

Editorial

Music and Spirituality: A Journey into Porosity

Edward Foley

Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, IL 60615, USA; foley@ctu.edu

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Abstract: Serving as an introduction to this special issue of Religion entitled “Music and Spirituality: A Journey into Porosity,” this introduction frames the following eight essays by considering the ambiguity not only of the meaning of music itself, but also of spirituality, liturgical-sacred music and other frames that attempt to examine and sometimes delimit the power of music. While taxonomies and theoretical boundaries are still useful, they need to be employed with some caution in view of the musical and spiritual realities they are attempting to describe or analyze.

Keywords: music; spirituality; theology

Early in my studies a treasured mentor once interrupted a presentation I was giving in his doctoral seminar when I too blithely attempted to distinguish “authentic” liturgy from people’s popular devotions. His concise but memorable seven-word intervention was: “words are words and things are things”. What Prof. Robert Taft¹ helped me begin to understand then and increasingly over the years is that too often—especially in western academics and all too consistently in my own Roman Catholic tradition—we easily confuse frameworks with the realities to which they point.

This Taftism, as his students came to deem his many memorable maxims, returns to me as these eight articles are gathered from honored colleagues into a volume that emerged from a special issue of the peer reviewed journal *Religion*. The distinguishing perspective, when first soliciting these works and now presenting them together as a monograph, was the word “global”. There are other words that could have been employed in its stead, and in all likelihood this choice is equally as flawed as the many discarded ones. e.g., multicultural and contextual. Such framing words cannot capture all the richness and realities of these thoughtful contributions and the vast arenas of music and spirituality from which they emerge.

Attending to musics from around the world or outside what some might consider the “mainstream” is not new. How we view these musics and evaluate their worth, however, has changed drastically—especially over the past few decades. As in anthropology, non-Western musical practices were often categorized as exotic or, more problematically, “primitive” artifacts. This and comparable frameworks cast an undeniable specter of self-ceded superiority to the outside observers who stumbled across such “discoveries”. While these findings were no revelation to the people who had been performing them for untold years, intrepid western explorers instinctively presumed their unchallengeable qualifications—whether derived from some advanced training, social status, or national origin—to judge the value of cultural productions about which they ordinarily knew precious little.

The emergence of the field of comparative musicology was an important context for critiquing the ethnocentrism of musical studies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and valuing music that did not follow Western tonal or compositional frameworks. While largely agreeing with its aims, in 1950

¹ Robert Taft SJ (d. 2018), in a seminar on Eastern Liturgies at the University of Notre Dame, 1980. For more on Archimandrite see the Necrology from Sant’ Anselmo at <https://www.osb.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/TaftSAWebCorretto-EN-2.pdf>.

Jaap Kunst argued that “comparative musicology” was an especially flawed term and in its place suggested the frame of ethno-musicology² which soon morphed into ethnomusicology.

From the outset there have been varying opinions on the purpose and focus of this discipline. Some ethnomusicologists were and yet are passionately committed to studying and preserving the music of non-Western societies. Increasingly, however, others recognized that besides the study of non-Western music, there is an essential role in this discipline for studying folk, traditional, and popular music in Western cultures. Prophetically one of the pioneers in the field, Bruno Nettl, suggested that ethnomusicology should concern itself with (1) music of nonliterate societies, (2) the music of Asian and north African “high cultures,” and (3) folk music.³ More recently ethnomusicologists have moved beyond the geographic confines of “non-Western” or restrictions of the oral traditions deemed “folk” music and understand the field of ethnomusicology as the study of music in any culture. As early as 1965 the French ethnomusicologist C. Marcel-Dubois held that his discipline was about studying “living musics” and placing them in their socio-cultural context.⁴ Thus, the Society for Ethnomusicology itself currently defines the field apart from any geographic boundaries and, instead, notes that it is the study of any music in its social and cultural contexts.⁵

A similar development has evolved in the study of religion and religious music over the past decades. Particularly, since the 16th century religious Reformation in the West, theology in general and liturgy in particular have been understood to be arenas of denominational prerogatives. While the ecumenical and then interfaith movements of the 20th century have nourished theological dialogue beyond denominational boundaries, there are yet clear delineations. Thus, Reform and Roman Catholic Christians presume it is their right and responsibility to delineate what they respectively believe to be orthodox theologies for their churches. Along with the ecumenical movement, however, the emergence of the field of religious studies in the late 19th century has seriously challenged the unique authority of denominations and even world religions to maintain such boundaries and barriers. Alternately conceived as comparative religion or the history of religion, contemporary proponents of the study of religion emphasize that beliefs, devotional practices, rituals, and even religious institutions can be effectively studied without assenting to any religious beliefs. This turn from an emic to a more etic theological approach has spawned an unheard-of hybridity in appreciation for and interpretation of religious beliefs and practices, both traditional and contemporary. Emblematic of this movement is the sprawling American Academy of Religion whose annual meetings draw thousands of participants across the religious spectrum.

The definitions and study of sacred or liturgical music have also been largely defined by denominational boundaries. What a Roman Catholic might consider “liturgical” music—especially after the teachings of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65)—are very different from what a Jewish cantor might deem liturgical. However, categories such as sacred music and liturgical music have long been appropriated by musicologists and scholars from other purportedly secular fields. This “outsider” appropriation has contributed greatly to the blurring of denominational control of these frames. Furthermore, the rise of ritual studies as an independent academic discipline in the late 20th century⁶ and the parallel emergence of ritual music as an optic for considering the ceremonial music of everything from Buddhist temples to Voodoo exorcisms continues to demolish denominational boundaries and unmoor many of the distinctions that corralled sacred and secular rituals and their musics.

A final boundary obfuscation that is pertinent here concerns the nature of spirituality. Traditional Roman Catholic theology considered the spiritual life as an integral element in theological discourse but for centuries did not treat it as a separate area of speculation. By the post-Reformation era, however,

² (Kunst 1950).

³ (Nettl 1964, pp. 5–7).

⁴ (Marcel-Dubois 1965).

⁵ <https://www.ethnomusicology.org/page/AboutEthnomusicol>.

⁶ (Foley 2012, pp. 143–52).

the distinctive discipline of mystical theology developed, which considered the soul's journey to union with God. At the same time, popular practices such as the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556) and the largely abandoned field of ascetical theology, concerned with the practice of virtues that would lead to such union with the Holy One, shifted emphasis from abstract theories about the soul to pastoral concerns about individuals and their call to holiness.

In the 20th century spirituality increasingly came to be understood as a multifaceted reality, e.g., (1) the lived experience of faith, as (2) teachings about that lived experience (e.g., formulated in schools of spirituality), and finally as (3) the academic study of the first two.⁷ Because of the emphasis on experience in emerging definitions of spirituality, it too migrated beyond traditional religious boundaries and is now happily appropriated by groups as diverse as Muslims and humanists and so many in between. For the growing number of religiously unaffiliated in the world, Lionel Abadia notes that spiritual has emerged as an alternative or even substitute for institutionalized religion and has come to represent “a modern form of sacredness, centered on the individual and oriented toward emotions and experiences rather than based on rites and aligned on norms”.⁸

It is in celebration of this welcome spiritual and musical porosity that the following eight essays are offered as a kind of sampler. Obviously eight essays cannot map the range of musical practice and theologizing that marks this topic. At the same time, these collected works serve as a kind of primer for understanding something of how contemporary disparate musical practices are reckoned as theologically potent and spiritually rich.

The collection opens with Helen Phelan's enlightening observations on the musical practices of a Congolese choir, established by a group of asylum seekers in her hometown of Limerick, Ireland in 2001. On the faculty at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, Dr. Phelan is well versed in the protocols of field observation and ritual theory. She also is conversant in theories of deconstruction and postmodern hermeneutics. These multiple lenses—the interdisciplinary marks of a trustworthy guide on this journey—allows her to present a sonic case study of the singing group *Elikya* (the Lingala word for “hope”) that not only provides insight about the interplay of music and identity but also effectively tests the proposal of a new model for a respectful and enriching “sonic encounter”.

The contribution by Juyoung Lee and Jane W. Davidson is also a study of migrants, but in a distinctively different context employing a decidedly different research method. Whereas the previous work examines music's contribution to the forging of identity, this piece is concerned with music's contribution to the physical and mental wellbeing of a small group of Koreans living in Australia. The musical exercise occurs in the context of weekly charismatic prayer meetings in a Roman Catholic Church. By employing a focus group method, the researchers were able to discern some of the key factors motivating the often-long term engagement of members in these prayer meetings that contributed to a palpable sense of communion among them. There was also evidence that engaging in this highly musical prayer practices contributed to physical and psychosocial benefits for participating members.

A completely different musical palette is examined by Sister Sidonia in her examination of Georgian polyphonic chant and spiritual songs. This interdisciplinary study explores Orthodox Georgian chant through theological as well as iconographic-architectural and historical lenses. Punctuated by almost two dozen musical examples, Dr. Sidonia offers thoughtful musicological analysis of selected chants and liturgical songs intended to serve her underlying theological questions. Weaving spiritual reflections throughout the analysis allows her to demonstrate how Georgian polyphony is a theologically potent repository for believers, especially regarding central tenets of Orthodox faith about the Trinity and Incarnation. Just as the theological traditions under consideration have been woven together from different strands of its members into an ecclesial confession of faith, so do these musical

⁷ (Principe 1999).

⁸ (Abadia 2017).

examples illuminate a musical weaving from different melodic sources that effectively echo that same sustaining faith.

The next contribution admittedly is a geographical and spiritual leap from Georgian Chant and Orthodox Christianity to Irish funeral laments and Celtic spiritual yearnings. Nonetheless, Dr. Mary McLaughlin's historical and ethnographic study of the "keen" demonstrates in its own unique way how traditional musics both reflect and respond to deep spiritual needs of a community. Intimately wed to Irish wake practices in a predominantly Roman Catholic country, the practice of keening, like similar cultural practices, was both curtailed and condemned by various leaders within Catholicism. While this ecclesiastical critique pushed the practice underground, shrouding it in secrecy and rendering the ethnographic task of collecting evidence of its performance difficult, McLaughlin yet constructs a credible outline of this improvisatory practice from the sparse evidence available. She further illustrates how this practice informally continues, particularly among grieving family members, and points to the deep cultural-spiritual need for emotional expression in the face of death.

The interplay between music and theology is explicitly advocated by the TheoArtistry Composer's Scheme that Prof. George Corbett examines in his contribution to this volume. This initiative, based at the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts at Corbett's home University of St. Andrews (from 2016–2017) created partnerships between theologians and composers, resulting in six new works of sacred choral music. A catalyst for this initiative was the Scottish musician and theologian Sir James MacMillan, a celebrated composer of classical and liturgical works. Corbett grounds his contribution in an opening analysis of MacMillan's convictions about the intrinsic religiosity of music. He then described the process of collaboration between six theologians and six composers, centered around six "annunciations" from the Hebrew Scriptures recounting God's direct communication with humankind. Prof. Corbett argues for future forms of reintegrating theology and the arts, as well as the special contribution that results from a more fulsome disclosure of the composer's theological inspiration.

Resonant with this claim is the work of Prof. Braxton Shelley and his consideration of the sacramentality of sound in "the Black gospel tradition". As an experienced musician in the tradition he exegetes, Shelley is aware of the challenges of employing a sacramental frame for music's role in Black Baptist theology and practice. He nonetheless credibly demonstrates how, in many Black Protestant churches, sound occupies a primary place in the sacramental economy. Central to this argument is a consideration of the song "Hebrews 11" by the gospel composer and artist Richard Smallwood. Through both textual and musical analysis, Shelley illustrates a structural similarity between Smallwood's composition and the New Testament text. Playing on the potency of sound—and therefore music—as a mediator of spiritual, even Godly presence, he concludes that, along with recognized liturgical practices such as baptism and the Lord's supper, sound itself is a primary conduit "through which spiritual sustenance finds its way into the bodies and minds of believers".

The ambiguous border between the sacred and the secular, between sacramental and profane sound receives a fresh infusion of insight from Dr. Jennifer Budziak's examination of major choral works that have emerged over the past few decades that self-identify as some form of "passion". While this has been a celebrated framework for crafting classic musical compositions that take the death of Christ as their spiritual and even textual center, the plethora of recent compositions draw their inspiration from a wide range of sources, some of which are decidedly not Christological and even spurn that religious frame as central to the genre. In a provocative methodological move, Budziak reappropriates a largely bypassed and even debunked theory—that of liminality as initiated by Arnold van Gennep and promulgated by Victor Turner—to consider the choral passion itself as a liminal space. Pushing the interdisciplinary margins, Budziak weds the frame of liminality with that of postmodernity as both a philosophical and musical movement. She concludes that the resurgence of the Passion as a serious genre of choral music coincides with the emergence of musical postmodernity. Furthermore, contemporary composers in the genre render the Passion an ideal template for pondering ritual liminality in the compositional process.

The volume closes with a contribution from the German composer and theologian Dieter Schnebel made possible through a translation of his seminal essay on spiritual music by Prof. Christopher Anderson. While in no way a summary of the previous seven contributions, Schnebel's reflections on the spiritual capacities of music are yet a fitting conclusion for this work. Anderson well situates Schnebel's thinking at the surprising intersections of mainstream theologians such as Karl Barth and the avant-garde music scene of post-war Europe, of the traditional and innovative, and of the sacred and the secular. Schnebel believed that Spirit-possessed music, like theology itself, is a source of renewal and liberation in a world saturated with suffering and oppression. Deeply committed to the Confessing Church, Schnebel yet believed that truly spiritual music must press out into the world, in order to grant space to the Spirit that similarly yearns to move into the world through contemporary forms and language.

This introduction began by recalling the wisdom of a beloved mentor whose seven-word aphorism underscored that the language we employ to explain our world and whatever Divine Spirit that inhabits that world is always inadequate. "Words are words and things are things". Attempting to explain the nature of music is similarly daunting. There is a celebrated story of Robert Schumann who, after having played a difficult études, was asked to explain the meaning of the music. In response, Schumann sat back down at the piano and played it again. Words are words and music is music. How music functions as a spiritual vehicle is not easily explained. The following essays certainly provide insight into that enduring question. At the same time, together they affirm anew the ambiguity of any and every "sound theology" and music's singular capacity for transcendence. Words are words, but music is music.

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