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## The Ritual of Vinyl

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### *Prelude by Way of a Cartoon [1]*

A recent cartoon by “Gregory” depicts two middle-aged men standing before a rather elaborate audio system at the center of which sits a turntable spinning a record. One man says to the other, “The two things that really drew me to vinyl were the expense and inconvenience.”

### *A Ritual Being*

In a culture that seeks to make everything mundane—whether because we abhor the transcendent or wish to control it—our understanding of ritual is often muddled by notions of pretension or snobbery and, therefore, ripe for being derided and mocked. Classical liberals are very snobbish about snobbery.

But the fact is, ritual—a repeated practice that seeks to capture and convey the richer and perhaps invisible meaning of the world we inhabit—is inextricably part of what it means to be human. Joseph Ratzinger argues in *The Spirit of the Liturgy* that worship and cult undergird and frame all of human life, and, indeed, if we take a moment to think about it, we can see that even though our modern rituals are perhaps not immediately directed to the transcendent, they nevertheless exist: the pour-over coffee fanatic, the foodie, even the daily gym-goer build their lives on a kind of ritual. Human being is ritualistic being—there is simply no getting around this.

One of the interesting things about our rituals is how *material*, how *fleshly* they are. Thought about in the pre-modern sense of the term—that is, directed immediately to the transcendent—it almost seems oxymoronic that our rituals *require* the material things of this world in order to bring us into contact, as it were, with transcendent and immaterial realities. It is as if ritual expresses the horizon-like nature of man, constitutively both material and immaterial, who needs both realms to express who and what he is. Ritual, then, like man himself, is of a dual nature: both material and immaterial, both flesh and spirit. Attempting to

bypass either dimension, as it were, results in losing the whole thing.

## *The Ups and Downs of Recorded Music*

Music may be one of the best examples of ritual, both modern and pre-modern. Music, like all fine art worthy of the name, is an attempt to capture the beauty of ineffable being in a medium that can be sensed. What is invisible in itself thus becomes visible (or, in this case, audible). Such art, made by human beings, is intended for the pleasurable reception of other human beings, that is, other rational animals equipped with senses but capable of transcending the senses toward the unified whole which they express. In the colors, lines, shapes, etc., of a painting, the human viewer sees a form; in the sounds, rhythms, time changes, etc., of a piece of music, the human listener hears a song or composition. As such, all art, and perhaps especially music, aids human beings in attending the relationship between what is transcendent and what is immanent, what is invisible and what is visible, what is timeless and what is in time, what is spiritual and what is sensual, etc. As a very young Hans Urs von Balthasar once said,

Music stands closest to immanent meaning, because, like immanent meaning, music is development. Both are dynamic and inexpressible, ineffable. Music is, like all art, logical, indeed it is perhaps more so than the other arts. It is a boundary-point of the human, and at this boundary begins the Divine. It is an eternal monument to the fact that humans can intuit what God is: eternal and simple, circumnavigating dynamically and manifoldly in himself and the world as the Logos.

Of course, not all music or art achieves this lofty goal, and some can positively debase its recipients by reducing them to mindless consumers or trousered apes,<sup>[2]</sup> but then it is not truly art but propaganda, pornography, marketing, or some other such thing.

Music can be made or played, but music can also be listened to. While not ignoring the former, I wish to focus on the latter in what follows. Music was originally tied to ritual or sacred uses. As such and from the beginning, it was intended to be experienced with other human beings, brought together for a common celebration, ritual, or festival. Walter Benjamin rightly notes that even in the most secular societies this ritual element remains. Anybody who's ever been to a concert of any kind can attest to this, whether it's the reverent silence during the performance of a classical concerto or the raised lighters (now become cellphones) at a rock concert.

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**Vinyl records, on the other hand, are too weighty, too obtrusive, dare we say too inconvenient to let us forget [the material], which is why enthusiasts often speak of the ritual of getting out a record, cleaning it, dropping the needle, and sitting in just the right spot for the spectacle.**

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Furthermore, much of the enjoyment of music is not merely aural, but also visual. Watching Glenn Gould or Lucinda Williams perform is second only to hearing them perform. During a jazz concert, it is not only helpful to see who is soloing, but also how the players in the group react to each other. Apparently, Miles Davis didn't always react so positively to John Coltrane's

protracted solos! And this doesn't even take into account the effect our fellow concertgoers have on our own enjoyment of the music. In short, music is best taken in as an event, and events are communal affairs: they have a ritual quality.

All that I've just said ought to make us pause a bit over the ubiquity of recorded music in our age. Indeed, it is unarguable that the overwhelming majority of our listening to music is done through recorded media of some sort, most likely now in a digitized form through some sort of streaming device. Should we react to this with the Platonic worry that we are now listening to an imitation of an imitation and so are even further removed from the reality of music? I think at the very least this worry ought to be noted and considered. If the original musical idea never quite gets instantiated in perfect form when it is committed to a score, and then, further, never gets performed quite the way the composer conceived it when he wrote it, we must acknowledge that the *recording* of music adds yet another level of removal. Many artists and composers in the early 20th century, after the invention of the phonograph, were positively opposed to it. Returning to Walter Benjamin: he argues that once music has been recorded and then passed onto a consumer in the form of a vinyl record to be bought and sold, it has long since lost its aura, its ritual quality.[3]

Is it then bad to listen to recorded music? I don't think so, provided we realize that what we are getting is an imitation of an imitation and is itself therefore an art. If art can be judged, as Aristotle and, later, Dante thought it could, by the quality of its imitation of nature—if, that is, art must be deferent to the primal artist, which is Nature, then a good recording of music must be deferent to the music intended by the artist. In fact, behind some of the best recorded music there is either a recording engineer and/or producer who is himself an artist—I think here of Rudy Van Gelder's work on so many Blue Note jazz albums of the 40s through 60s—or there is the artist himself, who has become heavily involved in the recording process (e.g., Frank Zappa or Brian Wilson). Sometimes it is the collaboration of a great producer, such as Daniel Lanois, who is himself a great musician and lover of music, and a great artist, say U2 at the time of *Unforgettable Fire* or Bob Dylan in the making of *Oh Mercy* or *Time Out of Mind*. Finally, Gillian Welch and David Rawlings are heavily involved not only in the music they make but also in the way it is recorded and eventually put onto vinyl (they own their own record company and vinyl pressing plant).

In short, I am arguing that, provided we recognize that the recording of music is also an art, and provided that art is in the service of the music that it is recording, we need not fear or shun recorded music *qua recorded*. But this means that we realize that listening to recorded music is different from attending a concert. It means, furthermore, that we are aware of how the recording of music and the various media upon which it is recorded modifies the music in question. This deserves a closer look.

The first thing to be noted is that the recording of music is a very recent phenomenon when compared to the history of music. Edison invented his phonograph in 1877, and he didn't even intend it for the recording of *music*. It was the Victor company, with their introduction of the Victrola (a phonograph designed as a piece of furniture), that really initiated the widespread recording of music, and this wasn't until 1906. This is not the place to sketch out the history, so allow me to offer a few examples of how the recording of music affected the art of music for either better or worse.

Let's begin with a "worse." It should be kept in mind that modern technology already bears a logic that is hostile to the traditional understanding of nature and of art. This is exacerbated by modern economic theories which switch the priority from the quality of the thing made and the dignity of the laborer who makes it to questions of profit, convenience, marketability, and

the like. Both of these things affect recorded music. In the 40s and 50s, record companies were under pressure to produce immediately pleasing music for as wide (and adolescent) an audience as possible for the sake of selling records and radio advertising. The songs encouraged by the industry were to be short, catchy, and instantly pleasing even to the most aesthetically challenged. Oh, and loud!

What became known as the “Motown” or “Detroit sound” was a matter both of a certain style of music involving lots of saccharine boy and girl “doo wop” bands and a certain sound designed to catch people’s immediate sonic attention. Since, for whatever reason, loud music tricks the ear into thinking it’s better-*sounding* music, we got the beginning of the so-called “loudness wars.” Soon even bands like the Beatles were vying for ways of competing against all of this (mostly, but not all, superficial) and very loud music.[4] Since music can only be recorded and played so loud before running into sonic problems, recording studios began simply to raise the volume on the originally quieter parts of the song so that the whole song now sounded loud. This is also known as “compression,” meaning that the louder and quieter parts of the song are compressed (think: sandwiched) all at a maximal level of loudness. I don’t think it necessary to spell out how this is an instance of the recording industry working directly against the artfulness of music. It should be noted that these loudness wars negatively affected recorded pop and rock music well into the 1990s and haven’t totally abated even in our day. This example of heavy-handed interference from radio executives and recording engineers should serve as a cautionary tale against any notion that recorded music is merely a neutral medium in service of the art of music.

But there are also better moments in the history of recorded music. The originally shy Louis Armstrong spent his early years playing second fiddle (or, in his case, trumpet) to King Oliver in the latter’s big band. As much as he learned in that band, there is little doubt that he was too talented to remain there. Fortunately, in the 1920s, a recording engineer persuaded him to come to the studio to record his now-famous *Hot Fives* and *Hot Sevens* albums onto 78rpm records. It wasn’t that Armstrong was now simply going to record the music that he had already been playing; rather, he was forced to record a whole new style of jazz music suitable to a record containing about five minutes of music per side. It was also important that he accentuated his considerable talents as a trumpet player in order to hold the attention of people who could now only *hear* and not *see* his band at work. The result is some of the best jazz music we have. As a bonus, those of us who weren’t there to witness these sessions can still hear them fairly faithfully preserved.

A similar sort of thing happened when, due to the invention of the 33rpm “lp” (long-playing record) in the late 1940s, Duke Ellington was able to enter into the studio and record four of his concert-style compositions on two sides of vinyl (which could hold around 20 minutes of music per side). Those who had only ever heard Ellington on 78s or on the radio would have never been able to appreciate his full musical genius. I have a 2014 remastered version of this album (called, *Masterpieces*) in glorious, monaural analog, and it rivals anything in my collection, both in terms of music and sonics.

Provided, then, we don’t make the mistake of thinking of recorded music as an adequate substitute for music played live and “in-person,” we can see that it has a proper place of its own. In response to Benjamin’s worries, we might note that even if a book written by a philosopher is no substitute for, say, studying under that philosopher, again, “in person,” the book is yet able to convey some of that philosopher’s genius in his absence. There is something a little gnostic about suggesting that any physical representation of a thing simply and without further ado loses all of the “aura” of that thing.

# *A Conclusion by Way of a Recommendation*

This brings me to my final thoughts, now on the *listening* of recorded music. Here, too, there have been ups and downs since the invention of the phonograph. The 8-track tape was mostly a down! The cassette tape marked a step in the right direction. But today we are witnessing a scene divided between the overwhelming majority of people, who listen to digital music through either earbuds or a Bluetooth speaker, and a resurgence of those who prefer the usually 33rpm vinyl record. Digitally-recorded and -mediated music seems to attempt to bypass one of the main elements of music, and thus one of the main dimensions of ritual: the physical. Though the physical cannot be completely left behind even in the digital medium, it's easier to forget that what is pointing us to the transcendent is a *material* reality. In fact, the drive towards greater and greater digitization through more and more disguised media betrays a positive embarrassment regarding the nuisance of the material. Vinyl records, on the other hand, are too weighty, too obtrusive, dare we say too inconvenient to let us forget, which is why enthusiasts often speak of the ritual of getting out a record, cleaning it, dropping the needle, and sitting in just the right spot for the spectacle. Pressing "play" on one's cellphone just isn't the same. The vinyl set up in my house ties me to a particular place and limits me to certain listening times.

During 2021, vinyl records outsold any other physical medium for recorded music. This is a good sign in my view. First, there is still a great deal of vinyl out there that is pure analog, meaning that a source recorded in analog has been pressed onto a vinyl record without any digitizing in the process. It's all waves etched into a master tape and reproduced again as waves. (We might call this AAA—*analog [master], analog [transfer], analog [vinyl record]* as compared to the compact discs which once boasted of being DDD—*digital [master], digital [transfer], digital [compact disc or file]*.)<sup>[5]</sup> If music represents a beautiful marriage of the physical and the spiritual, hearing music from a source that relies on the physical waves made by musicians and singers is more fitting. If I can get an analog recording of a piece of music on vinyl, I strive to do so, even if I, admittedly, can't always tell the difference in terms of sound. And this is not to say that digital music is all bad or badly recorded. My Beatles records are from digital sources because the original analog tapes are in bad shape. They mostly sound wonderful, and I'm glad we have digital sources to preserve that music. A phone conversation with a distant friend is better than no conversation at all.

But I recommend listening to music on a two-channel stereo system, fitted with a good turntable. The physicality of the record, its packaging (often with helpful "liner notes"), and the ceremony that accompanies its playing helps to capture some of the "event quality" (the *aura*) of the music that it mediates. The two-channel system also creates a "soundstage" which enables the listener to locate the various instruments in space throughout the audible "stage."

In sum, I argue that the medium ought to be suited, as much as possible, to the message. That's what the physicality of art is all about. It concerns, to quote Balthasar, being's *self-showing*. But if music primarily concerns the audible, it also includes the visible: made by visible human beings using visible instruments and played to visible audiences in often visibly beautiful places. If recorded music cannot reconstitute all of this, it ought to have a way of compensating for that, a way of representing some of music's ritual nature. It's for these reasons that I suggest that a good, two-channel vinyl rig, expense, inconvenience and all, is the best way of listening to recorded music. There is a particular Miles Davis album which I prefer to listen to at night, with the lights turned off. I anticipate in particular and with great joy a moment when John Coltrane's saxophone is going to come in, with all its pronounced breathiness, from my left speaker. I sometimes close my eyes and imagine that he's in the room, making present that

which transcends time and space.

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[1] I would like to thank my wife Kelly and my friends Tony DiStefano and Rachel Coleman for their helpful suggestions in the writing of this. Rachel even came up with the title! I would like to dedicate this to my late uncle Joe, a great bricklayer and even better banjo player, who taught himself how to play banjo by slowing down Earl Scruggs' 45rpm records to the speed of 33.

[2] I owe this expression to C. S. Lewis.

[3] Benjamin, 6. I am also indebted for what follows to, Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Music, Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987).

[4] For more on the Detroit sound and loudness wars in general, see A. J. Wykes at *Soundguys*.

[5] It should be noted that in a digital recording, soundwaves are translated into a digital code of "0s" and "1s." These "0s" and "1s" cannot be heard as the ear can only hear physical waves. Therefore, even a DDD recording will have to be converted to an analog wave to be heard. Whether you know it or not, all of the devices upon which you listen to digital music contain (necessarily) a "DAC" (digital to analog converter). Turntables require no DAC. Some DACs even boast about their ability to reproduce the "analog sound." But I've never heard of a turntable company boasting that their turntable sounds more digital than all the rest!

