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 'annunciations', 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.
7.2. Composer’s Reflections

Anselm McDonnell

The British composer, Harrison Birtwistle, compared his compositional process to an outdoor stroll: there is a general destination, but the walker may linger along the path — caught by the sight of a gnarled tree here, an intriguing tunnel there, or the dappled sunlight reaching through a net of leaves.¹ My own artistic endeavours often mirror this approach. Once a destination is set, the journey itself may unfold in a myriad of ways. Musically, I have an aversion to lingering, so perhaps a more apt comparison is a walk that bristles with energy and exploration: a chord or motivic fragment may seize my imagination briefly until it is cast by the wayside as my curiosity wanes and I find something else to tinker with.

Taking such a walk with someone else — as in interdisciplinary collaboration — risks the possibility that one disciplinary approach may hinder or obstruct the other, or one inflexible vision may dominate the direction and progress. Any concerns that I had as a composer about being given a task that was overly prescriptive were quickly put to rest after my first meeting with Margaret McKerron. McKerron presented themes and information regarding our Gen 3 passage to see what provoked inspiration. I had a pre-conceived notion that, once the theological groundwork had been done, I would take that information and use it as an extra-musical starting point; however, in practice the interaction between the activities of theological and musical thought became inseparably intertwined. To hijack Birtwistle’s analogy, rather than theology sending music out for a walk while it remained in the armchair with its feet up, both set out to explore together (although it is inevitable that at some point theology will reprimand music for having left the map at home).

¹ In conversation with Ryan Wigglesworth, Birtwistle alludes to artist Paul Klee’s practise of ‘taking a line for a walk’. While specifically related to Birtwistle’s use of monody, he also uses this language to describe compositional exploration. Interview with Birtwistle, 12/07/11, NMC Recordings, https://www.nmcrec.co.uk/recording/nights-black-bird

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This collaborative attitude was vital not only for the conception of the initial ideas, but also for the project’s development as the piece began to take shape. On several occasions, the work took unanticipated twists and turns, highlighting nuances to our themes we had not noticed. This experience caused me to reflect with more self-awareness on the nature of art as ‘a vehicle of discovery’. Frequently, this revelatory aspect takes the form of self-discovery. As W. B. Yeats observes, ‘Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry’. Collaboration, therefore, is not an invitation to produce rhetoric, but to enter the inner world of quarrelling that takes place within the artist. This invitation contributes to making collaboration more daunting, for it requires a self-exposure of truths and intentions in our art that we often avoid verbalising. To add theology creates a potent mix, for the self-discovery of sinful man in the light of God’s holy character is an uncomfortable experience.

The text of Gen 3 picks up on these very themes with Adam and Eve’s discovery of their own nakedness, both physically and spiritually, before God. They attempt to hide themselves, first by physical concealment and then by blame-shifting. Initially, after my discussions with McKerron at the TheoArtistry Symposium (November 2016), I had been taken with the idea of Adam and Eve avoiding blame, and implicitly rebuking God. I began sketching out a piece that would contain active polyphonic textures between combating male and female voices. After a frustrating week, I jettisoned both the musical material and the theological theme; I asked McKerron if we could start afresh. Calming my concerns about what seemed to me a wasted week, McKerron suggested that we approach the passage by focusing on a more general concern that both of us had noted at the symposium. McKerron’s research showed the chiastic structure of the Hebrew prose running from Gen 2.4 to the end of Gen 3. The chiasm draws the reader’s attention not to Adam and Eve’s sin or punishment, but rather to the surprising grace God shows to his disobedient creation — a grace that crystallizes in his merciful and gentle invitation to them to approach him and confess.

I was struck by this theme of grace, especially when McKerron pointed out that commentaries (and works of art inspired by Gen 3) tend to neglect this aspect, instead focusing on temptation and judgement. Musical structure that derives its architecture from literary models is, moreover, a compositional interest of mine. I had already experimented, for example, with using parallelism in the Psalms as source material. There, the returning in parallelism was used to elicit the sense of eternal truth contained within a finite structure (in defiance of the notion that both music and poetry are bound to a temporal plane). With the importance of these themes highlighted, McKerron and I produced a text based on the questions God asks in the garden and framed them in a chiastic structure.

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The resulting text has a strong typological element to it, using the object of the tree as a locus. The inclusion of typology seemed fitting as it is, arguably, a clear instance where artistic and theological concerns aligned. The idea of motivic seeds and organic growth found in the musical concept of Jean Sibelius’ profound logic, or the developing variation of Arnold Schoenberg, is very reminiscent of the hermeneutical categories of type, anti-type and recurrence throughout the biblical narrative. McKerron did some research finding typological links that could be drawn out between the ‘Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil’, the tree of the cross, and the tree of life in Rev 22. After some deliberation, we decided to focus solely on the link between the trees of Eden and Golgotha. This had more dramatic potential and would be clearer than adding in too many references to the mix.

One area which we had not yet addressed was the theme of annunciation. Elements integral to other annunciations are missing from the Gen 3 text, such as God’s repeated calling of a particular person or the response ‘Hinneni’, which means ‘Here I am’ in Hebrew (e.g. ‘Moses, Moses’ and ‘Here I am’, Exod 3.4). It was, however, possible to work a more explicit allusion to annunciation language into the text: Adam, Eve and God are named repeatedly, and the response ‘Hinneni’ plays a key role in the narrative.

I had begun composing at this stage, starting off with the central elements of the piece and working outwards so the chiastic structure would be an integral part of the composition. I reflected on the questions that God asks Adam and Eve, realizing that there was an opportunity for role reversal: the questions could be repeated, but their direction changed. Such an approach would fit well with the chiastic structure and typological associations I wanted to impress. In the first half of the piece, God asks Adam and Eve, ‘Where are you? Who told you, you were naked?’ and, ‘Have you eaten from the tree? What is this you have done?’ Musically, these questions are represented by falling musical motifs, as the divine descends to the earthly. Then, the roles are reversed with the revelation of ‘the second Adam’ on the cross. Adam and Eve now ask God with rising musical lines, ‘For whom are you naked? What is this you have done? Where are you?’.

God’s annunciation to man is placed parallel to man’s search for the only one who can grant forgiveness. The repeated ‘Hinneni’ provide an emotional barometer of the narrative: the listener is taken from Adam and Eve’s initial reluctance to emerge from hiding to the final, comforting ‘Hinneni’ as God answers the searching sinners. He is not aloof or far off, but on the cross: paying for their sins and welcoming them with grace and forgiveness.

Using ‘Hinneni’ as an identifying marker in my piece, I wanted to integrate a further cohesion with the Hebrew prose of Gen 3. McKerron found one biblical commentator who emphasized that the verse narrating Adam and Eve’s disobedience is challenging to pronounce in Hebrew (Gen 3.6). Madhavi Nevader, who was consulted on Hebrew textual issues, pointed out that the description of Adam and Eve’s sin is staccato and phonologically percussive, characterized by the repetitive ‘va’ consonant. I decided to exploit the aural effect of the Hebrew syllables by creating three susurrating backgrounds to various sections of the text. At a basic level, these sounds could be taken to represent
the hushed rustling of leaves and wind in the garden that form the soundscape for the encounter between man and God, or Adam and Eve’s desire to conceal and cover up. However, this technique serves a deeper, dual purpose. The first was to re-introduce the blaming concept that I had initially abandoned. The first Hebrew phrase, vocalized by the men, is an accusatory denunciation of Eve’s role in the sin: ‘she took of its fruit and ate.’ The second phrase, whispered by the sopranos and altos, is a responding condemnation of Adam: ‘and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.’ Mankind’s imprecations, however, fall silent in the face of Christ’s sacrifice: the third phrase (‘then the eyes of both were opened’) is uttered not as a realization of sin but as a recognition of the grace that has paid the price.4

The second purpose of these backdrops is the subtler intention of layering, based upon the chiaroscuro oil-painting technique of Renaissance painters such as Caravaggio. Strong tonal contrasts of light and dark are used to create dramatic and three-dimensional effects. Here, the canvas is painted entirely dark and then light is gradually worked up in layers to create a focal point. The heart of the concept is that the eye is always drawn to a light that has overcome darkness. The unpitched, hissing accusations of rebellion are overcome by the powerful redemption and justification achieved by grace. This technique is known to theology. In Ephesians, when Paul describes the state of the Christian, he begins with a dark description of their previous ignorance of Christ (‘and you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked’) and progresses to the contrasting light (‘But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved’).5 In my choral work ‘Hinneni’, grace is all the brighter because it takes place over and against a backdrop of murmured and hidden sin.

Composing this piece was an enjoyable learning curve, both as my first experience of this kind of collaboration and as a project with explicit intention to explore theology and the arts. Although already an area of interest for me, the interactions and ideas of the staff of ITIA (the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts), James MacMillan and especially my theological guide, McKerron, have greatly increased my appreciation and understanding of what it means to produce art as a Christian. I am very grateful to have been introduced to so many artists and theologians in whom I have found a similar concern for the place of contemporary Christian art. Perhaps the annunciation to Isaiah provides a fitting summary for the Christian of any discipline: ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ ‘Hinneni, send me.’

4  All biblical quotations in this chapter are taken from the ESV translation, unless otherwise noted.
5  Ephesians 2.1-5.