MUSIC AND SPIRITUALITY

THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES, EMPIRICAL METHODS, AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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1. Encountering the Uncontrollable: Music's Resistance to Reductionism and Its Theological Ramifications

Jeremy Begbie

In this chapter, I explore the way in which the practices of music press against reductionism, and the theological resonances this provokes. I suggest that music is especially effective in countering reductionist habits: more than any other art form, it stubbornly refuses to be treated as an equivalent or merely an instance of something else, or as nothing but its component parts. Music makes sense, certainly, but in and through the distinctiveness of its own forms of life. I home in on one form of reductionism that I suspect lies behind many of the concerns of this volume—'naturalistic reductionism'—and on the paradigm of language that regularly attaches to it. I argue that music's challenge to the impulses that propel this reductive outlook (and its favoured language) pushes us in decidedly theological directions—although perhaps not in the ways that we might expect.

To begin with, however, a little throat-clearing. We have been asked to consider the ways in which music might connect with 'spiritual realities'. And we have been told that the term is to be taken as referring to 'a perceived area' or 'dimension of human experience *beyond the material*'.[1] I offer three comments on this.

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1   George Corbett and Sarah Moerman, 'Call for Papers: Music and Spiritual Realities International Workshop: EuARe 19-21 June 2023 at St Andrews', *University of St*

First, if music is regarded in *this* sense as supremely spiritual ('the most spiritual of the arts', as some would say), the implication might be that music is uniquely able to lead us beyond the physical in such a way as to leave the physical behind. This clearly carries some difficulties. In recent years, the philosophy of music has seen what Julian Johnson has called a 'lurch' towards the body: a fresh recognition of music's bodily entailments, the physiological processes that make music possible, the ways our bodies interact musically with other bodies and the physical world at large.[2] Further, it hardly needs to be said that in many religious traditions, materiality is regarded as intrinsically valuable, with its own ineradicable goodness. If we are to attend to the 'spiritual' in our encounter with music, then care is needed over what 'beyond the material' may imply (even if inadvertently).

Second, though I am a musician, I come to this discussion primarily as a Christian theologian. This does not for a moment preclude the value of non-theological perspectives on our theme. Numerous disciplines are currently illuminating the links between music and what is spoken of as 'the spiritual.' But since it is far from obvious that 'the spiritual' is understood in anything like a univocal sense in contemporary discourse, it seems wise to have at least a measure of clarity about what we might be investing in the phrase. And here my own interests are unashamedly theological: they concern how talk of 'spiritual realities' might relate to the 'spiritual reality' of overriding concern to theology, namely God (as distinct from all that is not God).

Third, in exploring why it is that the language of 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' is so readily and widely used in relation to the world of music, we would do well not to jump to theological conclusions too quickly. So, for example, it may well be that we are aware of dimensions of musical experience that consistently resist exhaustive explanation

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Andrews, https://music-spirituality.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/call-for-papers/, my italics. See further George Corbett and Sarah Moerman, 'A Toolkit to Measure the Spiritual', *University of St Andrews*, https://music-spirituality.wp.st-andrews. ac.uk/a-toolkit-to-measure-the-spiritual/

2   Julian Johnson, *After Debussy: Music, Language, and the Margins of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 16. See Carolyn Abbate, 'Music—Drastic or Gnostic?', *Critical Inquiry* 30.3 (2004), 505–36; Mickey Vallee, *Sounding Bodies Sounding Worlds: An Exploration of Embodiments in Sound* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Bettina Varwig, *Music in the Flesh: An Early Modern Musical Physiology* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2023).

in terms of the natural sciences, or features of musical experience that radically exceed the expressive power and scope of language. And it may well be that many will draw on 'spiritual' language to speak of such intuitions. But to assume that music's inexplicability and ineffability can *straightforwardly* be aligned with, say, the Christian God, is questionable. For the cynic may well respond: these phenomena only show that the world is a lot more interesting and mysterious than we thought; they do not have to be intimating anything directly about God. After all, in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, God is not 'another' reality within the created world alongside others—a spiritual reality, filling the gaps left by explicable physical things or the spaces that language cannot reach. Rather, God is the origin and sustainer of all things, of all that is not God, whether physical or non-physical, speakable or unspeakable. If we are to make fruitful theological connections between music and 'spiritual realities,' it is worthwhile being alert to this kind of category error.

I. Reductionism and Its Drives

With these caveats in mind, let me turn to a few comments about reductionism and its characteristic moves.[3] Reductionism is often signalled by the presence of words such as 'just', 'only', 'merely', 'really', and (especially) 'nothing but'. To say A reduces to B is to say that A is nothing over and above B, nothing but B. Much of the energy behind the work of the Templeton Foundation has been directed against what we might call naturalistic reductionism (NR), which I take to be characterised by at least three commitments. First, there is a denial of the reality of any non-physical entity or property, including, of course, God—a view sometimes known as 'physicalism'.[4] Second, there is a supreme confidence in the universal reach of the 'hard' or natural sciences—physics above all—to secure reliable knowledge. And third,

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3   For a fuller discussion, see Jeremy Begbie, *Abundantly More: The Theological Promise of the Arts in a Reductionist World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2023).

4   Sometimes this goes by the name of 'materialism': the belief that there is only one sort of stuff, namely matter—the stuff pre-eminently studied by physics. Many prefer the term 'physicalism', given that physics has shown that what we call 'matter' is nothing as stuff-like as we might have supposed. And since we are here talking about realities studied by what many see as the supreme science (i.e., physics), it makes sense to speak of physicalism here.

NR will typically seek to account for complex wholes entirely in terms of their constituent parts: a rainbow is nothing but water droplets refracting light of different wavelengths, the mind is nothing but billions of neurons firing, and so on.[5]

In late modernity there are many signs that this outlook is waning. There is after all nothing in the natural sciences that requires any of these commitments (a repeated refrain in Templeton literature). And the resurgence of interest in 'spirituality' (broadly understood) is widely regarded as evidence of at least a general dissatisfaction with NR. But here I want to focus on the drives that propel NR rather than NR itself, drives which are arguably still pervasive across many domains of culture.[6] I highlight three of these. First, there is a drive toward ontological singularity—an aspiration to identify one class of existing entities that can be considered fully and properly real. In NR, the favoured ontological type will typically be some kind of microphysical particle, the basic unit of matter. Second, there is the drive toward favouring one type of language as the sole means to engage truthfully with the authentically real. In the case of NR, the assumption is that language at its purest takes the form of denotation and assertion, picking out things for attention and affirming things about them. These two drives are often harnessed to a third: a pressure toward control and mastery. One of the main attractions of reductionism, of whatever type, is that it purports to give us access to what is *really* the case, along with the language to identify and commandeer it. And this in turn—at least in principle—opens up immense possibilities for managing and manipulating anything we encounter, from sub-atomic particles to the person next door.

The potential negative consequences of such a drive toward mastery hardly need to be pointed out: they are epitomised in the late modern ethos of instrumentalisation, domination, and possession—something

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5   For full treatments, see, for example, Lynne Rudder Baker, *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *Naturalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); and Peter Harrison and Jon H. Roberts, *Science without God?: Rethinking the History of Scientific Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

6   Picking up a phrase from Rita Felski, reductionism is perhaps less a philosophy than a 'thought style', characterised by distinctive drives or ambitions. See Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 2.

recently explored in an especially pointed way by the German sociologist, Hartmut Rosa.[7] All three of these drives (much simplified here) are closely associated with NR, but they can be found far beyond those who consciously seek to take their cues from the natural sciences. And, of course, all three make it exceedingly hard to talk of 'spiritual realities'. As far as ontological singularity is concerned, unless 'spiritual realities' are regarded as themselves the 'real' realities (as in some venerable philosophical traditions), they will likely be shoe-horned into accounts of entities that are regarded as properly real (in the case of NR, physical entities and properties). Further, 'spiritual realities' will almost certainly be seen as breaking out of the protocols of declarative-assertive language, and very likely as exceeding control and mastery. Further, these drives would seem to be foreign to what we have come to call 'the arts', especially the non-verbal arts. Many have claimed that the arts offer distinctive and potent counter-pressures to the singularising, one-language-fits-all, and controlling momentum of reductionism.[8] For rather than singularise, the arts typically open up multiple levels of meaning. They do not easily submit to the demands of straightforward depiction and assertion, and they certainly kick against being controlled (have you ever tried organising artists?).

II. Music, Language, and Reductionism

Our particular focus here, however, is on music. Music seems to pose an especially strong challenge to reductionist drives. Indeed, in modernity music has often been called upon to provide a counter-reductionist imagination of the world. A striking example is the exaltation of instrumental music we find in some of the German Romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, against the background of what they saw as the closed and de-sacralising worldview associated with the ever-expanding natural sciences.[9] Wordless music becomes elevated to a quasi-divine status, in some instances furnishing an entire

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7   Hartmut Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, trans. by James C. Wagner (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2020).

8   See Begbie, *Abundantly More*, ch. 6.

9   For discussion, see Jeremy Begbie, *Music, Modernity, and God: Essays in Listening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ch. 5.

metaphysics of the infinite.[10] And since then there have been numerous attempts to advance theological or 'spiritual' agendas by harnessing music's potent anti-reductionist capacities. But what are these capacities? For the remainder of this chapter, I concentrate on one that many would see as key to music's resistance to reductive ambitions, and thus to its theological/spiritual potential. It concerns music's relation to language.

It is a truism to say that hearing a piece of music outweighs anything we could ever say about it. Music makes us acutely aware of the inadequacies of language. As George Steiner comments: 'In the face of music, the wonders of language are also its frustrations'.[11] Indeed, many would claim that language is not only inadequate in the presence of music but distorts and cramps music's possibilities through its tendency to tie down, foreclosing meaning.[12] How many liner notes or concert programmes have actually helped listeners to hear more, and to want to hear more? Here I shall argue that music does indeed resist wholesale assimilation to language (both in what music evokes and the ways it evokes it), and that this can indeed have theological ramifications. However, we need to avoid mistaken contrasts between language and music—especially those that trade on shrunken (reductive!) views of the former, and there needs to be due attention to the roles that language is called upon to play within specific theological traditions.

(a) A Pervasive Paradigm

The issue of music's relation to language is highly contested. But we can at least begin to open it up by expanding on the second of the reductive drives I highlighted above: the drive toward privileging one understanding—and thus one type—of language. At the risk of extreme generalisation, we can tease out some of the common assumptions about language that haunt discussions of the music–language relation in modernity. At the basic level, it is often assumed that truthful engagement with reality reaches its supreme and paradigmatic realisation in language, and moreover that language is so essential to the process of

10   See, for example, Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

11   George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (London: Phoenix, 1997), p. 65.

12   So, for example, Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', in Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2009), p. 8: 'Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable'.

understanding that there can be no 'sense-making' without it. With this often goes the belief that language can be truth-bearing only insofar as it conforms to (or can be reduced to) a particular *modus operandi*. Truth-bearing language entails the encoding of thoughts that correspond or 'refer' directly to entities (ideas, events, objects, or whatever), and such encoding takes the form of attaching specific terms to the mental act of referring, according to an ideal of one-to-one correspondence. Crucial to this are denotation and assertion: language enables us to pick out pre-existing things for attention (denotation), things about which we go on to say something (assertion). Denotative assertions are understood to be literal, third-person, dispassionate, body- and context-independent, with a clear subject–predicate structure and a singular meaning. With this often goes the belief that language's distinctive strength is—so to speak—its ability to get a fix on reality. This is where our third drive, the impulse to *control* is especially apparent. Through its power to specify and name, language possesses the ability to stabilise, command, and manipulate its subject-matter. The strength of language (its greatest strength?) is the way it functions as a technology of mastery, a means of commandeering the world-as-experienced.[13]

(b) A Place for Music?

Clearly, the musician is going to feel distinctly awkward in this environment, especially if she wants to claim that music is in some sense capable of bearing truth. Music does not generally operate through encoding thoughts that refer through one-to-one correspondence, or through denoting and asserting: we would struggle to say anything as basic as 'this is a chair' in music, or to sum up a piece of music in anything like that form.[14] And most music is not third-person, dispassionate, body- and context-independent, let alone in subject–predicate form

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13   The literature on this paradigm, or something very like it, is vast. But, for an exceptionally lucid treatment and critique, see Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016).

14   This is not to deny that music operates with relatively stable 'codes' of reference within specific cultures—film composers would be lost without these. But although there may be correspondence here, there are no claims being made. To quote Taylor on a piece by Frédéric Chopin, 'A human possibility is articulated and disclosed … but nothing at all is asserted' (*The Language Animal*, p. 236).

or singular in meaning. Nor does it seem to have powers of control comparable to those of language's power to identify and specify.

Faced with this, those with a theological interest in music are often tempted to take one of two paths. (I am simplifying drastically here.) (1) On the one hand, some will accept the basic paradigm just outlined, and insist we tie music as closely as possible to worded texts—as in song-settings, hymns, etc. In this way, music can do its own (primarily emotional) work, but wholly in service to the truth-bearing, referential power of texts. Such an outlook has a long and venerable history, and has been adopted by many theologians, Augustine and Calvin among them. It surfaces prominently in the Protestant Reformations, especially in the Reformed stream, where a strong concern for Scriptural authority is allied to a no-less-strong suspicion of non-verbal media. Words—above all the words of Scripture—are needed to keep music's emotional power properly directed and in check. Music should thus conform in every possible way to a text.[15]

(2) On the other hand, there are those who broadly accept our linguistic paradigm, but point to the radical disparities between music and language. If music is going to be allowed to do its own theological/'spiritual' work, it must be decoupled from language as far as possible. This is a common trope in modernity, especially since the nineteenth century. We have already mentioned the German Romantics' adulation of textless music. Recent years have seen a swathe of writing on music's ineffability, its vibrant refusal of any kind of linguistic capture or containment. According to the oft-quoted Vladimir Jankélévitch, music can '*express infinitely that which cannot be explained*'.[16] Jankélévitch distinguishes between the 'untellable'—what cannot be spoken about, and the 'ineffable'—what can be spoken about but in an infinite variety of ways. Music is ineffable in that there are 'infinite interminable things

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15   For discussion, see Begbie, *Music, Modernity, and God*, pp. 180–83. It is worth mentioning a related strategy: to try to show that, in fact, at a basic level music does or can operate in language-like ways. In the eighteenth century, it was common to pinpoint devices or motifs within music that supposedly 'refer' to specific phenomena, the commonly cited phenomena being affective states. And there have been numerous attempts to demonstrate close structural similarities between music and language.

16   Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable,* trans. by Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 71. Italics original.

to be said of it'.[17] In making or encountering music we discover an excess, an abundance of life that inevitably invites speech but resists linguistic enclosure. When adopted by those with more overt theological agendas, these lines of thought lead some to hold that it is primarily music's indeterminacy that gives it its theological potency. Its freedom from the apparatus of reference and correspondence, from dependence on the concrete particular,[18] from language's inevitably controlling tendencies, give it a remarkable capacity for serving as a vehicle of the infinite, for mediating a sense of 'transcendence', even offering—according to Russell Re Manning—a 'theology after writing'.[19]

Although I have sympathy with elements in both of these approaches, (1) and (2), I believe they are beset by significant weaknesses. Both tend to operate with a reductive view of language according to the paradigm I have described, with its associated ethos of control. The first approach will assume the paradigm and press music into its service; the second will assume the paradigm and insist on music's radical divergence from it. But what if we were to question the paradigm itself?

A further weakness of (2) in particular is that it can give the impression that the more music can be disentangled from language, the more it will be suited to mediate the divine. It is as if language as such is to be seen as inherently an obstacle to the infinite. But this sits uneasily alongside something basic to many faith traditions (including Christianity): that there are certain instantiations of language that are believed to play a normative and authoritative role in the mediation of God's presence and activity (sacred texts, for example). What if we were to relinquish the axiom that language per se is an impediment to the presence and activity of God?

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17 Ibid., p. 72.

18 As in Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Christmas Eve: Dialogue on the Incarnation*, trans. by Terrence N. Tice (Lewiston, NY: John Knox Press, 1990). One of Schleiermacher's characters speaks of a singing piety 'which ascends most gloriously and directly to heaven' because '[n]othing peculiar or accidental restrains either [singing or piety] … Never does music weep or laugh over particular circumstances, but always over life itself' (p. 47). This, she believes, also applies to an authentic religious sensibility.

19 See, for example, Russell Re Manning, 'Unwritten Theology: Notes Towards a Natural Theology of Music', in *Music and Transcendence*, ed. by Férdia J. Stone-Davis (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 65–73.

(c) Music and Language: A Little Pre-History

All of this suggests we might need to re-think at least some of the common default ways of thinking about music's relation to language. One useful perspective to draw on here is a recent and growing current of writing on the evolutionary pre-history of both music and language, drawing on a panoply of disciplines (including evolutionary anthropology, archaeology, neuroscience, and the philosophy of language). I claim no special expertise in this field, and the jury is still out on many issues. But something of a consensus seems to be surfacing, and one that is highly illuminating for our purposes. According to this literature, our capacity for language and our capacity for 'musicking'[20] emerged together, alongside each other.[21] In his immensely thorough study, Gary Tomlinson speaks of the 'co-evolution' of music and language.[22] This cuts against accounts which have held that one sprung from the other (for example, Steven Pinker's famous thesis that music is evolutionary froth on the surface of language, a disposable pleasure stimulus).[23] It certainly questions the assumption that music's significance for us can be accounted for largely or wholly within a linguistic frame of reference. Further, many scholars have postulated the existence of some kind of precursor to what we now know as music and language, out of which both emerged: a 'protodiscourse'[24] consisting of emotionally charged vocalisations closely related to bodily gesture. (We might think here of infant-directed speech (IDS), the prattling language adults often use with babies.) According to the Oxford anthropologist Iain Morley,

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20   Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998).

21   Gary Tomlinson, *A Million Years of Music: The Emergence of Human Modernity* (New York: Zone Books, 2018), pp. 13–14, et passim.

22   Ibid.; Ian Cross, 'The Evolutionary Basis of Meaning in Music: Some Neurological and Neuroscientific Implications', in *The Neurology of Music*, ed. by Frank Clifford Rose (London: Imperial College Press, 2010), pp. 1–15; and Steve Brown, 'A Joint Prosodic Origin of Language and Music', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8 (2017), 1894. For a semi-popular presentation, see Steven J. Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind and Body* (London: Phoenix, 2006).

23   Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton, 2009), p. 528, puts it starkly: 'As far as biological cause and effect are concerned, music is useless'. He muses, further, 'I suspect that music is auditory cheesecake, an exquisite confection crafted to tickle the sensitive spots of at least six of our mental faculties' (p. 534).

24   Tomlinson, *A Million Years*, p. 108.

> It would seem that social-affective content was initially the most
> important component of vocal communication, one element of a system
> of gestural expression and comprehension of emotional state, and that
> this remains a very important component of our vocalization behaviours
> today … This system of vocal and kinaesthetic communication of emotion
> constituted the foundation for vocal communication out of which later
> emerged culturally-shaped melodic, rhythmic musical behaviours and
> semantic, lexical linguistic capabilities.[25]

Further still, most scholars of this field of study hold that this
protodiscourse (and thus musicking and language) was inherently
social: it arose out of, and generated fruitful embodied relations with
others—group cohesion, commonality of mood, a sense of shared
purpose, etc.

What about the differences between musicking and language as they
developed into the forms we know today? Again, the field is highly
complex, but, according to Tomlinson, very early on, humans developed
certain competencies which made possible what we now call music, and
which musicking in turn encouraged and nourished. Among others,
Tomlinson highlights the capacities of entrainment (co-ordination of
bodily movement with an internally or externally generated pulse),
discrete pitch perception, and hierarchical ordering.[26] In due course
there appeared patterned rhythms, melodies, metre, and so forth—
characteristics of music as we practice it today. Language, by contrast,
though employing such devices as intonation, rhythm, and volume,
does not rely on entrainment, discrete pitch-perception, or hierarchical
ordering. But it clearly does involve the ability to single out objects for
attention and predicate properties of them—a capacity not typically
attempted by music.[27]

These findings would seem to put a large question mark against
some of the key assumptions about language we have sketched above.

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25   Iain Morley, *The Prehistory of Music: Human Evolution, Archaeology, and the Origins of
     Musicality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 321.

26   Tomlinson, *A Million Years*, pp. 76–83, 197–205, 161–62, 169.

27   Paraphrasing Tomlinson, Julian Johnson writes: 'the non-referential and
     musical aspects of protolanguage [protodiscourse] represents a very significant
     achievement of the human mind … 'Musicking' … embodied the achievement of
     a sophisticated non-referential communication' (*After Debussy*, p. 31). Of course,
     being able to distinguish and identify things with precision and consistency and
     assert things of them does not exhaust the powers of language.

First, they suggest that *both* music and language are means of 'sense-making'—that is to say, both are ways in which we interact appropriately with the world we inhabit, human and non-human, and 're-present' it truthfully. There is no need to privilege language in this respect and set it in a league of its own.

Second, the evidence concerning a 'protodiscourse' suggests that *both* language and music depend upon pre-articulate and pre-theoretical bodily know-how, affective or emotional dispositions, and embeddedness in communities of trust.[28] If music foregrounds these dimensions, it is only bringing to the surface things on which the use of language depends at every turn, even the most formal and technical languages. The psychiatrist and prolific writer Iain McGilchrist mounts a convincing case for claiming that many of the woes of modernity—including our social uprootedness and our tendency to instrumentalise others—arise from divorcing language from its bodily, social, and empathetic capacities. It is just here that music can, so to speak, remind language of its roots.[29]

Third, *both* language and music ought to be treated as intrinsically communal. Language no less than music began in 'functions that are related to empathy and common life, not competition and division; promoting togetherness'.[30] 'To be inducted into language', writes Charles

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28   This links up with influential streams of philosophical writing, of which Michael Polanyi and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are among the prime representatives. See Begbie, *Abundantly More*, pp. 112–13.

29   Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2012), ch. 3. Tomlinson writes: 'there can be little doubt that [language] retains in its pragmatic structure the rhythms and emotional flux of human protodiscourse. These ancient elements, however, are more evident still in musicking. For this reason *musicking should occupy a special place in the effort that has recently coalesced from several disciplines to analyse and describe the embodied aspects of all our modes of consciousness.* Musicking is a human activity unique in the degree to which it highlights somatic experience while structuring it according to complex, abstract, and relatively recent outgrowths of our cognition', my italics (Tomlinson, *A Million Years*, p. 289). Along similar lines, Hanne Appelqvist, 'Philosophy of Language,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Western Music and Philosophy*, ed. by Tomás McAuley, Nanette Nielsen, Jerrold Levinson, and Ariana Phillips-Hutton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 365, contends that 'instead of using a particular account of linguistic meaning and understanding as a tool to explain music, we ought to look to music itself as a phenomenon that serves to illuminate the nature of linguistic meaning and understanding'.

30   McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*, p. 119.

Taylor, 'is to be in a relation of potential communion with others'.[31] This would suggest that there is no particular need to posit an intrinsic link between language and harmful control. The development of referential language has undoubtedly made it possible for us to grasp things in the world:[32] to get a 'hold' of specific entities, objects, and ideas. But this process need not necessarily be damaging, or manipulative. Learning someone's name may of course be directed toward dominating them, but it can also bring to light their particularity and uniqueness—indeed, it can be a way of loving someone. The linguistic drive to manipulative containment is certainly a pathology, but not a necessity.

The supposed paradigm of truthful language use that we outlined above would thus seem to be woefully inadequate and potentially misleading. Doubtless, the kind of language celebrated by this model has led to immeasurable leaps in our understanding of the world. But as a wealth of studies have shown, it is akin to a small village in a large county. Not least, narrowly focusing on the denotative and assertive capacities of language can easily overlook the truth-bearing capacities of non-literal, figurative language (metaphor, simile, and so forth).

A fourth and fairly obvious consequence of these evolutionary observations is that music will be profoundly misunderstood if conceived as a system of signification that depends on depiction, on guiding our attention to extra-musical 'objects'. The point has been developed at some length by Rosa, in ways that are both fresh and suggestive. '[T] he peculiar quality of music', he writes, 'lies in its ability to produce a highly specific form of relating to the world',[33] Music has 'no content of its own,' nor does it provide a 'cognitive reference point'; rather, it modulates, or 'negotiates the quality of relation *itself*, whereas languages and sign systems can only ever thematize one particular relationship to or segment of the world at a time. ... Music is the rhythms, sounds, melodies, and tones *between* self and world, even if these of course have their source in the social world and the world of things'.[34]

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31   Taylor, *The Language Animal*, p. 90.

32   McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary*, pp. 111–13.

33   Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of the Relationship to the World* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019), p. 94.

34   Ibid. Italics original.

III. Back to Theology (and 'the Spiritual'?)

It is time to return to our main topic—spiritual realities and music. Clearly, if 'spiritual realities' are understood to be realities within the space–time continuum that resist explanation according to the kind of crude and stark physicalism that informs NR, then our encounter with music presents a formidable challenge to such an austere creed. Indeed, NR's inability to provide compelling accounts of numerous phenomena of human experience that grate against the drives of NR, and on which the making and hearing of music appears to depend (e.g. first-person experience, intention, purpose, and so forth), should give the hard-line naturalist serious pause for thought. But, as I made clear at the start, my main interest here is in 'spiritual reality' understood theologically, as a way of speaking of the reality of God, and the Christian God in particular. And as far as music's resistance to reductionism is concerned, I have focused on the way it presses against reductionist accounts (and uses) of language. What are the *theological* implications of this resistance?

(a) Keeping Language Open without Leaving It Behind

I would suggest that among the most important ways in which music can evoke the active presence of the divine is through making us aware of the finitude, the limits of all language about and to God—and thus the inadequacy of all God-talk. Theological language finds its ultimate legitimation in a God whose life is not contained or bounded by finitude: words must always remain open to (or be opened up by) that which infinitely exceeds their grasp. Music is not of course infinite, but its refusal to be contained by language or to carry the specificity of which referential language is capable makes it well placed to gesture toward the uncontainability of God, countering the illusion that through speaking and writing we can in some manner grasp or circumscribe the divine. In the presence of, say, the words of the *Sanctus* in a eucharistic liturgy—'Holy, Holy, Holy'—music's capacity to evoke a sense of uncontainability may profoundly deepen a congregation's sense of the boundless inexhaustibility of divine holiness.[35] The music, that is,

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35   For a fuller discussion of the interaction of music and texts, see Begbie, *Music, Modernity, and God*, chs 7 and 8.

may well bring worshippers a kind of awareness that the texts on their own do not provide. And textless music can play a similar role. It is not at all surprising that much of the instrumental music of Arvo Pärt, for example, induces for many a sense of the limitlessness of the divine Spirit, given the way his music, though never formless, undifferentiated, or inchoate, nevertheless studiously avoids the directional implications, gestures of closure, and referential dynamics of speech. There is thus a crucial current of truth in accounts which see in music's resistance to linguistic determination one of its strongest theological assets. George Steiner rightly observes that 'music puts our being as men and women in touch with that which *transcends the sayable,* which outstrips the analysable … the meanings of music transcend'.[36] The German Romantics are indeed profoundly significant in this respect; as I have argued elsewhere, their witness to modes of sense-making outside the purely verbal are of perennial value to theology.[37]

Nonetheless, if we carry this line of thinking forward, it is worth registering a few cautions. First, there are many finite and this-worldly things that transcend the sayable, so if we want to make specifically theological claims about the power of music in this respect, or to justify a claim that something recognisably theological might actually be happening in a particular instance, we would need to say rather more about the *Theos* we might have in mind. The notions of 'beyondness', non-finitude, alterity, ineffability, transcendence, etc. on their own provide relatively meagre fare for making theologically informed judgements. If the Christian God is in view, for example, at some point reference will need to be made to the content of this God's self-disclosure.

Second, in the case of language about/to God, the danger of imagining we can in some sense contain God in speech is of course idolatrous, and has led to some of the most shameful horrors in history ('Thus says the Lord…' declares the religious tyrant). We have all met the kind of scripturalism that seeks to justify the value of something by measuring it against an explicit reference to the Bible; or a doctrinal rigidity that becomes fixated on propositions for their own sake, rather than on the living divine reality to which they bear witness and in whose life they

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36 George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), 218, my italics.

37 Begbie, *Music, Modernity, and God*, ch. 5.

are meant to share. Despite all of this, however, I would suggest that the enemy here is not language per se, but, as we have indicated, specific types of language coupled with a narrow model of the way truthful language typically operates. Theology, as with scripture, is marked by a huge variety of language forms, and even those that take a subject–predicate, assertive structure will often be severely misunderstood if seen as driven primarily by the deleterious attempt to seize and contain, to stifle openness and mystery, to put God at our disposal. (And, we might add, valuable as music might be in setting off this danger, are we to assume that idolatry is *less* common among musicians than amongst speakers and writers?)

Third, we would do well to avoid the simply binary in which language is regarded as an opaque screen and music as transparent and direct. There is a grain of truth here, of course, in that music does depend to a very large degree on the immediacy of bodily, sensual, and affective awareness. In the absence of the apparatus of words and the possibilities of reference they enable, music relies on these modes of knowing to a heightened degree. However, even the most formal and abstract language would make no sense without its embeddedness in the bodily, sensual, and affective; and the fact that language employs terms that denote does not thereby cancel such embeddedness, nor does it restrict the capacity of language to be a vehicle of 'communion' between persons. Rita Felski can speak of language as 'more like an interface than a firewall, an array of devices that connect us to other things'.[38]

The need to offset these negative assumptions about language are especially important in the theological arena. To underline a point we touched upon earlier, in many faith traditions, we find the audacious claim that human speech has been assumed by God into God's purposeful interaction with the world, not negated or denigrated as such. For the Christian, language, in all its frailty and proneness to sin, is held to be part of the 'flesh' the Word came to assume and re-make in Jesus Christ. The church commits to the normativity of certain speech-acts—supremely Christ's own words, and Scripture as a whole—not because of some imported philosophy of language or

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38   Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 70.

a fetish about words, but because our ability to speak belongs to the humanity God came to redeem and re-instate. In this outlook, although speaking to and about God is of course prone to destructive hubris, it need not be irredeemably stuck there. And the same goes for speech between persons. Language is not essentially a hurdle to be overcome, an impediment to communion with God and others. '*The design plan for language*', Kevin Vanhoozer avers, '*is to serve as the medium of covenantal relations with God, with others, with the world*'.[39] Music may well free us *from* the illusion that we can get our linguistic fingers around God, but it can also free us *for* an engagement with language such that words can become a vehicle of communion rather than a tool of seizure or mastery.

Fourth, if these reflections are along the right lines, it would seem decidedly odd to turn to music in order to escape responsibility to language, to strive for a 'beyond' that is wholly and utterly unreachable by speech, out of the belief that this will somehow guarantee a superior and more veridical access to the divine. This is not to say that all music needs to be tied at every point to a text (or textual explanation) in order for it to have theological power or validity,[40] nor that music is incapable of bearing its own kind of witness to, and enacting in its own way, dimensions of a text's meanings that the text itself may be relatively impotent to express. Nor, is it to deny that music can be a godsend when destructive uses of language do need escaping. What I am questioning is treating language per se as something from which we need to be freed, and music as the liberator par excellence.[41]

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39   Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), p. 206. Italics original.

40   I have sometimes been criticised for holding this view, although in fact I have never held it. Being faithful to texts—which in the case of the church entails being oriented to theological truth by Scripture, and secondarily by the church's confessions and creeds—does not imply that an art like music is of value if and only if it directly 'illustrates' a biblical text or a theological doctrine. A far subtler approach to theological language is needed than this would imply. I have addressed these matters at length in *Music, Modernity, and God*, chs 7 and 8.

41   An observation by Rowan Williams on the negating impulse in theology is worth citing here: 'The risk of a negative theology in abstraction, the identification of the sacred with the void, is the purchase it gives to a depoliticized—or even anti-political—aesthetic, in which there is a subtle but unmistakable *suggestion that social and linguistic order (as opposed to this or that questionable order) is what we need to be delivered from, and that a particular kind of artistic praxis can so deliver*'. Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 31, my italics.

A fifth and final comment. Throughout this chapter, I have returned intermittently to the theme of control or containment—understood as a danger, a pathology—and I have spoken of music's distinctive resistance to this reductive impulse vis-à-vis language and the way this can gesture towards divine uncontainability. However, what I have said so far could give the impression that this uncontainability is a static affair, a function of a motionless, bare infinity. But there is a feature basic to all music (as far as we know) that can suggest something far livelier and more generative, and far more theologically fruitful—namely, repetition. It is well known that repetition is hard to sustain in language without inducing boredom. But it seems to be a kind of default or natural condition of music, not least in music we find interesting and compelling. Musicians cannot seem to get enough of saying the same thing over and over again (even if some degree of difference and variation is always present). There is a continual reaching for the next thing, for 'another', eliciting a sense of overflow, a habitual bias towards 'more ... and more'. The psychologist Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis writes: 'music is the canonical domain of repetition, and when we reinterpret another domain to emphasize its repetitiveness, we are, in fact, examining a quasi-musical aspect of that domain'.[42] She continues:

> My claim is that part of what makes us feel that we're a musical subject rather than a musical object is that we are endlessly listening ahead, such that the sounds seem almost to execute our volition, after the fact. This sense of super-expressive voice .... . . can be pleasurable in and of itself. It is the pleasure of *expansion, of movement beyond limits*, of increased power—all characteristic of strong experiences of music as chronicled by existing experimental work.[43]

Christian theology witnesses to a divine momentum or rhythm at work in the world that by its very nature is unlike the closing of a circle—the return of something to a starting point—but rather a movement that always 'exceeds,' surpasses any predictable limit. In theological terms, this is the momentum of the Holy Spirit (the 'spiritual reality' par excellence, we might even say)—an outward, outgoing dynamic,

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42   Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis, *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 4.
43   Ibid., p. 12, my italics.

so the Christian tradition maintains, which belongs to the very heart of God's own life. This may be another reason why music for many is so suggestive of the (uncontainable) divine—and the divine here conceived not as motionless infinity but as limitless life.

(b) Jubilant Uncontainability

I close by citing some extraordinary reflections by Augustine (354–430) that bring together many of the themes of this chapter.[44] They come in the light of reflecting on words from Psalm 33: 'Sing to him a new song; play skilfully on the strings, with loud shouts' (v. 3). What does it mean to exult 'with loud shouts'? Augustine answers:

> It is to realize that words cannot communicate the song of the heart. Just so singers in the harvest, or the vineyard, or at some other arduous toil express their rapture to begin with in songs set to words; then as if bursting with a joy so full that they cannot give vent to it in set syllables, they drop actual words and break into the free melody of jubilation [*et eum in sonum iubilationis*]. The jubilus is a melody which conveys that the heart is in travail over something it cannot bring forth in words. And to whom does that jubilation rightly ascend, if not to God the ineffable? Truly is he ineffable whom you cannot tell forth in speech, yet we ought not to remain silent, what else can you do but jubilate? In this way the heart rejoices without words and the boundless expanse of rapture is not circumscribed by syllables.[45]

In another place, Augustine writes,

> Consider, beloved ones, how people sing songs when they are making merry. ... You know how sometimes, in between songs with words, the singers seem to overflow with a joy that the tongue is inadequate to express verbally; you know how then they let out wild whoops to give utterance to a gladness of spirit, since they are unable to put into words what the heart has conceived.[46]

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44   For a fuller version of what follows, see Begbie, *Abundantly More*, pp. 210–15.

45   Augustine, *St Augustine on the Psalms*, trans. by Scholastica Hebgin and Felicitas Corrigan, 2 vols (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1961), II, pp. 111–12.

46   Augustine *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 94.3, as translated in Carol Harrison, *On Music, Sense, Affect, and Voice* (New York: T&T Clark, 2019), p. 143.

By 'jubilation' ('whoops' in this translation; I am reminded of Nick Cave's phrase, 'spasms of delight'),[47] Augustine seems to intend an affectively charged flow of unconstrained and wordless praise that overspills the capacities of speech. And he believes this is especially apt as a mode of praise for a God who, although within reach of language, cannot be constrained by it. This jubilation is not everyday speech ('He most definitely has singing in mind'),[48] yet it is not an organised or regularly patterned melody. Might it be close to what Pentecostals call 'singing in the Spirit'?

In any case, this jubilation eludes any deadening will to control. The fact that it is a form of praise is no accident: in praise, God is being honoured (among other things) as humanly uncontrollable, by speech as much as anything else. This is a wordless witness to the impossibility of God being encompassed by spoken words. It 'arises from the struggle to articulate what is ineffable—and then, suddenly, we are set free: the *jubilus* escapes, explodes'.[49] And yet Augustine never suggests that jubilation releases us from all accountability to normative language (and certainly not from responsibility to the Psalms of scripture). There is no hint that he sees language per se as a necessary evil, as inherently 'containing' and idolatrous. In Isaac Harrison Louth's words, 'Augustine writes that singers in jubilation turn away from the syllables of words towards sound but notes that the very joy which motivates them springs in the first place from their exulting in the words of the songs ... There is a way in which jubilant sound burst[s] forth from the text and, at the same time, works itself free from the text'.[50] The *jubilus* arises from the uncircumscribable joy of reading or hearing the words of the Psalms. And of that joy, Augustine believes, there is no limit or end.

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47   Rowan Williams, 'Nick Cave: My Son's Death Brought Me Back to Church', *The Times*, 4 March 2023, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ nick-cave-my-sons-death-brought-me-back-to-church-qdskjx277
48   Harrison, *On Music, Sense, Affect, and Voice*, p. 142.
49   Ibid., p. 145.
50   From an unpublished paper, quoted in Harrison, *On Music, Sense, Affect, and Voice*, p. 144, n. 89.