

Creativity, Music and Sexuality

David Eaton
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I recently received a complimentary issue of classical music magazine, *Listen*. Of interest was the cover story wasn't about a current firebrand on the classical music scene such as dynamic conductor Gustavo Dudamel or soprano Anna Netrebko. Nor was it about iconic figures of the past: Leonard Bernstein, Herbert von Karajan or Maria Callas. The cover story was about none other than pop music icon, Sting.

Anyone familiar with Sting's musical career knows he has been venturing into the realm of classical music for some time. His recording of the role of Joseph the soldier in Igor Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*, with Kent Nagano conducting the

London Sinfonietta, dates from 1988. In recent years, he has recorded the music of the English Renaissance composer, John Dowland, and is attempting to master the lute, Dowland's primary instrument and the precursor to the modern guitar. In 2010, he recorded orchestral covers of songs from his Police days with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (*Symphonicities*).



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In his *Listen* interview, Sting referred to the lives and music of Robert and Clara Schumann, perhaps the most famous couple in the annals of Western classical music history; both were talented composers and pianists. Sting cites a letter by Robert in which the composer refers to music as being "nothing more than resonant light." Sting observes: "I think resonant light is exactly right; scientifically, it's a waveform just as light, just a different part of the spectrum. I don't know whether he knew that or whether it was just a poetic intuitive image, but certainly it's true scientifically."

Speaking to the metaphysical and spiritual aspects of music, Sting states, "If I have a spiritual life, [it] is one of music. I seem to be, through music, in touch with something bigger than myself or bigger than the material world; it's a spiritual path."

On this trajectory I'm sure that many of us agree with Sting. Music can put us in touch with our higher selves and in so doing has the effect of bringing about a change in our consciousness. Yet we know intuitively that music (and the music industry) can have deleterious effects on our psyche as well. Later in the interview, Sting discusses his views of classical music:

I think it's really about the higher emotions, about the heart and intellect at a very high level. It's not about the lower chakras, it's not really about [sex with] your girlfriend – and there's nothing wrong with that, there's a place in music for that. But classical music does tend to be higher in this sense. What it wants to achieve or what it wants to say about the human condition is, I think rarefied — and I'm attracted to that."

For me, this observation reflects a rather unfortunate perspective about love and sex in relation to music, not to mention our latent divinity and the spirituality of sexuality.

Though it has become commonplace to relegate sexuality to lower strata in the human experience, *Divine Principle* posits that sexuality is very high and sacred when motivations and intent are in line with higher virtues and the "higher emotions" that Sting alludes to. It's actually a matter of motivation, intent, purpose, and being in accord with a higher, "rarified" mind and spirit.

We know that in Christianity the idea of sexuality and music as a path to the Godhead was not always a favored viewpoint. In early Christian culture, the "sins of the flesh" were to be avoided because they were often seen as having deleterious effects in the pursuit of "holiness." Sacrifice, from the Latin *sacre* (holy) and *ficio* (to make), has been considered the purer path to attain spiritual fulfillment and maturity in Judeo-Christian thought. Consequently, at various junctures in Christian history, sexual fulfillment has been viewed as anathema to the pursuit of godliness.

Music too was often seen as being somewhat prurient in this regard as it was often associated with pagan rituals in medieval Europe. The early church fathers understood that music possessed a sensual aspect and

as such could not easily reconcile this with attempts to foster “higher” emotions and pure thoughts. The medieval Christian concept that spiritual fulfillment and redemption were somehow hindered or obstructed by pleasurable things like music is one that troubled even the most enlightened practitioners of the faith. St. Augustine, whose timorous distrust of music and its sensual properties is well known, would eventually be assuaged with regard to music’s divine properties and the luminous liturgical music of Palestrina, Obrecht, Bach, Mozart, and Haydn became a quintessential aspect of Christian worship.

As the evolution of musical composition progressed from Gregorian Chant to the early polyphony of the Renaissance and then on to the full flowering of Western tonal music in the early 1700s, religious belief was an ever-present impulse that motivated composers. Martin Luther referred to music as “a sermon in sound.” Bach believed the technique of figured bass (the foundation of four-part harmony) was the most efficacious way for musicians to praise and glorify God. Bach would go as far as to say that figured bass “is the most perfect foundation of music, being played with both hands in such a manner that the left hand plays the notes written down while the right hand adds consonances and dissonances in order to make well-sounding harmony to the Glory of God and the perfect delectation to the spirit; and the aim and final reason, as of all music...should be none else but the Glory of God and the recreation of the mind.”

This sacred application of music would continue with the settings of the Catholic Mass by Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Berlioz, Schubert, and Bruckner. Several of Gustav Mahler’s symphonies have distinct religious narratives. In the 20th century, the Requiem Masses of Fauré and Britten, as well as Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms* and Leonard Bernstein’s *Mass* and *Kaddish* symphony, are further continuations of the liturgical legacy of music.

In his observation of the music of 20th century French Catholic composer, Olivier Messiaen, *New Yorker* magazine music critic Alex Ross observed that “God spoke to Messiaen though sounding tones...The Lord could manifest Himself in consonance and dissonance alike, though consonance was His true realm.”

I beg to differ.

This is like saying that the Almighty prefers men to women or positive valences to negative valences, or sperm to the egg, or vowels to consonants. As *Divine Principle* instructs, the nature of Nature (ontology) is one of balance and harmony of polar opposites. If nature reflects God’s image in substance, then we can extrapolate that God’s “true realm” in music is one where the interplay between consonance and dissonance is manifested in a sublime union, because both consonant and dissonant intervals are present in the overtone series — the physics of acoustics. Whereas the sexual act is the union of two equally important aspects in which if one aspect were missing procreation could not occur, in Western tonal music, dissonance plays a vital role. It is intrinsic to the aesthetics of the tonal spectrum and allows the fullest range of emotional expression to be realized when is it syntactically harmonized with consonance.

When considering whether to conduct Mahler’s reconstituted Tenth Symphony, Bernstein famously asked a colleague: “I have one question. Will it give me an orgasm?” The metaphorical quip says a great deal about how music and sex are often conflated. Bernstein, ever the Romantic, simply wanted to know if the music would aesthetically arouse the senses in a cathartic fashion. The fact that he used a sexual analogy to make his point underscores the emotive and cathartic power that we expect and long for when experiencing great music.

The tension and resolution experienced in the aural relationship of consonant and dissonant intervals (vibratory energy in motion), or tonic and dominant harmonies in tonal music, create emotional and physical sensations akin to the sensations in sexual activity. The reciprocity of these yin and yang elements within the aural spectrum of music is representative of God’s deity and is what stimulates our “higher mind,” and in so doing can generate a “musical orgasm.” The composers of the late Romantic era — e.g., Tchaikovsky, Liszt, Wagner, Mahler — would often prolong and sustain the dominant chord (in the object position) at a given climatic point in their music in order to heighten aural tension so that when the tonic chord (in the subject position) arrived the sense of resolution would be highly cathartic.

The idea that God loved us as a parent to such a degree that the Almighty bestowed us with the gift of creativity as an expression of that love, is a distinct feature of Christianity. This narrative gave rise to the idea of *agape* love — the highest expression of love between God and humankind. Though *Eros* is associated with the sensual and carnal aspect of love, the idea that sexual love is not “godly” or without transcendent potentialities can be seen as an incomplete view of sexuality from a Christian perspective. Though we should be cognizant of the divine aspect of sexual love, we should remember that according to various theological interpretations in Christianity, it was the misuse of sexual love that led to the human fall and human suffering.

It could be said that music, too, has been objectified and misused. Dissonance as an aesthetic unto itself became a primary rationale of mid-20th century modernism. The prioritization of intellection over heart and emotion in the realm of musical composition contributed to the marginalization of the great liturgical

and Romantic musical legacy of the past, primarily because it was based on what Swiss conductor, Ernst Ansermet, called “a faulty aesthetic.” Moreover, consumerism in the post-Woodstock era had the effect of turning music into a mere commodity, diminishing its divine attributes in much the same way that sex was diminished by the porn industry.

We should give Sting, or any celebrity, high marks for using their fame for the advocacy of humanitarian issues. He’s seriously advocated for protecting natural resources and the sustainability of our planet via his environmental activism, especially regarding Brazil and the Amazon rain forest.

Yet if we imagine “human resources” in the context of sustainability, it could be said that love and the human energy expended through acts of loving are perhaps our most precious human resources. If we consider creative energy the most precious and organic human resource, we should think long and hard about how we use it, for the abuse of sexual love, more often than not, results in tragedy, heartbreak, and social ills that require inordinate resources — spiritual, emotional and economic — to heal or rectify these problems.

In this way, sexuality and musical composition, when practiced in accordance with godly motivation and principles, can be said to be “true.” Restoring sexuality to its divine and sacred place is an important aspect in our culture’s recovery from the morass of the moral relativism and abject nihilism that plague our current social condition. Orgasm becomes godly, the apotheosis of conjugal love. Add some great music to the equation and we’re on the stairway to heaven.

David Eaton has been Music Director of the New York City Symphony since 1985. In addition to his conducting career, he has been an active composer, arranger and producer with 55 original compositions and over 700 arrangements and transcriptions to his credit. His most recent orchestral composition, “70 and Counting!”, was performed at the United Nations as part of its 70th Anniversary concert in June 2015. In May last year, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by UTS.

Photo at top: A detail of the cover photo of Sting used in Listen magazine’s featured interview with the English singer, songwriter and actor.