

CHRISTMAS IS MUSIC

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Christmas is Jesus. Christmas is music, too. Even during a pandemic, I've had live carolers at my door. When in-person performance isn't possible, we listen to recordings of choirs performing Handel and his classical *Messiah*. There's the comfort of the Vince Guaraldi Trio—piano, bass, and drums—in the background of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. There's even that one radio station that plays Christmas music 24/7 all month long. It's the station that reminds us that not all Christmas music was composed equally! Though the Gospel of Luke makes no mention of music, when we read of angels announcing Jesus' birth to shepherds, we often imagine the heavenly host singing rather than speaking: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14). And thus, music is tied to the shepherds, the angels, and the birth of Jesus.

Christmas and music have something important to teach us about living with each other. Music is all sorts of harmonies. The simplest is unison, with every voice and instrument playing the same note. Musically, unison adds emphasis; it underscores key phrases and focuses attention on important lyrics. The effect in life is similar. We feel power in unity. We take comfort in being with others who think, look, and act similarly. Unison also highlights difference. When we're all on the same note, even just one person singing off-pitch can be grating. And if someone plays an altogether different note, it's all we can do not to stop and stare.

Life isn't lived in unison. Old and young, Black and white, single and married, Democrat and Republican, urban and rural, male and female, rich and poor, with the crowd and against it—these are realities that don't lend themselves to unison. But if we're patient enough to move past the initial cringe of dissonance, new and beautiful sounds await.

Try this on your own. Find a piano. Play any black key and the adjacent white key, above or below. Now pound it! At best this is what a pleasant train wreck sounds like! At first listen, it seems like a mistake, but it can produce much richer music than any one note by itself. Now add some more traditional harmonies, for example a major seventh chord. A major seventh chord will include those same two adjacent notes but add two or three more notes as well. The sound is different, by many standards beautiful, and at the very least much more interesting than unison. Replacing unison with dissonance is like upgrading your television from black-and-white to color, or, for the younger crowd, from HD to 4K. At first you just stare in amazement. Eventually, you realize you're hearing a sound that is vibrant and complex and stunning all at the same time. There's no going back: from now on, it's all 4K harmony.

In music, dissonance is particularly useful when it resolves into a more traditional sound. Tension followed by something familiar is very satisfying to the ear. In fact, this is what makes most music interesting: phrase after phrase of tension and resolve. The same can be true in life. For example, apply this to your social media experience during an election cycle. If your feed is like mine, it sounds a lot like this: unison, unison, train wreck, unison, train wreck, etc. There is very little in between, and the dissonance never resolves into something beautiful. But if you sit down with a person whose voice is different from yours, if you look past the polarization and hear their experiences and life story, then the initial dissonance is fleshed out by all sorts of complex harmonies. To be sure, some tension remains, but where you once heard

a one-note blunder, you now hear an entire phrase. You understand a little better how the dissonance fits into a larger motif. What once sounded hideous is more palatable.

We don't often have these conversations. We shy away from dissonance because it's uncomfortable. Sometimes we even mistake the clashing of sounds for a battle between good and evil. It's our side versus the other side, and of course we're the good guys. When this happens, we become trapped by sameness, mistaking conformity for unity, myopically believing the echo of one voice is better than the harmony of several. Rather than participate in a symphony of sounds reflecting our varied lives, we enter a contest to see who can agree more with those like us and disagree more with those not like us.

There are some voices in the world that are absolute evil, but these typically lie well below the longest bass strings of your piano. It's almost always okay to consider something different and to consider *someone* different. Just like music without tension can be boring, a single voice is often monotonous. How to avoid the monotony? Have that uncomfortable conversation, dwell on the dissonance long enough to fill in the missing notes, learn enough about someone else to flesh out the whole sound.

What does this have to do with Christmas? Jesus' birth wasn't announced just to shepherds but to the whole world: the star shone across nations. When I imagine the heavenly hosts singing to the shepherds, it's not in unison but in harmony. Implicit in this harmony is the miracle of Christmas. Jesus' birth, life, death, and atonement don't transform us from dissonant sinners to all-in-unison saints. Rather, they teach us how to love and serve each other despite—even because of—our differences.

Christmas is a celebration of how we can live when we look beyond ourselves and make room for other voices. Christmas is an acknowledgement of the tensions and resolutions that are the rhythm of life. Christmas asks us not to single out a certain note but to sort through

life's many sounds, creating a literal symphony of my life alongside your life alongside everyone else's, with all of us plucking different strings, collectively creating a melody more beautiful than any one of us could arrange by ourselves.

The shepherds were sore afraid when "the glory of the Lord shone round about them." Contemplating all the harmony—the tension and resolution—that Christmas entails, we might be afraid too. With enough courage, we can do what the shepherds did. Go to Bethlehem, find Jesus, and make the angels' message known abroad:

Christmas is Jesus.

Christmas is music.

Christmas is all of us.

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