

Suffering and Death in the Music of Nativity

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The nativity of Christ is the easiest Christian holiday for people to relate to since, after all, we were all born. The music dedicated to Christmas and created over the centuries has as many themes as the Gospel narratives. There is the good news from the angels, the gifts of the Magi, the joy of the coming of the Savior into the world. There are also the simple maternal lullabies, sung on behalf of Mary and of any spectator who witnesses the nativity at the manger of the infant. Finally, there is a topic that cannot be ignored when contemplating the event of the nativity of Christ: death. The proximity of death and birth is implied in non-Christian lullabies as well, because any newborn has just come from nothingness and is still fragile, and the cradle looks so much like a coffin. In folk magic traditions, songs about death are often sung to the newborn in order to drive death away.

Our topic is special, however. After all, Christ was born into the world to die. In the Creed, the incarnation and suffering are mentioned together. The theme of the future passion of Christ is always present in the symbolism of worship. Christmas lullaby lyrics sometimes include the theme of the future cross. The subject of death is at the heart of the murder of innocent babies by Herod in Bethlehem. Many Christmas pageants include Rachel crying for her children and finding no consolation. In past centuries, when child mortality

was incredibly high, many generations of Christian women drew support from the image of the inconsolable Rachel.

These themes are found in the earliest Christmas carols. The Church remembers the Bethlehem infants a few days after the Nativity of Christ, on December 28 on the Western calendar and December 29 in the East. In an Oxford manuscript from the twelfth century, there is a dancing song about the Bethlehem infants with this text:

*Magno gaudens gaudio nostra pueritia
sallat cum tripudio propter hec natalia!
Ad honorem innocentum sonent lire
timpana.
Lete mentis argumentum cantus sit
et organa!*

*Iure festi cum celesti curia
gratulemur et letemur, eya!
Nostra sint familia iocus et letitia,
risus pax et gratia cum perenni gloria.*

*Gaudeamus, pueri, Herodes defunctus est.
Facti sumus superi hostis noster
victus est.
Penam ferens infernalem surgere non
poterit
et nos agnum immortalem sequimur
quo ierit.*

Let our company of boys, rejoicing with great joy, celebrate in song and dance this anniversary feast!

In honour of the innocents let harps
and drums sound! Let songs and
instruments witness to a happy
mind!

Rightly festive, let us rejoice and be
merry with the court of heaven, eia!
Let sport and gladness, laughter,
peace and courtesy make up our
household!

Boys, let us rejoice! Herod is dead,
we have conquered, our enemy is
overcome. Suffering eternal tor-
ment, he will not be able to rise
again, and we shall follow the im-
mortal lamb wherever he may go.¹

It is important to note that the expres-
sive means of medieval music differ
from ours in the most radical way.
There may be tragedy in the text, but the
music does not reflect it in a way that is
familiar to our ears. The Oxford carol is
a dance of joy, a dance of victory. And
medieval carols, more than the songs
of the following centuries, were dance-
able (which sometimes led to tensions
with the Church). The boys who sung
this carol were students of the singing
school and were called *innocentes*.

Another famous later carol that has
the theme of the Bethlehem massacre
is Coventry Carol, which was part of
the sixteenth-century Christmas mys-
tery *The Pageant of the Shearmen and
Tailors*. The mystery was performed
by the city guilds. The author of the
text is unknown, but we owe its public
appearance to Robert Croo, the ambi-
tious organizer of Coventry's festivities.
Working on this annual performance
in Coventry for twenty years, he did a
variety of jobs, from editing and rewrit-
ing texts to tailoring costumes and mak-
ing sets and props, eventually saving
enough money to play the part of God.
The book, rewritten by Croo, dates from
1534, though it appeared in print only in

the nineteenth century (1817, published
by Thomas Sharp).

Lully, lulla, thow littell tynne child,
By by, lully, lullay thow littell
tynne child,
By by, lully, lullay!

O sisters too, how may we do
For to preserve this day
This pore yongling for whom we
do singe
By by, lully, lullay?

Herod, the king, in his raging,
Chargid he hath this day
His men of might in his owne sight
All yonge children to slay, —

That wo is me, pore child, for thee,
And ever morne and may
For thi parting nether say nor
singe,
By by, lully, lullay.

Every mystery about Christmas fea-
tures a crying Rachel and people
who comfort her. In the mystery of
Coventry, this lullaby was sung by
three women from Bethlehem to their
children after an angel appeared to
Joseph and warned of the danger.
(The female roles were played by
men, however, so the song is for alto,
tenor, and baritone parts.) This carol
may be the most famous of those that
have survived from the Renaissance,
perhaps because of an incident from
World War II when, on Christmas
1940, following the bombing of Cov-
entry cathedral, BBC radio broad-
cast members of the cathedral choir
singing this song from the ruins.
Since then, the song has been part of
many classical and popular perform-
ers' repertoires. It sounds like a sign
of the times in the British TV series
Call The Midwife (at Christmas in the
maternity home, midwives go to the
ward with candles singing the carol).

¹ Translation
from Christopher
Page, "Medieval
Music: To Sing and
Dance," lecture,
December 10,
2015, <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/medieval-music-to-sing-and-dance>.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Massacre of the Innocents* (1565–67). Royal Collection Trust.

One popular interpretation is sung by the vocal ensemble Pentatonix.

In the Baroque era, word and music united in a new alliance, giving rise to a new musical rhetorical vocabulary. This system has ramified and became more complicated over time. Especially recognizable rhetorical figures include symbolic musical portrayals of joy and sorrow, laughter and fear, indecision, sighing, and stepping. The music of the Baroque era was so saturated with the word that gradually and with only instrumental means, it learned to talk about the deepest and most subtle things. Special treatises were written about this, and in our time, studying them has yielded a huge body of literature. Even if we are listening to a vocal piece in an unfamiliar language, knowing this system of Baroque musical symbols helps us to better understand the content.

As an example of the nativity theme in early Baroque music, consider the *Canzonetta Spirituale sopra alla Nanna* by Tarquinio Merula (1595–1665). The musical content is completely determined by the text. Only two

bass notes alternate throughout the music (the *ostinato* principle), an expression, on the one hand, of the visual and tactile character of a lullaby, of the act of cradling the infant, and on the other hand, of the persistence of tragic thoughts about the child's destiny on the cross. An unstable harmonic pattern creates further instability, as though the infant's cradle swayed over the gaping agony of the coming cross. The soprano part traces out melodic waves designed to symbolize excitement, now restrained, now breaking through. This effect is created by chromatic notes, rhetorical pauses, and features of melodic movement. Only in the last stanza, the continuous movement stops, finding a fulcrum: the child is still securely in the mother's hands.

As the text of this lullaby is easy to find, I will cite only especially characteristic fragments.

Common lyrics for a lullaby (“*Or ch’è tempo di dormire, dormi, dormi figlio e non vagire. Perchè, tempo ancor verrà, Che vagir bisognerà. Deh ben mio deh cor mio fa, Fa la ninna ninna na*”) are conjoined from the very beginning with an alarming *ostinato* figure. Soon an explanation is found for

this: now you are drinking milk from your mother's breast, but you will be given bile and vinegar to drink; now you are sleeping in a soft bed, but you will cry out in a loud voice, calling the Father from the cross; these arms and legs will be chained and then pierced with nails; this beautiful forehead will be stained with blood from a crown of thorns. As for the mother, in the words of Simeon the God-Receiver, "a sword will pierce her heart." On the one hand, emotionally, this is a very baroque text. On the other, it is so simple that one involuntarily recalls the early Italian laudas:

Over prendi questo latte / dalle mie
mamelle intatte / perchè ministro
cruделе / ti prepara aceto e fiele. //
Amor mio sia questo petto / or per
te morbido letto / Pria che rendi
ad alta voce / l'alma al Padre sulla
croce. // Posa or queste membra
belle / vezzosette e tenerelle / per-
chè poi ferri e catene, / gli daran
acerbe pene. // Queste mani e ques-
ti piedi / ch'or con gusto e gaudio
vedi, / Ahimè! come in vari modi, /
passeran acuti chiodi! // Questa fac-
cia gratiosa, / rubiconda or più di
rosa, / sputi e schiaffi sporcheranno
/ con tormento e grand'affanno. . . . /
Dormi dunque figliol mio, / Dormi,
dormi, pur redentor mio, / perchè
poi con lieto viso, / ci vedrem in
Paradiso.

Ultimately, this image of a mother pondering over the cradle about the future fate of her child is as universal as motherhood itself. That is why there are so many disturbing lullabies, even if they do not talk about Christ, including Franz Schubert's *Ammenlied*, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Lullaby in a Storm*, and many more.

The image of the grieving Virgin is found in another cantata of the Baroque era, *The Blessed Virgin's Expos-*

tulations by Henry Purcell. Formally, the text by Nahum Tate tells the story of Mary's experiences during the long search for the twelve-year-old child Jesus. The text itself mentions the flight to Egypt, which is why the cantata is often performed at Christmas. The dramatic nature of the text also allows this cantata to be included in the repertoire of Holy Week. Interestingly, this work, which tells of grief and hope, caught the attention of the 31-year-old Benjamin Britten during Advent in 1944. He arranged the basso continuo part for piano, thereby bringing this music closer to the modern performer.

Having lost Jesus in the crowd, Mary fears that the child is lost forever. She recalls how she was once called the Blessed One and laments that now she is the most unfortunate of mothers. In fear, she calls on the Archangel Gabriel (a modern listener will remember a similar ecstatic call from Sergei Prokofiev's *The Fiery Angel*):

Tell me, some Pitying Angel quickly
say,
Where does my Soul's sweet
Darling Stay?
In Tyger's, or more cruel Herod's
way?
Ah! rather let his little Footsteps press
Unregarded through the Wilderness,
Where milder Savages resort,
The desert's safer than a Tyrant's
Court.
Why, fairest Object of my Love,
Why dost thou from my longing
Eyes remove?
Was it a Waking Dream, that did
fortell thy Wondrous Birth?
No Vision from above?
Where's Gabriel now, that visited
my cell?
I call, I call: Gabriel!
He comes not; flatt'ring Hopes,
farewell.

Me Judah's Daughters once caress'd.
 Call'd me of Mothers, the most
 bless'd.
 Now — fatal Change — of Mothers
 most distress'd.
 How shall my Soul its Motions
 guide?
 How shall I stem the various tide,
 Whilst Faith and Doubt my
 Lab'ring Soul divide?
 For whilst of thy dear Sight
 beguil'd,
 I trust the God, but oh! I fear the
 Child.

Purcell's cantata consists of several parts, as was often the case in the mature baroque era. The recitative parts are replaced by arioso. Various musical and rhetorical means are used to express protest, fear, call, questioning, recollection of a promise, and the collapse of hope.

Perhaps the most convincing musical-theological expression of the inextricable connection between the incarnation and suffering is found in the work of Johann Sebastian Bach. Reflection on Christ's life and personality took center stage in all of Bach's music. One of his later works, the *Mass in B Minor*, includes musical reflections on this particular theme. In one of the central parts of the Credo section, the chorus "Et incarnatus est" is juxtaposed with the duet "Et in unum Dominum" and the chorus "Crucifixus."

The duet is a setting of the text "*Et in unum Dominum Iesum Christum, Filium Dei unigenitum, et ex Patre natum ante omnia saecula. Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine, Deum verum de Deo vero, genitum, non factum, consubstantialem Patri; per quem omnia facta sunt. Qui propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem descendit de caelis.*"² The two natures of Christ, divine and human, are symbolized by the



combination of two echoing duet voices in one tessitura (soprano and alto). The combination of two homogeneous voices is also found in the instrumental parts (two violins, two oboes d'amore). The duet is written in a major key, its music light and distinct. For the first time in the Credo, the name of Christ is pronounced, and at the very beginning, there is no imprint of future suffering on it. But as soon as the story of salvation appears in the text ("*propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem descendit de caelis*"), the music begins to change almost imperceptibly. A descending motive (*catabasis*) appears in the instrumental parts, chromatic notes appear in the harmonies, and the main intonational figure of the duet, which in major has the character of an affirmation, is transformed into a rhetorical figure of sighing (*sospirando*). On the words "*descendit de caelis*", a musical-rhetorical figure of the cross appears in the viola part. Bach tells us in musical

A French woman sits on a ruin surrounded by three children. *Homeless on Christmas Day, 1914.* Agence Rol/Bibliothèque nationale de France.

² "And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one essence with the Father, by whom all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven."

language that the descent from heaven already foreshadows the cross.

After this is a chorus on the text “*Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine, et homo factus est.*”³ Incarnation and nativity are evoked here not in majestic and joyful colors (as, for example, in George Frideric Handel’s chorus “For unto us a Child is born” from the *Messiah* oratorio), but as a *kenosis* or self-emptying. Bach uses all the musical means at his disposal to express this theme: a minor key, a slow tempo,

chromatic harmonies, and a subdued instrumentation consisting only of strings (a significant musical choice, as Bach uses the strings in a related way in his *Saint Matthew Passion* to form a sonic “nimbus” around Christ’s recitatives). The principle of simultaneous contrast applied here serves the same purpose of telling the story of incarnation as suffering, with a static bass—like earthly gravity—and flying, descending lines of strings. Descending lines seem to “draw” all the voices of the chorus, except the vocal lines are straight and the lines of

³ “And was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man.”

Saint Maria Skobtsova, Icon of the Cross-Bearing Theotokos.



the strings are broken. Each line contains the rhetorical figure of a cross. Throughout the chorus, these lines remain unchanged. The mention of Mary is also accompanied by the figure of the cross. With the words “*et homo factus est,*” an ascending movement begins in the voices: God’s descent from heaven has lifted humankind. And with these words, for the first time in the entire chorus, the bass line ceases to be even, static and begins to move, the rhetorical figure of the cross finally penetrates into the basis of the foundations: after all, the incarnation is a shock to all natural foundations.

The next chorus, the “Crucifixus,” continues this theme in its content and rhetorical composition. Its form is a variation on a constant bass. Of course, here too we meet the already familiar figures of the cross and the sigh. It is also important how this chorus ends (in the words “*passus et sepultus est*”⁴), as the voices descend into a low tessitura and the instruments are completely removed from the score. If the “*Et incarnatus est*” ends with the incarnation, the “Crucifixus” ends with the burial. At a short distance, the ear easily “rhymes” these events through the similarity of compositional techniques Bach uses, serving a common goal: the incarnation and the cross are similar in that they both carry dying in themselves. It is only after this, in the chorus “*Et resurrexit,*” that the chorus explodes with real jubilation: Resurrection is a life that will never end.

Let me conclude this article with a modern example of the combined theme of nativity and suffering, Claude Debussy’s

song “*Noël des enfants qui n’ont plus de maison*” (1915).⁵ Debussy wrote this late composition during the First World War (he died in 1919). The text is a prayer for the Christmas mercy of Christ the Pauper, sung on behalf of children of all nations who have lost everything: shelter, loved ones, schools, churches. Children ask the infant Christ for Christmas toys, but they are even more in need of daily bread; their wooden clogs are worn out, but the children of France need a victory even more. Stylistically, the melody would be similar to that of an ordinary carol. Yet the fast pace and pulsating texture on the piano, like the beating of small hearts, and of course the text itself, combined with the intonations of supplication, all produce an amazing effect. Christmas is irrevocable, and here He is: the Christ child suffering along with the children of wartime, in burning schools, churches, and deaths of loved ones. This is Debussy’s deepest vision, and it is not only a protest against the war, but also an assertion that Christ can be seen in a homeless child. Of course, this topic is not new in itself—we can recall both Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Match Girl” and Fyodor Dostoevsky’s “The Beggar Boy at Christ’s Christmas Tree.” But here, the topic of private fate grows to the scale of the most important universal question that arose in the terrible twentieth century: where is God?—and the answer to it is given, in childlike simplicity. A visual analogy for this Noël would be the famous embroidered icon by Mother Maria (Skobtsova), in which the Mother of God embraces the cross with the Christ child crucified on it. ✽

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⁴ “He suffered and was buried.”

⁵ Claude Debussy, “*Noël des enfants qui n’ont plus de maison*” (1915),



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