I

Introduction

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My guiding conviction in this book is that music can serve to enrich and advance theology, extending our wisdom about God, God's relation to us and to the world at large. I hope to show this with particular attention to that dimension of the world we call 'time'.

In the twentieth century, the corridors of theology were not generally alive with the sound of music. Music has received virtually no sustained treatment in contemporary systematic theology. Much has been written about the bearing of literature upon theological disciplines (especially biblical hermeneutics), and the same goes for the visual arts. There have been some courageous forays into theology by musicologists,[1] but apart from a few notable exceptions, twentieth-century theologians paid scant attention to the potential of music to explore theological themes.[2]

1. E.g. Mellers (1981, 1983); Chafe (1991).

2. Bonhoeffer's enticing discussion of polyphony is an exception (Bonhoeffer 1972, 302). David Ford's engaging treatment of 'polyphonic' living draws upon Bonhoeffer's work (Ford 1999, ch. 10). Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Truth is Symphonic* (von Balthasar 1987) and J. Pelikan's *Bach Among the Theologians* (Pelikan 1986a) are other exceptions. Dorothy Sayers sought to expound trinitarian doctrine through an extended analogy of artistic making (Sayers 1941), although both the doctrine of the Trinity she advocates and the model of creativity she employs are, I believe, highly problematic. David Cunningham reflects on polyphony as a contribution to theology, especially as it embodies difference without exclusion, unity without homogeneity (Cunningham 1998, 127ff.). But he does not discuss any particular music at length, or how the distinctive features of sound-perception challenge the 'zero-sum game' which he rightly sees as endemic in much theology (the more active God is in the world the less active we can be). Francis Watson's recent and curiously over-sceptical article on theology and music does not address in any sustained way the possibilities of music advancing theology (Watson 1998). Barth's treatment of Mozart will be discussed later.

There have been modern theologians who, without treating music at length, have nevertheless pursued theology in a musical manner. The American theologian Jonathan Edwards is a prime example – I am very grateful to Dr Gerald McDermott of Roanoke College, Salem, Virginia, for pointing this out to me. Cf. Jenson (1988), 20, 35f., 42, 47ff., 169, 182, 195. Mention should also be made of Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Christmas Eve*

In some respects this is puzzling, given not only the supposedly limitless interests of theology, but also the universality of music in all cultures, the unprecedented availability and ubiquity of music in so-called 'postmodern' culture, the persistence of music in the worship of the Church, the strong traditions of theological engagement with music in past centuries, the intense interest shown in music by many philosophers past and present, the growing literature on the politics, sociology and psychology of music, the recent emergence of ethnomusicology, and the intriguing deployment of musical metaphors by natural scientists. In the chapters which follow, we shall be touching upon some reasons for this theological neglect. Undoubtedly, one of them is the difficulty of speaking about music in ways which do justice to its appeal and which genuinely shed new light upon it. As George Steiner observes: 'In the face of music, the wonders of language are also its frustrations.'[3] Another reason is the opacity of the process of musical communication: it is clear *that* music is one of the most powerful communicative media we have, but *how* it communicates and *what* it communicates are anything but clear.

Whatever the reasons, this almost complete theological disregard of music is regrettable. For, as I hope to show, when theology is done with musicians as conversation partners, music is found to have considerable power to generate fresh and fruitful resources for the theological task. Jacques Attali, in his remarkable (if eccentric) book *Noise*, declares that 'Music is more than an object of study: it is a way of perceiving the world. My intention is . . . not only to theorise *about* music, but to theorise *through* music.'[4] Attali's principal interests are in the socio-economic aspects of music but his words prompt the question: what would it mean to theologise not simply *about* music but *through* music? This book is a preliminary attempt to answer that question.

footnote **2.** (*cont.*)
(Schleiermacher 1967). In a number of writings, Jon Michael Spencer has argued that 'theomusicology' should be recognised as a legitimate discipline (see e.g. Spencer 1991, 1994); theomusicology being 'a musicological method for theologizing about the sacred, the secular, and the profane, principally incorporating thought and method borrowed from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and philosophy' (Spencer 1991, 3). Among the differences between Spencer's approach and ours are that his focus is generally more cultural and anthropological, there is relatively little analytic attention to musical sounds and their interrelation, and theologically his purview is much wider than the Christological and trinitarian perspective of this book (his concern being with religion on a very broad scale).

In relation to biblical interpretation, Frances Young's book *The Art of Performance* is an illuminating essay, utilising musical models to understand the hermeneutical process (Young 1990). Nicholas Lash and Stephen Barton develop similar lines of thought (Lash 1986; Barton 1997, ch. 2, and more fully in a later article, 1999). **3.** Steiner (1997), 65. **4.** Attali (1985), 4.

My main aim, therefore, is not to offer a 'systematic theology of music', an account of music which situates it within a particular doctrinal environment. This kind of enterprise has a legitimate and necessary place in the music–theology conversation.[5] But this book is rather different. Without pretending that we can ever operate in a theological vacuum – we shall underline this in the final chapter – our primary purpose here is to enquire as to the ways in which music can benefit theology. The reader is invited to engage with music in such a way that central doctrinal loci are explored, interpreted, re-conceived and articulated. It will be found that unfamiliar themes are opened up, familiar topics exposed and negotiated in fresh and telling ways, obscure matters – resistant to some modes of understanding – are clarified, and distortions of theological truth avoided and even corrected. In this way, we seek to make a small but I hope significant contribution to the re-vitalising of Christian theology for the future. Not surprisingly, this can be a profoundly disturbing business, for many of theology's most cherished habits will be questioned and shaken.[6]

It is important to stress that when music advances theology in this way, it does so first and foremost by *enacting* theological wisdom. We shall be arguing that music is best construed primarily as a set of practices, actions involving the integration of many facets of our make-up. Music is fundamentally about making and receiving sounds, and this book is designed to show some of the theological fruit which can emerge from examining carefully what is involved in this making and reception. Obviously, then, the written form of this book is inadequate: ideally we need not only an enclosed CD but live music of some sort. But being restricted to written words need not worry us unduly, provided we bear in mind throughout that when we speak of music we speak chiefly of something made and heard – sung, played, performed, listened to – and it is to the complexities of this making and hearing that we seek to be true in what follows. (It is no accident that the major musical impetus for this book has come not from reading books about music but from my experience of giving concerts, music teaching, conducting orchestras

5. See Begbie (1989, 1991b).

6. My project here is parallel in many ways to that of Kathleen Marie Higgins in her fine study *The Music of Our Lives* (Higgins 1991). She sets out to show how music can further *ethical* reflection, noting that music's ethical dimension has been largely lost sight of in both musical and philosophical thought. In addition to what she says about ethics, I am very sympathetic to Higgins' general approach to music, marked as it is by a desire to overcome the damaging isolation of music from wider networks of thought and practice, while still doing justice to its distinctiveness.

and choirs, improvising with others, as well as talking to numerous musicians.)

Some of the limits I have set myself need to be made clear. Theologically, my main focus will be on the benefit of music for 'systematic theology' (sometimes also described as 'Christian doctrine', 'dogmatic theology' or 'constructive theology'), that branch of theology concerned with the doctrinal loci which give the Christian faith its characteristic shape and coherence – e.g. creation, Trinity, incarnation and so forth.

Many gain their main theological benefit from music by listening to settings of biblical texts, such as Bach's *St Matthew Passion* or Handel's *Messiah*; others from the setting of liturgical texts such as Mozart's Masses; others from musicals such as *Jesus Christ Superstar*; others from songs which tackle theological matters less directly (those of U2 or Van Morrison, for example); others from music which has no overt theological intent but which has come to have powerful theological associations. In this study I largely leave to one side music strongly tied to words, texts, narratives, liturgy and other particular associations. I concentrate on music in its more abstract genres not because I believe it to be intrinsically superior or because I believe music can or should be sealed off from everything extra-musical, but because such music is best at throwing into relief the peculiar properties of musical sounds I wish to highlight and the distinctive way in which they operate.[7]

I have chosen to concentrate on one major dimension of music, its temporality. Music is, of course, a temporal art. But beneath this apparently straightforward assertion lie many layers of significance. When we ask *how* music is temporal, we are confronted by an enormous range of temporal processes. We are also struck by how much can be learned about time through music. In the words of Victor Zuckerkandl: 'there is hardly a phenomenon that can tell us more about time and temporality than can music'.[8] Music offers a particular form of participation in the world's temporality and in so doing, we contend, it has a distinctive capacity to elicit something of the nature of this temporality and our involvement with it (as well as to question many misleading assumptions about it). Here we try to show how the experience of music can serve to open up features of a distinctively *theological* account of created temporality, redeemed by God

7. The one major exception I have allowed myself is John Tavener's music (chapter 5), much of which sets Christian texts. I make the exception because the music powerfully highlights key issues with regard to time and eternity, because it is so overtly theological in intent and because it currently enjoys immense popularity. 8. Zuckerkandl (1956), 152.

in Jesus Christ, and what it means to live in and with time as redeemed creatures.

For reasons of space, I have decided to concentrate principally on the kind of music that will be best known to readers, namely Western 'tonal' music. This musical tradition emerged towards the end of the seventeenth century and has been predominant ever since in European culture and in cultures primarily shaped by modern Europe. It is the tradition of Beethoven and Bach, as well as the Spice Girls and Michael Jackson. To restrict ourselves in this way does not commit us to a cultural hegemony which automatically exalts this music to a position of superiority above all others. Nor should it be taken to imply any particular value-judgements about types of music outside Western tonality. In any case, Western tonal music itself has unclear boundaries; it can share many features with traditions normally regarded as non-Western. (If 'tonal' is taken in a very broad sense to refer to any music with fixed reference pitches – tones within a piece which act as stabilisers – then virtually all music can be considered 'tonal', since such tonal stabilisers are extremely common in music worldwide.[9]) Nor do I want to suggest that this music is necessarily better equipped than any other for tackling questions of time and temporality. And I am not discounting other forms of music as fruitful for theology; different types of music have different theological capabilities.

No particular musical expertise is required to read this book. To be sure, we need to give music a certain amount of 'room' so that it is allowed to bring to the surface those aspects of Christian truth with which it is especially qualified to deal, and this entails some musical analysis. The sections in a contrasting (sans serif) typeface are designed for those who can read music and are accustomed to some of the basic vocabulary of musicology, and the footnotes do occasionally contain some technical terms. But these are intended only to support the main text, which should be comprehensible on its own to those who do not read music and are unfamiliar with its theoretical discourse.

In the first chapter, some markers are set down in musical aesthetics as guidelines for the material which follows. Chapter 2 outlines some of the main characteristics of the temporality of Western tonal music. This paves the way for the specifically theological matters which are addressed in the rest of the book. Four chapters relate the findings of chapters 1 and 2 to various theological fields: the reality and goodness of the world's

9. Sloboda (1993), 253ff.

temporality, created and redeemed in Christ (chapter 3); eschatology (with special attention to musical resolution) (chapter 4); time and God's eternity (with particular reference to the music of John Tavener) (chapter 5); and eucharistic theology (explored through musical repetition) (chapter 6). The next three chapters examine one particular musical practice – improvisation. We focus on its intriguing interplay of constraint and contingency, opening out a major theme in theological anthropology, namely human freedom (chapters 7 and 8). Election and ecclesial ethics are then explored through the dynamics of improvisatory gift-exchange (chapter 9). I close with some brief reflections on the ways in which music functions in this book, and some of the wider implications of our study for theology in the future (chapter 10).

I am aware that many composers and many forms of music which could throw light on issues of theology and time are not mentioned. Likewise, many areas of doctrine which could have been drawn into the discussion are left to one side. But my desire is not to be comprehensive, either musically or theologically, but to demonstrate possibilities in a few specific areas in order that others can extend the discussion further afield. Despite the limitations, my hope is that at the very least the reader will conclude that music, so often thought to be at best half-articulate and at worst corrupting, has significant potential to help us discover, understand and expound theological truth, to the advantage of theology and the deepening of our knowledge of God.

1

Practising music

Any theologian who wants to learn from the world of music is going to have to ask some basic questions about what this remarkable practice we call 'music' actually is.[1] And if there is one thing we should stress from the start it is just that, that when we speak of music we speak of a practice or, better, a multiplicity of practices.

We can keep the principal practices in mind as we proceed, even if their edges are unclear and they often overlap. At the most basic level, there are two interlocking and mutually informative procedures: those which engender music – *music-making*, and those of perception – *music-hearing*, and under 'hearing' I mean to include all the faculties associated with musical reception, not only the ears. We may speak of music-making as the intentional bringing into being of temporally organised patterns of pitched sounds. For these sound-patterns to be called music, clearly, someone must be able to hear them not just as patterns of sounds but as patterns of 'tones'[2] to which the term 'music' can be appropriately applied: 'A person is making music when he intentionally produces certain sounds which he believes *could* be heard as music by some (extant) persons.'[3]

Music-making and hearing are properly considered the foundational realities of music. And throughout this book we shall be stressing that these practices entail a peculiarly intense involvement with *time*, with the world's temporality. By contrast, our culture has schooled many of us into thinking of music as basically about written 'works', which can be understood, to a large extent at any rate, apart from their temporal constitution

1. The word 'music' can in fact speak of a huge range of phenomena. It is a term without clear and widely accepted semantic boundaries, and this is especially so if one thinks globally. See Sparshott (1987), 43ff.
2. In this book I shall use 'tone' to denote any discrete pitched sound that is recognised as musical. **3.** Wolterstorff (1987), 116.

or situation. In the Western tonal tradition, musical works, so understood, have come to occupy a very prominent place. Much modern musicology has revolved around the study of works, treated as if they were self-contained objects, with no intrinsic connection to the circumstances of their production or reception, and as if they were best understood in terms of their structural features (as written down in a score), rather than their acoustical and physical characteristics as experienced.[4] But, as many scholars have stressed, this objectification of the musical work is highly questionable.[5] People were making and hearing music long before works were conceived, written or performed. Moreover, when we look carefully at what is designated by the term 'work', we soon find that it is highly artificial to imagine we are dealing merely with sound-patterns abstracted from actions. Nicholas Wolterstorff writes of an imaginary society whose music-making and hearing develops through stages, from the emergence of various musical genre concepts, through the establishing of rules for music-making, and repeated acts of music-making which follow the same rules, through to the emergence of works.[6] Whatever the historical accuracy of his account, it serves to remind us that the concept of a work is not foundational but has emerged from a variety of activities. Wolterstorff goes on to argue that what we now choose to call a 'work' entails a complex interplay between a 'performance-kind' (types of performance); a set of correctness and completeness rules (rules of correctness specify what constitutes a correct playing or singing, rules of completeness specify what constitutes a complete playing or singing); a set of sounds and (usually) ways of making sounds such that the rules specify those as the ones to be exemplified.[7] To insist that a work of music consists entirely of sound-patterns, or of sound-patterns heard in a certain way, or sound-patterns codified in a score, is artificial and inadequate – for it also consists of actions, and this means actions which can only properly be understood as temporally constituted and situated.

But we need to fill out these sketchy preliminary remarks. Without pretending that this book is a substantial treatise in musical aesthetics, and without attempting to provide a sustained case for any aesthetic stance (huge aesthetic issues will be side-stepped and giant questions

4. The rise of so-called 'autonomous', non-functional music, the development of the conviction that this kind of music is a paradigm for all music, and the emergence of sophisticated forms of notation – these are among the factors associated with this characteristically modern conception of a 'work'.
5. See e.g. the discussions by Cook (1998b) and Higgins (1991), among many others.
6. Wolterstorff (1987), 117ff. 7. Ibid., 120.

begged), I need at least to map some of the routes through the musical-aesthetic jungle with which I feel most content, even if I cannot justify here adequately why I choose these routes and not others.

Unnecessary polarisations

The way in which music 'means' has been an issue of perennial fascination and debate. Two broad tendencies in music theory may be distinguished. We may speak of *extrinsic* theories of musical meaning which pivot on what is believed to be music's capacity to relate in some manner to some extra-musical/non-musical object or objects or states of affairs (e.g. emotions, ideas, physical objects, events etc.); and *intrinsic* theories which lay the principal stress on the relationships between the constituent elements of music itself.[8] The history of musical aesthetics 'may well impress us as a kind of pendulum, swinging between these two conceptions, across a whole spectrum of intermediary nuances'.[9] But there seems little to be gained by polarising these as competing and mutually exclusive. For, as even common sense would seem to indicate, music generates meaning *both* through its own intrinsic relations *and* through its extra-musical connections.[10] It is hard to give any satisfactory account of musical meaning which rigorously excludes one or the other.

Music's referential limitations

Certainly, music of itself does not in any very obvious way 'point' with precision and reliability to particular extra-musical entities. The inadequacy of certain linguistic theories of reference when applied to music has long been recognised. The sound-patterns of music do not normally 'refer' beyond themselves with consistency and clarity to the world of specific objects, events, ideas etc. Music can provide virtually nothing in the way of propositions or assertions. Peter Kivy comments: 'even the simplest narration seems to require a propositional content beyond that of music to convey. Music cannot say that Jack and Jill went up the hill. It cannot say Mary had a little lamb, and the failure must lie in the inability

8. The latter type will tend to align with structuralist semantics, and is sometimes brought under the umbrella of 'formalism', although this term is notoriously polyvalent and perhaps should now be dropped altogether from the discussion. **9.** Nattiez (1990), 110. **10.** 'If there is an *essential being* of music defined from a semiological vantage point, I would locate that being in the *instability* of the two fundamental modes of musical referring' (ibid., 118).