

THE MUSIC OF LIFE

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Whether or not *Oppenheimer* should have garnered an entire shelf full of Oscars at the Academy Awards on Sunday, the Oscar for best original score was fully deserved. Ludwig Goransson, who had previously won an Oscar for *Black Panther*, composed two hours and 40 minutes of music for a three-hour movie — a noteworthy accomplishment in and of itself. But one moment in the film highlights his artistry.

Early in the movie, the famous Danish physicist Niels Bohr, who developed the model of the atom, asks a young Oppenheimer, “Can you hear the music?” — the music of atoms splitting and stars exploding. The two-minute montage of images and music that follows Bohr’s question foreshadows what is to come: scientific idealism, mathematical elegance, technical mastery, and indescribable horror.

The montage begins with a simple theme played by violins. The idea of using the violin to portray the inner life of Oppenheimer came from director Christopher Nolan, who views the violin as the most expressive of instruments. Since Goransson’s wife Serena McKinney is an accomplished violinist, Goransson began collaborating with her to capture, as he put it, the emotional core of Oppenheimer’s journey. Using a haunting six-note melody underpinned by a simple four-note base line, Goransson expresses what he viewed, after reading the script, as Oppenheimer’s fundamental loneliness.

But Goransson also wanted to capture musically the math and science that make Oppenheimer’s journey possible. To do so, Goransson created a musical element he calls “Hexatonics,” which is built on two chords: B minor and C Major. Goransson took the first, third, and fifth note of each chord, known as the tonic, and used these six notes played melodically by the violins, overlaid with an ominously intrusive synthesizer, to create a sound that expresses both complexity and danger.

The resulting two-minute montage, available on YouTube, is well worth watching on its own. It’s a masterpiece of cinematic pyrotechnics and musical creativity. You can also watch a YouTube video of Goransson explaining how he composed the music for the montage. As Christopher Nolan put it, the music draws viewers into the emotional dilemmas of Oppenheimer’s character.

At its best, that’s what music does. It opens our minds and hearts to the deepest realities of life — its simplicity and elegance, its complexity and beauty, and also those haunting experiences of loneliness, danger, and even horror. Whether in the best of times or in the worst, music both expresses and validates our deepest joys and sorrows.

The celebrated American poet Elizabeth Bishop highlights the fundamental role music plays in human experience with her sonnet titled, “I Am in Need of Music.” She writes:

I am in need of music that would flow
Over my fretful, feeling fingertips,
Over my bitter-tainted, trembling lips,
With melody, deep, clear, and liquid-slow.
Oh, for the healing swaying, old and low,
Of some song sung to rest the tired dead,
A song to fall like water on my head,
And over quivering limbs, dream flushed to glow!

There is a magic made by melody:
A spell of rest, and quiet breath, and cool
Heart, that sinks through fading colors deep
To the subaqueous stillness of the sea,
And floats forever in a moon-green pool,
Held in the arms of rhythm and of sleep.

I am in need of music, Bishop says, but not just any kind of music. When the sky is falling, and there’s sorrow and slaughter everywhere, when I am feeling fretful and trembling at the bitter taste of life, I am in need of a melody that is deep and clear, one that gives rest and healing, one that is old as death and as restful as sleep. Despite everything, there must be music.

As *Oppenheimer* illustrates, movie soundtracks can help us grapple with a world that is equal parts wonderful and terrible. Another musical genre that plays this role is blues music, whether sung by traditionalists like Robert Johnson and Koko Taylor or by revisionists such as Bonnie Raitt and Beth Hart. Blues music captures that healing swaying, old and low, that we need so desperately when life devastates us or other people disappoint us — or perhaps even more, the pain that engulfs us when we disappoint ourselves. The blues insist that life is hard, difficult. But the blues also insist that hard things come to us as signs that we have engaged life at its highest and deepest. The blues would agree that Icarus, as the poet Jack Gilbert once put it, was not failing as he fell; he was just coming to the end of his triumph.

Let me turn to another form of music that engages both life’s soaring heights and its sorrowful depths. For more than 1,300 years, the musical form known as the mass has played a vital role not only in Christian worship, but also in the culture of the West. This morning, the choir has performed several excerpts from Mozart’s Mass in C major. Mozart composed this mass, his first great mass, in 1757 at the age of twelve.

In its original form, the mass is a musical form of the Holy Communion service. The service includes the Kyrie (the text translates as Lord, have mercy upon us), the Gloria (Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all those of good will), the Credo (I believe in one God, maker of heaven and earth, and all things visible and invisible, etc.), and the Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts). Many masses also include the Agnus Dei (The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world) or the Benedictus (Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord) or both.

Over the years, however, the musical form of the mass has been repurposed by many different composers — believers and nonbelievers alike — for many different occasions. In 2020, the contemporary American composer Sarah Kirkland Snider, who is in her thirties and was not raised Catholic, released to widespread acclaim her composition “Mass for the Endangered,” which is a prayer for wildlife on the planet. In 2018, the celebrated American composer Frank La Rocca premiered his “Mass of the Americas,” which incorporates Mexican, Central American, and Latin American influences. In 2008, the nine-time Grammy award-winning jazz composer Winton Marsalis composed “The Abyssinian Mass” for big band and gospel choir to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Harlem’s Abyssinian Baptist Church. In 1971, Leonard Bernstein composed his “Mass,” a musical theater work commissioned by Jacqueline Kennedy, choreographed by Alvin Ailey, and premiered at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. And so on.

Why? What accounts for the continuing popularity of the mass as a musical form? The power of the mass emerges, in my view, from embracing life in its fullness — experiences of sorrow and celebration, of pain and promise, of failure and forgiveness, of obligation and awe. When we look at the grand sweep of life, we understand that the principal themes of the mass — Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, and Sanctus — point toward experiences that are universal.

The first note in the music of life is Kyrie, which is a cry for mercy or pity. Each of us inevitably encounters times when we are overwhelmed. Life can be difficult and painful, and often is. Sometimes people we love die — our children or parents or spouses or lovers. Sometimes we or those we care about fall ill or fall on hard times in other ways. Sometimes we lose our way in life, betraying our best intentions and disappointing people who depend on us. No matter how fortunate and healthy and well-connected and well-heeled a person may be, nothing can insulate anyone from the harsh realities of life. Sometimes, when life is tough, the only way we can respond is to plead for mercy.

The second note in the music of life is Gloria, which means praise. It expresses a sense of being awestruck by the splendor of what we see and hear and feel — and responding almost spontaneously with a word of praise. I say, praise Mozart and Hildegard and Etta James. Praise the planet Saturn and the Andromeda Galaxy. Praise the poetry of Jericho Brown and Elizabeth Bishop. Praise things born of the earth

inexplicably: chanterelle mushrooms and crocuses. Praise pure water and fresh air. Praise my fierce love for my wife and my daughter. Praise that they love me back.

The third note in the music of life is Credo, which means I believe. The Latin word *credo* usually appears in our language as the word *creed*, such as the Apostles Creed used by most Christians in their worship. But the Latin word *credo* may have been derived from two other Latin words, *cor*, meaning heart, and *do*, from the verb meaning to give. In its original meaning, *cor-do* may well have meant “I give my heart.” To believe in something, on these terms, is to give your heart to it.

In my view, a credo is not primarily about whether you believe the Bible is true, or God is spirit, or the earth is round. It is about what you aspire to give your heart to. A credo is an ideal we set for ourselves, a goal by which we measure our conduct and our accomplishments. Because it emerges from the depths of our hearts, it defines who we are — not by specifying our beliefs, but by revealing the choices we have made about how we intend to live. The need to express ourselves in this way may initially emerge as we experience the wonder of life — its grandeur and vast possibilities. This feeling becomes religious when it is accompanied by a sense of duty to the larger life that we share.

The fourth note in the music of life is Sanctus, which means holy. It conveys a sense of reverence for realities that exceed our control and even our imagination. The Hebrew Bible recounts the story of a man named Job, who was wealthy and blessed until suddenly all manner of bad things began happening to him. Job asks God why he has been made to suffer although he has been good. God replies, “Do not be surprised that things have not gone your way: the universe is greater than you...See how small you are next to the mountains. Accept what is bigger than you and what you do not understand.”

Can you hear the music? Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus: a plea for mercy, a word of praise, an acknowledgment of duty, a sense of reverence. These moments open our lives to the pulse of the eternal. Whether you experience them by listening to the soundtrack of *Oppenheimer*, the blues of Beth Hart, or a mass by Mozart or Sarah Kirkland Snider, I hope you find music that resonates with life at its utmost.

For my part, I'm with Elizabeth Bishop:

There is a magic made by melody:
A spell of rest, and quiet breath, and cool
Heart, that sinks through fading colors deep
To the subaqueous stillness of the sea,
And floats forever in a moon-green pool,
Held in the arms of rhythm and of sleep.