resounding truth

Engaging Culture

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series editors

The Engaging Culture series is designed to help Christians respond with theological discernment to our contemporary culture. Each volume explores particular cultural expressions, seeking to discover God's presence in the world and to involve readers in sympathetic dialogue and active discipleship. These books encourage neither an uninformed rejection nor an uncritical embrace of culture, but active engagement informed by theological reflection.

resounding truth

christian wisdom in the world of music

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In memory of
MMB and GHB

contents

introduction

Can you imagine a day without music? You wake up. Perhaps a bedside radio brings you a jingle at news time. You take a train to work—easy classics are piped through overhead speakers at the station. Or you drive to work and flick on the radio—cool jazz fills the car, a jeep next to you at the traffic lights throbs with hip-hop. You are at home with children; one of them plays a video game—with synchronized music; they watch a video—most of which is backed by music. In the evening, you put your feet up and watch a sitcom you recorded earlier in the day—the scenes are joined by five-second musical links. Or you go for a beer—and you find a folk band in the bar. Or you go out to a movie—half the sound track is musical. And on Sunday, perhaps you go to church—and about half of the service uses music.

More than ever before in Western society, music is part of our lives, ubiquitously present. Whether we love it or ignore it, play it or shut it out, revel in it or resent it, it is there.

Yet many of us rarely if ever stop to think about what music is, how it works, what it might be doing to us, and what we might be doing with it. Christians are no exception. The last twenty years or so have seen a flood of books on "Christianity and . . . ," covering topics from party politics to biotechnology. And rightly so. In many constituencies in the church, a tendency to retreat into a ghetto and withdraw from culture at large has been superseded by a desire to relate the claims of the faith to every sphere of life. Yet even when the arts are given serious thought, music is often noticeable by its absence.

That is certainly true when it comes to the world of theology. In the last hundred years, serious dialogue between theologians and musicians has been hard to find.[1] In recent times, a flurry of writing on theology and the arts has appeared,[2] but it would be hard to deny that the lion's share of attention has been given to the visual arts (especially painting) and literature. When I attend conferences on "theology and the arts" or "Christianity and the arts," I frequently

bump into a default assumption: painting and literature represent art proper, and the rest, including music, will somehow fall into place accordingly.

Why has so little Christian intellectual energy been devoted to music in recent times? Undoubtedly one of the reasons is the sheer difficulty of speaking about it. Elvis Costello once said that writing about music is like dancing about architecture. It may be a cliché to say that the experience of music cannot be grasped in words, but it is no less true for that. Speech always seems to fall painfully short of the reality. George Steiner remarks that "in the face of music, the wonders of language are also its frustrations."[3] Many music critics leave us feeling that we would have gained far more simply by listening to the music. Andrew Solomon writes of his experience of interviewing the Russian virtuoso Evgeny Kissin:

> Watching Kissin perform, one sees a man who seems literally possessed by his music. Though Kissin can speak of music with intellectual clarity, he can no more verbalize how he has arrived at his way of playing the piano than the leopard can explain how he got his spots. "How do you choose your encores?" I asked him. . . . "They come to me," he said. "How do you judge an audience?" "I feel something in the air." "How do you decide when you are ready for a piece?" "This is always very clear to me." "How do you decide which concerts to attend?" "I attend the ones I'm interested in."[4]

Further acute difficulties arise from trying to fathom how it is that music does what it does. It is indisputable that music is one of the most powerful media humans have at their disposal; *how* it mediates and *what* it mediates are notoriously hard to understand or explain.

Moreover, thinking Christians may be inclined to disregard music simply because they believe, with many others, that it does not concern anything objective, anything that could invite claims to truth. Appraisals of music seem to be wholly or largely determined by our own preferences ("I know what I like, and that's all that matters"; "it's all a matter of individual taste, anyway") or by the prevailing currents of our social group. Any conclusion I reach about what makes a piece "good" or "bad" will surely either be arbitrary or die the death of a thousand qualifications. Indeed, some go further and say that there are no universal norms by which music can be interpreted and assessed—an approach intensified in the so-called postmodern ethos, with its "tendency to question the very notion of an original, independent truth or reality to which the arts, morality, or indeed any kind of 'discourse' could refer."[5]

A further reason for neglect is that in comparison with the monumental dilemmas of our age—the ecological crisis, mass starvation, the AIDS pandemic—music will seem for many a thoroughly inconsequential matter. As we shall see, in our culture the most common primary use of music is to create or change moods; it would seem odd to give something so trivial any serious intellectual attention. At best music is a distraction from the urgent and press-

ing demands of daily living, a luxury for those who have the time and money to use and enjoy it.

Why Bother?

Of course, the chances are that readers of this book already have some interest in music and believe that thinking about it in a Christian way is worthwhile. Nonetheless, in the light of what we have just been saying, it is worth asking: why bother putting our minds to something that is so hard to speak about, so apparently unconcerned with matters of truth, and seemingly so insignificant?

The question of the difficulty of speaking about music and the issue of music's relation to truth will be touched upon many times later in the book. Here we focus on the question: why should music be a significant or important matter for Christians to think about?

Theologically, the most general and basic reason is simply the *lordship of Jesus Christ*. For the follower of Christ, there is no "exclusion zone," no "secular" territory outside the scope of his saving work, no value-free or neutral area of human life. This applies as much to music as to any other cultural activity.

But there are more specific reasons for caring about music. The first we have alluded to already: music is *pervasive* in our culture. Even if we never go near a concert hall, or switch on a radio or TV, or go to films, music will seek us out in airports and train stations, in doctors' clinics and dentists' chairs, at the hairdresser's, and in shopping malls, pubs, and clubs. We do not have to find it; it finds us. A teenager said to a friend of mine recently: "Music is the ocean we swim in." It would be odd if Christians were never to think in depth about something so omnipresent.

Not only that, music seems to be *universal*. We know of no culture without something akin to music. "There have been cultures without counting, cultures without painting, cultures bereft of the wheel or the written word, but never a culture without music."[6] Music spans the full range of wealth and privilege. To think of it as a disposable luxury for the lucky few flies in the face of the evidence. Even the most poverty-stricken peoples will sing. Music may not be necessary for biological survival—on a desert island we could subsist without it—but it does seem vital to human flourishing. Would it not be strange, to say the least, if there were no distinctively Christian comment to make on so prevalent a feature of the human race?

Music also cries out for attention simply because of the *immense power* it can have in many people's lives—something memorably celebrated in movies such as *The Pianist*, *Sister Act*, *Music of the Heart*, and *Les Choristes*. Few doubt that music can call forth the deepest things of the human spirit and affect behavior at the most profound levels. Anyone who has parented a teenager will not need to be told this—study after study has shown that music often plays a pivotal part in

the formation of young people's identity, self-image, and patterns of behavior.[7] The commercial sector knows that music can affect, among other things, the time people spend in a shop,[8] the amount of money spent,[9] and the choice of product.[10] Through music, DJs shift the energy levels and social interactions of a club and restaurant managers promote an image and mold our moods. Factory workers are relieved of boredom and fatigue; warriors forget their fear and rush into battle; the mentally ill are helped to health. Polish sacred music played a key role in the solidarities that eventually overturned communism.[11] It is small wonder that some totalitarian regimes have been extremely nervous about music (the Taliban administration in Afghanistan sought to ban virtually all music because of its perceived social dangers) and that others have unashamedly harnessed it precisely because of its influence (the Nazis, for example). Any Christian who cares about the good of human society ought to be concerned with what kind of power music might possess and how such power might be used responsibly.

Another reason for thinking at length about music is *the importance that many people are prepared to grant it in their lives*. George Steiner recounts that for the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, "the slow movement of Brahms' third Quartet pulled him back from the brink of suicide."[12] The singer Sting has said: "I think music is the one spiritual force in our lives that we have access to, really. There are so many other spiritual avenues that are closed off to us, and music still has that, is still important, is important for me. It saved my life. It saved my sanity."[13] Admittedly there are some for whom music possesses little attraction or interest and a few who dislike all music. But they are few. In addition to the music we hear whether we want to or not, a large part of the population spends considerable amounts of time (and money) seeking it out. A glance at the statistics of musical consumption in any Western country will confirm this. The revolution in digital technology and Internet communication availability has played a critical role here, opening up an unprecedented flood of consumer access to music. Again, it would be curious if thinking Christians were to ignore something in which people are prepared to invest so highly.

A further incentive to consider music theologically comes from recognizing what seem to be the *very close links between music and*—for want of a better term—*religious impulses*. An ethnomusicologist comments: "I seriously doubt, in fact, that one could find any religion, large or small, that does not concern itself with the ways 'music' is . . . vital to conveying the word of God. . . . Music," he continues, is "a preferred medium for expressing religious meaning."[14] George Steiner is worth quoting again:

> Music and the metaphysical, in the root sense of that term, music and religious feeling, have been virtually inseparable. It is in and through music that we are most immediately in the presence of the logically, of the verbally inexpressible but wholly palpable energy in being that communicates to our senses and to our

> reflection what little we can grasp of the naked wonder of life. . . . It has long been, it continues to be, the unwritten theology of those who lack or reject any formal creed.[15]

In nearly every culture where we encounter phenomena that would normally be categorized as religious, music will not be far behind: the urge to sing, pluck strings, or send air through resonating tubes seems irresistible. Moreover, there are many, as we shall see, who believe music serves a religious or quasi-religious function even when there is no formal or overt recognition of the fact. A good example would be those who see the contemporary club culture as performing, at least in some respects, a religious role in contemporary society.[16]

Care is needed here. There is indeed a kind of intuitive, gut feeling that many have about music: that it is in some special way religiously or theologically "loaded" (or at least particularly well suited to religious purposes) and that this is confirmed by the often intimate links between music and religion in history. Some will want to take this further and claim that just because of this, we have in music a point of contact of immense potential between the church and culture, a bridge across which the church must learn to walk in the interest of engaging effectively with the contemporary world. This might be so in many cases. We would be foolish to deny the possibility of the Spirit's stirrings in music far beyond the church, and the implications of this for the church's mission. Nevertheless, claims of religious experience through music are notoriously hard to evaluate and build upon unless one is prepared to identify at least something of the content of the "religion" in question. The category of "religion" or "religious," after all, is a massively contested one, as is the belief that there is some kind of locatable core or essence of "religious experience." Unless we are willing to clarify what we might mean by asserting that, for example, music puts us in touch with God (for the Christian, as for any theistic faith, this would mean with a quite specific God), we will be powerless in the face of the skeptic, who will see such claims as no more than hyperbole for a fervent emotional experience or as a way of masking our desire to have some kind of ultimate authority to back up our musical tastes! In short, a laudable attempt to connect with musical experience in the culture at large can easily trade away the distinctives of Christian faith, leaving the church more irrelevant than ever.[17]

Nevertheless, the widespread and apparently ineradicable use of music by the world's major faith traditions should at least give us pause for thought. Certainly in the case of Christianity, we only need think of the first stirrings of the church when prayer was quickly wedded to song, or of the centuries of plainsong, the cantatas of Bach, the avalanche of praise music of the last thirty years, the fierce crucifixion symphonies of James MacMillan. The long and strong relationship between Christian faith and music is striking. To be sure, the marriage has not always been a happy one. Currents of suspicion are not

hard to find: "Music dulls the intellect and its sensuousness entraps the soul; it offers a world of harmony where no harmony exists, and replaces the real world with the world of entrancing make-believe. So runs the traditional critique of music."[18] But however strong the misgivings, the links between music and Christianity have been persistent and irrepressible, and this deserves attention from the thinking Christian.

Another factor encouraging us to think about music theologically is that *in a wide range of musical genres today*, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, *theological or Christian themes are being explored*, and often in ways that go far beyond using religious words simply for style or surface effect.[19] At times we can find a clear attraction to Jesus Christ along with misgivings about organizational religion (Bono, Moby, Nick Cave), at other times, a far wider "spirituality."[20] A flurry of writing on U2 has highlighted the biblical imagery and Christian resonances of much of their music.[21] A variety of composers with little or no professed religious commitment have been journeying into the theological. Sir Harrison Birtwistle's *Last Supper* (1998–99) is one example; John Adams's oratorio *El Niño* (2000) is another, a two-hour retelling of the nativity story. Significantly, the distinguished director Peter Sellars, who staged the Paris premiere of *El Niño*, comments: "For a number of years, most of the work I've been doing is about conveying a religious or spiritual message. . . . I think in this age of television and Hollywood film, if classical music is going to stick around, there'd better be a very good reason. We have to offer something that is not available otherwise. I think it is spiritual content, which is what's missing from the commercial culture that surrounds us."[22] There are also composers like James MacMillan (discussed in chapter 7) and Sofia Gubaidulina, openly theological in intent and setting overtly Christian texts, who enjoy widespread acclaim.

Of no less interest is the huge commercial success of the so-called New Simplicity music (e.g., John Tavener, Arvo Pärt, Henryk Górecki, and others).[23] In the case of some of these composers, the Christian affiliation is quite overt, and the religious motivation behind their writing very evident. They provoke one writer to talk of "the return of religion" in music.[24] It is hard to miss this music's burgeoning popularity, as well as other music put under the umbrella of "spiritual" or "New Age" in which the interest is not in presenting a musical argument but in creating a kind of "soundscape,"[25] uniform in texture, unhurried, with little tension, rhythmic edge, or drive. Again, though, theological caution is needed. The word "spiritual" may be more popular than "religious," but it is no less slippery. Move beyond the language and we find that the depth of engagement with religious (let alone Christian) matters can vary enormously. Nonetheless, whatever our final assessment, there is surely much to be gained from a consciously Christian engagement with such music.

A final reason for Christians to attend to music thoughtfully is, as we have just mentioned, that *music has habitually played a key part in the church's worship*. Despite periods when it has fallen into neglect and even been snubbed

altogether, a glance at church history confirms that more often than not, worship has included music and often in copious quantities. Is it not worth asking why this is so? Just what it is about music that has made it so pervasive in the praise of God's people?

Theology and Music

The aim of this Engaging Culture series is "to help Christians respond with theological discernment to our contemporary culture" with a view to "active engagement informed by theological reflection." This book is concerned with music in particular: gaining theological discernment about music with a view to—and, we would want to add, in the midst of—active engagement. It is concerned with how God's truth might "sound" and "re-sound" in the world of music.

Put another way, we are asking: what can Christian theology bring to music?[26] Needless to say, theology is a word that can have hugely negative connotations today. For many, it will suggest at best something harmlessly irrelevant and at worst oppressive dogma imposed on the unwilling. It is commonly associated with abstraction—never touching the ground of day-to-day living and divorced from direct encounter with God (simply thinking *about* God rather than engaging *with* God).

This is hardly the place for a lengthy discussion about the nature of theology; there is much that will have to be assumed. But at least this can be said: I am taking theology to be *the disciplined thinking and rethinking of the Christian gospel for the sake of fostering a wisdom that is nourished by, and nourishes, the church in its worship and mission to the world.* This is worth a little unpacking.

Disciplined thinking and rethinking: Theology entails thinking, intellectual effort, and no apology is made here for the fact that this book will require hard thought. Even if, as we shall see, imagination is a crucial part of this hard thinking, it is no less strenuous for that. However, this is not an isolated type of thinking, cut off at the neck, locked into the mind, unconnected with the rest of what makes us human. Whole streams of writing have attacked the common captivity of theology to this kind of model, epitomized in the indulgently cerebral academic who never leaves his (and it is often assumed to be "his") study. Theology is a form of thinking, certainly, but it is affected by, and ought to affect, every human faculty—including our willing, feeling, sensing, and bodily actions. In the case of theology, it is especially important to recognize that thinking is inextricably bound up with story (the narrative shape of faith), symbols of various sorts (such as the sacraments), and practical action in the world. This rich, multiply-connected kind of thinking is part of what has been made possible through Jesus Christ—the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:1–2)—and as such, part of an integrated lifestyle in which all of a person's capacities have

been liberated by the Holy Spirit to find their true role in relation to God and one another in the world.

Of the Christian gospel: By "the gospel" I mean the announcement that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Triune Creator, the God of Israel, has acted decisively to reconcile the world to himself. Here is theology's raison d'être and its lodestar—theology is not free-floating speculation, but it is disciplined by this gospel and seeks to interpret the whole of reality from this center. Just because it is so motivated, the theologian is ultimately responsible to a living God: the God of the gospel is not an inert presence but personally active, continuously at work to transform his creatures and his creation. Hence learning *about* God is undertaken in the context of learning *from* God, as God relates to us and we to God. This means, in turn, that theology is inseparable (though distinct) from prayer and worship—thinking appropriately *about* God means regularly engaging *with* God. It also entails being strenuously faithful to Scripture, since the gospel is testified to and mediated first and foremost through these life-transforming writings, themselves the outcome of God's reconciling work. Thinking theologically about music, then, is gospel-oriented thinking in these senses.

For the sake of fostering a wisdom: Precisely because it relates to the whole of us and concerns the energetic, life-transforming God of the gospel, theology has a practical orientation. One of the best ways to express this is to speak of theology fostering wisdom. In the so-called Wisdom literature of the Bible (for example, the book of Proverbs), gaining wisdom concerns much more than amassing data for the mind's scrutiny. It is practically geared. To be wise means being able to discern what is going on in specific, down-to-earth situations and to judge what it is right to say and do in those situations in a way that is faithful and true to God. We become wise *in order to live well*. As "*lived* knowledge,"[27] wisdom is directed toward a lifestyle thoroughly "in tune" with God—godly living—that resonates aptly with the Creator's intentions for us and his world. Theology aims at generating and celebrating this kind of wisdom. My hope is that this book will help Christians, and anyone with more than a passing interest in music, to develop a Christian wisdom about music, that is, generate Christian habits of judgment that can form, and perhaps re-form, the practicalities of making and hearing music, whether that means listening to a symphony, composing a song, or playing in a rock band.

Nourished by, and nourishes, the church in its worship and mission to the world: The gospel finds its outworking in a people gathered by God's Spirit to share God's life and make known what he has done in Jesus Christ, a people of worship called to be *in* and *for* the world. Theology that seeks a wisdom true to the gospel, therefore, cannot take flight from this community—fallen, compromised, and shabby as it is and always has been. This is emphatically not to claim that no fruitful Christian or God-honoring thinking can ever take place outside the church, nor is it to claim that theology has no interests outside the Christian

community. It is simply to remind ourselves of Christian theology's primary home and where it has its immediate responsibilities, amid the distinctive practices of a distinctive community. Theology's first calling, I would contend, is to help build up the people of God, to shape the Christian community for the sake of its worship and mission to the world. In this book we seek a wisdom about music to this end.

Unfortunately, Christian thinking about music often bypasses the church. Many individual Christian musicians rightly have a strong passion for mission. They are rightly keen to be "salt" in the world and not become closeted in the church or trapped in the worship sanctuary. But mission is no less a corporate affair than worship, and it is unlikely that there can be a transforming Christian musical presence in society until the church refinds its musicians and musicians refind the church. Individual believers are always part of a larger body of Christians, even if during weekdays they may be exercising ministries with few, if any, Christians in sight. Among other things, recovering this corporate sense means being prepared to learn from one another in the body of Christ, to comprehend *with all the saints* (past and present) the breadth, length, height, and depth of the gospel (Eph. 3:18). It also entails a willingness to explore the abundant treasures of Christian wisdom from the past, the way in which God's truth has sounded and re-sounded in the world of music down the centuries. (Chapters 3–7 are concerned with doing just this.)

In the sense I have described it, theology can and should be practiced by all Christians, not only professionally trained academics. All Christians who think intelligently about their faith along these lines are theologians. Certainly, some are called to develop particular theological skills, and some of these may become professionals in an institution (seminary, university, or whatever). But disciplined thought about the Christian faith cannot be the preserve of this latter group alone. Indeed, one of the most encouraging developments in recent years has been the "laicization" of theology: a burgeoning number of laypeople who are not intending to be theological teachers or ordained clergy nonetheless are thinking their faith through rigorously. This book is meant not only for the professional theologian but also for anyone who wants to think seriously about music from a Christian perspective. (Hence I have tried to avoid theological jargon where possible and to confine technicalities to the endnotes.)

Pitfalls

There are serious pitfalls in the kind of enterprise we have in mind, and it is well to be aware of them at the outset. Two of these form a pair, one often leading to the other: *theological imperialism* and *theological aestheticism*. In theological imperialism, theology swells its chest and music is stifled. Out of a concern for doctrinal orthodoxy, music is not given room to be itself, not