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BOOK REVIEW

Danielle Anne Lynch. *God in Sound and Silence: Music as Theology*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018. xxiii + 208 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-5326-4149-7. \$28.00.

The conversation between music and theology has been burgeoning of late. Danielle Anne Lynch wades into the fray as both a theologian and a musician who is interested in the role music may play in revealing something about God. She sees a personal, subjective, and embodied experience of music as a starting point for theology.

Lynch opens her work by dividing the literature on music and theology into two approaches. The first is music as a “revelatory experience” and the second uses music to expound “given theological truths.” In her survey of the former approach, Lynch draws on Friedrich Schleiermacher, Paul Tillich, David Brown, and Férdia Stone-Davis, among others. These authors share an interest in subjective experiences or encounters with God through music. In Brown’s thought in particular, such experiences or revelations may even “contradict older forms of revelation, most notably, the biblical account” (17). No examples are forthcoming as to how this kind of experience might work. While Lynch insists that the second approach is compatible with the first, she tends to downplay it as an inferior approach. In her view, music may indeed be of some value in expounding theological truths given elsewhere, but such an approach “is ultimately constricted by pre-existing thought” (22). In other words, this approach misses what music may be able to say aside from pre-existing sources of theology. Here she draws on Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Barth, and Jeremy Begbie. Unfortunately, her discussion of Begbie in particular—a prominent figure in contemporary discussion of music and theology—is restricted to a

single book now nearly two decades old. As a result, Lynch does not engage with Begbie's recent work, where he addresses concerns similar to the ones she raises.

Having confronted the problem of limiting the theological potential of music to explicating given theological truths, Lynch then turns to the problem of approaching music and theology in ways that downplay or ignore the body. Against any attempts to appreciate music abstractly, she insists that embodiment in particular makes an encounter with God through music possible. Drawing on Stone-Davis, she writes that being "absorbed in the physical experience of the music" allows one to be "temporarily unaware that the music is external to oneself" and that this "mode of attention . . . is pre-reflective" (61). In other words, when one is caught up in a piece of music and is not analyzing or reflecting on it, the line between oneself and the music seems to disappear. Such musical experiences temporarily suspend "the boundary between the human subject and divine object" (49), allowing one to encounter God. Theologically, Lynch grounds this approach in the incarnation and a sacramental approach to music. Since God revealed himself in bodily form and created everything that exists, revelation must occur through the human body. Building on the idea of God as creator and the source of human creativity, she seeks to do away with the dividing line between sacred and secular music so that "all music has sacramental potential" (94). Furthermore, since music does not require words, neither does God's revelation through music.

In favoring "revelatory experience" in music over efforts to explicate "given theological truths," Lynch follows in the footsteps of Heidi Epstein (whom she cites several times). Like Epstein, she does not explicitly deny the place of these truths, and even suggests both approaches may be compatible. But in practice, Epstein and Lynch downplay objective truth claims in favour of the experiential. For Lynch, this even affects her understanding of God. In her afterward she writes about "the infinite mystery I name God" (195). Instead of God revealing and naming himself, Lynch seems to prefer a more ambiguous conception of God that she experiences and names subjectively. One wonders if God's initiative in revelation is implicitly being

called into question.

The second half of the book journeys through three major eras in Western music, focusing on the musical genre of the requiem in particular as a point for comparison. Beginning with the Classical era, Lynch seeks to focus on “the content and experience of music” rather than its form (106). Drawing from Paul Tillich against Balthasar, she pushes back against the search for the ideal in the Classical era, arguing that a focus on objective beauty and perfection takes one away from the reality of embodied human existence with all of its complications. “Music, as embodied experience,” she argues, “reveals the importance of the incarnate revelatory content of the person of Jesus, not through resembling the abstract Christ-form [as set out by Balthasar], but through being of the same nature as it, embodied” (109). Her argument in some respects mirrors ancient controversies in which different parties emphasized the human nature of Jesus Christ over his divine nature and vice versa. She makes a strong case that embodiment is a vital and necessary aspect of music and apprehension of divine revelation, yet she risks missing out on the archetypal role of Christ as a sort of second Adam (Rom 5:12–21). In my view, just as there is no need to posit a zero-sum game between the divine and human natures of Christ, there is no need to posit a zero-sum game between the particular, embodied human nature of Christ and the archetypal role he plays in the lives of all who follow him.

The Romantic era is more conducive to Lynch’s concerns. She shows how this era turns towards the experience of the embodied self as it encounters the sublime, nature, and death. In fact, music in the Romantic era depends on the relationship between the form of the music and the self to produce meaning. In other words, the form of the music is not independent, but dependent upon the one experiencing it for meaning. Continuing her project of blurring distinctions between secular and sacred music, Lynch analyses Johannes Brahms’ requiem, noting the changes Brahms makes to the traditional text in order to focus on earthly life rather than the life to come. She concludes, “Music is not religious because of the content of a traditionally religious form, but because of the way the individual body responds to it”

(156). Schleiermacher, with his focus on religious feeling, is, naturally enough, her theological dialogue partner in this section.

Lynch's treatment of the Modern era is perhaps the most engaging part of her book. She surveys silent works by composers Erwin Schulhoff and John Lennon in addition to John Cage's famous *4'33"*, noting Cage's discovery that true silence is not possible to experience because bodies produce sound, but the context surrounding perceived silence can give it meaning. For Lynch, these silent compositions celebrate the limitations of embodiment, thereby affirming life. Toru Takemitsu's technique of blurring the distinction between sound and silence in his requiem provides Lynch with an example to illustrate how "the boundary between the human subject and divine object" can "be temporarily suspended" (182). After moving from a set text in the Classical era to a modified text stripping away certain religious content in the Romantic era, it should not be surprising that words disappear altogether in Takemitsu's requiem of the Modern era (aside from the title). In Lynch's tour of the intersection between music and theology in these eras, experience has fully taken over from truth claims.

Lynch is undoubtedly right to point out the limitations and contingencies of bodily existence and to insist that divine revelation is something we encounter in this life as embodied beings. However, her assertion that music is—or at least can be—a sort of non-linguistic theology is a misnomer. Theology, by definition, is not a mystical encounter with God through music or some other art form, but as Anselm helpfully puts it, "faith seeking understanding." There is certainly a place in the Christian life for experiences that go beyond words (cf. Rom 8:26), but it remains unclear in Lynch's work how such experiences can shape or challenge what God has revealed in Scripture.

Speaking of which, Lynch's enterprise rests on assuming an incarnational christology, the objective existence of God, and the effectiveness of sacraments in making an encounter with God possible. Yet she does not flesh these assumptions out; nowhere does she appeal to Scripture or to ecumenical creeds. Failing to make the connection between these assumptions and her project leaves it on uncertain footing. Her book would be stronger if she

laid them out explicitly at the beginning and if she considered the impact these assumptions might make in interpreting a musical encounter with God.

Anyone concerned with the growing dialogue between theology and the arts—music in particular—should familiarize themselves with this book. Even those whose interests lie elsewhere can benefit from re-examining their own understanding of divine revelation and the sources they draw upon in forming their theology. Only time will tell what sort of fruit Lynch's approach will yield.

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