MUSIC AND SPIRITUALITY

THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES, EMPIRICAL METHODS, AND CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

EDITED BY
GEORGE CORBETT
AND SARAH MOERMAN

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

George Corbett and Sarah Moerman (eds), *Music and Spirituality: Theological Approaches, Empirical Methods, and Christian Worship*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2024, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0403

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-302-7
ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-303-4
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-304-1
ISBN Digital eBook (EPUB): 978-1-80511-305-8
ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-307-2

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0403

Cover image: Hans Memling, *Christ with Singing and Music-Making Angels* (1483–1494), Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Musicerende_engelen,_Hans_Memling,_(1483-1494),_Koninklijk_Museum_voor_Schone_Kunsten_Antwerpen,_779.jpg
Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpa

11. Spiritual Subjects: Musicking, Biography, *and* the Connections We Make

Maeve Louise Heaney VDMF

Introduction

In one of the best talks I have heard addressing the connection between the arts and spirituality, the Irish poet and writer Aidan Matthews pays special attention to the inobtrusive connecting word between the two, that small three-letter word 'and', describing it as 'a humble, understated' word, which hides as much as it says, since it is the nature of the connection between what we seek to understand that is important.[1] As I approach this chapter on music and spirituality, it occurs to me that the same is true here: just how we connect the musical and the spiritual is important, and the reality is that this connection is a personal one. Music—better described as 'musicking' (the useful term coined by Christopher Small to refer to every aspect of the reality of how music happens)—and spirituality are either human phenomena or they are perceived and performed by human beings. I am not suggesting that the world is an unspiritual place or that creation lacks musicality, but in seeking to explore the relationship between music and the spiritual, attention to *who* is doing the connecting, as well as to *how* and *why* they

1 Aidan Matthews speaking at 'The Arts and Spirituality', speech given at the Manresa Jesuit Retreat Centre, Dublin, August 2007.

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0403.11

are interested in doing so, is paramount. In this way, exploration in the field of music and spirituality is analogous to work on faith and science. Australian theologian Denis Edwards, who dedicated much of his life to this area, explained that there are three types of people active in that interdisciplinary space: scientists with an interest in religion and theology; theologians with an interest in science; and those who have interest and expertise in both.[2] Similarly, the commonly-perceived links between music and spirituality are primarily seen by three groups: those aware of spirituality (whether they name it in this way or not) with an interest in music; musicians with an interest in spirituality; and people with an authoritative foot in both camps. A core invitation of this chapter is to interrogate critically *how* we pay attention to the subjective source of our thought.

In inviting us to adopt this lens, however, it is also important to realise that my use of the word 'subjective' or 'subject' in this context is not to be understood as the opposite of 'objective'. Rather, it recognises the fact that every human perception or thought has a subject as its source. It also challenges the conventional notion of 'objectivity' in the history of Western thought—emphasising, as it does, reason over emotion, and the natural sciences over the humanities—and suggests that 'objectivity' is, at best, unattainable (since only 'someone' outside the socio-historical reality of human life—the divine, in theological terms—could ever have twenty-twenty vision over what is being understood), and, at worst, false. From a human perspective, the perception of truth is only possible through the lens of shared, critical reflection; in the words of Bernard Lonergan, a philosopher and theologian who has explored extensively the reality of how we come to know, 'genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic [shared] subjectivity'.[3] My own lens, then, is that of a female Irish Roman Catholic theologian who is also a musician and composer.

In this chapter, I offer some initial definition of our core terms as I understand them, and I provide an overview of some relevant insights from my past and current research, in five steps or sections. First, I

2 Denis Edwards, 'Story of a Theologian of the Natural World', in *God and the Natural World: Theological Explorations in Appreciation of Denis Edwards*, ed. by Ted Peters and Marie Turner (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2020), pp. 21–30.

3 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), p. 292.

define the terms of music and spirituality with which I am working. Second, I explore some key theological truths that are important, if not essential, foundations for an understanding of how music and spirituality connect. Third, I name some interdisciplinary lenses at play in work in this field. Fourth, I introduce the importance of narrative and autobiographical awareness in all scholarship, and explore the insightful work of Lonergan in this regard, through a multifaceted understanding of what he calls 'conversion'. Finally, I exemplify how this might be helpful in a short case study involving scholars currently collaborating on a *Handbook of Music and Christian Theology*.[4] Based on that research experience, I conclude with some initial explorations into this subject which will be an essential element of future work in this field: the connection between scholarly work and biography, that is, the connection between our persons as scholars (life, culture, concerns, religious affiliation, etc.), and the research areas and methods to which we are drawn.

I. Defining our Terms: 'Musicking' and 'Spirituality'

Such a broad and open research question as the one addressed here needs to adopt an equally wide-ranging and inclusive definition of what music is, in its creation, performance, and enjoyment. Christopher Small's definition of 'musicking'—emphasising music as a human activity to which people contribute in many and various ways—is helpful: 'To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practising, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing', a definition he extends to those involved in the essentially non-musical tasks of taking our tickets or setting up the stage.[5] This open definition allows space to explore more specifically, and with hermeneutic awareness, *when*, *how* and *why* musicking occurs.

4 I am grateful to its general editors, Bennett Zon and Steve Guthrie for their willingness to support and collaborate in this with me.

5 Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), p. 9.

A similarly broad approach is needed for our understanding of the spiritual, described twice in this project's introduction as a dimension or perceived area of human experience 'beyond the material'.[6] The expression is an interesting one that creatively collides with my own lived experience and what Roman Catholic theology calls sacramentality—a worldview in which the material world mediates the divine such that revelation and access to what Christianity calls 'God' *happens through* matter. The nature of musicking resonates well with this tensive understanding of the spiritual and material worlds. In terms of definitions, my starting point is that of scripture and spirituality scholar, Sandra Schneiders, who describes human spirituality as 'the actualization of the basic human capacity for transcendence ... the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the horizon of ultimate value one perceives'.[7] While the definition is broad and inclusive in recognising the basic human quest for more, its focus on intentionality, ultimate value, and 'conscious involvement' underlines the centrality of conscious meaning-making in human living for an understanding of what spirituality might mean. Schneiders' definition carries an implicit challenge to anyone considering a kind of human drifting in positive, spiritual terms; an important insight. Schneiders suggests that spirituality can be defined more specifically as Christian spirituality when the triune God revealed in Christ is the ultimate concern of one's life; self-transcendence refers to modelling one's life after the life of Jesus; and the 'spirit in spirituality is identified with the "Holy Spirit", all lived out in the community of the Church'.[8]

The way Schneiders connects *and* differentiates spirituality to and from its Christian expression is another example of the importance of how our key term 'and' is negotiated. I would similarly recognise and uphold both the reality that spirituality can be found wherever the human spirit is invested in life and open to the quest for truth and human dignity, and the fact that *Christian* spirituality implies a particular experience

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

7 Sandra M. Schneiders, 'Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality', in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. by Arthur Holder (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), pp. 15–33 (at 16).

8 Ibid., p. 17.

and understanding of the God revealed in Christ. While this may seem distant from the theme at hand of music and spirituality, I suggest it is actually at its essence. To explore how music and the spiritual intersect from a Christian perspective implies reflecting on, and defining, how an author positions themselves at this intersection; in Christian terms, the core question could be formulated as follows: can the God revealed in Jesus Christ leave traces in, or be experienced through, the world of music *outside* the context of explicit Christian practice and belief? If so, how do we explain this without overreaching or imposing our Christian interpretative perspectives on the musickings of someone who does not self-identify with the Christian faith? Analogous questions could be posed from within other religious worldviews.

II. Theological Soundbites: Grace, Trinity, and the Ascended Body of Christ

At this intersection of Christianity and culture, I would name three theological 'truths' or doctrines that I think are fruitful in the exploration of music and spirituality, both in their own right and when we bring them together: first, a theology of grace that seeks to recognise the work of God in the world within and beyond the realms of the baptised community of Christian faith; second, our understanding of the ongoing incarnation of Jesus' ascended body in the world and beyond it, which different denominations call ascension theology or the mystical body of Christ; and, third, a trinitarian theology that seeks to take seriously and reimagine the nature and order of how God interacts with the world.

A theology of grace makes it possible to hold together Christian belief in salvation through Jesus with the presence of grace encountered beyond the world of the baptised, because of the universal salvific will of God, whose gift of self to the world prepares and enables human openness to God. This presence of divine grace without (or before) needing to be named can ground our understanding of the arts as a *locus theologicus* of the Word; and, likewise, the obligation to listen to the 'signs of the times' therein lest we miss the work of God in the world. While this position is explored by various theologians, the key forerunner in Catholic theology is Karl Rahner and his understanding

of grace as the 'universal existential' offered to all people and present in every personal act of knowing and loving, which has been developed in myriad ways since his work. The quest for grace in the non-Christian is a major focus in theological studies on different realms of contemporary music, although these are often focussed more on the lyrics, with the noteworthy exception of jazz, which has drawn interesting theological reflections on improvisation.[9]

Incarnational theologies that view music as an intersecting point of the material and the divine, of body and spirit, are central to many theologies of the arts. However, Augustine's (354–430) insight into the ascended body of Christ as the heart (or head) of sacramental theology, and the reality of Jesus' ongoing risen body 'in whom we live, move and have our being' (Acts 17:28) present in the world and mediating humanity and God (the reality is the Body of Christ, cf. Col 2:17) is, I suggest, the single most underestimated Christian truth of faith for both spirituality and music studies alike. That God entered the world is scandalous; that God has not left it, is world-changing and transformative.[10]

There are myriad ways in which trinitarian theology and spirituality connect, but one approach, I suggest, has potential to answer some of the questions about connection being raised here: a trinitarian theology which enables us to reimagine how God reveals Godself in the world. We normally name and 'image' God in the order of their theological-if-eternal 'originating' and Scriptural revelation to us: 'Father (Mother/Creator)—Jesus/Son—Spirit'. While this honours the 'order' of salvation in which Christians normally name God's interaction with our world, it

9 See the two foundational works: Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, ed. and trans. by. W. Dych (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968); and Karl Rahner, *Hearers of the Word*, trans. by Rolands Walls (London: Sheed and Ward, 1969). However, the best access to this aspect of his thought can be found in chapters of his voluminous *Theological Investigations.* For example: Karl Rahner, 'Reflections on the Experience of Grace', in *Theological Investigations III*, ed. and trans. by Karl H. Kruger and Boniface Kruger (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967), pp. 86–90; Karl Rahner, 'Anonymous and Explicit Faith', in *Theological Investigations XVI*, ed. and trans. by David Morland (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), pp. 52–59; Karl Rahner, 'Prayer for Creative Thinkers', in *Theological Investigations VIII*, ed. and trans. by D. Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), pp. 130–31.

10 See chapters four, five, and six of Maeve Louise Heaney, *Music as Theology: What Music Has to Say About the Word* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications Wipf and Stock, 2012), pp. 135–305.

is often not the order in which we actually sense, experience, and come to know the divine in our lives. Rather, some would suggest, we move in the opposite direction: from the Spirit, through Jesus, to the Source and Origin of all life, whom we never fully grasp. The underlying theological category at stake in this theology of trinitarian grace is revelation: how God interrupts history and becomes present in the world. In the words of Lonergan (drawing on St Augustine):

> God becomes known to us in two ways: as the ground and end of the material universe; and as the one who speaks to us through Scripture and Tradition. The first manner might found a natural Religion. The second adds revealed Religion. For the first, one might say the heavens show forth the glory of God; what can mere words add? But for the second, one must answer that, however trifling the uses to which words may be put, still they are the vehicles of meaning, and meaning is the stuff of man making man [*sic*].[11]

In other words, there is an explicit categorical knowledge of God that is the fruit of 'Scripture and Tradition', but God goes beyond that, or better said, before that. Human existence is flooded with God's presence, a presence that precedes 'knowledge', and provokes faith. From the perspective of Christian theology, the backdrop of this understanding is Augustine's notion of the double mission of the Son and the Spirit, referring to them as the 'outer' Word and the 'inner' Word: the inner and invisible word of the Holy Spirit, poured out universally into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (*fides ex infusione*); the outer and visible Word of Christ in his historical mission (*fides ex auditu*).[12] And importantly, it is the inner Word that comes first.

These are three rich theological categories with which to imagine the felt spirituality at work in and through music. They allow us to reimagine and articulate our questions in creative ways: where does the

11 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, 'Theology in Its New Context', in *A Second Collection. Papers by Bernard J.F. Lonergan S.J.*, ed. by F. J. Ryan and B. J. Tyrell (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), pp. 55–68 (at 61–62).

12 See Frederick G. Lawrence, 'Grace and Friendship. Postmodern Political Theology and God as Conversational', *Gregorianum* 85. 4 (2004), 795–820 (at 818); Bernard J. F. Lonergan, 'Mission and the Spirit', in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan. A Third Collection.*, ed. by Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), pp. 21–33; Frederick E. Crowe, 'Rethinking God-with-Us: Categories from Lonergan', *Science et Esprit* 16. 2 (1989), 167–88.

inner Word of the Spirit 'show up' in musicking? And how, if at all, can we name this? Does it only become 'Christian' mediation when words qualify and articulate the presence of the 'outer Word'? Is that not an excessively monotheistic way of how we might imagine divine action? In my own experience as musician and composer, I have at times related these dual inspirational sources of the Spirit and Jesus with the process of song writing when it moves from music or melody emerging from any given experience to lyrics that seem to express what the music was trying to 'say'—one tending to the other, incomplete without the other. This understanding of the Spirit present before words define things could also help us to name respectfully what takes place in music performed or shared by people of diverse religious experiences or none: music as a school and expression of love of the Spirit poured out into humanity (Rom 5:5) and implicitly known universally in human experiences of unconditional love. John Blacking began to name this years ago in connection with the corporal nature of human life and empathy, but there is more to be explored.[13]

III. Interdisciplinary Perspectives: Musical Semiotics, Hermeneutics, and History

These theological perspectives need, of course, to be complemented by interdisciplinary expertise into the nature of musicking. Three aspects have, to date, been important in my own research: musical semiotics, hermeneutics, and history.

Revelation and the Incarnation of God oblige us to take seriously the nature of the human. With regard to musicking, this implies qualitative attention to the fields of music studies, music theory, history, musicology, and ethnomusicology (in the measure that these can and should be distinguished). My own emphasis on the embodied nature of Christian faith and music has led me to draw extensively on the work of colleagues in musical semiotics, and, especially, on the work of Willem Marie Speelman, who applies the complex field of semiotics to

13 John Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?* (London: Faber, 1976).

the musical space.[14] I think attention to and analysis of what is actually happening in the music (melody, tonality, harmony, lyrics, rhythm, etc.) for those who are involved is an ongoing essential element of its understanding; otherwise, we risk theorising away the actual meaning of musicking in each context in which we find ourselves.

Context, history, and a hermeneutical approach to all analysis are now central to any quest for understanding. In relation to our theme, the work of Jean-Jacques Nattiez helps name perspectives in musicking that challenges the discursive nature of philosophical hermeneutics and can therefore fruitfully be used in an ongoing way.[15] If nothing else, these perspectives hold the analyst or interpreter accountable to the context and intentionality with which they approach their analysis, and it is surprising how often such awareness is absent. The intersection of human contexts, history, and interpretation is a necessary element of every study of music and spirituality. However, there is a more immediate, and, perhaps, underestimated perspective that needs to remain front and centre in our considerations: that is, the actual history of interaction between music and the theological, philosophical, and literary understandings of music over the history of human life. The fact is that musicking has been an essential element of human life in every human culture since we have awareness of human life, and of every religious tradition. Conversely, religious and philosophical strands of thought—in my context, the Judaeo-Christian Story—have deeply influenced our understanding, creation, and evaluation of musicking for centuries.[16] Many of the polarising positions in Christian theology between right and left, 'conservative' and 'progressive', classical and contextual, also affect research into music and spirituality and music; these positions can often betray a type of amnesia of the bigger picture of the history of music and thought. Every individual study needs to be cognisant of the bigger shifts of which it is a part, especially the central

14 See Willem Marie Speelman, *The Generation of Meaning in Liturgical Songs* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1995); Willem Marie Speelman, 'Music and the Word: Two Pillars of the Liturgy', *GIA Quarterly* 19.4 (2008), 14–45 (see 14–15, 44–45).

15 See, for example, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse. Toward a Semiology of Music* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

16 This is true of both the development of what we might broadly call 'Western or European classical' music and the many strands of music emerging from Afro-American music, in all its variety.

historical questions affecting the history of interpretation: what was/is important in this moment, and why? What got carried forward and what did not, and why?[17]

IV. The Biographical Nature of Work in Music, Theology, and Spirituality

Evaluating critically the biographical nature of work in the field of music and spirituality is essential, therefore, for clarity moving forward, and is a central concern of my current research. In one sense, it is a consequence of taking history and hermeneutics seriously in a felt quest for understanding or truth: every interpretative act is contextually situated and cannot be fully understood, therefore, without reference to its source. Even when named, however, it seems that awareness stays at the more impersonal level of socio-cultural influences or, as perhaps more recently, of gender and intersectionality, but what about the whole range of an individual's biography? Researchers and scholars tend to write themselves out of their reflections and conclusions so as not to corrupt the 'objective' nature of their work, but is that helpful or even possible? The spiritual 'subjects' of my title refer not only to the themes we address but the embodied and evolving persons that we are, from and through whom our musicking takes shape and our experience and thought reaches paper and publication.

Although underdeveloped, this theme is not new. Over fifty years ago, Johann Baptist Metz wrote a short piece on the biographical nature of theology entitled 'Excursus: Theology as Biography'. Adapted from a piece written on and for Rahner on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, it argues that Rahner's theology is intrinsically linked to his life and spirituality (which some have referred to as an 'everyday mysticism'); as such, it is 'a narrative, biographical dogmatic theology which is at the same time more objectively instructive than any other theology' of that time.[18] The influence of Rahner on the Catholic theological world,

17 The questions are drawn from Bernard Lonergan's understanding of the history of interpretation.

18 Johann Baptist Metz, 'Excursus: Theology as Biography', in *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. by David Smith (London:

in shaping the *sensus fidelium* of the Church and the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, would back this claim. Metz's title 'excursus' is nonetheless deceptive, as it seems to suggest an afterthought, somewhat secondary in nature and limited to the thought of one person. For Metz, however, it is clearly more foundational than that. In the book of which it is a part—entitled *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*—the 'Excursus' is situated at the end of the central chapter of three chapters addressing the three basic categories of his practical theology (memory, narrative, and solidarity). Metz's category of 'narrative' seeks to challenge the disconnection between story and theory as detrimental to any pretension to a scientific understanding of truth. Marginalising narrative as not critical or pre-critical leaves theology alienated from experience and therefore empty of its originating sources, since story is the very language of God's interruption in history (a definition of revelation initiated by Metz and taken on by others).[19] In order to overcome the unhelpful gap between religious experience and theology as a system, narrative, story, and biography are essential:

> Biographical theology introduces the subject into the dogmatic consciousness of theology. It does not in any sense propagate a new form of theological subjectivism. 'Subject' is not a term that can be exchanged at will in this context for any other. It is man [*sic*] involved in his experiences and history and capable of identifying himself [*sic*] again and again in the light of those experiences. Introducing the subject into dogmatic theology therefore means raising man [*sic*] in his religious experience and biography to the level at which he becomes the objective theme of dogmatic theology. In other words, it means that dogmatic theology and biography can be reconciled with each other and that theological doxography and mystical biography can be brought together.[20]

Written in 1977, Metz's assessment still holds true today, although how we might name the issues has, of course, changed. The very concepts of 'objective' and 'subjective' need more careful attention, as noted above. It is simply false to think that our personhood does not influence our

---

Burns and Oates, 1980), pp. 219–28 (at 224); Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Continuum, 2007). The statement challenges and complements historical emphases on the difference and disagreement between Metz and Rahner.

19 Metz, *Faith*, pp. 206–16.

20 Ibid., p. 220.

questions, processes, and conclusions, no matter what theme we are dealing with. It is also worth mentioning that the issue of the place of the scholar in research is not exclusive to theology: the social sciences, spirituality, and philosophy all grapple in some way with how this might be named and explored.[21]

For a research project that seeks to explore the connections we can and do make between music *and* spirituality, it is essential that we delve deeper into these underlying, implicit, and often unconscious or subconscious mechanisms that condition how we perceive, experience, and reason. Otherwise, there are undisclosed interests or influencing factors we are in danger of missing, which nonetheless affect and condition our perspectives and conclusions. We have all witnessed instances in academic discourse where the difficulty in reaching a consensus is more due to unacknowledged premises, unnamed biases or horizons of comprehensions, and undeclared interests than to any postmodern inaccessibility of truth. In musicking and spirituality, both domains in which taste, aesthetics, and non-verbal creativity are central, it becomes essential that we consciously seek and name unmentioned aspects of human sensibility.[22]

One way of addressing this in a systematic way in the world of theological investigation is that of Lonergan's exploration of human epistemology, its application to a systematic approach to theological method, and the work of those who continue to develop his thought.[23]

---

21 For example, the emergence of autoethnography in the social sciences, or the implication of the scholar in the academic discipline of Spirituality. See, for instance, Carolyn Ellis and Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, *Music Autoethnographies: Making Autoethnography Sing/Making Music Personal* (Bowen Hills: Australian Academic Press, 2010); Belden C. Lane, 'Writing in Spirituality as a Self-Implicating Act. Reflections on Authorial Discolsure and the Hiddenness of the Self', in *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders*, ed. by Bruce H. Lescher and Elizabeth Liebert (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), pp. 53–69.

22 Feminist (speaking broadly), queer, theopoetic, and post-colonial theologies excel in addressing this. Do the reading lists for the classes we teach incorporate such perspectives?

23 For his major study on how human beings come to know, see Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957). There are a variety of what can be identified as 'Lonerganian' centres of thought, for example, at Boston College, Massachusetts (https://bclonergan.org/); Regis College, Toronto (http://www.lonerganresearch.org); Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles (https://bellarmine.lmu.edu/lonergan/); Dublin (https://lonerganmorin.wordpress.com/2007/03/04/

It is a complex and compelling exploration of human epistemology and the quest for truth in our contemporary and plural world, which defies contemporary resistance to truth claims and systems in academic research while acknowledging the difficult and complex nature of the quest. It is also a closely knit system in terms of how its parts interact with and imply one another, which is impossible to fully present here. Despite this, I would name one aspect as particularly important for the music–spirituality–theology conversations: Lonergan's understanding of the person of the scholar (or the community of scholars) as foundational to all academic work (from the natural sciences to theology and religious studies).[24] He calls for considerable self-awareness and self-appropriation of the researcher in their work, which, in the sphere of studies into religious studies and theology, leads him to introduce the notion of 'conversion' as an essential guarantor of the quest for theological truth.

Lonergan's use of the term 'conversion' needs to be clarified, however, because he is not talking about 'conversion' in the biblical understanding of *metanoia* (turning back to God and spiritual transformation) but of the need to identify the horizons or worldviews of human experience and knowledge within which we position ourselves, the questions we raise, and the influences we welcome (socio-political, philosophical, religious,

dublin-lonergan-centre/); and at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome (https://www.unigre.it/it/ua/facolta/teologia/progetto-lonergan/).

24 Interestingly, James Wm. McClendon Jr presents a similar insight, albeit addressing it in a different way. See James Wm. McClendon, Jr, *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1974). McClendon takes ethics as its entry point to respond to the changing reality of faith practice and knowledge, specifically an 'ethics of character' or 'theology of character': 'I claim here that the truth of faith is made good *in the living of it* or not at all; that living is a necessary condition of the justification of Christian belief. There is no foundational truth available apart from actual life, no set of timeless premises acceptable to believers and unbelievers alike, upon which Christian theology can once and for all found its doctrines ... By recognizing that Christian beliefs are not so many "propositions" to be catalogued or juggled like truth-functions in a computer, but are living convictions which give shape to actual lives and actual communities, we open ourselves to the possibility that the only relevant critical examination of Christian beliefs may be one that begins by attending to lived lives. Theology must be at least biography. If by attending to those lives, we find ways of reforming our own theologies, making them more true more faithful to our ancient vision, more adequate to the age now being born, then we will be justified in that arduous inquiry. *Biography at its best will be theology*' (*Biography as Theology*, pp. viii, 22).

and theological), as well the willingness to broaden them. Lonergan scholars name four such essential areas in need of attention. Although this is only one way among others to differentiate and sub-divide, these categories are insightful, and therefore a perhaps useful framework within which to situate our findings: religious, moral, intellectual, and psychic.[25]

Religious conversion refers not only to the explicit spiritual, religious, or denominational allegiance of the scholar (or lack thereof), although necessary. Rather, it suggests the reality of unconditional love that floods human life, whether the scholar is a believer, or a Christian, or not. The term 'religious conversion' is therefore perhaps misleading but interesting, as it seeks to recognise the 'ultimate concern' that can grasp human living and focus our intentionality, perception, and life. If and how a researcher positions themselves in relation to God or the Spirit or the world as a whole, or religious thought, and if and how they are open to the same, is an important conditioning element of their work. The connection between a person's spirituality, 'religious' experience and their interaction with music is, therefore, highly significant.

Moral conversion refers to how someone understands and embraces the fundamental reality of human freedom: are we living for self (and drifting), on the one hand, or seeking and choosing values and the common good over self and, in doing so, shaping our own lives and those around us, on the other? So, while 'moral conversion' embraces notions of personal accountability and social justice, it goes beyond moralism to the awareness of life as gift and task, and the contexts within which this plays out for each person. This is perhaps the aspect that most coincides with the insistence on the historical and socio-political contexts and background of our thought, with connections to theological and philosophical anthropologies, in feminist, liberation, and post-colonial theologies.

Lonergan's notion of 'intellectual conversion' is perhaps the hardest to access and therefore often the most controversial; its absence leads to difficulties in intellectual dialogue and in the discernment of the differences between persons or between schools of thought. It recognises the complicated epistemological history of the mainly

25 I have explored these more fully in chapter four of Maeve Louise Heaney, *Suspended God: Music and a Theology of Doubt* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2022), pp. 104–08.

western intellectual tradition; Lonergan asks scholars to identity the epistemological worldview out of which they work, and to 'convert' or move to the insight that we are beings in a world in and of which we mediate meaning. In other words, 'intellectual conversion' positions itself against both idealism (reality is only in our minds) and empiricism (reality is only 'what is actually out there', in front of us), proposing, instead, a critical realism in which we understand the role of the meaning-making subject in the world we live in. While this may seem unduly abstract, the epistemological conundrums facing philosophy, theology, and current musicological debates are exacerbated by our unawareness of how our minds work, of how we think they work, and of the force of the intellectual traditions we buy into when we fail to acknowledge them. Since academics in religious and Christian traditions, as well as music theorists, often work out of these worldviews, naming them is essential for scholarly dialogue to move beyond the dual pitfalls of ideological animosity and a kind of beige tolerance and naïve optimism that all opinions are equal and can somehow co-exist.[26]

Psychic conversion refers to the symbolic and aesthetic awareness of our embodied selves, and how past experiences and wounds, their recognition, and their healing affect our thought much more than we realise. Given the centrality of musicking to human existence and development, I would suggest that attention to the connection between musicking and spirituality will uncover significant aspects of this symbolic dimension of human experience. Naming and critically reflecting on them can only help clarify our tastes, research foci, and collaborations.

V. A Small Preliminary Test Case

During the process of reflecting upon and writing this chapter, I asked a group of people with whom I am currently working in the field of

26 Kevin Ernst Korsyn describes this as the tension between the biblical image of the Tower of Babel and the Orwellian Ministry of Truth (from Orwell's novel *1984*), in chapter one of Kevin Ernest Korsyn, *Decentering Music a Critique of Contemporary Musical Research* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 5–31; Kevin Ernest Korsyn, 'The Aging of the New Musicology', in *Approaches to Music Research: Between Practice and Epistemology,* ed. by Leon Stefanija and Nico Schüler (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 9–23.

music and theology to write about their own motivations and influences in this research field. Colleagues were asked to identify the connections between themselves as scholars (life/biography; culture; concerns; spirituality/religious affiliation/theological education; and personal encounters or friendships), the research areas and methods they are drawn to, and their perception of the societal need, or the 'signs of the times', that required attention. The aim was to kickstart and test some initial reflections on the connections between biography and scholarship to see if more systematic research and analysis would be helpful. I received responses from 70% of those asked, and a further 20% expressed an interest in the project's future. The findings were deep and rich. In an initial (although attentive) reading, I have categorised their reflections into seven subjects which I describe here in the order that best reflects the connections I noticed being made. I have also named the conversions I sense implicit in these responses, although this is complex and not in any way comprehensive.

(a) Musicians *(Psychic)*

All the contributors were active musicians and/or composers interested in a wide variety of music-types, and often with a family background in music, which at times overlapped with their experience of faith and/or church. Most had chosen theology as their professional pathway, which is unsurprising given that my own world and network is more theological than musical, and the selection was drawn from people I intuited would be open to this initial exploration. A broader pool of scholars would allow us to better explore how this affects our work. Ideally, it would include a variety of scholars, at the intersection of music and spirituality/theology, analogous to the threefold typology noted above in Denis Edward's study of scholarship in faith and science.

(b) Music's Influence in Religious Faith/Practice (*Psychic/Religious*)

Most contributors identified an initial or even foundational experience of the connection between musicking and spirituality and/or religious affiliation, either personal or in their family origins. For example:

> We were Protestant, and went to church weekly. My father sang in a choir, and that sound touched me deeply…
>
> Music played a huge part in keeping me attached to church life while many of my peers dropped away…
>
> My music and experience of God always seemed intertwined. As a child, I would occasionally hear a tone inside my ear that I thought was God getting my attention. Today I accept that there may be other explanations, but I continue to experience these tones as gifts because they remind me of the mystery and closeness of God and the embodied yet ethereal mystery of sound and music.
>
> Amongst the things [my aunt] would often sing was a very particular version of the Aaronic blessing by Lowell Mason … My grandfather was the leader of the choir in their Methodist church … So, at the heart of things is my memory of so many hymns … that I never remember learning that pour from my heart.
>
> The worship services in our church were filled with hymn singing and personal testimonies. Men and women would stand and testify through tears to their powerful experience of God's tenderness and closeness. We sang: 'He walks with me and talks with me/along life's narrow way….'

The personal and symbolic resonance of these passages is clear, making the connection between music and the religious and psychic dimensions of conversion stand out.

(c) Denomination (*Religious*)

All the contributors identified some form of religious affiliation and/or spirituality that influenced their thought. Some had struggled with the institutional church's resistance to insight or change—particularly in relation to women and power-struggles, and sought other pathways in spirituality (such as meditation, contemplative practices, etc.). Others recognised how they drew on that worldview in their work.

(d) Autobiography/Identity/Spirituality (*Religious/Psychic/Moral/Intellectual*)

Personal identity and history emerged as another fertile ground of awareness and insight, which highlighted a clear sense of how good

and bad past experiences were constitutional in framing identities and research interests. For example:

> Music and the arts were where I found my voice in my early and school days. As a queer kid, it was a way into participation and belonging outside of sport and stereotypically gendered activities.

Named experiences included gender, sensibility to nature, solitude and friendships, family trauma and their consequences (such as eating disorders, depression, etc.), how the classroom may inform positively our curiosity and knowledgebase, and how abusive atmospheres in academic workplaces shape both research interests and our relationship to musicking.

(e) Theological or Other Background/Education (*Religious/Intellectual*) and Personal Encounters (*Religious/Moral/Psychic*)

A person's background and their encounters with others seem to overlap, as in many cases the influence of a person's intellectual passion and the expertise of their mentors was clear and moving. At times, the admired expertise was in *how* they connected music, spirituality, and theology, but the more common denominator in bringing people to research into music and theology was their own personal investment in music alongside a felt interest in *understanding* musicking.

(f) Cultural, Ecclesial, or Social Context (*Moral/Psychic*)

The positive and negative sides of cultural, ecclesial, or social contexts continually shaped how participants unpacked their research. An example of the former was the principle of sacramentality in Catholicism, which envisages the arts as mediators of revelation. But the more challenging aspects of these contexts seem even more influential in shaping the foci of people's research fields, as the unfinished or negative understanding of experience and thought leads to further exploration and/or pushback. For example, the unfinished and to a large extent, 'experimental liturgical reforms of Vatican II'; the historical (and still present) marginalisation of women in a Christian understanding; fundamentalist rigidity in welcoming socio-political issues; the inner manoeuvrings of the institutional church in liturgical matters, and its

resistance to change. In the words of one researcher: 'I think this has made me more polemical/apologetic in my approach to my scholarship, and more committed to the axiom that the spiritual is political'.

(g) Music and Words: Tension and Dichotomy, and Mutual Enrichment (*Intellectual/Religious/Moral/Psychic*)

The dichotomy between experience and theory, mysticism and theology, musicking and music studies, emerges clearly in many of the contributions:

> There were dear people in my childhood church who warned me against going to seminary, because it would water down the mystery of my faith and steer the warmth of my devotion into too-neat categories. Likewise, some of the musicians in the bands I played in in high school warned me against going to music school, saying that it would make my playing stiff or too conventional.

A common trait was an awareness of the limits of words to fully express the divine, however that was named (faith, mysticism, mystery, etc.), combined with the desire to understand more analytically, which led people to the more academic work of music theory and theology.

> My religious upbringing meant that I never doubted that reality exceeded the realm of the linguistic, the empirical, or that which could be expressed in logical syllogisms.

> My whole life has been driven by a desire to communicate something of who God is, in music, in words, in both together.

> My own approach was somewhat bi-polar, inhabiting both sides of this dichotomy at different times …When musicking … I feel like a musician expressing and discovering my faith in music; when teaching or writing, I am a theologian expressing and discovering faith discursively and conceptually—even when the subject is music. The balance/proportion is not clear—I think it probably fluctuates—but since I have university credentials in theology, and not in music, I tend to find myself nudged in the direction of 'theologian' (by others but also by myself).

Also common was the felt tension in deciding which pathway to take as a life option, 'torn between music and pastoral ministry', or between music and theology. The option for the academy as a pathway was described

relatively frequently as 'safer', although theory and musicking (in whatever form it takes) were usually described as mutually enriching:

> I see my musicking and my theology as mutually informing.

The insights into how scholars negotiate this dichotomy was profound. For example, in one songwriter-theologian's reflection on past music-making and her shift to theological language:

> What struck me when I listened to [songs written when younger] again is that to me they seem to express the voice of a child. I don't know what my adult voice sounds like, except in the words of books that are no longer musical. Sometimes I wish I could return to song-writing, yet there is a naiveté that has gone from me now.

Most show considerable awareness of how navigating the two affects and enriches their work:

> [I] find music a salient entry point to work in liturgical reform and renewal— ... for much of my career.
>
> That said, I am instinctively and incessantly analytical—music theory appeals, e.g., and so does theological method and things like theoretical physics. I like to plumb the depths, while also tearing down barriers to the experience of mystery
>
> I wonder how much of my theological work is an attempt to articulate my musical experience, even to set it on a firm footing.

And this in an ongoing way, not just as a past or even foundational dynamic. The factors reflected upon do not only merge as shaping the past, but also that of an ongoing process of interaction and influence.

> I am constantly re-inventing my music and my theology; I am constantly being interrupted.

This mutuality is not just personal but structural, since music performs 'sets of codes and conventions that have culturally semiotic meaning ... the profound interdependence of musicality and sexuality—music as a semiotics of desire—with all the political, socio-historical implications and interanimations this nexus entails'.

Provisional Conclusions and Further Questions

The above testimonies, categorised into seven subjects and implicit conversions, set the stage for a series of questions which emerge from this work, as starting points for further research. Indeed, the participants' own varied and fascinating questions are pertinent to this line of enquiry:

> Today many reject the religion of their parents in favour of a broader 'spirituality' or 'mindfulness'. There is a need to present religion (and for many it is Christianity) in ways that support spiritual exploration and integration, regardless of where the spiritual quest leads. Musicians have their creativity to draw upon for this sacred work, and musical theologians/spiritual directors are best suited to innovate ways to companion them on this journey.

> Much of my waking life is spent trying to work out, then, how 'God' can make sense in a world that has no memory of the kind of life that was lived when I was a child, no memory of music and God fused together.

> If music and musical interpretation are semiotics of desire, what deep dark desires drive exclusionary, conservative theologies thereof? ... Musico-erotic experiences (especially from the margins) save music from being a proof-text for Greek metaphysics or Calvinist doctrine.

> Why does anything sound good? Why is it that a vibrating string or a struck piece of leather should move me so profoundly? Why should song form such an essential element of our worship? ... My questions about music were more theological than musicological.

> The eclipse of community and of a sacramental worldview potentially make Christianity (and at least ritual worship) untenable... Can we still celebrate the Eucharist? Lament and the dark side of sacramentality need exploration. Processes of liturgical reform must be opened up and revitalised; local agency is essential; theologians need a place within the conversation that can inform 'official' change. Post-conciliar formation (liturgical and otherwise) of Catholics has failed; a Catholic fundamentalism endures. Expertise in engaging with primary sources in liturgical studies is diminishing; this makes informed engagement with tradition difficult.

> The gap between how Christianity expressed its worldview and how the world does so. This includes the epi-logos (post-word) nature of human meaning making and its challenge to Christianity's tenet of Truth/truths as accessible and eternal.

Although this is but an initial exploration into some scholars' own thoughts about what they are doing and why, I think it heralds an insightful and necessary focus for future work in the field. As noted above, it is incomplete in its representation, making the inclusion of other perspectives all the more attractive and necessary. This chapter's invitation to take the person and biography of the scholar more seriously seeks to lay a foundation for a more honest, nuanced, and fruitful understanding of the connection between musicking and spirituality.

The implicit but unnamed worlds of meaning and horizons of comprehension are often the 'elephant in the room', impeding us from moving towards understanding and, if not consensus, at least a harmony of sorts. However, welcoming biography into the space of scholarship has consequences, not least of which is that attention to narrative may change and disrupt the perceived 'eternal' nature of our conclusions, or the specific expertise we claim. Life moves and changes: people, events, encounters, and the process of human growth, which is never linear, can lead us to change direction. But then, here below 'to live is to change', as John Henry Newman put it, and musicking is part of the invasive, interruptive, and transformative symbolic revelation of God.