

Article

The Offence of Beauty in Modern Western Art Music

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Abstract: In recent decades, beauty has become a largely unfashionable, even offensive notion within art and philosophy. As Eastern Orthodox theologian, David Bentley Hart, has pointed out, this offence has a twofold sense. Firstly, the ‘beautiful’ has been dismissed as philosophically insignificant in comparison to the ‘sublime’ by an intellectual tradition tracing itself back to Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. Secondly, the making of apparently beautiful art has, especially after the Shoah, frequently been regarded as ethically offensive in the face of suffering in the world. The present essay discusses how these two critiques of the beautiful find themselves reflected in twentieth and twenty-first century musical aesthetics, with particular reference to the writings of Theodor W. Adorno, and asks what solutions have been found by composers of Christian sacred music in the Western tradition confronted by this ‘taboo on beauty’.

Keywords: beauty; atonality; David Hart; Adorno; Leibowitz; Messiaen

1. Introduction: The End of Aesthetics?

Both in philosophy and in art, beauty, it would seem, is out of fashion. Indeed not only out of fashion but downright offensive to the contemporary Western mind. This seemingly strange observation is one of the main starting-points for Eastern Orthodox theologian, David Bentley Hart, in *The Beauty of the Infinite*, a thought-provoking and virtuosic exploration of the aesthetic dimension of Christian truth which has lost none of its force or relevance a decade after its publication in 2003.

A scouring of the philosophical landscape leads Hart to contend that the beauty of the world of sensory phenomena is predominantly treated with contemptuous dismissal in an age characterized by radically anti-metaphysical “narratives of the sublime”, effectively demolished as a category worthy of serious thought. This, he asserts, reflects a philosophical tradition traceable back to the Enlightenment:

‘As it happens, beauty has fallen into considerable disfavor in modern philosophical discourse, having all but disappeared as a term in philosophical aesthetics. In part this is attributable to the eighteenth-century infatuation with Longinus’s distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, one of whose unfortunate effects was to reduce the scope of the beautiful to that of the pretty, the merely decorative, or the inoffensively pleasant; in the climate of postmodern thought, whose humors are congenial to the sublime but generally corrosive of the beautiful, beauty’s estate has diminished to one of mere negation, a spasm of illusory calm in the midst of being’s sublimity, its “infinite speed”’ ([1], p. 15).

Hart points out that the *locus classicus* of the divorce between the beautiful and the sublime is Immanuel Kant’s dissection of the experience of sublimity in his *Critique of Judgement* which sets the infinity of mental concepts over and against the finite reality of the phenomenal realm. The Kantian sublime radically breaks with the latter:

‘Unlike the beautiful, its manifestation is an intuition of the indeterminate, whether one encounters it in the incomprehensible vastitude of the “mathematical sublime” or in the incomprehensible natural power of the “dynamical sublime”, though, in fact, the true sublime properly resides nowhere in the things of sensibility (which can only suggest it), but only in the mind, which discovers, even in the instant of its rapture, its own essential superiority over all of nature.’ ([1], p. 45)

For Hart, this line of thought has acquired particular force in postmodern authors such as Jean-François Lyotard, who sees Kant as heralding ‘the end of an aesthetics, that of the beautiful, in the name of the final destination of the mind, which is freedom’ ([2], p. 136, quoted in [1], p. 47). Beauty is offensive to this philosophical current to the extent that it is at best an irrelevance, at worst an obstacle to reaching the philosopher’s ‘final destination’.

Going on to expose the essentially nihilistic, post-Nietzschean character of this supposed freedom, Hart’s *Beauty of the Infinite* makes an impassioned defence of the persuasive, rhetorical dimension of the Christian message over against the postmodern refusal to countenance any kind of analogy between beauty, whether natural or artistic, and the infinitely beautiful Creator.

The second ‘offence of beauty’ is perhaps less central to Hart’s overall argumentation, but is stated no less explicitly in his preliminary remarks: with its implicit promise of transcendent healing of the broken world, beauty is viewed as a suspicious distraction from the violence of experience which demands more than a purely aesthetic response:

‘the marmorean repose of a child lately dead of meningitis might present a strikingly piquant tableau; Cambodian killing fields were often lushly flowered [...] Beauty seems to promise a reconciliation beyond the contradictions of the moment, one that perhaps places time’s tragedies within a broader perspective of harmony and meaning, a balance between light and darkness; beauty appears to absolve being of its violences’ ([1], p. 16).

Building in the remainder of the present essay on these perceptive remarks of Hart’s, I would like to discuss how these two objections levelled against beauty by philosophy (and ethics) find themselves reflected in Western art-music in the late twentieth century (and perhaps to a lesser extent on into the twenty-first).

2. Abstraction and Rationalization

It might be argued that with the breakdown from just after 1900 onwards of the system of tonality which had held sway since the time of J.S. Bach, much modern music consciously broke loose from its traditional moorings in an unprecedented fashion. This is especially noticeable in radical works (by composers such as Pierre Boulez or Karlheinz Stockhausen) written in the decades immediately following the end of World War II. Avant-garde music distanced itself from its social roots by waging war on received notions of melody, tonal/modal harmony and musical phrasing or syntactical organization, thereby opposing analogies with song and language. Indeed, atonal music at its most uncompromising arguably goes further in also freeing itself via radical abstraction from the shackles of sensory perception, from the need to be comprehensible as an aural experience. Instead, aided by rationalizing mathematics, it strives for the freedom of Lyotard's "final destination of the mind", thus siding with the sublime against the sensorially beautiful in terms of the Kantian polarity discussed by David Bentley Hart.

With the abolition of all external referents, we have the logical end-point of the tradition of 'absolute music' beginning with Beethoven and strikingly contemporaneous with German philosophical idealism, (as musicologist Daniel Chua has pointed out at length in his highly insightful and entertaining study entitled *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* [3]). Take for example the following very ambitious declaration dating from 1949 penned by France's leading apostle of twelve-tone music, the composer and conductor René Leibowitz, which I quote in order to give a taste of the sort of equation between music and philosophy which became prevalent in the post-war years. In case anyone thinks this kind of theorizing is, to quote one leading British music historian, nothing but 'pretentious goobledgook' [4], it is worth pointing out that Leibowitz's seminal *Introduction à la musique de douze sons* was written in direct collaboration with none other than Jean-Paul Sartre. Focussing on the break with tonality in the works of Arnold Schoenberg, he claims that the modern composer effectively starts from zero, music being an expression of pure consciousness unaffected by any tonal system floating in the background and dictating the way in which elements of the music are shaped:

'in discarding the tonal system, Schoenberg to some extent places himself outside any pre-established musical contingency [...] Such an attitude of putting the musical world ' in parentheses' effectively corresponds to the act of phenomenological reduction as understood by Husserl [...] for the twelve-tone composer there can be no question of an essence preceding existence; on the contrary, it is the object in existence [*l'existant*], entirely recreated with each new compositional effort, which constitutes its own essence as well as its own laws' ([5], pp. 101–04).

Music is by its very nature maybe the most 'abstract' of the arts; the radicalization of such abstraction in instrumental music after 1945—overtly associated by Leibowitz and Sartre with existentialism—is a complex phenomenon. The implications of abstract art perhaps merit more attention than they have hitherto received on the part of theologians reading modernism's vision of the artistic endeavour as a 'sign of the times', in terms of the perception of the artist no longer as a craftsman working with the material world of sound, but as a creator *ex nihilo*.¹

¹ As Rowan Williams points out in his compelling *Grace and Necessity* [6], these implications were already intuited some decades earlier in the Thomist aesthetics of Jacques Maritain. See for example Maritain's discussion of the difference

3. Adorno and the Taboo on Musical Beauty

As for the second objection to the musically ‘beautiful’—that of its falsehood in a world deprived of beauty, the key philosophical reference-point is the highly influential writings of Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno in relationship to the crisis of musical form after 1945. In the frequently polemical discussions concerning musical composition in the second half of the twentieth century, few names continue to arouse fiercer passions than that of Adorno, whether championed as the prophet of the avant-garde or reviled as an intolerant elitist guilty of a form of cultural terrorism, a misanthrope whose forbidding rhetoric succeeded in crippling music after World War II, ‘a kind of inverse Cassandra, fated to tell untruths but to be believed’ [9]. His two-part *Philosophy of New Music* [10], perhaps the best-known articulation of Adorno’s stern dialectical vision in which the essay *Schoenberg and Progress* has as its counterfoil *Stravinsky and the Restoration*, continues to polarize opinion 70 years after its publication and to function as a seemingly inescapable starting-point for any serious debate on musical modernism². It is certainly the foundational text for a view of artistic progress as a ‘canon of prohibitions’ ([10], p. 32), translated by the post-war generation of composers into a radical rupture with all past musical idioms. Famously epitomized by the statement of the young Pierre Boulez that composers who did not follow down Schoenberg’s dodecaphonic road were “useless”, post-serialism became the official idiom of the Western European avant-garde as typified by institutions such as the Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music, where Adorno was a lecturer.

Basing its interpretation on an immanent method of criticism, *Schoenberg and Progress* focuses on the development of musical material as ‘sedimented spirit, preformed socially by human consciousness’ ([10], p. 32), mirroring the historical process. In the grim context of 1941, the latter had in Adorno’s view had reached the point at which market forces on one hand and totalitarian repression on the other had effectively liquidated even the concept of the autonomous subject. Given this bleak reality of utter alienation, Adorno asserts the bankruptcy of all artistic images of harmony (on which the tonal system is predicated) as ‘unsustainable in the face of the catastrophe toward which reality is veering’ ([10], p. 101). This goes far deeper than mere issues of style: for Adorno the whole notion of

between the divine and the human creative process in *The Frontiers of Poetry* dating from 1927 [7]. Describing the search for abstract art with particular reference to tendencies within French artistic life after Mallarmé, he asserts that “To order contemporary art to exist as abstract art, discarding every condition determining its existence in the human subject, is to have it arrogate to itself the aseity [being un-derived] of God”. ([7], p. 70). At the same time Maritain does not argue in favour of a utilitarian or merely representational view of art, recognizing that “Art itself [...] is in a way an inhuman virtue, a straining after a gratuitously creative activity, entirely absorbed in its mystery and its own laws of operation, refusing to subordinate itself either to the interests of men or to the evocation of what already exists. In short, the straining towards abstract act follows from the very essence of art, once beauty has awakened it to self-consciousness.” ([7], p. 72). Although Maritain’s thought and its place within the Catholic Intellectual Revival in France in the early twentieth century has lately been the object of excellent historical analysis on the part of Jesuit polymath Stephen Schloesser in his landmark study *Jazz Age Catholicism* [8], Maritain remains a largely neglected resource for contemporary reflection on artistic practice.

² Adorno’s *Philosophy of New Music* is maybe even more frequently cited by writers sceptical of the project of the avant-garde than by its supporters: for two recent French examples see the discussions of Adorno in Benoît Duteurtre’s *Requiem pour une avant-garde* [11] or composer Nicolas Bacri’s *Notes étrangères: considérations paradoxales sur la musique d’aujourd’hui* [12].

finished aesthetic form itself becomes untenable, as in the face of unspeakable human suffering artistic form as a structural image of reconciliation can only be equated with false consciousness, a weapon in the hands of the oppressors. For Adorno, radical negation is the only path left open: he chillingly concludes that all music's 'happiness is in the knowledge of unhappiness; all its beauty is in the denial of the semblance of the beautiful' ([10], p. 102).

This is of course an unremittingly pessimistic outlook, in that Adorno is under no illusion that such art can be "successful" either in terms of securing an audience or even in creating coherent artworks. Despite the title of the first essay of the *Philosophy of New Music*, "Schoenberg and Progress", to read Adorno as sanctioning the twelve-tone system of composition as *the* progressive method on which the future of music could be positively constructed is to misunderstand his dialectic. Although he became the uncontested principal theoretical reference of the avant-garde, he was simultaneously the first serious commentator to note the self-defeating tendency within the dodecaphonic compositional method. On one level, twelve-tone music represents total rational domination of the musical material, as the integrally organized work consumes everything via the row (the series of all twelve chromatic pitches) as *Grundgestalt*: 'twelve-tone technique approaches the ideal of mastery as domination, whose boundlessness consists in the exclusion of whatever is heteronomous, of whatever is not integrated into the continuum of this technique' ([10], p. 53).

Paradoxically, the effect of this 'mastery' is not the liberation of the composer as was promised by the break with tonality (seen as 'emancipation of the dissonance'). While Adorno clearly sees the expressionistic period of 'heroic' free atonal works (roughly 1910–1923) in Schoenberg's output as the pinnacle of his achievement, the systematic serialism which evolves from free atonality strangely leads not to increased freedom but to its opposite. With the abolition of any grammar of hierarchical relations between notes (in, for example, a chord), harmonic differentiation, the guiding principle behind the whole Germanic musical tradition dating back to Bach, becomes impossible and with it meaningful formal articulation in time and indeed expression itself. In striving for ultimate mastery, the composer as autonomous subject effectively relinquishes all power to shape the music, which is now completely opaque, alienated. All that is left is the basic arithmetic of the method, 'a machine that fulfills no function: It simply stands there, an allegory of the 'technical age'.³ Yet, via a dialectical sleight of hand of the type for which Adorno is (in)famous, it is precisely this failure to communicate which for him constitutes the 'truth-content' of New Music as it reveals the nature of historical reality itself, embracing aesthetic martyrdom in the process:

'Today the alienation inherent in the consistency of artistic technique itself forms the content of the artwork. The shocks of the incomprehensible—which artistic technique in the age of its meaninglessness dispenses—reverse. They illuminate the meaningless world. New music sacrifices itself to this. It has taken all the darkness and guilt of the world on itself.' ([10], p. 102).

The theological resonance of this final sentence is no accident; Adorno's thinking, like that of the Frankfurt School in general, has powerful undercurrents of Jewish Messianism. Charges of nihilism and

³ Here Adorno's thought strikingly parallels Jacques Ellul's concept of modern Western society as a totalizing *système technique*. Of particular relevance is Ellul's penetrating analysis of art within a technological framework in *L'empire du non-sens: l'art et la société technicienne* [13].

misanthropy frequently levelled at Adorno would be justified were it not for a highly individual form of negative theology in constant operation in his writing. Although this is mostly implicit rather than overtly stated and easily missed given his prevalent tone of ‘protest atheism’, it surfaces most clearly in the closing passage of Adorno’s *Minima moralia* of 1949:

‘The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light⁴ ([14], p. 247).

Adorno’s work of the 1940s can be read as a devastating critique of the failure of secular eschatologies of progress. The radically alienated artwork’s meaninglessness reveals the world’s need for redemption, that future beauty whose cruel absence in the present art refuses to palliate.⁵

It is of course outside the scope of this article to chart the history of twentieth-century Western art music, but the decades immediately following 1945 were marked by the emergence of an avant-garde dogma which effectively based itself on the argument of ‘historical necessity’ found in Adorno’s *Philosophy of New Music*, but without its dialectical subtlety⁶ or an understanding of the *via negativa*

⁴ This theme is profitably taken up in Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Coming of God* [15], where Jewish thinkers are credited with an indispensable role in Christian eschatology’s proper reappraisal of Jewish apocalyptic: ‘For the rebirth of Messianic thinking out of the catastrophe of Christian humanism in the First World War, we are indebted to Martin Buber, Ernst Bloch and Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno [...] They brought reason into the Jewish and Christian hope and—even more important—hope into the reason that was self-sufficient and hence self-destroying. Out of the ruins of historical rationality they rescued hope as a theological category. Without their messianic thinking, eschatology today is literally unthinkable.’ ([15], p. 30). See also Moltmann’s earlier discussion of Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Crucified God* ([16], pp. 294–95). John W. de Gruchy and Johann Baptist Metz are among other writers to have explored the theological potential in the work of the Frankfurt School.

⁵ This apophatic vision of course flies in the face of Schoenberg’s own positive view of dodecaphonic technique as providing a unifying force for music endowed with the same level of structural power as tonality, a totalizing project which would assure German musical superiority for coming centuries. Adorno’s analysis is underpinned by the belief that the immanent characteristics of artworks as objects take precedence over the intentions of their creators: he dismisses the naïve belief that an idiom historically derived from dissonance as the articulation of suffering or psychological collapse (as in a piece such as Schoenberg’s *Erwartung*) could somehow be translated into an affirmative system harnessed to technological progress, which he in any case views with extreme scepticism. This is highly ironic in that here he arguably anticipates the dead-end of a great deal of music written after 1945, where the technique of the Second Viennese School, in itself intimately linked with and shaped by a certain philosophical and cultural Central European climate) was adopted as an international “language” and therefore lay itself open to the criticism of reification as a mere self-legitimizing style divorced from any deeper meaning, thereby degenerating into the antithesis of artistic freedom—conformism:

‘What the attentive ear discovered is distorted into a trumped-up system in which the criteria of compositional right and wrong are to be abstractly verified. This explains the readiness of so many young musicians—especially in the United States, where the sustaining experiences of twelve-tone technique are wanting—to write in the “twelve-tone system” and their elation at the invention of a surrogate for tonality, as if freedom were aesthetically intolerable and needed to be furtively replaced by a new compliancy’ ([10], p. 55).

⁶ This is not altogether surprising given that Adorno’s writing presupposes an acquaintance with the categories of German philosophical thought with which the majority of composers are unfamiliar (even Pierre Boulez has admitted that as a

behind it. Music in the years after World War II would seek theoretical legitimacy by reference to philosophy, science, architecture (e.g., Xenakis) or even chance (John Cage), but certainly not beauty.

4. Sacred Music and New Tonality

The position of overtly religious composers in relation to this modernistic taboo against beauty is a complex issue. Naturally not all musical circles were equally affected by the debate, and tonal or modal music continued to be written for the church much as before by musicians who maintained their idiom unchanged. I have no wish whatsoever to belittle the contributions to the sacred musical repertoire of figures such as Maurice Duruflé, Vaughan Williams or Herbert Howells, all of whom produced substantial work after World War II, but my own interest in the context of this essay is in those composers who attempted to engage with modernism in its radicality whilst continuing to write expressive sacred music, sharing Rowan Williams's concern for 'art which is intensely serious, unconsoling, and unafraid of the complexity of a world that the secularist too can recognize'. ([6], p. 170).

As early as the end of the 1950s, dissatisfaction with the postserial idiom had begun to set in within the avant-garde as composers such as György Ligeti began to look for ways out of the aporia already indicated in the *Philosophy of New Music*, sensing that the strict application of twelve-tone technique had become a compositional straightjacket. On a technical level, experience led many to the conclusion that the possibilities of totally chromatic material had been exhausted and could only generate nondescript, identikit modernist musical objects, while philosophically it seems obvious that Adorno's call to artistic martyrdom through the embracing of a non-communicative language was an understandable response of self-immolation in the face of the extreme horror of the Third Reich and could never be translated into a general principle or long-term strategy.

The next three decades were to see spectacular defections from the serialist camp as the desire both for beauty in a more positive sense and self-expression reasserted themselves. In the cases of Arvo Pärt, Henryk Mikołaj Górecki and John Tavener, all interestingly working independently of one another, the break with the dodecaphonic idiom went hand-in-hand with the development of a new type of sacred music sometimes referred to somewhat pejoratively as 'holy minimalism'. Other composers such as Einojuhani Rautavaara, Alfred Schnittke in his later years and (in my view somewhat more problematically) Krzysztof Penderecki sought to write in a more lyrical style with tonal elements.

Critical opinion remains divided as to the artistic quality and significance of what has been termed New Tonality. Consonance is certainly no longer an offence in the postmodern musical climate, but whether this in itself constitutes genuine beauty is another issue. For some, the return to diatonic material is a liberation which demonstrates that the project of the avant-garde was, to mis-appropriate an Adornian phrase, 'an experiment with a negative outcome'. Others charge musical postmodernism with vacuity; the simple deployment of tonal chords, while not necessarily sounding 'false' as Adorno claimed in 1941, does not necessarily guarantee any sort of 'truth-content' or, to put it less polemically, carry any real artistic conviction. According to this viewpoint, which essentially repeats the critique of

young man with limited philosophical baggage he felt intimidated by Adorno). For a clear and penetrating discussion of the central Adornian issues concerning music, see Max Paddison's *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* [17]. A detailed but far more difficult exegesis of the *Philosophy of New Music* can be found in David Roberts' *Art and Enlightenment: Aesthetic Theory after Adorno* [18].

neo-classicism found in the second part of the *Philosophy of New Music* entitled *Stravinsky and the Restoration*, tonality—like the bourgeois society which generated it—is irrevocably lost and all attempts to restore it doomed to failure. Indeed, as with other art-forms, it seems that some postmodern composers, of whom Gustav Mahler was maybe the first in another age, anticipate this criticism by flaunting banality and meaninglessness as elements of style (though without Mahler’s metaphysical nostalgia).

It is hard to refute the suggestion that the scarring of humanity and our planet is such that beauty, for which tonal harmony is both a metaphor and a potential medium, cannot simply be taken for granted as artistic subject-matter; a true appreciation of the natural and human world is indissociable from a lament both over social injustice and the negative effect of post-Enlightenment culture’s domination of nature. In this context it is worth emphasizing that the so-called “holy minimalists” all reverted to consonant music subsequent to a participation in the avant-garde, whether European (Pärt, Górecki, Taverner) or in the American environment influenced by John Cage.⁷ Whether consciously or unconsciously, their music’s refusal to participate in the continuation of an essentially Germanic artistic teleology would seem to endorse the Adornian critique of the Enlightenment as a dead end, while of course rejecting the Hegelian conceptual apparatus on which that critique still relies. It would be a crude simplification to reduce the work of these composers to a common agenda, but they share a concern to obviate the pessimistic *fin de partie* (the reference to Beckett is wholly intentional) of Western art-music in its postserial form by a *ressourcement* that is either geographical (non-Western elements in Reich, Johnson) and/or historical (the allusions to music pre-dating the enlightenment in Pärt, Gorecki and Taverner). At the same time they resist the nihilism of the post-Nietzschean, ‘anything goes’ variant of postmodernism, whose collages of universally available historical and stylistic idioms communicate “pure affirmation” without any attempt to construe meaning.

Minimalism constitutes one potent exit strategy from the crisis of musical modernism. Its spiritual achievements of minimalism are considerable, examples being the shattering austerity of Arvo Pärt’s *Kanon Pokojanen* (Liturgy of Repentance, 1997), where radical musical simplicity and self-emptying penitence fuse to stunning effect, or the granitic *Beatus Vir* (1979) of Górecki.⁸ The facile charge that the return to the simplest of tonal/modal means is an escapist abdication from contemporary social reality moreover ignores the fact that both composers just mentioned were actively involved in resistance to Eastern Bloc Communism. Just as ill-founded are the accusations of musical vacuity; given that many minimal works are overtly devotional in nature and are not conceived as exercises in the demonstration of technical ability for the benefit of music critics, the negative judgements emanating from some quarters of the musical establishment ought perhaps not to be surprising.⁹ Indeed, the

⁷ Although their work does not feature so frequently in discussions of sacred music, here I would include Steve Reich and Tom Johnson, whose output includes the imposing and theologically engaged *Bonhoeffer Oratorio* (1988–1992) and the monumental Zen-influenced cycle *Organ and Silence* (2000).

⁸ Górecki’s most successful work is arguably not the highly moving but somewhat one-dimensional *Third Symphony* (especially when to my taste spiritualized out of its rugged, earthbound context in the polished bestselling recording conducted by David Zinman with Dawn Upshaw) but the wider-ranging “Copernicus” symphony Op. 31 of a few years earlier which combines elements both of Górecki’s modernist and minimalist periods.

⁹ I doubt whether Pärt, Górecki or Taverner would be unduly concerned at allegations of musical fideism; although I would not like to assert clear categorical boundaries in this respect, the primary aim of their works would appear to be worship rather than theological reflection or apologetics.

conscious ‘poverty’ of means employed may be seen as articulating an important message; minimalism’s very strength would appear to derive from a radical paring down of the material and an implicit critique of the hubris of much of the Western tradition’s search for subjective expression in art.

The question nevertheless arises as to what other options may be open to Judeo-Christian composers in search of means of contemporary expression who wish to avoid an unreflecting conservatism while going beyond the effective but necessarily narrow focus of the minimalists? It is here that I would argue that the trajectory of Olivier Messiaen provides material for potentially fruitful reflection.

5. Olivier Messiaen

Olivier Messiaen’s early style is one of the most immediately recognizable of any twentieth-century composer, not least because he himself was so explicit about its constituent elements. By the time of the publication of his *Technique de mon langage musical* in 1944, the compendium of his technical devices was already well-defined (his celebrated *modes à transposition limitée*, use of so-called Hindu and Greek rhythms...). Messiaen had evolved a highly personal and controversial idiom which shocked some by its modernity, while offending others by its unabashed harmonic voluptuousness, the latter including the young Pierre Boulez, who famously described the first extracts from Messiaen’s *Turangalîla-symphonie* to be performed as ‘brothel music’ (*musique de bordel*) at their première in 1948.

Although somewhat allergic to philosophical jargon and remote from the Central European intellectual tradition both analyzed and personified by Adorno, Messiaen found himself at the centre of French post-war aesthetic debates both as a composer and a pedagogue. As a teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, his class became the spawning-ground for many of the leading avant-garde composers of the generation after 1945, although Messiaen himself taught analysis rather than composition and (unlike the highly partisan Leibowitz) refrained from aligning himself with any movement. His own pieces from the years following the completion of *Turangalîla*, certainly bear the marks of the aesthetic debates of the time. Although nowhere in his pedagogical writings¹⁰ or commentaries on his own music is an overt admission to the ‘taboo on beauty’ to be found, it is striking that Messiaen’s works from the period 1949–1951 (notably the *Quatre Etudes de rythme* for piano and the two large organ works *Messe de la Pentecôte* and above all the *Livre d’orgue*) see him move in the direction of increasing abstraction and intellectualization typical of the epoch. Messiaen’s unashamed hallmark tonic and ‘added sixth’ chords of his music up until *Turangalîla*, provocatively affirmative to the point of kitsch, are banished in favour of an austere linearity; although there is a subsequent loosening of this idiom in Messiaen’s remaining works of the 1950s, it is not until the mid-1960s (with *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* and *La Transfiguration*) that Messiaen reintegrates certain elements of his luxuriant earlier style into his compositional language.

¹⁰ Curiously, Jean Boivin’s *La Classe de Messiaen* [19] suggests that Messiaen as a teacher was not untouched by the repressive attitude found in doctrinaire avant-garde circles towards melodic writing and ‘forbidden’ intervals (pointing out the appearance of octaves in his pupil’s compositions, for example, or advising his student Akira Tamba in 1963 that ‘There are currently two ways of approaching contemporary music: one must either go through twelve-tone technique or *musique concrète*, so choose’ ([19], pp. 379–80). A charitable interpretation would be that Messiaen’s comments reveal a realistic pedagogical concern for the acceptance of the younger composers’ work in a rigid musical climate, rather than a statement concerning the aesthetic validity of the styles in question.

There has been much speculation as to the reasons behind these stylistic shifts; less charitable critics have sometimes claimed that Messiaen's turn away from aural beauty to cerebral serial rigour was either a case of naïve pandering to fashion or a cynical act of self-preservation in the face of the dogmatic revolutionary zeal of his pupils. This interpretation is not as fanciful as it might seem: in comments of later years, Messiaen distanced himself from twelve-tone works such as the *Modes de valeurs et d'intensités*, which he came to regard as emotionally frigid intellectual exercises. There is for example a hint of earnestness as well as jest in his gently self-deprecating comments on the *Livre d'orgue*, whose recourse to serialism he later described as 'a sacrifice to the idols of the twentieth century'¹¹ ([20], pp. 226–28). However, there is no doubting the seriousness of his engagement with the techniques of modernism; a balanced appreciation ought justly to emphasize both Messiaen's openness to new musical currents and his unrelenting desire to harness exploration to an underlying Christian purpose which keeps his abstraction in check. Even in the most dryly abstruse and least accessible passages of the *Livre d'orgue*, he attempts to relate his chosen musical devices to theological concepts such as the 'incomprehension surrounding the mystery of the Holy Trinity' ([20], p. 181). Moreover, he clearly and crucially maintains the dividing-line between the type of speculation invited by the imagery of the Old Testament prophets (as in Ezekiel's vision of *Les yeux dans les roues*) and speculation for its own sake as a demonstration of the conceptual power of the human mind. Messiaen is certainly attracted by the sublime, as for example indicated by the title of the 3rd movement of the *Livre d'orgue*, *Les mains de l'abîme*. His response to the abyss, however, is not that of Kant's *Critique*: the overwhelming of the senses does not lead to an awareness of the conceptual superiority of the mind but to a sense of holy fear. The sublime and the beautiful are for Messiaen not divorced but rather indissolubly linked, as a quotation of Rilke's 1st Duino Elegy in his compositional treatise makes clear in relation to his reading of the Biblical prophets:

'The beautiful is that degree of the awesome which we can still bear ... *we can admire it, for it scorns to destroy us ... Every angel is terrifying* [...] The divine visions of the Prophets have this terrifying beauty. Terrifying, searing and at the same time pacifying. They leave us overwhelmed while communicating to us something of their peaceful force' ([20], p. 181).¹²

Equally central to Messiaen's thinking is the inseparability of artistic beauty and that of creation. For Adorno any reference to the natural realm on the part of art had been essentially rendered impossible on account of the self-legitimizing appeal to nature by totalitarianism¹³ (both in its Fascist and Socialist

¹¹ See Peter Bannister, 'Messiaen as preacher and evangelist in the context of European modernism.' ([21], pp. 29–39).

¹² Translation and italicization (quote from Rilke) mine.

¹³ An awareness of this political background helps to understand the occasional excesses of Adorno's polemical style as exemplified by his seemingly unjustified and mis-directed tirade *Glosse über Sibelius* written for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1938. Although it is difficult to detect any unsavoury political undertones in the admittedly nationalistic compositions of the by-then ageing Finnish composer, it is not hard to see why the Nazis would have been interested in co-opting his pantheistic symphonic music in the service of their own Nordic pagan mythology. For Adorno the link between nature-worship and Fascist regression is explicit: 'Sibelius's supporters scream in chorus: nature is all, nature is all. Great Pan, and where necessary blood and earth (*Blut und Boden*), step up into the picture.' An example of the avant-garde's view of the illegitimacy of appeals to nature—and by implication the evocation of natural beauty—can be found in an article for *Die Reihe*, a journal associated with the Darmstadt school, written by Herbert Eimert in 1957: 'In

Realist variants); bolstered by an unshakable Catholic theology and helped by geographical distance Messiaen obviates this problem by ignoring the whole trajectory of the Austro-German tradition and its concomitant view of music as the expression of subjectivity. This does not however mean that he seeks a return to the tonal system as objectively beautiful; the grammatical organization of tonality he (correctly) perceives as a social and historical construct that should not be preserved at all costs. Instead, he anchors his music in two natural phenomena whose objectivity cannot be contested. The first is *la résonance*, i.e., the overtone series. This is part of creation and cannot be superseded by man-made strategies which ignore the physical properties of sound, its existence as aural reality. At a time when for many composers written notation of music had become a question of transcribing abstract thought, Messiaen's historical position is somewhat atypical in this regard.¹⁴

The second natural phenomenon is birdsong, which Messiaen regards as ontologically prior to human music—it is ornithology which allows him, starting with a series of works in the 1950s exclusively (and perhaps at first somewhat monotonously) based on birdsong, to avoid the aporia of the avant-garde and the whole issue of the crisis of subjective expression.¹⁵ Messiaen's language may not be to all tastes, but posterity would appear to have vindicated his aesthetic position: of all the major composers associated with the musical vanguard in Western Europe in the second half of the 20th century, Messiaen is maybe the only one to have been able to appeal consciously to beauty with impunity.

With the gradual thawing of the ideological climate from the 1960s onwards—as the trauma of the experience of the Second World War receded—it is understandable that several composers of Messiaen's generation (Lutosławski and Dutilleux being prime examples) should have moved towards greater lyricism in their later work. Interestingly, for Messiaen, unlike the somewhat younger 'holy minimalists', this does not represent a dialectical movement away from modernism and conditioned by it as its negative image. Instead Messiaen's late masterpieces display an extremely individual combination of modernist techniques with the harmonic affirmation of his early works, a synthesis which arguably leads to some of Messiaen's greatest achievements such as the opera *St François d'Assise*. This inclusive attitude finds a parallel in his Thomist standpoint on the relationship between space-time and eternity as articulated in 1945 in his commentary on the last of the *Trois petites liturgies (Psalmodie de l'Ubiquité par l'amour)*: 'The words: 'Succession is simultaneity for you' express ... the composer's desire to escape time with its barriers and divisions'.¹⁶

the recent past, nothing was more in vogue than 'Nature'; not its secondary version, dominated by the supra-natural authority of the artist (as is sometimes understood in our milieu) but primal, pseudo-ontological nature decorated with Orphism, where one finds grouped together the categories of race, people, blood and soil. This hijacking of nature is perhaps one of the reasons why art can no longer be brought back to nature. What despotism wants is not reason and order, but the "return to nature", or, to speak like Günther Anders; "the little word *Nature* is the one favoured by terror." (Cited Esteban Buch, *Figures politiques de la technique sérieuse* ([22], pp. 213–26. Translation mine.)

¹⁴ Writing in the 1960s in a far more genial tone than two decades earlier, Adorno himself commented on the negative consequences of the "disempowerment of the living, listening act as the authentic constituent of music" ([23], p. 657).

¹⁵ It is interesting to note that, writing in 1961, Antoine Goléa—who was Messiaen's translator in Darmstadt—interpreted the latter's insistence on the superiority of natural to human music as an expression of pessimism concerning humanity stemming from the personal difficulties in Messiaen's life in the 1950s, most notably the mental disintegration of his first wife Claire Delbos (see Antoine Goléa, *Rencontres avec Olivier Messiaen* ([24], pp. 234–35).

¹⁶ In Brigitte Massin, *Olivier Messiaen; une poétique du merveilleux* ([25], pp. 164–65).

Messiaen's thought is not dialectical but holistic. As all times (and places) are present to God, all possible epochs and styles are available as raw material to the composer, without exclusion. Messiaen's "theological rainbow" (*arc-en-ciel théologique*) seems to have a space for anything and everything from plainchant to Einstein's theory of relativity: for him there is no incompatibility between raiding the latest astronomical research as well as the neumes of ancient Gregorian chant for inspiration. Messiaen's music, rooted in a positive eschatological vision of the New Heavens and the New Earth, remains teleological, but in a completely different sense both from that of the unthinking secular belief in progress and that of Adorno's dystopian vision. Messiaen does not simply abandon modernism to its fate, but rather looks through and beyond it.

6. Adorno or Messiaen?

For all the difficulties and limitations of his arguments,¹⁷ Adorno's consistent refusal to resolve dissonance prematurely (both in art and in thought itself) is surely a significant one for any attempt to hold artistic apophasis and cataphasis in proper tension. An understanding, though not necessarily an acceptance of the post-war taboo on beauty can help to bring Christian artists back to a genuinely Biblical vision in which concealment and revelation, cross and resurrection are inseparable.

As he himself often admitted, Olivier Messiaen naturally tended towards being a 'theologian of glory'.¹⁸ The titles of his early compositions such as *L'Apparition de l'Eglise éternelle* and *L'Ascension* plainly bear this out. The ability to express a *theologia crucis* in music was one that Messiaen had to learn and which went against his artistic grain. It was perhaps precisely by engaging, albeit idiosyncratically, with the negativity of the avant-garde and the sometimes barren asceticism of the 1950s, allowing his language to be temporarily purged of the joyous sonorities and harmonic lushness of his earlier idiom, that Messiaen was subsequently able to re-integrate both the timeless natural beauty of birdsong and the humanly conceived beauty of tonal harmony into an expanded idiom able to embrace the stigmata of St Francis¹⁹ and the darkness of Golgotha,²⁰ employing the full panoply of techniques developed by modernism and somehow 'evangelizing' them.

Without wishing to make a qualitative comparison between styles, Messiaen's music at its best suggests that the drastic reduction of compositional means found in minimalism may not be the only way forward for the aspiring composer of sacred music for our times, and that something of the project of

¹⁷ Critics have not been slow to disqualify Adorno's musical aesthetics on the grounds of their over-reliance on a Hegelian view of history and an ethnocentric refusal to acknowledge socio-historical contexts other than that of Central Europe (exemplified by his spectacular mistaken judgement on jazz). Post-colonial theory in particular has exposed the element of domination in the Adornian conceptual framework, somewhat ironically given that suspicion towards meta-narratives is one of the cornerstones of his project and one of its most successful aspects. This does not however in my view invalidate Adorno's analysis of his own tradition; nor should it be concluded that his method cannot necessarily be applied to other traditions given appropriate adaptation.

¹⁸ An excellent if limited treatment of this aspect of Messiaen's output can be found in Jean-François Labie's *Le Visage du Christ dans la musique des XIXe et Xxe siècles* [26].

¹⁹ It is perhaps significant that the orchestral prelude to the section of *St François d'Assise* entitled *Les Stigmates* is a very rare instance in Messiaen's later works of the employment of total serialism to depict an atmosphere of anguish and foreboding.

²⁰ Exemplified by the movement entitled *Les Ténèbres* from Messiaen's monumental cycle for organ *Livre du Saint-Sacrement*, in which the composer unusually uses cluster techniques to convey the physical and spiritual darkness of the crucifixion.

modernity—indeed maybe a great deal—can still be redeemed once its undoubted technical discoveries are divested of their more dubious philosophical pretensions. To return to our starting-point, Messiaen’s attempt to saving modernity from itself relies, at least in part, on insisting that the *aural* basis of music, its sensory beauty, is no mere epiphenomenon to be jettisoned in the quest for immaterial absolutes, but rather has value in and of itself, by virtue of its identity as part of Divine creation. Messiaen’s unfashionable emphasis on the significance of the beautiful in intimating Divine transcendence suggests that the beautiful and the sublime should be viewed in a ‘both-and’ rather than an ‘either-or’ relationship. After all, it is worth recalling that the ultimate Biblical promise is not merely the sublimity of a new Heaven but also the imperishable beauty of a new Earth (Revelation 21).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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