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 'announcements', 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.
In an essay exploring the spiritual dimensions of human creativity, James MacMillan invokes Luke’s account of the Annunciation and, in particular, Mary’s posture of receptivity as a way of thinking about artistry and the role of divine inspiration. As MacMillan observes: ‘In St Luke’s account of the Annunciation, it is not just Mary’s fecundity that is inspiring to a creative person. A more powerful and more pertinent metaphor for the religious artist is the balance between, on the one hand, Mary’s independent free will and, on the other, her openness to the power of the Holy Spirit’.  

Similarly, as MacMillan explains, ‘an artist or composer who thinks in real and meaningful terms of a divine inspiration’ should at the same time recognize ‘the full and active participation of all one’s human faculties’, for it is ‘through the interaction of all that makes us human — our intellect, our intelligence, our emotion and our physicality, our universal experience of joy and despair, our flesh and blood — with the breath of God which brings forth creative fruit (for an artist new work, new art, new music)’.  

In this chapter, I want to draw on this model of receptivity as a matter of openness and active participation. However, instead of focusing on the artist or composer, I wish to consider the role of the listener and the ways in which musical meanings are also interactively constituted. Whilst in general this is a relatively uncontroversial argument, which broadly accords with widespread developments within the field of musicology, to argue for such an interactive approach in relation to religious meanings is to diverge from dominant interpretive models within that discipline and, perhaps more surprisingly, within the sub-field of music and theology. Before setting out

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2 Ibid.
the positive case for a conception of music-listening as a matter of active receptivity, therefore, I shall outline the influential approaches to music that keep this interactive model from view. The first of these argues for the importance of ‘social’ and ‘subjective’ meanings but seeks to exclude certain religious possibilities; the second argues for music’s religious significance but neglects the role of the listener in co-producing this. In arguing for a third way between these extremes, my conclusion thus owes something to the wisdom of ‘Goldilocks and the Three Bears’.

I. Closed-World Musicology

Perhaps the most prominent development within musicology over the last thirty years has been a widening of the predominantly ‘formalist’ focus away from a concentration on ‘the music itself’ to encompass, on the one hand, the ways in which music’s meanings are socially and culturally constituted in the subjective experience of music listening, but also, on the other hand, how music is chiastically involved in the formation and enhancement of listeners’ identities. One of the most articulate and pioneering advocates of this development — which is associated with ‘new’, ‘postmodern’ or ‘critical’ musicology\(^3\) — is Lawrence Kramer.

Kramer’s work has been influential in ways that can only be briefly acknowledged here. To begin with, it has been instrumental in dismantling the institutionalized segregation of music and language, which shored up the sense of music’s radical autonomy, which, in turn, he believes, shuffled classical music ‘out of the public sphere’ to ‘an honorific place on the margins of high culture’\(^4\). Kramer’s subversion of the music-language divide — by means of which he sought to deconstruct the dualistic categories of the ‘music itself’ and the ‘extra-musical’, as well as ‘the subjective musical response and objective musical knowledge’\(^5\) — has also played a vital role in opening up the discipline of musicology to an array of critical discourses and interpretive practices that have foregrounded the ‘worldly’ character of music (which was often occluded in readings that privileged its aesthetic autonomy) and have helped us to recognize the ways in which music contributes to the construction of social realities. In addition, Kramer’s conception of music as ‘cultural practice’ — the underlying rationale of which is ‘simply a demand for human interest’\(^6\) — has brought increased legitimacy not only to the idea of ‘performative listening’ and the ‘subjective’ meanings that ordinary

\(^3\) Although manifestly differing in their connotations, these three terms have all been used to describe the work of Lawrence Kramer, Richard Leppert, Susan McClary, Rose Subotnik and others, whose once intensely controversial approaches to music have now been largely absorbed into common practice. See Musicology: The Key Concepts, ed. by David Beard and Kenneth Gloag (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 122.


\(^5\) Ibid., p. 3.

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 1.
listeners bring to music, but also to informally evocative acts of interpretation — that is, ‘unsystematic, freely metaphorical or epithetical [...] semantic improvisations’. All of which has formed part of an immensely productive effort to release music from what Theodor Adorno described as a condition of ‘inane isolation’, which, according to Kramer, is fostered by ‘a hard epistemology that admonishes us not to impose our merely subjective interpretations on the semantic indefiniteness of music’. It is this sort of active participation by the listener in the co-constitution of music’s meanings that I am referring to as ‘the listener’s share’ and that along with Kramer I wish to affirm.

There are, however, some problems with Kramer’s attack on the idea of musical autonomy, which have significant ramifications for a theological approach to music. Most obviously, whilst Kramer’s interdisciplinary model of cultural practice purports to defend the value of ‘situated’ subjective responses to music and ‘context-related meanings’, it seems that certain listening experiences have more ‘human interest’ than others. For in arguing against the ‘ineffable’ autonomy of music, Kramer disparages another kind of ineffability too — namely, the sense of transcendence that may be evoked by music, which he derides as a ‘fable’ and the ‘relic of a certain nineteenth-century vogue for sentimental metaphysics’. Indeed, ideas about the autonomy and ineffability of music are deemed to be so pernicious that they are classed as ‘destructive irrationalisms’ by Kramer and portentously associated with those who ‘justify unspeakable things’. Even more bizarrely, just as formalist musicological activities are positioned outside the sphere of human interest — in contrast to the practices of those across the corridor who favour socio-political approaches — acts of

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7 By ‘subjective’ Kramer is not referring to ‘the condition of the self-regarded as a private monad’, but to ‘lived positions’ or ‘the process whereby a person occupies a series of socially defined positions from which certain forms of action, desire, speech, and understanding become possible’ (Lawrence Kramer, ‘Musiology and Meaning’, The Musical Times, 144 (Summer 2003), 6–12 (p. 6)). Kramer thus advocates a highly reflexive model of musical meaning, in which the listening subject has a constructive role and music can serve as a form of ‘world-making’ (ibid., p. 7).

8 Ibid., p. 7.


10 Kramer, Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge, p. 2.

11 In speaking of ‘the listener’s share’, I am drawing on the work of the art historian E. H. Gombrich, who spoke analogously of ‘the beholder’s share’ — that is, the psychological and emotional involvement of the viewer that an artwork invites and by means of which it is ‘completed’. See Chapter 6 of E. H. Gombrich, Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation, 6th edn (New York: Phaidon Press, 2002).


13 Lawrence Kramer, The Thought of Music (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), pp. 46–47. Kramer describes the ‘paradigm of autonomy’ in listening as ‘the rapture of being wholly absorbed or deeply moved or touched by musical experience, revealed to oneself in the ineffability of music’ (Kramer, Musical Meaning, p. 4). This ‘double ideal of autonomy’ is the bête noir of critical musicology, whose practitioners have a rather un-critical tendency to assign all faults to the idea of autonomy and all merits to ‘social meanings’.

14 Kramer, Musical Meaning, 5.
listening that involve a sense of transcendence are set over against ‘the realities of the social world’, as though such experiences and the effects they have on the listener took place somewhere outside the real. Yet surely it is possible for a listener to have ‘situated’ religious experiences — even if these are experiences of transcendence — and for music’s ‘context-related meanings’ to be inflected by faith or theistic concerns? Part of the problem with Kramer’s account is that he seems to think of experiences of transcendence in purely negative terms, as a kind of aesthetically induced concussion or a condition of vacancy that lacks any positive lure of its own and so is only significant as a ‘turning away’. For those more open to religious possibilities though, the experience of transcendence tends to be conceived as a positively motivated ‘turning towards’ — that is, as a ‘freedom to’ at least as much as it is a ‘freedom from’ — which is typically associated with a movement into I-Thou relation or a realization of divine presence that entails an expansion or intensification of being. As such, for the believer, rather than constituting a withdrawal from the real, the experience of transcendence is an opening of the self to an ultimate reality.

Yet even if one is uninterested in religious possibilities, one might also wonder if contemplative rapture in listening — even when it is an enchanted tarrying with aesthetic forms — is really so reprehensible. Are not such experiences, like going

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16 Like Kramer, Leppert and McClary bring together under the heading of ‘the ideology of autonomy’ both the ostensible self-sufficiency of the musical work and the ‘conventional musical reception of the “music lover” who listens to music precisely in order to withdraw from the real world’ (ibid., xiii). The idea that imaginative engagement with transcendent worlds is something that is set against the real has been vigorously challenged by Graham Ward, who argues that such acts of imagination are not ephemeral cognitive events that pass without footprints in a virtual sphere, but are instead acts that involve the body and can have real-life, extra-aesthetic effects that survive the experience and bear ‘ontological weight’ (see Graham Ward, Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don’t (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), Chapter 6, pp. 133–60).

17 This is not to suggest that the divine can be magically conjured by works of art, after the manner of Aladdin rubbing his lamp, but that art may serve as an affective trigger, which can radically transfigure our vision and open up new possibilities for being in the world. In this sense, what is transcended in such experience is an obstacle in us — namely, our customary alienated perception of the world — and what is revealed is the depth of the reality in which we always already stand. This conception of transcendence does not therefore entail an instrumentalization of the divine or usurp God’s free and prevenient agency (even though something radically changes or needs to ‘realized’ by the perceiver), and yet it remains a form of revelation, in which something ordinarily unapprehended is disclosed to us.

18 Thankfully, this somewhat puritanical critique of escapism has recently been challenged by a number of thinkers in various fields who have defended such modes of aesthetic absorption. See, for example, Elaine Scarry, On Beauty and Being Just (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1999); Jane Bennett, The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Rita Felski, The Uses of Literature (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); and Marie-Laure Ryan, Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015). However, it might in any case make sense to adopt a more nuanced model of contemplative experience, which recognizes an interplay between engrossment and detached reflection, thus involving an epistemological balancing of credulity and scepticism. For a consideration of this ‘twofold’ model of aesthetic absorption, see Sarah Tindal Kareem, Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
to the cinema or watching sport, a sort of healthy ‘holiday’ from one’s quotidian concerns? Moreover, as the practices of music therapy have shown, surely there are all sorts of psychological, emotional and social benefits to be gained from experiences of musical transcendence. Nevertheless, like Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, Kramer positions experiences of ‘rapture’ and ‘sublime transcendence’ on the same side of the fence as aesthetic autonomy, which is set over against ‘“real-world” concerns’ and the ‘actual’ conditions of ‘life and thought.’ In other words, what we find in Kramer’s reading of music is an ideological privileging of certain kinds of ‘social utility’ and contextual meanings along with an un-argued-for suppression of others, which is based on a refusal of religious possibilities.

Of course, Kramer is entitled to hold whatever views he wishes about religion. However, the problem is that he seeks to delegitimate certain possibilities on the basis of unaired presuppositions, and in doing so performs something of a vanishing trick on music’s transcendental significance. Against such taken-for-granted assumptions, I want to suggest that, although they may have been marginalized by the dominance of a secular construction of the real, these possibilities were never entirely effaced and music may still serve as ‘a venue for transcendence’.

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19 For a theologically informed discussion of ‘musical healing’ and the ways in which the art-form offers us the possibility of transformation and strengthened living, see June Boyce-Tillman, Constructing Musical Healing: The Wounds that Sing (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2000), and Experiencing Music — Restoring the Spiritual: Music as Well-Being (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016).


21 Kramer, Musical Meaning, pp. 4–5, 12.

22 Kramer’s narrow conception of ‘the social’, as a matter of interpersonal relations, is called into question by Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, which brings to light the ‘heterogeneous nature of the ingredients making up social ties’ and accordingly reconceives the social as an imbroglio of ‘actants’, which may be human, non-human, this-worldly or transcendent. See Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).


24 See, for example, the opening chapter of Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge, in which Kramer notes that once upon a time music was experienced as ‘a venue for transcendence’, and agrees with Carl Dahlhaus that during the nineteenth century ‘autonomous music capable of conveying the “inexpressible” became a replacement form of religion’; however, he goes on to claim that ‘Gradually […] the religious truth signified by autonomous music is effaced by the very autonomy that is, or had once been, its signifier. Where “strict concentration on the work as self-contained musical process” once meant the apprehension of the work in its unworldliness, the same concentration now means the apprehension of the innate character, the complex unity-in-diversity, of the musical process itself (ibid., p. 16). Quite a lot is asserted — and erased — in Kramer’s ‘now means’. Perhaps most conspicuously, it absolutizes the already sweeping assertion about the gradual effacement of music’s transcendental significance into a universal truth, which not only assumes that no one now listens to music in this way but also quietly seems to deprive music of the very possibility of such significance. This broad-brush narrative, in which the transcendental significance of music becomes a purely formal transcendence — in the sense of a cordoned off aesthetic sphere — such that music loses its potential metaphysical import, is repeated elsewhere in Kramer’s work. See, for instance, Kramer, Musical Meaning, Chapter 1, pp. 11–28.

25 For evidence that troubles Kramer’s assumptions, see, for example, Alf Gabrielsson’s Strong Experiences with Music: Music Is Much More than Music (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), which offers a snapshot of the multiplicity of things that music ‘now means’ — in the socially mediated and
Whilst methodologically this might appear to be advocating a retrograde step, this sort of interpretation of music can be maintained not only in light of, but even in terms of, Kramer’s critical musicological agenda. For, in its staging of a modality ‘at ontological odds’ with ‘the spatio-temporal object world’, music can serve an ‘iconic’ function, offering the listener intimations of the infinite or an analogical experience of transcendence. (As all the eschatological data are not yet in, it would seem premature either to take the validity of such intimations for granted or to rule them out in advance.) In this sense, then, the purported ineffability of music is not necessarily a matter of aesthetic autonomy sequestered from extra-musical meanings, as Kramer’s critique appears to assume. Rather, its ineffability and the sense of transcendence it evokes may paradoxically be a referential matter — even if its referent is in itself ineffable. To put this another way, what tends to get lost in the ‘either-or-ism’ of debates about music’s aesthetic autonomy, and deconstructions of its apparently transcendent self-sufficiency, is the possibility that music’s distance from quotidian reality may itself have a mimetic dimension.

Since it is often assumed to the contrary, it should be emphasized that although such experiences of transcendence are performative effects artfully induced by worldly constructs, this does not in any way prevent them from having an ‘iconic’ function. What matters from a devotional perspective is what takes place in front of the work — which is to say, how the possibilities it opens up are appropriated and ‘realized’ in the life of the listener. Whether a particular cultural product serves an ideological or revelatory function — and these are not mutually exclusive options — is only to be determined after the fact by the work’s effects. Neither does an affirmation of music’s productive aesthetic significance entail a denial of its ‘social meanings’. On the contrary, it is possible to acknowledge the constructedness of musical works and their embeddedness within ‘the densely compacted, concretely situated worlds of those who compose, perform and listen’ whilst simultaneously recognizing their ability to serve as a technology of enchantment, which can augment our vision of the real and offer us intimations of transcendence.

Although for many in the latter decades of the previous century, ‘transcendence’ was something of a dirty word — which smacked of escapism or mystification and an

subjective sense that is espoused by Kramer — and which includes a range of spiritual, ecstatic and transcendental experiences.

29 In advancing this argument I am diverging from the views of Susan McClary, who sees ‘metaphysical’ readings of music as ‘irreconcilable’ with approaches that recognise it as a ‘socially grounded, socially alterable construct’ (‘The Blasphemy of Talking Politics during Bach Year’, in Leppert and McClary (eds.), Music and Society, pp. 13–62 (p. 15)). Against this assumption, I want to contend that it is possible for a ‘worldly’ phenomenon such as music to be concretely situated and socially constructed and yet still evoke something beyond itself.
occlusion of socio-political concerns — such notions have, it seems, become more widely thinkable again, at once encouraging and encouraged by the so-called ‘re-enchantment’ of the West.⁴⁰ Indeed, one of the most surprising features of postmodernity is the way its radical epistemological scepticism appears to have precipitated an openness to mystery and a questioning of secularism’s confident exclusions.⁴¹ In such a context, the ‘demystifying’ gestures of critical musicology — which purport to ‘unmask’ the metaphysical pretensions of music as social constructs (in the sense of claiming that ‘X is really Y’) — start to seem as ideological as the stance they reject.

Drawing together the strands of this section: it seems possible to hold, against Kramer’s critique, that music may serve as a technology of transcendence without banishing it to a sequestered autonomy; without denying its social construction; and without suppressing its ‘human interest’. Indeed, perhaps the most important thing that is brought into view by the foregoing discussion of Kramer’s work is the possibility of a religious form of critical musicology; for although in Kramer’s antimetaphysical account moments of rapture and transcendence in listening are set over against ‘real-world’ experiences, one might to the contrary affirm that the ability to mediate intimations of the infinite — that is, to engender a sense of transcendence or a radiant ‘more’ at the heart of being — is one of the ‘social utilities’ of music.

II. Theological Imperialism

If Kramer’s work helps to open the way for a constructive theological account of music, even as it refuses religious possibilities, the work of Jeremy Begbie demonstrates how music can illustrate theological ideas, though it does so in a way that leaves little or no room for the kind of active receptivity that for Kramer — and most contemporary musicologists — is a vital part of the listening experience.⁴² In order to explain this

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⁴⁰ For a consideration of these changes, see Christopher Partridge, The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture, 2 vols. (London: T&T Clark, 2004 and 2005).

⁴¹ For an account of this paradoxical development — by someone who has no desire to promote it — see Quentin Meillassoux, After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency, trans. by Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008). Kramer’s stance is somewhat ambivalent in this respect, since on the one hand he prefaces his discussion of transcendence in The Thought of Music with an exposition of Derrida’s reflections on the modality of the ‘perhaps’ and the ‘as if’ structure of humanistic knowledge (pp. xii–xiii) — which would seem to announce a radical openness to the nature of the real — and yet, on the other hand, when it comes to determining the legitimacy of religious intuitions, this Derridean reserve disappears and there is little evidence of any real openness to different possibilities.

⁴² Another nagging problem with Begbie’s project, which there is not space to elaborate here, is his apparent antipathy towards popular music, which aside from a few tokenistic references is all but excluded from serious consideration. This rather illiberal exclusion zone, which seems to me theoretically and theologially very hard to justify, is especially glaring as his work purports to be concerned with music in general, and focuses on extremely widespread features, such as tension and resolution or the simultaneous sounding of different notes within the same musical space. Thus, his consistent disinclination to give any sustained attention to popular music, along with his fervent denunciation of ‘light’ and ‘sentimental’ forms gives the distinct impression that he considers it to be an inferior art-form of little or no religious significance. For a consideration of this problem, see David Brown and Gavin Hopps, The Extravagance of Music (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), Chapter 5, pp. 187ff.
omission and why it is a problem, we need to consider the methodology that Begbie espouses and has defended in the face of recent criticism by David Brown and others.33 Before doing so, however, it should again be acknowledged that there is not space here to do justice to the importance of Begbie’s work more generally, which has done so much to invigorate the theological study of music, in particular by highlighting how it can serve a catechetical purpose in providing us with new and fruitful ways of modelling Christian doctrine.34 Nevertheless, in spite of his sustained and fertile defence of music’s theological value, Begbie’s approach involves what amounts to a ‘listener-free’ model of musical meaning — which is to say, it presents us with an account of music in which its meanings are predetermined by the theologian and imposed upon rather than co-produced by the listener. What is the rationale behind this?

In Begbie’s view, theological engagements with music need to begin not with particular pieces of music, whose religious significance might then be considered, but rather with what he calls ‘the controlling truth criteria’,35 which are to be determined by the theologian and only thereafter applied to specific works. A clear exposition of this methodology is provided by Begbie in the opening essay of The Beauty of God: Theology and the Arts, which begins by abstracting from the New Testament a list of Christological criteria (although the criteria according to which these criteria are determined are not themselves presented for inspection), which are then ‘translated’ into musical equivalents.36 In this way, Begbie sets up a sort of theological algorithm by means of which it is supposed to be possible to measure the ‘Christian-ness’ of particular pieces of music, according to the degree to which they conform to his list of metaphorical criteria.37

Furthermore, in an attempt to exclude all secular influence and to establish a ‘purely’ theological model of aesthetics, Begbie insists upon a conception of beauty


36 Begbie passes briskly over the process of translation upon which his methodology rests; though it seems to me that the equivalences he attempts to secure — between the specifics of salvation history and the polysemic openness of sonorous forms — are much more precarious and problematical than his account acknowledges.

37 This kind of theological approach has been helpfully characterized by Gordon Lynch as an ‘applicationist’ methodology, which he defines as follows: ‘In this approach […] culture is subjected to a critique on the basis of certain fixed theological beliefs and values. A basic assumption of this approach is that it is possible to identify core theological truths from a particular source (e.g., the Bible or Church tradition) and then apply these critically to the beliefs and values of […] culture. Having identified these religious beliefs and values, […] culture is then evaluated positively or negatively to the extent that it fits with this particular religious view of the world’ (Gordon Lynch, Understanding Theology and Popular Culture (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 101).
that rejects traditional understandings of that notion and instead seeks to mirror, in an ‘emblematic’ fashion, the content of revealed theology. (Thus, such things as ‘broken beauty’ are elevated in his hierarchy of forms and presented as intrinsically more ‘Christian’ than such things as ‘closed harmonies’.) In this way, his ‘controlling truth criteria’ are tethered to specific aesthetic forms in advance of any consideration of particular works or experiences of listening.  

Whilst Begbie’s defence of an applicationist method appears to be motivated by understandable concerns about the demotion of theological criteria in the process of evaluation, his attempt to safeguard the authority of this interpretive vantage is puzzling in a number of respects — not least of which is the suggestion that this pre-emptive approach is the only valid theological method, and that all the alternatives are unwittingly beholden to secular criteria and are therefore insufficiently Christian. As George Corbett has noted, Begbie at times gestures towards a sort of ‘via media between what he perceives as the “double hazard” of “theological instrumentalization” (where “music is treated as essentially, or no more than, a vehicle, a mere tool at the behest of theology”) and “theological aestheticism” (where an overriding concern with the “autonomy of music” leads people to give music “a semi-independent role in relation to theology”, and to attribute to it a “veridical access to the divine”’). Yet there is little sign of this middle ground in practice; for whilst it is clear that Begbie keeps his distance from the latter, it is hard to see how an approach that insists upon the pre-emptive assertion of ‘controlling truth criteria’, and evaluates works of music on the basis of their conformity to this theological checklist, can avoid the first of these hazards. As I have highlighted the hermeneutical problems with this approach

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38 This promulgation of a normative model of ‘Christian’ beauty, based on a checklist of privileged aesthetic features (Christian beauty will involve A, B, C, and Christian beauty will avoid X, Y, Z), inevitably consigns a vast amount of art and human experience to the category of the ‘not beautiful’ or ‘not Christian’. The obvious question that is raised by this is: does ‘Christian’ necessarily have to mean ‘formal correspondence to a gospel-shaped pattern’? Can it not be a matter of moral or spiritual effects, doing as Christ did, or work performed for the greater glory of God irrespective of the particular forms?


40 Begbie’s hardline stance on this matter has come to the fore in a spate of recent essays that take issue with the flourishing of approaches that appeal to notions of sacramentality and natural theology. See for example ‘Natural Theology and Music’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, ed. by Russell Re Manning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 566–80; ‘The Future of Theology amid the Arts: Some Reformed Reflections’, in *Christ across the Disciplines: Past, Present, Future*, ed. by Roger Lundin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 152–82; and ‘Openness and Specificity: A Conversation with David Brown on Theology and Classical Music’, in *Theology, Aesthetics and Culture: Responses to the Work of David Brown*, ed. by Robert MacSwain and Taylor Worley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 145–56. In these essays, which have been gathered together and republished in *A Peculiar Orthodoxy: Reflections on Theology and the Arts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), Begbie adopts a more combative posture, describing his own riposte as the firing of ‘warning shots across the bow of this fashionable steamer’ (‘The Future of Theology amid the Arts: Some Reformed Reflections’, pp. 181–209 (p. 156)), and appears to insist that his applicationist approach is the only legitimate theological method. This rather exclusivist stance is also reinforced by a series of delegitimizing evaluations of alternative approaches, such as those espoused by Albert Blackwell, David Brown, William Dyrness, Anthony Monti, Philip Stoltzfus and Richard Viladesau, all of which are summarily deemed to be unconvincing.
elsewhere, I shall concentrate here on its sidelining of the listener and its troubling neglect of difference, which seems to be an inevitable consequence of the pre-emptive determination of musical meaning.\footnote{Begbie is of course aware of and claims to disapprove of such ‘theological imperialism’ (see, for example, Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (London: SPCK, 2008), p. 21). Indeed, he frequently begins his works with an anticipatory caricature of precisely such a posture, presumably in an attempt to put some distance between it and his own practice. However, I do not think the problem can be taken care of with disclaimers, since it appears to be an in-built tendency of his pre-emptive approach.}

In what sense is this so?

In contrast to Kramer’s interactive model — which makes room for differences in gender, race, social circumstances and disposition etc., in allowing meanings to be subjectively co-constituted in the act of reception — Begbie’s approach seeks to establish the meaning of music’s constituent features, in a prevenient and essentialized fashion, aside from the particular context of reception.\footnote{For a scathing critique of Begbie’s work from a feminist perspective, see Heidi Epstein, *Melting the Venusberg*, pp. 84–87.} What this means in practice, in spite of Begbie’s theoretical disapproval of ‘theological imperialism’, is that the theologian dictates to the listener what the meaning of the music will be. Gone, it seems, is the possibility of more subjective responses to music. Gone is the polysemous openness of a-semantic sonorous forms. And gone is the dependence of meaning upon context, which Jacques Derrida among others so persuasively established.\footnote{As Derrida argued, signs — including, and perhaps especially, musical signs — can always signify ‘more, less, or something other than what [the author] would mean’ (Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 158). This is because every sign can be performed, cited or ‘re-sited’ in a context that altogether alters its meaning. The upshot of which is that the meaning of musical forms cannot be fixed in advance according to a system of formal correspondences, for signs cannot be forcibly stabilized to an ‘essence’, neither can they be tethered to any one context nor ‘ideally’ established outside of all context. Instead, their meaning is provisionally and pragmatically determined by particular contexts of reception and performance, whose meanings are always open to supplementary re-contextualizations, which neither the context of origin nor the author’s intentions are able to control. In light of these widely accepted conclusions, Begbie’s attempt to foreordain the meaning of musical forms and establish a system of context-transcending correspondences would seem to be hermeneutically somewhat naïve.}

Yet what room is there for such differences of response in an approach that dogmatically lays down in advance what the theological meaning of musical forms will be?

There is, however, a further opportunity cost, as Begbie’s theologizing ‘through’ the arts — which gives us the answers ahead of the questions — is a very rationalistic affair, which shows how music can provide helpful analogies of doctrinal loci, like illustrations in a theological handbook, but which has little to say about the devotional uses or affectivity of music.\footnote{Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Meaning Making* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 182.} This tendency to restrict music’s religious significance
to an illustrative ideational function appears to be tied up with Begbie’s aversion to natural theology, which is itself a metonymy of a wider pessimism that shapes his approach.  

Of course, it will at first seem odd to describe Begbie’s project as pessimistic, given that he has, across a series of scholarly studies, championed the religious significance of music and promoted its ability to clarify theological insights. And yet, when it comes to music’s effects, its epiphanic potential or the ‘subjective’ uses that Kramer and other musicologists celebrate — indeed, when it comes to anything beyond the ability of music to provide us with analogues of Christian doctrine (which I suspect is not the primary reason most people listen to music) — he is extremely reluctant to grant it any airtime and prefers instead to dwell on the dangers at the expense of a more constructive reading that explores the possibilities of music.

In summing up, therefore, we might say that Begbie’s approach to music discourages that daring but discerning hospitality to mystery that John Keats referred to as ‘negative capability’ — that is, the willingness to dwell in openness with indeterminacy and to hold oneself in ‘uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts’, content for the present with ‘half-knowledge’, without any ‘irritable reaching after fact and reason’. Begbie’s approach, in contrast to this, encourages a distrust of any intimations of divine presence that lack explicit Trinitarian form. Indeed, it seems what is wrong with natural theology for Begbie is that it is not revealed theology. What I mean by this is that instead of considering natural theology and revealed theology as compatible but different things, based on different kinds of data and involving different modes of knowing,

metaphor; it is a giver of insight’ (William A. Dyrness, Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life, p. 151). Along with a number of others, Dyrness wonders if this is all that music can do. Suggesting that it can perhaps do or be something more, he asks: ‘Can it perhaps be a kind of icon, transparent to its eternal ground? Can it perhaps stop us in our tracks and make us aware of a Presence before which we may be transformed?’ (ibid.). See also the work of Philip Stoltzfus, who complains that Begbie’s approach is not ‘a constructive one’, since it serves only ‘to reinforce or reconceptualize the already existing, unexamined “cantus firmus” of “the triune God, definitively disclosed in Jesus Christ”’. Stoltzfus worries that such an approach ‘merely assist[s] us in providing apologetic décor to previously articulated doctrinal positions’ (Philip Stoltzfus, Theology as Performance, p. 16).

See, for example, the conclusion to Theology, Music and Time, which ends with a rather pessimistic coda, emphasizing ‘the effects of human corruption’ and distancing his project from natural theology (p. 247ff.). See also Jeremy Begbie, Music, Modernity, and God: Essays in Listening (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), in which Begbie provides an informative historical discussion of the relationship between music and natural theology in the eighteenth century, which opens up all sorts of fruitful possibilities that are then summarily closed down in the chapter’s pessimistic reflections on the value of natural theology in contemporary culture (pp. 90–94).


Begbie’s most extensive treatment of this issue is contained in his latest monograph, Jeremy Begbie, Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), which patiently summarizes and then proceeds to unpick an array of theological approaches to the arts that affirm the value of vespertal intimations of the divine and art’s ability to engender a sense of transcendence. For a more positive consideration of natural theology, which includes a helpful account of how the theological quest for ‘disciplinary purity’ and ‘the single-minded security of an essentialist approach’ led to the denigration and eventual eclipse of the ‘inherently “impure” enterprise of natural theology’, see Russell Re Manning, ‘Natural Theology Reconsidered (Again)’, Theology and Science, 15 (2017), 289–301 (pp. 289, 297).
each with their own distinct uses and value, Begbie has a tendency to treat the former as a faulty or inadequate version of the latter, which taints our perception of natural theology and encourages the impression that it is more trouble than it is worth. The problem with this, as Conor Sweeney has observed in another context, is that Begbie is ‘so concerned to avoid idolatry that he ends up short-changing the full experience of created being’. Moreover, this reticence towards natural theology — which leads Begbie to leave aside in his approach to music the less certain, more open and more mysterious experiences of listening — also leads to a neglect of the ways in which subjectively inflected meanings emerge in the interaction between the music and the listener. This neglect, I have suggested, is an inevitable consequence of his pre-emptive methodology, according to which theology lays down criteria in advance that prescribe and control the meanings of music, which leaves little or no room for the active receptivity of the listener.

III. A Hospitality to Possibilities

So where does this leave us? Having considered the problems with the approaches espoused by Kramer and Begbie, how might we more constructively fashion a ‘third way’ that draws on the insights of both approaches whilst taking account of their reciprocal critique?

What in general I wish to propose is what might be described either as a theological variant of Kramer’s model of ‘critical’ musicology or a ‘post-hoc’ alternative to Begbie’s applicationist approach. In contrast to Kramer’s ‘closed-world’ model, such an approach would not rule out religious possibilities and would not, or not necessarily, construe the ‘escapist’ experience of absorbed listening or the evocation of an enchanted ‘elsewhere’ as a negative activity. Rather, I suggest, this sense of transcendence in music listening, which is obviously an aesthetic construct, can nonetheless serve a devotional purpose — as an icon or analogical foretaste of what, for a believer, may be a reality to come. And in contrast to Begbie’s pre-emptive approach, which encourages an essentialization of musical meanings, I think the criteria of evaluation should be introduced at the other end of the interpretive process, after, rather than before, the listening experience, so that it is possible to take account of what the music does and how it is used by individual listeners. Since the value, from a theological point of view, of widening Kramer’s model of listening to encompass the possibility of religious experience should be readily apparent, I shall concentrate in this final section on the advantages of adopting a more hospitable ‘post-hoc’ alternative to Begbie’s predetermining approach. But first though, what might such an alternative look like in practice?

50 In developing this more optimistic theological approach to music, I have been influenced by the example of David Brown, whose ground-breaking work on theology and culture focuses attention on the ways in which works of art — including ostensibly secular art — may be capable of eliciting religious experience (see, for example, David Brown, God and Grace of Body).
In contrast to the ‘theological imperialism’ of an applicationist approach, which seeks to assign religious meanings (and hence also values) to musical forms in advance of the event of music listening, a ‘post-hoc’ approach would encourage us more courteously first of all to attend with ‘a maximum of openness’ to the particular work, along with the context of its performance and reception, and only afterwards to reflect on its religious value, in light of its effects on the individual listener (which may be positive, negative or theologically neutral). Thus, the difference between the approaches pertains not only to the point at which theological criteria are introduced but also the kind of criteria employed. For whilst, according to Begbie’s applicationist model, theological significance is a matter of formal correspondence with what John Shepherd somewhat facetiously calls ‘a shopping list of meanings’, according to the alternative I am proposing, the criteria of evaluation would be more practical or experiential, in that they would be related to the moral or spiritual fruits of the experience in the life of the individual listener. In the view of John Hick, this moral or spiritual ‘fruits’ criterion — which would allow us to make judgments about religious experiences more ecumenically in terms of their congruence with the teachings of any particular tradition — is ‘the universal criterion of the authenticity of religious experience’, common to all of the major world religions. It also accords with the

51 Robert Johnston, Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 65. Johnston makes this point with reference to film; however, I think his argument can be generalized to other forms of art, including music. As Johnston avers: ‘to first look at a movie on its own terms and let the images themselves suggest meaning and direction — is not to make theology of secondary importance. Religious faith is primary. […] But such theologizing should follow, not precede, the aesthetic experience’ (p. 64).

52 In his study of the role of music in contemporary worship, Frank Burch Brown recommends a parallel model of ‘aesthetic hospitality’. Very briefly, according to Burch Brown, the process of responding ‘hospitably’ to an artwork should entail three discrete elements: first of all, it involves apperception (that is, taking in ‘everything relevant to whatever makes the work of art the thing it is’), followed by appreciation (registering our personal likes or dislikes about the work), and finally appraisal, which, he argues, we must learn to postpone until we are sufficiently familiar with the particular style or form of art under consideration (Frank Burch Brown, Inclusive yet Discerning: Navigating Worship Artfully (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 20–21). See also Trevor Hart’s essay ‘Conversation after Pentecost? Theological Musings on the Hermeneutical Motion’, Literature and Theology, 28 (2014), 164–78, in which he argues to the contrary of Begbie that it is the ‘kenotic’ suspension of pre-emptive criteria in the ‘conversation’ with aesthetic phenomena that constitutes a distinctly Christian model of hermeneutics.

53 For some reason Begbie appears to assume that hermeneutic priority is determined by sequence alone, as if beginning the act of interpretation with works of art rather than Christological criteria necessarily entails ceding authority to the former. Yet surely it is possible to engage in criticism from a Christian perspective without first of all seeking to fix the meaning of aesthetic forms, according to a checklist of metaphorical correspondences? And surely the act of suspending judgment — or refraining from pre-judging the religious significance of tonally moving forms — is not the same as renouncing a Christian standpoint? Can one not turn to theology or scripture after allowing music its say, without this relativizing our religious orientation? Surely one can listen to others without ceasing to be a Christian?


traditional Augustinian principle of charity, which exhibits what we might refer to as an ‘adverbial’ logic. Very briefly, this might be explained as follows.

Since, for the present, according to Augustine, the earthly and the heavenly cities ‘are entangled together […] until the last judgment effects their separation’, the city to which we ultimately belong is determined not according to what we love but according to the kind of love we exhibit (whether our love ends in the thing itself or whether the object mediates and entices our love beyond itself). Therefore, whilst Augustine can be severely critical of pagan culture, and worries about even as he delights in the allure of this-worldly beauty, there is a more fundamental principle of charity consistently running through his work, according to which the value of this-worldly phenomena is not to be determined in an ‘essentialist’ manner by things ‘in themselves’. Instead — to employ an anachronistic idiom — it is performatively constituted according to the good it does or to which it leads. In short, for Augustine, if it serves the good, it is good. (Jean-Luc Marion’s well-known distinction between the icon and the idol also evinces an ‘adverbial’ logic that parallels Augustine’s principle of charity, in that icons and idols are not defined for Marion on the basis of their intrinsic properties; rather, they are constituted by the kind of gaze or comportment they engender. Hence, any phenomenon can function as an idol — irrespective of its content — if the gaze it elicits terminates in, and is exhausted by, its object, just as any phenomenon can function as an icon — again, irrespective of its content — if it orients the gaze beyond itself towards the unenvisageable divine. The criteria that I would therefore propose, as an alternative to Begbie’s pre-emptive approach, pertain to the charitable effects of a work, and not simply its formal constituents. In Augustine’s terms, if a thing leads to an increase in our love of God and love of our neighbour, then we may call it good.

There are, I suggest, several interrelated advantages to this sort of ‘post-hoc’ theological method, which may be clustered into two key points — to do with openness and diversity — by way of conclusion. In the first place, this kind of approach to music — which is broadly indebted to the ‘turn to affect’ — is important because we can never securely determine in advance what stimuli will elicit what effects, so that


58 Augustine discusses the hermeneutical implications of his ‘principle of charity’ in De doctrina christiana, where he argues that the ultimate criterion of evaluation is whether or not an interpretation inspires a ‘double love’ — that is, ‘love of God and love of [our] neighbour’ (Augustine, On Christian Teaching, trans. by R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), I, p. 86 and II, p. 11).


60 Gordon Lynch advocates a more detailed but less explicitly theistic variant of this pragmatic approach in Lynch, Understanding Theology and Popular Culture, pp. 190–91. His criteria are intended to help us form aesthetic judgments ‘on the basis of their effects for human experience, relationships and communities’; however, one of his criteria is ‘Does [the particular cultural work] make possible a sense of encounter with “God”, the transcendent, or the numinous?’ (ibid.).
we cannot with any certainty say what sacred artefact might become an idol or what ostensibly profane work of art might serve as an icon and kindle within us a sense of the divine. After all, who could have predicted the effect that reading *Phantastes* would have on C. S. Lewis? Of course, this means — as Plato and Augustine amongst others recognized — that music can be dangerous, which is why discernment in relation to its effects is necessary. Yet this openness is also an affordance structure and a source of hope, as it is this that allows music to be coupled to an incorrigible plurality of things, in ways that can radically transfigure our environment, extend or enhance our natural capacities and open up new modes of being in the world. Music, in other words, has a transformative potential — which is dependent upon even as it reciprocally elicits the active participation of the listener — and can serve a variety of devotional purposes, such as clearing a space for contemplation, scaffolding acts of domestic piety or evoking intimations of transcendence. In contrast to applicationist approaches — which seek to constrain or set aside the generative openness of music’s affects by tethering its forms to readymade meanings — a more capacious post-hoc approach leaves room for us to evaluate these often unforeseeable affordances and their effects on the listener (as well as the ways in which music is able to illustrate doctrine). Thus, without losing sight of the dangers or letting go of theological criteria, a post-hoc approach encourages a more hopeful posture of openness and a hospitality to possibilities in the midst of ‘uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts’.

In the second place, this sort of approach is much more attuned to human diversity. This is because in beginning with a ‘one-size-fits-all’ template of pre-evaluated musical meanings, prescriptive theological approaches like Begbie’s evince a troubling disregard of the ways in which differences in gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation may condition the subjective reception of music. (In presenting his theological criteria as a neutral précis of the scriptural witness that is supposed to be normative for all Christians, Begbie displays a parallel disregard for denominational differences and a failure to recognize that his distillation of scripture is an interpretation of

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61 Lewis famously ascribed a vital role to the experience of reading George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* in his conversion to Christianity. ‘What it actually did to me’, he wrote some years later, ‘was to convert, even to baptize […] my imagination’ (Introduction to *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946)). This experience prompted him to observe wryly: ‘A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere — “Bibles laid open, millions of surprises”, as Herbert says, “fine nets and stratagems”. God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous’ (C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Collins, 2012), pp. 221–22).

62 The notion of affordance, as developed by the psychologist J. J. Gibson, allows us to recognize both the specific properties of music and the openness of its potential effects, and so enables us to steer a pragmatic middle course between ‘immanent’ and ‘attributed’ models of meaning. For a good discussion of this kind of balancing of affordance and affect, see Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For a more critical account of how music can be used to transfigure our surroundings, see Michael Bull, *Sound Moves: iPod Culture and Urban Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2007), which offers a socio-political analysis of auditory ‘technologies of separation’ that highlights in particular their ‘dystopian’ aspects. However, his account also brings into view the possibility of a more positive reading of the ways in which such listening practices offer an escape from or transformation of the blankness and ‘repelling nature’ of urban life (p. 31).
scripture, which is shaped by the preferences of a particular tradition.\footnote{This is especially problematical in his evaluation of composers whose music is criticized from the perspective of traditions other than their own. For example, what it seems Begbie is criticizing in the music of the Catholic Messiaen and the Orthodox Tavener is that it doesn’t sufficiently reflect the emphases of the Reformed tradition (see Begbie, \textit{Theology, Music and Time}, p. 145; and Begbie, \textit{Resounding Truth}, p. 175).} Moreover, in presuming to determine in advance what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Christian music for all listeners, such approaches fail to leave room for pragmatic pastoral considerations — about what aspects of the Christian narrative it might, in particular times of need, be appropriate to foreground; for surely what is damaging and what is conducive to a person’s spiritual and psychological wellbeing will vary widely according to their experiences and existential circumstances. Thus, the other principal advantage of a post-hoc theological approach is that it takes cognizance of human diversity and allows us to recognize the role of context, cultural conditioning and individual difference in the constitution of musical meaning (which thereby ceases to be something that is imposed from on high and becomes, instead, reflexively determined by the listener’s active reception of the music). Adopting this sort of approach to music also means that the criteria of evaluation — which encompass the music’s effects on the listener — can be tailored to the individual’s own particular conception of the good, be it religious or secular. As I have argued, postposing the act of evaluation in this way need not entail an elevation of aesthetic over theological judgments; though it does involve making room for diversity in determining the sort of theological perspective to which one appeals, and it does endorse a pluralistic vision that honours the inflections of lived experience.