This fascinating volume draws together contributions from a wide range of theologians and practicing musicians to consider the ways that theology and belief can interact with the practice and appreciation of music, to mutually invigorating effect. It is an impressive and exciting achievement and I am sure it will be read eagerly by all those for whom music can illuminate the sacred.

—Dr. Jeremy Thurlow, University of Cambridge

Our contemporary culture is communicating ever-increasingly through the visual, through film, and through music. This makes it ever more urgent for theologians to explore the resources of art for enriching our understanding and experience of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Annunciations: Sacred Music for the Twenty-First Century, edited by George Corbett, answers this need, evaluating the relationship between the sacred and the composition, performance, and appreciation of music.

Through the theme of ‘announcements’, this volume interrogates how, when, why, through and to whom God communicates in the Old and New Testaments. In doing so, it tackles the intimate relationship between scriptural reflection and musical practice in the past, its present condition, and what the future might hold.

Annunciations comprises three parts. Part I sets out flexible theological and compositional frameworks for a constructive relationship between the sacred and music. Part II presents the reflections of theologians and composers involved in collaborating on new pieces of sacred choral music, alongside the six new scores and links to the recordings. Part III considers the reality of programming and performing sacred works today.

This volume provides an indispensable resource for scholars and artists working at the interface between theology and the arts, and for those involved in sacred music. However, it will also be of interest to anyone concerned with the ways in which the divine communicates through word and artistry to humanity.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher’s website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com

Cover image: Don Simone Camaldolese. Frontispiece from a Choir Book, ca. 1390. Ink on vellum, 59.4 x 44.8 cm. (irregular left edge). Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn Museum Collection, X1015. Cover design: Anna Gatti.
1. The Most Spiritual of the Arts: 
Music, Modernity, 
and the Search for the Sacred

James MacMillan

My contribution to this volume is based on my work with students at the University of St Andrews, and on my observations of, and reactions to, the TheoArtistry Composers’ Scheme and Festival which brought theologians and composers together. As a composer with an interest in the theological reflections which underpin much of what I do, I try to account for this art form, which many, religious and non-religious alike, will refer to as ‘the most spiritual of the arts’. I argue that the search for the sacred did not end with modernity in music and that, if anything, it has grown and become more complex. I think some people regret asking me if it feels odd and lonely being a religious composer. This may be because I have a long answer for them, much of which considers other contemporary religious composers, like Arvo Pärt, John Tavener and Jonathan Harvey. But the story of twentieth, and now twenty-first century music, is the complicated and sometimes bewildering re-engagement of composers with metaphysical, spiritual and religious insights. Roger Scruton, in *Death-Devoted Heart*, claims that this outcome could be imputed to Richard Wagner and, in particular, *Tristan and Isolde*. But music, though it may be, at times, the most abstract art form, does not come about in a vacuum. The other arts — specifically poetry — offer parallel lines of engagement.


2 An earlier version of my reflections was first published by Standpoint Magazine in July/August 2016. I would like to thank Standpoint Magazine for permission to republish some of this material here.

There are certain words associated in the public mind with modernism in the arts and, particularly, music. Modern music can sound wild and even savage. Like much else in the modern arts, contemporary music can open a door to the dark side of human nature and our thoughts, fears and experiences. Yet, it is also modern music that sparkles and bedazzles as generations of composers fall in love with new, bright instrumental colours and the experimental vividness of orchestration. And, in spite of the retreat of faith in Western society, composers over the last century or so have never given up on their search for the sacred. From Edward Elgar to Olivier Messiaen, or from Igor Stravinsky to Alfred Schnittke, one hears talk of transcendence and mystery.

Visionary mysticism, in particular, is currently in vogue in discussions about the arts. ‘Spirituality’ is held to be a positive factor by many, especially among the non-religious, or those who pride themselves on their unorthodoxy in religious matters. Music is described as the most spiritual art by those who proclaim their atheism and agnosticism. The word spirituality is used by many, covering everything from yoga and meditation to dabbling in religious exotica. For example, William Blake’s visionary mysticism has become popular again in our own time. Its private mythology, narcissistic religion and gesture politics chime with the mishmash of sexual libertarianism and virtue-signalling at the heart of contemporary liberal culture. His work presaged our ‘New Age’. Still, Carl G. Jung described Blake as having ‘compiled a lot of half or undigested knowledge in his fantasies’. In the face of his popularity, it might be this flaw that has alarmed the wariness of others. It is worth exploring the scepticism that surrounds Blake and his influence, among perhaps more clearheaded and analytical artists, going right back to G. K. Chesterton and T. S. Eliot.

Chesterton regarded Blake as a mystic but, in his book, William Blake, he gives an account of why he thinks mystics go off-base — especially mystics of the modern world who seek to separate themselves from any traditional experience of visionary mysticism springing from Judeo-Christianity. Chesterton suggests that this rudderlessness distinguishes them from the fundamental values of genuine mysticism. Blake trusted and followed no tradition; he invented his own unseen world, leading in timeless gnostic fashion to obscurity and mystification. Blake’s mysteriousness, in the negative sense, prompted Chesterton to define a true hallmark of true visionary mysticism — that it illuminates rather than obscures:

A verbal accident has confused the mystical with the mysterious. Mysticism is generally felt vaguely to be itself vague — a thing of clouds and curtains, of darkness or concealing vapours, of bewildering conspiracies or impenetrable symbols. Some quacks have indeed dealt in such things: but no true mystic ever loved darkness rather than light. No pure mystic ever loved mere mystery. The mystic does not bring doubts or riddles: the
doubts and riddles exist already. [...] The man whose meaning remains mysterious fails, I think, as a mystic: and Blake [...] often fail[ed] in this way.7

Poets too have noticed the broader implications of modern mysticism in the literary arts. I have collaborated especially closely with the poet Michael Symmons Roberts. He highlights Seamus Heaney’s reference to ‘the big lightening, the emptying out’ of religious language, and David Jones’s vision of the English language ‘littered with dying signs and symbols, specifically the signs and symbols associated with our Judeo-Christian past’.8 Symmons Roberts suggests that ‘the resultant impoverishment hasn’t just affected poets, but readers too, and this has been borne out by the now common struggles of English teachers in schools and universities to provide the biblical and historical literacy necessary to make sense of John Milton, John Donne, George Herbert, Eliot, and others’.9

Symmons Roberts argues that this ‘emptying out’ of religious language was the result of what might be described as ‘The Enlightenment Project’, which, for some of those involved, was ‘meant to see off religion’.10 However, this has not happened. Symmons Roberts notes that ‘many sociologists argue that it is secularism that is in retreat. Worldwide, the case is clear-cut. Christianity and Islam are growing very rapidly throughout the developing world, and a recent report placed the numbers of atheists worldwide at three per cent and falling’.11 Yet this is, nonetheless, a powerful and well-heeled three per cent wielding clout over matters political, economic and cultural.

In Post-Secular Philosophy, Phillip Blond argues that ‘secular minds are only now beginning to perceive that all is not as it should be; what was promised to them — self-liberation through the limitation of the world to human faculties — might after all be a form of self-mutilation’.12 To this, Symmons Roberts adds:

The myth of the uncommitted artist (free-spirited and unshackled from the burdens of political, religious, or personal commitment) was always an empty one. To be alive in the world is to have beliefs and commitments, and these extend at some level to politics and theology. But this myth has left us with a terror of the imagination in thrall to a belief. Surely this could limit the scope of the work, may even reduce it to a thin preconceived outworking of doctrine or argument? Yet this fear was always unfounded. The counter-examples are obvious, including great twentieth-century innovators such as Eliot, Jones, Auden, Moore, Berryman, and Bunting. [...] And there’s an equivalent list in the

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7 Ibid., pp. 131–32.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
other arts too (music’s list would include Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Messiaen, Poulenc, Gubaidulina, Schnittke, Penderecki). The relationship between creative freedom and religious belief is far from limiting.\(^\text{13}\)

I believe most of these writers and composers would argue that their religious faith was an imaginative liberation. Some, like Jones, have affirmed that this withering of religious faith and the resulting negative reduction of imaginative liberation represents a parching of our culture — a parching of truth and meaning, a drying up of historical associations and resonances leading to an inability for our culture to hold up ‘valid signs’.\(^\text{14}\)

The opposite of Jones’s ‘valid signs’ would have to be ‘invalid signs’. There is evidence that Eliot saw manifestations of these in what he perceived as the faulty, incoherent vision of Blake and his gnostic, romanticized heritage and legacy. As Symmons Roberts notes, Eliot disapproved of Blake’s rejection of tradition, considering his obsession with inventing a religious worldview a distraction from the vocation of writing original poetry.\(^\text{15}\) Eliot saw a strong framework as the means of avoiding the parching of the poetic flow, and as a structural conduit to a fuller and truer vision:

[...] about Blake’s supernatural territories [...] we cannot help commenting on a certain meanness of culture. They illustrate the crankiness, the eccentricity, which frequently affects writers outside of the Latin traditions [...]. And they are not essential to Blake’s inspiration.

Blake was endowed with a capacity for considerable understanding of human nature, with a remarkable and original sense of language and the music of language, and a gift of hallucinated vision. Had these been controlled by a respect for impersonal reason, for common sense, for the objectivity of science, it would have been better for him. What his genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own, and concentrated his attention upon the problems of the poet. Confusion of thought,

\(^{13}\) Symmons Roberts, ‘Contemporary Poetry’, p. 699. See also Michael Symmons Roberts, ‘Freeing the Waters: Poetry in a Parched Culture’, in Necessary Steps: Poetry, Elegy, Walking, Spirit, ed. by David Kennedy (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2007), pp. 124–31 (pp. 128–29): ‘There’s a popular view, influenced by Romanticism, that only the pure, unfettered imagination can produce the great work. Poets should not be religious, or overtly political, or committed to anything much outside the poetry. Poets should be freewheeling, free-thinking free spirits. As if that meant anything.’

\(^{14}\) See David Jones, ‘Preface’ to The Anathemata (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), p. 15: ‘The artist deals wholly in signs. His signs must be valid, that is valid for him and, normally, for the culture that has made him. But there is a time factor affecting these signs. If a requisite now-ness is not present, the sign, valid in itself, is apt to suffer a kind of invalidation.’ See also Symmons Roberts, ‘Freeing the Waters’, pp. 125–26: ‘If the language of poetry has become parched in our culture, parched of truth or meaning beyond the poem itself, parched of historical associations and resonances, parched of its potential to hold up, as David Jones would see it, “valid signs”, then this is a particular crisis for religious poetry.’

emotion, and vision is what we find in such a work as Also Sprach Zarathustra [...]. The concentration resulting from a framework of mythology and theology and philosophy is one of the reasons why Dante is a classic, and Blake only a poet of genius. The fault is perhaps not with Blake himself, but with the environment which failed to provide what such a poet needed.\textsuperscript{16}

It is to this question of environment that we should now turn, because the very things disparaged by Eliot are held in highest regard by our own culture. The framework of theology and tradition held to be an essential grounding for Eliot is the focus of disdain and rejection according to our contemporary prejudices.

Let us take Elgar as an example. As John Butt writes, ‘Elgar’s Catholic upbringing tends to be underplayed in most writings on the composer, but it may nevertheless be one of the most significant sources of his compositional character’.\textsuperscript{17} Since The Dream of Gerontius, commentators have fallen over themselves in an attempt to portray Elgar’s Catholic faith as weak or insignificant. Charles McGuire notes that even his biographer, Jerrold Moore, follows the same tendency: ‘It is therefore perhaps inevitable’, Moore affirms, ‘that, when he produced The Dream of Gerontius, a setting of a poem by a Roman Catholic Cardinal which explores various tenets of the Catholic faith, people should jump to the conclusion that his Catholicism underlay his whole life. But his faith was never that strong’.\textsuperscript{18} McGuire explains this cultural anxiety about Elgar’s Catholicism: ‘The popular negating of Elgar’s Catholicism both at his death and today serves an obvious end: it makes Elgar’s music safer, more palatable for a British audience. In essence, it creates an avatar for Elgar as the “essentially English composer” beyond the reach of any of the complicating factors of partisan religion.’\textsuperscript{19} However, as Stephen Hough argues:

When he decided in 1899 to set Cardinal Newman’s The Dream of Gerontius’ to music, he was taking an enormous risk. It was his first major commission, and his career was all set to take off. So to choose this deeply Catholic text in a country where ‘Papists’ were a suspicious, despised and even ridiculed minority was to court disaster. Yet he went ahead, with total disregard for any possible censure or disfavour. So it’s hard to believe that the words had no religious meaning for him at the time, especially as he was aware that his faith was an impediment to his career.\textsuperscript{20}

If it is true that The Dream of Gerontius is the composer’s masterwork, and a work of extraordinary vision, then it was a vision burnished with courage — foolhardiness

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\item Eliot, ‘Blake’, pp. 142–43.
\item Ibid.
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even — and gained singularly through a particularly defined religious tradition and sensibility. This was the kind of framework regarded as vital and necessary by Eliot when he outlined the conditions required for outstanding visionary art and which had so eluded, or had been so self-consciously rejected by lesser seers like Blake and his romantic self-delusionists.

Elgar was to suffer for his courageous vision as performances of The Dream of Gerontius were banned as ‘inappropriate’ in Gloucester Cathedral for a decade after the premiere, and performances in Hereford and Worcester were only permitted with large sections bowdlerized, with much of the objectionable Catholic dimension removed.\(^\text{21}\) This vehement reaction may have impacted greatly on the composer, even to the extent of him gradually losing his faith over the rest of his life. He may also have been seduced by the fame and praise which he found in the wake of his more secular instrumental works, which turned him into a national treasure. Indeed, he was to become Britain’s official composer, being made a baronet, awarded the Order of Merit and appointed as Master of the King’s Music. Proclaimed as ‘quintessentially English’, he became a totem of nationalism. Enjoying all that, why go back to the depredations of Catholic martyrdom?

Yet it was from this religion of martyrs and saints that Elgar drew the freedom to visualize a work of greatness. This is perhaps counterintuitive, since the etymology of religio implies a kind of binding. Symmons Roberts cites Jones’s essay ‘Art and Sacrament’:

> The same root is in ‘ligament’, a binding which supports an organ and assures that organ its freedom of use as part of a body. And it is in this sense that I here use the word ‘religious’. It refers to a binding, a securing. Like the ligament, it secures a freedom to function. The binding makes possible the freedom. Cut the ligament and there is atrophy — corpse rather than corpus. If this is true, then the word religion makes no sense unless we presuppose a freedom of some sort.\(^\text{22}\)

This implies, as Symmons Roberts notes, that the visionary requires religion and theology: ‘So perhaps to “free the waters” and help slake the thirst of a parched culture, poets and other artists need religion, need a theology. Now there’s an unfashionable idea’.\(^\text{23}\) An interesting and challenging idea indeed! How would that go down in today’s citadels of metropolitan bien pensant culture? As Symmons Roberts continues, ‘if David Jones is right, then that image of the free-spirited artist is, and always has been, an illusion. Freedom is not absence. The binding makes possible the freedom’.\(^\text{24}\)

Indeed, major modernist composers of the last hundred years were, in different ways, profoundly religious men and women. Stravinsky was as conservative in his

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\(^{23}\) Symmons Roberts, ‘Freeing the Waters’, p. 128.

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Religion as he was revolutionary in his musical imagination, with a deep love of his Orthodox roots as well as the Catholicism he encountered in the West. He set the psalms, he set the Mass; he was a man of faith. Schoenberg, that other great polar figure of early twentieth-century modernism, was a mystic who reconverted to Judaism after he left Germany in the 1930s. His later work is infused with Jewish culture and theology, and he pondered deeply on the spiritual connections between music and silence. It is no surprise that John Cage chose to study with him. Cage found his own route to the sacred through the ideas, and indeed the religions, of the Far East. It is intriguing that his famous, or indeed notorious 4’33’ (that is four minutes, 33 seconds of silence), a profound provocation to our listening culture and sensibilities or lack of them, can be traced back to ideas for a piece originally entitled Silent Prayer.²⁵

The great French innovator and individualist, Messiaen, was famously Catholic, and every note of his unique contribution to music was shaped by a deep religious conviction and liturgical practice. Messiaen was a powerful influence on Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen (major figures of the post-war avant-garde) and therefore can be counted as one of the most impactful composers of modern times. Far from being an impediment to this, his Catholicism was the major factor behind it. Messiaen wrote one opera — *St Francis of Assisi* — but the most important French Catholic opera of the twentieth century was written by Francis Poulenc. His *Dialogues des Carmélites* appeared in 1956. Based on a true story from the beginnings of modern revolutionary violence — of sixteen Carmelite nuns guillotined in the terror of the French Revolution — it was an act of defiance on the part of the composer against the secular terror of that time and the secular orthodoxies of the modern world.²⁶ For a culture that had supposedly transcended such religious themes, the popularity of *Dialogues des Carmélites* is remarkable; it is probably the most successful modern opera of the last sixty years. As Mark Bosco argues: ‘No other opera combines twentieth-century musical sensibilities with such profound theological themes on Catholic mysticism, martyrdom, and redemption’.²⁷ However, it is not just another avenue on the search for the sacred but a bold rebuttal of secular arrogances and certainties, and a beautiful proclamation of Catholic truths. Here, as Bosco highlights, ‘traditional Catholicism becomes[s] intellectually compatible with all that was modern and progressive in French culture in the early part of the twentieth century’.²⁸ Poulenc’s opera is ‘at once a Catholic story of heroism and faith and yet speaks to the modern world, an opera for the post-war period of Europe in the 1950s and one resonant with our contemporary struggle with Christian faith and martyrdom’.²⁹

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²⁵ See James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 59: “‘Silent Prayer,’ as it was thus described in 1948, is clearly the first glimmer of an idea that, four years later, would become 4’ 33’; while ‘Silent Prayer’ is not 4’ 33’ itself, it is its ancestor.”


²⁸ Bosco, p. 19.

There is a substantial list of composers in recent times whose work radiates profound religious resonance, covering a whole generation of post-Shostakovich modernists from behind the old Iron Curtain: Henryk Gorecki from Poland; Pärt from Estonia; Giya Kancheli from Georgia; Valentyn Silvestrov from Ukraine; Schnittke, Sofia Gubaidulina and Galina Ustvolskaya, all from Russia; again, figures who stood out and against the prevailing dead-hand orthodoxy of the day: state atheism. And, in Great Britain, after Benjamin Britten have come Harvey, Tavener and many others. Far from being a spent force, religion has proved to be a vibrant, animating principle in modern music and continues to promise much for the future. It could even be said that any discussion of modernity’s mainstream in music would be incomplete without a serious reflection on the spiritual values, belief and practice at work in composers’ minds.

But do these cultural ‘spats’ between the outlooks of Eliot and Blake, between Chesterton and the New Age, between orthodoxy and majoritarian scepticism, tussle with different types of transcendence? The search for spirituality seems ubiquitous these days. But in what sense can we call a spirituality made in our own image, to suit our own comforts, to fit our own schedules and agendas, transcendent of anything? Sometimes transcendence has to be fought for, as when Messiaen’s music encounters the baffled sners of its secular, super-rationalist modernist audience and critics, who are eventually won round and see the full glory of the composer’s genius, and realize the music is the way it is, precisely because of its theology. When Elgar composed *The Dream of Gerontius*, he knew it would be met with immediate hostility and animosity. But in this work, he seemed to be preparing for the inevitable; he had to face up to an unavoidable spiritual challenge, which, for him, involved rejection and ridicule. The cleansing flames of public disapprobation, he would no doubt maintain, orientated him towards the cleansing flames of Purgatory itself, the very subject of the Newman poem he set. When people say they are baffled by what *The Dream of Gerontius* is all about, but are profoundly moved by the music, the transcendence, the revelation and the understanding has already begun in their souls.

The search for the sacred, therefore, seems as strong today in music as it ever was. Perhaps that search now — as it was with Elgar’s *The Dream of Gerontius*; as it was with the theological rootedness of Messiaen’s masterworks; as it was in Poulenc’s glorious celebration of the mercy, sacrifice and redemption at the heart of Catholic teaching; as it was for any artist who has stood out and against the transient fashions and banalities of the cultural *bien pensant* — is the bravest, most radical and counter-cultural vision a creative person can have, in the attempt to re-sacralize the world around us.