

ON PREFERRING MOZART

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Upper harmonies

Like the sound of a bell struck ages ago, the question of sacred music has faded away. Or so it seems. While musical theory has long lost its grip on the issue, musical practice often still makes use of gestures that call for a (re)consideration in theological terms.

However, writing and listening in a post-Christian age, one inevitably has to face a certain 'death of God'. For one cannot simply reify the old music theologies and interpret contemporary musical practice in terms of those theologies. Augustine and Luther may well be of value, as for instance Radical Orthodoxy has recently tried to show, but one cannot escape the new (pre)conditions of 'sacred music'.

When considering sacred music *after* the 'death of God', one should first perhaps question how it would be possible. What, in other words, are these (pre)conditions? In this essay I will not discuss sacred music in so far as it is labelled as 'sacred' (by individuals or institutions, such as the Pontificium Institutum Musicae Sacrae in Rome) on the basis of law, genre, or habit. When I refer to the notion of sacred music, I am pointing at a certain (slight, but decisive) difference between 'religious' and 'sacred' music. Before continuing, let me first clarify this point.

Iégor Reznikoff, at present logician at Nanterre University and most famous for his practical re-interpretations of Gregorian chant, has spoken words that are pertinent to recall. In a lecture at the 1975 *Congrès de Musique Grégorienne*, he said, "Each of the members of this Congress would be quite embarrassed if one would ask him or her to respond with precision to the question [of 'what is sacred music?']. Or [he or she] would answer by a circumscription of the genre: it's liturgical chant, the chant of divine Office, chant that accompanies or supports prayer... But the question remains: *qu'est-ce que le chant sacré?* What is a chant that supports prayer? In fact, one would wish an analytical type of answer. In a precise manner: can one draw a distinction between its [sacred] music and [...], in particular, beautiful *religious* music?"

Does it know particular and precise laws? And if it does, what are these laws and what are their meanings?"¹

The preliminary answer Reznikoff gives to this question is that sacred art (to generalize the issue) "serves to put [itself] into relation *as really as possible* with the divine world [...], whereas religious art [is] as any other [art] at a given time, but with a religious text, theme or subject."² This definition is clearly only the beginning of a reflection on the issue of sacred art and music, but it may well serve to set aside (or at least to warn against) any simple interpretation of sacred music as something we all know in one way or another. I must comment - please allow me this professional confession - that I am, time and again, surprised by the number music listeners who do seem to have a (often vague but positive) notion of sacred music. I am also surprised by their frank and largely unreflected affirmation (even among intellectuals such as Roger Scruton) that this or that music is 'absolutely' in tune with the divine. The names most often heard in this context are - surprisingly unsurprising - those of J.S. Bach and Olivier Messiaen.

Sacred music seems to be alive and well. The question remains: what kind of life does it live? Certain secrecy has always been part of its theory and practice, but that should not tempt one to leave it to the fideles or the unreflected. For there is too much at stake. If music is (still) related to the divine, as so many affirm, and if it is (and it is!) repeatedly used as the example *par excellence* of divine manifestation, it should be taken seriously and analyzed critically. Music has somehow receded into the realm of the listener's private inner space, and has become the object of private (and often sentimentally motivated) judgement. This obstructs possibilities, which were perhaps better until the demise of musical modernism, to transcend the level of mere *doxa* and engage in a critical debate. The present time - to put it sweepingly - calls for a renewal of the reflection on sacred music more than any other, precisely because sacred music has become the object of theoretical neglect, intellectual laziness, and personal fantasy.

The immediate cause of this topic for discussion has been the delightful appearance of music in Marion's *Étant donné* and several references in his work to the idolatries of the ear and the various forms of boredom involved in listening. However, on a more profound level, it has been astonishing to find Mozart again the referred example. In the context of my research into the the-

¹ Iégor Reznikoff, 'Le chant grégorien et les traditions du chant sacré,' in *La vie spirituelle*, vol. 623 (1977), 877-890: 878. My italics.

² Iégor Reznikoff, 'La transcendance, le corps et l'icône dans les fondements de l'art sacré et de la liturgie,' in F. Bspflug (ed.), *Nicee II, 787-1987: Douze siècles d'images religieuses* (Paris: Cerf, 1987), 375-391: 380-81.

ology of music, Marion's reference resounds with many other references most often found in theologically informed thinkers who are generally not known for their involvement in music. One may think that this very lack of involvement explains why they refer to Mozart instead of, say, Antoine Brumel. Closer inspection of these references reveals that it is indeed for specific reasons that Mozart's name is mentioned. This begs the following questions: what are these reasons and what do they tell us about the possibility of sacred music in the current, so-called post-secular world? In the search for answers, I do not look directly to Mozart or his musical work. Rather I cite the traces of 'Mozart' in the work of, among others, Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Jean-Luc Marion.³

The concluding thesis is that contemporary musico-theological thought, while trying to thematize the possibility of sacred music, tends to overlook the undecidability of musical idolatry, which itself is indispensable for the very religious potential of music in the first place. In other words, there is no sacred music in the orthodox, pure sense without the structural, heterodoxical possibility of its turning into an idol. Or even more straightforwardly, music remains indispensable for religion, yet without being in whatever sense a safe haven for devout thoughts, feelings, nor - hard to translate - for 'beleving' or 'zingeving'.⁴

Mixed Feelings

In a well-known documentary, Sviatoslav Richter once murmured, while sitting at a table and scrutinizing his pianist hands, with typical despair: 'Why can no one play Mozart well? What is the secret of Mozart?' His brief answer: "No comment."⁵ This short remark uncovers a dimension of Mozart's music which his admirers readily defend against those who insinuate that his music is too easy and too accessible to be profound. More often than not, these opponents adhere to the other Viennese giant, Ludwig van Beethoven. As generally known, Karl Barth is one among those who would definitely not side with Beethoven. For him, it's Mozart *über alles*. "I even have to admit

³ Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart 1756-1956* (Zürich: TVZ Verlag, 1956), 16-17, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Bekenntnis zu Mozart,' in *Die Entwicklung der musikalischen Idee: Versuch einer Synthese der Musik* (Einsiedeln - Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1998), 62.

⁴ In recent decades, these Dutch words have moved to center stage in the debate on individualized and (almost) secularized forms of religion, expressing a kind of personal, emotive perception of the world, and the act of giving meaning to one's life and the world, respectively. In the following I formulate an implicit argument against these notions, rejecting their focus on the self-conscious (listening) subject as the locus of religious originality.

⁵ See Richter, *l'insoumis* (translated as *Richter, the Enigma*), directed by Bruno Monsaingeon (1998).

that, if I would ever go to heaven, I would go to Mozart before I would inquire about Augustine and Thomas, Luther, Calvin, and Schleiermacher.”⁶ Barth’s faith in Mozart is quite remarkable if one takes into account that the theologian of the “*Senkrecht von oben*” was even prepared to think of Mozart in terms of analogy; in this way diverting from the very core of his thinking since the *Römerbrief*.⁷ “Let no-one think that it is easy to find out what or whom it is we are dealing with here. Taking the brevity and eventfulness of his life into consideration, Mozart’s rich oeuvre presents us with an account [*Rechnung*] which in no way can be easily settled - one may call it a *secret*. It is important to realize this if one wants to understand why his music (and through his music also his personality) has such an exceptional appeal, even to this very day.”⁸

This leads to the perhaps impossible question: what secret? It is not surprising that Barth has no straight answer to this question. However, he does not halt at stating his claim. He hints at Zwingli’s remark that even a pagan could have straight access to the Lord, and suggests that Mozart may have had something of the kind. But more importantly, he specifies the idea of a Mozartian secret by referring to a double “riddle” in the composer’s music.⁹ Firstly, he refers to the paradox of its apparent matter-of-factness (*Sachlichkeit*). “Listening to Mozart, one hears all of the 18th century music. [...] But the 18th century isn’t Mozart and Mozart isn’t the 18th century.” He has written his music within the bounds of contemporary musical language, and yet remains infinitely superior in his time, elevated “like an eagle.” Then secondly, Barth defines the paradox of Mozart’s freedom. In particular this refers to an objection to Mozart’s music being perceived as “easy-going, effortless, light and therefore relieving and liberating.” Barth states the contrary and says of Mozart, “That which is grave is light, and that which is light is infinitely grave.” Further adding, “His music is not at all accessible *ohne mehr*. In its most radiating, most naive, as well as in its really gay movements, the music’s lightness, without hiding itself as such, is very demanding, disquieting, almost stirring.” Finally he concludes, “The specifics of Mozart’s music might well be related to this contradiction - or that in his music, it is no contradiction.”

⁶ Barth, *Mozart*, 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 46-47: “I rebound one question unanswered: how do I, as an evangelical Christian and theologian, arrive at speaking in favour of Mozart [...] while he was so Catholic, freemason at that, and for the remainder wholly musician? [...] May I kindly ask [the audience] to accept for this moment the general remark that the New Testament does not only speak of the Kingdom of the Heavens, but also of the *similarities* [*Gleichnissen*] of that Kingdom?”

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16. My italics.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 35-38.

The theme of united but contradictory feelings resurfaces in many writings on Mozart. In a recently republished collection of texts on music, François Mauriac writes: “Mozart - music simple in appearance, easy departure, full of laughs and lost, calls to a source which exists, which is very nearby, in the secrecy of ourselves, [...] but no! The road that leads up to it is lost, forever lost. [...] To live is, for most of us, to be distanced from the paradise of which Mozart collects the voices, the laughs, the songs, in a ravishing music which gives us so terrible a pleasure that one needs a lot of strength and courage to listen to it without tears.”¹⁰ Dwelling on the topic of “terrible pleasure,” Mauriac and Barth (among many others) seem to touch upon the feeling of the sublime, which only shortly after the death of Mozart became a key notion in musical thought. Mauriac’s image invokes the imagery of Novalis and Schiller, who readily described music as a veil covering the then-favorite goddess Isis. Music offers itself to the listener as a place of transparency for the absolute beyond, while keeping him or her at an equal distance from this paradise. In the discourse of the musically sublime, the mixed feelings of pleasure and pain this inspires are ascribed to the fragmentary experience of a beyond which itself is understood as music, i.e. as the absolutely musical.¹¹ Barth hints at this *topos* when he asks: “Couldn’t the unmistakable primeval tone [*Urton*] of the youthful and also later Mozart be identical to the primeval tone of music itself? Didn’t he ring this tone in a Form [*Gestalt*] valid for all times? Isn’t that the reason why it is so hard or impossible, to define the singularity of Mozart: see here! Look there! [...]?”¹²

Mysterious Analogies

“*Auf Mozart ist noch kein Staübchen gefallen...*”¹³ This final sentence of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Bekenntnis zu Mozart* wonderfully illustrates this point. Mozart’s music is not about its sounding appearance, but about its being somehow elevated above the finite world. On Mozart’s music dust *cannot* fall. Von Balthasar almost regards this music as not being made by human hands, as Cicero would have it, *non humana manu factum, sed de caelo lapsum*. “While on the forehead of all Beethovenian music we discern the sweat drops it has cost its creator, and while in Bach we discern at least the labour behind so much tectonics, [...] the enormous oeuvre of Mozart seems to have come

¹⁰ François Mauriac, *Mozart & autres écrits sur la musique* (La Versanne: encre marine, 2002), 85-86.

¹¹ See Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, *The Musically Sublime* (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2002).

¹² Barth, *Mozart*, 18.

¹³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, ‘Bekenntnis zu Mozart,’ in *Die Entwicklung der musikalischen Idee: Versuch einer Synthese der Musik* (Einsiedeln - Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1998), 63.

into being without any effort, delivered like a full grown child and matured without a single disturbance. A phantasmagoria from paradisiacal primeval times - [...]?"¹⁴ It is tempting to translate these evocative phrases in terms of the iconic tradition. Von Balthasar suppresses the composer's human involvement in favour of the *acheiropoietos* usually ascribed to the icon, and puts extreme weight on the riddle of the music's apparent 'objectivity'. But instead of going deeper into the fascinating hypothesis of musical iconicity, I would like to comment on von Balthasar's own music theology.¹⁵ Doing so will shed a brighter light on Karl Barth's reference to the analogical dimension of Mozart's music, i.e. its "resemblance" to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Von Balthasar - who is known to have been directly inspired by Barth's analysis of divine glory (*Herrlichkeit*) in *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*¹⁶ - has gone a long way to defend the transcendentalism of beauty. In his design for a theological aesthetics, he gives central place to the notion of *Gestalt*, which he both derives from the Thomist (and for that matter Aristotelian) thought of hylomorphism and from Goethe's reflections on botanic life forms (*Pflanzenmorphologie*). This double source is typical for von Balthasar's approach to theological aesthetics in that he does not limit his scope to the theological tradition, but very much shows the value of artistic and philosophical sources as well. In his opinion, the *Gestalt* is the formal principle of beauty. "Those words that try to express beauty, first of all focus on the mystery of the *Gestalt* or the creature [*Gebilde*]. *Formosus* stems from *forma*, *speciosus* from *species*. But at the same time the question arises of the 'great radiance [*Glanz*] from within,' which illuminates the form from within. At once there is: the creature, and that which makes it radiant, which turns it into something valuable and lovable."¹⁷ These two objective instances of beauty (*species* and *lumen*) subjectively correspond to the perception of, and the being enraptured by, beauty. In this perception or "*wahr-nehmung*" beauty and truth coincide, "for no-one sees truth who is not at the same time enraptured, and no-one can be enraptured who has not perceived [*wahr-genommen*]."¹⁸ Thus, starting from the idea of *Gestalt*, von Balthasar designs an aesthetic that pairs form with depth, truthful "*wahr-nemung*" with ecstatic feeling, and revelatory objectivity with faithful "*Hingabe* [giving-(oneself)-away]."

¹⁴ Ibid., 61.

¹⁵ See for a discussion of the musical icon my *Doorbraak en Idolatrie: Olivier Messiaen en het geloof in muziek* (Delft: Eburon, 2003).

¹⁶ Cf. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, II-1 §31 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1987), 722-64.

¹⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit: Eine theologische Aesthetik*, vol. I (Einsiedeln - Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1988), 10.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Earlier in his life, von Balthasar wrote an essay on music and its relation to the transcendent. This essay does not yet speak the precise language of the later *Trilogie*, nevertheless, it foreshadows the thought of the *Gestalt*. According to the young von Balthasar, music contributes to the “in-formation” of the divine, i.e. it offers a “diminished projection of the Eternal in the land of Form.”¹⁹ The Eternal he associates with notions of sense, such as the “*Gesamtidee*” of all art. Thus, information means the coming-into-Form of a supreme sense. This movement of divine information can only be experienced in an immediate metaphysical experience, based on an *analogy* between the sensible Form that results from information, and the dynamic Form of divine mystery. The thought von Balthasar develops here clearly draws from the idea of the *analogia entis*, postulating a “Form of Truth” on the basis of the Pauline notion that Christ is the living image (i.e. dynamic Form) of the Father. The analogy of Forms enables him to transpose musical and even theatrical Form to the level of revelatory speculation. “Music is that particular Form which brings us closest to the Spirit, it is the thinnest veil that separates us from it. [...] [Music] is a terminus of the human, and at this limit the Divine begins. It is an eternal monument to the fact that mankind can suspect [*ahnen*] what God is, eternal-singular, multiple and dynamically fleeting in itself, and in the world as Logos.”²⁰

According to von Balthasar, the main vehicle music has for this analogical approach to the divine is the musical ‘living image’ par excellence, *melody* (and, to some extent, rhythm). One may recall that for Clement of Alexandria, Christ was the “New Song,” the only and true Orfeo. Melody has great power, but always remains enigmatic. It has the capacity of transcending its own technical make up, because its proper shape (its contour or *Gestalt*) is always more than the sum of its notes. A melody can be transposed up and down without losing itself. Being (as such) an ideal object, hovering above the sounds that carry it, melody remains an enigma. An enigma with a very powerful grip on the human soul. In this respect - and this is important not only for von Balthasar, but also for Schopenhauer²¹ - it resembles the *form* of mystery. For, according to the former, divine mystery does precisely that: catch mankind by beautiful (i.e. verisimilar and ethical) form, while remaining itself a question mark.²² And so one may understand how a great lyricist like Mo-

¹⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Die Entwicklung der musikalischen Idee: Versuch einer Synthese der Musik* (Einsiedeln - Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1998), 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

²¹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, §52 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), 362.

²² It should be added here that in the later von Balthasar, form is not just Kantian beautiful form, but always broken form, modelled after the broken and yet united *corpus triforme*, which consists of the eucha-

zart, by creating melodies that *at once* catch the listener with immediacy, and leave him or her in the dark about their true nature, can transport us *by analogy* to the Kingdom of Heaven. Again we find traces of the sublime, the ‘mixed feelings’, the ‘terrible pleasure’ of listening to music - now formalized in the melodic *Gestalt* and its analogical power. But have we yet arrived at a notion of sacred music?

Kunstreligion

Von Balthasar’s music theology is brave because it’s risky. Intended at least in part to defend Christian theological aesthetics against the formless pantheism of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, he has to admit that the analogy of melody remains empty. And to a certain extent, this emptiness seems to be demanded by the experience of music itself. In the present context, the privileged example remains, of course, Mozart. Barth stresses that his music “does not mean to say anything.” And he explains: “As opposed to Bach’s, Mozart’s music does not contain a message, and as opposed to Beethoven’s, it does not contain any life experience. He does not give musical expression theses; nor to himself. [...] Mozart does not mean to say anything; he just sings and plays without imposing anything on the listener, without demanding a choice or attitude, it leaves the listener completely free. [...] He does not even want to praise God. Although in fact he does so by his humility, through which he, being in a sense only an instrument, simply makes audible what he hears, what apparently comes to him from God’s creation, what comes to his mind or what comes to the surface.”²³ This passage indicates that, at least in Barth’s view, Mozart’s music does not receive its eminent significance from any inherent or given content, but from the music’s *formal* character. It is, as Barth stresses, purely musical play. Correspondingly, von Balthasar declares that musical form is a “revelation from above” and adds the question, “for what else is form?”²⁴ Thus one might be tempted to conclude that it is in form, and *in form alone*, that one has to look for any theological dimension in music.²⁵

ristic, natural and ecclesial bodies. However, he does not apply this notion of form to music or musical experience. See von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit*, vol. I, 443.

²³ Barth, *Mozart*, 24.

²⁴ Von Balthasar, *Die Entwicklung*, 48.

²⁵ In his analysis of von Balthasar’s text on music, Mario Saint-Pierre stresses that it has been one of the main aims of this text to refute the one-sidedly Dionysian interpretation of music by Schopenhauer, Wagner and Nietzsche, which according to Saint-Pierre, von Balthasar would have found alien to the Christian emphasis on the (living) image, as well as to the ideas of light, form and analogy. See Mario Saint-Pierre, *Beauté, bonté, vérité chez Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Paris: Cerf, 1998), 37-110: 63.

Von Balthasar's notion of form has just been described - it is not flat formalism, but intends to discern from the musical form its depth and light. It gives insight into the priorities of a Christian music theology as opposed to metaphysical speculation. The prime example of the latter is Schopenhauer, who to some extent solidified the thoughts of a number of music-loving Romantic poets and writers, including Ludwig Tieck and Wilhelm Wackenroder. These two stand out as theoreticians of musical transcendence and are well known for their practice of a religion that is in fact the diametrical opposite of orthodox religion: a religion of art (*Kunstreligion*), and more specifically a *religion of music*. This religion turns the format of any music theology upside down, by taking music as its means (and, to a certain extent, even its end) for religious - or not so religious - devotion. It would seem to belong to the domain of aesthetic theology rather than theological aesthetics.²⁶

The most striking detail however, is the way in which these thinkers and artists theorize the possibility of musical revelation. Taking the symphonies of Beethoven as their inspiration, Tieck, Wackenroder and a host of other like-minded music lovers rejected the idea of programme music and adored the possibilities of purely instrumental music. In their view, this music, being delivered from the external such as mundane authority, Church, or non-musical programmatic narratives, was the chosen new media for divine revelation. Baptized later on by Wagner as 'absolute music', it became the vehicle of a transformed post-Christian, and largely secularized spirituality, which it must be noted to some extent still functions in concert halls this very day. The principle figure that made this new heterodox religion possible was the kenotic, empty form of absolute music - the ideal monstrosity for *Sehnsucht* and pious feeling. Remarkably, this empty form, figure par excellence of the *aesthetic* notion of the musically sublime, turns out to be the spitting image of von Balthasar's notion of form, and indeed the question arises: how can one separate his orthodox notion of *musica sacra* from its idolatrous (and I would say indeed *demonic*) double?²⁷

The remainder of this reflection focuses on the possibilities Marion's thoughts offer in considering the difference between these two phenomena. To some extent this difference draws (or is supposed to draw) the line between aesthetics (and/or the heterodoxy of aesthetic theology) on the one hand and

²⁶ For a specification of this distinction, see the introduction to the first volume of von Balthasar's *Herrlichkeit*.

²⁷ Saint-Pierre's argument that von Balthasar's notion of form stresses that element of distance while Schopenhauer's metaphysics aim at a kind of mystic union, seems to overlook the fact that both take musical melody as their (ideal) object for the contemplation of whatever lies 'beyond'. In addition, von Balthasar's use of the image of the veil (see his *Die Entwicklung*, 57) is similar to the imagery used for instance by Novalis, who in Saint-Pierre's view would stand out as an opponent of the former.

theological aesthetics on the other. In other words, it is supposed to draw the line between the divine song of the Angels and the demonic (but equally 'terrible' and ecstatic) song of the Sirens.²⁸

The Gift of Music

In one of his letters, Augustine writes, "Music, that is the science or the sense of proper modulation, is likewise *given* [*concessa est*] by God's generosity to mortals having rational souls in order to lead them to higher things."²⁹ This idea of music being given is perhaps the best entrance to the thoughts developed by Marion and which so far have culminated in his masterly *Etant donné*. As many of you will know, the central problem of this study is phenomenological *Gegebenheit* (givenness) and, if I may say so, its misappreciation (or should I rather say blasphemy) by idealist philosophy. In a passage sketching the saturated phenomenon as a phenomenon that exceeds by its sheer excess of donation the parameters of philosophical (i.e. normative) phenomenology.

This excess raises the question of how can the saturated phenomenon ever be part of experience if it contradicts the conditions of the possibility of experience as described by (among others) Kant. Marion writes that the experience of the saturated phenomenon should - arguments to the contrary withstanding - be regarded as a "well-founded experience."³⁰ "In fact, confronted with the saturated phenomenon, the *Je* cannot see it not, but cannot see it either as a simple object." Here in ocularcentric terms, as in most of his work, the privileged example of the saturated phenomenon as a 'counter-experience' is, according to Marion, *music* - or rather musical listening. "The honor goes to music, or rather to musical listening, to give privileged examples of this conception of the phenomenon: the overture of a symphony - *for example the 'Jupiter'* - arrives at me in such a way that well before being able to reconstitute [*sic*] a melodic line or taking measure of an orchestral texture (i.e. before constituting two objects on the basis of two givens [*donnés*]) I hear [*prends dans l'oreille*] the movement (non objectifiable, because giving) of the sonorous mass which arrives at me and which submerges me, and then [I hear] my

²⁸ The French Catholic composer Olivier Messiaen was known for his use of the exclamation "terrible!" as an expression of his delight and approval.

²⁹ Augustine, Epistula 166 ("De origine animae hominis"), V, 13. My italics. Cf. PL 33, 726: "Unde musica, id est scientia sensusve bene modulandi, ad admonitionem magnae regni, etiam mortalibus rationales habentibus animas Dei largitate concessa est."

³⁰ Jean-Luc Marion, *Etant donné* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), 300-302. My translation.

very delay with regard to the event of this coming.”³¹ Although I may know the piece of music performed, Marion says, this knowledge will not annul the appearance as such of the music, in other words, its *event*. “The musical offering offers first of all the movement itself of its coming - it offers the effect of its offering, without or beyond the sounds it produces.”

This passage contains many references to the tradition of music theology and aesthetics. Most striking perhaps is its similarity, on a structural level, with the notion of the sublime as theorized by Jean-François Lyotard. According to Lyotard, the sublime is “*ce qui brise l’esprit* [that which shatters the mind]” - a “*je ne sais quoi*” that circumvents the synthetic powers of the mind and leaves its traces in the outer regions of consciousness. Music likewise circumvents the economy of the listening mind by its singular “timbre” or “nuance”, offering the event of its arrival well ‘before’ (i.e. logically anterior, but also more originary than structural kinds of listening) its constitution as a sound object or piece of music.³² Marion’s analysis of a certain musical “event” as being well on its way to ascertaining a privileged relationship between music and donation, indeed encounters the musically sublime, as did the thoughts of Barth, von Balthasar (and, for that matter, Gerard van der Leeuw) on the subject. The theological possibilities of music are embedded in the experience of an *affectio*, which also cradles thoughts about the musically sublime and its tradition of absolute music. In the passage quoted, Marion testifies to the experience that music “affects one directly, as a pure donation which mediates almost no objectifiable object and which imposes on me an effectiveness immediately its own.”³³

Appearing as it may, this *affectio* or “effectivité” remains an enigma. It comes and touches, and - to borrow from Lyotard’s wonderful *Unvollendete* - may even be seen as existing only in (and through) touching.³⁴ It belongs to music, certainly, but this is not a belonging in the usual sense. It touches, maybe even “*interior intimo meo*,” but remains hidden from thought as “*superior summo meo*.”³⁵ In this respect, one finds oneself again accompanied by the tradition of theological and metaphysical thought on music as an analogy of (divine *or metaphysica*/ i.e. idolatrous - this remains undecided) mystery. Although Marion’s analysis does not mention it, the experience of music as “*para-doxe*” must be one - returning here to Mauriac - of “so terrible a pleasure that one needs a lot of strength and courage to listen to it without tears.”

³¹ Ibid., 302. My italics.

³² See also Jean-Luc Nancy’s recent essay on timbre and non-structural listening (“écoute”) in his collection *A l’écoute* (Paris: Galilée, 2002).

³³ Marion, *Etant donné*, 302.

³⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *La confession d’Augustin* (Paris: Galilée, 1998).

³⁵ Augustine, *Confessiones*, III, VI, 11.

So where does this leave us? Aren't we in fact incapable of accounting for the possibility of *musica sacra* other than within an aporetic parallel between the figures (*Gestalt*, *kenosis*, *affectio*) that are supposed to justify it theologically on the one side, and the very same figures that justify and support its diametric reverse? How to decide between an *affectio* in terms of the sublime and one in terms of a *visitatio* (or rather, *auditio*)? And how to decide between the *Gestalt* as a musical analogy of the Pauline "living image," and the *Gestalt* as a vehicle of musical *Kunstreligion*? It seems that music leaves us hovering between the two, proving time after time that it is "indispensable, but dangerous."³⁶

The undecidability of *music sacra*, or for that matter of musical idolatry (a *religion of music*), remains to be thought - and practically confronted. On the level of thought, Marion has offered musico-theological reflection an equally indispensable, but also dangerous hint by his discussion of the Kantian sublime. In the same section as cited earlier, Marion draws attention to the very short moment wherein the subject of the sublime is 'looked at' by the phenomenological other with "respect". According to Marion, this effectively turns the idol's invisible mirror into a rare experience of iconic saturation.³⁷ Although the Kantian account of this reversal remains ocularcentric, it may well open the parallel possibility of a saturating 'being listened-to'. It may lead towards turning the speculative, mirror-like logic of the musically sublime (that key figure of the historic, 19th Century form of the religion of music) into the aural 'transparency' of the musical icon.³⁸

In discussing the possibility of the musical icon with Marion, he first of all pointed out that, as opposed to the visual arts for which the reverse seems true, music is always iconic in the first place and becomes idolatrous only in the second instant. As Marion suggested, music belongs to the domain of *energeia* (or even *energeia enteles*), rather than to the sphere of *parousia* - it

³⁶ Henry Chadwick, aptly summarizing with these words Augustine's thought on music in the *Confessiones*.

³⁷ See Marion, *Etant donné*, 306-307.

³⁸ Here I should again refer to Nancy, in particular to his reflection on the chiasmic structure of the aural experience in general (see *A l'écoute*, 74-75). Nancy stresses the fact that I am never just the listener of a sound object outside of myself. I am always also, and at the same time, a body that resonates with the arriving sounds (and with the sounds that I myself produce, such as in singing or speaking). In other words, listening is always already engaged in a vibration that produces (or *gives*) *at once* my listening subjectivity *and* the objectivity of its sonorous 'outside', well before the (self-conscious) constitution of this dichotomy as such. The very resonance of my listening body opens up the possibility of my subjective listening being 'listened to', of its becoming the object for the ear of the other 'outside' of me. In this way, it precedes and resists any speculative appropriation in the vein of the musically sublime (which, it has to be repeated, has been a historical and systematic condition for the 19th Century religion of music).

escapes sensual or conceptual reduction precisely in the manner of a saturated phenomenon. Musical melody, for instance, demonstrates that in music, one does not listen to whatever becomes sensually apparent (i.e. the sounds), but to what gives itself without showing itself (i.e. the melody as such).³⁹

However, given the ongoing debate on the (theological, or non-theological) nature of phenomenological givenness, this musical privilege should not be taken as an answer to the question of *musica sacra*, nor even to the one of musical idolatry. It does, however, point to new ways to raise these seemingly obsolete questions and to look for new answers. The experience of music may generally be saturated with idolatry, but reading so to speak the musically sublime from the standpoint of the gift - a most arduous task - may help to understand the possibilities music still harbours for contemporary thought and experience. That is, well beyond the limits of a simple and triumphant reduction to *either* conceptual theology *or* the categories of present-day music aesthetics. It should also warn us against any simple appropriation of music as a last resort for private, all too private (i.e. unreflected and possibly self-indulgent) religious experience.

The sound of the bell struck long ago may have faded, but its highest overtones - untempered and barely audible - remain among us, and continue to whisper the question of *musica sacra*.

³⁹ This discussion took place at a colloquium dedicated to his work, organized by the Catholic University at Utrecht, and held on November 15th, 2002. I cordially thank Jean-Luc Marion for his inspiring interventions in the discussion on musical iconicity. In addition, I would like to thank Kirsten Spry for her linguistic comments on earlier versions of this text.