Annali di studi religiosi
ISBN 979-12-218-2156-7
DOI 10.53136/979122182156717
pp. 321-334 (ottobre 2025)

DANGEROUS PLEASURES: THE SUBLIME AS CORRUPTION IN RENAISSANCE CATHOLICISM[1]

Luís Neiva

Abstract: Music has never been a quiet partner to liturgy. Since as early as the time of Saint Augustine, both music and musicians were commonly seen as a source of excess, transgression, and lewdness. These accusations became even more severe during the last decades of the fifteenth century with the advent of Renaissance polyphony. To better understand this phenomenon, this article starts by examining the ideological structures underpinning the Catholic ritual of the Renaissance, framing religious belief as an external, objective act. Drawing its theoretical core from Lacanian psychoanalysis, it interrogates how sacred practices function as ideological constructs, embedding faith within collective actions rather than personal spirituality. The study then shifts to the contentious debates surrounding polyphonic music, analyzing how its perceived excesses transgressed the boundaries of doctrinal purity. Through historical critiques and theological anxieties, the article demonstrates that music, rather than serving as a mere vehicle for devotion, fundamentally disrupted the ideological stability of the Church by exposing the inherent gaps within belief itself. Ultimately, this study contends that the tensions surrounding music's place in worship reflect a deeper struggle to contain the disruptive potential of aesthetic experience, revealing a fragile ideological mechanism wherein the sacred is sustained through its very negation.

La musica non è mai stata un partner silenzioso della liturgia. Fin dall'epoca di sant'Agostino, sia la musica sia i musicisti sono stati comunemente considerati fonte di eccesso, trasgressione e licenziosità. Tali accuse si fecero ancora più gravi negli ultimi decenni del Quattrocento, con l'avvento della polifonia rinascimentale. Per comprendere meglio questo fenomeno, il presente articolo prende le mosse dall'analisi delle strutture ideologiche che sorreggono il rituale cattolico

(1) This article is the result of a talk given at a panel titled: "On Awe", as part of the European Academy of Religion, in May 2024. It was made possible by the financial support of FCT (2023.05264.BD), CESEM–NOVA FCSH (UIDB/00693/2020), and In2Past (LA/P/0132/2020).

del Rinascimento, concependo la fede religiosa come atto esterno e oggettivo. Traendo il proprio nucleo teorico dalla psicoanalisi lacaniana, il saggio indaga il modo in cui le pratiche sacre operano come costruzioni ideologiche, inscrivendo la fede nell'ambito dell'azione collettiva piuttosto che in quello della spiritualità personale. Successivamente, lo studio si concentra sulle accese controversie intorno alla musica polifonica, analizzando come i suoi supposti eccessi trasgredissero i confini della purezza dottrinale. Attraverso critiche storiche e ansie teologiche, l'articolo mostra come la musica, lungi dall'essere un semplice veicolo di devozione, abbia invece destabilizzato in modo radicale l'equilibrio ideologico della Chiesa, rendendo visibili le fratture interne al credere stesso. In ultima analisi, lo studio sostiene che le tensioni relative al ruolo della musica nel culto riflettano un conflitto più profondo: quello volto a contenere il potenziale destabilizzante dell'esperienza estetica, la quale svela un meccanismo ideologico fragile, in cui il sacro si regge proprio attraverso la propria negazione.

Keywords: Renaissance, Polyphony, Ideology, Music, Belief

Parole chiave: Rinascimento, Polifonia, Ideologia, Musica, Credo

Lisbon, 19th of April, 1506

As a group of believers gathered at the chapel of S. Domingos for the Sunday mass, a mysterious light shone upon the face of the crucified Christ. A miracle, for sure, a sign that the plague and famine that dwelled upon the city were about to end. However, among the group, a *converso* — one of the thousands forced to convert from Judaism to Christianity less than a decade before — claimed that there was nothing supernatural about that light, that it was solely a reflection of a nearby candle. His words sparked outrage; following the enraged instructions of one of the priests, the crowd seized the man and violently dragged him outside, where he was beaten to death. The hatred unleashed at that moment spread swiftly, and over the next three days, hundreds of Jewish men, women, and children were massacred in the city streets in what would be remembered as the Lisbon Pogrom[2].

This terrible tragedy, sadly almost erased from the Portuguese collective memory, speaks to the darkest facets of ideological fundamentalism. However, the absurd magnitude of such an upheaval also raises

(2) This event is described with some detail in various chronicles of the time. See, for example, Góis (1566) and Resende (1554).

some unsettling questions on the nature of belief and the lengths to which people will go to defend it — questions that lie at the core of this essay.

To address them, I propose to remain within the era of this tragic episode but shift my focus to a particularly significant debate that emerged a few decades earlier and profoundly influenced both sacred art and devotional culture in Europe throughout the sixteenth century.

This debate centers on the use of music, especially polyphonic music, within the Catholic liturgy.

The first part of this article will thus focus on the ideological structure of religious rituals, with the aim of investigating the inner mechanisms of faith and how they shaped Renaissance liturgy.

Subsequently, I will examine the debate surrounding polyphonic music from the perspective of its critics. Here, I propose a reinterpretation of historical accounts to shed light on the disruptive nature of liturgical music and its complex role within religious practice.

1. Ritual and performance in religious belief

Common sense would tell us that belief is something fundamentally personal and internal, rooted in individual conviction. We engage in certain practices because we believe in what they represent. Yet, these practices require some level of trust; even the most fundamentalist believer cannot claim to know the inner workings of every ritualistic gesture they perform. On the contrary, they would agree that one is not supposed to know, but do it, nevertheless. And still, according to this perspective, someone needs to know. Within (Catholic) religious contexts, priests, first, and saints, on a higher level, take on the role of mediators, the safekeepers of meaning. They act as conduits, bridging the divine with the mundane, allowing the congregation to "know" through them. This mediation is seen not only as a method of transmission but also as a powerful structuring of belief itself, as it suggests that the internal dimension of belief is sustained by an external, delegated knowledge.

However, things may not be this straightforward.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek proposes a curious inversion: what if what we do through others in religious practices is not knowing, but believing? To illustrate this, Žižek (1989, pp. 31–32) refers to an interesting practice:

> It is similar to Tibetan prayer wheels: you write a prayer on a paper, put the rolled paper into a wheel, and turn it automatically, without thinking […]. In this way, the wheel itself is praying for me, instead of me — or, more precisely, I myself am praying through the medium of the wheel. The beauty of it all is that in my psychological inferiority I can think about whatever I want, I can yield to the most dirty and obscene fantasies, and it does not matter because — to use a good old Stalinist expression — whatever I am thinking, objectively I am praying.

This notion, which Žižek aptly terms "objective belief", reveals an often–overlooked aspect of ideology: belief is not as internal as it seems; rather, it is an external element born from the practices themselves, and even independent of personal convictions. More important than that, belief is fundamentally decentered: one always believes through an Other. Ideology operates then not by convincing us of certain ideas but by embedding itself into the routines and rituals that structure our social reality.

This is not to say, of course, that the aforementioned aspect of "not–knowing" is to be ignored. Faith is impossible without doubt; a barrier must exist between practice and practitioner, a sort of mysterious apparatus that keeps absolute knowledge at bay and interrupts the "vicious cycle of deferred belief" (Žižek 2004, p. 21). To those accustomed to the psychoanalytical jargon, this process strongly resembles the work of *transference*, a mechanism through which the subject entrusts the mystery of their unconscious to an external figure that is presumed to "know" in their place. In Lacanian psychoanalytic practice, the analyst often responds with deliberate vagueness to the analysand's insights, dreams or slips of the tongue, sometimes avoiding verbal answers altogether and instead replying with a mere "hmm…". This ambiguity drives the analysand into an anxious search for meaning, incessantly compelled to interpret what is left unsaid, an endeavor that ultimately leads them toward their unconscious desires (Fink 1997).

The phenomenon of transference has strong theological implications. It is at this point that one can observe how faith summons its own requirements. To make this clearer let us consider the sentiment of love for a moment: any lover could easily attest to the fact that true love is unconditional, in the precise sense that we do not love a person because of its specific, contingent features, rather those features appear to us as unique only retroactively, through the very act of love. In the same way, any true believer would certainly claim that God's existence requires no proof, and yet find all the evidence necessary through their own faith.

The religious context of the Renaissance, on which I anchor the present essay, perfectly exemplifies this dynamic: it is quite revealing that the Council of Trent (1545–1563) not only reaffirmed the importance of speaking Latin at the liturgy (a language that was not understood by the vast majority of people) but also demanded that priests "would not say the words hastily, but in a proper way, pronouncing each one distinctly and gravely, so that by saying them, the thought is fixed on God and everyone can understand their letter and spirit" *(Concilium Tridentinum* 1901, p. 927).

I would claim that the apparent contradiction between the discourse coming out of the Vatican and the reality of the believers is not merely a contingency of some cultural or social gap completely ignored or dismissed by ecclesiastical authorities. On the contrary: by holding the significance of the sacred text secret, the priest appears to suspend subjectivity, since the strange, imperceptible words (if spoken "in a proper way") hold the promise of an absolute identification with the divine.

On the other hand, people had to realize at some level that they were indeed only listening to words, not magical spells. And here resides the true radicality of the Žižekian dialectical twist: it is not so much that the individuals do not know what they do, but that they know and still do it as if they did not know. As Žižek (1989, p. 16) puts it, "'Ideological' is not the false 'consciousness' of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by 'false consciousness'".

Finally, it is relevant at this juncture to invoke Jacques Lacan's retelling of Freud's Oedipal theory: for Lacan (1991), the pre–Oedipal phase involves an undivided unity between the child and the maternal figure[3], a state where the mother has no desire except for the child, and the child has no desire except for the mother. In this early stage, desire is not yet differentiated; there is only the feeling of complete identification with an Other, a *hic et nunc*. Over time, however, the child comes to recognize that the mother entertains desires that extend beyond them, leading the infant to attempt to align with her desire. Yet this alignment is interrupted by the symbolic prohibition associated with the father figure, introducing the child to the castrating rules of social life: language, the law, social practices, morality, etc. For Lacan, what drives the subject's desire is the attempt at returning to this primal unity, a realm without lack. The paradox here is that the primal unity is only created retroactively, through language, persisting only in its own unattainability. Desire, in Lacanian theory, is structured by the impossibility of total fulfillment.

In the same way, the delicate balance that sustains belief is in the acceptance of the faithful that the substance of their faith is unattainable. As long as there is something left to conceal, the unknown remains cherished, eternally veiled, with each believer complicit in the mystery that both binds and eludes them.

It is this sensible stability that music appears to undermine.

2. The problem with polyphony

2.1. *From Augustine to Trent*

Music has never been a quiet partner to liturgy. In fact, since as early as the time of Saint Augustine, song has occupied an ambiguous place in the Catholic ritual, somewhere between function and sin:

> So I waver between the danger that lies in gratifying the senses and the benefits which, as I know from experience, can accrue from singing. Without committing myself to an irrevocable opinion, I am inclined

(3) More than any biological attribute, the maternal figure/mother here essentially stands in for the function of the primary caretaker. Equally, the paternal figure/father relates to the symbolic.

> to approve of the custom of singing in church, in order that by indulging the ears weaker spirits may be inspired with feelings of devotion. Yet when I find the singing itself more moving than the truth which it conveys, I confess that this is a grievous sin, and at those times I would prefer not to hear the singer. (Augustine c.400)

This dichotomy took on new dimensions starting in the twelfth century with a revolution centered around the newly founded Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, where composers like Léonin and Pérotin began combining two, three, and four voice parts to produce the first rhythmically complex polyphonic works. As might be expected, this new genre was not always well received, as evidenced by the words of John of Salisbury:

> It also dishonors the very practice of religion that in the very sight of the Lord […] with the lewdness of a lascivious voice and a kind of self–ostentation […] they attempt to effeminate the astonished little souls. […] you would believe it to be a chorus of Sirens, not a choir of men. […] Indeed, when such practices go too far, they can more easily occasion arousal in the loins than devotion in the mind. (McGee 1998, p. 23)

At this time, and until the late fourteenth century, critics primarily focused on the rhythmic complexity of some of these works rather than on the genre itself. It was common to find viewpoints that accepted — and even valued — the presence of polyphony in liturgical ceremonies, even among its critics, provided it was performed with appropriate restraint. This situation, however, changed in the 1470s.

Amid rising ideological tensions within the Catholic Church, deeply conservative clergymen such as Johannes Roth and Girolamo Savonarola started to gain prominence, and with them a new type of opposition towards polyphony: rejection was now directed more at the very act of singing in multiple voices rather than any possible excesses in rhythmic or expressive sophistication(4). These two excerpts from Giovanni Caroli and Savonarola, respectively, illustrate the radicality of the criticism:

(4) For a thorough description of this debate, see Wegman (2005).

> Therefore those polyphonies, which are both new and unheard of and (if we will truly admit it) presumptuous, and the so–called *biscantus*, lacking all harmony, do not much please. Indeed I rather hate and detest those things, since they most truly seem to pertain more to the levity of women than to the dignity of leading men. (Wegman 2005, p. 28)

> And behold, along came the grub, that is, the Devil, and under the appearance of good began to lead the monks into building pretty churches, and [conducting] pretty ceremonies, and to devote themselves to *canti figurati*; and all day sing, sing, sing, and soon there is nothing of the spirit; likewise the nuns, all day organs, organs, organs, and soon there is nothing: and in this way the grub has destroyed the greenery of prayers and of the spirit. (Wegman 2005, p. 57)

Such strong sentiment eventually led to the prohibition of this genre in Breslau (1482), Görlitz (1486) and Florence (1493), and to heavy restrictions across various regions of Europe (Wegman 2005).

Notwithstanding, the dominant stance inside the church was never one of complete prohibition, but moderation. Attempts to control such an excessive presence were common, leading to profound changes in the compositional style of this music throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the Iberian Peninsula, for example, older formulas of improvised counterpoint crystallized in a unique way of composing polyphonic requiem masses, which kept the plainchant melody intact in one of the voices (usually the higher one), creating a very clear hierarchy inside the harmonic structure (Wagstaff 1995).

The most significant and organized response, however, emerged during the Council of Trent, where music was a topic of discussion both within the Council sessions and in the preliminary meetings. Commonly proposed guidelines included prohibiting secular melodies in church, encouraging composers to make use of established rhetorical codes, and, above all, ensuring that musical textures remained simple enough to preserve the clarity of the text at all times (Seiça 2019).

Consequently, composers such as Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina and Tomás Luis de Victoria came to be revered as paragons of refined taste, profoundly influencing the evolution of music composition in the following decades.

Despite these efforts, excess did not entirely vanish, even in contexts strictly adhering to Tridentine guidelines. Instead, accusations of improper conduct were often directed at the musicians themselves, as illustrated by this remark from Pedro Cerone (1613, p. 7):

> And thus he is made a Centaur; a mythical beast of the ancients, which was half man, half horse: from which is to be understood, a man given to his vices and sensualities, governed by his appetite and not by reason; who, having the figure of a man, lives as an irrational animal. So that considering the behavior of some musicians, I can philosophically say: that musicians know how to temper their instruments, but not their defects and bad inclinations.

The persistence of this transgressive drive is quite enlightening in itself as if the excess always found new ways to resist repression, which begs the question: why was music always condemned to non–belonging?

2.2. *With a broken voice*

To find an answer, we might need only to examine the critiques of those who opposed polyphony. The primary criticism of this genre focused on the lack of textual clarity, particularly when compared to the lucidity of plainchant, a much older and well–established tradition. However, as previously noted, the issue appears to run deeper, since even fully homophonic structures faced rejection from some. Thus, the subversive nature of this music seems to lie elsewhere. What I will attempt to demonstrate is that the fundamental disruption of polyphonic music is inextricably linked to a perceived betrayal of the voice as a medium for meaning.

We should, first, note that a common description of polyphony during the Middle Ages and Renaissance was *fractio vocis*, or "the breaking of the voice". This term referred to how sung text was expressed through multiple distinct sounds or rhythms simultaneously[(5)], but it could also be interpreted in a different light.

(5) The wonderful ambiguity of this expression has been widely discussed in the field of Historical Musicology. While some interpret it merely as counterpoint, others argue it refers to rhythmical mensuration of a single melodic line, or even to ornamentation. See, for instance, Ferand (1957).

My claim is that in this fragmentation of voice, it is the very ideality of meaning that is shattered. Through polyphony, text becomes a site of rupture, where we glimpse, however momentarily, that meaning was never there to begin with — an absence that appears precisely within the harmonic spaces between notes. Just like in Lacan's Oedipal theory, a gap emerges, at this point, between music as an idealized reality (while stuck to the written notation) offering the promise of complete access to the meaning sealed in the sacred text, and music at the moment of performance — a materialized excess that corrupts and threatens the primary unity between the individual and the sacred maternal.

This is not to say that only polyphony hinders the relationship between voice and (idealized) meaning. What Savonarola and all the other critics failed to see in their approval of plainchant as the only moral practice is that the same (non–) relation was also what Saint Augustine struggled with, centuries before polyphony was even discovered. Ultimately, this deadlock speaks to the very nature of (vocal) music as the device that exposes the vacuity of language.

Language, as Ferdinand de Saussure (1995) would later argue, is centered around the idea of the signifier, an element with no inherent content, animated only through differentiation from other signifiers. This negative existence undercuts any straightforward connection between voice and meaning, revealing a structural lack at the heart of language, a lack that mirrors the very disjunction both Augustine and Savonarola sensed in vocal expression (Dolar 2006).

This insight also draws upon Leonardo da Vinci's words taken from his *Paragone*: "But Painting surpasses and outranks Music since it does not die instantly after its creation as happens to unfortunate Music; on the contrary, it stays on and so shows itself to you as something alive while in fact it is confined to a surface" (Winternitz 1970, p. 281).

There is, indeed, something intrinsically elusive about that which dies the moment it is born — and that fundamental inability to grasp the "object–voice" (Dolar 2006) is what music ultimately lays bare. Listening to music ultimately reveals a fundamental negativity.

Logically, the attempts made by the Council of Trent to hide this gap were doomed to failure. However, the way they failed reveals yet another unexpected subversion: this lack is not only woven into the practices but into the practitioners as well, a point also made by Björn Schmelzer (2024), who suggests that this excess comes from the very physical presence of the musicians during the ritual: "The sensation of excess causing stupefaction was more easily accepted in painting and architecture than in polyphony, where it was usually severely dismissed, no doubt because of the physical and often embarrassing presence and involvement of human beings."

Subsequently, it is fair to say that the act of performing music opens up space for a double kind of subjectivity: the one enacted by the musicians on the music, turning the idealized, comfortable reality of the written symbols of notation into the outrageous manifestation of the performance; and the one enacted by the music on the musicians, revealing that the split is located in the self as well. Again, to find echoes of this perspective, we need not look further than in the opinions of polyphony's harshest critics, notably the words of the thirteenth–century Dominican preacher Guillaume Peyraut, cited in the 1440s by the mystic Denis the Carthusian:

> The breaking–up of voice appears to be a sign of a broken soul. In the same way as the [artificial] curling of hair is reprehensible in men, the pleating of garments in women, so [is] the breaking–up of voice in singers; just as the wind customarily produces ripples in the water, so the wind of vanity customarily produces this trembling and breaking of the sound. (Wegman 2002, p. 50)

It follows from this that the awe–inducing aesthetical experience of music is deeply connected with the experience of the sacred. However, this experience is not found in the confrontation with an unbearable vastness of meaning but rather in the encounter with the most unbearable nothingness(6). In a context so impregnated with signification construction devices, as was the case of the catholic liturgy of the sixteenth

(6) Keeping in the spirit of allowing the past to speak about its own contradictions, it might be worth recalling, at this point, the words of Meister Eckhart (2009, p. 465): "You should love Him as He is: a non–God, a non–spirit, a non–person, a non–image; rather, as He is a sheer pure limpid One, detached from all duality. And in that One may we eternally sink from nothingness to nothingness. So help us God."

century, the real traumatic twist introduced by music is precisely the interruption of that process, hinting at the underlying fragility of mediated belief.

Ultimately, if we accept that the idea of God is effectively born in the practices done in His name, a split practice like music splits the Absolute itself.

3. Coda

The anxiety surrounding music's role in worship raises a compelling question: if it posed such a profound threat, why not simply ban it altogether? Why integrate it into the ritual, only to wage an endless struggle against it?

The most immediate answer is embedded in the question itself. Evidently, the struggle against a practice like music reveals the common conservative deadlock of how the prohibition of enjoyment easily turns into an enjoyment of prohibition. At this level, the repeated attempts to regulate musical praxis affirmed its necessary (and desired) imperfection, solidifying a clear hierarchy governed by ecclesiastical authorities.

There is, however, a much more radical alternative interpretation(7). As I attempted to demonstrate, music points at a void, one that pervades all forms of ritual and extends to the very concept of God. And here lays the crux of religious belief: while constantly seeking the transcendental, believers also shield themselves from their own findings. The more powerful the revelation, the more radical its rejection. That is, ultimately, why polyphony faced a stronger opposition than other practices, including plainchant.

Could we not frame the tragic episode with which I opened this essay in the same way? The supposed sin of the Jewish man was perhaps stranger than a simple refusal to accept the practices that essentially sustained objective belief, and consequently, the rules of the social game.

In stating the obvious, the man affirmed what was already on everyone's minds, but could not be uttered: "I do not believe it myself, but

(7) A similar point is made by Richard Boothby (2023), who juxtaposes the figure of Christ and its significance for Christianity with Jacques Lacan's complex theory of sexuation.

Others do, so I believe through them". By denouncing the split of the religious Other, he exposed the fragility upon which collective belief rests — a structure that can only endure as long as its paradox remains unspoken.

Bibliographic references

Augustine (c.400) *Confessiones* (engl. trans. R.S. Pine–Coffin, *Confessions*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1961).

Boothby R. (2023) *Embracing the Void: Rethinking the Origin of the Sacred*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston.

Cerone P. (1613) *El melopeo y maestro*, Giovanni Battista Gargano & Lucrecio Nucci, Naples.

Concilium Tridentinum: diariorum, actorum, epistolarum, tractatuum nova collectio (Vol. 8) (1901) Herder, Freiburg am Breisgau.

Dolar M. (2006) *A Voice and Nothing More*, MIT Press, Cambridge.

Eckhart (2009) *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York (engl. trans. and ed. M. O. Walshe).

Ferand E.T. (1957) *What Is Res Facta?,* "Journal of the American Musicological Society", 10(3): 141–150.

Fink B. (1997) *Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London.

Góis D. de (1566) *Chronica do Felicissimo Rey Dom Emanuel*, Francisco Correa, Lisbon.

Lacan J. (1991) *Le Séminaire, livre IV, La relation d'objet (1956–57)*, Seuil, Paris (ed. by J. –A. Miller).

Mcgee T.J. (1998) *The Sound of Medieval Song: Ornamentation and Vocal Style according to the Treatises*, Clarendon Press, Oxford

Resende G. de (1554) *Lyvro das Obras de Garcia de Resende*, Manoel da Costa, Évora.

Saussure F. de (1995) *Cours de linguistique générale*, Payot, Paris.

Schmelzer B. (2024) *The Philosophy of Cusanus and Polyphonic Practice: A Rudimentary Attempt to Explore Their (Non–)Relation,* "Bergkerk Deventer", https://bergkerkdeventer.nl/graindelavoix/, (last access 20 February, 2025).

Seiça A. M. (2019) *"A minha casa é casa de oração": A propósito da música no Concílio de Trento*, "Estudos Teológicos", 23: 115–154.

Wagstaff G.G. (1995) *Music for the Dead: Polyphonic Settings of the Officium and Missa pro defunctis by Spanish and Latin American composers before 1630* (PhD thesis), University of Texas.

Wegman R.C. (2002) *Musical Understanding in the 15th Century*, "Early Music", 30: 46–66.

——. (2005) *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe 1470–1530*, Routledge, New York.

Winternitz E. (1970) "The Role of Music in Leonardo's Paragone", in M. Natanson (ed.), *Phenomenology and Social Reality: Essays in Memory of Alfred Schutz*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 270–296.

Žižek S. (1989) *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* Verso, London.

——. (2004) "O Sujeito Interpassivo" in C. Oliveira (ed.), *A Subjectividade por Vir,* Relógio d'Água, Lisboa, 11–46.