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.
I first applied to the TheoArtistry project as a composer with a long-standing but waning connection to the Christian faith. Sacred music played a large part in my upbringing and the connection between music and spiritual (or emotional) directness is something that I continue to explore within all of my compositional work. TheoArtistry was a truly collaborative process from start to finish: an alchemy in which the theologian was influencing the experience of the composer and the composer was influencing theological experience. My theologian partner, Rebekah Dyer, was exploring ‘Fire in the theological and social imagination’ as her PhD thesis topic at the time of the collaboration, and was also an amateur Fire Art performer. From the early stages of the project, where the six composers were offered a selection of biblical extracts, I was immediately drawn to the evocative imagery found within Exod 3. The power and mystery of fire, as a force which can both give, sustain and take life, was something that I thought would be fascinating to explore musically. The text is full of expressive harmonic, textural and melodic possibilities. Moments of darkness and plight are juxtaposed with moments of hope and light. Using Dyer’s extensive research, we decided to delve deeper into the context and connections surrounding our choice of text.

We discussed how these underlying connections might provide stimuli which could be translated into musical ideas or responses. Our biblical extract, for example, provides several contextual questions surrounding the notion of identity. The identity of the voice calling Moses from the bush is initially ambiguous. Contextually, there are also questions surrounding Moses’ own identity and, indeed, that of God. One way of expressing these issues seemed possible through texture. The opening, ‘Moses, Moses, here I am’ is set between the upper voice parts (S/A I, II and III) and starts on a unison note. It then grows out of itself into a three-part, largely homophonic, texture which then proceeds back to a unison note. The three-part writing here often features a turn-like semiquaver motif in the S/A III part, reflecting the flickering flame movement
found, initially, within the organ part. This idea also appears later in a T/B I, II and III split at the text ‘Who am I?’ The fact that the texture is divided into three parts during these phrases also refers to the nature of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

The solo sections of the piece feature a more direct narrative; the baritone solo, for example, reflects the questions of Moses. The people of Israel then ask ‘What is His name?’ in homophony across all voice parts. This is the first time that this texture appears within the piece. At the moment where the identity of the voice emanating from the bush is revealed, ‘I Am’ (or ‘Yahweh’), there is a sense of annunciation, or divine revelation, as God responds to Moses’ plight and exclaims, ‘I Am that I Am. I Am hath sent me unto you’. The moment of annunciation — the moment where God is communicating directly — is the climax of the piece, and I sought to approach this in a subtle and special way. At this point, an ethereal solo emerges from a single triad. This follows on from the more harmonically challenging, bitonal section in which the people of Israel have asked ‘What is His name?’ The final section of the piece concludes with the soprano solo, ‘I will lift you up, I will lift you up out of the affliction of Egypt’, using textual repetition for emphasis. This is followed by the final response of the people, ‘Now let us go’, set in polyphony across all SATB parts.

Dyer and I discussed Moses’ sense of mystery when he first encountered the bush, unconsumed through the flickering flames. Perhaps this had some metaphorical connection to the survival of the Hebrew slaves afflicted in Egypt. The flickering flame depicted in the text influenced the continually flickering quaver writing in the organ part. The juxtaposition of tonal harmony and melody against more challenging bitonal sections was used to express different sections found within the text. These moments of dissonance often feature suspensions against trills, which tend to resolve to consonance or conclusion. Similarly, the piece begins with a minor and somewhat ambiguous form of modal tonality but then ends diatonically in the major, bringing with it a sense of hope that is reflective of the discourse of the text: the people of Israel will be lifted up ‘out of the affliction of Egypt’.

I find it quite difficult to describe the actual formation of musical ideas. The compositional process was influenced by an awareness of practicality for the performing forces and the subconscious influence of my own musical education, aesthetic taste and experiences. I wanted to create a piece that would be both enjoyable and thought-provoking for the performers and listeners. I also wanted to make the most of the acoustical possibilities of the space in which the composition would be performed and recorded. Throughout the process, I sent Dyer several musical ideas and examples, which we then discussed over Skype over a three-month period. For me, this collaborative approach was a new, unconventional way of working; it was productive and enjoyable. This process made me question the broader ‘role’ of the composer, particularly in terms of sacred music. Perhaps the composer is always subconsciously working as part of a team or cooperatively, considering that there is frequent input from other sources outside of the composer’s own creativity and background.
Arguably, composing relies on the expression of the ‘inner ear’. Many aspects of theology and music, then, are often inspired by a search for truth and spiritual directness (or emotional meaning), and also an openness to sharing this emotional or spiritual discourse with others. This is something that will differ for every individual, but there appears to be a communal theological and musical interaction united by threads of thought, connection and expression. This is particularly the case in sacred music performed within a holy space, whereby the visual and sensory aspects of the space, alongside the ceremony and ritual of a service, combine with the musical elements into something more.

It has been fascinating to work with Dyer’s input and the influence of the TheoArtistry symposia. I believe that, for many of the partnerships, the process led to an enhanced incorporation of theological perspective, depth and aesthetic. The process deepened our levels of engagement with the text. Although much of the musical creation came from a subconscious place, it has been interesting to evaluate what artistic choices were made with relation to the depiction of the composition’s textual, theological and contextual ideas. This has made me question the way I work and has also opened my eyes to the rich possibilities of collaboration. It was a moving experience hearing the fruits of our labour at the first performance, and to hear the work of the other partnerships involved in the project.