

Music as sound spirituality

Edward Foley

Introduction

ACROSS TIME AND GEOGRAPHY PEOPLE HAVE KNOWN the power of music for evoking the gods and acquiring spiritual insight. The earliest myths of classical antiquity recognized and celebrated music's special role in communicating with divinities. In these stories music was often a divine gift.¹ From its inception, Christianity had what could be considered a 'sonic spirituality', and believers acknowledged that their new song was Christ,² who invited them into a divine harmony, so that 'out of many scattered sounds, might emerge one symphony'.³

There are many ways in which one could consider music as a vehicle of, or metaphor for, the spiritual journey. It is particularly useful, however, to begin with sound itself – the acoustic experience of which music is the most refined genre – as the starting point for theological reflection.⁴

Auditory knowing

Human beings experience the world around them through a rich variety of senses. Each type of sensory perception allows a different mode of knowing and, therefore, a different kind of knowledge. If we could only touch a clove of garlic, and not see it hanging in an Italian deli, or hear it as it separates from the bulb, smell it as it simmers in olive oil, or taste it in a delicate pasta sauce, we would have incomplete information about garlic. Each sense provides a different way to perceive the world. As a particular type of sense perception, hearing enables distinctive kinds of knowing. This is true both because of the nature of sound as well as the physiology of human hearing. While not an exhaustive list, it is possible to outline some of the essential influences of sound phenomena and the physiology of hearing on the way we know in terms of five categories.

Sound as an experience of impermanence

One of the most frequently cited characteristics of sound events like music is their *transitory nature*. Hearing can be considered a sophisticated way of marking time with the ear: registering a sequence of sounds which eventually fade and come to an end. Sound events like

music or speech are impermanent events which exist for the listener only in the doing of them – only for the duration of the performance. Thus sound events like music are fundamental experiences of change: one note or syllable or lapping wave in sequence after another. It is especially music, as the most sophisticated sound event produced by humans, that is marked by impermanence, change, sequence and passing time. Susanne Langer suggests that music makes time audible, and renders its form and continuity sensible.⁵

Sound as an experience of the intangible

Closely related to the impermanence of the sound event is the *intangibility* of the sound phenomenon. The paradox of all sound phenomena like speech or music is that they are perceivable but elusive, recognizable but uncontainable. When sculptors, painters or architects ply their craft they employ materials that before, during and after the process can be touched, weighed and measured. But when orators or musicians ply their art, no comparable material has been transformed. Although they may sometimes employ instruments, as the painter uses a brush, the real stuff of their art is simply air: controlled, manipulated, articulated and punctuated. And air is a virtually imperceptible reality. This experience of the apparent intangibility of sound phenomena is heightened by the fact that sound phenomena are perceptible by only one sense. Whereas oil paints, sandstone and steel can be seen, touched and – if one wishes – tasted, sound is usually only heard. Music in particular is not only perceived as insubstantial but itself seems to have an ‘ambivalence of content’.⁶ This elusiveness in form and content is part of the reason why music is so often used for communicating with the spirit world.

Sound as an experience of activity

Sound events are perceived as active, dynamic experiences in comparison, for example, to the visual which can more easily give the subject the illusion of taking part in a passive, disengaged *activity*. This, again, is due to the nature of sound and to the physiology of hearing. Because sound events are fundamentally temporal events and exist only as long as the sound is being generated, they have an inherent dynamism about them. Such dynamism is less easily predicated of the plastic arts since an artefact such as a painting continues to exist long after the artistic process is finished. Furthermore, sound waves, travelling at approximately 750 miles per hour or 1,120 feet per second at 15° Celsius, move fast enough to communicate movement and yet

slowly enough to be perceived as moving. Thus we can watch someone fire a starter gun in the distance and hear the shot milliseconds later. Humans have more developed physiological capacities for hearing than for seeing. As Davies summarizes, ‘The “length of the present” for the ear is of shorter duration than for the eye’.⁷

Sound as an invitation to Engagement

As Plato (d. 347 BCE) recognized, sound events like those of the epic poets of his generation were not neutral occurrences which an impassive listener could take or leave. Rather, sound events like poetry or music are essentially acts of *engagement*. Plato believed that poetry was so engaging that listeners were unable to distinguish themselves from the poetic event.⁸ The sound event disabled the listener from detaching self from the sound and, therefore, rendered the listener unable to distinguish between subject and object; between poem and listener; between poem and poet. Sound events, from this perspective, are not only active events in and of themselves, but dynamic to the extent that they engage the other and captivate the listener. One aspect of human physiology that underscores the dynamic and engaging nature of sound is the human ear. Unlike the human eye, the ear has no natural covering: there is no ‘earlid’. The ear is born open to every sound. Thus the ear is the metaphor for human beings born open to engagement, not just with sounds, but with the people who produce them. Consequently the ear could be considered a physiological metaphor for relationship.

Sound as an experience of the personal

The assertion that sound events are not only dynamic but invitations into engagement leads us to a final assertion about the sound event: that they are not simply experiences of something other, but of *another*. Sound encounters are keyed to be *personal* encounters. Walter Ong explains this phenomenon in terms of ‘acoustic space’. He writes:

Habits of auditory synthesis give rise to a special sense of space itself. For besides visual-tactile space there is also acoustic space (which, through voice and hearing, has its own associations with the kinesthetic and tactual not quite the same as the kinesthetic and tactual associations of sight). We can apprehend space in terms of sound and echoes (abetted by tactile associations). Space thus apprehended has qualities of its own.⁹

Acoustic space does not, like visual space, contain a thing but is a sphere delineated by activity.¹⁰ This acoustic activity is translated by the human imagination as evidence of animation, of life, and particularly of human presence. Acoustic space, therefore, is what we might call 'filled space'.

Sound spirituality

These reflections on the nature of sound – the very building blocks of music – enable us to begin understanding how and why music is such an important element in religion and the spiritual life. The apparently intangible, insubstantial nature of sound, for example, is one of the reasons why music has so effectively symbolized the mysterious and wholly other since the dawn of creation. Music as a non-discursive symbol is not only perceived as insubstantial but, as noted above, seems to have an 'ambivalence of content'. This elusiveness in form and content is part of the reason why music is so often used for communicating with the spirit world. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition music is an effective means for communicating with a God who is both present and hidden. Furthermore, music offers itself as a powerful symbol for the Divine Self who is recognizable while remaining the unnamable 'I am who I am' (Exod 3:14). Music thus enables us to encounter and know God without presuming to capture or contain the divine Self.

Considering the dynamic nature of sound and music allows reflection on music as a metaphor for dialogue and communion. Because of sound's ability to resonate inside two individuals at the same time it has the capacity to strike a common chord and elicit sympathetic vibrations from those who hear. It is dynamic in its ability to enter the world of the other and elicit a response. Thus music effectively reflects the dialogic impulse of the God revealed in the Judaeo-Christian tradition who continuously initiates dialogue with believers. This characteristic emphasizes not only God's historical intervention or personal nature but further embodies the belief that God has been and continues to be engaged in the individual and corporate life of humankind.

Similarly, sound and music's capacity to indicate personal presence makes it an important vehicle for perceiving the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, who is believed to be not an abstract power intervening in history but a personal God who intervenes on behalf of a beloved. More often than not, this intervention in the Hebrew Bible took an auditory form and a pre-eminent image of God's presence was the Word (*dabar*). Though there are many visual images in the New

Testament, even here there continues to be a strong emphasis on the auditory. Thus Jesus, as the definitive revelation of this personal God, is proclaimed to be the Word (Jn 1:1). In view of this auditory bias in God's self-revelation as recorded in Old and New Testament, music as the most sophisticated form of sound has the capacity to symbolize the personal nature of God's self-revelation,¹¹ especially as it unites to the word.

Musical time as God's time

One of the most commonly noted characteristics of music is the temporal nature of this art form. As previously noted, hearing can be considered a sophisticated way of marking time with the ear. Thus music, as a time-bound artefact, teaches the ear to mark time. But it does so in a very different manner than does the clock. As Langer has rightly noted, clock time is homogeneous, simple and basically one-dimensional.¹² It is also only self-referential, marking change but change within its own world, from one second to another. What Langer calls this 'infinite succession of moments', however, is not the only or essential experience of time. Rather, she argues, clock time is an abstraction from the human experience of time which is anything but homogeneous, one-dimensional and self-referential.

An authentically human experience of time is the opposite of clock time. It is not the simple succession of one identical moment after another. An hour with a beloved may seem like a second; ten minutes in the dentist chair like an aeon. As these and so many other richly human moments illustrate, the experience of time involves more than length or interval between selected moments. Langer suggests, for example, that metaphorically speaking, passages of time also have 'volume', and from the viewpoint of human experience a unit of time may be great or small as well as long or short.¹³

Few human experiences of time communicate the 'volume' of the moment as much as music.

All music creates an order of virtual time, in which its sonorous forms move in relation to each other – always and only to each other, for nothing else exists there . . . music spreads out time for our direct and complete apprehension, by letting our hearing monopolize it – organize, fill and shape it, all alone. It creates an image of time measured by the motion of forms that seem to give it substance, yet a substance that consists entirely of sound, so it is transitoriness itself. Music makes time audible and its form and continuity sensible.¹⁴

Thus it is engagement with music – not with the clock – which provides an experience of what could successively be called *subjective*, *virtual* and *real* time. This is the time in which the soul needs to dwell, and God needs to be encountered.

Developing an ‘ear in the chest’

Entry into musical time – into time with volume, as distinct from the chronology of empty sequences of one upon one – provides powerful analogies for the spiritual journey to the God revealed in Jesus Christ. One of these is related to the previously noted characteristic of sound and music as an experience of activity. This dynamic characteristic of sound and music is due to the time-bound essence of the acoustic phenomena which exist only as long as the sound is being generated. In a related discussion, Walter Ong contends that sound as one of the basic building-blocks of music is more real or existential than any other sense object and situates us in the midst of actuality and simultaneity.¹⁵

Because of this ‘existential’ quality of sound, music has a unique capacity to evoke analogically the Judaeo-Christian God who intervened in human time and revealed the Divine Self in human history. But, like music, God’s self-revelation is never simply a past event. Music exists only now – only in the making of it and hearing of it. Analogously, God’s self-revelation is only now, in the eternal present. The challenge to us is to tune our souls to the self-sustaining trinitarian polyphony which sings the world into being.

This experience of the virtual time of music also provides the listening heart with a profound metaphor for the *eschaton*, that already-not-yet-breaking forth of God’s reign. The musical event, so real and so elusive, provides a moment of unusual richness in the tonal landscape of our lives: a moment truly present and then, in an instant, just as truly absent. So too is the reign of God, which in moments of grace so clearly breaks forth in the harmony of human lives, and just as often seems so absent from our dissonant world. Engaging the whole of creation in the cosmic hymn of Christ is God’s work shared with us. When the music ends, and the barren silence surrounds us, we admit again our ‘musical mission’, and take up anew the lyrical vocation of chanting the divine song through our lives. To live such a sonic spirituality requires what the Persian mystic and poet Jalal ad-Din Muhammed Dinar-Rumi (1207–73), in his poem ‘When things are heard’, called an ‘ear in the chest’.

The ear participates, and helps arrange marriages
the eye has already made love with what it sees.

The eye knows pleasure, delights in the body's shape:
the ear hears words that talk about all this.

When hearing takes place, character areas change;
but when you see, inner areas change.

If all you know about fire is what you have heard
see if the fire will agree to cook you!

Certain energies come only when you burn.
If you long for belief, sit down in the fire!

When the ear receives subtly, it turns into an eye
but if words do not reach the ear in the chest, nothing happens.¹⁶

To be graced with an ear in the chest is to achieve what the prophet promised (Ezek 11:19), when he prayed God to replace our stony hearts with hearts of flesh. It means developing a listening heart that beats empathetically to the rhythms and tunes of the Divine Self.

An experience of the primary

In the opening pages of *Real presences*, George Steiner sets forth a refreshing definition of hermeneutics. Rather than the systematic method and practice of explication, 'of the interpretative exposition of texts', Steiner wants to define hermeneutics as 'the enactment of answerable understanding, of active apprehension'.¹⁷ This definition is most comprehensible in view of Steiner's critique of art criticism, or what he calls 'the dominance of the secondary and the parasitic'.

According to Steiner, the direct experience of aesthetic meaning, in particular the arts, infers the necessary possibility of God's presence. He summarizes:

This study will contend that the wager on the meaning of meaning, on the potential of insight and response when one human voice addresses another, when we come face to face with the text and work of art or music, which is to say when we encounter the *other* in the condition of freedom, is a wager on transcendence.¹⁸

It is in view of this hoped-for transcendence that Steiner offers a critique of the 'secondary', which short-circuits the immediacy of the aesthetic and, by extension, diminishes the possibility of an experience of the transcendent. Rather than a society of the secondary, Steiner images a 'politics of the primary', which encourages the immediate experience of the text, the art work and the musical composition, and

thus unimpeded access to that which infers the necessity of 'real presence'.

Steiner's apparent disregard for the secondary reaches new proportions when he turns the discussion to music. He writes:

This question [as to whether anything meaningful can be said or written about music] does seem to me to imply not only fundamental speculations as to the limits of language; it takes us to the frontiers between conceptualization of a rational-logical sort and other modes of internal experience. More than any other act of intelligibility and executive form, music entails differentiation between *that which can be understood*, this is to say, paraphrased, and *that which can be thought and lived* in categories which are, rigorously considered, transcendent to such understanding.¹⁹

At a more radical level than any other art form, Steiner argues that the best of intelligence in music is musical; that the most exposed, engaged and responsible act of musical interpretation is performance.²⁰ To understand, critique and access the musical requires the musical. And it is music, rather than any commentary or critique on the same, which prompts Steiner's wager on the transcendent.

While Steiner argues for a 'politics' of the primary, by analogy he teaches us something about 'spirituality' of the primary; about a spirituality that is not so much understood as it is lived. His passion and praise for the mystery and transcendence of music supports our contention that music – especially as an experience of and analogue for the eternal now – is a most powerful metaphor for the spiritual journey. If only we would develop the necessary ear in the chest.

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NOTES

- 1 'The legends and myths of nearly all pagan peoples have sought to explain the elaborate use of music in their worship by indicating that the art of music was a gift of the gods to men': Johannes Quasten, *Music and worship in pagan and Christian antiquity*, trans Boniface Ramsey (Washington DC, 1983 [1973]), p 1.
- 2 Clement of Alexandria, *Protreptikos* I.6.5.
- 3 *Ibid.*, IX.88.2–3.
- 4 This concept is more thoroughly examined in my 'Toward a sound theology', *Ritual music: studies in liturgical musicology* (Beltsville MD, 1997), pp 107–126.
- 5 Susanne Langer, *Feeling and form* (New York, 1953), p 110.
- 6 Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a new key: a study in the symbolism of reason, rite and art*, 3rd edn (Cambridge, 1976), p 243.
- 7 John Booth Davies, *The psychology of music* (Stanford, 1978), p 49.
- 8 For an introduction to this facet of Plato's thought, see Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge and London, 1963).
- 9 Walter Ong, *The presence of the Word* (New Haven, 1967), p 163.
- 10 Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan, 'Acoustic space' in E. Carpenter and M. McLuhan (eds), *Explorations in communication* (Boston, 1960), p 67.
- 11 Jay Wilkey, 'Prolegomena to a theology of music', *Review and Expositor* 69 (1972), p 513.
- 12 Langer, *Feeling and form*, p 112.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp 109–10.
- 15 Ong, *Presence*, pp 111 and 128.
- 16 Rumi, *Night and sleep*, ed Coleman Barks and Robert Bly (Cambridge MA, 1981).
- 17 George Steiner, *Real presences* (Chicago, 1989), p 7.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p 4.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp 18–19.
- 20 As an illustration of this point Steiner relates the story about Robert Schumann who, when asked to explain a difficult *étude*, sat down and played it a second time: *Real presences*, p 20.