



THEOLOGY, MUSIC AND TIME

REVIEWED BY STEVEN WRIGHT



Theology, Music and Time (Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine)

Jeremy S. Begbie
Cambridge University Press, 2000, 332pp

The dialogue between theology and the arts has garnered increasing attention over recent decades. Yet interdisciplinary study has its pitfalls, not the least of which is that most of us are amateurs when disciplines converge. Work often leans too much in the direction of the author's specialisation, and fails to achieve a sophisticated perspective on multiple disciplines because of the sheer volume of content to be digested and synthesised.

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This is why reading Jeremy Begbie is such a pleasure, and his book from the turn of the century, *Theology, Music and Time*, is an excellent showcase of his ability. His work brings to bear his great understanding of music history, theory, and practice and marries it to a sophisticated knowledge of Christian history, theology, and practice. But even a capable author does not rescue us from being amateur readers. Few of us can claim to have expert knowledge of both music and theology. In his recent writing

Begbie goes to some lengths to cater to the limitations of his audience. However, earlier works such as *Theology, Music and Time* require a bit more of his readers.

Theology, Music and Time contains three sections: the characteristics of music; their application to theology; and improvisation and freedom.

Begbie's vision of music is enticing and thoroughly contemporary. Music is primarily an art of actions involving 'music making' and 'music hearing'. It is pleasing to find that Begbie does not participate in idealist theories where music is the most spiritual of the arts because of its ostensible intangibility. Also abandoned is the romantic idea of musical experience as the rapturous moment where the listener captures a glimpse of timeless eternity. Instead, he posits the physicality of music, which does not lift us out of time, but situates us firmly in it according to its own particular way.

This gets to Begbie's main thesis: considering music's interaction with time may benefit theology. Begbie's thesis is humble. His striving for precision at times restrains his writing and gives it a cautious tone. But perhaps caution is

advised when entering the proverbial minefield of theological discourse and the arts. At times the musical reader might wish that Begbie would theorise more about music from a theological perspective. However, at the outset he makes it clear that he is not writing a theology of music, or a 'theoretical overview of musical experience, or a comprehensive hermeneutics of music, or a theological hermeneutics on the basis of which we can provide secure "readings" of the "theological meaning"

of this or that music' (p19). Instead, he wants to explore the theological potential of music. Applied specifically to music and time, Begbie hopes to refine our theological thinking about time. We cannot simply read musical theory as theology, but inasmuch as there is a common object in their purview – in this case, time – there is room for dialogue. Begbie raises the possibility that insights about time arising from musical theory and practice may be worthy of theological consideration.

Historically the 'Great Tradition' of thought about music saw it as tuning in to the numerical order of the cosmos. The excellence of human music depended on the extent to which it tuned in to this inaudible music fundamental to all reality. The Neoplatonic variation on this has us reaching beyond the sonority of music to the idealised eternal beauty manifested in the lower physical forms of sound: vibration, resonance, etc. Even as this theory waned, its ideas have persisted as metaphor, and its language haunts even the accounts attempting to rebuff it. The Christian reception of this tradition must be tempered. Begbie reminds us that we cannot forsake the goodness of creation (p81). The Christian hope, after all, is not for the persistence of the immortal, immaterial soul after death, but rather for the resurrection of the body and the new creation: 'our final destiny is nothing other than to participate fully in ... redeemed temporality' (p147). Music then, is the art of music making within a world of God-given integrities, the 'musical ecology' (p89).

The popular understanding of time has the past and the future plotted on a straight line irreducibly held apart by the present. This account cannot accommodate musical time, where each



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successive note in a melody carries the completion of the preceding note and anticipates the next. Each musical moment contains the three supposed poles of time (pp62-63). Begbie hopes to expose the potential of thinking about time in this way for theology.

After his introductory chapters on the characteristics of musical time, he begins to make application to theology; and Begbie does not find himself short of applications.

At issue in theological discussions about time is the relation of God to his creation, and the relation of humanity to the rest of creation. Christians have often supposed that time is an unwelcome constraint from which we will be liberated at the end of all things. Contrary to this, Begbie construes time as a part of creation and a good gift from God. Music challenges the inferiority of temporal things (p86). We see in music that ‘change need not imply chaos’ (p85). Created reality exists with and in time, and this is not necessarily a sign of fallenness – Edenic paradise was temporally embedded.

Other applications embrace such doctrines as redemption, eschatology and the Eucharist. Musical time can instil patience and teach us that repetition need not be tedious, but may in fact be necessary for intelligibility. These analyses read, at times, like musical object lessons – as though Begbie were just giving us material for sermon illustrations. However, through music, he is attempting to bring

clarity to contested areas of theology. What holds for music does not necessarily hold for theology, and Begbie acknowledges this and avoids subjugating theology to music. Music’s interaction with time, however, raises questions about the nature of time and invites theological reflection. This, I think, Begbie demonstrates well.

Two of the more fruitful aspects for

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theology are his description of the levels of musical time and his discussion of freedom within constraint. Begbie describes musical time as occurring in overlapping metrical waves. Music is made up of bars and hyperbars. Two bars together might constitute a hyperbar. We might then imagine two of these hyperbars bracketed at another level by a larger hyperbar, and so on *ad infinitum*. One hyperbar may brace two smaller bars, but the closing of this hyperbar falls only part way through a greater hyperbar. The resolution of one wave is always carrying forward the tension of another wave at another level (p107). These many layered tensions and resolutions may be similar though not concurrent: ‘a cadence which closes, say, the first section of a work may be identical to the cadence which eventually brings the whole piece to a conclusion’ (p111). Music offers us an alternate vision of time by which we can attempt to understand delay and fulfilment. It would be very exciting to see theologians consider

the possibilities of this view of time. The third section of the book takes up the theme of improvisation to consider freedom. Begbie gives an excellent comparative analysis of John Cage and Pierre Boulez. Boulez composed according to strict mathematical patterns, Cage according to chance. Cage would toss coins to select his notes in an attempt to avoid imposing any melodic or harmonic idea – or external continuity – on the music (p190). Despite the great difference in their approaches to composition their music sounds very similar when performed. Begbie suggests that both were attempting to avoid certain constraints with which every composer must reckon, and resulting sounds can be hard to recognise *as* music (p188). Freedom is not the negation of constraint, but ‘mediated through, and in relation to constraint’ (p198). Begbie suggests that musical improvisation gives us a good picture of the exercise of freedom

within constraint. This improvisation can take the form of the mutual interplay between God and his creation. Given constraints are not bad, but make room for the exercise of freedom.

It has been ten years since the publication of *Theology, Music and Time*, yet the book is as timely now as it was then. Theologically, the book is rich. It leaves many doors open for further examination. Begbie’s rather short treatment of God’s relation to time could use some expansion, taking into account the complex structure of time. The notion that time is a good gift of God, and a fitting constraint on human freedom has consequences for Christian spirituality and public discourse that ought to be explored.

Begbie stands apart in the interdisciplinary field of music and theology. In this careful study he shows that music does have theological potential, and that faith seeking understanding should at times break out in song. ©