

**"As we are so we make":  
Life as Composition in Søren Kierkegaard and Dietrich  
Bonhoeffer<sup>1</sup>**

Introduction

This paper will explore the idea of one's life as a work of art, a composition, which each person creates along the lines of their own Life-View. The two thinkers whose forms of creation will be considered are Søren Kierkegaard and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Specifically, the notion of a human life's being a contrapunctual, polyphonic composition undertaken against the *cantus firmus* of the divine will be used to look at various themes found within the Kierkegaardian authorship and its concomitant lifework. As such, the paper will be divided into three parts. The first part will explore the notion of the poetic composition of the person as found in Kierkegaard. The second part will explore the notion of a polyphonic life as described in Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. The third and final section will deal with the differences and similarities between Kierkegaard's and Bonhoeffer's viewpoints.

Part 1.

The poetic composition of the person as found in Kierkegaard

A. What does it mean to be a poetically-composed person?

In Part Two of Søren Kierkegaard's 1841 magisterial dissertation *The Concept of Irony*, in the part actually entitled "The Concept of Irony", he discusses at length what he considers to be "irony's great requirement", namely, "to live poetically".<sup>2</sup> In this section of the work, "Irony after Fichte", irony is presented as a reified concept. In other words, it is treated as if it were a person or a persona, or – perhaps – an extension or evolution of what Socrates himself had been. Moreover, it seems that this personified, reified irony has actually somehow misunderstood what it means to "live poetically", for "irony understood something other and something more than what any sensible person who has any respect for a human being's worth, any sense for the originality in a human being, understands by this phrase."<sup>3</sup> And what irony (or the ironist) misunderstands is the true source for what is original or the original in a human being. The ironist views the self, or him- or herself, as the source of this originality and, yet "what is not true for God is true for man – out of nothing comes nothing;"<sup>4</sup> thus, the ironist runs the risk of becoming not merely nothing but equally as void, empty, and commonplace as that which he or she was ironizing. In other words, it is the irony

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<sup>1</sup> Presented at the International Seminar in Honor of Gregor Malantschuk (Lviv State University, Lviv, The Ukraine; November 26-27, 1997), entitled *Søren Kierkegaard and His Place in the History of European Intellectual Life*.

<sup>2</sup> *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and trans. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987-1995) (hereafter KW, cited by volume and page number), II 280; see also III 304 (Either/Or, part I).

<sup>3</sup> KW II 280, italics mine.

<sup>4</sup> KW II 281.

of irony that by virtue of the very distancing of itself from the commonplace world, in virtue of its negative freedom, that irony comes to resemble (or perhaps even becomes) that which was its original ironic object. And this is because this ironist in irony misplaces the source of human originality. For irony, the source of human originality is mistakenly located in human beings themselves.

Consider, for example, the following. If the source of each human's originality lies within each individual human, then what is left to compose poetically? If what makes me "original" as me lies in what I already am as a human, then what part of my existence do I need to compose? None, whatsoever. The composition is already finished. Thus, the ironist must needs deviate from what is already there in order to compose himself poetically. This is, in fact, the very nature of irony – a distancing from what is already given. Furthermore, it begins to appear as if part of what is truly ironic about "poetically composing" one's self, is that the endeavour by its very nature is rather akin to lying – for one is required to deviate not merely from what one already is, but from what one is. For this reason, Kierkegaard notes that "the ironist poetically composes himself and his environment with the greatest possible poetic license, [and] as he lives in this totally hypothetical and subjunctive way, his life loses all continuity. He succumbs completely to mood. His life is nothing but moods."<sup>5</sup> Thus, we see that the poetically composed human being is, in fact, a solipsist whose life, due to ironizing, is not mere discontinuous with the world which surrounds it, it is also not continuous with and within itself. This life is fragmented, based on mood and whim, rather like the life illustrated by the section called "Diapsalamata" found at the beginning of *Either/Or*. Perhaps it is not for nothing that this section is dedicated "ad se ipsum", "to himself", for when the ironist (here as an aesthete) tries to compose himself poetically he must write himself back to himself and thus does not, in fact, compose himself but simply composes another story about himself. If the source of human originality lies beyond the individual human being, then this attempt to compose one's self poetically is rather like a poem, in the middle of being written, reaching up and grabbing the pen out of the poet's hand in order to write another completely different poem which the first poem will henceforth call "its self". Fundamentally, then, it would seem that the desire to poetically compose one's self is, inherently, a kind of usurpation, but it is not entirely clear from *The Concept of Irony* whether it is a place or a power that is being usurped. What is clear from the text is that "it is indeed one thing to compose oneself poetically; it is something else to be composed poetically. The Christian lets himself be poetically composed, and in this respect a simple Christian lives far more poetically than many a brilliant intellectual."<sup>6</sup> In other words, and here is the salient feature of this observation by Kierkegaard, to compose one's self poetically is somehow an attempt to live poetically. But this attempt does not succeed. However, to be composed poetically, in this case as a Christian, is actually a way of living in which one comes closer to living poetically, i.e., composing one's self poetically, than many a brilliant thinker for whom the composing of one's self poetically is a life goal. And this, dear reader, is real irony!

B. What does it mean to be a poetically-composed person whose Author is God?

Irony, according to Kierkegaard, did not even understand living poetically "to be what the pious Christian thinks of when he becomes aware that life is an upbringing, an education, which, please note, is not supposed to make him [the Christian or the individual human being] into someone completely different (...) but is specifically supposed to develop the

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<sup>5</sup> *KW II 284*.

<sup>6</sup> *KW II 281*, italics mine.

seeds God himself has placed in man, since the Christian knows himself as that which has reality for God. Here, in fact, the Christian comes to the aid of God, becomes so to speak, his co-worker in completing the good work God himself has begun."<sup>7</sup> In other words, the person who is being poetically composed by God is truly one who poetically composes, or perhaps co-composes, himself. When one takes into consideration the source of the word poetry (the Latin *poësis* is derived from the Greek verb *poiein*, "to create")<sup>8</sup>, we see that the Christian or the one being composed poetically by God has, in fact, become not merely a creation of God, but a co-creator with God. Thus, there is a sense that the world which the poetically created individual poetizes is fundamentally much greater than that poetized by the poetically creating individual. That is to say that, unlike the individual who poetically creates himself and is reduced to moody solipsism, the individual who is poetically created by God not only succeeds in truly being truly created as a self, he or she also participates in the poetic(al) composing of the rest of the world. He or she is an active (co-)participant in the on-going process of creation. There is no reduction to solipsism since the poetically created person is linked to all "that which has reality for God"<sup>9</sup> since he aids God "in completing the God work God himself has begun"<sup>10</sup> which is not, I suspect, merely the good work already begun by the seeds planted in each and every individual human being, but the good work begun – the Creation.

C. How is Kierkegaard's poetical composition related to Bonhoeffer's *cantus firmus*?

If it is in fact the case that the person who is poetically composed by God can and may go on to act as a co-creator with God in the completion of the good divine work already begun, then it seems that there exists for Kierkegaard an extra- or meta-individual *telos* for which all possible and all necessary stressing of the need to become an individual is imperative. Whether this *telos* is actually explicit in Kierkegaard's writings is, of course, an issue open to debate; moreover, it is not the topic of the present paper. However, what I would like to note is that the existence of such a meta-individual *telos* would allow Kierkegaard to enter into a (more) fruitful dialogue with various modern, socially-thinking theologians. The theologian I have in mind is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who says quite explicitly concerning inwardness (and perhaps quite tacitly concerning Kierkegaard himself) that the "time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience – and that means the time of

<sup>7</sup> KW II 280, italics mine; see also I Corinthians 3:9 and Philippians 1.6

<sup>8</sup> Lest there be any doubt as to whether this idea of the poetic or poetical comes across correctly in English from the Danish, consider this sentence phrase "men for ret at kunne leve poetisk, for ret tilgavns digterisk at skabe sig selv," (Samlede værker, 3rd edition, ed. by P.P. Rohde, Gyldendal Publishers, Copenhagen, 1962-1964; hereafter cited as SV3 with volume and page number. SV3 I 293, emphasis mine). The Hong & Hong translation renders it "but in order really to live poetically, really and thoroughly to be able to create himself poetically" (KW II 281) where *poetisk* and *digterisk* are both translated as poetical. If one considers that the word *poetisk* derives from the Greek word "to create" whereas the word *digterisk* which not only derives from the Latin "to say" (i.e., *dictare*, the frequentative of *dicere*, from whence also comes the English word *dictum*) but also had a former connotation in Danish of foresight or befale, to command, one sees that Kierkegaard may very well be employing different nuances with his adjectives. However, there are two things to consider: (1) that, according to the creation account in Genesis, God does, in fact, create by speaking (Genesis 1:3); moreover, one gets the impression that "fiat lux" was not merely a suggestion but had something of the command about it, since "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." Thus, we see that creation *per se* is linked to speaking *qua modus*. (2) that the word *digterisk* means, quite literally, "like a poet" where *digter* means poet. It is not "digtisk", i.e., "like a poem", for example. In this sense, perhaps the act of creation is undertaken by a divine poet, and when we create we are like Him?

<sup>9</sup> KW II 280.

<sup>10</sup> KW II 280.

religion in general. We are moving toward a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps, in Kierkegaard's defense, it should be added that he himself might have sensed this change in people and for this reason, through his entire literary career, he constantly oscillated between using direct and indirect communication. Nonetheless, it is this movement away from the inward, away from the proto-solipstic, that permits Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer to be brought into a mutually profitable discussion.

Writing to Eberhard Bethge from Tegel Prison in Berlin in 1944, Bonhoeffer responds to some of Bethge's questions and doubts concerning the relation, or perhaps proportion, between erotic love and other kinds of love. According to Bonhoeffer, there's "always a danger in all strong, erotic love that one may love what I might call the polyphony of life. What I mean is that God wants us to love him eternally with our whole hearts – not in such a way as to injure or weaken our earthly love, but to provide a kind of cantus firmus to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint. One of these contrapuntal themes (which have their own complete independence but are yet related to the cantus firmus) is earthly affection. Even in the Bible we have the Song of Songs; and really one can imagine no more ardent, passionate, sensual love than is portrayed there (see 7.6). It's a good thing that the book is in the Bible, in face of all those who believe that the restraint of passion is Christian (where is there such restraint in the Old Testament?).<sup>12</sup> Apparently, there are some, who believe along with the creator of *Either/Or*, but believe so openly and Christianly, that the passions, too, are baptized.<sup>13</sup>

Be that as it may, one of the more interesting things about Bonhoeffer's commentary is its context. Bethge, a soldier at the Italian front, is worried about the wife and child he has left behind him in Germany. Bonhoeffer, in prison awaiting trial for subversive activities, is in the throes of longing for a fiancée he will, as we know, never marry. Here are two men involved deeply in two of the greatest extremities of earthly existence: love and war. Thus, I suspect, that it is not simply the orientation and proportion of one's earthly affections and attachments which concern them; I also suspect that it is the risk, suffering, and pain which joy, life, and love can bring that, too, weighs heavily on their minds.

For this reason, Bonhoeffer draws upon his musical training to illustrate what is fundamentally a faith position: the presence of God as the cantus firmus (and no doubt profundus) behind and beneath human existence. It is, as he says, that to "which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint" and to which they each "have their own complete

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<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letter and Papers from Prison: The Enlarged Edition*, ed. by E. Bethge, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1971) (hereafter cited as LPP with page number), LPP 279.

<sup>12</sup> LPP 303. And while I, personally, am not convinced by such a hearkening back to the Old Testament, I can add instead "where is there such restraint in the life of Christ"? My observation of many is that they prefer to emulate Christ in his divinity rather than in his humanity, failing to weep even as Jesus wept at the death of a friend (John 11:35). For the curious, the verse from the Song of Solomon, as translated from the German by Bethge, reads "How fair and pleasant you are, O loved one, delectable maiden"! The NIV translation of the verse fragment "O loved one, delectable maiden" is "O love, with your delights!" which does, in fact, seem more "restrained", especially since the NIV itself refers the reader to verse 4:10 which reads: "How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much more pleasing is your love than wine, and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice!" Delectable, indeed.

<sup>13</sup> Prefatory quote to *Either/Or*, Part One, from Edward Young, which, in the original reads: "Are passions, then, the pagans of the soul? Reason alone baptized?" That Kierkegaard may have shared more sympathy with Bonhoeffer than is usually supposed (even by Kierkegaard himself!?) is the prefatory quote to the second part of *Either/Or* which, attributed to Chateaubriand, reads: "Les grandes passions sont solitaires, et les transporter au désert, c'est les rendre. à leur empire." Then, again, the grand passions in question are solitary ones.

independence but are yet related". One such independent counterpoint theme is earthly affection, of which erotic love is merely one example.

For both Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard, then, human life is, by its very nature, best described as some form of artistic composition. For Kierkegaard, human life or human existence reflects the work of a poet. For Bonhoeffer, the artist behind human life is a composer, a great cosmic musician. In both cases, the nature of existence reflects the process of poiesis (as opposed to, say, *tekhne*, for instance). For Kierkegaard, the human being is rather like a poem produced by a poet. For Bonhoeffer, the human being's life reflects the playing of a piece of music. In other words, while both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer perceive human life as somehow an artistic production, Kierkegaard's image communicates the being of this product whereas Bonhoeffer's conveys the doing of this product. In other words, although these thinkers are conveying different moments in the life or existence of this artistic production which is a human being, they are not differing about the artistic, created, or poetic nature of the human being qua composition.

## Part 2.

### The notion of a polyphonic life as described in Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison.

#### A. Why the contrapuntal is an essential Christian view of life?

Although the tension and the resolution of the tension between earthly existence and an eternal orientation are recurring themes in Bonhoeffer's prison writings, the precise notion of a *cantus firmus* as supporting human existence is only mentioned in one particular letter (Tegel, 20 May 1944) of which the greater portion has been lost. Nonetheless as a notion and a name, it remains a tempting and useful concept when trying to explain the rather varied and non-systematic thoughts which Bonhoeffer was producing at this time.<sup>14</sup>

As mentioned above, Bonhoeffer advanced the theological notion of a *cantus firmus* in response to the very existential concerns of a close friend. However, he did not let the matter rest there as a merely intellectual, if personal, response, to a particular, but isolated, human dilemma; rather, he pushed the idea of *cantus firmus* further along by setting it in precise theological terms. According to Bonhoeffer: "Where the *cantus firmus* is clear and plain, the counterpoint can be developed to its limits. The two are "undivided and yet distinct", in the words of the Chalcedonian Definition, like Christ in his divine and human natures. May not the attraction and importance of polyphony in music consist in its being a musical reflection of this Christological fact and therefore of our *vita christiana*?"<sup>15</sup> In other words, what began as representative of an existential-theological notion now derives its own existential-musical importance from the divine relation that it represents. It is the Christian or, specifically, the Christological which justifies the musical and not the musical which functions analogically (or anagogically) for the Christian.

As a matter of fact, for Bonhoeffer, it is faith itself that makes existential polyphony possible, for "Christianity puts us into many different dimensions of life at the same time; we make room in ourselves, to some extent, for God and the whole world. We rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep; we are anxious (...) about our life, but at the same time we must think about things much more important to us than life itself. When the

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<sup>14</sup> Case in point, the notion of polyphony and references to music, particularly to Bach, are numerous. Bonhoeffer himself was an accomplished musician, a pianist, specifically.

<sup>15</sup> *LPP* 303.

alert goes,<sup>16</sup> for instance: as soon as we turn our minds from worrying about our own safety to the task of helping other people to keep calm, the situation is completely changed; life isn't pushed back into a single dimension, but is kept multi-dimensional and polyphonous. What a deliverance it is to be able to think, and thereby remain multi-dimensional. (...) We have to get people out of their one-track minds; that is a kind of "preparation" for faith, or something that makes faith possible, although really it's only faith itself that can make possible a multi-dimensional life."<sup>17</sup>

Only faith "can make possible a multi-dimensional life," a polyphonic life. Such an assertion may, perhaps, seem nonsensical. But what if one considers faith as an existential analogue to the psychological notion of "object permanence", the idea that a baby must learn that whenever mommy, the red ball, or the dog disappear they will come back again because they are still there, but just now beyond the infant's immediate knowledge? If this is the case, then the Christian existential notion of faith may be simply re-stated as the idea that even when it seems as if God is not there, He still is there, but just now beyond the believer's immediate knowledge. Or, in what one might call more "Bonhoefferian" terms, the *cantus firmus* continues on, even when we can least hear it. Moreover, just like the mommy, the red ball, and the doggy, we come to know that the *cantus firmus* continues, and we learn to go and look for it when it is absent and we need it. One only searches for lost house keys when one knows that they can be found.

Bonhoeffer further claims that to "have a good, clear *cantus firmus*; that is the only way to a full and perfect sound, when the counterpoint has a firm support and can't come adrift or get out of tune, while remaining a distinct whole in its own right. Only a polyphony of this kind can give life a wholeness and at the same time assure us that nothing calamitous can happen as long as the *cantus firmus* is kept going."<sup>18</sup> In other words, for a whole and integral life that is nonetheless a complex and multidimensional life, a *cantus firmus* is necessary as a kind of conductor or, better yet, as a kind of true and constant pitch by which we can tune the polyphonies which are the themes of our own lives. Moreover, this *cantus firmus*, as long as it is kept going, assures us that nothing terribly, terribly wrong or bad or evil – nothing calamitous – can occur. But why? My interpretation of Bonhoeffer's words would be that no note of our personal polyphonies can be so bad, so off-key, or so false that the underlying *cantus firmus* could not make beautiful music from it.

Consider, if you will, a Two- or Three-Part Invention by Bach. As the thematic phrase of the invention is repeated at different intervals in both hands, various notes coincide in such a way that resonance or dissonance result. As a whole, the piece is not dissonant; rather, it is melodious. Yet there are moments of dissonance, but these moments do not detract from the beauty of the piece, the invention, as a whole. In fact, wrong notes – as in the performer's mistaken playing of the text – do not necessarily detract from the beauty of his or her performance. Glenn Gould's interpretations of these Inventions would be a prime example of this fact. But one must note that no *cantus firmus* lies behind any of Bach's Inventions. They are, fundamentally, complex finger exercises in various keys that were written, albeit brilliantly written, for his sons. Yet, despite this lack of a *cantus firmus*, we can see how resonance and dissonance can be used to create beauty when employed by the hands of a musical genius.

Furthermore, what the Two- or Three-Part Inventions really show us is that separate phrases, apparently uncoordinated synchronically in time but expressing themselves in

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<sup>16</sup> The air raid siren at Tegel prison.

<sup>17</sup> *LPP* 310-1.

<sup>18</sup> *LPP* 303.

parallel through time, can create an overall musical harmony despite the lack of deliberate harmonization. I believe this is one of the lessons of polyphony that Bonhoeffer is drawing from works such as Bach's. But how does one apply such knowledge to the living of a human life wherein every move and motion is not (or apparently not) determined by pre-ordained composition, where life is not merely interpretation, the performance, of a pre-established work, but the writing of that work while the playing is going on. In other words, is such resonance and musicality possible when the work in question is an improvisation? Or, to put the question humorously, what if Bach had written jazz?

## B. How one maintains the complexity and distinctness of differing contrapuntal themes against/with(in) the cantus firmus?

Jazz is, I think, a good musical image by which to begin explaining the relation of contrapuntal themes to a cantus firmus. In jazz, one sees (or hears) a great deal of "solo" music. In other words, solo performances such as trumpet or piano or saxophone accompanied by a back-up band whose sole/soul function it is to observe the solo performer, stay in the same key and spirit, and accompany the performance. These back-up musicians, then, are essentially providing a kind of cantus firmus to the solo performer's improvisation. They watch the soloist carefully, looking for incipient changes in tempo and listening assiduously for clues to changes in key or style. They are completely focused on the soloist. For them, there is no one else, including them-selves, present during the performance, for if they were to cease concentrating for perhaps even a few seconds, the whole piece of improvisation might fall apart, spinning out of control into cacophony and noise. It would, then, cease to be music.

The same, I venture, can be said for living a human life.

But it should also be taken into consideration that it is precisely this absence of the pre-established harmony of the composer (or of Leibniz)<sup>19</sup> that makes jazz what it is, i.e., improvisationary. In virtue of not knowing exactly which notes are coming next, both the jazz performer as well as the jazz audience exist in a state of musical anticipation that is unique in its indeterminacy. No one is waiting for their "favorite part" of the piece; actually they are simply waiting to see what happens next, for almost anything is possible. This relation to the possible is, for Kierkegaard, the essence of faith, for faith "is essentially this – to hold fast to possibility"<sup>20</sup> as well as being "always directed to that which is not seen – (...) to the invisible, (...) to the improbable."<sup>21</sup> But such a holding fast to possibility is future-directed; it is the hope that eventually "all things will work together for good."<sup>22</sup> It does not explain how one lives a multi-faceted and polyphonous life in the present for it depends upon what may or might happen in the future. At this point Bonhoeffer might ask: How does one

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<sup>19</sup> NB: "As ruler of the world, God also wants to be the object of faith, he wants you and me to believe he is a loving Father, etc. A theory which would correspond to that harmony-theory must require that the world also be equally as devoid of ambiguity, so that it is human possible to sense directly that God is love. But the world is far from being like that. And why not? Because God wants to be believed in faith" (JP 2877). Here Kierkegaard seems to be implying that the removal of ambiguity, of indeterminacy, is tantamount to removing the need or place of faith.

<sup>20</sup> *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, ed. and tr. by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong, vol. 1-6, Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1967-1978 (hereafter cited as JP with reference number), JP 1126.

<sup>21</sup> JP 1119; consider also that this entry, in its entirety, reads: "Faith is always related to that which is not seen - in the context of nature (physically contrasted) to the invisible [Usynlige], in the spiritual context (spiritually) to the improbable [Usandsynlige]" (VIII A 203, n.d., 1846). In other words, it is a re-working of Hebrews 11: 1, "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (NIV).

<sup>22</sup> See Romans 8: 28.

remain distinct in one's own right? How does one keep one's own polyphony a full and perfect sound? To which Kierkegaard would respond: by becoming a "single individual" ["den Enkelte"] which is a category that "may be used in two ways. In times when security prevails and existence [Tilværelsen] seems to lie under a spell of apathy, 'the single individual' is the category of awakening. In agitated times when everything is tottering, 'the single individual' is the category of composure, The person who understands how to use this category will appear quite different in time of peace than in times of commotion, and yet he will be using the same weapon. (...) [For the] category of the single individual always relates to inward deepening."<sup>23</sup>

In other words, if one considered "the single individual" as one particular piece of music with its own polyphonies, its own idiosyncrasies and trills and grace notes, then the inward deepening of this category might just be analogous to a tune or a melody which becomes deepened, enriched, through repeated interpretation. As such, each new performance of the piece reveals some new nuance or idea lying within the musical text. This discovery of previously unseen dimensions in a musical score is achieved through continuous engaging of the text. In the same way self-knowledge, the product of inward deepening of the single individual, is also achieved through the self's continuous engaging of itself with itself. In music, this is called "practice", as in "practice makes perfect". I suspect for Kierkegaard that this notion of practice underlies his notion of "Repetition", but that is another story.

What we do see, in both Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer, is the fulfilled prophecy of Kierkegaard's words concerning the "single individual"; for Kierkegaard, in an age of security and apathy, truly felt himself to be immersed in the "category of awakening" whereas Bonhoeffer, living in a time of agitation and commotion, viewed as his task that of "keeping calm", of maintaining composure. And it is not as if these two men saw themselves in these categories per se; rather, given the fact that they were already moving along the paths requisite for deepening their own single individualities, they found themselves ipso facto occupying these categories. If we return to our musical analogy, we see how a melody, regardless of its complexity, if played clearly, richly, profoundly will, when played against a backdrop of noise or cacophony, sound composed, melodious, tranquil. It will sound comparatively calm. Whereas the self-same melody, when played against a mere monotony, a humming, or a droning, will sound in turn harsh, revelatory, alive, and awake – rather like one's alarmclock sounds against the stillness of early morning.

In this way, we see that the polyphony of the individual life while engaged in inward deepening can readily hold its own against the cantus labilus of the world, but how does the same individual polyphony fare against the cantus firmus of the divine? Is it not apt to be swallowed whole, lost in the immensity of sound, like a thin whistling is drowned out by the fullness of an orchestra? Maybe. Maybe not.

### C. Is the motif of the musical a spatial or a temporal representation of the Christian life?

Take, for instance, the case of the Bach pieces I mentioned above, the Inventions. There is a fullness to them that is not the result of a vertical harmony, i.e., through chord structure and progression as might be found in the much later music of the Romantic period, but rather a kind of harmony which results from the relentless moving forward of the music. Were the music to stop abruptly at any one particular place, the listener would be left with

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<sup>23</sup> JP 2013.

either a sense of dissonance or non-dissonance depending on what the last notes played conveyed. The sense of complete sound which a piece of music describes is only felt at the end of an Invention with the sounding of the final notes. That such finality produces a certain feeling, a certain wholeness, can be viewed by the fact that, unless one is an astute listener, whether or not such a piece is in a major or minor key will be in doubt until the end. Thus is not the case for Romantic music, for example, where the key is felt throughout the entire piece. But this is due to the fact that the resolution of the Bach pieces in question is achieved temporally through time, not synchronistically in time. Just as harmony before, so musical resolution is temporal in Bach as well.

But if the same were true of human life, that its harmony and resolution resided singularly in the playing of it, then there would be nothing but experience and, as Kierkegaard notes, "If there were nothing higher than experience, experience would drive a man crazy" for experience's "naked activity" is nothing more than a "tabular activity" which simply "enumerates particulars".<sup>24</sup> There would be no continuity, only an aggregation of moments or points in time, for it is the composer and the interpreter who provide the over-arching meaning to a piece of music.

If this is truly the case, and the Creator is, essentially, for both Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard the composer of life, then are we not the interpreters thereof? And, as such, co-creators of the music. Bach is dead. He can only be created again by Glenn Gould. Thus, every performance becomes a co-creation of the composer's original product, a repetition of it, if you will, whose accuracy and trueness rests with the interpreter. And, where music is concerned, this co-creation through interpretation in performance is not a temporal relation since there is no direct temporal relation between composer and performer. I do not mean simply that they are not contemporary, I mean that time is irrelevant to the relation. To know (of) Bach, one must have encountered him. Many of his contemporaries never had that chance. Yet many moderns do know (of) him. They have, in other words, although Bach is long dead, shared space with him and his compositions. The relation between the performer and the composer, then, is one of space, not time.

This is easier to see when we speak of the Creator and the created. We must assume that God is co-present with us, and this type of omnipresence is usually viewed as an atemporal temporality and called "eternity" or the "eternal". But what is lacking is a reference to the spatial where God is concerned. If the Creator is co-present at the place of co-creation with the performer, then is it not also possible that, in virtue of wishing to keep the full musicality of his composition, he is, in essence, also playing along? If this is the case, then it is imperative for the created co-composer to interpret the music written for him, as it is the Creator's job to play harmony, if only because knowledge of the full composition lies in the composer's mind only.

### Part 3.

#### A Comparison of Kierkegaard's and Bonhoeffer's viewpoints

##### A. Why the playing of harmony is never an option for the Christian.

There are two reasons for why the playing of harmony is not an option for a true individual. The first was stated in part above, and I will re-state it now as follows: Consider an orchestra playing a symphony in which every instrument's part is necessary for the beauty

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<sup>24</sup> JP 1070 & 1072.

of the whole. Imagine a rebellion of the violas who really want to play the first violin part. Now consider the loss in richness that would befall the entire piece were this to take place. There would be a diminishing of the fullness of perfection of the symphony. Likewise, every individual who does not, in the Kierkegaardian sense, pursue the inward depth of the individuality diminishes the fullness of perfection of the divinely created composition. In Bonhoeffer's term, the diminishment of the polyphony of the individual results in the diminished polyphony (and hence beauty) of the whole. It is not for nothing that Bonhoeffer confides that the Church ought to try to re-integrate what he understands as the Kierkegaardian "aesthetic existence" (the freedom found in art, friendship, and play) back into Christian life, for that would increase, not diminish, the possible polyphonies.<sup>25</sup> In other words, not engaging in one's polyphony does not merely smack of rebellion against the original composer (a religious interpretation of the phenomenon), it also lessens the beauty of the composition – something which should strike fear into all aesthetic souls.

The second reason that a truly individual should not engage in playing harmony is the fact that harmony is a response to the composed (i.e., the created) not to the composer (i.e., the Creator). If one hearkens back to Kierkegaard's notion of the category of the single individual being one whose interpretation differs depending upon whether the background music surrounding it is cacophonous or monotonous, one can readily see how, were the single individual to (quite literally) change his tune in order to harmonize with the surrounding music, that the nature of his own music would be immediately lost. For, how does one harmonize with a monotone? By becoming that very monotone oneself. And how does one harmonize with cacophony? For any attempt at consistency, at melody, would by itself become cacophonous in relation to cacophony and likewise not harmonic with cacophony in virtue of being in itself melodic. And, again, beauty, fullness of perfection – aesthetic or otherwise, is lost.

## B. How the "negative" contributes positively to the perfect musicality of life.

(i.e., suffering, silence, evil, despair, etc.)

We are, thus, it seems fundamentally left with the fact that it is necessary to engage in some sort of faith, whether in the traditionally eternal (that all things will come out in the wash and be perfect in the end) or in a more modern, almost Einsteinian space-time view of faith, where the actually perfect-making is going on now as a space relation to the Composer in question. In other words, faith is all that is left. "is essentially this – to hold fast to possibility. This was what pleased Christ so much in the sufferer, that after suffering for many, many years, he persistently believe with the same originality and youthfulness that in God help was possible. The demoralizing aspect of suffering is the paralysis of foundering in hopelessness."<sup>26</sup>

Or, perhaps, another way this idea can be interpreted, although it might also seem somewhat sadistic, would be the idea the silence and dissonance are to music what suffering and despair are in human life. This is not an easy notion, and I certainly do not present it lightly, but much of the tension of passionate music is created by its incongruence and its dissonance. Perhaps this is the "terrible beauty" of which Yeats speaks; perhaps this is also the shadow which makes a Rembrandt painting not merely beautiful but also rich and true,

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<sup>25</sup> *LPP* 193.

<sup>26</sup> *JP* 1126.

and as T.S. Eliot notes in "The Hollow Men": "Between the idea / And the reality /Between the motion / And the act / Falls the Shadow." And every shadow is what one makes of it: it can mean encroaching darkness or it can indicate that so-mewhere, someplace, can be found a light.

### C. What it then means to have a rich musicality, a full life.

Oddly enough, this is the question that no paper, especially an academic one, can answer. Kierkegaard himself already noted that the individual who lives as an individual will be subject to at least two different interpretations depending on the circumstances of his or her age: as one who awakens or as one who calms. But such interpretations are not the venue of the individual him- or herself. That one's life may be painted as a chiaroscuro may be true, but that says nothing about the content of the painting which is one's life. That one suffers both the silences, the rests, as well as the dissonances and harmonies of one's existence does not say whether that existence is in a major or minor key, happy or sad, or anything else about it. To choose to be true to the composition which one is means looking inward to see what is written there. But such as these are the instructions for a process; they are not the descriptions of a product. That is the process of becoming an individual which is, as Kierkegaard notes, "a striving."<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

Anybody can have the harmony, if they leave us the counterpoint  
– Lord Peter Wimsey –  
(From *Gaudy Night* by Dorothy L. Sayers)

The title of this paper stems from a book called *The Mind of the Maker* by Dorothy L. Sayers in which she points out that the world, as it is, reflects a great deal of the mind of its maker in virtue of the fact that "as we are, so we make." In other words, we are our interpretations. Our life as a composition will be come as our Life-View, in the most Kierkegaardian sense of the word. And, if we believe ourselves to be poetically composed by God, we as compositions will become divine poems. Thus, our existence is our hermeneutical device, but unless we employ that existence to its fullest, we will never know the heights and the depths of our hermeneutics. We will do ourselves a disservice. And perhaps this is the most important moral of the Parable of the Talents<sup>28</sup>: that we will only do as much as our worldview, our life-view, our interpretation of the poem and the Poet allows.

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<sup>27</sup> JP 2031.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew 25: 14-30; see also: Luke 19: 12-27.