

The Accidental Theologian: A Response to Jeremy Begbie's *Theology, Music and Time*

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In the interest of playing with, or improvising upon the theme articulated by Jeremy Begbie in *Theology, Music and Time*, I propose the following question: If music is a useful tool for doing theology, as Begbie persuasively contends, then doesn't it naturally follow that those who participate in music—as composers, performers, even listeners—are on some level theologians? To improvise a tentative yes to the question—as I hope to do—is not to make the insupportable claim that all who study or learn to make music are students of theology, nor that all who listen to music are theologically motivated or discerning. But it is to suggest that those who make and receive music are implicated in a theological enterprise. Insofar as music does benefit theology and can serve to deepen our understanding of God, it does so only by being brought to life through those who play and those who listen. That is, music has an incarnational quality, a pure embodiment in the work of persons. And, those who embody musical ideas and bring them to life are, by necessity, servants of music's theological potential.

Some of the persons involved in the creation of music are and have been theologians in an explicit sense. Begbie, in describing the work of Tavener, demonstrates the composer's clear theological intentions: “. . . much of his work is concerned with an evocation of divine eternity (providing a ‘window on God’).” [Begbie, p. 136] Bach is another obvious example. He chose, explicitly, to give God the glory for all his glorious compositions, secular as well as sacred.¹ It might even be expected that theologians who are musicians would use music to advance their theological purposes. It is no surprise that the *Wittenberg Nachtigal*² was accused by his opponents of ruining

¹ For a discussion of Bach as theologian, see Jarislav Pelikan, *Bach Among the Theologians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986)

² Luther, a lutist and possessing of a strong tenor voice, was known as the Nightingale of Wittenberg.

more souls with his hymnody than with his preaching. Yet, those who make music theologically are clearly a small group. And those who participate in music as listeners are rarely theologians. (Theologians, as a rule, do tend to love music, but not one music lover in a thousand, I surmise, would wish to be called a theologian.) Most of those who participate in making music are, at most, accidental theologians. That is, they do their theological work without any intention of doing so, and usually without any knowledge of their having advanced an understanding of God or of benefiting any theological initiative.

The listener/reader will quickly note that those who make music are not (usually) in control of music's theological powers. They are simply participating in an event that, as Begbie makes clear, through its practice in time, has the capacity to help us grasp theological truths. They are not doing theology, merely making or listening to something that has the faculty, if carefully investigated, to bring clarity to theological concepts or to offer traces or parallels of God's activity in the world. Yet, they are indispensable to the theological work going on because they participate in an activity that cannot exist apart from their taking part in it.

Music is an embodied activity. It does not occur apart from its practice. A musical score is not music. It is merely the graphic representation of symbols that stand for the music. Brahms once refused an invitation to hear a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* quipping that he would sooner stay home and read it.³ His humor rings true only because we know that music actually exists in its being brought to sound. A score does not become music until a person performs it. In fact, it does not become music until someone plays or sings it *and* (arguably) it is heard, either by the performer or an audience of some sort. One can envision a musician executing the notation of a musical score on an electronic keyboard that has its sound turned off. Even here, though the graphic symbols of music are being executed manually, it is not music until it is heard. Without the

³ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hannover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), p. 5.

sound, a listener would not perceive music (except, perhaps, its rhythm heard as the percussive tapping of muted keys). What Eugene Lowry said of sermon manuscripts is true also for musical scores: “A sermon manuscript is the corpse of a sermon that once lived.” The point is that music relies upon embodiment, enfleshment, or incarnation. It takes one or more persons to perform the music; it takes one or more persons to hear it.

That a performer is necessary to make music is self-evident. But, the place of the hearer must not be overlooked. Even though listening to music is often a passive activity, it is one that is critical to music coming to life. Without the hearing, it does not exist; without the hearer, it cannot occur. A friend who suffers from serious hearing loss once took a group of deaf school children to a symphony concert presented just for them. The orchestra began to play; but for the children, there was no sound perception, and consequently, no music occurred to them. Then my friend gave each of the children an inflated balloon, a trick she had learned from her mother who had taken her to the symphony as a child. Now, when the orchestra played, smiles of surprise and recognition filled the young faces. They were, in a sense, hearing the music. In what sense? In the sense of touch, as the balloon became a surrogate eardrum and the fingertips, the cochlea. Music began to exist for them, not abstractly as the observance of people strangely sawing at and blowing on instruments. They perceived the music as sound when through their fingertips they “heard” it as sets of vibrations. Listeners, however passive, are critical to music’s reception, which is the indication of its creation.

Music exists as human activity. “The fundamental nature and meaning of music,” notes musicologist Christopher Small, “lie not in objects, not in musical works, but in action, in what people do.”⁴ And, what do these people do—the composers, performers, and listeners—in making music? They participate in all that the music has the capacity to do, including its theological work.

⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

An argument to the contrary lies close at hand. Clearly, the person that makes a hammer does not have to be a carpenter. The violin maker is not necessarily a musician. Similarly, it can be said that the persons involved in making music, whether composers, performers, or listeners are not theologians, even if their music has powers to give a theological account of God's activity.

In counterpoint, Small provides a useful observation. He defines the obscure verb usage of the word "music":

To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing. We might at times even extend its meaning to what the person is doing who takes the tickets at the door or the hefty men who shift the piano and the drums or the roadies who set up the instruments or carry out the sound checks. . . .⁵

Obviously, the piano movers are not musicians. Yet, by Small's definition, they are a key part of the music making, or what he calls "musicking." A musical concert would not happen as felicitously without them. Their work is accidental to the main work of playing and hearing music. But it is necessary work. The music proceeds as it is played and heard, once the piano has been placed in the proper position for optimal performance and hearing. And, insofar as the musicians and listeners create a musical experience, they are also creating a moment weighted with theological significance. According to Begbie's formula, a theologically astute percipient might hear not just music, but also, in its play of melodies in the fields of key, rhythms in the fields of meter, and the many layers of meter and hyper meter, echoes and reflections of God. [Begbie, p. 277] The musicians and listeners, to say nothing of the technicians and movers, are participants in a theologically profitable activity. As such, they become accidental theologians.⁶

⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶ To claim that musicians and participants in musical experiences are accidentally involved in theological work may appear frivolous. If so, it is a position happily held with another, more persuasive theologian, Karl Barth, who said: "Why is it possible to hold that Mozart has a place in theology, especially in the doctrine of creation and also in eschatology, although he was not a father of the Church, does not seem to have been a particularly active Christian, and was a Roman Catholic, apparently leading what might appear to be a rather frivolous existence when not occupied in his work? It is possible to give him this position because he knew something about creation in its total goodness that

One aspect of this theological contingency, to choose only one in this brief response, has to do with a theological idea already sounded: incarnation. A glance at the theology of preaching will provide a useful model.

A commonplace in the field of homiletics is the conviction that there is a quality of incarnation in the preaching of the Word of God. This takes place on two levels. First, the preacher is the present embodiment of a Word that was once spoken or written. If the written scriptures are blood turned into ink, to borrow a phrase from T. S. Eliot, then words preached upon those scriptures are ink turned back into blood.⁷ Whose blood? That of the preacher. In other words, the preacher becomes the embodiment, or re-incarnation of a Word that is either God's Word once recorded by living persons or the words of God incarnate in Christ. When the preacher speaks, it is God speaking, yet it is very much God's *human* speech.⁸ The second incarnational quality of preaching holds that Christ is personally present in the preached Word. Richard Lischer puts it plainly: "Insofar as preaching rearticulates the saving themes and offers the life of God in Christ, it is Jesus himself who is the preacher, blessing our sermons with his presence."⁹ Bonhoeffer puts it even more forcefully:

The proclaimed word is the incarnate Christ himself. As little as the Incarnation is the outward shape of God, just so little does the proclaimed word present the outward form of a reality; rather, it is the thing itself. The preached Christ is both the Historical One and the Present One . . . the proclaimed word is the Christ himself walking through his congregation as the Word.¹⁰

neither the real fathers of the Church nor our Reformers, neither the orthodox nor the Liberals, neither the exponents of natural theology nor those heavily armed with the "Word of God," and certainly not the Existentialist, nor indeed any other great musicians before and after him, either know or can express and maintain as he did." *Church Dogmatics, 3.3 The Doctrine of Creation*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), p. 298.

⁷ Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), p. 63.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁹ Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel* (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1992), p. 91.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Proclaimed Word," in *Theories of Preaching*, ed. Richard Lischer (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1987), p. 28.

These echoes of God's incarnation through Christ in the word preached and in the person of the preacher point us toward an intriguing parallel in music, if a tantalizing bit of conjecture can be proven true. In his concluding comments, Begbie plays on his own theme, asking:

How appropriate or useful is it to characterize what we have highlighted in music as *vestigia Dei*—‘traces’, ‘reflections’, ‘echoes’, or ‘parallels’ of God? Can music praise God so directly that we may speak of *integral* connections between God and musical phenomena? [Begbie, p. 277]

Luther called music a “handmaid to the gospel.” Could it be more? Could it be that music is an essential and elemental form of praise, that there is a quality in music that is intrinsically connected to creation and the Creator? It is not hard to imagine the singing of a bird to be the creature's song of gratitude for life. Every sound the bird makes is part of its genetic programming and reflective of the Creator's intent. A bird has no capacity for cursing (the sound of the Blue Jay notwithstanding) and cannot speak against God in any way. It can only voice the praise that God gives it to sing. The imagination of the 17th century mystic, Johannes Scheffler, ran in the same direction: “Naught exists without voice: God hears always in all created things his echo and his praise.”¹¹ Might this somehow parallel the genetic properties of music made by humans? Might not all music, from the simple humming of a child to the complex patterns of sound and meter in a symphony, be an elemental form of praise. Elsewhere, Begbie offers that “through intimate interaction with us, [God] frees us to ‘sound’ as we were created to sound.”¹² Might it not be the case, as it is with preaching, that the when humans sound through music, there is a present echo of God? In this book, Begbie seems to hope that this hypothesis would hold: “. . . on theological grounds, it would be quite wrong to preclude the possibility *a priori* of such connections, and, indeed, somewhat bizarre to do so, especially in light of what we have found in this book.”¹³ [Begbie, p. 277].

¹¹ As quoted in Albert L. Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999.), p.11.

¹² Jeremy Begbie, ed., *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), p. 146.

¹³ Begbie is not alone in this hope. Standing in a line that begins with Simone Weil and runs through George Steiner,

If it were so, a number of stimulating questions spring to mind: If the quality of praise is engineered into music's atomic structure, then does it function as praise even in secular use? This would explain, perhaps, Bach's understanding that even his secular works were created *in soli Deo gloria*. It might also account for the capacity of Mozart's music to enable Barth to know his theology more deeply. [Begbie, pp. 95-96] Other questions arise: Can music that does not honor God, at the same time praise God? Can there be waves and hyper-waves of meaning in music and can their meanings be contradictory? Can music, if it is an elemental form of "voicing creation's praise,"¹⁴ redeem layers of meaning that are contradictory to its basic laudatory purpose?

While these are intriguing questions, one thing appears clear. If there is some elemental quality in music that can "praise God so directly" that we may speak of that integral connection between God and music, then any persons involved in the making of a musical experience or the fulfilling of it through listening are no longer merely accidental theologians. Like preachers, they are participants in an activity that dynamically draws upon God's presence and, further, they are, in their musicking, embodied agents, or incarnations of a divine gift. What God has people say, we readily call the Word of God. What God has people sing: we might call that the Music of God. Whenever it sounds, are we not with the floods and the hills and all of creation, singing together at the presence of the Lord? [Psalm 98:8-9]

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Albert L. Blackwell speaks of music as having a sacramental quality, by which he means music is a medium of "contemplation and self-communication of the divine." See Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music*, pp. 25ff. In a similar vein, Graham Hughes wonders whether music is "a form of 'grasping' lying deeper and more primitively than the kinds of meaning-making and meaning-appropriation we ordinarily identify, practically exclusively, with language." *Worship as Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 111.

¹⁴ The phrase borrows from the title and theme of Jeremy Begbie's previous work exploring the ways in which Christian theology can throw light on the practice of making art: *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts*, (London: T&T Clark: 1991).