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Theology, Music and Time

JEREMY S. BEGBIE

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Theology, Music and Time

Theology, Music and Time aims to show how music can enrich and advance theology, extending our wisdom about God and God's ways with the world. Instead of asking: what can theology do for music?, it asks: what can music do for theology? Jeremy Begbie argues that music's engagement with time gives the theologian invaluable resources for understanding how it is that God enables us to live 'peaceably' with time as a dimension of the created world. Without assuming any specialist knowledge of music, he explores a wide range of musical phenomena – rhythm, metre, resolution, repetition, improvisation – and through them opens up some of the central themes of the Christian faith – creation, salvation, eschatology, time and eternity, eucharist, election and ecclesiology. In so doing, he shows that music can not only refresh theology with new models, but also release it from damaging habits of thought which have hampered its work in the past.

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 2004

First published in printed format 2000

ISBN 0-511-03750-3 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN 0-521-44464-0 hardback

ISBN 0-521-78568-5 paperback

To Helen, Mark, Heather and Emma

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Acknowledgements

An enterprise like this does not see the light of day without a large network of support, going back many years. I owe an immense debt of gratitude to one of my first teachers, Colin Kingsley of Edinburgh University, whose academic interests combined with high standards of performance provided an inspiration which has never waned, and to James Torrance, who many years ago introduced me to the limitless intellectual wonder of the Christian faith.

The Principal, Graham Cray, and the staff and students of Ridley Hall, Cambridge have shown much encouragement as this book has gradually taken shape. I am deeply grateful for dialogue with ordinands and graduate students at Ridley, and with many members of the University of Cambridge. David Ford has been a model of encouragement from the moment the idea for this book was first conceived. In numerous ways, his irrepressible intellectual enthusiasm has stretched me far beyond the predictable and commonplace. My thanks are also due to Daniel Hardy, whose extraordinary multi-disciplinary instincts have enabled me to reach much further with ‘theology through music’ than I initially thought possible. Over many years, Colin Gunton has provided both intellectual food and musical insight. Alan Torrance’s support, musical acumen and theological rigour have proved enormously important. Steven Guthrie has read much of the text and offered penetrating insights and sound advice, and my colleague at Ridley Hall, Michael Thompson, provided very helpful comments on the biblical sections. I am also very grateful for many illuminating conversations with Richard Bauckham, Maggi Dawn, John De Gruchy, Robert Duerr, Malcolm Guite, Trevor Hart, Simon Heathfield, Roger Lundin, James MacMillan, Stephen May, Ann Nickson, Micheal O’Siadhail, John Polkinghorne, Tiffany Robinson,

Andrew Rumsey, Chris Russell, Luci Shaw, Janet Martin Soskice, Dal Schindell, Paul Spicer, Nigel Swinford, Stephen Sykes, John Tavener, Anthony Thiselton, Rowan Williams and Tom Wright.

Much of what follows arose from my experience teaching outside the UK. I have greatly benefited from discussions with friends, scholars, musicians and many artists at Regent College, Vancouver; Fuller Seminary, Pasadena; Wheaton College, Illinois; Calvin College, Michigan; as well as at the universities of Yale, Stanford, Berkeley, Edinburgh, London and Cape Town. A large part of the text was completed while on sabbatical leave in 1995 at the Center for Theological Inquiry in Princeton – I greatly appreciate the considerable help I received from the scholars and staff there.

This book is one of the main outcomes of a project entitled ‘Theology Through the Arts’ which I have directed at the Centre for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies in the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge. I could never have finished without the enthusiasm, insight and sheer hard work of my colleagues in that project, Fiona Bond and more recently Ally Barrett, together with the invaluable research assistance of Catherine Price. I am indebted also to Andrew Pearson, who patiently assembled the musical examples, and to Michelle Arnold, who compiled the indexes. The British and Foreign Bible Society have provided substantial funding for ‘Theology Through the Arts’ – without their support I would never have had time to complete this work, and I am immensely grateful to them.

Cambridge University Press has provided three editors over the years to nag me – Alex Wright, Ruth Parr and Kevin Taylor. Their patience and dedication have been exemplary, and Lucy Carolan has been superlative with the copy-editing.

Inevitably, families contribute an enormous amount to this kind of publication, and bear much of the hidden cost. My gratitude extends to my loyal parents, whose love for learning and wide range of interests have proved so influential upon me. And the largest debt of thanks must go to my forbearing wife, Rachel, and to my children, Helen, Mark, Heather and Emma, to whom this book is warmly dedicated.

Introduction

Introduction

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 'post-modern' 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.

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).

of music to express the appropriate propositional content even of such limiting cases of narration.¹¹ Attempts to account for musical meaning in terms of representation, in the manner of, say, a representational painting, are no less problematic. Music's capacities in this respect are extremely limited, and the pleasure derived from musical experience does not seem to arise to any large extent from its representative powers.¹²

This is not to deny that music has been and can be employed quite deliberately to refer specifically to extra-musical phenomena (as with the depiction of bird-song in the second movement of Beethoven's *Pastoral* symphony). It can be ordered in such a way as to correspond to some kind of atmospheric or pictorial reality (as in Debussy's *La Mer* or Musorgsky's *Pictures at An Exhibition*). It can be made to interact with extra-musical narrative or sequence of events (as in Richard Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel* or Paul Dukas' *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*). A musical phrase or passage may be employed to indicate a character or event in, say, a music-drama of some sort (as so often in Wagner). Units of music, from motifs to whole pieces, can come to acquire an instantly recognisable significance. Composers for television, film and video rely heavily on these kinds of connections. But in these instances, what we hear would still be formally justified even if the connections were unknown or ignored. (The fact that the same tone-patterns can be employed successfully in radically different contexts strengthens the point.) The principal reason for this will become clear as we proceed: musical tones become meaningful, not fundamentally because of their relation to anything to which they might of themselves 'point' – not even other tones – but because they are *dynamically and intrinsically interrelated* to preceding and coming sounds. This is not an accidental feature of music derived from our present mode of interest in music; it would appear to belong to the heart of the way music turns sounds into tones. This feature of music is crucial to the main concerns of this book.

Music's interconnectedness

Nevertheless, we should be careful not to jump to the conclusion that musical meaning is best considered as locked up in its own autonomous zone, as if the rationality of music were somehow wholly intra-musical. The ideology of musical autonomy, the cult of what Kivy calls 'music alone',¹³ has had a long and distinguished run for its money, even though

11. Kivy (1984), 159.

12. S. Davies (1994), ch. 2; Scruton (1997), ch. 5.

13. Kivy (1990).

its hold may have loosened considerably in the last few decades.¹⁴ Indeed, just because music is relatively weak in consistent referral, it is generally freer than, say, language to interact with its contexts in the generation of meaning. Musical sounds relate to extra-musical phenomena and experience in a wide variety of ways, not only extrinsically by convention and ascription, but intrinsically by virtue of the properties of sounds, and of sound-producing and sound-receiving entities. 'Pure music,' Nicholas Cook reminds us, 'is an aesthete's (and music theorist's) fiction'.¹⁵ Or, as I sometimes say to my students, 'there is more to music than meets the ear'.

In this book, our particular interest is in music's temporality. One way in which music becomes meaningful for us is through the interplay between its temporal processes and a vast range of temporal processes which shape our lives in the world – from the rhythm of breathing to the coming and going of day and night. It will be our contention that this interplay can be of considerable interest to the theologian. But with this general point in mind, more specific connections between the musical and extra-musical need to be noted. I mention only four.

First, in musicology it has become commonplace to emphasise the *social and cultural embeddedness of musical practices*. It is not sound-patterns alone which mean but people who mean through producing and receiving sound-patterns in relation to each other. The *bête noire* here is 'essentialism': treating music as if it were an asocial, acultural (and ahistorical) phenomenon, with no intrinsic ties to contingent, shared human interests.¹⁶ Music always, to some extent, embodies social and cultural reality – no matter how individualistically produced, no matter how autonomous with respect to intended function, now matter how intertwined with the circumstances of a particular composer.

14. See e.g. Cook (1998b), Higgins (1991), Norris (1989), Hargreaves and North (1997).

Theories of the 'self-containedness' of music are members of a larger family of theories which promote the view that 'genuine art must forgo all attachments to language, meaning, and content in order to enjoy autonomous self-referentiality' (Thomas 1995, 6). Cf. Begbie (1991b), 193ff., 215ff. 15. Cook (1998a), 92.

16. This takes us to the heart of what is sometimes called the 'New' musicology – a name coined by Lawrence Kramer in 1990. Nicholas Cook (who believes this musicology is now 'mainstream') writes: 'Central to it is the rejection of music's claim to be autonomous of the world around it, and in particular to provide direct, unmediated access to absolute values of truth and beauty. This is on two grounds: first, that there are no such things as absolute values (all values are socially constructed), and second that there can be no such thing as unmediated access; our concepts, beliefs, and prior experiences are implicated in all our perceptions. The claim that there are absolute values which can be directly known is therefore an ideological one, with music being enlisted to its service. A musicology that is 'critical' in the sense of critical theory, that aims above all to expose ideology, must then demonstrate that music is replete with social and political meaning'. (Cook 1998b, 117).

Among other things, this means recognising the enormous variety of social roles music can play – establishing cohesion between people, arousing emotion, expressing grief, praising a deity, putting to sleep, and so on. Listening to music for its own sake – ‘disinterested’ aesthetic contemplation in a hushed concert-hall, for example – is only *one* of the uses to which music can be put. To insist on it as the *sine qua non* of true music is restrictive and distorting.¹⁷

In this study, at various points some of the links between musical practices and wider socio-cultural realities will be traced. However, it needs to be said that the links are often extremely hard to trace with any precision. Most promising are attempts to discover correspondences or parallels between the structures of music and the formal structural characteristics of social and cultural practices, but the waters here are very muddy, and we have to admit that some commonly quoted accounts of music in relation to cultural concerns have been very tenuous. Furthermore, it is wise to resist a social reductionism which would seek to account for music exclusively in terms of socio-cultural determinants, or which would forget that different kinds of music may be socially and culturally conditioned to different degrees.¹⁸

17. I argue this in relation to the arts in general, in Begbie (1991b), 186ff. One of the most useful discussions of the social situatedness of music is provided by Nicholas Wolterstorff, who argues, drawing especially on Alasdair MacIntyre, that musical practices are intrinsically ‘social practices’ (Wolterstorff 1987).

18. This should make us cautious about the more unguarded claims made for the ‘New’ musicology. A significant stream of ‘ideological criticism’ would seek to construe music fundamentally (and, sometimes it would seem, solely) as the product of power relations in a particular society. Cf. e.g. Ballantine (1984); McClary (1991); L. Kramer (1990, 1995). Accordingly, ‘the critic must assume the role of undeceiver, enabling us to perceive truly what has been enchanted, mystified, and hallowed in the interests of power’ (Scruton 1997, 428). This can veer perilously close to treating music-makers and music-hearers as little more than ciphers of group interests. While a piece of music may indeed reflect, endorse and reinforce the social conditions (including the power relations) in which it is made, it may also question, extend and even reject them. Sometimes it may come close to transcending them altogether. Indeed, the ideological dimensions may be what is least interesting about a piece of music. Similarly with hearing music: the way a person hears music may be markedly out of line with his/her society’s dominant habits. In addition, a rush to trace social meanings and power-plots in music will risk overlooking the configurations of sounds themselves and their own particular character. It is interesting to observe how a prominent musicologist like Nicholas Cook can react strongly against the notion of musical works as autonomous, asocial and ahistorical but then fail to find any convincing way out of a vicious vortex of social and cultural constructivism (Cook 1998b). He insists that music ‘is *not* a phenomenon of the natural world but a human construction’ (131), without considering the possibility that it might be, in very profound senses, both. He attacks the idea of ‘private consciousness’ as a bourgeois social construction (128f.), but the same could be said of his conviction that ‘human consciousness [is] something that is irreducibly public’ (128), a belief which he thinks can pull us back from the abyss of extreme relativism, saving us from a ‘pessimism’ about understanding music and using it as a means of personal and social transformation. What is missing here is any rooting of

Second, music-making and hearing arise from *an engagement with the distinctive configurations of the physical world we inhabit*. The entities of the extra-human physical world vibrate in certain ways and produce certain kinds of sound waves in accordance with their constitution. This very obvious point has in fact frequently been forgotten, but can be used to open up large fields of theological import, not least in relation to time.

Third, musical practice is inescapably *bodily*, another matter of theological potential, as we shall see. Our own physical, physiological and neurological make-up mediates and shapes the production and experience of sound to a very high degree.

Fourth, it has long been recognised that music has very strong connections with our *emotional life*. Vast intellectual energy has been invested in trying to trace the links. While it is going too far to claim that musical meaning lies purely and entirely in its emotional content – this is another kind of reductionism we need to avoid – music does seem able to ‘express’ emotion in remarkably powerful ways. Theories which identify this expressive content with the composer’s emotions or with the emotion evoked in hearers will inevitably falter.¹⁹ Some would argue that there is a

musical sounds in features of the extra-human physical world and universal features of the human constitution, features which can work *along with* social and cultural shaping.

We might add that to over-play the socio-cultural card will likely result in the matter of *aesthetic value* being dissolved too quickly into matters of social utility or function. There is a justifiable attack on the elevation of the notion of the ‘aesthetic’ and associated concepts of ‘high’ and ‘fine’ art etc. But much less justifiable is the intensification of the critique such that the entire concept of aesthetic value is treated, for example, as a particular moment or phase in the development of Enlightenment bourgeois culture, to be accounted for solely in terms of that culture’s economic infrastructure. It is disingenuous to put such historical or cultural limitations on the concept of the aesthetic – both as an object and as a mode of perception. The examples of something akin to both, *outside* modern bourgeois culture, are legion. See Scruton (1997), 474ff. It is probably wiser to argue that there is an irreducible dimension of reality which we term ‘aesthetic’, exemplified in various qualities, qualities which have always been valued to some extent; that music, as with any art, can possess these qualities; that there is an associated posture or attitude with respect to these qualities; and that at various times and places in the history of musical practice the aesthetic and its corresponding attitude have been elevated to a place of considerable importance, and this for a variety of reasons. On these matters, see Begbie (1991b), 186–232.

19. It is fallacious to attribute the emotional content of a piece of music to the artist who created it, as if it were our task to recover the content of the artist’s emotional state when he or she was composing. Thousands of pieces bear little or no resemblance to the composer’s emotional condition at the time of composition. It is also fallacious to identify expressive content with an emotion evoked. A work may express grief without our feeling grief. A similar point should be made about emotional associations – music may come to have strong emotional associations for us, but we would be misguided if we identified its expressive content with such associations.

Mention should be made here of Deryck Cooke’s classic *tour de force* entitled *The Language of Music* (1959). The author proposes and defends the thesis that music is a ‘language of the emotions’. He argues that a musical lexicon can be devised which assigns emotive

resemblance between musical patterns and emotional patterns in the mind. Emotions are essentially states of mind which music in some way resembles: to say that music expresses an emotion is simply to draw attention to the resemblance.²⁰ Although it cannot be denied that there will be correspondences between the temporal patterns of emotional experience and the temporal patterns of music, there are weaknesses in this kind of account. In addition to presupposing too readily that emotions are best construed as mental states, resemblance theories of this sort trade on the main drawback of representational theories of music, the notion that essential to the understanding of music is the hearing, in addition to the sounds, of some kind of discrete referent which claims our intrinsic interest – in this case, an emotion or emotional pattern. It is far from obvious that this is what happens. Even in cases where a composer may deliberately draw our attention to emotional states – for instance, through a title or other associated texts – it is normally quite possible for the music to be intelligible without attending to the texts or their reference. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the most interesting question about

footnote 19 (*cont.*)

meanings to basic terms of musical vocabulary, even if such meanings are not rigidly fixed. In Western music since 1400, Cooke points to numerous correlations between emotions and particular patterns of melodies, rhythms and harmonies which have been used to convey these emotions. Such evidence suggests that music is a means of communicating moods and feelings. The sheer number of musical figurations which Cooke identifies in similar expressive contexts, across a wide historical spread of music, is impressive.

Nonetheless, the weaknesses of his case are considerable, most of them hinging on the weight he is prepared to put on the music–language comparison – he too quickly assumes linguistic principles are operating in music, he underplays the malleability and context-dependent character of musical expression, he places too much stress on music as a means of emotional communication, he pays little attention to large-scale musical form, and it is not clear whether he believes expressiveness to be a property of the music or an emotional state to which it refers. For discussions of Cooke, see S. Davies (1994), 25f.; Scruton (1997), 203ff.; Begbie (1991b), 243ff.; Zuckerkandl (1960).

20. The classic account is offered by Susanne Langer, who speaks of an analogy of dynamic structure between emotion and music, and argues that music is an iconic symbol of mental states. Music conveys not the content of specific feelings but the *form* of feelings (Langer 1953). For her, music is an example of ‘presentational’ symbolism. A presentational symbol does not symbolise by means of fixed units of meaning as in the case of language or discursive symbolism. The elements of a presentational symbol are understood only through the meaning of the whole symbol as its elements interrelate with each other. A presentational symbol is a dynamic instrument of discovery and clarification rather than a purveyor of static references; it does not so much assert as articulate (Langer 1957, ch. 4). A piece of music, Langer believes, is a non-linguistic presentational symbol. It symbolises human feelings, not by ostensive denotation, but through possessing the same temporal structure as some segment or segments of emotional life. The dynamic structure of a musical work and the form in which emotions are experienced can resemble each other in their patterns of motion and rest, tension and release, fulfilment, excitation, sudden change, etc. Music, and indeed all art, ‘is the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling’ (Langer 1953, 40). For extended criticism of Langer, see S. Davies (1994), 123–34.

music and emotion is bypassed and left unexplained: what emotional *benefit* do we gain by listening to music, especially by repeated hearing? Models of similarity or resemblance by themselves tend to be too static, allowing little room for what would seem to be a complex interaction between our emotional life and music.

Roger Scruton has suggested a promising way of understanding emotional expression through music, and it links with important concerns in this book.²¹ He challenges the view that emotions are to be located solely in some inner or 'subjective' life, the conditions of which are then externalised through music. Though emotions may have an 'inner' aspect, they are publicly recognisable states of an organism, displayed in desires, beliefs and actions. Further, they implicate the whole personality and are intrinsically bound up with our relation to other people. Emotions become what they essentially are through their public expression – they are formed and amended through dialogue with others. Hence the expression of an emotion is also to some extent the creating of an emotion, and this is one of the ways in which a human subject comes to self-awareness and maturity. Normally, though emotions may include feelings, they are also motives to actions – we act *out of* fear, joy, sadness, or whatever. Emotions are also intentional states: they are *of* or *about* an object, and the most immediate object of an emotion is a thought – about an external object or about the subject who has the emotion. (Fear involves the thought that something threatens me, joy the thought there is something which is good, beautiful, or whatever.)

Building on this, Scruton outlines an account of emotional engagement hinging on the notion of 'sympathetic response'. These responses are quite complex in structure but the heart of the matter is clear enough: if you are afraid of death, and I, observing your fear, come to share in it while not being afraid for myself, then my fear is a sympathetic response. Sympathetic responses are aroused more fully by fictional situations than non-fictional ones, for in the latter, our interests are at stake and this clouds our sympathies. In the world of fiction, our feelings are free from the urge to intervene, to do something with or towards somebody, for there are no concrete 'others' to be the objects of sympathy. Through the exercise of our emotions in this way, we can be educated – our emotional life can be stretched, widened, deepened. Sympathetic response is not merely a matter of 'inner' feeling but also of action and gesture – I

21. Scruton (1997), 346–64.

comfort a bereaved friend, I put a hand on his shoulder. But in the fictional world we have action and gesture without objects, sympathy without any concrete person or situation in view. Among the most remarkable of such gestures-without-objects, according to Scruton, is dancing – when I ‘move with’ another, I find meaning in the appearance of the other’s gestures, and respond accordingly with movements of my own, without seeking to change his predicament or share his burden. Dancing is not necessarily an aesthetic response, but it has a tendency in that direction, to involve responding to movement for its own sake. Our emotional response to musical sounds, claims Scruton, is fundamentally a sympathetic response of a similar kind, a response which does not *require* a precise object of sympathy or interest, whether a human subject or a situation perceived through the eyes of a subject.²² It is a kind of latent dancing, internalised movement, a ‘dancing to’, or ‘moving with’ the sounds, even if the actual movement may be only subliminal and not overt. Gesture, in other words, is the (often invisible) intermediary between music and emotion. We are led into a kind of ‘gravitational field’ which draws us in, we participate in a process, a journey in and through sound. As far as the emotions are concerned, through sympathetic response they are *exercised* – and we must exercise our sympathies if they are to be alive at all. Moreover, we are emotionally *educated* – our emotional life is enriched, deepened, and perhaps even re-formed. Hearing music can mean ‘the reordering of our sympathies’. Scruton remarks: ‘The great triumphs of music . . . involve this synthesis, whereby a musical structure, moving according to its own logic, compels our feelings to move along with it, and so leads us to rehearse a feeling at which we would not otherwise arrive.’²³ Music can therefore not only reflect an emotional disposition already experienced – this is what resemblance theories latch on to – but can also enrich, nuance and even re-shape our emotion, affecting subsequent emotional experience. This would in part account for music being so emotionally beneficial and why we can derive pleasure again and again from the same piece. We can be emotionally exercised and educated.

Whatever questions we might ask about Scruton’s account (and clearly much more could be said about the specific links between music and emotion), it chimes in with many of the theological strands which will appear

22. When words, images and other media are linked to music (and to some extent, *all* music has such links), these other media can serve to provide the ‘formal objects’ of the emotions embodied in the music. See Cook (1998a), 94.

23. Scruton (1997), 359.