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.

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11.2. Composer’s Reflections

Lisa Robertson

Of the texts suggested for the TheoArtistry project, I was immediately drawn to the passage from 1 Kgs 19.4-12. There were many aspects that sparked a creative interest for me, such as the dramatic ‘wilderness’ setting of Elijah’s encounter with God. I believe that many of the emotions evoked through listening to music can also be brought about when one finds oneself alone, in awe, amongst dramatic scenes of nature. This text is dramatically heightened by its wild, mountaintop setting. Perhaps in this landscape, Elijah was perfectly disposed to receive the Word of God. I often turn to aspects of nature as sources of inspiration in compositions, so I was instantly drawn to creating a musical portrayal of the atmosphere, emotion and natural phenomena which are conveyed in Elijah’s divine encounter. The main interest for me, which during the collaboration became the focal point of the piece, was the ‘sound of sheer silence’. In isolation, this concept may seem to be the antithesis of both drama and of music, unless in reference to John Cage’s famous work ‘4’33’. However, in the biblical episode, the boisterous earthly phenomena — the outbursts of the wind, the earthquake and the fire — that occur before the moment of silence arguably make this silence the most powerful, and even the most musically provocative, moment. I often use silence within my music as I feel that such pauses are necessary in order to provide contrast to louder musical sections and to allow for a moment of clarity for the music to be understood. The idea of heightening the importance of this silence was therefore inviting.

My preference for this text brought me happily into partnership with theologian, Mary Stevens. During our first meeting at the TheoArtistry Symposium in November 2016, we had very engaging conversations in which Stevens conveyed a great deal of information; she revealed certain aspects of the text that I had not been aware of, which opened up many possibilities for the piece. As Stevens has a musical background herself, she was aware of aspects which could be of interest and also of issues that
might arise at different points during the process. Her hope was that we would be able to unravel the text using music. She explained that, in this passage, ‘the sound of sheer silence’ is really associated with an encounter with God; this suggests that ‘knowing God’ cannot be expressed through words alone. She hoped that music might convey a little of the emotion which cannot be described in words. In this text, silence may be a metaphor for an encounter with God and, in an extended sense, music could act as a further image to represent this silence. This was a compelling notion for me. The music which I write is often still and quiet in its nature. I wondered if using quiet music as a metaphor for silence might be, along with the possible juxtaposition of actual silence, a possibility for musical drama.

I was delighted to discover also that mountains are crucial symbols for annunciations or theophanies throughout the Bible. This confirmed my hope that taking inspiration from the vivid contrasts of a wild landscape might be important in portraying the meaning of the text. I took this as a cue to create a soundscape inspired by the vastness of mountains. Therefore, I adopted a sparse but widely spaced harmonic language in this piece. I also aimed to include large contrasts in the dynamics, texture and range. Stevens’ experience within the Carmelite Order was also fascinating as she was able to demonstrate the influence of this episode, and of Elijah’s life more generally, on Carmelite spirituality. She introduced me to the poetry of St John of the Cross, drawing particular attention to his phrases ‘silent music’ and ‘sounding solitude’. These phrases bore a relevance to 1 Kgs 19.4-12; it also linked to the ideas which we had about using music as a metaphor for silence and juxtaposing actual silence with the music in order to draw attention to its importance.

Following the preliminary symposium, I left St Andrews with many creative sparks glimmering. My first step was to take Stevens’ suggested lyrics and to judge which of the lines it would be possible to use within the three-minute time limit of the final piece. I was eager to use a great deal of the text as I felt that the interweaving of parallel texts would help to uncover the meaning of the passage. It also offered the possibility to add a sense of depth to the piece, which might be further appreciated by listeners who already have an understanding of the theological significance of these texts. We felt that it was important to frame the piece with God’s calling to Elijah, as this also defines the structure of the text. As we discovered at the symposium, the story of Elijah’s encounter differs from other annunciations because God calls him by name only once, rather than twice. However, in consultation with Stevens, I decided, in the music, to call Elijah by name twice in reference or homage to this formal trend of annunciations and because it felt musically appropriate. I also decided to use the names Elijahu and Elohim, for Elijah and God respectively. I felt that, as well as giving a sense of the context of the story, the words themselves had a pleasing natural timbre and rhythm.

In the opening, I wanted to create a feeling of confusion and mystery; the texture is therefore canonic, which masks the pulse. I then seek to introduce the picture of
mountains where God calls Elijah, giving this music a sense of power and vastness by using a wide range and a unison texture. These ‘calling’ sections frame the piece. After initial conversations, it was clear that both Stevens and I hoped for the climax moment of the piece to be in the silence where Elijah appears to have an encounter with God. As this follows the three dramatic natural phenomena of the wind, the earthquake and the fire, it was possible to use these events as a means of intensifying the tension towards the climax point. I felt that the most successful means of achieving this would be to enhance the listener’s musical expectations with four repetitions of musical material. The fourth repetition begins to conform to the listener’s expectations, according to the pattern, but is then suddenly interrupted and, surprisingly, met with lengthy silence.

Instead of actually stating the phrase ‘the sound of sheer silence’, I decided to juxtapose several fragments of the text which Stevens had selected from the Christmas liturgy: ‘when all was in quiet silence, the Almighty Word leapt down’ from the Book of Wisdom and ‘my beloved mountain, the tranquil night at the time of rising dawn […] silent music sounding solitude’ from St John of the Cross’ poetry. With these fragments, we hoped to describe not only the silence and stillness itself but also the significance of the silence in encounters with God. The piece returns from this exploration of silence to the story of Elijah with the phrase, ‘Here is your God’ which becomes something of a refrain for the remainder of the piece.

In our later discussions, Stevens found the phrase ‘your God’ to be significant as it implied a personal relationship with God. I wondered if, perhaps, we could also use the phrase ‘my God’, which would allow Elijah to speak and to acknowledge his search for this personal relationship. We also discussed the portrayal of different characters. We disliked the idea of separating the male and female voices specifically to enhance the difference between the voice of God, the voice of Elijah and the narration. A possibility would have been to use purely male voices for the voice of God. However, I thought that the choir singing tutti could portray the voice of God more powerfully, with an increased scope of range and louder dynamic. It may also make this important moment more inclusive, in keeping with the idea of portraying personal relationships with God.

After discussing the sections of the text where God is present and those where God is not, I was keen to find a way of distinguishing between them. It was at this point that I added percussive sounds to the sections where God is not present (for example, ‘My God is not in the earthquake’). These also helped to intensify the tension towards the climactic moment of silence. In a way, the sections where God is present were harder to define musically. Stevens felt that the key point was that God was present from the moment of silence until the end of the section of text. However, it would not be possible to maintain the texture of silence for the rest of the piece. I sought to find, therefore, an audible means of representing silence. This was an idea which we had already considered due to various translations of the text. Other translations of ‘the sound of sheer silence’ include ‘a still small voice’, ‘the sound of a gentle blowing’ and ‘a soft
murmuring sound’. This made me think of using whispering sounds as an extended vocal technique. I felt that this contrast between whispering sounds and the regular timbre of singing might be a suitable replacement for the contrast between silence and sound. In previous compositions, I have used similar sounds to mimic the sound of wind and to enhance the aural portrayal of natural landscapes. On mentioning this to Stevens, she suggested that we could use the analogy of gentle wind to connect the whispering sound to other points in the Bible where God’s presence is shown in wind, such as at the beginning of Genesis where the breath of God hovers over the waters.

A later addition to the piece was a series of performance indications. I took words from other translations of the passage and also other words which I thought might reflect the emotion of each point in the passage. I felt that this might help the performers to approach the music with the correct emotional intention. We also deliberated for a long time over the title, but eventually decided on ‘The Silent Word Sounds’ as it seemed to draw together several of the threads which we hoped to weave through the piece.

Being part of the TheoArtistry Composers’ Scheme was a very interesting experience for me. It was a pleasure to approach a piece with Stevens. With her meticulously prepared research, I could begin to compose almost immediately as I had, already in place, an understanding of the text, ideas about structure, and a clear goal of what we hoped the final piece would become. Being able to consult with Stevens during the writing process was also useful. I was able to confirm with her whether ideas which I had during the process would be theologically appropriate and significant. This was creatively liberating, as I sought to unravel the text through musical portrayal.