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.
9.1. Setting Fire to Music: Theological and Aesthetic Approaches (Exodus 3)

Rebekah Dyer

When the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts (ITIA) circulated a call for theologians to participate in a new collaborative initiative with composers, I could not resist the prospect of a ‘TheoArtistic’ approach to the burning bush of Exodus [Exod] 3. The self-revelation of God through fire represents a particular area of interest in my research, which explores the multifaceted interpretations of fire in biblical and contemporary experience. The dramatic first encounter between God and Moses never stopped flickering away in the back of my mind during the period of my doctoral research.¹ The TheoArtistry Theologian-Composer Partnerships invited me to consider the passage anew: to open up my own imagination to fresh insights and interpretative possibilities of Exod 3. Firstly, this chapter outlines the context of Moses’ encounter with God in the burning bush, before offering some reflections on the challenges of representing the burning bush in music, and the method that emerged as a result. I discuss how drawing upon experiential ‘ways of knowing’ helped forge a more integrative approach, shaping the collaboration as a whole and opening up new creative and theological possibilities.² I then examine how composer Kerensa Briggs — my TheoArtistry partner — characterizes God and Moses in her choral piece to create and explore theological meaning. Finally, this chapter concludes with suggestions as to how experiential approaches to the text might be cultivated in future artistic responses to Exod 3.

I. Finding God in the Flames

Both narratively and theologically, the burning bush constitutes much more than a single miraculous incident in the wilderness. It is but one of many wonders told in the book of Exodus, which is an account of human conflict, treachery, divine judgement, salvation, and survival. At this point in the biblical narrative, the Hebrew people are enduring forced labour in Egypt. The days of their forefathers, whose lives were shaped by God, seem to be long past. Nothing short of divine intervention will bring them relief from this oppression; yet God seems ignorant of their suffering. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob appear to have been forgotten by the deity, while their Egyptian slave-masters mark even infants for death. Into the bleakness of Hebrew captivity, Moses is born. Saved from death by the courage of two Hebrew midwives, and a second time by the ingenuity of his mother, the infant Moses is found and adopted by the Pharaoh’s daughter. He is raised in the safety and luxury of the royal household. Yet, confronted by the oppression of his kinsfolk as an adult, Moses perpetrates the murder of an Egyptian slave-master. Fearing for his life, Moses flees to Midian. He settles among a foreign tribe, marries Zipporah, and earns his keep by tending to his father-in-law’s flock.

When Moses stumbles upon an inexplicable fire in the wilderness, he courts death yet again. To be so near a deity is to risk being struck down by divine power; but, like the burning bush, Moses is not consumed. Instead, God speaks from the flames. Moses is called by name and charged with leading the Hebrews out of captivity. What follows is a conversation — or a negotiation — in which Moses hesitantly accepts his role in the redemption of his people. He is a fugitive, an exile, a criminal. How will his testimony of a strange deity in the desert possibly convince the king of Egypt? And how can he speak on behalf of the Hebrews when he once lived as an Egyptian royal, complicit in their oppression? Yet God bestows authority upon Moses as a divinely-appointed envoy to the Pharaoh. Moses asks for the name of the one who sends him. ‘I am that I am,’ God responds. Then, for the first time in the biblical narrative, God discloses the divine name, Yahweh (YHWH). This is a cosmic moment of intimacy at the edge of the wilderness. The personal and geographical isolation of Moses from other human beings only heightens the immediacy of his encounter with the divine. In the burning bush, God seems so overwhelmingly present — and yet the form of his presence is inexplicable and paradoxical. God, later called ‘consuming fire’ (Hebrews 12.29), here appears in fire which does not consume. For Moses, the long-absent deity of his ancestors is almost within reach, yet unapproachably holy.

Briggs was particularly interested in capturing the emotional complexity of Exod 3. As with many biblical texts, Exod 3 is laden with theological and interpersonal tensions. Questions about Moses’ conflicted identity, the nature of God, the suffering of the Hebrews, and the potentially consuming power of divine presence each offered compelling avenues for musical exploration. We explored these tensions first through a narrative approach to the text, situating the passage within the broader biblical
account of the life of Moses and the history of Israel. This gave us a starting point for tracing thematic and artistic possibilities, which we then considered in dialogue with aspects of the imagery, typology, and reception history. Ongoing conversations gave us the opportunity to articulate the themes and ideas we saw emerging at each stage of the composition. As the work came together, it became clear that even the most practical of musical decisions could have unanticipated theological implications. The decision to include a portrayal of the burning bush presented a particular compositional challenge, one that required the integration of musical, experiential, and theological approaches. Likewise, the characterization of God and Moses required making particular theological, as well as musical, choices. In this way, Briggs’ composition does not present its source text passively, but actively interprets and explores theological meaning.

Fig. 9.1.1 Rebekah Dyer, *Exodus — 1 — Beach Fire* (2017). A beach bonfire kindled in celebration of the TheoArtistry Composers’ Scheme in St Andrews.
II. Re-Imagining the Burning Bush for Music

There is no single starting point for a creative response to a biblical passage — except, perhaps, the text itself. A creative response need not precisely correspond to the narrative; Briggs and I proceeded with the understanding that any representation of Exod 3 should not be at the cost of imaginative discourse. At the same time, there were certain elements of the passage which Briggs wished to portray: namely, the dialogue between God and Moses, and the flames of the burning bush. We both felt that the burning bush contained a great depth of creative and theological potential and should be included, if possible, within the final composition. However, communicating the presence of fire through choral music would not be a straightforward task.

The portrayal of fire was, in some ways, the linchpin of our collaborative interest. It was a creative and theological experiment which compelled us to examine how we understood fire with regard to our respective fields. It was only in preparing for the Composers’ Scheme that I realized I had formerly conceived of the burning bush as a primarily visual image. Grappling with the question of how fire might be portrayed in music, I became acutely aware of my reliance on the visual imagination as the basis for my analysis of Exod 3. This quickly proved insufficient for conceptualizing fire within a non-visual medium. Another approach was required — alternative ‘ways of knowing’ based on more than what existed in my mind’s eye.

A solution arose from an experience of an entirely different art form: fire spinning. Fire spinning is a performance art that involves manipulating a burning staff (or other apparatus) to create whirling movements with the flame. It has associations with the circus arts, along with other fire-based performance skills such as fire breathing and fire juggling. In these arts, fire is drawn close to the body, engendering a responsive relationship between the performer and the flames. The motion of the flame is determined by bodily movements that are governed, in turn, by the momentum of the burning staff. It is an intimate and intensely physical experience of fire.

Fire spinning, like dance, is guided by the sensations of the body. The performer maintains near-continuous movement to prevent the flames blooming to a treacherous scale. The fire behaves as though it has a life of its own, and can burn in unpredictable ways. The ever-changing volume and direction of the flames results in a shifting centre of gravity which must be accommodated by the body. The performer must decide whether to embrace the fire’s effect on their movement or to try to work against it. With each motion, the flames roll through the air. The performer is enfolded by heat. Usually, there is little smoke, but the smell from the burning paraffin can be overwhelming. The entire body is involved in the experiential knowledge of fire.

The mind’s eye may conjure an image of light and heat but reduce — or forget entirely — the sensory impact of the smell, movement, and sound of a flickering flame. Privileging the non-visual aspects of fire worked as a corrective to the limitations in
my initial approach. I took my experience of fire spinning as a prompt for thinking more holistically about the nature and behaviour of fire. By incorporating physical ‘ways of knowing’ into our partnership, Briggs and I were able to utilize an additional resource by which to address the creative and theological conceptualization of the burning bush.

In seeking to portray fire in music, our collaborative methodology evolved like this:

1. Within the partnership, we agreed on a mutual goal: to represent the burning bush in the final composition.
2. An apparent limitation was identified. How could fire be represented in musical performance without visual cues?
3. Experiential forms of knowledge were integrated into the thought process and applied to theological aspects of the research (i.e. narrative and textual analysis; artistic and theological implications of the imagery, etc.).
4. These experiential perspectives were articulated to the composer through academic writing and discussion.
5. The composer allowed these perspectives to inform the process of composition.
6. In concert, the audience encounters a portrayal of the burning bush through sensory and aesthetic experience.
Participation in the arts gives rise to ways of thinking and feeling which integrate the physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions of the self. In terms of the *Exodus III* composition, experiential knowledge helped overcome barriers in the way certain ideas were being conceptualized intellectually. Specifically, a physical understanding of fire generated fresh ideas for a musical portrayal based on experience of fire performance art. This improvised methodology perhaps falls into A. Abby Knoblauch’s definition of ‘embodied rhetoric,’ in that it involved ‘a purposeful decision to include embodied knowledge […] as forms of meaning making’ during the project. Presented through academic forms of writing and analysis, embodied knowledge became integrated into more traditionally ‘scholarly’ approaches to the text. Moreover, embodied ways of knowing revealed a route to theological understanding:

[… ] fire is an intensely multi-sensory experience. Not only do we see, hear, feel it; it provokes an emotional response. Just as fire is ungraspable, so is God; so, too, is music. The three are compatible, even complementary, concepts. Exploring their complementarity is an act of theology — whether that exploration is conducted in writing, music, or both.

Using experiential knowledge of fire as a starting point, Briggs and I discussed how the music could evoke an impression of the burning bush in the audience’s imagination. In particular, the sounds and rhythms of fire took precedence as characteristics that might be captured by the music. We took time to consider the correspondence between sound and movement. Volume could be suggestive of scale: fire blazing through the air booms, while a stable fire crackles and single flames whisper. During *Exodus III*, the burning bush is represented through steady, repetitive sequences given to the organ part. The piece opens with the organ, and so the portrayal of fire provides the entry point into this divine-human interaction — appropriately enough, since the burning bush constitutes the meeting point of the dialogue partners. The rise and fall of musical notes signal the rise and fall of flames. Variations in volume and rhythm suggest fluctuations in intensity as the burning bush continues to burn throughout the theophany.

Within Briggs’ composition, no direct mention is ever made of the burning bush. Yet fire generates its own sense of presence, as anyone who has enjoyed the welcoming flicker of a hearth may attest. It draws attention, not only as a source of potential danger but as a point of fascination, aesthetic pleasure, or reverie. Likewise, in *Exodus III*, the organ is given time to establish itself in the mind of the audience, which must take note of this unique voice. As the music progresses, the organ plays for several bars between the choir vocals, carving out space in the midst of the conversation. Like fire, the organ generates its own, distinctive presence within the piece.

Just as the organ is more than an accompaniment in the music, so the burning bush is more than a background feature of Exod 3. It is integral to this divine self-disclosure:

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4 A. Abby Knoblauch, ‘Bodies of Knowledge’, *Composition Studies*, 40.2 (2012), 50–65 (p. 52).
5 Excerpt from research by the author, presented within the Composers’ Scheme partnership (unpublished, 2016).
not only as the means by which God speaks, but also as a manifestation of God’s presence on earth. It is both context and content; backdrop and mouthpiece. As an image for divine presence, fire offers a tangible example of something powerful, elusive, and other-than-human. It changes everything it touches and moves with a will of its own. Fire never stands still as it burns, yet always remains fire. Like God, its nature remains constant.

The consistency of divine presence is captured through the portrayal of the burning bush in ‘Exodus III’. Through the organ music, the burning bush is present throughout the piece. Though the vocals may fall silent, waiting or listening, the organ’s reminder of divine presence is continuous. At times, the organ’s complexity falls away to privilege the vocals, notably the soprano and baritone solos — but its music is never silenced by the conversation.

Fig. 9.1.3 Rebekah Dyer, *Exodus — 3 — The Bush That Burns* (2017). The composition draws inspiration from the sound and movement of flames.
III. The Characterization of God and Moses, and Constructing New Theological Meanings

Setting the burning bush to music provided new ways to conceptualize old ideas, and revealed how different forms of perception can stimulate both the imagination and the intellect. Collaboration between theology and the arts is beneficial not only as a ‘mutually enriching conversation,’ as Jeremy Begbie reminds us, but also for reintegrating intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic, and bodily ways of knowing.6 There is an alchemical interaction between scripture and art, between physicality and intellect, and between theology and the imagination.

God’s act of self-disclosure in Exod 3 is difficult to capture in all its narrative and existential complexity. At the burning bush, God’s eternal presence is revealed amidst a finite creation. Moses is initiated into the faith of his ancestors through nothing less than direct contact with divine reality. Divinely commissioned to lead his people out of slavery, it is not difficult to imagine that Moses is overcome with terror, wonder and self-doubt. Exploring Moses’ emotional landscape may open up a route to aesthetic and theological engagement for both the artist and the audience, taking us beyond the scope of the text to contemplate the complexity of divine-human encounter. In Briggs’ composition, there is no description or narration; only the words of God and Moses. Although historical and narrative context informs the piece, it is not overtly presented. As a result, there is a sense of dislocation from events which come before and after: a kind of narrative wilderness that reflects the liminality of the encounter. The themes of isolation and intimacy are evident here, as much for the audience as for Moses. Without the explicit narrative framing of the original text, the fragments of dialogue hang together like echoes of a distant conversation. It is as though the listener comes upon the conversation in media res. They must piece together its meaning line by line. They are required to pay attention, to discern (aesthetically, intellectually, spiritually) the significance of this encounter.

While Moses is called by name near the very beginning of the piece, the identity of the one who calls him is ambiguous. It is not until the first solo (beginning at bar 33) that we are offered a glimpse into God’s eternal selfhood: ‘I am that I am...’ The phrase constitutes a double revelation, disclosing not only divine identity but the sound of the divine voice. The biblical text does not give an indication of what God’s voice sounded like to Moses. However, God is conventionally portrayed in masculine terms and associated with masculine conceptions of power and sovereignty. In ‘Exodus III’, such expectations are subverted. When the soprano’s voice rises to announce divine identity, the listener might be surprised by the feminine portrayal of divine presence. The strength of the soprano’s solo conveys the authority of such presence as effectively as a baritone, yet the distinctiveness of this musical choice generates much

greater theological meaning. If God is usually portrayed as masculine, the femininity of the soprano allows the association of God with another gender, providing a way to express divine transcendence of human assignations.

By virtue of the soprano’s pitch, the divine voice seems to soar from another plane. Moses’ baritone solo achieves the converse effect, grounding Moses’ voice in the earthly realm. Theologically, the distinction between the divine and human voices is significant, suggesting the transcendent otherness of God and the historically-bound nature of human existence. The multiplicity of voices that call to Moses draw attention to a transcendent reality which is greater than Moses’ individual circumstance. In contrast, the Israelite voices (bar 77 onwards) are dense and overlapping — urgently seeking the end of oppression. Moses himself is heard clearly only at the epicentre of the piece when his solo is both the counterpart of, and counter-balance to, the ethereal voice of God.

Yet, intriguingly, divine and human identity are sometimes obfuscated through the precise setting of the text. This reflects some of the tensions regarding identity which Briggs and I identified in our initial conversations. In the original text, God calls Moses by name (‘Moses, Moses’) and Moses answers (‘Here I am’). In the musical rendition of these words, there is no change in voice. Narrative elucidation regarding the speaker is absent. The elision of divine and human speech juxtaposes divine and human identity to the point that they lose distinction. When the altos and sopranos sing ‘Moses, Moses, Here I am,’ is it Moses who declares his presence, or God? Either attribution would be appropriate. While the original narrative is clear about the pattern of call and response — in which God calls, and Moses responds — the music offers an alternative suggestion. By calling to Moses through the fire of the burning bush, God also declares, in effect, Here I am. As the piece draws towards its conclusion, the growing urgency of the choir creates an air of expectancy. The members of the audience are invited to respond, with Moses, to the call of the choir: ‘Go…’. The audience, thereby, may reflect on their aesthetic (and perhaps emotional) experience in thought and action, and ask what it might mean to respond to divine presence — the same divine presence which called Moses by name.

The Composers’ Scheme was more than a collaboration of individuals; it was a collaboration of approaches, of ways of knowing. Within the music, theological and aesthetic ideas converge and are placed in conversation with one another in active mediation of the biblical text. As composer and theologian respectively, Briggs and I found that we needed to reach beyond our respective disciplines to navigate the creative and conceptual demands of the partnership. The process of composition led us to explore ways of incorporating physical, emotional, and spiritual perspectives into the project — with both artistic and theological implications.

Aesthetic expression and perception are rooted in the body. Music is perceived and processed through the senses, and it is on this physical basis that the sensations called forth by music can be conceptualized through the intellect.\(^7\) Embodied knowledge

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became the catalyst for our methodology, and may also be fruitful not only for future artistic work on Exod 3 but also on other, sensually rich biblical episodes. It is a strength of ‘TheoArtistic’ collaboration that it provides the opportunity to consider ‘alternative narratives and discourses not privileged by current research.’ To this end, it is worth exploring what insights might be gained through locating the text within the embodied nature of human existence.

Exod 3 is not only a conversation between God and Moses; it is an encounter between divinity and humanity. While God’s nature is eternal, human existence is finite and takes on countless expressions of self-disclosure and identity construction. There is no single way to be human. God calls not only Moses towards divine encounter but all of humanity: so what would it mean for Moses to be portrayed as a young man, rather than an ageing patriarch? As a refugee? As female? These questions concern the embodied nature of human life and identity. They encourage the creative artist to explore the relationship between bodily and spiritual experience — especially for individuals and communities whose bodies are vulnerable, exploited, or heavily politicized, and therefore not typically understood as the receivers of divine revelation.

Indeed, the association of oppressed bodies with divine identity is another important consideration for creative approaches to Exod 3. Portrayals of God that subvert traditional expectations give both artists and theologians the chance to explore a conception of divine personhood which far transcends the conventional picture of a singular (white) male authority. The soprano solo of Exodus III provides a straightforward example in which a feminine voice is associated with God’s self-disclosure. Picturing God in yet more diverse ways may, in turn, suggest greater variety in the ways human beings are made in ‘the image and likeness’ of God (Genesis 1.26).

When Moses encounters the overwhelming power of divine presence, he cannot leave unchanged. The music of Exodus III embraces the uncertainty of such a moment, destabilizing the encounter by moving between elements of the conversation as expressed by different voices. The portrayal of flames in constant motion also signals the unfolding transformation, suggesting that the mysteries of divine and human selfhood burn almost within reach — yet remain ungraspable. The sensory and spiritual resonances of fire connect Moses’ encounter with God to both physical sensation and emotional response. Further engagement with experiential ways of knowing could arise from considering changes in Moses’ body language, voice, syntax, or physical appearance. In a more abstract portrayal, the fabric of the aesthetic work might itself bear the marks of transformation through alterations in form, tone, or colour palette. In such cases, aesthetic, emotional, and embodied forms of knowledge combine to convey a transformational spiritual

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experience. At the burning bush, all humanity is invited to approach God’s presence and contemplate the mysteries of divine personhood. It is the task of both artist and theologian to help facilitate and interpret this moment of encounter. Knowing that eternal mysteries are beyond human thought, we may attempt to render them with an aesthetic experience that resonates with spiritual and emotional ways of knowing over and above the limitations of human language and intellect.

List of Illustrations


