 'essay', and we are entitled to interpret this term quite as Montaigne intended it. What Labat holds out to us is a sketch, a work-in-progress, an offering that invites response. This dialogic, non-dogmatic trait is an attractive aspect of monastic theology, which enjoys a more flexible range than that imposed by the austere requirements of the schools. Precisely because it *is* free and off-beat, it can come up with insights that are fresh and illuminating.

In the grandiose monologue that brings *Capriccio* to a close, the Countess expresses her inability to perform the task set before her. Words and music, Olivier and Flamand, appear so intrinsically connected that the composer's plea, '*Prima la musica!*', fills her with consternation. 'Can there', she asks, 'be a conclusion [to this problem] that is not trivial?' Élisabeth-Paule Labat shows us that, yes, there can. She presents *one* answer, not *the* answer, but it is one that deserves (and repays)

consideration. The category of ‘sign’ allows her to go beyond juxtaposition; to *articulate* the mystery of music in a way that is both coherent and profound. And it could be that the quandary of Madeleine ultimately rests on insufficiently defined terms. As Cardinal Newman reflected as an old man, in a letter cited in *Essay*: ‘Perhaps thought *is* music?’ (cited in Ward, 1912, II, 76). If so, would it be so far-fetched to think that the *logos* of ‘the beginning’ is present and manifest also as the *melos*? After the death of Élisabeth-Paule Labat, Louis Bouyer wrote of her as follows in his preface to her posthumous volume *Présences de Dieu*:

The harmony of this monastic soul, so profoundly delicate and sensitive, overcame the dissonances of this present life by assuming them, presaging the peace of eternity—the faithful echo of a Presence sensed and acknowledged that claimed her entirely for itself. (Bouyer, in Labat, 1979, p. 2)

It is striking that Bouyer, a man of such profound intuition, should evoke Labat by means of a musical metaphor. The ‘essential music’ to which she aspired had taken possession of her even before she plunged fully into the ‘sea of God’. It had resounded in the ‘night’ where, if we will, we can hear it still.

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