Riffing on Mehldau: Anti-Classical, Pro-Pop, and Escaping History by Imrovising in the Moment, Gunning for Transcendence

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For Saturday morning breakfast, we often listen to jazz. This morning, we listened to the Brad Mehldau Trio, *Art of the Trio 4: Back at the Vanguard.* Mehldau's playing on the disc is exceptional. The trio crushes the set, a sort of musical smack-down via aggressive virtuosity. If you're just starting to appreciate jazz, or Mehldau in particular, I wouldn't recommend the disc - there's just so much information coming at you at once, it's hard to process. Even now, I have to be in the right mood. He's just that good. My 13-year-old daughter, listening with me, said, "How do you even play that?" I just rolled my eyes and waved my hand in front of my face as if her question were a pesky fly. I don't play that way. I will never play that way. I'd cut off my right arm just to have his left hand (not really, but it is an *amazing* hand).

So imagine my surprise at reading the liner notes he wrote and finding an incendiary piece on the meaning of jazz, classical, pop, art and death. It's a brilliant rant about things that have bugged him for years. And when I mean "brilliant," I mean it. He speaks as someone who has walked the virtiginous paths of postmodern literary theory. He's conversant in that language, and can use it to deliver some convincing verbal smack-downs to go with his musical smack-downs. Believe me, I know. I teach on postmodern cultural theory - the man knows what he's talking about. Apart from the fact that this makes me insanely jealous (How is it possible for someone to be that good on an instrument AND that good with words and theory?), his argument resonated with me, even as I found parts wrong and disturbing.

Here's the part that caught my eye, where he discusses the term "classical," and jazz as "America's classical music" :

> Classical wasn't called classical when it was being created. Someone came along after a point in time and lumped it all under one term, implying as well that an ending had taken place. This in turn implied that anything after that wasn't valid. 'Classical' is a term ripe for deconstruction: It defines itself by a symbiotic Other that belately doesn't rise to its stature. Its shaky legitimacy depends on a dreary nostalgia for a time when distinctions between the high arts and everything else were more clear (if they ever were). People with this kind of backward longing are blind to their own irony. They feel that they missed an event that's no longer possible and, with their heads in these grey clouds, miss the present event.

I love his argument here. He's right. The fetishism wrapped up in a high culture mindset makes us blind to the great and excellent all around us now. In theological terms, an idolizing of past culture blinds us to the grace of the present time.

But as his argument continues, it's clear that his anti-classicism runs far deeper. There's a sense in which calling something "classical" implies a judging norm, a weight of history that sets a bar that all other works have to conform or be dismissed. The same things happens in a negative mode when something is called "pop." It's assumed that this means disposable, ephemeral. In reality, classical was the pop of its day, and some pop has achieved long-lasting legitimacy, and so can be called classical. Or in Mehldau's words:

> what was initially called classic reveals itself as a pop anachronism; what was conceived as pop cheats its origins and wins the bid for immortality.

Jazz, in his opinion, rejects this dichotomy and dances between the two. It escapes the weight of history, refuses to play the game of legitimation and normativity by living in the moment. It's an improvised music - a thing of the present. And so, it offers a sort of immediate salvation:

> Jazz musicians want to make the earth move now. They don't want to interpret how someone else did it and be told they're wrong. Again, there's something intially American in that project: after a thorough ransacking, a gleeful egg-tossing at the entire rule-list of Occidental music, in favor of a hit-or-miss attempt at a quick-fix transcendence, to be felt here and now, for the first (and maybe the last) time. This is what I love about jazz more than anything -- the spirit in which it's created.

Jazz (and pop) try to throw off the weight of history, the hierarchies and the standards, in order to revel in the moment, in a bid for a "quick-fix transcendence." It sounds like a much-needed corrective to the dour idolizing of the Grand Tradition of Western Art, the Romantic notions of Art-as-Religion out of which the high/low culture distincts grew.

In fact, Ken Myers in his pop-culture-hating book, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes,* speaks much about transcendence. Unlike Mehldau, his "culture of transcendence" is about the reverence for tradition, for craft, that is rooted in beloved abstract ideals like Truth and Beauty. It is a slow, heavy, and judgmental type of transcendence. I think it comes too close to turning high culture into an idol. And you can understand Mehldau's reaction: Throw it off! Throw it all away and jump into the transcendence of the moment! But what Mehldau doesn't realize is that he's simply trading one false trasncendence for another. The transcendence offered by Brahms or Handel, or the transcendence offered by Trane or Miles, both are wonderful, and neither lead ultimately to life.

The real deal comes only through relationship with the living God, in which there *is* an authority

structure and norms (sorry Brad), *and* in which there is freedom from the weight of the past, improvisation and spontanaeity (sorry Ken). In a world that has rejected the story of salvation, people mistake feelings of transcendence for the real thing. And they can err on both the side of tradition or innovation, high or pop. Our culture's soul-sickness draws energy from both sides. And only grace can cure it.

One more thought. (Otherwise, this turns into "Look! A cultural problem! What's the solution? All together now: JESUS!" True, but can feel cliche). I think part of Mehldau's grumpiness with classicism, and with jazz critics in particular, is the feeling of being judged, of having to labor to be creative underneath a load of preconceptions. And he'd just rather make music and give people joy. I can truly understand that. I'd be willing to bet my eye-teeth that he's not a Christian for pretty much the same reasons: He finds the judgmental attitude of Christians unattractive, burdensome, and he'd rather just be free to do his thing.

But that's not how the church should be. We should be about grace, about presenting the gentle freedom available *through* the way we live our lives and pursue our relationships. Does this mean we jettison the law? No. But the law has lost its power to condemn, to judge, to make us feel small. It is now a guide for intimacy with the Father, for following hard after Jesus, for keeping in step with the Spirit. Something that lasts.

Even Mehldau isn't into absolutely free jazz. He says in his liner notes that musical improvisation needs a framework to give it purpose and motivation. Isn't that true of the law and grace as well? The law no longer condemns, but gives us a life-giving framework within which we improvise our lives in concert with the Father (like a good jazz trio would). (I don't mean to undermine God's sovereignty - it just feels a whole lot like improvisation from my side). And over time, that builds a life-giving relationship full of grace. And that grace spills out to those around you, hopefully drawing people into engaging with the Father.

All of this produces something far better than a quick-fix transcendence. After all, the problem with a quick-fix transcendence is that you keep needing another fix. And sooner or later, you've got a nasty jazz habit, because jazz cannot deliver what you truly need. You need a lasting transcendence, one as stable as the grace of God for us. Art cannot save. Art cannot produce a generous heart that sees God's goodness in all things. Only walking with the Father can produce that kind of music.

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