

MUSIC AND SPIRITUALITY

THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES, EMPIRICAL
METHODS, AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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Foreword: A Composer's Perspective

James MacMillan

The inspiration for my third symphony, subtitled 'Silence', comes from the novel of the same name by one of Japan's greatest twentieth century writers, Shūsaku Endō, who died in 1996.¹ His book—made into a film by Martin Scorsese²—asks profound philosophical questions and resonates with one of the most anguished questions asked some 2,000 years ago 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' It is a question that has been asked continuously since, right through Auschwitz and into our own time. Endo's 'silence' is the silence of God in the face of terrible events springing from the merciless nature of man: torture, genocide, holocaust. One of Endo's characters comments, 'I cannot bear the monotonous sound of the dark sea gnawing at the shore. Behind the depressing silence of this sea, the silence of God... the feeling that while men raise their voices in anguish, God remains with folded arms, silent'. For Endo—a Christian convert—this silence is not absence, however, but presence. Rather than 'nihil', it is the silence of accompaniment, as Christ accompanies us in our *via dolorosa*, through the valley of tears, suffering with us as one of us. But the notion of silence as presence—as mystical or metaphysical substance—is one that has many musical analogies. The emptiness and solitude of a composer's silence is pregnant with the promise of possibility and potency, and music itself grows out of silence.

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- 1 James MacMillan, *Symphony No. 3: 'Silence'* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 2002); Shūsaku Endō, *Silence*, trans. by William Johnston (London: Peter Owen, 1976).
 - 2 *Silence*, dir. by Martin Scorsese (Paramount Pictures, 2016).

Descend into silence, indeed, and you become an extension of it. A composer should feel the silence adhering to him. And yet, we fill our worlds with everything that will challenge, contradict, and ultimately kill this precious silence. Music itself has been harnessed and co-opted as a weapon in this elemental war, transformed as it is into muzak—everywhere. Musicians should not collude with this. The war against silence is also a war against us, and against the interior life, from where spring our inspirations to create. In the early 1600s, the philosopher and boredom theorist Blaise Pascal wrote, ‘All of humanity’s problems stem from a man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone’. Since this is what composers do a lot of the time, in following our vocations as creators, we should ask, and we should be asked, ‘why are we different? Are composers’ problems different? Why are we able to sit quietly in a room alone? Are we more fortunate than everyone else? Are we the most fortunate of the fortunate?’ On one level we are, but the descent into silence comes with a price. There is a deep fear of silence. And it is natural for composers to feel it too. This disquiet at being alone, at holding our tongues, at being starved of distraction has been with us, all of us, from the beginning—it is our natural state. More so today than ever. So we wage war on it. Silence is almost extinct.

Why do we resist going there? There is clearly a fear of nothingness—the abyss of non-being. That is completely natural. We avoid thinking about our own deaths, for example—the deep scandal of being irrelevant to this exciting, throbbing, living world. How dare they imagine going on without me? But what if there is something even more terrifying than nothing at the heart of this silence? What if Endo is right—that this silence is not absence? But presence? If it’s not ‘nihil’ that is there, but ‘accompaniment’? What are we being accompanied by? When stoics, mystics, saints, and composers dig deep into this silence searching for what is there, what if they meet that which searches in the opposite direction? Something that is searching for us? Coming back at us... I don’t know if that is what John Cage had in mind when he devised his 4’33”—that is, 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence—a kind of provocation to our listening sensibilities, or lack of them: a kind of goad to make us hear music and other things better, a kind of challenge perhaps to our ‘Entertain me and entertain me now’ culture. It may come as a surprise

to some that his original title for this apparently jocular little slice of aesthetic naughtiness was 'Silent Prayer'.³

This silent 'place' is not necessarily a happy or contented 'place'. Sometimes the silence is dreadful and terrifying. No wonder Beethoven raged against his dying of the sound. What a frightening place to travel into, for anyone who has ever heard, never to emerge again. What an especially vile place for a musician and composer to go to and never return from. But go he did. A prison from where the condemned man will never exit. And the condemned man was Beethoven. Not just hell on earth, but hell in his own soul. And in that soundless, airless vacuum of nothing what did the composer meet? We will never know, of course, but we have messages from that deep impact, postcards from the other planet, air from this harrowed, empty place that now fills our planet with sound. His silence was pregnant. His nihil was accompanied. What became present in that ghastly absence of sound were some of the greatest masterpieces a human being has ever composed. If you want to know what is there, in that silence, what awaits, searching back at you, have a look and listen again to Beethoven's late string quartets.

I tell the young composers that I meet that this is the 'place' where we must go. Not deafness, not airlessness, not outer space. But silence. It calls us from its depth—deep calling on deep—like a monstrous ocean. It is imperative that we obey its command. It's as simple as that. Because when all the lessons are over, when you've completed your last counterpoint exercise, when you've learned all you can about how to orchestrate, when you've done modernism, postmodernism, minimalism, neo-complexity, and *musica negativa* until you can't think straight, there is only one other place to go. It is perfectly understandable if one chooses to get off the boat now. But for those who have to continue, how should we travel into this unexplored domain?

Have you ever gazed into the eyes of another person for a long time? I suppose husbands, wives, and partners do it. I suppose parents do it with their children. But otherwise it's weird, uncomfortable, unnatural. Twenty years ago, the psychologist Arthur Aron did an experiment.

3 See James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 59: "'Silent Prayer,' as it was thus described in 1948, is clearly the first glimmer of an idea that, four years later, would become 4' 33"; while "Silent Prayer" is not 4' 33" itself, it is its ancestor'.

He was able to get complete strangers to fall in love in his laboratory. The participants sit and look into each other's eyes for four minutes (or maybe four minutes, thirty-three seconds!) without saying a word. Two of the subjects got married six months later. In this scenario, four minutes becomes a very long time—it is as though one is being pulled towards the other. Is this, perhaps, like staring into a religious icon? What actually is staring back at us? What does it see in our eyes, looking in? Gazing silently into the blind eyes on an icon is meant to let us see into the beauty of the divine presence. Icons are very important objects in the Greek and Russian Orthodox spiritual tradition. They are considered as windows into the soul of God. But God looks back. Silently. Some of the most powerful artistic representations of the nature of Heaven depict the Father staring into the eyes of the Son—for ever. Silently.

I've come to realise, then, that it is this ongoing encounter with silence that is the necessary state for a composer. Both eyes and ears turn to this empty place in an apparent and paradoxical search for sounds. Sounds which germinate in a place empty of sound. Sounds which are quickened into existence in a state of sonic vacuum—an apparent absence which brings forth presence. There is obviously a religious dimension to this but I'm keen to speak of it in ways that people and composers of very different worldviews and understandings can adapt to their own creative searches. For some, gazing at and listening for beauty is a matter of belief, but the composer's search for the numinous can take many forms—a deep, attentive looking and listening—and can be integrated into our lives as a spiritual practice, or perhaps simply as an imaginative discipline and search for the inner imagination, a search for the interior life.

My analogy with gazing at icons is intended to be helpful to my fellow composers. The composer John Tavener told me that in the Orthodox tradition icons are a form of prayer. He said to me, 'Jesus is the image (icon) of the invisible God'. When you look at an icon, it is meant to make you aware that you are in the presence of the divine. Icons, then, are not just art with a religious theme. Instead, they are sacred art because they bring the viewer into the presence of the holy. When one fixes one's undivided attention on these images over a substantial period, the images may come to life and enter into animated dialogue with the practitioner, or so the thinking goes. Painters and creators of

icons say that the image being gazed at seems to look at you, coming nearer and nearer, even into your soul. Notice how prominent the eyes are in icons. The understanding is that heaven is looking back at you.

It is said that icons are designed to be doors between this world and another world. And my suggestion is that the musical analogy of this—which does not necessarily involve or need a specific image—brings the composer to an ambiguous hybrid place where his or her world comes into contact or communion with another state, and where the mysterious silent encounter sparks sonic life and compositional possibilities. The new music that we—as composers—are always seeking thereby arises from deep within our creative imaginations and, if you like, from deep within our souls. It is music that emerges when the silent composer descends into a deeper silence, an objective other place or state to which he or she adheres and of which he or she has become an extension. Silence listening to silence.

