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The Word of God and Music in Luther: Re-Reading Luther's 1538 Rhau Preface

“The topic is greater than can be described in the short time of this occasion”, confesses Luther at the end of a deep reflection on music, lamenting that he has insufficiently addressed the particular relation between the Word of God and music.¹ There are indeed so many statements in Luther's *oeuvre* about the Word of God, and comparatively few concerning music, that the task of approaching the two topics in combination is not an easy one. Beyond the literal question arises the systematic problem of how to compare music and the Word of God. For it seems to be in the nature of both that they transcend cognition; that is to say, the perceived content of each cannot be exhausted by interpretation and theory: by our words, by our language. But this aspect, however, while the source of the difficulty of both subjects, may also be that which allows us to determine their relation. We cannot, after all, hesitate to speak about what we have heard, music as well as the Word of God.

Luther's remark about the affinity of music and theology is well known. But what does it mean? One thing is for sure: that theology must not to be confused with the Word of God itself.

To focus my topic, I will confine myself to interpreting a single text, one which is remarkable for the extent to which it – even in the context of the work of Luther – displays an extraordinary concentration of content in just a few lines. It is a text about music which is not among his most frequently published texts, and which is at first glance chiefly significant for his conception of music – but which by virtue of this also becomes a key to our understanding of Luther's conception of what happens when the Word of God is at work. The text about which I speak is Luther's short preface to the collection *Symphoniae iucundae*, edited by the Wittenbergian printer and composer Georg Rhau in 1538, which contained 52 four-part compositions for human voices, by, among others, Heinrich Isaac, Johann Walter, Ludwig Senfl and Pierre de La Rue. The edition appeared in four partbooks, the tenor of which contained Luther's Latin preface. In 1564, Johann Walter published a German version, probably his own translation.²

¹ WA 50; 373, 7f.: “Sed res est maior, quam ut hac brevitate utilitates eius describi queant.”

² Both versions are available in WA 50; 368–374. A third version (in German) was published by Figulus (see Appendix 1 in the present volume). Robin A. Leaver chose this preface as a funda-

I will undertake a close reading of the text, following which we may be better able to reconstruct the complex relationship between music and the Word of God – a relationship that here is founded on musicological reflection, albeit sensitive to a religious context.

A Close Reading of the ‘Preface’

Let us start by commenting on the *genus* of a preface. Prefaces primarily aim to divert attention towards the work which follows, to put it in context, and, no less importantly, to praise it. And this is exactly what Luther’s preface does. It starts by sketching the wide horizon of the work’s context, and ends with praise of the work. Given that the contextualising horizon takes the form of a discussion of the essence of music in general, it is likely that the laudatory conclusion will appear reasonably convincing.

But finding the initial point for the praise of music is not easy, as Luther confesses, because music is a whole, and a whole cannot be described from outside. The praise must be articulated from inside, using models and methods for that which the musical notation presents, i. e., the medium of sound itself. That is why the traditional rhetorical order of the preface is impossible, and Luther explicitly turns to another structure for his speech. If the world of sound is universal, there is no other starting point than creation. This, therefore, marks the real beginning of Luther’s preface:

If you care about music, you will find music from the beginning of the creation created like a garment of any creature, both in its individual life as in their communal existence. There is nothing without sound.³

The argument behind this insight is far-reaching. For Luther conceives the air as the fundamental medium of sound. Air is, primarily, the condition for living for terrestrial animals, and it represents at the same time the medium of their encounter. Although the air itself is invisible and without any sound of its own, there can be no life and no communication without air. Furthermore: the air, although invisible, becomes the mediator of sound and music and sense. There is, as Luther notes, a kind of miracle at work when the physical phenomenon of air

mental source in his chapter “Luther’s Theological Understanding of Music” in *Luther’s Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), (Reprinted: Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 65–105.

³ WA 50; 368–369.

changes into a phenomenon full of sense, audible and understandable at the same time.

With the next step of his scheme, Luther turns from the omnipresent medium of sound to the occurrence of living bodies which produce a sequence of tones. So we have to leave behind us objects which sound only by being moved from outside, for example by the wind. We do not really know what happens with the birds who seem to sing; at least we try to hear kinds of melodies, or, that is to say, an order of sounds in a temporal succession which seem to belong together. Surely, there is a physiological basis as well as a behavioural intention in birdsong. We perceive that a quite anonymous sound becomes an expedient sequence; this cannot happen without a kind of spirit. But it seems to be presupposed that we as humans, listening to the birds, find a kind of expression within their utterances. That is why Luther's argument then moves on to the human voice – and to the human capacity to hear and understand that which sounds in the world.

There is no doubt, Luther states, that the human voice exceeds all other sounds. Two different aspects are worth examining at this point. The first is the astonishing fact that the human voice, produced by the small human tongue and the narrow human throat, reaches such great distances in the world. What humans articulate, speaking or singing, transcends immediate intimacy and becomes potentially public. Human calls spread out over vast distances and allow communication. This is the first aspect. The second is allied to it – or, rather, explains the first. For human communication is not only a matter of producing and receiving sound, but more a question of understanding the sounds that are produced and received. It is the grasping of the sense of what has been caught by the ears which really leads to the public effects of listening. If listeners understand what they have heard, the content becomes their own, which cannot be figured otherwise than by the internalization of external physical sensations. And the elementary medium of adoption of external influence is listening, grasping the sense in the sounds received by our ears. Reading and writing, obviously, are later constellations of the same function.

Luther proceeds quite rapidly from listening to understanding at this point. Nevertheless, he notes that there is a real and critical difference between the two – by pointing to the fact that philosophers to that point (and, we must assume, for all time) were not able to explain the progression from listening to understanding, which definitively does not take place without sound. For it is precisely within the receiving of the audible phenomenon that what we call the making of intelligible sense takes place. The use of words, of language, remains necessarily connected with the world of sound. Even more, our total human existence is shaped by the fact that we as rational animals belong to both sides: to the sen-

sitive and to the intelligible world. And music, it seems, defines the fact that we cannot live our physical lives without sensitive utterances – even before we decide to utter anything. Laughing and crying are the two phenomena which Luther addresses at this point of his preface. He has good reasons to remind us of this peculiarity of human existence; we, living after Helmut Plessner's *Laughing and Crying*, know more about this.⁴

What we learn from Luther's description of human existence is the importance he ascribes to the pre-voluntary state of human life and human utterance. And we must not forget: music is the very embodiment of this structure. That is why Luther emphasises, in the following passage, the affective condition of humankind and its relation to music: music, as the famous phrase goes, is "the real mistress and leader of human affects".⁵ Affects – or emotions (I use the terms as equivalent here) – are the definite signs that human existence – the sensible being in a world of senses – can never be dominated by reason alone. There are powers within human nature which determine human self-understanding as well as human behaviour. Affects turn humans in this direction or in another. They tear humans away from their centre. They make human dependence tangible, as we are shaken back and forth like trees in the wind. But Luther says that music is "the real mistress and leader of human affects". How is this possible?

To answer this question, we must primarily consider the way in which Luther introduces the primary impact of music, that is the moderating or alternating power of music over our affects or emotions. As I said, affects tear human beings away from their centre, so that they lose control over themselves and are unable to regain a position of equilibrium. This is where music comes in and does its work: "sad people are put upright, gay people become scared, despaired ones encouraged, presumptuous ones collapse, people in love are set into calm, people in hatred are mitigated." (my translation).⁶ What is remarkable here is that Luther does not accentuate music's power to exaggerate or enhance affective states. On the contrary, he emphasises music's mediating role in helping human beings relocate their centre and lost equilibrium, although we all stay physically moved and shattered by our affects.

Peculiarly enough, it is precisely at this point that the term "the Word of God" is introduced by Luther. The Word of God also governs and puts in order human affects. In a certain sense its function follows the power of music, seen under the guise of its immediate effects upon the soul – the place where

⁴ Helmut Plessner: *Lachen und Weinen: Eine Untersuchung nach den Grenzen des menschlichen Verhaltens* (Bern: Francke, 1950).

⁵ WA 50; 371, 2.

⁶ WA 50; 372, 5–7.

our affects reside. On the other hand, the Word of God reaches the human soul in a deeper way. This has primarily to do with the fact that the Word of God uses semantic content, spoken words full of substance. Primarily, it is the phenomenon of preaching which Luther has in mind here. But even from this perspective, there remains a deep connection with music, as the conjunction of word and sound is also a characteristic of developed human music. So we can assume that there is a high degree of proximity denoted here between sung music and the Word of God. An example of this is found easily enough: Luther reminds us of this aspect in, above all, the Psalms.

If we regard the operation of the Word of God through analogy with music more deeply, we observe that there is an internal turning point in the middle of the human soul: being touched by the Word of God in its immediate affectual existence, the soul is moved to express itself. The soul's medium of expression is also music, but music receives at this moment its most precise sense: it serves as an expression of the praise of the Lord. Where the human soul in its affectual life is touched by the Word of God, music becomes therefore the necessary form of its self-expression.

We have, later on, to explain the manner, how the Word of God basically provokes human expressivity. For the time being, let us remain focused on the internal turning-point from listening to music and the Word of God to the expression of this inner determination. The effect is that everybody has his or her own voice. Luther alludes to the strict individuality of every human voice, which is the most significant representation of being an individual. This individuality resides in how we are addressed by the Word of God: it is this which makes each one of us unique. To be sure, this is, as anything that Luther meditates on, a theological interpretation. We must nonetheless acknowledge that this interpretation gives a deeper sense to an otherwise rather trivial empirical contingency. For if even the physiological datum of the individual voice is related to the Word of God, the corporality of speech belongs, when mediated by music, to the sphere of religious life. To put it in another way: even the most basic and natural functions of human existence, such as self-expression through the medium of sound, must be understood in a broader cultural and perhaps especially religious sense. It remains astonishing that it is at just this point in his discourse that Luther chooses to remind us of the expression of human individuality through the human voice.

We must not overlook the fact that this insight also serves the next step in his argument. What we actually find is the most diverse status of humankind – human beings divided by their individual voices. Certainly, this differentiation among human beings is the presupposition for exchange and understanding, both in technical and moral matters. But, as we know, the challenge for understanding does not immediately bring about its realization. Here, music is the sol-

ution, especially music in parts or polyphony, where another key insight comes into play, which is to say the miraculous character of polyphony. We can grasp Luther's amazement at the fact that different voices sound together to form a whole, a whole that does not exist before it is performed. What we see are staves and notes within a system of notation, and what we might hear are just single notes of a melody. But what is performed exceeds the written formulas and the practised monody: a whole cosmos seems to open up, which could not have been expected or planned. This is exactly the summit which Luther needed his argument to reach: the praise of the *Symponiae iucundae* as miracles of art and as the acme of music. The whole cosmos is where we actually arrive with this text. And in that respect, the conclusion leads us back to the text's beginning.

So we will stop our reading of Luther's preface here. We now turn to a more systematic evaluation of his ideas, and we start with analysing what has been said about music. This will lead us, in a later argument, to a discussion of Luther's understanding of the specific character of the Word of God.

Systematic Aspects in the Concept of Music

What do we learn from Luther's preface about music? Let us start with where he arrives at the end, namely polyphony. We shall see that there is a continuous line from the conclusion to the beginning. I would like to distinguish six aspects.

First, polyphony, music in parts, is the ultimate form of musical art. Polyphonic music exceeds both painting and poetry. Paintings bring things together in a two-dimensional space; we who regard paintings must dissolve what is condensed on the canvas, must transfer it into a story, and discover the emotion that has been expressed in colour and contour. Poetry is nearer to ourselves. It tells stories, evokes emotions, but normally stays within a linear model, even if the tale has many moments of tension and contradictions, as in tragedies, for example. What we cannot remove from poetry is the character it attains in performance, at least potentially; in this respect, poetry is part of music. Polyphony, however, lives by the synchrony of diverse voices, which perform together a new piece of art that cannot be seen or read, only heard. It exists in time and remains only in human memory, but not as a material property, only rather as guidance for the repetition of the performance. What sounds, bringing the different voices together, sounds as a whole, though it has a temporal starting point and comes to an end. In this respect, the whole created by polyphonic music is an analogy of creation, nurtured in the midst of the finite world. The possibility of creating polyphonic music in particular appears to Luther a divine gift to

humankind. Through music, there comes into existence a creative result which transcends human capability, even though music is performed by human beings. Playing music is a human accolade to God.

We might be more reluctant today, of course, to indulge in such a strong theological interpretation. Nevertheless, the problem of how to understand humankind's musical capacity remains. It is not only due to the tradition of the past few centuries that people use religious terms, such as "genius" or "creator", when speaking about composers or artists or performers. This indicates that we must acknowledge a certain cultural competence in composing and performing music without being able to definitively explain the origin of music.

Second, we are called to observe the coincidence of word and sound in music. Evidently, there are differences which are combined. Language denotes more specific intentions than do sounds. Language tries to fix its reference while sound often has no particular external reference at all. Words seek addressees, sound spreads out involuntarily. In combination, each supports the other: the intentionality of the word gets reinforced with respect to affect, while the affectivity of music is led into an understandable direction. Words and music together represent a very strong amalgam of art. From this perspective it is not surprising that the opera became such an important species of art in modernity.

At the same time, and keeping in mind the broad range of aspects intrinsic to a musical opus, we must admit that vocal music transcends mere usefulness. Commands, in, for example, the military or in the workplace, are not sung. Singing a text serves to relieve it of any direct application. Through this, the idea of freedom from purpose comes to mind, a freedom which underlies all human culture. Therefore, we can say that cultural productions bear the sign of superabundance. Music is not necessary for human life in the world – but it is universally present. So – for what? Would it not be reasonable to think about music's coming into being specifically in praise of God?

This element of abundance might also be understood differently. But the question remains as before: how should we interpret cultural abundance otherwise? The vast majority of aesthetically sensible subjects will be disappointed when confronted with neuropsychological interpretations of art, especially of music, as mere elements of natural evolution for the benefit of biological reproduction.

Third: one of the things we find in music is the involvement of the individual person. This has to do with the non-intentionality we reflected upon a moment ago. We cannot say, cannot see from outside what happens when music is heard. How should we describe "understanding music"? It is evident that there is a huge difference between understanding music and understanding a text or a theory. We only know what might be meant by understanding music from our

own experience, and we can try to transfer our own experience to others, rather experimentally. Real understanding should lead us to our own expression of ourselves, even if we do not have the capacity of composing or performing music in a satisfying manner. Nevertheless, being touched by music at the heart of our inner being is bound to provoke a reaction – even if that reaction is simply one of raised sensitivity, so that we gain greater possibility of expressing ourselves.

We might, of course, find conceptions of music that seem to contradict this opinion; conceptions that target more or less the amalgamation of the subject with what is heard. We cannot deny this aspect of music. Again, it is the moment of non-intentionality and of erratic diffusion which is responsible for this effect. But even in cases of attempts to unify music and the listener, the mere corporal occurrence of listening remains an individual act. It provokes, rather, severe judgement of kinds of music which aim to eliminate the subjectivity of the listener.

Fourth: music and affects. The alliance of music with the affects is a common topic, even in contemporary discourse. It is not easy to explain, however, why music might govern affects. Starting from Luther's proposals, we can nonetheless try to explain how this is possible. Let us remind ourselves of Luther's description of the faculty of music to mediate or to temper the sharper affects, which normally always proceed to amplify themselves. Moderation of these affects is only possible if the offspring of music is not emotion itself. Although musical expression is closely allied with corporal sensation, its cultural power does not derive from this origin. Instead, producing music is a cultural competence in its own right, a creative power and therefore analogous to God's creation. Musical structures – tonality, rhythm, dynamics and so on – therefore represent in themselves an encounter with God's power, by which he rules the world. Moderating the affects, hence, does not aim at a neutral equilibrium of stoic *ataraxia*, but holds present the dynamics of the human soul, extended between the two extremes of joy and fear, as they come into presence in the intensely corporal but expressive acts of laughing and crying. Music touches humankind peculiarly insofar as we live our life in the middle of the range between laughing and crying. This point is one we will return to later when we reflect upon the notion of the Word of God.

Fifth: we have seen so far that music is an extreme case of the coincidence of natural disposition and cultural ability. What happens to human beings, also finds its place in nonhuman nature. The ability of animals to communicate in a nonverbal way, by means we cannot innately understand, is a vivid expression of the fact that nothing in the whole creation is without spirit. That we live in a created cosmos, at least on earth, where communication is omnipresent, is not

only a result of random evolution, but a sign of divine presence in the middle of evolution. That is why our bodily existence also belongs to nature as it is; we are not the opposite of the natural environment we live in – culture does not disconnect us from nature, as nature itself has its spiritual side. This insight is not a speculative claim, but the result of our reflection on the fact that there is music in the world. Human creativity in music is the expression of the creative divine spirit in God's creation.

Sixth: to bring our remarks on the place of music to a conclusion, I want to emphasise the fact that Luther refrains from invoking the theory of the harmony of the spheres. He simply starts with creation, so that music is also a natural phenomenon, albeit one with an implicit spiritual power. The harmony of spheres, instead, represents a non-personal concept of relations which might be best recognised by music. In this Pythagorean theory, music retains a key function for understanding the whole, but here harmonic structures are timelessly actual, omnipresent beyond changes of life. Luther is convinced that creation, stemming from the personal God as counterpart of the world, opens all the possibilities needed to understand and to practise music. It is the physical phenomenon of air which is used as the medium of music, not mathematical relations as in the Pythagorean theory. To name air here is also significant for Luther's view of the presence of the spirit within creation. We must presume that, for Luther, the invisible character of air is a sign of the spirit, in which we cannot see how communication works even as we cannot deny that it does work. Air, so to say, is an index of non-mechanical transport of information; that is why air is apt for spiritual exchange. Do not forget: it is the spirit over the waters, which marks the starting point of creation, if we follow Genesis 1.

We can thus easily perceive the arc, which reaches from the very beginning of creation to the polyphony of voices. The short preface comprehends a whole, while at the same time it must remain within that whole—an apparent contradiction that is possible by music alone.

From Music to the Word of God

What do we learn about the Word of God, if we begin our exploration from the point of view of the phenomenon of music, as we have done so far? For one thing, we can be sure of coming across aspects of the subject which are not common in theological discourse—but are, perhaps, more vivid. With this in mind, my discussion here will proceed in the opposite direction to the preceding discussion of music, namely moving from the beginning of Luther's text to the end. I would like to distinguish five elements.

First: the Word of God belongs to creation. It takes part in the created cosmos, and it comprehends analogous structures as they belong to other creatures. The basic element, of course, is the co-presence of natural and spiritual moments. We do not find anything in created nature which is without communication with other creatures. As they all owe their existence to God, they are united, their empirical differences unseen. In the specific sense of communication, that is to say by the manner they realize the connection with others, all creatures fulfil their duty, a duty which is given to them by the creator. In this respect humans also belong among other created natures, and when the Word of God comes into play, it is not as something supernatural, as in the sense of an extramundane fact; rather, the Word of God attaches at an essential level to the way human beings conduct their life. We shall see shortly the specifics through which the Word of God works within the frontier of human existence.

Second: the Word of God takes part in human life. What is seminal in creatures becomes evident and explicit in human existence. The concreteness of life is characterised by two peculiarities, namely the diversion and the connection of existential dimensions. Human life fulfils its duty by leaving the mere identity of itself, by testing and proving oneself in the variable course of life. We must leave behind what we are – to become what we shall be. And we have to realise that the way through life is dangerous and that we know about danger. This is why our inner life is excited by joy and fear. Joy represents the moment when we attain our goal, fear is our companion on the way, as we know that it is not in our own power to reach that to which we strive. In laughing and crying, the emotional extremes are involuntarily expressed, we cannot restrain from these utterances. Our bodily existence is deeply impregnated by expression; expression belongs to our natural life. We know that this structure of life is ours. We have to live within it, always hoping that the inner tension will not break us in two. In the strong tension of joy and fear we try to conserve our existence by concentrating our power, without being able to overcome definitively the incoherence of our life.

Third – and this is the point where the Word of God becomes explicit – as we saw, music touches our affective life in a manner which promises more order in the diverse tensions of life. But the promise offered by music has to find its roots in an absolute counterpart. Human disunion cannot be held together only by natural means, not even by the phenomenon of music alone. There must be an unconditional element that addresses human unity in the middle of all disorder. That is exactly what the Word of God does. Here we have to distinguish two elements.

In human words sound and semantic content play together; this is the first element. The intentionality of words and the affectivity of sound address human

subjects in a way analogous to a musical stimulus. This is why the dimension of affectivity is reached, and why affects are altered. The Word of God – the other element – appears in the mode of human language in that moment when the affective basis of human existence is addressed, i.e. in the twofold structure of joy and fear; especially when they are not related to particular objects of empirical experience. If God himself is the counterpart of joy and fear, these two elementary affects become thoroughly clear. One who feels addressed in this dimension, who knows that there is no longer an excuse, feels located in opposition to God, and at the same moment judged and recognised. This happens primarily in the affective realm of human subjectivity, in the sphere in which we are no longer able to exercise control over our own affects. We feel exposed to the Word of God in a way that is precisely analogical to the way in which we feel exposed to the power of music. We cannot withstand it, but simply have to follow, as we hear what is the basic fact of our own existence. Therefore, we can say that both music and the Word of God act to bring human beings to the truth of their existence.

This is the basic function of the Word of God. We acknowledge that the use of the word “god” is indispensable – we need the precise designation of the unconditioned, but in a personal shape. The function, however, does not depend on the term “god” alone; it is characteristic of Luther's concept of the Word of God that humans are immediately addressed by this word, i.e. in their inner affective life. The mode of address is the evidence of its divine authenticity.

Fourth: the function of the Word of God yields specific effects. As we saw in examining the effect of music, the first result is a kind of individualisation. Being confronted with their own emotions, sensing the vivid affects, immediately makes a human an isolated individual. The Word of God goes even deeper, as it focuses not on the level of diverse affects in their variety, but on the very core of all affects, i.e. the tension of joy and fear. Being addressed on that ground is the last and deepest individualisation which is possible. For joy accompanies the lucid, bright relationship with God, whereas fear is the emotional equivalent of a disturbed relationship with God. We can say that in this tension of fear and joy the theological difference of law and gospel becomes sensible before the forum of own feeling and conscience.

But the individual existence which is felt here, gets in the same moment a further determination, namely to be directed towards others. Although the Word of God must be heard by our own ears, what sounds as the Word of God is spoken publicly to any human being. The fact that the Word of God sounds loudly cannot be denied, so it potentially addresses anyone who hears it. Already the fact of the word being spoken unites the listeners, even more than what is heard, specifically in that God comes near to anyone, so that they all

are one before God. Like music, the word of God sounds in the ears of the individual and permeates the inner world of affects, it then also has an external effect by helping the individual to express what has been heard. People find themselves gathered pre-voluntarily, just by listening to the Word of God. They come together like an orchestra to perform the piece they are elected to perform. The Word of God builds individual people into societal structures, in which individuals can live without being suppressed. Like music, the Word of God links together individuality and social life.

Fifth: we regarded music as a mirror of the universe. Every creature is in communication with each and every other creature. It is the divine spirit which creates these interrelations. We recognize that there is a common structure in the whole of creation, and each part contributes their work to the universal. By the Word of God humans are implored to fulfil their duty. To enable this, the Word of God had to become a human word, present in human language and addressing human individuals. What those who listen to the Word are doing, is following the task they have among others. They are part of the whole, without being able to see the whole of the universe. But they are aware of the creator who is present in His Word. Therefore, they can praise the Lord of the universe from within creation. The preferred medium of praise is music, for reasons which should now be quite obvious. For music pre-symbolises the final harmony of the whole—though in actual life we cannot overcome the suspense of affectual life.

The Relation Between Music and the Word of God

So, at the very end, we return to the question of the relation between music and the Word of God. Within the universe, we see coherence and communication – as well as disruption and silence. We regard the motion of life and the tension of emotions which make life risky. We notice joy and fear, laughing and crying.

And in all this, we experience hope, an emotion that holds the promise for us to set and realize a final goal for the world and humankind.

We listen to music, this divine gift that harmonises the greatest differences and dissonances and lets them come to an end. We listen to the Word of God that explicitly promises us good outcomes, including of our own peaceless life.

And while we are on the way through life, we listen to both, to the Word of God and to music, and we sense that they are dealing with one and the same subject.

That is, roughly speaking, what can be found in Martin Luther's short 1538 preface. The question whether Luther's conception has had direct effects on Lutheran practices of music requires musicological investigations beyond the scope of this chapter. But I suggest that the ideas behind Luther's brief words comprise some of the most striking insights we owe to the Reformation.

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