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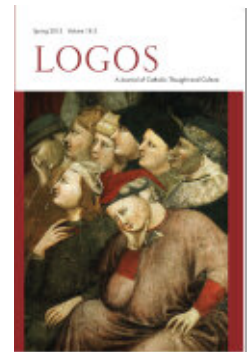
Simone Weil on Music: Listening with Tears of Prayerful  
Silence

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## Simone Weil on Music

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### Listening with Tears of Prayerful Silence

Music does not reside in notes; it resides in a relationship; and yet it makes one weep. That is how man is made: Relationships touch him physically.<sup>1</sup>

The love which unites Christ abandoned on the Cross to his Father at an infinite distance dwells in every saintly soul. . . . In such a soul the dialogue of Christ's cry and the Father's silence echoes perpetually in a perfect harmony.<sup>2</sup>

#### *I. Introduction*

THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTER of music is “relational” for Simone Weil (1909–1943). The delimiting, distancing emotions evidenced through weeping are produced not merely by denoted sounds and their modulations, but rather by the artistically forged cosmos that constitutes an order, a unity, which is apprehended by inwardness through the senses. That order, that unity, ultimately expresses for Weil the tacit spiritual “dialogue” or “relationship” between God's original creative “fiat” that is one with the re-creative love in Christ “abandoned on the Cross” and the human soul as embodiment of that love.

Weil considers the truly musical as an implicit “dialogue [between] Christ’s cry and the Father’s silence [as it] echoes perpetually in a perfect harmony.” Thus central to an understanding of Weil’s core and essential view on music is not only “Christ’s cry” or his suffering and death on the Cross, but also the “Father’s silence” as pervasive tacit ground of the silence of the cosmos which underlies the phenomenal world of human experience.

These two complementary notions lead me to examine how they open Weil to a communion with what she calls a “greater reality” (*GG*, 34) that is infinitely more real than the world of gravity, necessity, change, and time.<sup>3</sup> “God has left us abandoned in time” (*WR*, 424), Weil writes, and thus time is God’s waiting for us to return to him: “The stars, the mountains, the sea, and all the things that speak to us of time, convey God’s supplication to us” (*WR*, 424). It is a function of music, says Weil, to give voice to this relationship between humanity abandoned by God and God’s call to us in the crucified Christ, inviting us to pierce through time, so that we “find eternity behind it” (*WR*, 494). Music is concerned with time,<sup>4</sup> yet for Weil it is a manifestation of beyond or outside of time:<sup>5</sup> “Music unfolding in time captures the attention and bears it away outside of time by bringing it to bear at each instant on what is.”<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, attention to music or to art or to things in general functions for Weil as the soul’s movement into God. Stated differently, attention to music is for Weil a form of prayer by those who open themselves to higher or newer levels of auditory reception, so that they become attentive in ways that they never listened or heard before. “Attention,” Weil writes, “taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love” (*GG*, 105).<sup>7</sup> In musical attention as prayer, life passes from “what is” to “outside of time,” from reason to faith, and from speech to silence; music, by capturing our attention, leads us to contemplate or to pray, and thus it helps the soul to achieve contact or union with God.

Weil’s notion that music aids in our contact or union with God, or that music expresses religious ideas, is in line with the musical

aesthetics or philosophies of Pythagoras, Plato, Augustine, and Schopenhauer—to name but a few. Weil herself tells us that the ideas of limit, measure, equilibrium, proportion, and harmony constitute the very soul of the Greeks—the Pythagoreans, Socrates, Plato (*WR*, 164). The Greek mind, Weil goes on to say, could imagine a harmonious universe, because it attached great “importance to numbers” (*WR*, 299). This emphasis on numbers led Pythagoras to contemplate the relationship between the numerical relationships that permeate the universe and numerical ratios in musical harmony. But more than this, what attracted Weil to Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans was their use of mathematics as a means of purification of the soul:<sup>8</sup> “Purity of soul was their concern; to ‘imitate God’ was the secret of it. The imitation of God was assisted by the study of mathematics, in so far as one conceived the whole universe to be subject to mathematical law.”<sup>9</sup> Thus Pythagoras discovered the link between mathematics and music, or between number and musical harmony. In the musical philosophy of Plato, Weil learns that both the universe and the soul are similarly composed according to the same numerical ratios or proportions, rendering them beautiful. In *The Republic*, Plato advances the notion that music, through its rhythm and harmony, detaches the soul from material concerns or attachments, so that it can pursue true knowledge or wisdom. Thus Plato recommends that the young should be educated in music:

Musical training is a more powerful instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful . . . and also because he who has received this true education of the inner being will most shrewdly perceive omissions or faults in art and nature, and with a true taste, while he praises and rejoices over and receives into his soul the good, and becomes noble and good, he will justly blame and hate the bad, now in the days of his youth, even before he is able to know the reason why; and when reason comes he

will recognize and salute the friend with whom his education has made him long familiar.<sup>10</sup>

In Plato's view, without education in music, there can be no education of the soul; and if there is no education of the soul, there can be no philosophy or dialectic by which the soul can ascend to "the love of beauty,"<sup>11</sup> where it finds its fulfillment or spiritual health. Weil declares that in his *Timaeus*, Plato counsels us "through contemplation to make ourselves like to the beauty of the world, like to the harmony of the circular movements that cause day and night, months, seasons, and years to succeed each other and return" (*WG*, 177). Everything in the world is beautiful for the Greek mind, Weil concludes, because everything is rhythmic and harmonious, and therefore it is governed by basic proportions or relationships or numerical ratios, and also because everything is a bridge by which "we go towards God" (*GG*, 133) in Christ as "proportional mean"<sup>12</sup> between God and the world.

Augustine, who transmitted this Pythagorean-Platonic view to the Middle Ages, in the sixth book of *De Musica* describes how music can foster the individual's detachment from the material world and her or his ascent to God. Augustine believes that this is possible because of the numerical nature of music, which it shares with the material world—created and ordered according to number—as well as with God: the immaterial source of all number and order.<sup>13</sup> Augustine writes: "I wrote six books *On Music*. The sixth of these became especially well-known, because in it a subject worthy of investigation was considered, namely, how, from corporeal and spiritual but changeable numbers, one comes to the knowledge of unchangeable numbers which are already in unchangeable truth itself, and how in this way, 'the invisible attributes' of God, 'being understood through the things that are made, are clearly seen.'"<sup>14</sup>

In *The World as Will and Idea*, the primary work by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), music is identified with the very being of the world—which is, for Schopenhauer, the will. Forms of art other

than music furnish only representations of ideas, which are themselves copies of the will. Thus the arts, unlike music, are copies of a copy of the essence of the world.

Music stands alone, quite cut off from all the other arts. In it we do not recognize the copy or repetition of any Idea of existence in the world. Yet it is such a great and exceedingly noble art, its effect on the inmost nature of man is so powerful, and it is so entirely and deeply understood by him in his inmost consciousness as a perfectly universal language. . . . We may conclude from the analogy of the other arts . . . and affect us on the whole in the same way as it does, only that the effect of music is stronger, quicker, more necessary, and infallible.<sup>15</sup>

In all these views, music is conceived as freeing the individual from temporal attachments, so that the listener can pursue higher or eternal truths, which verbal language is incapable of pursuing. Weil's musical aesthetics has a similar aim. The higher or eternal truths that Weil mentions are those of the Christian faith, and therefore her preoccupation lies in the capacity of music to link the human with the divine, the temporal with the eternal, the beauty of the world with the creative word of God in the mysteries of Christ.

To clarify Weil's musical philosophy, I must begin with the meaning that she attaches to attention as it relates to detachment.<sup>16</sup> Then I will go on to examine Weil's notion of art, beauty, and the good. Finally, in the last section, I will explore the contemplation of silence in sacred music.

## *II. Attention and Detachment*

The clearest expression of Weil's understanding of attention is to be found in an essay by the title, *Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God*—which she had sent to her spiritual director, Father Perrin. In it, Weil identifies attention with detach-

ment and emptiness of thought, and with openness and receptivity: it is not an activity or a search, she tells us, but a looking and a waiting in which truth comes to dwell in us. As she puts it:

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, sees also below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains. Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it.<sup>17</sup>

Detachment, Weil explains, separates us from everything that constitutes our very being, so that our being becomes perfect not so much in the things we see, know, and desire, but in those things which we no longer see, know, and desire (*GG*, 37)—that is, in the “decreation” (*GG*, 28) or “destruction of the ‘I’” (*GG*, 23). Once we understand that “We possess nothing in the world” (*GG*, 23), we acquire a vision in which we perceive things with a non-possessive eye, or with an eye of detachment, or with an eye of love: “The name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love” (*WR*, 333). This notion of “disinterested” or detached attention is fundamental; it implies distance between the subject and the beautiful: “Distance is the soul of the beautiful” (*GG*, 136), and hence “The beautiful is that which we can contemplate” (*GG*, 135) without trying to touch or seize it. “The beautiful is a carnal attraction which keeps us at a distance and implies a renunciation” (*GG*, 136).<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Weil is well aware that music can eclipse this distance, thus perverting the soul: “For, just as there is an art [music] which is divine, so there is one which is demoniacal. It was no doubt the latter

that Nero loved. A great deal of our art [music] is of the devil" (*GG*, 138). In fact, Weil personally experienced this demoniacal or seducing power of music when she tells Fr. Perrin: "I know that if at this moment I had before me a group of twenty young Germans singing Nazi songs in chorus, a part of my soul would instantly become Nazi. That is a very great weakness, but that is how I am" (*WG*, 53).

In contrast, the music of Palestrina, of Monteverdi, of Bach, Weil goes on to say, attains a sense of the whole or of completeness via its "relationship" between the various elements, thus rendering it good for the soul: "The music, the voices, the words of the liturgy, the architecture, the crowd . . . there you have the comprehensive art that Wagner is seeking . . . I don't know whose music it was, but doubtless Palestrina's."<sup>19</sup> Weil says the same of the music of *L'Elisir d'Amore* by Donizetti: "A very spiritual libretto, music of perfect grace."<sup>20</sup> To Weil, this means that Donizetti wrote his music according to an ascending and a descending movement:

This movement of descent, the mirror of grace, is the essence of music. . . . The rising of the notes is a purely sensorial rising. The descent is at the same time a sensorial descent and a spiritual rising. Here we have the paradise which every being longs for: where the slope of nature makes us rise towards the good. . . . A double movement of descent: to do again, out of love, what gravity does. Is not the double movement of descent the key to all art? (*GG*, 137)

"Gravity," Weil explains, "corrupt[s] the function of language" (*GG*, 3), thus destroying our relation with the world, with our verbal discourse, and with God. Furthermore, "gravity" includes everything that we call base (*GG*, 1), superficial (*GG*, 2), and selfish: "The greatest sin" (*GG*, 3). This produces a void (*GG*, 11) in us, so that we have the need of grace. Grace, Weil notes, is both supernatural in origin and altruistic in orientation, and it is the "only exception" (*GG*, 1) to the law of "gravity": "Grace fills empty spaces but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes



this void" (GG, 10). Weil recommends that we endure the void and that we accept the inevitability of sufferings, so that we can receive the help of "supernatural bread" (GG, 11) by which we escape from the law of "gravity": "So long as we ourselves have begun the process of destroying the 'I', we can prevent any affliction from causing harm. . . . Purely external destruction of the 'I' is quasi-infernal suffering. External destruction with which the soul associates itself through love is expiatory suffering. The bringing about of the absence of God in a soul completely emptied of self through love is redemptive suffering" (GG, 23–24). And, "He emptied himself of his divinity. We should empty ourselves of the false divinity with which we were born. Once we have understood we are nothing, the object of all our efforts is to become nothing. It is for this that we suffer with resignation, *it is for this that we act* [author's emphasis], it is for this that we pray. May God grant me to become nothing. In so far as I become nothing, God loves himself through me" (GG, 30).

In becoming nothing, and in suffering with resignation, we find ourselves in total detachment, perceiving "the silence of heaven and earth" (GG, 37) as the ultimate means of expression, and waiting patiently in expectation for God: "We are incapable of progressing vertically. We cannot take a step toward the heavens. God crosses the universe and comes to us" (WG, 133). To become nothing, not only intellectually but also in the imaginative part of our soul (WG, 159), means that attention is turned "to what is real and eternal," and thus it sees "the true light and hear[s] the true silence" (WG, 159), and it grasps pure or divine love: "Pure love of creatures is not love in God, but love which has passed through God as through fire. Love which detaches itself completely from creatures to ascend to God, and comes down again associated with the creative love of God" (GG, 57).

This theme of detachment is central in the spirituality of St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) and of St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) whose lives and works inspired Weil. Its roots go back to Augustine, and its full development can be traced to the fourteenth-century

German mystic, Meister Eckhart (1260–1327). All of them see detachment as a way of returning to God from whom we have become estranged by attaching ourselves to earthly possessions or attachments. Eckhart notes: “And if man is to become equal with God, insofar as a creature can have equality with God, that must happen through detachment.”<sup>21</sup> And this equality must come about in grace, according to Eckhart, for it is grace that draws us from all temporal things, and makes us pure of all transient attachments: “And you must know that to be empty of all created things is to be full of God, and to be full of created things is to be empty of God.”<sup>22</sup> Thus for Eckhart, the soul can receive God only when it has substantially emptied itself through detachment. Since all creatures are nothing taken in themselves, then, concludes Eckhart, “If you want to be perfect, you must be naked of what is nothing.”<sup>23</sup>

Like Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross also recommends detachment as a way of transforming ourselves to draw closer to God. Like Eckhart, John views detachment as a way by which the soul strips itself of all creaturely attachments and of its actions and abilities, so that when everything that is not like God is cast out, it “may receive the likeness of God.”<sup>24</sup> God fills the void created by detachment in the dark night of the soul, and thus the soul becomes divine “through the participation of union,”<sup>25</sup> insofar as this is possible in this life. To render this process of transformation more clearly, John compares it to a clean or polished window illumined by the ray of divine grace. He tells us that attachments are like “stain[s]” in the window that obstruct the divine ray from entering; “and the cleaner the window is, the brighter will be its illumination. . . . If the window is totally clean and pure, the sunlight will so transform and illumine it that to all appearances the window will be identical with the ray of sunlight and shine just as the sun’s ray.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the soul on which the divine light of God shines, must be totally clean and pure: “A soul makes room for God by wiping away all the smudges and smears of creatures, by uniting its will perfectly to God’s; for to love is to labor to divest and deprive oneself for God of all that is not of God. . . . The

illumination will not be perfect until the soul is entirely cleansed, clear, and perfect.”<sup>27</sup>

The illumined or detached person, John goes on to say, acquires the virtue of liberality, which is one of the principle attributes of God. Such a person will also acquire “liberty of soul, clarity of reason, rest, tranquillity and peaceful confidence in God and a true reverence and worship of God which comes from the will. He will find greater joy and recreation in the creatures through his detachment from them, for he cannot rejoice in them if he looks upon them with attachment to them as to his own.”<sup>28</sup> Clearly, then, detachment does not imply a turning away from the world; rather, it implies, in Weil’s own words, that “we change our attachment. We must attach ourselves to all” (*GG*, 128) by identifying our life with the life of Christ. “We must not help our neighbour *for* Christ but *in* Christ [author’s emphasis]. May the self disappear in such a way that Christ can help our neighbour through the medium of our soul and body. . . . Christ did not suffer for his Father. He suffered for men by the Father’s will” (*GG*, 40). And to model our life after Christ’s life is to accept and “to love necessity” (*GG*, 38) with its suffering:<sup>29</sup> “The Cross is necessity itself brought into contact with the lowest and the highest part of us. . . . There is not, there cannot be, any human activity in whatever sphere, of which Christ’s Cross is not the supreme and secret truth” (*WR*, 465).

Those who love God—“God makes himself *necessity* [author’s emphasis]” (*GG*, 38)—and those who model their life after Christ, consent to obeying necessity, and this consent, Weil states, is the supreme act of self-denial: “The love within [the soul] is divine, uncreated; for it is the love of God for God that is passing through it. God alone is capable of loving God. We can only consent to give up our own feelings so as to allow free passage in our soul for this love. That is the meaning of denying oneself. We are created for this consent, and for this alone” (*WG*, 133–34). What seems to be necessity becomes for Weil obedience; and, “as soon as we feel this obedience with our whole being, we see God” (*WG*, 130). We see God precisely

because the “mechanism of necessity” (*WG*, 128) constitutes the very beauty of the world: “In the beauty of the world brute necessity becomes an object of love. What is more beautiful than the action of gravity on the fugitive folds of the sea waves, or on the almost eternal folds of the mountains?” (*WG*, 128–29). The sea, Weil goes on to say, is not less beautiful to our eyes because we know that sometimes ships are wrecked by it. On the contrary, this adds to its beauty. If it altered the movement of its waves to spare a boat, it would be a creature gifted with “discernment and choice and not this fluid [thing], perfectly obedient to every external pressure. It is this perfect obedience that constitutes the sea’s beauty” (*WG*, 129). The world of necessity may indeed be cruel, Weil insists; but all the cruelties of the world are “like the folds imposed upon the waves by gravity. That is why they contain an element of beauty. Sometimes a poem, such as the *Iliad*, brings this beauty to light” (*WG*, 129).

### *III. Art, Beauty, and the Good*

Thus the poet, or any other artist, creates with a view to reveal the beauty of the world for us: “Art is an attempt to transport into a limited quantity of matter, modeled by man, an image of the infinite beauty of the entire universe. If the attempt succeeds, this portion of matter should not hide the universe, but on the contrary it should reveal its reality to all around” (*WG*, 168). And the beauty of the world is for Weil a reflection of God’s creative or divine love: “God created through love and for love” (*WG*, 123). Consequently, “There is as it were an incarnation of God in the world and it is indicated by beauty. The beautiful is the experimental proof that the incarnation is possible. . . . In everything which gives us the pure authentic feeling of beauty there really is the presence of God” (*GG*, 137). This makes contact with the beautiful similar to a sacrament, according to Weil: “Every true artist has had real, direct, and immediate contact with the beauty of the world, contact that is of the nature of a sacrament. God has inspired every first-rate work of art, though its subject may

be utterly and entirely secular; he has not inspired any of the others” (*WG*, 169).

The artist’s work thus reveals a sacramental view of the world, one that sees reality as issuing from God in successive levels, all of which are beautiful: “It is this very agreement of an infinity of perfect beauties that gives a transcendent character to the beauty of the world” (*WG*, 164). Beauty, Weil goes on to say, is not an attribute of matter itself. It is a relationship of the world to our sensibility (*WG*, 164). Neither is beauty for Weil a means to anything else; beauty alone “is good in itself” (*WG*, 167) and “the only finality here below.” As Kant said very aptly, “it is a finality which involves no objective” (*WG*, 165). Furthermore, Weil considers the beautiful not as “something we should like to feed upon,” but as “something to look at” (*WG*, 166). Hence the beautiful appears only from a distance—that distance that causes us to enjoy what is for Weil the “contemplation” or the “pure intuition” (*GG*, 11) of the object of beauty.

In this, Weil is in full agreement with Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who places disinterested aesthetic pleasure at the heart of his aesthetics. To illustrate his notion of disinterestedness, Kant gives the example of someone standing before a palace. He tells us that some may find it morally repelling, since it may have been constructed for “the vanity of the great”<sup>30</sup> with “the sweat of the [poor] people.”<sup>31</sup> Or, some of us may find ourselves on an uninhabited island without any hope of ever returning to civilization, thus we imagine such a fine palace by our mere wish.<sup>32</sup> Kant sees nothing wrong with these judgments or perceptions of the palace. However, he insists that when it comes to the question of whether the palace is beautiful, the only thing that enters into our judgment is simply one’s disinterested delight or satisfaction: “*Taste* is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an *entirely disinterested* satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called *beautiful* [author’s emphasis].”<sup>33</sup> This, Kant goes on to explain, does not reduce the beautiful to merely subjectivity or relativism. Rather, the beautiful is bound up with the claim to universality, and thus “A judgment

with *objective universal validity* [author's emphasis] is also always valid subjectively."<sup>34</sup> Kant explains that this universality of judgment of beauty comes from the harmony of our cognitive powers it sets in motion; "but on that universality of the subjective condition for judging of objects is alone based on the universal subjective validity of the satisfaction bound up by us with the representation of the object that we call beautiful."<sup>35</sup> When judgments of beauty are made, Kant concludes, what evokes the experience of beauty in the artwork is not purpose, but the form of purpose: "Thus we can at least observe a purposiveness according to form, without basing it on a purpose."<sup>36</sup>

Thus Kant arrives at the definition of beauty and the beautiful: "*Beauty* is the form of the *purposiveness* of an object, so far as this is perceived in it *without any representation of a purpose* [author's emphasis]";<sup>37</sup> and, "The *beautiful* is that which without any concept is cognized as the object of a *necessary* satisfaction [author's emphasis]."<sup>38</sup> This "necessary satisfaction" is free of all cognitive ideas, and hence it is disinterested; it is universally valid because it derives from "the free play of the imagination and the understanding"<sup>39</sup> as they harmonize with each other and with the aesthetic judgment. "The excitement of both faculties (imagination and understanding) to indeterminate but yet, through the stimulus of the given sensation, harmonious activity, *viz.* that which belongs to cognition in general, is the sensation whose universal communicability is postulated by the judgment of taste."<sup>40</sup>

Weil inherits from Kant the notions of "disinterestedness" and of "purposiveness without a purpose." Yet, even these two notions do not share the same source or center, which for Kant is reason, and for Weil is *attention, waiting*: "The attitude of looking and waiting is the attitude which corresponds with the beautiful. As long as one can go on conceiving, wishing, longing, the beautiful does not appear" (*GG*, 136). For Weil, the subject has to be passive in order for the beautiful to appear. This kind of "passive activity" (*WG*, 194), where there is only "waiting, attention, silence, immobility" (*WG*, 194), Weil finds it perfectly embodied in the mystics. Hence: "Mysticism should provide the key for all knowledge and all values. The

key is harmony (Philolaos). Christ is the key. All geometry proceeds from the cross" (*WR*, 437). If all geometry proceeds from the cross, then Weil regards geometrical relationships or mathematics or numbers as constituting the very order of the universe—as do Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine—with the cross as its center. For Weil, then, everything in the world is beautiful because it is "Christ's tender smile for us coming through matter. He is really present in the universal beauty. The love of this beauty proceeds from God dwelling in our souls and goes out to God present in the universe. It also is like a sacrament" (*WG*, 165). Weil goes on to say that God created the universe, and Christ created the beauty of it for us (*WG*, 164). Therefore, Christ is the model of beauty to imitate; that is, renunciation of our own self and obedience are the conditions for passing over into the realm of the beautiful: "Everything that is related to beauty should be unaffected by the passage of time. Beauty is eternity here below" (*WR*, 172). Consequently, "Upon her rest all the hopes of truth and justice, with tongue cut out. She, too, has no language; she does not speak; she says nothing. But she has a voice to cry out. She cries out and points to truth and justice. . . . Justice, truth, and beauty are sisters and comrades. With three such beautiful words we have no need to look for any others" (*WR*, 334).

Justice, truth, and beauty, Weil continues, are always and everywhere good; it is the good that is above all the sacred in every human being. "The good is the only source of the sacred. There is nothing sacred except the good and what pertains to it" (*WR*, 315). The sacred, and therefore the good, is for Weil the realm of the "impersonal and the anonymous" (*WR*, 318)—"The whole effort of the mystic has always been to become such that there is no part left in his soul to say 'I'" (*WR*, 318)—which can be reached only by "the practice of a form of attention which is rare in itself and impossible except in solitude; and not only physical but mental solitude" (*WR*, 318). This form of attention, Weil concludes, is practiced by the artist or by the saint: "Every time that a man rises to a degree of excellence, which by participation makes of him a divine being, we are aware of some-

thing impersonal and anonymous about him. His voice is enveloped in silence. This is evident in all the great works of art or thoughts, in great deeds of saints and in their words” (*WG*, 179). For example, the Gregorian chant, Romanesque architecture, the *Iliad*, the invention of geometry were not for Weil “occasions for the manifestation of personality,” but they were occasions for “their personality [to have] vanished” (*WR*, 318).

There is truly the good in the impersonal and in the anonymous individual; for such a person, Weil tells us, contemplates the other as oneself exposed to suffering and to necessity (*GG*, 70). The good that is done this way—for the sake of the other—is pure: “All absolutely pure goodness completely eludes the will. Goodness is transcendent. God is Goodness” (*GG*, 40). And every good action is accompanied by humility as “the root of love” (*WR*, 436). Humility constitutes genius for Weil: “Real genius is nothing else but the supernatural virtue of humility in the domain of thought” (*WR*, 329); and in the domain of thought, “the virtue of humility is nothing more nor less than the power of attention” (*GG*, 116). This virtue of humility as attention is the more beautiful, sweet, and lovely, the more it is obedient, waiting, solitary, and afflicted; for, when we are most humbled and most solitary, we are most raised up above the world of necessity to the sacred where God dwells in silence. “Humility partakes in God’s patience. The perfected soul waits for the good in silence, immobility and humility like God’s own. Christ nailed on the cross is the perfect image of the father” (*WR*, 424); and, “The speech of created beings is with sounds. The word of God is silence. God’s secret word of love can be nothing but silence. Christ is the silence of God. Just as there is no tree like the Cross, so there is no harmony like the silence of God. The Pythagoreans discerned in the fathomless eternal silence around the stars. In this world, necessity is the vibration of God’s silence” (*WR*, 467)—the same silence that frightened Blaise Pascal. And those who are capable not only of listening but also of loving can hear this silence as the word of God in the crucified Christ, whose “glorified body



. . . bore the marks of the nails and spear” (*WG*, 123). “This tearing apart, over which supreme love places the bond of supreme union, echoes perpetually across the universe in the midst of silence, like two notes, separate yet melting into one, like pure and heart-rending harmony. This is the Word of God. The whole creation is nothing but its vibration. When human music in its greatest purity pierces our souls, this is what we hear through it” (*WG*, 124).

#### *IV. Contemplating Silence in Sacred Music*

Human music thus only serves to make the word of God audible; and by contemplating Christ on the Cross, we learn to hear the eternal music of God’s silence in the affliction and in the beauty of the world. For Weil, affliction and beauty are heard more in silence than in the spoken words, and hence in prayer or contemplation. In prayer, time stands still; past, present, and future are in harmony with one another, as are the three Persons of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (*WR*, 495). In prayer, we listen to the world as it emerges from God’s silence and returns to it; in prayer, the whole of creation is seen or heard as the soundless movement or vibration of necessity. Necessity is a sound, which we must listen to with “an attentive silence” (*WR*, 316) through which God’s lamentation or cry can make itself heard. Speaking of the Lord’s Prayer, which Weil recited in Greek with “absolutely pure attention” (*WG*, 71), she tells us that she experienced the sensation of escaping from the sense of time into the world of timelessness, where all is silence; even noises are for her interspersed with the silence of infinity:

At times the very first words tear my thoughts from my body and transport it to a place outside space where there is neither perspective nor point of view. The infinity of the ordinary expanses of perception is replaced by an infinity to the second or sometimes the third degree. At the same time, filling every part of this infinity of infinity, there is silence, a silence which is not an absence of sound but which is the object of a positive

sensation, more positive than that of sound. Noises, if there are any, only reach me after crossing this silence. (*WG*, 72)

Weil brings this same practice of absolute attention to the listening of the Gregorian melodies during Holy Week at the Abbey of Solesmes, thus experiencing the same sensation as she did in reciting the Our Father. As she listened attentively, Weil was able to find a pure and perfect joy “in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words. This experience,” she says, “enabled [her] by analogy to get a better understanding of the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction” (*WG*, 68). As she continued to listen with pure attentiveness, “the thought of the Passion of Christ entered into [her] being once and for all” (*WG*, 68), and thus she experienced the eternal presence of God’s love in her. In both experiences, absolute attention is seen by Weil as the very music or song of the soul—an attention that is an exchange between body and mind or soul, between being in time and timelessness, between speech or sound and silence, between tears and joy. “What tears I shed in your hymns and canticles!” exclaims Augustine in *The Confessions*. “How deeply was I moved by the voices of your sweet singing Church! Those voices flowed into my ears and the truth was distilled into my heart, which overflowed with my passionate devotion. Tears ran from my eyes and happy I was in those tears.”<sup>41</sup> And, further on, as Augustine discusses the notion of the memory as it extends into the past, he questions the enjoyment he derives from listening to music; nevertheless, he concludes with Weil and with Plato before him that there is “some secret kind of correspondence”<sup>42</sup> between music and the soul.

Though secret or mysterious is this connection between music and the soul, music nevertheless delivers or bears the soul to Eternity, to God, thus freeing it from the passage of time. “God is not in time” (*WR*, 423), says Weil, as does Augustine, and hence the soul wishes to live in the Eternity, in the sacred world of the things of beauty we love. However, the now of existence is for Weil, as it is

for Augustine, distraction, restlessness, suffering, nothingness, or meaninglessness, discord; in short, it is a cry that is not heard, since God is hidden or absent from us—*Deo absconditus*—thus leaving us abandoned in time. Augustine cries out:

Now *are my years spent in mourning* [author's emphasis], and you . . . my Father, are eternal. But I have been spilled and scattered among times whose order I do not know; my thoughts, the innermost bowels of my soul, are torn apart with the crowding tumults of variety, and so it will be until all together I can flow into you, purified and molten by the fire of your love. [Then] I shall stand and become set in you, in my mold, in your truth.<sup>43</sup>

Similar to Augustine, Weil also seeks “that transcendent kingdom . . . where truth resides” (*WG*, 64); and, she also wishes to free herself from “time . . . and the vicissitudes of change” (*WR*, 499). Like Augustine, Weil also focuses her attention to the divine *logos*, God, in order to explore temporal existence or time. She tells us, as does Augustine, that with original sin, “we have been thrown out of eternity” (*WR*, 69), and hence the acceptance of, or obedience to, time is the only and true disposition of the soul, which is unchanging, and thus the eternal in the changeable, the permanent in movement, the presence in the absence, silence in speech. The flow of time cannot be stopped or changed, Weil goes on to say, as does Augustine;<sup>44</sup> the only thing that we can do is to ride it painfully—minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, and year by year:

Time is that waiting. Time is God's waiting as a beggar for our love. . . . God is . . . waiting there in silence. . . . God has given his finite creatures this power of transporting themselves into the infinite [eternal]. Mathematics [as in music] is its image. If the pleasant or painful content of each minute . . . is regarded as a special caress from God, in what ways does time separate us from Heaven? The dereliction in which

God leaves us is his own way of caressing us. Time, which is our misery, is the very touch of his hand. It is the abdication by which he lets us exist. He stays far away from us, because if He approached He would cause us to disappear. He waits for us to go to him and disappear. (*WR*, 424–25)

If each minute is a “caress from God,” then no time separates us from God: time is nothing but grace or love descending from above, taking us upward freed from our misery (*malheur*). As such, time is for Weil waiting, attention, contemplation, “pure intuition” (*GG*, 11); it is simply “an image [instant] of eternity” (*GG*, 18). That is what comes about when we listen to music, says Weil: we have a feeling of an immediate contact with the eternal. In this way, music is like faith; it is the nourishing bread of the soul (*GG*, 11). She writes: “When one listens to Bach or a Gregorian melody, all faculties of the same fall silent and strain to apprehend this perfectly beautiful thing, each in its own way. The intellect among others finds nothing in it to affirm or deny, but it feeds on it. Must not faith be an adherence of this kind?”<sup>45</sup> Hence the way of faith is analogous to the method of music; or, as Weil puts it, the method of music should be followed in spiritual matters, and in everything connected with the welfare of the soul. “As soon as we have a point of eternity in the soul, we have nothing more to do but to take care of it, for it will grow of itself like a seed. It is necessary to . . . nourish it with the contemplation of numbers, of fixed and exact relationships. We nourish the changeless which is in the soul by the contemplation of that which is unchanging in the body” (*GG*, 108).

As I stated earlier, this view is rather Pythagorean, Platonic, and Augustinian in spirit, for it carries the notion that the ascent of the soul to the heavens, to the Ideal, to God, takes place by means of music as the “art of the highest order” with its basis in rational numbers and numerical relations. For Pythagoras, Plato, and Augustine, God is unity, harmony; the world a multiplicity, a disharmony; and only through proportion, can creation reflect the creator, God, and the

soul be united to the body. In contrast to Pythagoras and Plato, who envisage numbers as imposing merely a degree of order upon the world, Weil is similar to Augustine in her view that creation exhibits a perfect order or beauty, and the nothingness or necessity or gravity or chance intrinsic to creation is a necessary part of this order: "Necessity, in so far as it is absolutely other than the good, is the good itself. That is why all consolation in affliction separates us from love and from truth. That is the mystery of mysteries. When we touch it we are safe" (*GG*, 99). But to touch that which we cannot touch is nothing but the death of the self: "That is what is required" (*GG*, 99). To contemplate the beauty of the Cross is a way to strip ourselves of "an imaginary divinity . . . like Christ did of his real divinity" (*GG*, 29), so that the soul reaches "beyond time" (*GG*, 98), and thus beyond affliction.

To deliver the soul "beyond time" is a function of art. "A work of art has an author and yet, when it is perfect, it has something that is essentially anonymous about it. It imitates the anonymity of divine art" (*WR*, 378). "Hence all art of the highest order is religious in essence. . . . A Gregorian melody is as powerful a witness as the death of a martyr" (*GG*, 137). Gregorian music is powerful, because it "does not seek to be music, does not listen to itself, but is released as the spontaneous cry of religious thought and feeling."<sup>46</sup> This cry is nothing but an "uninterrupted interior prayer" (*GG*, 115) of each of us articulated in *de profundis*: a song or hymn of the soul. Of her experience in the little Portuguese village, where Weil had gone with her parents on vacation, she writes: "I was alone. It was the evening and there was a full moon over the sea. The wives of the fishermen were, in procession, making a tour of all the ships, carrying candles and singing what must certainly be very ancient hymns of a heart-rending sadness. Nothing can give any idea of it" (*WG*, 67). In listening to these hymns, it seemed to Weil as if eternity, the beautiful, love, and grace or God had gone out of existence; or, that temporal existence confronted or addressed God about the why of the present sad situation. The "sustained, monotonous groan" (*WR*, 466) of these

women expressed to Weil not only humanity's suffering, but also a reaching out to God, who is absent, and who remains forever silent:

Why? Why? Why? . . . There can be no answer to the "Why?" of the afflicted, because the world is necessity and not purpose. . . . The afflicted man's question goes on for hours, days, years; it ceases only when he has no strength left. He who is capable not only of crying but also of listening will hear the answer. Silence is the answer. . . . He who is capable not only of listening but also of loving hears this silence as the word of God. The speech of created beings is with sounds. The word of God is silence. (*WR*, 466–67)

And so Gregorian chant or music—"When the same things are sung for hours each day and every day" (*GG*, 135–36)—is for Weil a cry and a listening, which allows us to approach beauty, the sacred. "Holiness," Weil writes, "radiates in Romanesque and Gregorian chant."<sup>47</sup> According to Michel Sourisse, "Gregorian chant is more than an art, it is a breathing of the soul. . . . It only takes on all its meaning when integrated into the monastic liturgy, so that, in listening attentively, there is effected a veritable contact with the divine."<sup>48</sup> Monastic liturgy, and in particular the liturgy of the Mass, does not imitate, or is not an image of ordinary time, or of what Weil calls, "clock time" (*WR*, 70). Monastic liturgy directs itself to the present by reenacting the death of Christ, who is now absent, but who was in time. Thus Gregorian chant deals with sacred time in "clock time," and with redemptive love in sin and suffering or misery. It speaks to us of the precariousness of human existence—"We possess nothing in the world—a mere chance can strip us of everything" (*GG*, 23)—and of love: "We have to be in a desert. For whom we must love is absent. . . . Nothing which exists is absolutely worthy of love. We must therefore love that which does not exist" (*GG*, 99). Of necessity, then, Gregorian music obeys the rhythmic cycle of the liturgical day, week, month, and year, and thus its monotonous character. "Monotony is the most beautiful and the most atrocious thing," Weil

notes. “The most beautiful if it is a reflection of eternity—the most atrocious if it is the sign of an unvarying perpetuity. It is time surpassed or time sterilized” (*GG*, 158).

In the final analysis, Gregorian music or chant offers the imitative model of attention as prayer, as well as of silence, and of self-renunciation; it delivers the soul from time to sacred or eternal time in the crucified Christ. In Christ’s death on the cross, God’s beauty and humanity’s misery are satisfied, as are time and eternity, speech and silence, gravity or necessity and grace or love, the beautiful and the good, the true and justice. Therefore, all great music, Weil concludes, draws inspiration from them:

When the silence of God comes to the soul and penetrates it and joins the silence which is secretly present in us, from then on we have our treasure and our heart in God; and space opens before us as the opening fruit of a plant divides in two, for we are seeing the universe from a point situated outside space. This operation can take place in only two ways . . . affliction and beauty. . . . The man who has known pure joy, if only for a moment, and who has therefore tasted the flavor of the world’s beauty, for it is the same thing, is the only man for whom affliction is something devastating. At the same time, he is the only man who has not deserved this punishment. But, after all, for him it is no punishment; it is God himself holding his hand and pressing it rather hard. For, if he remains constant, what he will discover buried deep under the sound of his own lamentations is the pearl of the silence of God. (*WR*, 467–68)

Silence is the language of God,<sup>49</sup> and therefore music, Weil insists, “comes from silence and returns to silence”<sup>50</sup>—and this silence speaks of the very finality of human existence, of an existence full of sorrow and of pain, as Schopenhauer said before Weil.

The eternal alone is invulnerable to time. In order that a work of art [music] should be admired for [listened to] all time . . .

there must be an inspiration from on high. . . . The past . . . is time coloured with eternity. . . . Only the past . . . is pure reality. Time as it flows wears down and destroys that which is temporal. Accordingly there is more of eternity in the past than in the present. . . . Thus the past presents us with something which . . . can draw us upwards—a thing the future never does. The past: something real, but absolutely beyond our reach. . . . Thus it is the most perfect image of eternal, supernatural reality. (*GG*, 154–55)

It is for this reason that there are tears of silence in listening to music. The value of music properly understood is for Weil analogous to that of remembrance of things past in Marcel Proust. Like Weil, Proust also believes that music expresses the eternal in the temporal, the ideal in the real, and the past in the moment. Music, writes Proust, conveys “actual ideas, of another world, of another order, ideas veiled in shadow, unknown, impenetrable to the human mind, but none the less perfectly distinct from one another, unequal among themselves in value and significance.”<sup>51</sup> And these “actual ideas” show us “what richness, what variety lies hidden, unknown to us, in that vast, unfathomed and forbidding night of our soul which we take to be an impenetrable void.”<sup>52</sup>

### Notes

1. Simone Weil, *Cahiers*, vol. 3 (Paris: Plon, 1974), 114.
2. George A. Panichas, ed., *The Simone Weil Reader* (New York: David McKay, 1977), 433. This work will be cited in the text as *WR* for all subsequent references.
3. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Routledge, 2002), 34. This work will be cited in the text as *GG* for all subsequent references.
4. This question is explored in great detail by Philip Alperson in “‘Musical Time’ and Music as an ‘Art of Time’,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 38, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 407–17.
5. The modern theory of music opposes this view, as for example, John Cage’s *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961).
6. Weil, *Cahiers*, 192.
7. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 105.



8. For an excellent discussion on the Pythagoreans, see Mario von der Ruhr, "A Philosophical Apprenticeship," in *Simone Weil* (London: Continuum, 2006).
9. Simone Weil, *Seventy Letters*, ed. and trans. Richard Rees (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 117–18.
10. Plato, *The Republic*, bk. III, 401–02, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 1, trans. Benjamin Jewett (New York: Random House, 1937).
11. *Ibid.*, 403.
12. Simone Weil, *Letter to a Priest*, trans. A. F. Wills (London: Routledge, 2002), 24.
13. Augustine, *De Musica (On Music)*, trans. Robert Catesby Taliaferro, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 4 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1947).
14. Augustine, *The Retractions*, trans. Sr. M. Inez Bogen, RSM, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 60 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1980), 45–46. For an excellent treatment of Augustine's sixth book of *On Music*, see P. K. Ellsmere, "Augustine on Beauty, Art, and God," in *Augustine On Music: An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays*, ed. Richard R. La Croix (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988).
15. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, ed. A. Hofstadter and R. Kuhns (New York: Modern Library, 1964), 486–87.
16. For an understanding of the centrality of attention in Weil's aesthetics that affirms my view, see Martin Andic, "Freedom," in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil*, chap. 9. He writes: "Weil . . . considers desire and consent and prayer for truth and transformation and union to be an act of *attention* at its highest intensity and purity, its most wholehearted and selfless" (169–70). The essay, however, leaves this reader somewhat confused as to the relationship between desire, attention, freedom, and the love [will] of God. Yes, Weil did want "the freedom for loving intelligence to find [the truth] and look for it everywhere" (172). But she also limits, if not rejects, intelligence when it comes to experiencing the truth of the mystery of God's love. "The raising of our loving attention to the true goodness and life of God" (*ibid.*) is made possible for Weil by detachment from everything, even from intelligence, which raises desire as the root of attention, which at the highest level is prayer, to the truth of God's goodness and beauty. Thus we read in her spiritual biography: "Every human being, even if his natural faculties are almost nil, enters this realm of truth reserved for genius, if only he desires truth and strives perpetually to reach it," 14.
17. Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959), 111–12. This work will be cited in the text as *WG* for all subsequent references.
18. For an excellent treatment of distance in art and in aesthetics, see E. Bullough, *Aesthetics: Lectures and Essays* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1957), 91–130.
19. Quoted in Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 304.
20. *Ibid.*, 301.
21. E. Colledge, OSA and B. McGinn, trans., *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, in *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 288.

22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 183.
24. St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, ed. and trans. E. Allison Peers (New York: Image Books, 1958), bk. II, 5, 4.
25. Ibid., 5, 5.
26. Ibid., 5, 6.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., bk. III, 20, 2.
29. For a clear discussion of necessity in Weil's thought, see Thomas R. Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 125–47.
30. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, 282.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 286.
34. Ibid., 289.
35. Ibid., 292.
36. Ibid., 294.
37. Ibid., 301.
38. Ibid., 304.
39. Ibid., 292.
40. Ibid., 293.
41. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: New American Library), IX, 6.
42. Ibid., X, 33.
43. Ibid., XI, 29, 30.
44. For additional similarities between Augustine and Weil, see Thomas R. Nevin, *Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew*, 268.
45. Weil, *Cahiers*, vol. 2 (Paris: Plon, 1972), 139.
46. Dom Pierre Combe, *The Restoration of Gregorian Chant*, trans. Theodore N. Marier and William Skinner (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), xiii.
47. Weil, *The Need for Roots*, vol. 2, trans. A. Wills (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), 296.
48. Michel Sourisse, "Simone Weil and Music," in *The Beauty That Saves: Essays on Aesthetics and Language in Simone Weil*, ed. John M. Dunaway and Eric O. Springsted (Mercer, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 130.
49. See Ramundo Panikkar, *The Silence of God* (New York: Orbis, 1989).
50. Weil, *Cahiers*, vol. 1 (Paris: Plon, 1972), 97.
51. Marcel Proust, *The Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 379–80.
52. Ibid., 380.