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I. A Premise: Towards a Definition of Christian Joy

I’m a musicologist. Not being a theologian, I would like to set out - rather than argue with any theological erudition - a working premise on what Christian joy might be from a layman’s perspective. Feel free to refine or dispute, but this is the model I will work with for this position paper on joy and music.

A two-part definition of Christian joy:

1. Joy is a relationship with God: In the words of the Westminster shorter catechism: ‘Man’s chief End is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever’. As a relationship with God, joy is not an end in itself, as if it were a noun: it functions better as a verb - to enjoy - for God is the object of the verb, its end. This joy is both a ‘steady state’ and a spontaneous human expression found in God through the saving work of Christ (John 16:22-24 and 17:13, Psalm 52:12) and sustained by the Holy Spirit (Rom: 14: 17). As such, it is dependent on God and independent of circumstances, both in the sense that joy is available in all circumstances, and can spontaneously erupt as a counterforce in difficult circumstances (1 Thes 1:6/ 1 Peter 1:8/Paul in Prison). Therefore, as a ‘steady state’ it is an unshakable position of strength in God (Neh 8:10); as a spontaneous human expression it is an act of praise to God whatever the circumstances.

2. Joy is sustained within an ecology of virtues. Two points - fruit and roots:
   i) Fruit. Joy is inextricably bound to Christian sanctification as an integral part of the fruit of the Spirit, namely, love joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). Joy is therefore inseparable from the other ‘segments’ of the fruit and can only flourish fully within this ecosystem of virtues. It cannot survive independently without drastic impoverishment to the Christian life. In other words, joy will be a robbed of its sanctifying purpose; its pleasure will fail for lack of discipline.
   ii) Roots. Joy is fruit, not root; it is not a primary source or absolute condition but is rooted in ‘faith, hope and love’ - the foundations of the Christian life (I Cor 13:13, 1 Peter 1:3-9) – and is only fully alive when sustained by the roots. Once deracinated, joy is short-lived since it
is no longer based on a trust beyond visible circumstances (faith), a vision that can withstand despair (hope), and an unconditional relationship of security and generosity (love).

In summary, joy cannot be divorced from either the fruit or roots without serious damage; it would be a damaged good.

II. The Basic Thesis
My thesis is that modern joy is a ‘damaged good’ that needs to be returned to its manufacturer. Again, my definition of modern joy is a simple sketch that can be refined or disputed. What follows is a working premise for the current argument, which is stated in rather black-and-white terms for the purpose of discussion.

The Enlightenment modernised Christian joy. At its core, the modern notion of joy is a ‘declaration of independence’, free from the seeming ‘constraints’ of (1) a relationship with God and (2) an ecology of ‘fruit and roots’. Modern joy is often separated as an end in itself, going solo with the human subject and its social projects. The chief end of man is to enjoy joy. Joy as an end is rebranded as ‘happiness’. Instead of being nourished by faith, hope and love, it has gone underground as a root, taking a foundational role, along with other modern absolutes, namely, freedom and life (aka bioethics). This can all be summed up by the well-known phrase in the United States' Declaration of Independence:

‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are born equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness’

The statement understands joy as a ‘pursuit’. It has become the goal of modern society and the ultimate value of eudemonic forms of politics (Rousseau, in particular comes to mind). As a pursuit, joy has been co-opted into the idea of modern progress; it is a utopian end, the result of the moral perfection of humankind. There are two consequences. First, joy is conceived as a present lack. As such it exists as a desire, and can only come about instrumentally, manufactured by human hands for the future. Second, joy has become an abstract entity, along with life and
liberty, since these absolutes, as autotelic principles, are arguably without content (Hegel critique of Kantian freedom comes to mind). Joy-in-itself tends to be somewhat meaningless if realised and can easily become an empty pleasure.

Replacing ‘faith, hope, and love’ with their Enlightenment counterparts of ‘life, liberty and happiness’ is highly problematic for human well-being

III. Beethoven

Does music have anything significant to say on this issue? The modern world has a musical anthem, the subject of which is joy – the choral finale of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony with words from Friedrich Schiller’s poem, ‘Ode to Joy’ (An die Freude). It’s the closest piece we have to a universal anthem for modern humanity (at least in the West), and is liberally used as a statement of resilience in situations where human liberty, life and happiness are either celebrated or threatened, from the fall of the Berlin wall to the fall of the twin towers in New York. It stands for what we moderns believe to be our chief end: universal Joy. The question is, what kind of joy does the work portray? What does the music say about joy? The work is clearly able to tap into the identity of the modern subject and arouse our deepest values, but because it is music, the values are often expressed at a tacit level that we are unable (or feel no need) to articulate. So why is this music so important to us? I suggest that it enables us to experience six elements of modern joy.

1. Pursuit: The Ninth Symphony is about the pursuit of happiness. Together, the four movements of the symphony form a creation narrative from D minor to D major. It begins with nebulous tremolos hovering over hollow fragmentary materials, as if there were some primeval spirit brooding over the chaos, bringing a world into being from nothing. The narrative ends with a utopian society of joy – a brotherhood united in song with the famous D major tune. The D minor-to-D-major struggle is another one of Beethoven’s darkness to light narratives epitomised by his Fifth Symphony. Joy starts out, then, fundamentally as a lack; it is not a gift (a given) to be received; it is not already part of God’s creation. The symphony does not start with an affirmation of ‘it is good’, but begins from some primordial ‘soup’. Joy is something that has to be made from the chaos and pursued as the goal of social perfection. If we were to give this joy
an ontology, it would be categorised in John Milbank’s words as an ‘ontology of violence’ under
the aesthetic of the sublime. The ontology of peace, Milbank’s alternative, is a non-starter in the
Ninth.ii

2. Power: Given Beethoven’s creation narrative, Joy can only be conceived in terms of power,
asserting its force in a violent universe. The model for this kind of joy is found in the figure of
the hero that is almost synonymous with Beethoven’s most iconic works. In fact, the Ninth is
often regarded as a throw back to Beethoven’s so-called ‘heroic period’ (i.e. the middle period,
which includes works such as the Eroica, the Fifth and Seventh Symphonies). Another name for
the heroic in Beethoven is Prometheus, iii a figure that not only stands on the base of the
Beethoven Monument in Vienna,iv but a myth that arguably stands for modernity itself; as Jürgen
Moltmann writes, Prometheus is ‘the great saint of the modern age’.v Beethoven’s heroic
defiance and the sublime joy that forms its apotheosis, tally with the myth of Prometheus, a Titan
who steals fire for humankind in rebellion against the gods. It is tempting to imagine that ‘Joy’s
divine spark’ (Götterfunken) in the ‘Ode to Joy’ is a fire that has to be stolen from the gods to
make up the lack with which the symphony begins. This is just conjectural, but the arrival of joy,
introduced halfway through the finale when the voices enter, is announced in defiance of the
violent music that precedes it (often called the Schreckensfanfare - 'horror fanfare'). ‘Friends,
not these tones’ declares the tenor voice as if to stand against the world in an act negation. Joy
comes as an act of rejection against that which is given. It is made as a counterforce, emerging
from an ontology of violence. Perhaps Romain Rolland’s portrayal of Beethoven as a
Nietzschean superman joyfully declaring ‘Kraft über alles!’ is not too far off the mark!vi But, as
Adorno would ask about Beethoven’s sublime stance: ‘Does not music perhaps stand firm
against fate precisely in becoming fate? Is not imitation the canon of resistance? … Does not
gaining-power-over-oneself, freedom, lie only in imitation, in making-oneself similar?vii Heroic
joy, it seems, is always based on threat, requiring a prior evil to react against in order to celebrate
a virtue that merely replicates the evil it resists.viii

3. Speed: Joy as violent power is most clearly articulated in the Alla Marcia section of the finale.
Accompanied by the militaristic noise of Turkish percussion, Beethoven invites us to ‘hurtle
through the heavens … as joyful as a hero on the way to triumph’.ix Power is portrayed as speed
– the quintessential military tactic for dominance and the modern experience of exhilaration. Here, the speed and transcendence of Beethovenian joy are not only put into words (‘hurtle through heavens .. as joyful as a hero to triumph’) but made palpable by a music that gathers force. The Alla Marcia is a song that enlists us to join in; the music gets bigger and louder, until it takes leave of the percussion and chorus and launches into a contrapuntal gallop that spirals upwards into some abstract celestial realm (bs 431 ff). With the hunt as the topic of the fugal subject and martial rhythms in the countersubject, this ‘battle music’, as Wagner calls it, moves at full speed - no longer a march but a stampede. By the end of the section, the chorus re-enters; the hero hurtling triumphantly through the heavens is now a universal brotherhood speeding *en masse* in some celestial vehicle.

4. Death: But the result is death. Speed kills. When the Turkish music returns at the very end of the symphony in its full glory (bs 843-940), it arrives as an acceleration, rocketing the finale into a fast-forward mode of such speed that its joy has often been (mis)construed as aggression. It is apt that Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* heard the end of the symphony as a Bacchanalian orgy of intoxicated violence. The militarized speed that closes the symphony is a celebration of annihilation before the Schopenhaurian Will. Heroic joy is ultimately tragic.

The tragedy of joy is no surprise given that heroic morality is inextricably tied with fate. After all, for Prometheus, life does not end well. In fact, it doesn’t really end since he is punished by Zeus by having his ever-regenerating liver eaten afresh by an eagle every day while tied to a rock. The fact that this story is portrayed at the pedestal of the Beethoven’s monument in Vienna should alert us to necessary tragedy behind the joyful apotheosis of Beethoven’s symphonic forms. The death of the hero, celebrated in a number of Beethoven’s works, is not a cause for mourning, but of celebration in the same sense that heroic societies would commemorate the hero with elaborate funeral rites and funereal games.

5. Desire: The commingling of joy and death, then, tallies with the aesthetic of speed as a sublime thrill that dices with death. Joy requires an appetite for danger. It is the *jouissance* of the hero. In this sense, Nietzsche’s perverse reading of the Ninth understood the finale perfectly: the symphony ends with an ecstasy of death before the Will. This is joy as a kind of death drive.
6. Exclusion: Heroic joy is about victory. The death of the hero immortalises his accomplishment in securing the safety of the society to whom he has pledged his life. But because joy is always a victory, it can never be inclusive: history belongs to the victors as does joy. In the finale of the Ninth Symphony, what Agamben would classify as ‘a state of exception’ in which sovereignty is established by the law of exclusion, is explicitly portrayed; all are included in the brotherhood of joy with the exception of its Other – ‘he who cannot rejoice’. 

Whoever has the great fortune to enjoy mutual friendship,
Whoever has taken a loving wife, let him join us in celebration!
Yes! Even he who calls only one single soul his own in all the wide world!
But he who cannot rejoice, let him steal weeping away from this group.

Schiller’s poem states this political order seemingly without embarrassment, but Beethoven sets the injunction for the Other ‘to steal away’ with a counterintuitive dynamic that illumines the ban that gives joy its sovereignty (see example 1). The emphatic cadence that normally punctuates the ‘joy theme’ with a loud flourish closes with a rather awkward ‘diminuendo – piano’, as if the music needed to hide an anomaly at this point (bars 280-84 and 288-92). The theme’s embarrassment is, in one sense, merely word painting – the music steals quietly away - but in doing so, the sudden hush brings out the contradiction between the inclusiveness of joy and its necessary exception by impeding the dynamic flow. So for all its heroic noise, the celebration of brotherhood in the theme harbours a quiet blush that gives away its lie, for the humanism it champions treats its Other as less than human.

IV: Pause

Before I continue, I should add a note about great music. It may seem from the above that Beethoven is a moral beast. The fact that Beethoven’s humanity and his quest for happiness should result in such ‘violence’ should not lead to an indictment of his music. After all, music has always glorified gods and the divine rights of their earthly representatives, and now that
sovereignty has been made universal in the human subject under the crown of joy, why shouldn’t music reflect the contradictions of humanity in its attempt to glorify the self? Whatever violence the music harbours, it is an inescapable symptom of modernity and not some evil intent with malice aforethought. Indeed, any music great enough to capture the spirit of modern freedom will inevitably model the contradiction inherent in it. If it did not, it would not be true. As Adorno states: ‘[T]his the tribute Beethoven was forced to pay to the ideological character whose spell extends even to the most sublime music ever to aim at freedom under continued unfreedom’.

We should also bear in mind that Beethoven cannot be reduced to the heroic. Although the heroic is the predominant image of Beethoven in the reception of his music, in reality, only a handful of pieces fit neatly into this category. His music says much more than the sketch given above. But this is beyond the current scope of this paper.

V: Mozart

What might Christian joy sound like in music? Rather than analyse another piece, I would like to turn to Karl Barth and his infatuation with Mozart expressed in his Church Dogmatics III:

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Why is it that this man is so incomparable? Why is it that for the receptive, he has produced in almost every bar he conceived and composed a type of music for which “beautiful” is not a fitting epithet …

Joy is not a term Barth uses to describe his experience of Mozart, but it is the basis from which his eulogy on the composer seems to percolate. The sense of joy in this passage is inextricably bound to other qualities - to the fruit and roots that Barth indicates, such as goodness, peace, faith, hope. If Beethoven stands for force, Barth understands Mozart’s music as pure play, a kind of joy without coercion that does not define its purpose against a chaotic world, but seems to affirm ‘creation in its total goodness’. Rather than pursuing happiness, the music seems ‘to express the good creation of God, which also includes the limitation and end of man.’ The good is already given. Barth writes this section on Mozart quite deliberately before his section on the chaos, singling Mozart out as the antidote to all Promethean misunderstandings of the world:
I make this interposition here, before turning to chaos, because in the music of Mozart—and I wonder whether the same can be said of any other works before or after—we have clear and convincing proof that it is a slander on creation to charge it with a share in chaos because it includes a Yes and a No, as though orientated to God on the one side and nothingness on the other. Mozart causes us to hear that even on the latter side, and therefore in its totality, creation praises its Master and is therefore perfect. Here on the threshold of our problem—and it is no small achievement—Mozart has created order for those who have ears to hear, and he has done it better than any scientific deduction could.

In effect, Barth modernises in Mozart the image of creation as a symphony, which has its earliest theological exposition in Clement of Alexandria, where the music of the spheres (the Pythagorean notion of cosmic harmony) is re-vised in the image of Christ. In his *Exhortation to the Gentiles*, Clement describes Christ as the ‘new song’ that brings the dissonant cosmos into a symphony of praise; the song of the gospel retunes the fallen universe. His vision of music not only involves the redeemed singing with Christ, but the entire creation sounding out its doxological relationship with God. Just as Clement uses the ancient concept of ‘absolute music’, Barth turns Mozart’s ‘absolute music’ into a doxological relationship with God, sounding out creation’s praise in its free and abstract play of tones. Mozart, writes Barth, ‘did not produce merely his own music but that of creation, its twofold and yet harmonious praise of God.’ The music of the spheres becomes a music that hears the entire creation under the providential care of God: ‘In face of the problem of theodicy, Mozart had the peace of God which far transcends all the critical or speculative reason that praises and reproves …. He had heard, and causes those who have ears to hear, even to-day, what we shall not see until the end of time—the whole context of providence.’

Barth’s Mozartian ontology, is therefore one of peace; ‘Mozart had the peace of God’ at a time when the Lisbon Earthquake shook the very ontology of peace, and opened up an ontology of violence for the purveyors of the sublime.
Is Barth describing Christian joy through Mozart? To return to my opening definitions of joy, Mozart’s ‘total music’ is independent of circumstances, both in the sense that the music is available in all circumstances, and can spontaneously erupt as a counterforce in difficult circumstances. It is both a ‘steady state’ (unshakable even with the shaking of Lisbon); and a spontaneous human expression that gives praise to God ‘with a light that perpetually shines – Et lux perpetua lucet – even in the ‘shadows’, and even with ‘the dead of Lisbon’. This music, rooted in God’s goodness and bearing the fruits of the spirit in aesthetic terms, is fundamentally joy. But what is important for Barth is that this joy is alive as music. Mozart says something about joy that no theologian or philosopher can articulate. What could so easily be become stoicism or utopianism when put in philosophical terms, in Mozart is transformed into a feeling for the providential nature of God and his good purposes that ‘neither the real fathers of the Church nor our Reformers, neither the orthodox nor Liberals, neither the exponents of natural theology nor those heavily armed with the “Word of God,” and certainly not the Existentialists, nor indeed any other great musicians before and after him, either know or can express and maintain as he did’. In the words of 1 Peter 1:8 – this is an ‘inexpressible and glorious joy’ because for Barth, Mozart’s joy, as absolute music, is not expressible in words.
APPENDIX: Karl Barth on Mozart

… Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Why is it that this man is so incomparable? Why is it that for the receptive, he has produced in almost every bar he conceived and composed a type of music for which “beautiful” is not a fitting epithet: music which for the true Christian is not mere entertainment, enjoyment or edification but food and drink; music full of comfort and counsel for his needs; music which is never a slave to its technique nor sentimental but always “moving,” free and liberating because wise, strong and sovereign? Why is it possible to hold that Mozart has a place in theology, especially in the doctrine of creation and also in eschatology, although he was not a father of the Church, does not seem to have been a particularly active Christian, and was a Roman Catholic, apparently leading what might appear to us a rather frivolous existence when not occupied in his work? It is possible to give him this position because he knew something about creation in its total goodness that neither the real fathers of the Church nor our Reformers, neither the orthodox nor Liberals, neither the exponents of natural theology nor those heavily armed with the “Word of God,” and certainly not the Existentialists, nor indeed any other great musicians before and after him, either know or can express and maintain as he did. In this respect he was pure in heart, far transcending both optimists and pessimists. 1756–1791! This was the time when God was under attack for the Lisbon earthquake, and theologians and other well-meaning folk were hard put to it to defend Him. In face of the problem of theodicy, Mozart had the peace of God which far transcends all the critical or speculative reason that praises and reproves. This problem lay behind him. Why then concern himself with it? He had heard, and causes those who have ears to hear, even to-day, what we shall not see until the end of time—the whole context of providence. As though in the light of this end, he heard the harmony of creation to which the shadow also belongs but in which the shadow is not darkness, deficiency is not defeat, sadness cannot become despair, trouble cannot degenerate into tragedy and infinite melancholy is not ultimately forced to claim undisputed sway. Thus the cheerfulness in this harmony is not without its limits. But the light shines all the more brightly because it breaks forth from the shadow. The sweetness is also bitter and cannot therefore cloy. Life does not fear death but knows it well. *Et lux perpetua lucet* [light perpetual shines] (sic!) eis [upon them]—even the dead of Lisbon. Mozart saw this light no more than we do, but he heard the whole world of creation enveloped by this light. Hence it was fundamentally in order that he should not hear a middle or neutral note, but the positive far more strongly than the negative. He heard the negative only in and with the positive. Yet in their inequality he heard them both together, as, for example, in the Symphony in G-minor of 1788. He never heard only the one in abstraction. He heard concretely, and therefore his compositions were and are total music. Hearing creation unresentfully and impartially, he did not produce merely his own music but that of creation, its twofold and yet harmonious praise of God. He neither needed nor desired to express or represent himself, his vitality, sorrow, piety, or any programme. He was remarkably free from the mania for self-expression. He simply offered himself as the agent by which little bits of horn, metal and catgut could serve as the voices of creation, sometimes leading, sometimes accompanying and sometimes in harmony. He made use of instruments ranging from the piano and violin, through the horn and the clarinet, down to the venerable bassoon, with the human voice somewhere among them, having no special claim to distinction yet distinguished for this very reason. He drew music from them all, expressing even human emotions in the service of this music, and
not *vice versa*. He himself was only an ear for this music, and its mediator to other ears. He died when according to the worldly wise his life-work was only ripening to its true fulfilment. But who shall say that after the “Magic Flute,” the Clarinet Concerto of October 1791 and the Requiem, it was not already fulfilled? Was not the whole of his achievement implicit in his works at the age of 16 or 18? Is it not heard in what has come down to us from the very young Mozart? He died in misery like an “unknown soldier,” and in company with Calvin, and Moses in the Bible, he has no known grave. But what does this matter? What does a grave matter when a life is permitted simply and unpretentiously, and therefore serenely, authentically and impressively, to express the good creation of God, which also includes the limitation and end of man.

I make this interposition here, before turning to chaos, because in the music of Mozart—and I wonder whether the same can be said of any other works before or after—we have clear and convincing proof that it is a slander on creation to charge it with a share in chaos because it includes a Yes and a No, as though orientated to God on the one side and nothingness on the other. Mozart causes us to hear that even on the latter side, and therefore in its totality, creation praises its Master and is therefore perfect. Here on the threshold of our problem—and it is no small achievement—Mozart has created order for those who have ears to hear, and he has done it better than any scientific deduction could.


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1 To celebrate the fall of the Berlin wall in November 1989, Leonard Bernstein conducted the Ninth Symphony on both sides of what was formerly a divided city. Twelve years later, on what would have been the anniversary of Adorno’s ninety-eighth birthday, the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York collapsed in an act of terror. In London, the last night of the Proms had to be hastily reprogrammed; once again, the finale of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was wheeled out to galvanise the human spirit to press forward ‘joyfully on his way to triumph’ like the hero of Schiller’s text.


3 These heroic symphonies all end with some kind of Promethean joy (quite literally in the *Eroica*, since the theme for variation is taken from Beethoven’s Ballet *Creatures of Prometheus*).


Roh, wie seine Sonnen fliegen Durch des Himmels prächt’gen Plan/ Laufet, Brüder, eure Bahn, Fruedig, wie ein Held zun Siegen


Namely, the *Eroica* Symphony and the slow movement of the Piano Sonata in E-flat, Op. 26, ‘Marcia funbre per la morte d’un eroe’ (Funeral march for the death of a hero).

As Agamben contends, the structure of sovereignty has at its heart the inclusion of what it simultaneously excludes – the illegal exception. This exception takes shape in the figure of the *Homo Sacer*, a human who is cast out, reduced to bare life and, strictly speaking, cannot be murdered, executed or sacrificed since this will still grant him the dignity of being under the law. See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*. Schiller’s text merely belies the false-inclusionism of modern politics that the ban on joy’s Other in the final line of the verse makes clear. Joy is an addition to bare life that one must already possess to be included. The exception founds the sovereignty of joy, abandoning those whom it is bound to protect as subhuman in the name of humanism.

Wem der grosse Wurf gelungen, /Eines Freundes Freund zu sein, /Wer ein holdes Weib errungen! /Mische seinen Jubel ein! / Ja - wer auch nur eine Seele /Sein nennt auf dem Erdenrund! /Und wer’s nie gekonnt, der stehle /Weinend sich aus diesem Bund.

For further discussion of exclusion in the Ninth’s message of harmony see: Nicholas Vazsony, ‘Hegemony Through Harmony: German Identity, Schiller, and the Ninth Symphony,’ *Sound Matters: Essays on the Acoustics of German Culture*, eds., Nora M. Alter and Lutz Koepnick (Oxford & New York: Berghahn, 2004), 33-48; and Peter Tregear, ‘The Ninth after 9/11’, *Beethoven Forum*, 10/2 (Fall, 2003). Also see Adorno’s comments on this passage in *Beethoven*, 32-33 and 212: Adorno draws attention to the ‘affirmative force with which Beethoven hammers [the idea of humanity] home’ (212); the forte passages that surround the lines are just as guilty in their insistence as the ‘diminuendo – piano’ blush.

Adorno, *Beethoven*, 44.

I actually think that late Beethoven contains this joy but this is another long and complex story.

The text is given in the appendix