

AN OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF THE PRESENT DISCUSSION
BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND MUSIC

Bradley K. Broadhead
McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON, Canada

Introduction

Only six years after Jeremy S. Begbie's lament that "[m]usic has received virtually no sustained treatment in contemporary systematic theology,"¹ Philip E. Stoltzfus could say, "Since the close of the twentieth century, there has emerged a sudden flowering of theological commentary on music and musical aesthetics."² It appears that a new interdisciplinary field is emerging at the point of the intersection between theology and music. This is not to overlook historical writings on the significance of music to religious practice,³ or to say that there was a complete absence of theological reflection on music prior to the twenty-first century, but rather to note that there has been a recent trend towards a direct and focused engagement between theology and music. It is my intent to examine and assess this trend to see what these engagements share in common and to suggest ways in which the discussion can be moved forward.

I will limit the scope of my inquiry by setting up three criteria to determine whether a given work will be considered: First, the work in question must reflect a sustained engagement between music and theology; it must go beyond brief allusions to music for illustrative purposes. Second, the work must engage with music itself and/or its means of production and reception. The

1. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 3.
2. Stoltzfus, *Theology as Performance*, 12.
3. See Stapert, *A New Song*, for an overview of how the early church thought of music.

latter may include the circumstances out of which the music emerges insofar as it is demonstrably relevant to the production of this music. In other words, the focus must be on the qualities and characteristics of music as opposed to the words and/or images and personalities it may happen to accompany. Third, the theological framework interacting with music must be at least broadly Christian.⁴

Even through the lens of this narrowed scope, the field of theology and music is filled with many different, and often competing, agendas. This may be due in part to the fact that musical notes and phrases by themselves, unlike words and sentences, do not make reference to phenomena outside of themselves, although they easily *associate* with extrinsic elements. This penchant for association allows music to be utilized by a spectrum of views diverse enough to encompass everything from a conservative orthodoxy to process theology and feminism.

In order to discern what trends are emerging in the midst of this diversity, it is necessary to create some methodological categories. For Begbie, the intersection of theology and music involves two basic approaches: the first being the “bearing of theology on the arts”⁵ (including music) and the second being “the ways in which music can benefit theology.”⁶ Begbie acknowledges that these two are interrelated, but his own works show a marked difference in relation to his approach.⁷ While helpful, these categories are too narrow in terms of Begbie’s use of them, or too broad when expanded theoretically for the current task. Alternatively, Stoltzfus suggests arranging the field around the projects of prominent authors: “One can observe in the new literature three theological-aesthetic options taking shape: Albert Blackwell’s “sacred in music,” Heidi Epstein’s “feminist

4. The intersection of theology and music may be of interest to the broader study of religion and to other faiths as well. At present, however, most writers are operating with a broadly Christian framework.

5. Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise*, xviii.

6. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 5.

7. Compare Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise*, and Begbie, *Resounding Truth*, which take the first approach, with Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, where he adopts the second.

theology of music,” and Jeremy Begbie’s “theology through music.”⁸ I believe Stoltzfus is on to something here, but these categories are a little too narrow: these individuals are certainly key players in the emergence of studies on theology and music, but they have yet to inspire substantial secondary literature or followers who have furthered their approaches in significant ways. Categories are needed that have the potential to encompass not only these major players, but also the work of their lesser-known colleagues in the field, as well as previous forays into the area. Expanding Stoltzfus’s categories should provide a taxonomy that is able to meet this need.⁹

I propose organising the field of theology and music according to the following methodological categories: The first is aesthetics, by which I mean beauty and transcendence in relation to God. Contra Stoltzfus, it seems to me that “the theological aesthetics of beauty”¹⁰ remain part of emerging discussion in the field; in fact Blackwell’s approach exemplifies this. Expanding the “sacred in music” to aesthetics allows me to include the insights of the likes of Richard Viladesau in *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric*. The second is a dialogue through analogy, by which I mean drawing relevant connections between aspects of music and aspects of theology, hopefully resulting in mutually edifying insights. This category encompasses much of Begbie’s approach, especially when he is exploring what music can do for theology. It also leaves room for the fascinating enterprise of Francis Young in *The Art of Performance*. The third is primarily defined by

8. Stoltzfus, *Theology as Performance*, 12. See Blackwell, *Sacred in Music*; Epstein, *Melting the Venusberg*; Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*. Presumably, Stoltzfus would add to this his own category of “theology as performance.”

9. Unfortunately, while I interact with Stoltzfus’s useful survey of this area and expand on his categories, I lack space to deal with the bulk of his own work. Since much of it revolves around an analysis of the relationship of Schleiermacher, Barth, and Wittgenstein to music instead of focusing on music on its own terms in relation to theology, I pass over it in favor of other works more suited to my own endeavor.

10. Stoltzfus, *Theology as Performance*, 12.

Epstein's feminist deconstruction and reconstruction of the dialogue between theology and music, though reference will also be made to Ann Pederson.¹¹ The feminist approach stands alone until such a time as other ideological critiques and reconstructions can complement or further its project. These broad categories should suffice as a way of organizing the emerging dialogue between theology and music.

Finally, I aim to be comprehensive but not exhaustive in this undertaking. I have selected a number of significant works that fit into my expanded categories, providing me with enough space for critical interaction and assessment.

Theology and Musical Aesthetics

Richard Viladesau observes that, "it is clear that for a long time aesthetics was located more or less at the periphery of Christian thought . . . [but] in recent years it has moved into a much more central position of theological prominence."¹² In his review essay, "Aesthetics, Music, and Theology," Frank Brown links this movement to the postmodern deconstruction of formalism and aestheticism, which he says has opened vistas to theology once closed by the perception of art "as something whose intrinsic aesthetic purposes could never be subject to moral or theological criteria, except in some secondary sort of way."¹³ Several significant works around the close of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have exploited this opening. For my purposes, I will be examining works in which musical aesthetics connect theology to music by exploring theological traits inherent in music. In other words, the dialogue between musical aesthetics and theology is based on the premise that music can tell us something about God, distinguishing it from the analogical approach to linking music and theology

11. Ann Pederson writes about music and theology from a feminist perspective (see Pederson, *God, Creation, and All That Jazz*, ix), but I agree with Stoltzfus that her project has more in common with Begbie's. See Stoltzfus, *Theology as Performance*, 15.

12. Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 2.

13. Brown, "Aesthetics, Music, and Theology," 32.

below, concerned as it is with finding parallels and systems of relations.

Richard Viladesau

I begin with Viladesau, not because his work is chronologically prior to others, but rather because he is remarkably direct and succinct about his undertaking. The heart of his book, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric*,¹⁴ is explicated in the book's final chapter, in which he sets out his "underlying theses": first, "God is ultimate beauty, implicitly known as the ultimate desire of the human mind and heart"; second, "[r]evelation is the self-gift of God to humanity," in which God reveals himself in events in history, culminating in the Incarnation; and third, "[a]rt is one of the primary embodiments of the ongoing history of this revelation and its communication."¹⁵ From these theses, he concludes:

Theology, as a reflection on revelation, should be related to art in two ways: academically, theology must reflect on beauty, on art, and on the products of the arts, as part of its object; and pastorally, the arts of ministry must incorporate theology as an intrinsic part of their functioning.¹⁶

For the sake of my own objectives, I will be focusing on the former part of his project, without denying the value of the latter. Since the present discussion concerns music and theology as opposed to aesthetics in general, I will focus my overview and analysis on the first chapter, where he employs music to illustrate the theme of his work: "artistic beauty as a means of the mind's 'ascent' to God—or, from another point of view, as a medium of divine self-revelation."¹⁷ In Viladesau's schema, music is joined to theology by taking up the object of theology;

14. Viladesau's earlier work engages with aesthetics in a broad sense, but does not deal with music in a direct and sustained manner. See Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*.

15. Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts*, 218.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 4.

because God “is ultimate beauty,” finding beauty in music points the listener towards God’s ultimate beauty.

The chapter in question begins with a survey of the historical relationship between music and Christianity, noting that it was marked by ambivalence, suggesting that the reasons for this lie in “(1) the pagan associations of music in the ancient world; (2) the conflict between spirituality and immersion in the sense experience; (3) a certain competition between musical art and the word.”¹⁸ Viladesau then endeavors to answer these problems in inverse order. He first acknowledges the primacy of the word in Scripture, but suggests via Aquinas and Luther that, in terms of liturgy, this need not be an either/or decision and goes on to ask whether there might in fact be “a legitimate and valid approach to God through music and art.”¹⁹ Second, he works from the premise that music engages “the heart by representing emotional states, and [engages] the mind by evoking the meanings associated with those states in the human mind,” to argue that music as a sense experience in fact leads to a spiritual awakening via beauty to the contemplation of God.²⁰ Finally, Viladesau contextualizes the link between music and ancient paganism by bringing up the question of liturgy, acknowledging the potential of music to distract from worship, but also pointing out its value in underlining incarnational theology and concludes with a call to use music with prudence and discretion.

Viladesau’s engagement with music in the wider dialogue between aesthetics and theology provides a well-reasoned foundation for further exploration and discovery. It is noteworthy that as a Roman Catholic he also draws upon the Protestant tradition, broadening the appeal and the basis for his enterprise.²¹

18. *Ibid.*, 28.

19. *Ibid.*, 34.

20. *Ibid.*, 38–39, 46.

21. A reviewer has noted his sometimes misleading statements about the Eastern Orthodox tradition (it is primarily seen through the fictional work, *Doctor Zhivago*), but nonetheless warmly commends the book. See Bychkov, “Review of *Theology and the Arts*,” 518.

Albert L. Blackwell

The Sacred in Music appeared the same year as Viladesau's work on music and aesthetics and one year prior to Begbie's analogical venture in *Theology, Music and Time*. It represents the most thorough treatment to date connecting musical aesthetics with theology. Blackwell rests his enterprise on the premise that there is "sacramental potential" in music. His thesis is:

that the phenomenon of music, in all its great variety, is potentially sacramental, and not only in explicitly religious contexts. Dwelling at music's heart is a sacramental potency, awaiting only appropriate times and places for its actualisation, for manifesting the holy and for expressing our experiences of the holy.²²

He justifies using the term "sacramental" on the basis of the "flexible and commodious" use of the term *sacramentum* in the first three centuries of the Christian church and quotes Paul Tillich, Philip Sherrard, and Richard McBrien who argue for an expanded understanding of the term.²³ Finally, he comes forward with his personal conviction "that music offers divine epiphany, real presence."²⁴ By calling music potentially sacramental, offering a "*finite reality through which the divine is perceived to be disclosed or communicated*,"²⁵ Blackwell displays similarities to Viladesau's project, but goes beyond it in terms of what he claims for music.

Having made his case for his view of music, Blackwell links theology and music together in two "sacramental traditions": first, the Pythagorean tradition, that is, the contemplation of "invisible objects of our understanding and subjects of our insight," especially math and music, and second, the Incarnational tradition, that is, bodily perception, the world of matter, "objects of our senses and subjects of our desire," especially the sounds of

22. Blackwell, *Sacred in Music*, 28.

23. *Ibid.*, 26–28.

24. *Ibid.*, 29.

25. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 788. Quoted in Blackwell, *Sacred in Music*, 28, as the definition Blackwell wishes to apply to music. Italics in original and quotation.

music.²⁶ Balancing these traditions that emphasize body and spirit is essential to his schema. Next Blackwell moves to the relation of music to creation, beginning with Pythagorean intervals, moving through the overtone series, considering various scales and modes, the cycle of fifths, and basic chord progressions. He is not content with the European system, but also considers Asian systems and even the discovery of some ancient bells in China to support his case that “we may speak of music as a universal language in countless cultural dialects.”²⁷ He uses this aspect of music, combined with the transcendental nature of mathematics, to contest Richard Rorty’s anti-foundationalism, arguing for a world with an “intrinsic nature.” This intrinsic nature, found in the Pythagorean tradition, is a revelation of its artist. Blackwell shifts to the Incarnational tradition to explore the transcendental/sacramental effects of the sound of music. After linking music and emotion with the biblical tradition, he sets to work combating the deconstruction of the transcendental in postmodern critiques of Mozart by appealing to the “immediate experience” of the appreciative listener and the ineffable expressiveness of his music, rallying luminaries such as Ludwig Wittgenstein to his aid. From these heights, Blackwell turns his attention to the Fall, considering the dissonance, tension, and chaos found in music that expresses the fallen nature of creation. The “Pythagorean Comma” describes the fact that if the cycle of fifths followed a strictly Pythagorean ratio, the cycle would not finish perfectly and thus spin indefinitely into other cycles. Blackwell concludes:

The Pythagorean Comma, then, is like an emblem of our world, where imperfection is unavoidable. But though the Pythagorean Comma and human sinfulness are unavoidable, neither is irredeemable. . . . The Pythagorean Comma is redeemable through the musical process of tempering. Human sinfulness is redeemable through the religious process of salvation.²⁸

26. Blackwell, *Sacred in Music*, 47.

27. *Ibid.*, 72.

28. *Ibid.*, 158.

Salvation, defined as “healing leading to wholeness, both individual and communal,”²⁹ is linked to the sacramental nature of music. While acknowledging that music not only has the power to heal but to harm, Blackwell focuses on music as a means of unity in diversity, uniting while resisting the totalitarian tendencies inherent in idealist or utopian views of community. His work concludes with an examination of “final bliss,” in which he looks at music’s ability to bring about intimacy, fulfillment, and transcendence.

Blackwell’s work is sweeping in scope and daring in its undertaking. He interacts with a diverse range of scholars and musical genres, quoting them and interacting with them at length. Much of the work is autobiographical; his voice and opinions are everywhere present. This is to the reader’s benefit when dealing with a subject as ephemeral, elusive, and, in terms of taste, subjective as music is. These choices have assets and drawbacks, but given Blackwell’s approach, perhaps they are the right ones.

Assessment and Projections

Vildesau and Blackwell may indeed be gazing on vistas opened up by postmodernism, but, in linking their claims about music to Christian theology, they are also reacting against postmodernism defined as a rejection of meta-narratives. In appealing to music’s beauty and transcendent qualities, they are simultaneously making subjective evaluations and appealing to intrinsic (and therefore to some degree objective/universal) properties in music as a way of connecting with God. This tension may be unavoidable.

The aesthetic approach to the intersection of theology and music is a long and storied one; it is no accident that both of the authors considered above spend time in their respective works going over the historical relationship between music and the church. Given the history of Christianity, it is almost certain that the issues they address will continue to be relevant.

29. *Ibid.*, 197.

Dialogue through Analogy

The following connection made between theology and music differs from the above in that music is not so much a mode of divine revelation as a different approach to doing theology.³⁰ Just as a parable can assist one to see a given situation in a new light (see, for example, Nathan's parable for David's sin in 2 Sam 12:1–15), so musical analogies have the potential to shed light on theological issues. According to Dedre Gentner:

Analogies are partial similarities between different situations that support further inferences. Specifically, analogy is a kind of similarity in which the same system of relations holds across different objects. Analogies thus capture parallels across different situations.³¹

In the present context, a given aspect of music can assist theology insofar as it can provide a “system of relations” that also holds true for some aspect of theology. The works examined below employ this method as a means of bringing together theology and music.

Frances Young

Before Begbie openly pondered what music could do for theology, Frances Young, in *The Art of Performance*, discerned similarities between the questions being pondered in performance practice in the Western classical tradition of music and the question, “How can we live in and worship with the Bible—how can we ‘perform’ the Bible—in a modern world so different from the past which produced and used it?”³² In her prologue, she makes it clear that she is constructing an analogy and not

30. Though it is beyond the scope of this survey, it is worth noting that theology can also influence music. Historically, there have been one or two cases in which theology has affected music theory (see, for example, Rivera, *German Music Theory*, 122, 222, where he demonstrates how Johannes Lippius's conception of the Trinity assisted him in formulating his theory of inversion), and the way the words in sacred music have affected the musical choices of composers such as J. S. Bach has been well established (see, for example, Leaver, “Motive and Motif”).

31. Gentner, “Analogy,” 107.

32. Young, *Art of Performance*, 1.

attempting “a study of music in the patristic period,” though she does not deny the influence of the “positive use of the musical metaphor in the Fathers.”³³ Young skillfully weaves her analogy through the themes of each chapter: in “Interpretation and Authenticity,” exposition of the Scripture is linked to performance practice; in “Determining the Canon,” the biblical canon is linked to classic musical repertoire; “Tradition and Interpretation” speak equally, and in a similar fashion, to musical and biblical concerns; “Jewish Texts and Christian Meanings” are connected with musical devices such as theme and variation, key changes, antithesis and recapitulation; “The Question of Criteria” straddles both worlds on the theme of constraint in interpretation; in “The Bible and Doctrine,” the question of music’s ability to convey content is paralleled by efforts to discern and extract sound doctrine from the Bible; love songs and musical transcendence are worked into the spiritual use of the Bible in “The Bible and Spirituality”; and, finally, “Improvisation and Inspiration” links musical improvisation with the limitless applications of the Scriptures. Music acts as a foil for Young’s interpretive concerns; undeniably, music is serving theology, and doing the job admirably well.

Begbie acknowledges Young’s work in a footnote in *Theology, Music and Time*, calling it “an illuminating essay” but placing it in the realm of biblical interpretation as opposed to theology.³⁴ Yet Young’s work has theological implications; she does not just speak of merely understanding the Bible, but also of living and performing it. Admittedly, music is clearly the junior partner in the dialogue that she sets up, but it is a partner nonetheless. Furthermore, as seen below, Begbie himself engages in biblical interpretation when he employs a musical analogy to assist in his theological interpretation of Romans 9–11.³⁵ If he does not consciously borrow from her methodology, it remains evident that he, too, employs analogy in at least a

33. *Ibid.*, 3.

34. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 4 n. 2.

35. *Ibid.*, 255–70.

similar fashion in the conversation he stages between theology and music.

Jeremy Begbie

Theology, Music and Time marks a deliberate attempt to employ music in the service of theology.³⁶ If Young was among the first to take steps towards treating music as a full-fledged dialogue partner for theology, Begbie brought it to fruition. The book is centered on the close relationship between music and time and how this can be used to “see” challenging aspects of systematic theology in a fresh way. Begbie’s serious treatment of music is evident from the first two chapters, which are devoted to an explication of the nature of music, especially with respect to time. He takes the time to situate his understanding in the context of contemporary musical thought.

When Begbie engages with theology in part two of the book, he brings an understanding of time shaped by music into dialogue with Augustine, allowing him to critique Augustine’s association of temporality with fallenness. According to Begbie, temporality is an intrinsic aspect of God’s creation, not to be associated with the curse. Music comes to the fore in his examination of the waves of tension and release in musical phrases as they follow each other in temporal sequence to biblical prophecy. This approach avoids many of the problems inherent in a strictly linear approach to prophecy and fulfillment, paralleling the development of musical resolutions that defer final resolution with partial fulfillments of prophecy that await their ultimate resolution in Jesus Christ. Similarly, the repetition of the Eucharist finds justification and explication when connected to “metrical music” (music played with a sense of tempo) in which repetition functions to “both close the [musical phrase] and provoke a

36. See Begbie, *Resounding Truth*, for Begbie’s reversal of this approach: an engagement with music through theology. Unlike *Theology, Music and Time*, *Resounding Truth* addresses its topic through a variety of approaches in addition to analogy, including a historical look at musicians and theologians reminiscent of Stoltzfus’ work. It is also much broader in scope.

desire for further fulfilment.”³⁷ Music allows one to experience the Eucharist as a reminder of Christ’s death and “a re-charging of God’s promise of a new future.”³⁸

Part three offers musical insight gleaned from an examination of improvisation and freedom in music. The approaches of composers Pierre Boulez and John Cage are contrasted with each other; the former exerts his will over every note, tying each to a mathematical model that replaces previous groundings of music in physical reality, while the latter gives almost everything over to nature and chance. Both approaches are attempts “to be free of a supposedly oppressive teleological system (such as tonality)” but ultimately result in mathematical or temporal necessity.³⁹ According to Begbie, both approaches are products of a philosophy that regards “constraint as inherently detrimental to authentic freedom.”⁴⁰ In contrast with these attempts to throw off constraint, he makes a case that constraint is in fact integral to freedom. The use of analogy here is not as direct as in the previous examples. Music is tied to the worldviews of those who make it, and, in this case, the musical experiments of Boulez and Cage for Begbie represent excesses to be avoided instead of emulated. The following section delves into jazz as a musical model for freedom operating with constraint. Begbie, among other things, makes analogies between the way jazz tunes develop over time and the formation of tradition in the church, and between inevitable errors made by improvisers and the “restful restlessness” of Christian freedom.⁴¹ Finally, he connects improvising and gift-giving to the doctrine of election in Romans 9–11. God and Israel are linked in a musical improvisation during which Israel’s refusal to respond to God is taken up by God and used as a means to draw the Gentiles into the church. Then, “[t]he Gentiles’ improvisation will set off Jewish improvisation.”⁴² It is not possible to treat Begbie’s nuanced treatment of

37. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 166.

38. *Ibid.*, 167.

39. *Ibid.*, 196.

40. *Ibid.*, 197.

41. *Ibid.*, 244.

42. *Ibid.*, 258.

these issues fully here, but even this brief overview should serve to underline his robust use of the analogical approach.

However, his intrepid enterprise leaves something to be desired in the eyes of his contemporaries. In her own work, Epstein asserts that Begbie “reduces music to a mere proof-text for biblical doctrine.”⁴³ It is unclear whether she is objecting to his confessional stance or if she is arguing that his theological pre-understandings are keeping him from seeing all that music has to offer. As she develops her critique, she asserts that Begbie fails to “adequately . . . ground his analysis in musical practices of particular historical contexts.”⁴⁴ This is a valid concern; had Begbie addressed the social context of jazz, he would have had a resource with which to meet the concerns raised in Blackwell’s review dealing with Begbie’s treatment of Romans 9–11. Blackwell suggests that “Paul’s Christian particularism seems out of harmony with the musical pluralism of a robust jazz ensemble.”⁴⁵ Blackwell’s concerns could have been pre-empted had Begbie considered the social history of race relations in jazz music, with black and white providing the analogues corresponding to Jew and Gentile. It should also be noted that, while Begbie engages directly with composers in the classical tradition, he avoids similar engagement with any major jazz figures.⁴⁶

Ann Pederson

Ann Pederson stands somewhere between an analogical approach and a feminist deconstructionalist approach; in this section the former aspect will come into focus. Jazz and improvisation are the themes that dominate in *God, Creation, and All That Jazz*, and *The Music of Creation* (with Arthur Peacocke). In her first book, after situating her discussion of creation theologically, Pederson parallels classical theism with the way classical music is often performed in a contemporary context,

43. Epstein, *Melting the Venusberg*, 84.

44. *Ibid.*, 87.

45. Blackwell, “Review of *Theology, Music and Time*,” 474.

46. For an extended engagement with a major jazz figure from a theological perspective, see Howison, *God’s Mind in That Music*.

noting the commonality of authoritarian and static interpretation. Against this, she argues that “[w]ith the advent of Einsteinian physics and evolutionary biology, the model of jazz and improvisation has come to seem more appropriate.”⁴⁷ This discussion in her opening chapter on “The Composition of Creation” is followed by “creativity as creaturely vocation,” where she opts for process theology as an alternative to classical theism. According to Pederson, this model gives human beings the ability to improvise as “co-creators” with God. “Perfecting the Art of Hanging Out” parallels the open and interactive dynamics of small group jazz with the wider community of creation and the Christian community in particular. In “The Blues: An Affirmation That Life Still Swings,” Pederson wrestles with suffering and evil, bringing the blues into play not so much as an analogical sounding board for a theology of suffering but as a means of confronting and coping with them.⁴⁸ The concluding chapter, “The Life of the Church,” is a practical chapter that combines ecclesiology very naturally with the social aspects of playing jazz and makes some practical suggestions for church practice.

In Pederson’s book with scientist Arthur Peacocke, the theme of jazz and improvised music surfaces again in relation to creation. Science is also a dialogue partner in this work, but since this is not my present focus, I will highlight specifically the musical encounters pertaining to theology that it presents. One significant encounter concerns the two natures of Jesus Christ. Notes in a chord can be used as an analogy for the two natures. Both natures are present simultaneously without one having to give way to the other, just as notes in a chord sound together, so that “[t]here is no question in the Christian experience of ‘the more of God, the less of the human Jesus,’ or vice versa, and this familiar phenomenon in music serves to render intelligible, feasible, and credible what otherwise would seem paradoxical, if not downright contradictory”⁴⁹ The book then elaborates on the

47. Pederson, *God, Creation, and All That Jazz*, 18.

48. This chapter also contains her most pointed expression of feminist theology; see below.

49. Peacocke and Pederson, *Music of Creation*, 41.

theme of Pederson's previous work: linking jazz improvisation to a conception of God and human beings as "co-improvisers, embellishing on God's theme of grace, freedom, and love for all creation."⁵⁰ Practice as it pertains to both music and the Christian life flows naturally from this premise, and from there it is a short step to modeling the "ensemble of the church . . . after a middle-school jazz band rehearsal."⁵¹ What follows this develops the analogy, focusing especially on risk-taking, the parallels between learning a language and learning how to improvise, and the balance between individuality and collaboration. The final point of contact between music and theology summarizes and extends Begbie's view on the theological implications of music's finitude.

In her first book, Pederson's writing draws in nearly equal parts from her personal experiences and her interaction with other theologians. The result is more narrative than systematic, sometimes resulting in underdeveloped assertions. Furthermore, her approach to jazz lacks depth, relying too heavily on Paul F. Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, using supportive quotes from jazz musicians as opposed to entering into conversation with them. In fact, her dialogues with process and feminist theologians are more involved than her interaction with music. In what was presumably her portion of *The Music of Creation*, Pederson extends her use of jazz improvisation, but, like Begbie, still holds back from any extended engagement with any jazz musicians of note. That being said, her works raise important issues concerning the doctrines of God and creation and place her among the few theologians who have ventured an extended exploration of the theological implications of jazz and improvisation.

Assessment and Projections

Using analogy as a means of approaching the intersection between theology and music is certainly rarer, if not novel, in comparison with employing musical aesthetics. Judging from the

50. *Ibid.*, 50.

51. *Ibid.*, 55.

works considered above, it has the potential to be a fruitful endeavor. Even as a foil, as in the case of Young's work, musical analogy demonstrates the ability to sharpen theological insights, correcting logocentric and visual-conceptual myopias. As a method, musical analogy has almost unlimited potential when applied to areas of theology with which it shares common systems of relations. Unlike the aesthetic approach, however, this approach will never be able to raise music above the status of dialogue partner.

Feminist Deconstruction and Reconstruction

As noted above, feminism remains at present the only deconstructive/reconstructive approach to the intersection of theology and music. It represents a needed dialogue with the sociological and ideological motives behind the production of music.

Heidi Epstein

In *Melting the Venusberg*, Heidi Epstein employs a hermeneutic of suspicion to historical and contemporary Christian engagement with music before engaging in a feminist reconstruction. One could situate Epstein's endeavor under the heading of aesthetics because, like Viladesau, she is using music as a means of engaging in her enterprise. However, since half of her work is concerned with deconstruction, and her reconstruction is specifically focused on a feminist agenda, it seems fitting to acknowledge its uniqueness in relation to the other studies examined here.

Part one of Epstein's work undertakes the deconstruction of overt and subtle sexism in the history of Christian engagement with music. She begins with the "phallic rage for order," tracing the link between music and the cosmos from Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle to the Church Fathers. Music is lauded for its "disembodied Order," sweeping aside its bodily groundings and erotic implications.⁵² According to Epstein, the bodily-situated, erotic aspect of music was for the Fathers something "to be

52. Epstein, *Melting the Venusberg*, 23.

contained, sterilised, and if nothing else, redirected toward God.”⁵³ She makes the case that, beginning in Augustine and realized in Boethius, music became embodied and engendered as a woman, placed in a subservient position to the word. The following chapter continues the chronological deconstruction through the middle ages and into the twentieth century. Convincing evidence is supplied for the perception of music as a woman: virtuous and chaste as a virgin when conforming to masculine ideals, but whorish, seductive, and emasculating when stepping outside the carefully demarcated bounds of her critics. This research grounds Epstein’s critique of contemporary models in the final chapter of part one, culminating in the charge that these models “continue to perpetuate the phallic rage for order in similarly conventional terms of harmony and transcendence, sidestepping once again the messy yet creative potential that music’s erotic metaphoricality might afford.”⁵⁴ Among the first to be critiqued with respect to their view of music are the Protestant theologian Karl Barth and the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng. Barth’s understanding of Mozart is charged with being too transcendent while Küng’s assessment of the same composer fails in the same way in spite of his implicit connection between experiencing Mozart’s music and sexuality. Her critiques of other figures provide useful summaries and insights into their endeavors, as seen above.

In the second part of her work, Epstein seeks to construct a feminist theology of music. She begins by investigating the theological implications of the connection between music and sexuality. In her reading of the music of Hildegard of Bingen, Hildegard assigns “a redemptive role to the female body,”⁵⁵ focuses on the incarnation as opposed to the disembodied, and holds to a Christology where Christ is “God’s music-made-flesh” in addition to being the word-made-flesh.⁵⁶ Suzanne Cusick’s lesbian musicology provides a more direct avenue for Epstein’s

53. *Ibid.*, 26.

54. *Ibid.*, 59.

55. *Ibid.*, 122.

56. *Ibid.*, 126.

approach: Cusick's "redefinition" of sexuality through music and "minus its usual phallogocentric trappings,"⁵⁷ when linked to a conception of Christ-as-lover, results in a spiritual transcendence "achieved through the most sensual, polymorphously sexual, means."⁵⁸ The following chapter primarily interacts with a narrative in which the nuns in the convent of Santa Cristina della Fondazza in Bologna defied their Archbishop's prohibition on modern music via political and familial connections. Noting the musical success and notoriety gained by these nuns, and keeping the connection between music and the erotic in mind, Epstein sees a melting of the barrier between them and the courtesans of the time. She concludes,

The clerics' tactics and the nuns' disobedience demonstrate that music's theological significance lies not in its incarnation of harmony and order—divine, cosmic, or human—but precisely in the "*promiscuity*" and *disintegration* which it breeds; in its disorderly conduct of "power, pleasure, and intimacy" between willing (or not so willing) bodies.⁵⁹

This theme is then elaborated in the next chapter in Epstein's examination of African traditions combining music, dance, sexuality, and spirituality. She then picks up the motif of abjection begun in the previous chapter and considers the confrontational performance practices of AIDS activist Diamanda Gala. Gala is a "postmodern woman-mystic [who] immerses herself in abjection in order adequately to imitate Christ's cruciform plea for justice, compassion, and mercy."⁶⁰ Epstein lauds Gala's music as a rebuttal of naive attempts to affirm harmonic order as an answer to pain and suffering.

Stoltzfus rightly points out that Epstein's project relies on the perception of music as being imitative of the body, allowing her to draw lines between it and Christ's Passion. He suggests that her approach in fact shares a similar methodology with Schleiermacher's, in that they both share "a Romantically appropriated

57. *Ibid.*, 131.

58. *Ibid.*, 133.

59. *Ibid.*, 145. Italics in original.

60. *Ibid.*, 176.

expression theory of art.”⁶¹ Even if this is in fact the case, it would be difficult to deny that Epstein’s program veers sharply from Schleiermacher’s in its feminist outlook, explicit treatment of sexuality in music, and its concerted effort to deconstruct the notion of music as a representation of disembodied order.

The first portion of Epstein’s work provides a much-needed correction to conceptions of music overlooking music’s embodied nature and parallels with human sexuality. However, in spite of her early insistence that her work will not “unilaterally reject”⁶² the models she critiques, as she carries out her project it appears that in fact she does. In other words, her project rightly discerns an imbalance in past and present engagement between Christian theology and music, but her reconstructive project is not so much a corrective as an alternative. By consistently rejecting the validity of masculine understandings of music and sexuality, she has left no ground for a rapprochement. This is pronounced in the near absence of ecclesiology from the project.

Ann Pederson

As we have seen above, Pederson’s approach does not share Epstein’s lack of ecclesial application; she actively suggests ways in which her insights can be adapted in the life of the church. Pederson shares, though perhaps to a lesser degree, Epstein’s feminist/deconstructionist agenda. It is the most pronounced in the fourth chapter of *God, Creation and All That Jazz*: “the blues: an affirmation that life still swings.” Appealing to feminist and liberationist thought, Pederson seeks to deconstruct the substitutionary theory of the atonement on the grounds that it has led and continues to lead to the sanction of violence against women and the vulnerable by glorifying Jesus’s suffering. Seeking an alternative, she turns to the story, “Sonny’s Blues” by James Baldwin, as well as the Afro-American blues tradition, to argue for resistance and transformation in the face of evil and suffering. For Pederson, jazz improvisation encapsulates

61. Stoltzfus, *Theology as Performance*, 14.

62. Epstein, *Melting the Venusberg*, 14.

this response: the jazz musician reacts and plays on through the hardships of life.

Like Epstein, Pederson does not leave space for redemption or re-appropriation of the things she rejects. The line connecting the substitutionary theory of atonement to the perpetration of violence effectively outlaws its proponents.

Assessment and Projections

Above, I pointed out the weakness of the feminist approach to the intersection of theology in music with respect to a lack of space for rapprochement. This need not be a fatal flaw; it can be solved from within or from without. To solve the problem from within, feminist authors need to clarify how previous models can be resituated in light of the ones they propose. It is not enough to claim that one does not intend to abandon or jettison previous models, especially when the rhetoric points in precisely the opposite direction. To solve the problem from without, those being critiqued need first to acknowledge the critiques being made and then find a way of responding appropriately.

Looking ahead, it is possible that other marginalized voices will join in the task of ferreting out injustices in the narratives of theology and music, perhaps providing new alternatives. Sometimes critiques must be pointed and sharp, but it is to be hoped that ultimately harmony will triumph over cacophony.

Conclusion

While it does not present a unified front, there can be little doubt that a new field is arising from the dialogue between music and theology in light of recent publications. This field represents an intensification, explication, and expansion of the long history of encounters between the two disciplines. Musical aesthetics, analogy, and feminism provide significantly different approaches to the task, but I do not believe they need to be mutually exclusive. This survey has highlighted representative works in the field, but there remain many works to consider, some just outside of its scope. Hopefully critical mass will soon be attained and an important, if still fledgling, field of study will draw a new

generation of scholars to aid in the ongoing renewal of the theological enterprise.

Bibliography

Begbie, Jeremy S. *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music*. Engaging Culture. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007.

———. *Theology, Music and Time*. Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

———. *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991.

Blackwell, Albert L. "Review of *Theology, Music and Time*." In *Journal of Religion* 18 (2002) 473–74.

———. *The Sacred in Music*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999.

Brown, Frank Burch. "Aesthetics, Music, and Theology: A Review of Current Literature." *The Arts in Religious and Theological Studies* 13, no. 2 (2001) 32–35.

Bychkov, Oleg V. "Review of *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art, and Rhetoric*." *Modern Theology* 17 (2001) 516–18.

Epstein, Heidi. *Melting the Venusberg: A Feminist Theology of Music*. New York: Continuum, 2004.

Gentner, Dedre. "Analogy." In *A Companion to Cognitive Science*, edited by William Bechtel, George Graham, and D. A. Balota, 107–13. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998.

- Howison, Jamie. *God's Mind in That Music: Theological Explorations through the Music of John Coltrane*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012.
- Leaver, Robin A. "Motive and Motif in the Church Music of Johann Sebastian Bach." *Theology Today* 63 (2006) 38–47.
- McBrien, Richard P. *Catholicism*. 2 vols. Minneapolis: Winston, 1980.
- Peacocke, Arthur, and Ann Pederson. *The Music of Creation. Theology and the Sciences*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006.
- Pederson, Ann. *God, Creation, and All That Jazz: A Process of Composition and Improvisation*. St. Louis: Chalice, 2001.
- Rivera, Benito V. *German Music Theory in the Early 17th Century: The Treatises of Johannes Lippius*. Studies in Musicology. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980.
- Stapert, Calvin. *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church*. The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.
- Stoltzfus, Philip E. *Theology as Performance: Music, Aesthetics, and God in Western Thought*. New York: T. & T. Clark, 2006.
- Viladesau, Richard. *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- . *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric*. New York: Paulist, 2000.
- Young, Frances. *The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990.