OVERTURES OF GRACE: PREVENIENT GRACE AND THE SACRAMENTALITY OF MUSIC

Stephen Wright

Wishing theologically to reflect on music without abstracting from its inherent relations and worth, this article enlists the language of sacramentality. Not purporting to be exhaustive, its primary concern is to examine how God's prevenient grace is manifest in the interaction of music with persons and other media. It is contended that by exploring music through the dialect of sacramentality one is able meaningfully to describe music and its effects.

> *Music, as your parents understand and practise it, will help to dissolve your perplexities and purify your character and sensibility, and in times of care and sorrow will keep a ground-bass of joy alive in you.*
>
> -Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge," May 1944[1]

Music tickles the ears. It fills otherwise awkward pauses in film and television. Jingles seem innocent enough, but they stick with us and tell us what we ought to buy. Yet Bonhoeffer's comments at the baptism of young Dietrich serve to remind us that music has depths and meanings greater than its commercial use. Bonhoeffer avers that it can purify; I contend that it can also serve God's purposes. To clarify, I do not mean merely in the use of music by the church, but I speak of music in its broadest sense; not the lyrics of church songs, but of music itself.

Within this paper I am seeking to find a manner in which to describe God's action in music. To do this I will enlist the language of "sacrament," or more specifically "sacramentality." I make use of a distinction between these two terms. The former term

---

[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge," *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Letters & Papers from Prison,* ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald Fuller (London: SCM Press, 1971. Reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1971), 295.

encompasses those specific actions of the church which tradition and the biblical testimony have handed down to us as instituted by Christ and conveying grace. The latter term is derived from the former. Its use in recent theology has often pointed to the reality conveyed in sacraments but as manifest in other objects or actions. It signifies "sacramental" characteristics in, if you will, "non-sacraments" which, ultimately, are subordinate to sacraments. This line of thought has a long tradition. Luther considered Christ alone to be deserving of the moniker, "Sacrament," referring to the actions of the Church as "sacramental signs."[2] Thus, for Luther, a distinction is drawn between "sacrament" and "sacramental", the latter pointing to the former but not quite having the same fullness of participation that the former enjoys.

Much discussion on the sacraments begins with a discussion on their role as a "means of grace." In this paper my contention is that music is capable of being a vehicle for prevenient grace.[3] This is not to suggest that music is a sacrament, but that we may consider it to possess certain *sacramental* qualities. First, however, I will outline some of the features of prevenient grace which I consider to be pertinent to this discussion.

God's Overture

Through the incarnation we have been shown God's willingness to tie himself to creation in order to redeem it. The cross is unmistakably wood and symbol. In this sense we have already observed how Jesus may be considered sacrament, in its most fundamental form.[4] Then, suggests Wesleyan theologian Michael Lodahl, "in some important way[s] the entire created order – all of God's world! – is capable of being transparent to God's creative and redemptive presence, of being at least occasionally a "means of grace" to us if we are open and perceptive."[5] Lodahl's argument here is that the created order has sacramental *capacity*. This capacity is dependent on response. Grace is made available to us, but it is not coercive. Lodahl states that we must be "open and perceptive" to make use of this "means of grace."

---

[2] Eberhard Jüngel, "The Church as Sacrament?," *Theological Essays I* trans. and ed. J.B. Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 193.
[3] In some sections I will also allude to a possible "sanctifying" motion in music.
[4] See Eberhard Jüngel, "The Church as Sacrament?," 192ff.
[5] Michael Lodahl, *The Story of God: Wesleyan Theology & Biblical Narrative* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1994), 178.

Throughout his life John Wesley maintained that no person is without grace, but that prevenient grace is given to all. Yet he held that "prevenient grace is not coercive or irresistible."[6] H. Ray Dunning writes "[prevenient grace] extends to all human persons, restoring to them the capacity to respond to, as well as resist, the calling of God."[7] In Wesleyan theology, the encounter with preventing grace is not a single isolated event which takes place at the beginning of one's life. Rather prevenient grace is associated with every advance of God towards us. Randy L. Maddox gives more detail.

> Wesley did not limit the activity of Prevenient Grace to upholding our partially restored faculties. He also attributed to it God's initial *overtures* to individuals. As he once put it, Prevenient Grace includes "all the drawings of the Father... [and] all the convictions which his Spirit from time to time works in every [person]."[8]

The duality in meaning of the word "overture" is apt here. In music an overture can take place at the beginning of a larger work, such as an opera or a suite. It can also be a stand-alone work, an independent orchestral piece. To make an analogy of this, the former understanding of the word (closest to its general meaning with its suggestiveness of the beginning of a relationship) could be employed to signify those advances of God which are met with response and form the basis of a relationship, while the latter could signify those advances which are followed by silence. Such an advance is left without response. This does not diminish the power or significance of the advance (to regard an overture as inferior because it is not an introduction to a larger work would be ludicrous), but means that the advance will not result in a relationship.[9] In this way the non-coercive nature of prevenient grace is contained within the designation, "overture."

---

[6] H. Ray Dunning, *Reflecting the Divine Image: Christian Ethics in Wesleyan Perspective* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 57.
[7] Dunning, 57.
[8] Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley"s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994), 88. Emphasis original.
[9] This is because these two different uses of the word "overture" signify distinct musical forms, the relationship between which is not as close as this analogy suggests. This is the failing of this analogy. Whereas the advances of God are not different whether or not they are met with response, an "overture" which forms the introduction to a larger work is a unique form and is distinct from the form of an

Prevenient grace is not only that grace which "goes before," but it also performs a preventative function. Wesley asserted that he was a "hair's breadth from Calvinism."[10] Dunning elaborates, "in light of his insistence on the total depravity of human nature, the "hair" that distinguishes Wesleyan soteriology from Reformed is prevenient grace."[11] Without God's overtures of prevenient grace the "natural" person, the graceless human, would be a menacing creature. "Humane" would be synonymous with "demonic." But it is prevenient grace that allowed Jesus to assert that even the wicked know not to give their starving children rocks. In this system of thinking prevenient grace keeps us from realising our own depravity.

The key to appreciating Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace, in the eyes of Randy L. Maddox, is the notion of *uncreated grace*.[12] Rather than a condition or possession, grace is God's own motion and intent towards us. Grace is the uncreated nature of God's own being. Tracing the idea back to the Reformation, Wolfhart Pannenberg points to the approaches of the Reformers, Melanchthon in particular, as they identified the gift of saving grace with the gift of the Holy Spirit.[13] Extrapolating Wesley's sacramental theology Maddox describes Wesley as sympathetic to the Eastern Church's conception of grace *as* the Holy Spirit.[14] Thus the invocation of the Holy Spirit through the *epiclesis* is "constitutive of the eucharist's effective power."[15] Despite his varied usage of the term *real presence* it appears as though Wesley's own stance was more in line with the Anglican articles which in his day utilised the Calvinist notion of Christ's *spiritual* presence in the Eucharist.[16] For the purposes of this discussion I am content to remain with the language of spiritual presence, as I am not arguing for music to hold equal status with the Eucharist but for a *sacramental* understanding of music. As such, emphasising the role of the Spirit leaves room for more extreme interpretations of the degree to which music is sacramental, whilst

---

overture which is its own orchestral work (although this form was derived from the popularity of the former).

[10] John Wesley, in Dunning, 57.

[11] Dunning, 57.

[12] Maddox, 89-90.

[13] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology: Volume 3*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 197-200.

[14] Maddox, 198.

[15] Maddox, 198.

[16] Maddox., 204.

remaining amenable to the notion that music's sacramentality is of a lower order.[17]

Wesley, according to Maddox, understood the means of grace as performing a nurturing role for the believer – a role in the process of sanctification.[18] In this understanding a sacrament is a means of "sanctifying grace." Stanley Grenz emphasises the role of the Spirit in this process, but also keeps in mind that "our personal cooperation" is needed.[19] We are thus to appropriate that which is made available to us which would allow us to proceed in becoming more Christlike. Participation in the Eucharist is one such thing:

> The Eucharist may be understood as that means of grace, instituted by Jesus Christ, to which we are invited for repentance, for self-examination, for renewal, for spiritual sustenance, for thanksgiving, for fellowship, for anticipation of the heavenly kingdom, and for celebration in our pilgrimage toward perfection in the image of Christ. All these are involved in our sanctification, and all these are benefits available to us at the Lord's table.[20]

Sacramental grace can be understood as both prevenient and sanctifying. The latter is, however, more difficult to pin down in a sacramental discussion of music. Thus the focus here is on the former. I proffer that prevenient grace is sacramentally available through music, specifically in the fostering of relationships.

That music can "soothe the savage beast" is often considered axiomatic. One frequently cited biblical example of such soothing is David's lyre in Saul's chambers. When Saul was in spells of depression he called on David to play his kinnor (an instrument which was probably more like a lyre than a harp) to bring him peace. The biblical record states that when David played Saul's disposition was restored and any evil spirits would leave him.[21] Here we see music's ability to affect for the better. In these early music therapy sessions Saul was calmed and eased by David's playing. Music performed a preventative function for Saul (though, in the end, it didn't always stop him from hurling spears at David –

---

[17] Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: Volume 2, The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 226-27.
[18] Maddox, 192.
[19] Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 444.
[20] Rob L. Staples, *Outward Sign and Inward Grace: The Place of Sacraments in Wesleyan Spirituality* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1991), 202-203.
[21] 1 Samuel 16:23.

such grace is resistible). I now turn to consider in more detail how music participates in God's work to bring about the restoration of healthy relationships.

Reconciling Through Song

In contemporary evangelism the primary motif seems to be that of reconciliation with God the Father. When it is not this, the evangelical emphasis has been on "getting people in a right relationship with Jesus."[22] In either situation the priority is on righting one's relationship with God, or rather, through the cross, God taking on our lost cause and reconciling us to himself.[23] This is seen as the heart (or at least the point) of the Gospel.

Justification describes the righting of a dysfunctional relationship, namely our relationship with God. Lutheran theologian Gerhard Förde writes, "the fact is that we simply cannot get on with God. We cannot reconcile ourselves to God. Why? Just because God is God. We cannot bear that."[24] That in himself God is worthy of our attention – more worthy than we are – irks us.[25] Most frequently our attention is primarily on ourselves – ruthlessly on ourselves. This is our sin. Eberhard Jüngel suggests that, as a bearer of God's image, the other person also is interesting for his or her own sake.[26] Yet we fail to realise this. Contemplating Luther's "discovery" that God's righteousness is found in the gospel, not the law, Jüngel claims "now for the first time I realize clearly what it means to be a sinner. A sinner is one who is closest to him- or herself, in such a way that wholesome closeness to God or others is wrecked or instrumentalized and thereby destroyed."[27]

---

[22] Jim Peterson's popular book on evangelism, *Living Proof*, utilises both of these motifs. Jim Peterson, *Living Proof: Sharing the Gospel Naturally* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1989).

[23] This action, as God's free act of faithfulness to his creation, is the heart of the Christian message posits Barth. Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation: Church Dogmatics* trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, eds. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (London: T&T Clark, 1956. Reprint, London: Continuum, 2004), 3.

[24] Gerhard Förde, "Reconciliation With God," *Christian Dogmatics*, Volume 2, eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 65.

[25] Eberhard Jüngel reminds us that "God is interesting for his own sake. And when God is that no longer, then begins idol-worship, which is only an instrument of ruthless human self-realization." Eberhard Jüngel, "On the Doctrine of Justification," trans. John Webster, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1:1 (March 1999) 32.

[26] Jungel, 32.

[27] Jungel., 34.

This ineptness in relating with others is a failing spanning all humankind. It is an inward focus which subordinates all other claims for attention. It is only by God's prevenient grace that we are kept from destroying each other out of our own lust for violence and love of self.

That God gives such grace to the elect is an item of most traditions, however, certain people who would not count themselves as Christians – who have not made full use of God's grace – seem to demonstrate an ability to relate well which would put many Christians to shame. It would seem that humankind possesses a certain measure of care and concern for each other. Part of Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace was that it "effects a partial restoring of our sin-corrupted human faculties."[28] This entails a certain apprehension of how we ought to deal with one another. Universally accessible, this grace prevents us from living out our depravity. Within the Church we recognise God's movement in "portioning out" this grace through the sacraments.

Relating in Baptism and the Eucharist

In both Baptism and the Eucharist – those two actions which we have already established hold a privileged position among that which is deemed to be sacramental – a proper way of relating is evident. Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed describe baptism as acceptance "into the community of reconciliation."[29] To be in such a community is to realise reconciliation as it is meant to be – between myself, God and others. "Baptism is belonging; it is the sign of the Christian reality and our inclusion in it."[30] It is a sacrament of welcome into the Christian story.[31] This is peculiar to the Church. Within a broader context the universality of prevenient grace allows for acceptance of persons apart from their

---

[28] Maddox, 87.
[29] Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed, *The Sacraments in Religious Education and Liturgy*, (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1985), 164.
[30] Browning and Reed, 159.
[31] Browning and Reed argue that if this welcome is to be genuine it should be comprehensive. That is, that baptism completes itself and that there should be no need for confirmation, nor is there any reason why the baptised but unconfirmed should be refused communion. They look to the eastern tradition where "infants are baptized by immersion, confirmed with the laying on of hands and anointing with oil as symbols of the presence of the Holy Spirit, and given first communion" as an example of the Church fully accepting a new person into the body of Christ. Browning and Reed, 138-39.

encounter with the risen Christ, but as bearers of God's image and as the objects of his love by the work of the Spirit they also become the objects of our love.[32]

Writing from within the Orthodox tradition, Alexander Schmemann maintains that in the Eucharist it is the Church who serves, not the clergy, or the laity, or any combination of the two.[33] In this we see the unity present that is found in Christ. It is small wonder that the most popular designation for the sacrament within Protestantism is that of *communion*. Robert Jenson offers the following, "that churchly and eucharistic communion are one, in that both are communion in the body of Christ, has become a standard item of ecumenical consensus."[34] That is to say, the body of Christ is both the Church and the "loaf and the cup."[35] The Church is the body of Christ to the world as the Eucharist is to the Church. Jenson then proceeds with a citation from the *Anglican-Orthodox dialogue,* "the church celebrating the Eucharist becomes fully itself; that is, *koinonia,* fellowship – communion."[36]

Up to this point I have avoided specific discussion on music. To avoid confusion I must qualify the above observations. The differences between music as *sacramental* and baptism and the Eucharist as *sacraments* become clearer as the discussion becomes more specific. Within the Church the sacraments are accompanied by the declaration of the Gospel, but music can be considered *sacramental* apart from such declaration. From the perspective of Christian theology, however, this is to be considered a lack which may hinder music's effectiveness. Indeed, music's sacramentality is "heightened" (if such a thing is possible) when it is accompanied by such declaration. Apart from discursive attachment music relies on other externalities – such as social context and customs, dance, film, or personal context – for "meaning" or for advocating.[37] This reliance on externalities is consolation from the potential of sheer ambiguity, but does not protect us from the intent of these other externalities. This will be considered shortly. Here I am again

---

[32] Jüngel, 32.
[33] Alexander Schmemann, *The Eucharist* (Crestwood: St Vladmir"s Seminary Press, 1988), 88.
[34] Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2 – The Works of God,* 212.
[35] Jenson, 211.
[36] *Anglican-Orthodox Dialogue: The Moscow Statement* (1976), cited by Jenson, 212.
[37] Nicholas Cook would have it that music not only derives meaning from these externalities, but that it also injects back into them its own meaning. Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 20-22.

wishing to emphasise the subordinate status of music as sacramental – i.e. possessing a part of the character of the sacraments but not enjoying full participation in their reality. Nonetheless this discussion is being carried out within the context of sacramentality, thus observations of the sacraments remain appropriate.

Hearing the Other

That listening to, or taking part in the performance of, music demonstrates to us a better way of relating to each other is not necessarily evident at first glance (or hearing). Listening to music is strangely insular. Music seems to spatially and temporally envelop you in such a way that you are experiencing your own individual reality. This is the experience of the classical concert hall, or of the stillness one experiences when listening in the peace of one's own home.

The music of the Romantic era has come to be characterised (in the musicology of the 19th and early 20th centuries at least) with individual expression.[38] The aesthetic of this belief lies in the stillness of listening as one is communicated with directly by the composer. Beethoven is the champion of this view. Musicologist Nicholas Cook comments critically on Eugene Louis Lami's drawing, "Upon hearing a Beethoven Symphony."

> The listeners may be physically in a single room, but each of them is wrapped up in a different, private world. Music has taken them out of the public world of people and things... indeed, for all practical purposes, the people in Lami's drawing might as well be listening on headphones.[39]

Contrary to the assumptions of many, music is irreducibly an embodied activity. No matter how rapturous the experience, the listener remains en-fleshed. Any soul-lifting which occurs in music is accompanied by foot-tapping. Music is both a means of ingress and of egress; we sway, we dance, we sing. It draws us out of ourselves, away from a damaging inward focus. To what it points us is the question.

---

[38] Nicholas Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 19-20.
[39] Cook, 21.

Outwardly Oriented

These experiences of egress can be corporate. In these situations the drawing-out motion of music may lead us to bond with others. Music is capable of enveloping a group of individuals and uniting them. Each individual is made aware of and united with the adjacent person and both are introduced into this new reality. In the ultimate situation, this union is one of love and respect for the other; it is a sharing of something sacred. In both of these examples, the movement is a drawing-out from the self.

Literary critic and aesthetician George Steiner writes that "music often puts me "beside myself" or, more exactly, in company far better than my own."[40] Music beckons you to recognise and value that which is outside of yourself. Much is often made of music's social dimension. It is generally recognised that music either is formed by society, or forms society. Cook suggests that music is social "even when only a single individual is involved."[41] Even music which on the surface appears only to be self-interested draws us out of ourselves. One might consider this to be the outworking of the music's own megalomania. This is the music which consists solely of internal reference – its primary interest is itself. Nonetheless its cries for attention are heeded and our attention is turned away from ourselves. However, as I have already stated, such encounters with purely self-interested music are rare.[42] The relationship is more often one of dialogue and consideration.

---

[40] He is, of course, alluding to a divine "otherness." George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (N.P.: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1997. Reprint, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 85.

[41] That is to say that music cannot be understood apart from its performance and performance is always an activity of an individual or group of individuals which takes place within a particular social context. Cook writes, "the contemporary performance studies paradigm that has developed primarily in the context of theatre studies and ethnomusicology stresses the extent to which signification is constructed through the very act of performance, and generally through acts of negotiation between performers, or between them and the audience." Nicholas Cook, "Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance," *Music Theory Online: The Online Journal of the Society for Music Theory* (April 2001) 7:2. Online at http://www.societymusictheory.org/mto/issues/mto.01.7.2/mto.01.7.2.cook.html

[42] More often than not this self-interest is that of the composer, not the music. A piece which would seem prone to this kind of selfishness is Bach's famous working out of the potential of equal temperament in *Das wohltemperierte Klavier*. Yet few would suggest that this piece is just the selfish musical rantings of Bach. Not only

Enlivened By the Spirit

There is a wooing which takes place in music. It is small wonder that many cultures have associated music with the spirit world or spiritual rites. Moving beyond the personification of music, we can see that the wooing taking place in musical encounter is one of prevenience. The dysfunctional character of our relationships lies in our "ruthless human self-realization."[43] Being drawn out of ourselves in a way that allows closeness to others is remedial. Where this results in the affirmation of life and godly values I would posit the work of the Holy Spirit (I will discuss shortly instances where this action is void of the Spirit or where the Spirit is grieved). Michael Welker writes "The Spirit is present in that which is *held together* and *enlivened* by God."[44] This is no stretch of the imagination; the realm of God's activity is this plane of reality. The assertion that God is actively present in this world means the possibility that we can witness such action. Welker writes, "The Spirit does not act on abstract 'eternal' entities, but on living things. Fleshliness and the action of the Spirit are not to be separated from each other."[45]

If the Spirit is present in that which is enlivened by God and music can bring us a certain degree of personal improvement such as that which might be expected of prevenient grace then it follows that we may be able to see the Spirit at work in the effects of music. Luther enthusiastically stated that "The Holy Ghost himself honours [music] as an instrument for his proper work."[46] With Luther I assert that we find God's Spirit at work in music, specifically here in this drawing out motion. Music therapy has documented well the manner in which music can help to heal the

---

did Bach explore the sonic possibilities and inner workings of this new tuning system, but he turned it into a dialogue by demonstrating to his listeners how pleasant-sounding this tuning system could be. In a way Bach was giving a taste of that which was yet to be apprehended – the future of music – and thus was composing music which was pregnant with possibilities. This work should stand as an example of how rare completely self-interested music is.

[43] Jüngel, "On the Doctrine of Justification,"32.

[44] Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 161. Emphasis original.

[45] Welker, 163.

[46] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, vol. 53, Liturgy and Hymns*, trans. and ed. Ulrich S. Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), Cited by Gesa E. Thiessen ed., *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 145.

broken mind. Music is used in children's wards and retirement homes to help those who are suffering from depression or mental anguish to come out of themselves.[47] Therapists have also observed that music serves to facilitate a condition of amenability to prayer; it serves the "enhancement of a person's relationship with the Divine."[48] In these situations we see that the drawing out motion in music creates a situation of openness to God.

To what or to whom we turn our attention as a result of this motion is partly our response to the music and partly the context in which this occurs. To say that the Spirit is thus involved in music is not to say that he is always active in this way. Here I argue music's sacramental *potential*. Welker asserts that while the Spirit is present in that which is held together he is "not, for example, in that which is decaying to dust."[49] The action of the Spirit in music may also be denied and grieved. The prevenient grace made available in music is non-coercive, as I will discuss shortly. Presently, one more point of clarification may be offered, that any improving which is effected by music may last only for the duration of the song or for a short time thereafter. Brian Wren asserts that music may "momentarily perfect the emotional life of its singers."[50] Admittedly, the discourse of the Church and the biblical narrative have a better history of shaping people according to God's will than does music. I have already stated that apart from the informing narrative of the Gospel music's ambiguity may end up leading in all sorts of directions. However, it needs to be remembered that music is constantly involved in interaction with that which is outside of itself. Wren's assertion is understood best when we consider 1) that he is writing about the music of the Church, thus music accompanied by the word of the Gospel; and 2) that he is describing a communal action that draws us out of ourselves, the benefits of which may last only as long as the action itself. The transience of such effecting is in keeping with music's own disputed ontology.

---

[47] See "Depression Research: Music and Massage Therapy," *Internet Health Library*, online at http://www.internethealthlibrary.com/Health-problems/Depression-research_massage_music.htm

[48] R. Nikles, "Integration of Music Therapy and Theology: A Preliminary Approach," *Australian Journal of Music Therapy* 3 (1992), 54.

[49] Welker, *God the Spirit*, 161.

[50] Brian Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 68.

The Performance Paradigm

Many contemporary musicologists assert that music studies should not focus on the written score so much as the performance of music. The notion of the score as music is being challenged. Cook writes, "Western staff notation shows music 'moving' up and down and from left to right on the page. But what is it that actually does the moving? Literally, nothing... when we say the music moves, we are treating it as an imaginary object."[51] Talk of music often revolves around metaphor. Steiner observes this when he writes "almost everything said about musical compositions by critics, by poets or writers of fiction, by the ordinary listener and music-lover is verbiage... It is talk which enlists metaphor, simile, analogy in a more or less impressionistic, wholly subjective magma."[52] For Steiner this use of metaphor relates music's unintelligibility and indicates transcendence. We use metaphor because music's being is elusive. By speaking in this way we are able to treat music as though it were something we could reach out and touch.

We tend to speak of music as though it still exists after its performance has ceased. Yet this fall back into metaphor demonstrates the failing in conceiving music as a tangible "thing" completely independent of its performance. In light of this it seems preferential to recognise music as a *process* which occurs between individuals rather than a "practice centered on the silent contemplation of the written text, with performance... acting as a kind of supplement."[53] This process is played out by people through a group of actions; it is an interaction. Cook suggests that it is more helpful to think of the score as a script rather than a text. "To think of it as a 'script' is to see it as choreographing a series of real-time, social interactions between players: a series of mutual acts of listening and communal gestures that enact a particular vision of human society."[54] These interactions are not limited to those which occur between performers, Cook asserts that negotiations can take place between the performers and the audience also.[55] The performance of music is then impossible

[51] Nicholas Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, 70.
[52] Steiner, *Errata*, 71.
[53] Nicholas Cook, "Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance."
[54] Cook, "Between Process and Product."
[55] "Between Process and Product."

without interactions taking place between persons or apart from a social context.

Singing a Vision

It is important to note Cook's assertion that these communal gestures "enact a particular vision of human society." Cook believes that there is value in applying the theory that language determines how different cultures perceive the world, to aesthetics.[56] Thus for Cook music plays a formative role in culture and society. This is almost an inversion of the popular idea that music derives its meaning from its "mediation of society" – a point which is often associated with the discussion of the context of music's creation, performance, and reception.[57] Cook considers these contextual considerations to be important, but he believes that music's role in society is more than the mere mediation of existing societal values. Music is a social action, and as such, informs and forms society, just as much as it depicts it. Rather than allowing music's meaning to lie in abstractions, Cook wishes to learn something of its meaning by observing it workings.

> The point is simply that... [music] is *part* of society, and as such is as likely to be in the vanguard or to lag behind as any other part of society. And we are on much firmer ground when we try to understand the social transactions that are taking place within the practice of music – what is being *done*, in other words – than when we construct unverifiable hypotheses about what might be being represented.[58]

Viewed this way there is value in considering the way that the score (or whatever form the *script* for the performance takes) shapes the interactions which take place within a performance. That music enacts a vision of society is a radical thought. In an orchestral composition the interplay of the violins and violas may have something to say to us. Antiphonal pieces demonstrate a healthy dialogue between two parties. When understood this way music is not trying to ambiguously connect us with externalities, rather, it is embodying externalities.

---

[56] Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, 76-77.
[57] Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia*, 3.
[58] Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, 78. Emphasis original.

I hope that the sacramental relevance of this point is not being lost here. In sacramental theology the use of symbolism is of the essence. Rob L. Staples writes that the symbol is not "merely an accidental and *dispensable* '*pointer*' to a reality" rather it is "actually an *indispensable participant* in the reality to which it points."[59] We claim that in the Eucharist we are declaring Christ's death and resurrection. This is not just through the words of the sacramental liturgy, but it is embodied primarily in the bread and the wine which are for us the body and blood of Christ, and also in the sacramental actions. The elements themselves take part in the liturgy. When we assert that music makes us sympathetic to others we simultaneously posit the work of the Spirit. The social interactions which take place in music are the embodied symbol. In a very unambiguous way music draws us out of ourselves. When this results in healthy social relations we taste something of God's will for us. In identifying this work as that of the Holy Spirit, my evangelical tradition requires that the proviso be given that where the message conveyed in music is not true to the biblical story the Spirit is not the speaker. Stanley Grenz writes,

> we must realize that God's Spirit – who is the Creator Spirit – is present everywhere in the world, and consequently the Holy Spirit can speak through many media. To this I must quickly add... Wherever the Spirit speaks, he speaks only and always in accordance with, and never contrary to, Biblical truth.[60]

For the case of music, I would add that the Spirit may be speaking, but we may be ignoring him. That is to say, in situations where the use and performance of music would seem to be amenable to godly causes, yet the result is that of depravity or violence, the non-coercive prevenient grace has been disregarded or abused. But when Godly virtues do eventuate through song, even if only for the duration of the song, we witness the efficacy of God's prevenient grace.

Wesley asserted that in the Eucharist those "who know and feel that they want the grace of God, either to restrain them from sin,

---

[59] Staples, 58. emphasis in original.

[60] Stanley Grenz, "What does Hollywood have to do with Wheaton? The place of (pop) culture in theological reflection," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43:2 (June 2000), online at http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=55539150&sid=2&Fmt=3&clientId=66725&RQT=309&Vname=PQD

or to show their sins forgiven, or to renew their souls in the image of God" may find that for which they are searching.[61] Taking Jüngel"s understanding of sin given earlier, those who wish to restrain themselves from sin (by making use of prevenient grace) may find help in song. If what we need is to be saved from a love of self which disallows us to be close to others then it seems that singing may demonstrate to us a way of living which allows us to recognise and value each other. Cook likens the choral performance of hymn singing to that of the football match in that "it involves communal participation and interaction. Everybody has to listen to everyone else and move forward together."[62] For Cook communal singing "doesn't just symbolize unity, it *enacts* it."[63]

It is interesting that in writing on music's capacity to unite people both Cook and musician and theologian, Jeremy Begbie, comment on the singing of the South African national anthem, "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica." Begbie recalls his experiences singing it while visiting South Africa, "wherever I sang it, it evoked in me an extraordinary sense of togetherness, even though I hardly knew the hymn and often hardly knew the people with whom I was singing."[64] He attributes this sense of togetherness not only to the song's history as an anthem that "had bound thousands together" during the reign of apartheid, but also to the structure of its four-part harmony.[65]

Begbie and Cook both note how in the harmony of this song no part overpowers another. The music causes people to relate in a healthy way, without pushing others aside for one's own self-aggrandisement. For Begbie, this as an expression of authentic human freedom. Contemporary conceptions of human freedom entail the consequence-less actions of self-determining individuals who fear that getting close to others may impede personal freedom. Contrary to this, music demonstrates how we can occupy the same "space" without infringing on each other.[66] Music challenges the way we conceive space by offering an alternative to

[61] John Wesley, cited by Staples, 259.
[62] Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, 80.
[63] Cook, 80. Emphasis in original.
[64] Jeremy Begbie, "Through Music: Sound Mix," *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts*, ed. Jeremy Begbie (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 151.
[65] Begbie, "Through Music: Sound Mix," 151.
[66] Begbie, "Through Music: Sound Mix," 151.

visual models.[67] A musical conception of space demonstrates how being courteous and generous to each other is an authentic expression of human freedom. A kind of freedom which is experienced in the song "Nkosi Sikelel iAfrica" as "a sense of stability and mutual dependence."[68] Being a song which draws from both European and African musical traditions, Cook asserts that it has

> an inclusive quality entirely appropriate to the aspirations of South Africa... [it] goes far beyond merely representing the new South Africa. Enlisting music's ability to shape personal identity, "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica" contributes to the construction of the community that is the new South Africa.[69]

What we are seeing here is that music's ability to shape persons takes place within a cultural context; it shapes them within a particular community. By what means are people able to overcome their lust for self and be shaped and encouraged into healthy relationship? Begbie suggests that in singing a song like this "people are experiencing a kind of concord which embodies the kind of freedom in relation to others – even our enemies – which the Trinitarian gospel makes possible."[70] There is, then, in this kind of singing some apprehension of the gospel, of God's desire for us. Such an apprehension asserts itself as the result of God's gracious overtures. Steiner would remind us that "to 'live music,' therefore, as mankind has done since its inception, is to inhabit a realm which is, in its very essence, foreign to us."[71] The powers which we experience within this foreign realm – those which are strangely private and communal – Steiner suggests are "'in'-human."[72] Many theologies would suggest that we not presume that human effort alone makes such formation of community

---

[67] This is the point of Begbie's article on the incarnation and music. Music offers us a model for space in which two distinct entities can occupy the same "space" without diminishing, or covering over, one another. Two notes sounding at the same time maintain their individuality as distinct notes while at the same time complement each other in such a way as to hint at the creation of a new entity.
[68] Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, 80.
[69] Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, 80.
[70] Begbie, "Through Music: Sound Mix," 152.
[71] Steiner, *Errata*, 80-81.
[72] Steiner would take issue, however, with our putting a name to this "in-human" force. To speak of God would be acceptable, to name and identify this God is where Steiner would draw the line. To be clear, however, Steiner also makes room for the recognition of these powers as demonic in character. Steiner, *Errata*, 85.

possible. It is more suitable, rather, to conceive this formative freedom experienced through music to be a gift of prevenience. It is a means by which God chooses to reach out to us and show us something of his character and his intentions for us. In this he makes available the grace necessary to be able to apprehend these things, if only in part. It is small wonder that the response time in so many evangelistic services is accompanied by music, most often in the form of congregational singing.

Gambling in Dialogue

This is not to presume that such experiences are limited to the act of communal singing. The majority of music encountered by people in the West is that which has been recorded. As I have already mentioned numerous times, listening to music evokes a drawing-out motion. By presenting us with itself it pulls our attention away from ourselves. Even the introspection brought about by listening in the stillness of one's home (whether it be on the couch with a stereo or on the beanbag with headphones) is from the perspective of another. It is the interaction with music that brings us to see ourselves in a different light. This is not self-interest in the egotistical sense of the word, rather it is a self-interest brought about by the confrontation of the music. We are not alone on this journey into ourselves; the voice of another is with us through it. That the music is still present with us as we engage in this introspection keeps us in touch with something outside of ourselves. Cook has argued that music is ultimately a part of the culture in which it was composed or performed.[73] In this way it keeps us in touch with culture. The dialogue is not only with culture, but as familiarity with a piece or genre grows we come to find ourselves conversing with the musicians, the composers, and the producers. By drawing our attention away from ourselves like this listening to music, even recorded music, forces us to relate to others.

The link can be stronger when a moment of listening is shared. It is peculiar that this experience can be contemporaneously individual and corporate. Steiner describes music as empowering the "oxymoron of love" when he writes, "to listen to music with the loved one is to be in a condition simultaneously private, almost

[73] Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, 78.

autistic, yet strangely welded to another."[74] One aspect of the strangeness in this situation is the nervousness with which one may share a valued piece of music with another. There is a sense of ownership of the music: when sharing a piece of music I am vulnerable because what is being offered is a part of me and I am a part of it. It is "mine." What is desired in the sharing is that it should become "ours." But there is a chance that the music will not be welcomed and the rejection of the music can be felt personally; a part of me has been rejected. Steiner writes that there is a certain type of etiquette to aesthetic encounters in which we are sought out by "the living significations of the aesthetic."[75] In such a situation we have the capacity either to accept or refuse the encounter, there is a "gamble on welcome" on the part of the artwork.[76] Yet when I share a piece of music with another it is as though I am the one taking the gamble on welcome. Steiner would point out that there is less at stake in this gamble as mine is dependent upon that of the music; mine is secondary. Yet the feeling that a part of me is being put forward in the music is very real. In the act of acceptance and welcome of this gesture I am affirmed, it is a courteous act of love.

Again the theme of non-coercion is present. The rules of courtesy apply in aesthetics in a way reminiscent of the manner in which grace is resistible. I now turn to consider occurrences of discourtesy.

Ignoring the Other – Unworthy Participation

In 2001 the Israeli parliament, along with holocaust survivors, opposed the scheduled performance of Wagner's *Die Walkuere* at a festival in Jerusalem resulting in the removal of the piece from the programme.[77] On the night of the performance, however, conductor Daniel Barenboim chose to perform Wagner in an encore and subsequently found that an Israeli parliamentary committee was urging cultural institutions to shun him.[78] Hitler's love and use of Wagner's music is still too fresh in the collective

[74] Steiner, *Errata*, 85.
[75] George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), 147.
[76] Steiner, 156.
[77] "Protests stop Wagner concert," BBC News, 30 May 2001, online at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/arts/1360654.stm
[78] "Israel calls for Barenboim boycott," BBC News, 24 July 2001, online at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainments/arts/1455466.stm

Jewish consciousness for many to appreciate his work. Public opinion of Wagner is not aided by his own anti-Semitic writings.[79] Steiner likes to remind us that Lukács considered Wagner to be "implicated, to the end of time, in the uses to which Nazism put his music," a use to which – according to Lukács – "not one note in Mozart" could be put.[80]

This example, as well as the use of national anthems in wartime, reminds us that music is also capable of uniting people *against* others. In such uses of music the grace made available is rejected and abused. It is not a closeness to God which is realised. Paul accused the church in Corinth of failing to eat the Lord's Supper because of the manner with which they conducted themselves during the meal.[81] The Corinthians did not show consideration for each other; one person would be drunk from taking more than enough wine, while another would go hungry. Where the action of one diminishes another, God's grace is not utilised – it is not the *Lord's* supper. Similarly, where music does not foster an environment of consideration for others, its sacramentality points to something other than God.

> [Music] can be "the food of love," it can also trigger the feasts of hatred... Massed voices – the Welsh at rugby – bring on an unrivalled unison of communal fraternity; they generate shared prayer and meditation, paradoxically hushed by their very volume. But when harnessed to a national or partisan anthem, to the hammer-thrust of a march, the same choral practices, in an identical key, can unleash blind discipline, tribal mania, and collective fury.[82]

As a human action we cannot consider music to exist in "some zone immune to the effects of human corruption."[83] Much is made of Paul's warning to the Corinthians concerning "worthy" participation in the Eucharistic celebration. With great sobriety Paul declares that unworthy partakers are guilty of the gruesome death of Jesus. With our less than ideal concept of human freedom we individualise our way out of communing with anyone. Our small, daily acts of violence resulted in God on the cross. We can

---

[79] Some would argue, however, that Wagner"s own anti-Semitism is merely representative of the prevailing sentiments of his day.
[80] Steiner, *Real Presences*, 145. See also *Errata*, 80.
[81] 1 Corinthians 11:17-22.
[82] Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life*, 81.
[83] Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 276.

enact the same violence in our music. When falling short of sublime – or the sacramentally God-oriented transcendent – at best what remains is sound, noise, perhaps cacophony. When falling short of *communion* in the Eucharist, Paul warns us of judgement.

In the careless (or perhaps malicious!) use of music we risk small acts of selfish violence becoming great. We should take care not to underestimate music's ability to foster violence. But then again, music is neither innocent of blood, nor is it fully responsible for it. A reasonable person will not be engendered with a desire for genocide merely upon hearing Wagner; but neither will a malevolent (or even well-balanced) person "necessarily" be moved to benevolence.

From a Christian perspective artistic creativity operates as an expression of authentic human freedom within constraints. A spirit other than the Holy Spirit is present when artistry is used in a way that is damaging to others. By this I mean that in our music we may be expressing a spirit of human depravity, or of negative sentiment which may be demonic in character.

> Through falseness and unrighteousness human beings can grieve and banish God's Spirit... the knowledge of faith says... that God can take back God's Spirit and can turn away God's face, but that without God's will human beings are unable to activate the action of the Spirit. There are no interconnections between the behavior of human beings and the action of the Spirit that automatically run their course and necessarily produce definitive relations.[84]

In discussing the possibility of a sacramentality of music we must be honest that there is no promise, no divine contract, which obliges God to act in and through music. Yet I still posit that our experience of music shows us that something greater than the mere physics of sound waves is occurring in much music. Where we are drawn out of ourselves in such a way that results in openness to God, truth, or others we have made use of God's prevenient grace. I would allow room for us to recognise even a partial utilisation of prevenient grace when one empathises with that which is communicated through music but is not completely drawn out of self or open to others. God's prevenient grace is that which allows us to turn to him and come to a saving knowledge of

[84] Welker, *God the Spirit*, 161-62.

him, nevertheless such a result is more likely when music is accompanied by the word of the Gospel or is enacted within the Church. Yet where we are drawn out of ourselves only to turn against God and others (even against a healthy knowledge of self) we have grieved and banished the Spirit. God is not obligated to "enliven... the dead and the dust" – though he may if he so chooses.[85]

Conclusion

This paper has revolved around an "openness" for God to work through music. God's work through music is most likely realised when we foster an environment of consideration or magnanimity. Begbie considers musical improvisation to demonstrate "liberating constraint."[86] Jazz improvisation takes hold of certain constraints and uses them to enhance the music. "The improvised elements are not simply held by the constraints but reinforce the dynamism of those very constraints...[resulting in] mutual enhancement through interplay."[87] One such constraint is that of respect and care for others. Improvisers need to be aware of other performers and make "room" for them. Music is characterised by relationships. It is heavily involved in interplay with other media, with persons, and cultures. Where our encounter with music turns us from ourselves and frees us from hatred and fighting, I suggest that we have tasted God's grace. This grace allows us to love, to know others and to know God. I find sacramentality to be a fitting way to describe this action of God in music. It captures the irreducible physicality of song, and also the social dimension of music. It provides a framework for envisioning God's movements while allowing God to move as he will. In most traditions, song is at the heart of the Church's worship life. This is more than coincidence. God's overtures may be heard in music, the question is whether we join his song or choose to remain deaf to it.

[85] Welker, *God the Spirit*, 162.
[86] Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 204.
[87] Begbie, 212.