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BOOK REVIEW

Chelle L. Stearns. *Handling Dissonance: A Musical Theological Aesthetic of Unity*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019. vii + 229 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-62564-546-3. \$29.00.

Chelle L. Stearns' contribution to the growing conversation between music and theology is unique, timely, and practical. Stearns is Associate Professor of Theology at The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology. This book is a revision of her dissertation, but happily it is also a book that manages to be cognizant of the reader. More importantly, it makes a solid contribution to what a theology of unity *sounds* like.

Stearns' book is built around a critique of the musical philosophy/theology of twentieth-century composer Arnold Schoenberg via theologian Colin Gunton. While these men may appear to be unlikely opponents, in Stearns' hands Schoenberg becomes a foil for Gunton's theology of unity, which she explicates and then enhances through musical analogies. She does an exceptional job of allowing each man to speak for himself with few interruptions. At the same time, she diligently traces key influences, takes into account secondary sources, and engages with critics. When such matters risk distracting the reader from the matter at hand, they are nicely tucked into footnotes.

Part I opens with two chapters on the development of Schoenberg's musical thought. Chapter 1 traces his biography with special attention to his innovative approach to blurring traditional musical boundaries between consonance and dissonance. Readers with at least a basic knowledge of music theory will have an easier time with this chapter than those who do not. However, with perseverance and a willingness to look up the definitions of musical terms, even those lacking such knowledge will still be able to make out the big picture. In chapter 2, those

with a background in philosophy will in turn be more at ease as Stearns deftly traces the strong influence of Arthur Schopenhauer on Schoenberg's concept of unity and conflict. Stearns takes care to define key terms as she presents material that is inherently abstract and dense. Fortunately, she consistently chooses clarity over attempts to sound clever or "deep" in her presentation. One of the central ideas of this chapter is that for Schoenberg (via Schopenhauer), "particularity entails conflict and unity necessitates the dissolution of particularity" (67). The apparent particularity of the material world disguises the unity of "the innermost essence of the world" (70), which can be expressed through music.

Chapter 3 is the first stage of a rebuttal to Schoenberg's notion of unity. Employing Gunton's theology in conversation with musical-theological insights from Jeremy Begbie, Stearns seeks "to find a conception of unity that upholds the integrity and particularity of the many" (73). Looking at Western Trinitarian theology, Gunton critiques what he sees as an undue stress on God's unity and a corresponding downplaying of his triunity in Western theology. Stearns illustrates Gunton's insistence that there is nothing underlying "the three persons in triunity" (77) with Begbie's insights into how musical notes can coexist simultaneously and without competition in aural space while maintaining the distinction between them. Such a Trinitarian theology upholds particularity in unity, effectively countering Schoenberg's notion of a unity into which particulars dissolve.

Part 2 opens with two more chapters devoted to Schoenberg. Paralleling the opening two chapters, chapter 4 focuses in on musical concerns while chapter 5 deals with philosophical concerns and the influence of Schopenhauer. Together, these chapters make it clear that Schoenberg believes enlightened composers—who meet Schopenhauer's criteria as geniuses—are able to take and understand a single inspired musical "idea" and then to express it in a composition. Not everyone may be able to join the composer in being able to comprehend the idea, but the insights of the composer can trickle down to the elites and then to the masses to raise the lot of humanity and give it needed direction. Stearns concludes that for Schoenberg, "unity depends upon the

agency (or mediation) of the genius as he presented the idea within the world of sound: only the genius can ensure unity” (170).

At the beginning of the following chapter, Stearns helpfully summarizes the earlier stages of the book, showing how they lead up to her present argument that God’s triune unity undergirds the unity of created beings. To this end, Stearns expounds Gunton’s doctrine of God, focusing on his clear distinction between God and his creation, and how God can be truly known from his self-revelation in time and space. Because God is triune, he has space within himself for distinction and particularity between the persons and space for these persons to be in communion. God’s triune nature provides a model for how “[c]reated beings are made to be bound together in love and define one another through relationship” (197). Stearns contrasts Schoenberg’s theology of mediation—where the genius has exclusive access to the unity that underlies reality and must mediate it to the rest of humanity—with Gunton’s understanding of God sending (and in sending, revealing) himself.

If part two suffers from any defect, it has more to do with the space Stearns allots to aspects of Schoenberg’s thought and biography that are not directly taken up in her critique. She spends several pages developing Schoenberg’s perception of himself and how he viewed significant composers, but her rebuttal of Schoenberg’s self-perception and his concept of the genius is limited to just a few lines in chapter 6. Furthermore, also in chapter 6—a chapter supposedly devoted to a rebuttal of Schoenberg—she has to use Schoenberg’s opera *Moses und Aron* to illustrate his “theology of mediation” (102) because she did not do so in the previous two chapters. If this is a defect (others may find Stearns organization of her material defensible), it is not a serious one. Even if one finds details about Schoenberg which are not directly pertinent to the argument, they remain enjoyable and informative.

Readers with backgrounds in music history and theory, philosophy, and theology will all find valuable material. If they lack a good grasp of certain fields, they will find in Stearns an able guide. Music historians and theorists will find a well-researched

account of the thought of one of the most important composers of twentieth-century music. Philosophers will have the opportunity to contemplate the practical effects of Schopenhauer's philosophy on a great composer. Finally, theologians will gain a better appreciation of the implications of Gunton's theology when contrasted with the thought of a worthy opponent and enhanced by musical analogies. After engaging with her arguments, I am sure that most readers will affirm with Stearns that "one's particular beliefs about metaphysical and eternal categories can have unlooked for effects upon one's creative engagement with the world" (72).

Bradley K. Broadhead
Oyen Evangelical Missionary Church
Oyen, AB