



Annunciations

Sacred Music for the Twenty-First
Century

EDITED BY GEORGE CORBETT



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16. Sacred Music in Secular Spaces

Jonathan Arnold

When Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina wrote his Mass settings and motets, or J. S. Bach his cantatas and passions, they could not have imagined the ways in which their music would be heard today. We can now access sacred music in our living rooms, at work and on the commute: an hour-long compilation — entitled '*Agnus Dei*' — by the choir of New College, Oxford has nine and a half million views on YouTube, and five different versions of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* each have over a million.¹ This liberation of sacred music from its religious context and liturgical function has been recently complimented by a resurgence, in Britain at least, of interest in high quality sacred music performed *within* its ecclesiastical context, especially in cathedrals and chapels with choral institutions. But outside this setting, sacred music has been culturally re-appropriated into a multitude of private and public secular contexts, with the result that any theological resonances in the music have become diluted for the casual listener. But those who compose and perform sacred music today are not daunted by such a trend. Even Christian composers do not necessarily choose a liturgical service as the preferred context for their art, and some composers have abandoned institutional religion in favour of a more Universalist approach. Likewise, performers often find a secular setting a more powerful arena for the transmission of music's sacred message.

In this chapter, I shall explore the current interest in sacred music, both within and outside of its liturgical context. I will examine how sacred music has been freed from its ecclesiastical bonds and been re-appropriated into the globalized market of public and private consumerism; and I will investigate how composers, performers

¹ This essay is an extended version of a lecture given at the TheoArtistry Festival, University of St Andrews, 5 March 2018. Parts of the essay have been published in J. Arnold, *Sacred Music in Secular Society* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); and in *idem*, 'Evensong', *The Spectator*, 24 March 2018, p. 52.

and listeners have responded to these developments. Arguably, the expansion of sacred music should not be a cause for alarm for confessional Christians. Rather, it is to be embraced, because sacred music reaches beyond the bounds of doctrinal and institutional propositional belief and reaches out to a world hungry for spiritual nourishment. Music that speaks deeply into the human condition, promotes human flourishing and evokes spiritual meaning, appeals to believers and non-believers alike, for it relates to the experience, encounter and relationality of an unknown reality that transcends both ourselves and the world around us. Beauty can help us to intuit a truth beyond the confines of our materialist existence and lead us to the source of all truth, which is ultimately love — a truth that some call ‘God’. I will begin by exploring current trends in the performance of sacred music within its liturgical context.

I. Secular Listeners in Sacred Spaces

Spotify and smartphones have eliminated the need to visit a cathedral, church or chapel in order to hear sacred works of music, but yet visit we still do. While overall church attendance has fallen by two-thirds since the 1960s, attendance at traditional choral worship in England is on the rise, and has been for the last two decades in cathedrals, university college chapels and large parish churches with choral traditions.² Weekday choral services have contributed greatly to this resurgence in popularity in England’s forty-two Anglican cathedrals: though the end of the twentieth century saw attendance at cathedral services falling by up to five per cent each year, figures are now up by a third in a decade — and that is excluding the tourists.³ Evensong attendance at England’s six most popular cathedrals rose by 34 per cent between 2008 and 2012 alone.⁴ All this is in the face of a marked fall in biblical literacy in Britain through the generations, according to research released by the Bible Society.⁵

Evensong has barely changed since the publication of the Book of Common Prayer in 1662. It is perhaps not a coincidence that attendance at traditional choral services started to surge just as modern life began to seem most removed from their world of candles, canons and communal reflection: choral services offer an antidote to the modern age of instant digital gratification. As the working day ends, cathedral and chapel-goers can enter a beautiful space where they can be still, silent and receptive

2 John Bingham, ‘Church of England Attendance Plunges to Record Low’, *The Telegraph*, 12 January 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/12095251/Church-of-England-attendance-plunges-to-record-low.html>; and *idem*, ‘Looking for Britain’s Future Leaders? Try Evensong’, *The Telegraph*, 1 March 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/12176998/Looking-for-Britains-future-leaders-Try-evensong.html>

3 Simon Jenkins, ‘Why Cathedrals Are Soaring’, *The Spectator*, 8 October 2016, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2016/10/why-cathedrals-are-soaring/>

4 E. H. B., ‘Sing and They Will Come’, *The Economist*, 4 March 2014, <https://www.economist.com/prospero/2014/03/04/sing-and-they-will-come>

5 ‘Pass it on Report’, *Bible Society*, February 2014, http://www.biblesociety.org.uk/press/uploads/final-copy-of-Pass-it-On-research-report_02070706.pdf, pp. 1–36 (p. 13).

to the gentle drama that unfolds. As the choir and clergy process in, and the scene is set with their flowing robes, worshippers can scrutinize their faces, see their folders of music and hear the blend of their distinct voices as they begin the 'Preces and Responses'. For many Christians, there exists an unwritten contract between priest, readers, musicians, listeners and the unseen divine. The music enhances the words of the service, giving beauty and character to the heartfelt words of the Psalms, to the joyful thanksgiving in Mary's song of praise and liberation (the '*Magnificat*'), to Simeon's grateful prayer for rest (the '*Nunc dimittis*') and to the prayers of the 'Collects'. The music of worship is interspersed with silence, in which our own thoughts and petitions creep in and become part of the tapestry of the liturgy.

Yet not all of those who attend these services are Christian. The cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity of those who attend Evensong is remarkable. Formal choral worship does not coerce the attendee into any particular doctrinal confession: even Richard Dawkins admits to having a 'certain love' for Evensong.⁶ People are free to choose the extent to which they wish to engage with the worship, which is in many respects more passive than in Sunday services: at Evensong, the focus is on listening, and worshippers do not take communion. Quiet reflection is, indeed, hard to come by for a generation who struggle to sit in silence for mere minutes without taking out their phones. But peace and reflection are important, especially at a time when one in eight people suffers from an anxiety disorder.⁷ So, too, is community: under 35s, who can trace their friends' every move through Facebook and WhatsApp, are nonetheless more likely than those over 55 to experience regular feelings of loneliness.⁸ Attending a choral service offers a participation in something significantly other to ourselves. It takes the noise of our mental business and quiets us towards an inner silence. It points towards the transcendent and forges a bond between all in the sacred space by the shared experience of the liturgical rite.

The thirst for the sacred and spiritual remains a keen one. According to Brian Mountford, it is institutional Christianity's commitment to the 'search for truth through beauty' that has kept so many non-believers involved.⁹ While theologians such as Hans Küng and Karl Barth suggest that the experience of transcendence can only be explained through the language of faith, Mountford argues that it can be accessed through religious art, architecture and music: within the Christian liturgy, sound

6 Douglas Murray, 'Richard Dawkins Interview: "I Have a Certain Love for the Anglican Tradition"', *The Spectator*, 14 September 2013, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2013/09/interview-richard-dawkins-on-what-hed-miss-if-christianity-vanished/>

7 Louise Chunn, 'How Anxiety Became a Modern Epidemic Greater than Depression', *The Telegraph*, 11 June 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health-fitness/mind/how-anxiety-became-a-modern-epidemic-greater-than-depression/>

8 Natalie Gil, 'Loneliness: A Silent Plague that is Hurting Young People Most', *The Guardian*, 20 July 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/jul/20/loneliness-britains-silent-plague-hurts-young-people-most>

9 Brian Mountford, *Christian Atheist: Belonging without Believing* (Winchester, UK and Washington D.C.: O Books, 2010), p. 20.

alone can 'enhance a sense of height, depth, sadness, joy, fear, loss or triumph'.¹⁰ What some will hear through Christian ears is still beautiful when heard through secular ones. This is clear from the responses I have received from chapel-goers as part of my survey of attendee experiences of sacred music.¹¹ Listeners almost always describe choral music as profoundly moving: one recalled a sense of being transported 'out of the realm of everyday living. It was otherworldly and beautifully done'. However, sacred music not only attracts secular listeners into sacred spaces, it has been equally at home in secular spaces for many centuries.

II. The Sacred in Secular Spaces

Sacred music is accessed and consumed today in ways that would have been alien to past generations. We do not perform or listen to Bach today as those would have done in the eighteenth century, for instance. There have been major cultural, musical and liturgical shifts: 'The taste required for making and hearing music is culturally shaped and likewise evolves in relation to living traditions', as Frank Burch Brown has observed.¹² Since the eighteenth century, and the rise of the oratorio, sacred music has been liberated from the confines of the liturgy, and has been culturally assimilated into innumerable secular contexts. But even in the eighteenth century much sacred music was purposefully intended and written for newly-established concert halls: 'Although Handel appears to have been every bit as devout as Bach, his staging of oratorios in theatres for the paying public pointed the way to music's eventual emancipation from function'.¹³

Handel's *Messiah*, first performed in Dublin's New Music Hall in 1742, is still the most performed piece of classical music, year on year, in British concert venues.¹⁴ This shift of sacred music from the church to the concert hall, gave rise to a re-imagining of music's function and a reconfiguration of the use of public and private space, as Philip Bohlman argues:

With the new stage in modernity unleashed by the religious enlightenments at the end of the eighteenth century, worship and the music of worship moved from the sanctuary to the public square, sometimes in gradual stages, but often through the dramatic modulation of public soundscapes.¹⁵

10 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

11 For more information, see: Jonathan Arnold, *Experience of Music*, <http://www.experienceofmusic.org>.

12 Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religion Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 14.

13 Tim Blanning, *The Triumph of Music: Composers, Musicians and their Audiences, 1700 to the Present* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2008), pp. 82–85. For a discussion of the 'sacralisation' of music in society, see also *ibid.*, pp. 89–91, 122–46; Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. by Roger Lustig (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Mark Evan Bonds, *Music as Thought: Listening to the Symphony in the Age of Beethoven* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

14 Philip Bohlman, 'Music Inside Out: Sounding Public Religion in a Post-Secular Europe', in Georgina Born (ed.), *Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 205–23.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 207.

Thus, sacred music had to 're-enter the modern history of public religion ... *as music*', i.e. not just as something sacred and secret but as music *per se*.¹⁶ For an example, Bohlman cites the Turkish March from the final movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, which 'bears witness to the pre-Enlightenment encounter between Christian Central Europe and the Muslim Ottoman Empire. In Herbert von Karajan's textless reworking of the Beethoven/Schiller 'Ode to Joy' as the 'European Anthem', however, the Turkish March is silent, the symbolic centre of the European Union purged of Turkish and Islamic history'.¹⁷

In addition to these political and ideological public expressions of sacred music, there is the more physical dimension of music's inherent existence within time and space, or musical motion.¹⁸ Nicholas Cook has argued that music transforms space by giving it social meaning.¹⁹ It retains its meaning even when reduced to a recording and connotes place well, but it can easily be extracted from its space and appropriated elsewhere.²⁰ For instance, on the macro level, the Polish people may identify, consciously or subconsciously, with the music of Frederick Chopin, or the Viennese may associate their cultural identity with the music of Mozart. However, if that music is transferred to a completely different context, such as an underground station in South Korea, although the cultural link with Poland or Austria might still resonate for a European listener, the music has been appropriated to the extent that, for a native South-Korean, '... it carries no connotations of European culture or cultural prestige; but rather embodies an apparently effortless or naturalised international modernism'.²¹

On the micro level, iPods and portable digital musical devices mean that we can create, even on public transport, a personal, private space. Such devices create a 'phenomenological space that is dissociated from physical space'.²² Theodor W. Adorno's early work regarding audio recordings was remarkably prescient concerning the ability of this micro space (i.e., of one person listening to music on headphones) to convey transcendent, numinous, even divine truth. In this 'traffic with technology', as he called it, 'formulations capture the sounds of creation, the first and last sounds, judgement upon life and message about that which may come thereafter'.²³ Thus, the meaningfulness of sacred music can be translated into the secular space without any

16 *Ibid.*, p. 209.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 217, citing Caryl Clark, 'Forging Identity: Beethoven's "Ode" as European Anthem', *Critical Inquiry*, 23 (1997), 789–807.

18 Nicholas Cook, 'Classical Music and the Politics of Space', in Born (ed.), *Music, Sound and Space*, pp. 224–38 (p. 226). Cook cites Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 52.

19 Cook, 'Classical Music', p. 229.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 229–30.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 230.

23 Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Form of the Phonographic Record (1928)', trans. by Thomas Y. Levin, in *Essays on Music*, ed. by Richard Leppert, and trans. by Susan Gillespie (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), p. 277; quoted in Richard Middleton, 'Faith, Hope, and the Hope of Love: On the Fidelity of the Phonograph', in Born (ed.), *Music, Sound and Space*, pp. 292–310 (p. 298).

loss of power. Equally, however, sacred music can be appropriated to new cultural contexts and employed in ways unforeseen by the composer.

A recent example of this phenomenon is a recording of Thomas Tallis's forty-part choral motet *Spem in Alium*, one of the most popular pieces of sacred music in the repertoire today. When, in 2012, it reached number one in the classical charts, Peter Phillips, director of the *Tallis Scholars*, wrote:

I am thrilled that *Spem in alium* has attracted such a large new audience. It is one of the most remarkable achievements of the human mind, an extra-ordinary and moving piece written for 40 individual singers ... For me it ranks alongside the best works of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci and confirms Tallis as England's greatest composer. It's on my iPod!²⁴

The recording may evoke a memory of a live performance, which may in turn help the listener to recall liturgical performances. Alternatively, there may be no association with the music's original historical, theological or cultural context. Neither Tallis nor Phillips could have predicted that the sacred piece would be used as the soundtrack to the erotic film *Fifty Shades of Grey*. It is doubtful whether many people watching that film would have associated the music with the Elizabethan Chapel Royal or the need to put their hope in the God of Israel! When sacred music is thus re-appropriated it is tempting to think that its theological significance becomes diluted, if not entirely obscured. But can the theological essence of sacred music be erased by its cultural context? Daniel Chua thinks not, because Western secular culture is shaped by its Christian heritage and, ironically, puts God centre stage by replicating old theological modes of thought; it 'acts as a kind of divine surrogate' and is heard as 'a mode of "secular theology" that exposes some of the major theological issues of our times'.²⁵ We cannot separate the sacred from the secular in our society because of the historical saturation of religious culture in the arts, as James Herbert has acknowledged. The sacred is simply part of the artistic language: 'Religious issues arise even in seemingly secular works [of art and music] where we might not expect them, because Christian mysticism and metaphysics thoroughly permeate the rhetoric and sensibility of western cultural production.'²⁶ Herbert is echoing the words of the Italian scholar Gianni Vattimo, in this respect: 'While our civilization no longer explicitly professes itself Christian but rather considers itself by and large a de-Christianized, post-Christian, lay civilization, it is nevertheless, profoundly shaped by that heritage at its source.'²⁷

24 CMU Editorial, '50 Shades of Grey Propels Sixteenth Century Chant to Classical Number One', *Complete Music Update*, 17 July 2012, <http://www.completemusicupdate.com/article/50-shades-of-grey-propels-sixteenth-century-chant-to-classical-number-one/>

25 Daniel K. L. Chua, 'Music as the Mouthpiece of Theology', in Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie (eds.), *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 137–61 (p. 138).

26 James D. Herbert, *Our Distance from God: Studies of the Divine and the Mundane in Western Art and Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), p. 3.

27 Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. by Luca D'Isanto and David Webb (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 43.

Robert Scholl also acknowledges a need in modern society for so-called spiritual music, which he defines as ‘... music that seems to gnaw at the wound of modernity as much as it desires the spear that might close the wounds and overcome human alienations from God’.²⁸ He suggests that there is a search for the absolute and for a reconfiguration of humanity which implies a kind of ‘secular theology that, though it would like to transfigure the past, may, to varying degrees, question or simply remain open to an unknown outcome’.²⁹

This ‘secular theology’ arises when the listener, regardless of the intentions of the composer or performer, imbues music that relates to the depth of the human condition with theological meaning. Conversely, Christian composers may intend their music, full of intentional theological resonance, to be performed in a secular space. Thus, I will now delve further into the relationship between composers, performers and listeners.

III. Composer, Performers and Listeners

Recent research has revealed that, for many contemporary composers of sacred Christian music, the religious liturgy is by no means the only intended destiny for their music, nor is it necessarily a significant motivation for composition.³⁰ For composers such as James MacMillan and Arvo Pärt, the concert hall is an equally valid, and perhaps an even more appropriate place, for sacred music to be encountered as a religious house of worship. Thus, in today’s society, the sacred is no longer confined to the church-going few; it is now more available to the majority of people, through many different types of media, and in a more accessible way than ever before. A further erosion of the dividing wall between sacred and secular is evident in the abandonment of institutional religion by some twentieth-century Christian composers, in favour of a broader theological and humanitarian approach. Towards the end of his life John Tavener relinquished both institutional religion and secularism, seeing his music as a Universalist gift of healing to the world:

The fact that I’ve been given this Universalist vision of the world makes it a possibility that I might be able to contribute, just fractionally, towards the healing of a planet that’s torn to pieces at the moment, by strife, by war, by different religions warring with each other. But through the Universalist language of music perhaps there is a possibility to bring about a healing process and, after all, music originally was this function. If one listens or looks on the rituals of the American, Indian or African tribes one sees that all ritual ceremonies and all music was either addressed to the creator or it was music of healing in order to help heal. Music in the West has become so sophisticated [...] that I think we’ve lost sight of this dimension in music.³¹

28 Robert Scholl, ‘The Shock of the Positive: Olivier Messiaen, St. Francis, and Redemption through Modernity’, in Begbie and Guthrie (eds.), *Resonant Witness*, pp. 162–89 (p. 187).

29 *Ibid.*

30 Arnold, *Sacred Music*, pp. 63–86.

31 John Tavener, interview by David McCleery, transcribed from ‘John Tavener Reflects: A Recorded Interview’ on the album *John Tavener: A Portrait* (Naxos, 8558152-53, 2004).

Similarly, Jonathan Harvey hoped that his music would lead people away from selfish and harmful individualism and towards a better community: 'I like to unify, not into an easy unity, but a unity which is rich and complex. I'd like music to speak of, to herald and to prophesy a better world, less entangled with personal egoistic emotions.'³² At its best, therefore, music brings harmony and a shared experience broad enough to encompass everybody's individual experience, religious or otherwise, and thus bring them closer together.

Performers of sacred music also find the secular, concert-hall context a conducive setting for high-quality performance and musical interpretation.³³ For Phillips, sacred music is more powerfully communicated in a concert performance than in a liturgical one. If the performance quality is exceptionally good, moreover, the music's theological power is more effectively transmitted: 'I simply think the music is stronger theologically when it's being sung well, and that is more likely in a concert.'³⁴ For singer Francis Steele, musical interpretation is a crucial factor in communicating the sacred nature of music, regardless of context. This, he argues, is because sensitive interpretation can transform a relatively mundane text into one with authority and persuasiveness, bringing performer and listener alike closer to the mystery of God.³⁵ For both these performers music is able to transcend denominational and religious boundaries; their views are borne out by the opinions of respondents to a recent research survey.³⁶ For one respondent, there was a perceived community bond between the contemporary audience and those who had heard the same music in past generations:

I enjoy the shared experience of making music and sharing it with the audience, and the communion between the contemporary audience and the craftsmen of past ages who built the parish church in Witney. I like to reflect on the similarities and differences between the modern audience's reaction to the music and that of past audiences.

For another respondent, the concert music inspired a spiritual experience:

Sacred music always brings me back to the knowledge that I have a spiritual dimension. It enables me to be grounded in my prayer and meditation. For me sacred music, particularly Renaissance and Baroque, is a bridge between our worldly existence and the wonder, power and awesomeness of God.

Thus, some concert performances may not be easily categorized as either secular or sacred. Recent examples of concert series seeking to present a quasi-religious experience to concert performances have been those entitled 'Pilgrimage'. Harry Christophers' annual *Choral Pilgrimage*, with his choir *The Sixteen*; and John Eliot Gardener's *Bach Pilgrimage*, performed by *The Monteverdi Choir* and *English Baroque*

32 Daniel Jaffé, 'Jonathan Harvey: Interview', *Composition Today*, [n.d.], http://www.compositiontoday.com/articles/jonathan_harvey_interview.asp

33 Arnold, *Sacred Music*, Chapter 3, pp. 63–83.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

36 For survey results, see Arnold, 'Experience of Music', www.experienceofmusic.org

Soloists, both presented sacred music as concert programmes often performed within ecclesiastical settings, such as cathedrals, but without any liturgical or religious ritual. The result for the paying audience is a liminal experience which may be imbued with religious meaning or not, depending on the beliefs and intentions of the listener. But not all listeners are comfortable with this ambiguous arrangement. In a series of recent interviews with Anglican clergy, parish priest Nicholas Brown made a clear distinction between listening to sacred music within a worship context and listening in a concert context:

Even where the music is performed as a concert in a sacred building, for instance a reconstruction of a Latin mass, for me that is still very different from if it is performed as part of a celebration of the Eucharist. The concert setting and the genuine liturgical settings could be visually and practically identical, but there's something about the intention of the musicians and clergy that affects the way I engage with it spiritually.³⁷

This view is echoed by a comment made by an anonymous contributor to the recent research survey:

I felt removed from daily worries and preoccupations to a greater awareness of the miracle of human life and creativity. That feeling would have been greatly enhanced had the performance taken place in a place of worship. Sacred music and churches usually give me a space where I can be other than my quotidian self.³⁸

For some, religious liturgy is an important context for sacred music to be meaningful. For others, a sense of community (past and present), spirituality, prayer and meditation can be found by listening to sacred music in a secular setting. Indeed, even the terms 'religious' and 'secular', in the context of musical experience, encounter and relationship, can be misleading.

IV. Religion, Secularism and Faith — The Search for Truth through Beauty

One of the problems with these categories of 'religious' and 'secular' is the lack of recognition of the many people who do not neatly fall into either category; an experience of implicit faith is not the same as explicit propositional, ideological and doctrinal belief. A growing number of people want to label themselves as 'spiritual but not religious'. Nancy Ammerman has labelled such people as extra-theistic. Such people may be those who have never been to church; they might be those who have stopped attending church but who still seek meaning, joy, and the fulfilment of their humanity, in nature and beauty, whilst seeking somehow to explain the mystery of existence.³⁹ For this growing sector of society, institutional religion has less relevance

³⁷ Interview with the Reverend Nicholas Brown (Team Rector, Louth Parish Churches), 2017.

³⁸ See Arnold, www.experienceofmusic.org

³⁹ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), quoted in Ian Mobsby, 'The Place of New Monasticism in a Post-Secular

than spiritual experience. For them, spiritual practice is a superior pursuit to doctrinal belief. As Bryan Turner has argued, ‘philosophers tend [...] to concentrate on religious beliefs rather than on practice’.⁴⁰ In seeking spiritual nourishment through music, there emerges a sense of wonder that may have religious meaning, and may not. For some, ‘spirituality becomes process, with notions of God replaced by notions of being-ness’.⁴¹

Thus, in order ‘to understand the more general relevance of religion as a public cultural resource’,⁴² we might need to focus not so much on belief as on practice.⁴³ It is into this realm of practice, or praxis, that culture and the arts fit so well. Between the theist viewpoint of transcendence as an experience that leads one to the divine and the rationalist approach which explains it as a heightened level of feeling, there is a sense that truth can be found through the experience of beauty rather than doctrine alone.⁴⁴ This non-theistic standpoint elevates art and nature as access points to a better moral life, as Iris Murdoch has written: ‘The appreciation of beauty in art or nature is not only [...] the easiest available spiritual exercise; it is also a completely adequate entry into [...] the good life, since it *is* the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real.’⁴⁵

Those who attend concert performances of sacred music, whether in a secular space or a de-sacralized religious space, may be confessional Christian believers seeking religious meaning in the sacred words. Alternatively, they may have a less definite sense of the divine or spirituality in the numinous mystery of the music. No art form is arguably better for ‘spiritual expression and religious resonance’ despite, or rather because of, its non-verbal essence.⁴⁶ Nothing better conveys meaning and ‘communicates to our senses and to our reflection what little we can grasp of the naked wonder of life’.⁴⁷

Culture’; Nancy Tatom Ammerman, ‘Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 52 (2013), 258–78 (p. 258 and *passim*).

40 Bryan S. Turner, ‘Religion in a Post-Secular Society’, in Bryan S. Turner (ed.), *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), pp. 649–67 (p. 650); quoted in Marcus Moberg, Kennet Granholm, and Peter Nynäs, ‘Trajectories of Post-Secular Complexity: An Introduction’, in Peter Nynäs, Mika Lassander and Terhi Utriainen (eds.), *Post-Secular Society* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions, 2015), pp. 1–26 (p. 6).

41 June Boyce-Tillman, *Experiencing Music — Restoring the Spiritual: Music as Well Being* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 49.

42 Michele M. Dillon, ‘Can Post-Secular Society Tolerate Religious Differences?’, *Sociology of Religion*, 71 (2010), 139–56 (p. 142); quoted in Marcus Moberg, Kennet Granholm, and Peter Nynäs, ‘Trajectories’, in Nynäs, Lassander, and Utriainen, *Post-Secular Society*, p. 7.

43 Turner, ‘Religion in a Post-Secular Society’, p. 658.

44 Mountford, *Christian Atheist*, p. 22.

45 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), pp. 64–65, quoted in Mountford, *Christian Atheist*, p. 23.

46 *Ibid.*

47 George Steiner, *Real Presences* (London: Faber, 1989), pp. 216–17; Philip Bohlman, ‘Is All Music Religious?’ in Jon Michael Spencer (ed.), *Theomusicology — A Special Issue of Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 3–12 (p. 9); Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 16–17.

Conclusion: Encounter, Experience and Relationship

In the twenty-first century, music that speaks deeply to the most fundamental aspects of human flourishing inevitably concerns encounter, experience and relationship. For this reason, sacred music continues to appeal to a secular audience, because, as George Steiner has put it: 'Music means. It is brimful of meanings which will not translate into logical structures or verbal expression.'⁴⁸ Moreover, 'Music has long been, and continues to be, the unwritten theology of those who lack or reject any formal creed.'⁴⁹ The reason, therefore, that so many atheists hang on to the 'coat tails' of religion is that 'art, music and literature provide their closest access to religious experience.'⁵⁰

The search for truth through beauty is one that can be undertaken by the believer, the agnostic and the atheist alike. For people of faith, they might discern traces of an unknown reality that transcends the world.⁵¹ While for others, the experience of transcendence through music need not point towards a supernatural reality but, rather, is firmly of this world.⁵² Either way, whatever our faith stance, through sacred music we often encounter a transformative relational experience. In relationships we may perceive a spark of divinity, or spirit; in art we might take that experience one stage further and intuit a deep knowledge of the spiritual life that cannot be found by reasoned argument or deductive thinking. It is in this context that community becomes so important. It is through experience, encounter, and relationship — encompassing music and the arts, nature and the world around us, and relationships with people — that knowledge of a deeper reality of self and other emerges. The arts, and music in particular, offer an important path that can take our experience of the world beyond ourselves and help us to perceive the reality and mystical truth of something greater.

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

49 Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 218; quoted in Maeve Louise Heaney, *Music as Theology: What Music Says about the Word* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), p. 6.

50 Mountford, *Christian Atheist*, p. 20.

51 John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 136; Hans Küng, *Mozart — Traces of Transcendence* (London: SCM, 1992), p. 35; Mountford, *Christian Atheist*, pp. 20–21.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

