A Jazz Mass?

The Vexing Legacy of Mary Lou Williams

Ian Marcus Corbin

Last year marked the thirtieth anniversary of the death of Mary Lou Williams, the jazz pianist, composer, and arranger. There are few women in the pantheon of great jazz instrumentalists, and even fewer jazz performers in the pantheon of great Catholic artists. Williams was both. A pianist of unusual sensitivity and range, she could play almost anything—spirituals and ragtime, blues and swing, boogie-woogie and bop. Over her long career she made dozens of records, played with virtually all the most important jazz artists, and heard her compositions and arrangements performed by the likes of Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman. "Her music maintains a quality that is timeless," Ellington once said. "She is like soul on soul."

Williams's long, remarkable life contained a number of surprises, none more significant than her conversion to Catholicism. In 1957, following a half-decade of self-taught ascetic religious practice, she was baptized along with her friend Lorraine Gillespie, wife of the trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, and became a sort of apostle to jazz musicians, many of whom were wracked with addiction to drugs. Jazz, Williams believed, was fundamentally a music of healing, and she was determined to employ her gifts in the service of God and neighbor. Central to her new sense of mission was the composition of a jazz Mass, and in the coming years she would complete three of them. One, composed in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. after his 1968 assassination, was scheduled to be celebrated in Rome in February 1969, but was cancelled at the last minute when the vicariate realized that the setting included bongo drums. But Williams persevered, and later that year she received a commission from the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace to compose her third Mass, called *Music for Peace* (now commonly known as "Mary Lou's Mass").

As the 1970s began, Williams turned her energy to the task of seeing this Mass celebrated in a symbolic center of Catholicism—either St. Peter's Basilica or New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral. To her Catholic friends and boosters, the composition—a bright and exuberant romp through various jazz styles, along with some pop-rock and funk tinges—seemed the perfect liturgy for a new post–Vatican II Catholicism, an ebullient departure from stiff, musty Eurocentrism. But many clerics Williams approached expressed serious reservations. Church leaders in both Rome and New York repeatedly offered to stage recitals of the piece, but declined to accept it as a setting for the Mass. Doggedly undeterred, Williams approached New York's Cardinal Terrence Cooke (she would later recount chasing him across the campus of Fordham University), who assented, hoping such a move could help draw young people back to the church. In February 1975, "Mary Lou's Mass" was finally celebrated, and Williams left St. Patrick's in raptures.

This breakthrough did not, however, mark the dawn of a new era. Williams's repeated attempts to have her composition performed as a Mass in the Vatican were unsuccessful—and thirty-seven years later jazz remains, at the very best, on the periphery of liturgical music in America. This fact needs some explaining, because, as Williams always insisted, jazz is the only serious art form created exclusively in America. And it is indeed serious art; the highest achievements of jazz belong to the first tier of great Western music. So why hasn't jazz found a more central place in the liturgical life of the Catholic Church in America?

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Williams herself chalked it up to racial or cultural prejudice. Church leaders, she believed, thought of jazz as "pagan music" and were not willing to grant blacks a prominent place in the church. She was right to be frustrated. While many church leaders balked at the idea of a jazz liturgy, they generally failed to provide good, principled reasons for their reticence. The church's overall response to her artistic offerings was inarticulate and evasive—as if it were self-evident that bongo drums and Catholicism were mutually exclusive.

There are defensible reasons for this exclusion, even if few churchmen of Williams's day were willing or able to articulate them. Briefly put, a great jazz performer like Mary Lou Williams is an exemplary specimen of the artist as heroic individual. This individualism is not of the isolating sort bemoaned by all serious observers of America since Tocqueville, but rather a more romantic and ultimately communal sort. Joseph Conrad, in his celebrated preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, put forth a vision of the artist as one who descends to the "lonely region" within himself, in order to study and then speak to

> our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts: to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity.

The chief healing power of jazz, as recognized and demonstrated by Williams, is a power of precisely this sort. It emerges when an artist feels the ugliness and beauty of life and translates the feeling into melody, harmony, and rhythm. The sensitive listener hears all this and feels that she is not alone. But for all the deep fellow-feeling that jazz can inspire, it is always, at its best, individual and *personal*. We are moved not so much by the composition of "My Funny Valentine" as by the spontaneous, particular, irreplaceable overflow of feeling and expression that it can occasion in the performances of Miles Davis, Mary Lou Williams, or John Coltrane. The listener takes in this overflow and allows it to resonate, but it always remains irreducibly Davis's, Williams's, or Coltrane's. Jazz that lacks this personality feels stilted and contrived; it is not, in other words, great jazz. Insofar as jazz invites participation at all, it is of a passive spiritual sort, and it is a very serious question whether such participation is ideal for a communal celebration like the Mass.

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Moreover, jazz is finally a humanistic art. Its grandeur lies in exploring the tragedies, triumphs, and spiritual longings of human life. By way of contrast, the compositions of Bach or Palestrina, or the contemporary Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, aspire to touch the hem of great religious mysteries, to limn in sound a shadow of transcendence. These works fit with the *Catechism*'s understanding of sacred art, whose task is "evoking and glorifying, in faith and adoration, the transcendent mystery of God." Very little modern art fits this description, and neither does the music of Mary Lou Williams. What Williams accomplishes is to open *her* soul to the listener, offering spiritual friendship; the final goal is *interpersonal* communion, not communion with the divine. It is a music of earth, not of heaven.

None of this negates the greatness of jazz as an art form, or the real affinity that exists between the Catholic vision of reality and the profound, searching, spiritually hungry creations of Mary Lou Williams. What's more, such affinity can and should open the door to real friendship and collaboration. In 2009 Pope Benedict XVI invited a group of prominent contemporary artists to the Sistine Chapel and, quoting Pope Paul VI, told them, "We need your collaboration in order to carry out our ministry, which consists, as you know, in preaching and rendering comprehensible and accessible to the minds and hearts of our people the things of the spirit, the invisible, the ineffable, the things of God himself."

Lovely words, and welcome. But to whom could they be realistically addressed? How many practitioners of cutting-edge contemporary art could ever fathom taking "the things of God himself" as their subject matter? The rift Benedict hopes to heal is deep, and grew deeper over the second half of the twentieth century, as the art world was gradually overrun by aesthetic theories that decreed the primary purpose of art was to subvert dominant paradigms, whatever and wherever those might be. Today the Catholic Church, a favorite target for this subversive impulse, finds herself in a

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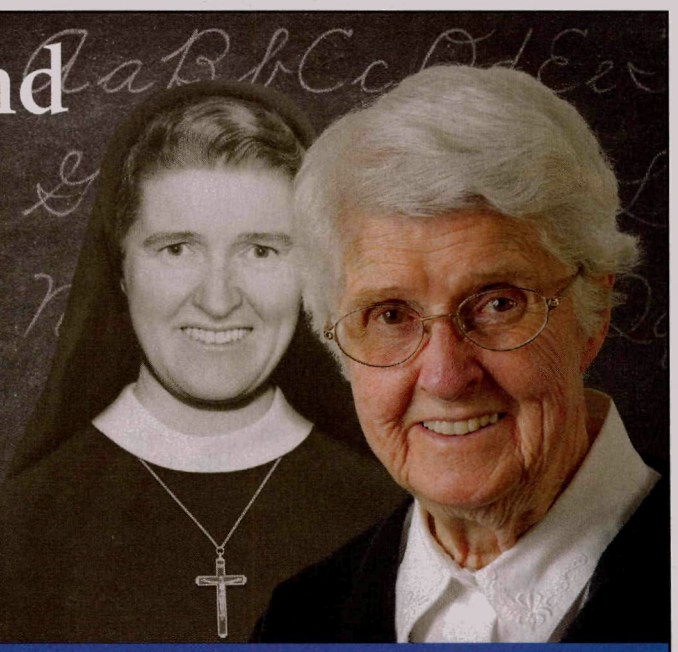

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new and uncomfortable position vis-à-vis the tastemakers of the Western art world. For a thousand years, the church was a principal, in fact *the* principal, driver of artistic achievement and progress in the West. During that time, most of the greatest composers, painters, sculptors, et al. deployed their skills in the creation of sacred art. Things have changed. The church is now an insurgent, attempting to advance a counterproposal from the margins, one very much at odds with the dominant culture. It's far from clear that she has learned how, exactly, to navigate her new position.

The way forward is indeed murky, but one thing seems certain. At a moment when irony, subversion, and nihilistic game-playing are ascendant in much of the art world, beautiful papal speeches will not suffice. Nor will it suffice to focus hopes for an improved future primarily on the most famous artists, the ones who win international acclaim. The Turner Prize, the Venice Biennale, the Booker Prize recognize certain kinds of authentic achievement, but are these anything like what Benedict XVI is calling for? Elsewhere in the same speech, and again quoting Pope Paul VI, Benedict expressed his wish to "reestablish the friendship between the church and artists." If any such rapprochement is to be accomplished in the foreseeable future, the church will need to search painstakingly for signs of life in contemporary art, both within and without the institutional art world.

It will not be easy. Among proponents of contemporary theories of art, the humanistic vision of the artist expressed by Joseph Conrad is hardly more in favor than the one put forth by Pope Benedict. And yet the Conradian vision continues to animate wonderful works of art created by actual artists—and these works continue to speak to intellectually serious, aesthetically sensitive people. This brings us back to the role of artists like Mary Lou Williams. She may not be Bach or Palestrina, but a church that seriously wants to reestablish friendship with contemporary artists would find in her a close ally. Such humanistic art, though earth-bound, opposes a theory-induced aversion to meaning, authenticity, and truth, and stands humbly open to the higher mysteries of existence.

Any alliance like the one proposed by Benedict would present challenges. It would require a reimagining of ecclesial art patronage, one that goes beyond the centuries-old custom of commissioning strictly sacred works. But it might repay the effort. Mary Lou Williams was a great Catholic artist who died believing that her church did not value her art. Perhaps someday we will be able to say that Williams simply died too early to see her music fully embraced by the church she loved. If so, those of us still around to see that day might be spared the spectacle of yet another pope inviting yet another group of art-world insiders to the Sistine Chapel, and pleading yet again for the reestablishment of a long-lapsed friendship. ■

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