



The Sacramental Potential of Music: Musical Experience Towards an Expanded Understanding of the Sacrament

ABSTRACT

There is more to music than what we hear; there is more to sacrament than meets the eye. This paper is an attempt to explore the sacramental potential of music through a holistic appreciation of the musical experience. It seeks to explore music's theological relevance in pursuit of an expanded comprehension of the sacraments. It posits that the gift of music brings us to a more progressive and holistic understanding of the sacrament and proposes the concept of entanglement as a novel outlook on sacrament.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine life without sound, without music. Pretty dull, isn't it? Music is an essential part of every culture and of human history. Its cultural significance can be seen in how music is expressed in the daily life of almost every culture. Alongside the ordinariness of music are its varied effects on the one listening, as well as on the one performing. For Christians, music has a theological relevance, including its potential as a sacrament, as a revelatory encounter with the Divine. There is a "graceful" connection between how we experience music and how our understanding of the sacraments can be reexamined through the musical experience. Music can lead us to a new way of theologizing, toward a dynamic making sense of God in our lives.



MUSIC AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Society and religion are never without a musical aspect. Don Saliers asserts that nearly all religions employ the human voice, instruments, and acoustic images in their devotional practices.¹ Music is a lifeblood of cultures and religions. There has been, however, what Blackwell calls the “negative neglect of music in the study of religion,”² or “a discrepancy between the centrality of music in religious experience and the peripheral attention given to music in the academic study of religion.”³ This paper hopes to address this deficiency.

Religion and music are analogous resources for interpreting and making sense of our lives. Blackwell’s conviction is that the “appreciation of music can help us interpret theological traditions with heightened sensitivity to their perennial insights and contemporary meaning.”⁴ Cyprian Love asserts that musical experience can actually “be seen as symbolically expressive of our immersion in sacred history, binding our sense of past, present and future in one.”⁵

What is sacred music? Is there even a distinction between sacred and profane in music? Blackwell cites Augustine having a more inclusive take on music as a religious experience beyond the restrictions of liturgical music, describing what makes a song a hymn.⁶ For Augustine, it is not so much whether music is with or without words, or whether it is refined or not refined. As long as it leads us toward devotion to God, that in itself is already sacred music, and therefore, a religious experience.

Martin Luther radically claimed that all music is ‘spiritual’, that is, theologically relevant. For him, there is no secular music in the strict sense, only degenerate or bad music.⁷ Blackwell believes that music of many kinds can contain religious value, “depending upon our context and state of mind as we experience it, whether as listeners, performers

¹Don Saliers, *Music and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), ix.

²Albert Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1990), 12.

³*Ibid.*, 11.

⁴*Ibid.*, 14.

⁵Cyprian Love, “Music and Faith,” *The Pastoral Review* 9, issue 2 (March/April 2013), 24.

⁶In Psalmum 99.4, in McKinnon, *Music in Early Christian Literature*, 158, as quoted by Blackwell, 152.

⁷Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music*, 17.

or composers.”⁸ In other words, music’s religious value rests both on our subjective reception and collective appreciation.

God communicates to us through grace in many different ways. But how are we supposed to experience grace in music? First and foremost, music is grace because it is a gift. Early beliefs, such as in ancient Greece, suggested that music comes from the gods. More recent scholars would say that music’s origins are far beyond our understanding. For someone who composes music, it is always a mystery where music really comes from. It may be a product of one’s personal inclination or triggered by other factors, such as emotion and passion.

Music comes from God, as all other beautiful things do. God reveals himself or herself in many ways, including through musical experience. To understand grace in the context of music, Blackwell (1990) compares it to the visible-invisible sacramental character. It is interesting how these two traditions concomitantly facilitate our appreciation of music as a sacramental grace. In other words, music appeals to us both through our rationality and sensibility, and this confluence enriches our reception of God’s self-communication to us.

MUSICAL TIME AND HOPE

“Music is a temporal art through and through,” declares Begbie.⁹ From its temporality, we can learn about how we understand time in general and theological time in particular. Begbie is convinced that music can actually be very useful in the process of exploring time, as well as understanding its nature.¹⁰ Our lives take place in the medium of time, and Cyprian Love (2013) asserts that of our five senses, the one linked to time most clearly is hearing.¹¹ When you say something, it becomes totally trussed by the particular time you uttered it, and you cannot simply take it back. You may repeat it, but it becomes a totally different thing the second time around. The same is true with music; every musical moment is different.

⁸Ibid., 18.

⁹Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 29.

¹⁰Ibid., 30.

¹¹Love, “Music and Faith,” 26.

Begbie is confident that the most important theological possibility that music offers is in the way it can suggest or approximate a timeless condition. “Music can evoke the timelessness of eternity.”¹² Compared to other forms of art, music is the most ‘spiritual’ or nonphysical of the arts. This freedom from physicality is one of music’s greatest theological virtues. Sound or music per se is nonvisual. Moreover, music creates its own time. Every time we listen to music is a totally different experience, as far as our reference to time is concerned. Those who make music and those who experience it by just listening are time-involved beings. Sound cannot but move with time, and the direction time takes as we know it is always toward the future. “To produce a sound in the present therefore evokes a futural symbolism,”¹³ and this, in theological language, is hope—a virtue that is essential to our faith.

Central to understanding musical time and hope (its theological consequences) are the twin elements of tension and resolution that primarily generate the directional dynamics of music. Tension and resolution work complementarily: “configurations of tension and resolution work in many different ways and levels, often engaging every parameter of music – melody, meter, pitch, timbre, etc.”¹⁴ The most common, harmonic tension and resolution, offer a musical sense of incompleteness and anticipation, such as when playing certain chords. The dominant seventh brings out anticipation and incompleteness that will be resolved by more stable chords. In music, hope can also be intensified when each experience is seen as a partial realization of what will eventually occur in its fullness. In a piece of music, every resolution is a partial realization of the final resolution. This is pretty much how Jesus describes the Kingdom of God—the already but not yet. And in music, sometimes what we think is an end turns out to be another beginning or a continuity of the music that has started.

¹²Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 34.

¹³Love, “Music and Faith,” 26.

¹⁴Jeremy Begbie, “Theology and Music,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, ed. David Ford and Rachel Muers (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 727.

Hope, as a theological value, is associated with the virtue of patience. In a song, this patience is usually observed by the practice of repetition of a particular segment of the song, such as the refrain and chorus. Hope is that which leads us to anticipate the future. Because sound already points us in the direction of the future, it opens up for us the idea of the future as beautiful. “Music is widely used among humans to express some existing hope, or to arrive at a state of hope yet to be achieved.”¹⁵ This musical hoping, as Love puts it, enters into human life through informal musicmaking like humming and whistling, and in the music we imagine in our heads.¹⁶

MUSIC AND SILENCE: AN ACT OF CONTEMPLATION

Music can never exist without silence. For people who love listening to music, musical appreciation presupposes recognition of silence. Blackwell poetically expresses what silence means to music: “music is painting with sound on a canvas of silence.”¹⁷

Begbie claims that the role of silence—within, before and after music—is highly instructive. Citing Augustine’s parallelism of music and cosmic order, he says that just as musical rhythm is exemplified cosmically, so also is the silence within music – the interlude or rest.¹⁸ “The alternation of sound and silence in music is seen by Augustine as a manifestation of the alternation of coming into being and non-being which must characterize a universe created out of nothing.”¹⁹ I can imagine that there was a great silence before the creation and sequences of silence during the creation. God, the great musical director/conductor, waves a hand and commands, “Let there be light!” and it was so. The voice reverberates across the abyss. And it goes on and on, until the last day of the first creation. Creation continues, God continues to conduct.

¹⁵Love, “Music and Faith,” 26.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music*, 142.

¹⁸Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 96.

¹⁹Ibid.

MUSICAL HARMONY AND COMMUNITY

One of music's intrinsic qualities is harmony, and as far as the traditional Western notion of harmony is concerned, its basis is the chord, a group of tones that are simultaneous and sustained.²⁰ Musical harmony can teach us about our faith and its impact on our concept of community.

According to Blackwell, Athenagoras of Athens, one of the earliest of Christian apologists, insists that "we should speak of God as the musical artist to whom we attribute the harmony of the cosmos."²¹ Blackwell also talks about an unceasing harmony of the heavens²² (cosmic harmony) that is musical and mathematical at the same time. This harmony of the heavens that is based on Pythagoras' acoustical discoveries led to the philosophical conviction that as mathematics expresses cosmic order, so music echoes cosmic harmony.²³

Music also imparts human harmony. Blackwell points out two distinct applications of human harmony, individual and social application.²⁴ He cites Plato who speaks of three capacities of human souls: "a desiring or impulsive capacity, a reasoning or calculating capacity and, mediating between the two, a tempering or spirited capacity."²⁵ Human harmony in its social dimension can and must be understood in terms of proportionality. "Harmonic proportion produces musical accord among disparate elements, and Plato therefore calls music the science of love."²⁶

One consideration that we must recognize about the social dimension of human harmony is that music can both unite and separate. People have different musical tastes; what one may find musical may not necessarily be so for another. Even in one culture, musical appreciation varies. And yet, what is more important to consider is the collective, communitarian encounter with music.

²⁰Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music*, 67.

²¹Ibid., 31.

²²Ibid., 42.

²³Ibid., 43.

²⁴Ibid., 180.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 184.

According to Love, music has the ability to symbolize the kind of society the Church is. There is a social space of musical community that resembles the Church.²⁷ Jazz provides a good example. Every player knows how and when to play their part, where to stop and what modulation is needed to complement with each and every other musician in the band. This is what the Church should be: a musical community where people experience a transformation of boundaries and can blend, harmonize and resonate with each other in endless possibilities.²⁸

MUSIC AND SACRAMENTAL ENCOUNTER

Let us now have a more focused consideration on the sacramental potential of music. To understand the sacramental relevance of music, it is important to comprehend what the term sacramental is in its widest sense and not only in a very particular, 'church-particular' way. Richard McBrien describes it as "any finite reality through which the divine is perceived to be disclosed and communicated, and through which our human response to the divine assumes more measure of shape, form, and structure."²⁹ In this definition, we see two movements—a movement initiated from above and a response rendered from below, God and human respectively.

To Have and to Hold: Musical Experience as Embodiment of the Divine

To make sense of musical experience as an embodiment of the Divine, we have to emphasize the significance of music in Divine revelation, in the disclosure of God in our humanity. And by this, we mean the role of hearing in revelation, which presupposes sounds. Revelation of God in the Scriptures is actually 'heard.' For example, when God called Moses on Mt. Horeb, it was only when God spoke to him that he recognized Him (Exodus 3: 1-6) since Moses initially saw a burning bush. In the New Testament, it was only through hearing

²⁷Love, "Music and Faith," 27.

²⁸Ibid., 28.

²⁹Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music*, 28.

the words of the angel that Mary understood God's plan for her; the angel asks Mary to "Listen!" (Luke 1:31). Thus, in his epistles, Paul emphasized that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17).

But more than that, singing is always part and parcel of the Scriptural revelation. The psalms were very significant in the lives of the Hebrew and Christian communities. Through the psalms, people are able to express to God the whole gamut of human emotions and aspirations. People are able to communicate to God through the singing of these psalms while God makes himself/herself present in their lives at the same time. Even Jesus and his disciples were singing a hymn before going out from the Last Supper (Matthew 26:30). Throughout the Christian church's history, songs have been sung echoing Hebrew prophets and psalms.

Gleenie claims that hearing is actually just a specialized form of touch that is why it doesn't make sense to make a distinction between hearing a sound and feeling a vibration.³⁰ And when we see someone playing a musical instrument, we can also see the movements in the drums and cymbals, for example. Saliers explains this relationship and complementarity of senses through the concept of synaesthesia. He says that "the training of the ear is also a training of multi-sensory receptivity."³¹ There is an interrelation between the human senses and the simultaneous blending or convergence of two or more senses leads to a heightened perception. Therefore, learning to listen is essential to a disciplined way of perceiving and living in the world. In order to love God, the most beautiful response we can give is to make use of all of our available senses. "Loving God requires the interanimation of all the available senses."³²

³⁰Evelyn Gleenie, *Hearing Essay* (1993), 2. <http://www.evelyn.co.uk>.

³¹Saliers, *Music and Theology*, ix.

³²*Ibid.*, 3.

SACRAMENT AS ENTANGLEMENT: A CRITIQUE AND A RESPONSE

This study hopes to achieve a re-evaluation and expansion of the definition of sacrament vis-à-vis a more holistic appreciation of music. The “visible sign of an invisible grace” definition of the sacraments, inasmuch as it is only one way of looking at the sacraments, is actually very wide open. A sign is a sign and it can mean anything. Music is a way of revitalizing what a sacrament should be. A sacrament is not supposed to be just a visible sign. It is supposed to be a corporeal sign. Music is corporeal and sacramental. It takes off from our audible experience until it leads us to a holistic encounter with the Higher Being. Inasmuch as music is an ordinary reality, it forces us out of the ordinary so that we can make sense of the extraordinary through that ordinary, bodily experience.

The sacraments are supposed to inspire us to seek God in our lives, and music does just that. Music breaks apart our notion of the ordinary. Every time we hear a piece of music, we are roused and driven to reexamine who we are. I think this is what a sacrament does. A sacrament is meant to open our senses, not just the sense of sight, but the totality of our senses. Music gives us this opportunity. Music widens our horizon in understanding sacraments.

At this point it is but fitting to come up with a contemporary take on sacramentology. If there is one contemporary definition of sacrament that emanates from our musical comprehension—aside from encounter, embodiment and empowerment—I believe that it is entanglement. All the insights we have articulated earlier boil down to an entanglement—a state of being involved; an active participation in an encounter initiated by the Divine and animated by the human.

Our point of departure in understanding the sacrament as entanglement is our encounter with music, a gift that embodies and empowers.

To be entangled here does not refer to the common understanding of being twisted together or being involved in a complicated situation in a negative way. To be entangled, for our purposes, is to be consciously and purposefully involved in a complex situation where all the participants are able to maintain their identity while at the same time able to appreciate the identity of the other. It is an entanglement of the ‘metaphysical’ (God) and the physical (human) through a medium that makes sense, most especially, to the latter.

To be able to explain this theological entanglement, I would like to borrow quantum³³ physics’ definition of the same term. A central principle of quantum physics, quantum entanglement means that “multiple particles are linked together in a way such that the measurement of one particle’s quantum state determines the possible quantum states of the other particle.”³⁴ The quantum state of a certain particle affects the quantum states of other particles; each is affecting the other.

In this phenomenon, the entangled particles remain connected so that actions performed on one affect the other, even when separated by great distances; Albert Einstein was so annoyed by this phenomenon he called it the “spooky action at a distance.”³⁵ In this quantum mechanical phenomenon, the quantum states of two or more objects must be described with reference to each other, even though the individual objects may be spatially separated.”³⁶

In the context of our musical experience as a religious encounter, this entanglement takes place among the musical ‘practitioner’ (the one who practices music), the music itself, and the Higher Being to whom we are eventually led to during the encounter. Sounds and music, as far as the physical (scientific) state is concerned, are both particles and waves—only with varying frequencies. This

³³Quantum means the smallest amount of many forms of energy. See, “Quantum” in Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/quantum>.

³⁴“What is Quantum Entanglement,” *About Education*, <http://physics.about.com/od/quantumphysics/f/QuantumEntanglement.htm>.

³⁵“How Quantum Entanglement Works,” *Live Science*, <http://www.livescience.com/28550-how-quantum-entanglement-works-infographic.html>.

³⁶“Quantum Entanglement,” *Science Daily*, http://www.sciencedaily.com/articles/q/quantum_entanglement.htm.

entanglement, moreover, is allowing the music to be alive in us while we become alive in and through the music. The music and the musician, though distinguishable, become one, and this entangled unity leads us beyond the mundane musical experience; eventually, we are channeled towards the extraordinary, nonphysical Being, God.

In our understanding of the sacrament, as Chauvet (1995) elucidated through the analogy of the gift and gratuitousness, this entanglement transpires not just between the Giver and the recipient; it is among the Giver, the recipient and the gift. The Giver is not only the active participant, the recipient is not only the passive receiver, and the gift is not only the medium of the encounter. In this sacramental entanglement, the recipient is no longer just a receiver; he becomes the gift himself and he becomes cognizant of the Giver. The Giver, who is actually the Gift himself/herself, ultimately becomes the Recipient. In this sacramental entanglement where we are active participants, God recognizes our humanity and because we cannot totally grasp the absolute gratuitousness that only God knows, God adjusts and reveals himself/herself in the banality of our human experience. God initiates and asks us to participate. We may have to struggle and wrestle with him/her along the way, but we ought to participate actively. We have to live up to the gift—of music and sacrament.

This disposition in understanding the sacrament is the kind of temperament we have to exhibit if we are to make sense of the sacraments in our Christian life. Music makes this possible. Grace will only manifest itself when we are able to ‘listen to’ the movements of the Spirit in the ordinariness of our lives. The entanglement is the ‘listening to’ attitude. It is this attitude that will eventually help us understand the sacraments.

The sacraments, like music, constitute and enrich our lives. They are supposed to bridge us to God—in celebration and proclamation of God’s presence in the entirety of our lives and to one another—towards a community of love and harmony. This entanglement is within music itself, where various notes, diverse sounds, and numerous instruments become entangled with one another to create a beautiful melody.

Ultimately, this entanglement that we hope for is perfectly seen in the life of the Trinity—in the entanglement of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father is not the Son and not the Spirit, and yet, the Father is in the Son and in the Spirit, and so on and so forth. It is through the same entanglement that we will truly understand the value of our Christian journey and our appreciation of the sacraments.

(NOT A) CONCLUSION

Identifying some musical elements and their theological relevance, we have realized that indeed musical appreciation is a window towards a more comprehensive understanding of the sacraments. Our musical experience, once we become cognizant of its value in our lives, may lead us to a sacramental encounter where the Divine is embodied and the human is empowered.

This musical-theological exercise is a journey from musical appreciation to theological conviction. It is a journey that began from a love of music and does not end but rather simply continues to a love of God, towards continuing to discover the wonder of human art and human experience in making sense of our relationship with God.

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