

By Dr. Andrew Childs

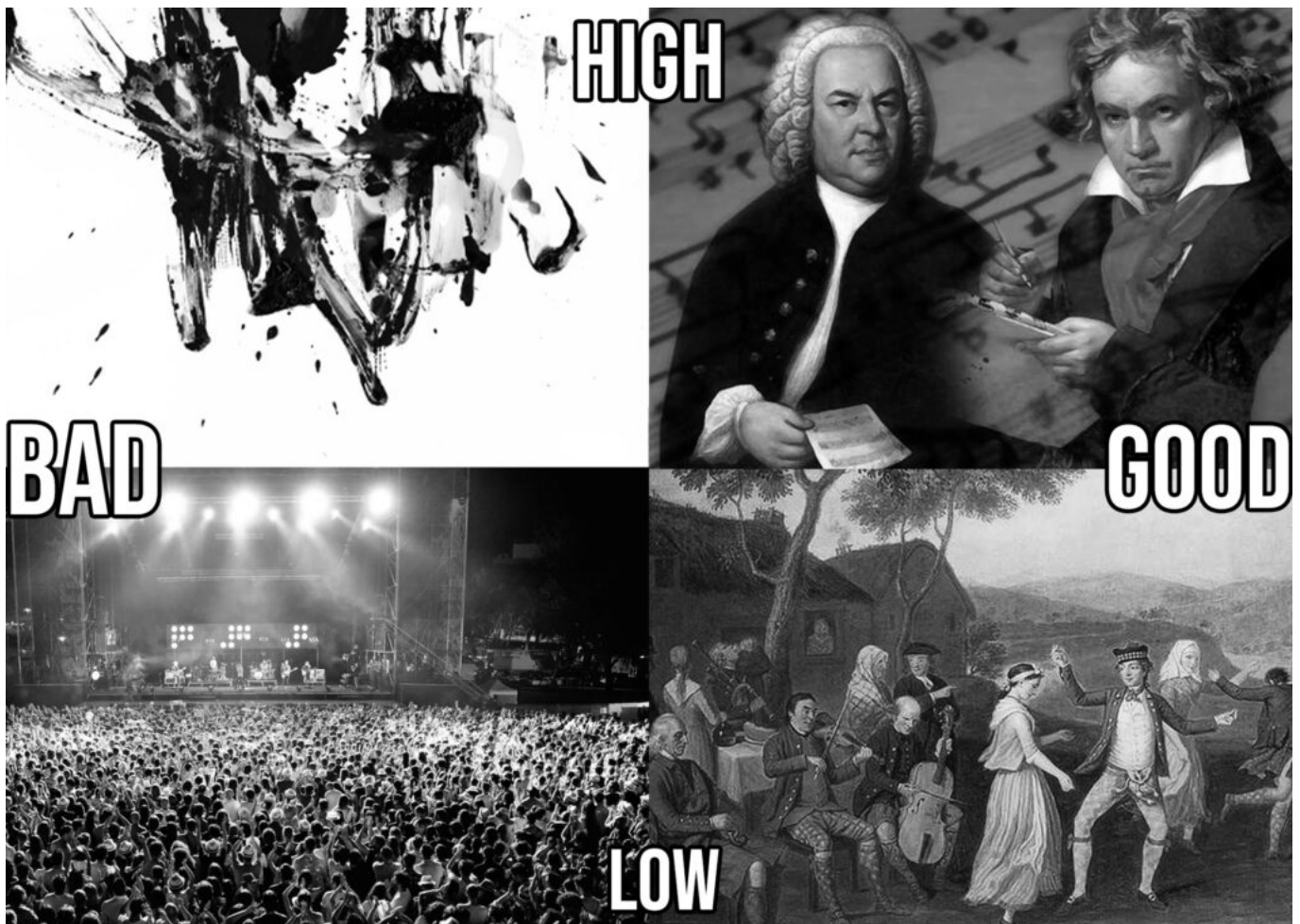
## The Basics of Catholic Music Discernment

We like order. Something about knowing where things fit makes sense on a very basic level, and provides a measure of stability and comfort; conversely, disorder can prove highly unsettling, and often requires immediate attention. Extremes certainly exist, from slovenly chaos on the one hand to fastidious obsession on the other. OCD, Obsessive Compulsive disorder, like any verifiable condition, is no laughing matter, though the untidy don't hesitate to use it as a rebuke to anyone with superior organizational skills. I will admit to a preference for extreme tidiness: though I would not immediately vacuum a rug to straighten the tassels, I would notice them, and it took my wife some time to convince me that not all people rotate their dishes (clean on the bottom, of course), and not everyone thinks spoons should actually spoon. All this to say, I spend a good deal of time organizing, and almost every project starts with my putting something in its place.

Music can fit more or less neatly in a number of boxes, and usually these relate to type or time, what genre of music a piece belongs to, and what era, always with a capital letter—a Baroque opera, or a Classical symphony. Frequently, other qualifiers put pieces more specifically in place; vocal or choral music can be sacred or secular, accompanied or unaccompanied, for example. Knowing the composers helps, but only if the listener has some familiarity with them. I'd like below to consider a general organization schema for music that puts pieces in one of four quadrants of a Cartesian graph. I call this The Chart. The horizontal x axis moves to the left toward Bad music, and to the right toward Good music. The vertical y axis moves downward to Low music, and upward to High music. Though taste is certainly subjective, and disagreements arise when it comes to classification, objective standards exist to determine relative goodness or badness of music. These are qualitative, quantitative, technical, and aesthetic, but not always predictable in a formulaic way. For example, a very technically complex piece may be less good than a simple folk song, though certainly higher. The terms cultivated and vernacular might better frame the high and low debate. Almost no music is as cultivated as the academic music of the twentieth-century, but it sounds awful. Only people with tenure can afford to write music nobody wants to listen to.

We need to acquire certain tastes, and this generally comes through education. Listening is a talent, though we don't often think about this. A sensitive listener hears more somehow, and like most talents, this can't be taught completely, though everyone can learn to listen more attentively through guidance and practice. Not to "get" atonal composition is one thing; some things need not be gotten. But to say that you have no need of Bach, Beethoven, or Mozart reveals a lack of proper sophistication that needs to and can be remedied.

Objective determination of goodness and badness starts with instinct and requires no particular training: how does it sound? Refinement of tastes—something completely different than prideful sophistication or snobbery—happens with exposure and time, and allows for the establishment of proper hierarchy: we really can say, objectively, that one thing is better than another, though both may be good and necessary. The Divine Comedy by Dante is better than Winnie the Pooh, and an expertly prepared multi-course meal is better than a loaf of bread; the one provides a superior level of nourishment even though there is an appropriate time and place for both. Music has a moral component as well, especially music with a text or specified program. La Bohème by Puccini, and Bach’s Mass in B-minor both qualify as high, but the subject matter and text makes the Bach a higher thing; almost all popular music rides on the same technical musical chassis of fundamental chords, but a folk song is certainly better than and a catchy pop ballad encouraging naughtiness or vulgarity even though it may be no higher.



The Chart

The culinary analogy works surprisingly well. Children speak, understand, think, and eat as children; when we become adults, we strive to put these things away and replace them with others that provide adult nourishment and satisfaction. For a child to eat sugar-laden breakfast cereal regularly is understandable; for an adult to do so is mildly embarrassing. It would be a mistake, however, to deny the appeal of lower experiences, provided these remain on the right side of the Good/Bad y axis. We genuinely need balance in both our culinary and cultural diets. To eat nothing but fast food may technically qualify as a sort of slow suicide—we all know it’s not good for us—but this food, an irresistible and glorious confluence of fat, salt, and sugar, will always appeal to us on a certain level. I want very passionately to pull into nearly every drive-through and pile on as many burger patties, and slices of cheese and bacon that the place has on offer, but I deny myself this pleasure almost all the time. The occasional indulgence has its place, but you can’t live off it.

Finding the music we listen to on the chart helps us to visualize our cultural tendencies and reveals any deficiencies we need to address. It’s also a satisfying exercise, and one that can become more advanced as we become better and more complete listeners. Beyond simply occupying space within one of the four quadrants, pieces have specific coordinates relative to others within the quadrant, and these comparisons lead to some wonderful conversations and friendly debates, some of the most fascinating of which relate to pieces that lie close to the lines. How high is Gilbert and Sullivan or Tom Lehrer? How bad is modern country music? A proper consideration of taste requires real honesty, detached from appeal or personal taste: no art benefits from assigning qualities to it that it does not rightly possess, and no listener will benefit from higher things that await if consumption relates only to current preference and experience. Deep down, every thoughtful person knows that he or she must come up higher. With these preliminary thoughts in mind, a consideration of The Chart.

### **Lower Left Quadrant: LOW/BAD (or, the music you know you shouldn’t listen to)**

Popular music is everywhere. We may be able to keep it out of our homes, but we cannot control the fact that nearly every public place has something unsavory playing overhead. Clandestine exploration of this space seems to be a right of passage for teenagers especially; adolescence literally means ‘to burn,’ and music of this type seems to speak knowingly to the age. As adults, this is a place we know we should not be, yet bad listening habits can be very hard to break. Composers in this unfortunate corner of the cultural world use art—expressed purposefully provocatively, violently, shockingly, explicitly—to encourage thoughts, words, and deeds recognizable as sinful, and note, interestingly, not the denial but the requirement that sin exists: if it didn’t, the moral shock Lower Left Guy needs in order to look and sound so edgy and cool has no traction whatsoever. The more sexually explicit,

graphically violent, and socially unacceptable the better. Read the text. The words matter, no matter how appealingly musically clothed they may be. This is music less about beauty than intensity, and it can prove very hard to resist. The relentlessness of extreme examples can have a numbing effect, severely compromising moral defenses.

[St. Thomas Aquinas](#) states that the enemies of freedom are ignorance and fear. The state of ignorance renders us less free; the state of profound ignorance can lead to enslavement, especially to sinful behavior, more easily proposed to the ignorant than the intellectually aware. This does not of course imply that awareness eliminates the appeal of sin, but the Devil has to work harder; provided you keep your head one step ahead of your heart, two steps ahead of your baser instincts, and your hand on your rosary, you stand a chance. This takes effort, especially in the case of formed habits, but God will reward the fight. Like everything below the Low waterline, it's designed to be very easy to consume. But this is not only junk food that is bad for you, it contains real moral toxins that can eventually destroy you—certainly spiritually.

### **Upper Left Quadrant: HIGH/BAD (or, music you're very unlikely to listen to)**

It seems hard to imagine that something High could also be Bad, but the badness here is of the very worst sort, that of intellectual pride. Music in this quadrant is highly sophisticated and requires great skill both to compose and perform. It has an air of exclusivity, properly meaningful only to the "initiated," and almost always emerges from The Academy. At their best, institutions of higher learning allow intelligent and inquisitive scholars to advance knowledge through research and experimentation. For many centuries, however, and certainly explicitly since the enlightenment, these pursuits have become increasingly humanistic, and at their worst, colleges and universities provide a safe haven for progressive intellectual charlatanism. Music of the worst academic type has many names, more or less technical: modernist, post-modernist, New Music, twelve-tone or serial, experimental, minimalist, electronic, or the ominous-sounding spectral. Composers of these types reject traditional forms, methods, harmonic and melodic systems, and most obviously aesthetics. They see recognizable beauty as a by-product of previous approaches and, so it would sound, scrupulously avoid it. In their defense, they possess great skill, intelligence, and imagination, some going so far as to invent entirely new approaches to organizing sound. The systems they develop require incredible attention to detail, and make heroic demands on performers. The music is impressive. It is also almost entirely unlistenable.

In an infamous 1958 article entitled, "Who cares if you listen?" the American composer Milton Babbitt compared new music to theoretical physics, dismissing the audience as unqualified to pass judgement on an intellectual pursuit beyond their capabilities. He and his like-minded colleagues wrote music that excludes rather than includes any audience who



might listen, by utilizing an alienating though structurally and mathematically ‘perfect’ system of tonal, harmonic, and rhythmic organization with no recognizable connection to accepted, comprehensible aesthetic standards. Pierre Boulez, another darling of the Academy bluntly stated, “Accessibility is a whore.” Supporters argue that progress has always seemed initially controversial, and that the uninitiated lack the intelligence or sophistication to understand, thus piquing curiosity and pride. The Emperor’s New Music. With the exception of a few academic pockets of stubborn resistance, this music has fallen out of fashion. No one, it seems, cared if composers like Babbitt write.

Iconoclasm does not equal progress, and aesthetics relate to unchangeable nature, not merely technical trend. We like things that taste good and reject things that taste awful; we like things that feel pleasurable and reject things that feel painful; we enjoy things that sound beautiful, and...feel really smart when we pretend to like Babbitt. The essence of Modernism lies in the denial of the supernatural. By extension, this also means the denial of truth in an absolute sense (a knowable truth to which we must submit by avoiding sin, the existence of which the modernist certainly rejects), and by further extension denial of natural law. Aesthetics or morality for the modernist represent personal choice, and nothing else. Truth, goodness, and beauty are purely subjective, and anything recognizably lovely simply becomes either another choice among many, all equally valid, or a target for scorn. The listener to modernist music takes pride in “getting it” while others can’t. Interesting, intellectually invigorating to work on, but you wouldn’t eat the culinary equivalent.

### **Upper Right Quadrant: HIGH/GOOD. (or, the music you know you should listen to)**

A line of reasoning: 1) [God wants you in Heaven, the Devil wants you in Hell](#); 2) the combination of a material human heart and reason exists only in YOU (rational animal with an immortal soul) and God (in the Incarnate Second Person)—in other words, God “gets” human emotion and suffering; 3) music deals very specifically with the relationship of intellect and emotion on a natural, one might say instinctive level: God and the Devil both understand this; 4) God wants to use your emotions to draw your nature higher, through the intellect, to Heaven; the Devil wants to use your emotions to debase your intellect, subjecting it to your animal nature, leading you to hell.

The Devil does not want you to have access to [cultural friends](#) of real character, Old Dead Friends who speak real comfort to real problems. He works hard to discredit substantial culture and subjects it to ridicule as stodgy, prudish, dorky, and outdated because he knows that keeping company with great art provides real consolation and will logically result in a turning toward God. It is hard to overstate the real and potential benefits of great music. Few things in the natural realm can surpass its ability to provide emotional and intellectual calibration. There is little point here describing the music in this quadrant: the composers

are common to all, even if only in name and not experience. We will spend a good deal of time meeting them in installments to come.

Lower Right Quadrant: LOW/GOOD (or genuinely good, good-ish, less bad, etc.) In this corner we find music of foundational importance but incomplete cultural nutritive value—folk music—and appealing cultural fast food and candy—pop music. Pop music artists become fast but unfortunately often false cultural friends—fast in that most popular music deals with universal but superficial emotional issues, and false in that sentimentality creates an intellectual softness which makes appeals to more sinister issues easier to believe. Only the artist understands how you feel, not your parents; only he knows how you should react to conflict, not your teachers or friends; only she understands how alone you feel, not...well, anybody, because as the addiction to the sentimentality grows, so does the addiction to isolation, and especially the assumed gap between teenagers and adults. This conflict has always existed perhaps, but popular culture has codified it. Recall the Disney inversion narrative: dad is dumb, mom is smart; adults are dumb, kids are smart; brother is dumb, sister is smart; though sister is smart, Fido (or better yet, Fifi) is smarter; the dirt (sorry, Mother Earth) is smartest of all. No truly happy ending comes without an adult apology to the children—most poignant of course when dad apologizes to adolescent daughter (pre-teen, though properly sexualized) just before lavishing praise on her for saving the day, or at least cleaning up the mess made by the grown-ups. The Devil wants you alone, where despair exists. He'll make sure your cultural new-best-friends keep you there, while convincing you they're the only friends you've got.

Certainly good, inarguably necessary, but as sentimental as popular music, folk music warrants endorsement because 1) it makes a legitimate claim to tradition, 2) it speaks to less overtly questionable themes, and 3) let's face it—it's fun and easy to do (never underestimate the appeal and importance of active participation). We must not, however, confuse (or conflate) means with ends: learning folk music works beautifully as a means to gain literacy, as entertainment, as a connection to cultural traditions, and as a technical foundation required to appreciate masterworks. Thinking that folk music represents a cultural end, however, is dangerous. We do not honor folk music by pretending that it has more cultural horsepower than it does. By way of literary analogy, we do not insult Fairy Tales by pointing out that an adult should read at a level above them. Without losing any affection for or appreciation of folk music, given the importance of music in managing the relationship of emotion and intellect we cannot fail at least to strive for more.

We choose to give up pop music (and this is a catch-all term) as a significant component of our diet as an exercise of our adult will; to continue to engage in the activities of a child as an adult is, well, childish, even potentially neurotic. The Devil, again: the age of physical

perfection lies in the 18-to-25-year-old range. Popular culture remains diabolically obsessed with putting and keeping everyone there, by hyper-sophisticating and sexualizing the young (frighteningly so in some cases), and by convincing older folks who should know better to behave, dress, talk, and recreate as superannuated teenagers (embarrassingly so in almost all cases). This is the age of fun, but also the age of moral danger. To inhabit this age as a necessary rite of passage—the age of oversized engines and undersized brakes—presents enough moral danger; to linger by choice amounts to playing with fire.

To reiterate, almost all pop/folk/vernacular/low music is simple, and purposefully easy to enjoy and do. The problems lie not with the catchy tune, the simple harmony, the repetition, the sentimental narrative, the admittedly driving rhythm (though I believe many overstate the dangers of rhythmic elements), but with the less tangible elements that speak not to style or technical elements, but to morality (and recall, the modernist denies that this exists). Moral neutrality applies to the raw material: the technical music of the song (melody, harmony, rhythm) that suggests you should kill yourself or have sex with a stranger is no more to blame morally than the car that the murderer uses to drive to the scene of the crime. Four chords in progression? Morally neutral: artists with good and bad intentions alike employ them. Creating a social atmosphere based on perpetual youth, unchecked freedom, guiltless irresponsibility, social isolation, unbridled sexual license, saccharine sentimentality? This is the bulk of what pop music can offer, and not morally neutral, but rather a Devil's playground of violence, sin, and despair.

I hope that this brief consideration will help you to see your musical choices more objectively. If you need to make changes in what you consume, think of it more in terms of making positive additions for the sake of creating balance, rather than trying to impose immediate extreme change. Diets fail if changes made to jumpstart progress are not sustainable. Though objectively certain things have no place in the life of a responsible Catholic adult, a healthy cultural diet can be diverse, even eclectic, but it must remain properly ordered. Throughout any process of change and growth, especially one undertaken as an adult, questions will arise. I have found over the course of more than twenty years that many people have the same questions about music as they make the heroic and humbling choice to give up the often highly flawed, frequently morally questionable, but just as frequently still-cherished things of cultural adolescence. In the next installment, we will address some of the questions I have heard most often. Until then, introduce (or reintroduce) yourself to some good cultural friends. Allow them to lead you up higher.

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*"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)*

## Understanding the Crusades

### Part One – The Islamic Aggression

By Phillip Campbell

The Crusades are a topic of perennial debate. Despite ending more than 750 years ago, they still provoke passionate discussion among Catholics and non-Catholics alike. For some, the Crusades are a sign of the vibrancy and strength of medieval Catholicism at the pinnacle of its influence. For others, the Crusades are reprehensible acts of religious violence – a blot on the Church's legacy that Catholics should be ashamed of.

As with other historical controversies, the truth about the Crusades tends to be overshadowed by partisan bickering; people get so invested in what they think the Crusades symbolize that the actual history becomes obscured. They are less interested in learning history and more interested in using the Crusades as a club to

bludgeon home a point. Today we will begin to rectify this with a series of articles on the Crusades, beginning with the backstory of the Crusading movement, which will give important historical context to the events that unfolded during the crusading era.

Too many histories of the Crusades begin with 1095, when the First Crusade was summoned at the Council of Clermont by Pope Urban II. This is an undesirable starting point, as it deprives us of the important background context that leads up to Clermont. Today we will focus on understanding the history of Islamic-Christian relations in the East up to the eve of the First Crusade, which will set the stage for further study of the Crusades proper in future installments.

The essential point we should understand at the outset is that the Crusades were primarily defensive



Templar Knights, by Giuseppe Rava

wars – they were a Christian response to increasing Islamic aggression in the Middle East. They were also an act of Christian solidarity, witnessing Latin speaking

Christians of the West aiding Greek speaking Christians of the East despite the tragic schism that had split the two churches back in 1054. We should keep these points

in mind when reviewing the history of this period.

The religion of Islam traces its origin to the year 610

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## The Modern Crusade: The Church vs Organized Naturalism

Brian M. McCall

Catholic Family News held its first in person conference since 2019 on March 1 and 2 in Florida. The theme was Christ's Program for Peace v. Satan's Plan for Disorder according to the writings of Father Dennis Fahey. About 100 people attended from around the country. Traditional Latin Mass was offered each morning by our two invited priest speakers, Father Michael McMahon, SSPX and

Father Matthew, OSB. We had a public recitation of the Rosary every day after lunch. For those who purchased the meals, there was a great opportunity to visit with the speakers and to get to know new Catholics from around the country.

Saturday opened with Mass being offered by Father McMahon. We knew the devil was not happy at the goal of this conference to expose his plans. During the Post Communion the hotel's

speakers started blaring pop music. As a few men scrambled to find a hotel worker to shut it down, I realized all the devil could do is lash out with little annoyances and this meant our goal was worthwhile.

### The Six Point Plan

After breakfast the conferences opened with an introduction of the overall theme and the six points of Christ's Plan for order, according to Father Fahey:

- The Church is supernatural and supernatural. All people must acknowledge the nature of Christ's Church as the only means of salvation.

- Nations are obligated to recognize Christ's Church and that the Church has the power to intervene in temporal



affairs as guardian of the divine and natural law.

- The Christian family

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