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AESTHETICS AND SACRED MUSIC

Gordon Graham

This paper aims to show how philosophical debates about the nature of music as an art can throw light on one of the problems raised by Plato's *Euthyphro*—how can human beings serve the gods?—and applies this to the use of music in worship. The paper gives a broad overview of expressivist, representationalist and formalist philosophies of music. Drawing in part on Hanslick, Nietzsche and Schleiermacher, it argues that formalism as a philosophy of sacred music can generate an answer to Plato's problem.

My purpose in this paper is to show how philosophical debates about the nature of music as an art can be made to throw light on an ancient problem about the worship of God. To do that, however, I must begin by setting out what I take that problem to be.

I.

Plato's short dialogue *Euthyphro* is generally thought important for a dilemma that it poses regarding the relation between religion and ethics. Is an action good because it pleases the gods, or does it please the gods because it is good? This is the issue that forms the centre piece of the exchange between Socrates and his interlocutor Euthyphro, but in fact the dialogue falls into three distinct parts. The first part effectively shows that the multiplicity of gods is irrelevant to the question—which is why Plato's dilemma is usually expressed in terms of God and good. The third, and possibly least discussed part, raises a question about the intelligibility of worship. How could human beings ever meaningfully serve God?

I am not quite clear [Socrates says to Euthyphro] about the thing which you call "service." I suppose you do not mean the sort of care we give to other things. The service of [God] is not like that—the sort of thing that we have in mind when we assert that it is not everybody who knows how to care for horses.¹

Euthyphro, of course, can only agree. The service of God must indeed be radically different from anything as mundane as veterinary care. At the same time, Euthyphro has difficulty seeing any grounds on which he

¹Plato, "Euthyphro," trans. Lane Cooper, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 181.



could deny the general claim that “care is given for the good and the welfare of the object that is served.” The problem is that subscribing to this general principle seems to bring with it an absurd result. If holiness is the service of God, and if service aims to benefit its object, then it seems to follow that “when you do a holy thing you make some deity better.”

This is an implication that Euthyphro emphatically rejects. Yet it is easy for Socrates to press the point. It seems obvious that the practice of worship includes such things as sacrifice and prayer. So much, at any rate, Euthyphro concedes. But if sacrifice is properly described as “giving to the gods,” and prayer is “asking them to give,” then worship is, as Socrates alleges, a “mutual art of commerce” between God and humanity. This, though, makes it impossible to avoid the question that Socrates poses: “What advantage could come to God from the gifts which He receives from us? Everybody sees what He gives us. Every good that we possess is given by Him. What advantage can He gain by what He gets from us? Have we so much the better of Him in this commerce that we get all the good things, and He gets nothing from us?” “Are you suggesting,” a horrified Euthyphro asks, “that God *gains* anything by what He gets from us?” Yet if He does not, Socrates responds, we are at a loss to explain the meaning of the gifts we offer Him.²

The dialogue does not end quite there. Euthyphro asserts that worship is not beneficial to God, but it is nevertheless pleasing. This claim simply returns the debate to the earlier dilemma, however. Are acts of worship good only because they please God, and not because they have any intrinsic value in themselves? If that is indeed the case, then *anything* that pleases will be a fit form of worship. Satanic practices will be as good as angelic ones, provided only that God is pleased by them. Accepting this horn of the dilemma, however, implies that there need be nothing *worshipful* about God. So why go in for divine service at all?

The problem Plato here identifies is a real one. What is it that we give God when we give Him “thanks and praise” which, the ancient *Sursum Corda* says, it is “right, and a good and a joyful thing always and everywhere” to do? What does God get from our praises? Euthyphro is surely correct in rejecting the idea that God *gets* anything. Since God is the sum of all perfections, He can lack nothing. Consequently, He cannot lack anything that we might give Him. But if God gets nothing from our worship, what is the point of engaging in it? And wherein lies the obligation to do so? On the other hand, Socrates is surely also correct in his contention that we must have *commerce* with God. A one-way transaction would not constitute anything properly called a relationship; if we are the *sole* beneficiaries (even on some refined spiritual plane), we can no more enjoy a relationship with God than we can with the air we breathe.

²Ibid., 184. I have substituted “God” for “the gods” here.

II.

Music plays a large part in the practice of giving God thanks and praise. To question the intelligibility of worship is thus to question the intelligibility of sacred music. To ask—what does God get from our music making?—is just to make a specific application of a more general question, and it thus presents us with a no less troublesome problem. Indeed it might be thought *more* troublesome. Some historical conceptions of what rightful worship includes fall very evidently foul of Socrates's challenge, but they are relatively easy to abandon. There is, after all, biblical precedent for doing so. "Your countless sacrifices, what are they to me?" Isaiah hears God declare. "I have no desire for the blood of bulls, of sheep and of he-goats when you come into my presence. Who has asked you for all this?"³ Who indeed? In pointed contrast to these barbarous practices, the Christian tradition of sacred music seems gloriously edifying, something that takes us into spiritual realms far removed from the blood and gore of ritually slaughtered animals. If the music of Bach or Tavener cannot be an adequate vehicle of divine worship, what could possibly serve this function? Nothing, it seems safe to say.

Perhaps we can approach the issue by asking what it is that *anyone* gets from music. Human responses to music might enable us to say something about God's response. What *does* an audience get from music? It is tempting to regard this as a quasi-empirical question, one that turns on the observed effect of music on listeners. But this cannot be quite right. While it is true that in matters of programming, say, the expectations and reactions of audiences are of considerable importance, there has to be more to the matter than this. Though we may need to know what kind of music people want to hear, we also need to know which music is most *worth* hearing. This second requirement, however, must have a different kind of resolution. To be able to identify the best in music, we have to have some understanding of what it makes sense to expect from music. To get this right requires us to have some conception of the nature of music, and this is a *philosophical* question, not an empirical one.

What should we expect music at its best to give us? It is widely supposed that there is an obvious answer to this question. Music provides us with profound emotional experiences. It does so because, the same supposition goes, its distinctive function is the communication of emotion. It is important to see the force of "communication" here. Music can have quite contingent emotional effects, and these can no more count as communication than angering someone can be called "communicating anger." Similarly, the power of a national anthem to arouse patriotic feeling depends on its being heard by those whose anthem it is. The music, in this case, does not *communicate* emotion; it simply *triggers* it. And, as this example suggests, music can have contrary emotional effects. The very same anthem that arouses pride in the

³Isa.1:11, Revised English Bible.

hearts of some, might engender fear in the hearts of others. So it is the communication, and not merely the causing of emotion that matters.

I shall call the idea that the communication of emotion is essential to music “expressivism.” The basic idea is that composers deliberately invest music with emotions that they employ their mastery of this distinctive medium to convey. Though it is a recognizable view in philosophical aesthetics, it also strongly influenced the composition of music in the Romantic era. Indeed, the existence of so much wonderful music created under this influence explains expressivism’s continuing plausibility. Who could listen to Schubert, Tchaikovsky, or Mahler and fail to think in terms of emotional experience? Yet an earlier period found an alternative answer equally persuasive, and one that has never entirely lost its plausibility. This may be called “representationism,” a conception of music that regards it as a distinctive medium for the communication of thoughts and ideas, rather than feelings. It is this conception of music that underlies Beethoven’s ambitious contention that “Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy;”⁴ a “higher” revelation because, perhaps, it communicates “thoughts too definite for words” as Felix Mendelssohn held.⁵

It is easy to see how both expressivism and representationism, in their different ways, might be called upon to forge the connection between art and faith that sacred music seems to require. For those to whom the heart of religious faith lies in an emotional response to the sacred, the effective communication and expression of that emotional response will have evident importance. If music has distinctive properties that allow it serve this function, then it will have special value in religious worship. To those for whom, alternatively, faith is the apprehension and affirmation of deep theological truths, the idea that music is a form of revelation has obvious appeal. J. S. Bach’s sacred music, it has often been claimed, is especially remarkable in this respect, because its harmonic structure is to be interpreted as embodying theological doctrines.⁶

Plausible though these suggestions may be, the extent to which expressivism and representationism about music in general can be applied to the use of music in worship is a debatable matter. But it is not the most critical issue. The main question concerns their philosophical adequacy. For, if they are defective as philosophies of music, they are equally defective as philosophies of *sacred* music. How well do they fare on this score? It is relatively easy to point to a number of obvious difficulties. At the heart of expressivism lies the contention that musical composition originates in an experience of emotion which the music then evokes in those who listen to

⁴As reported by Bettina von Arnim in a letter to Goethe, 28 May 1810.

⁵Letter to Marc-André Souchay, October 15, 1842.

⁶On this issue see the essays by Robin Leaver and John Butt in *The Cambridge Companion to Johann Sebastian Bach*, ed. John Butt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Calvin R. Stapert, *My Only Comfort: Death, Deliverance, and Discipline in the Music of Bach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 2000); and Karol Berger, *Bach’s Cycle, Mozart’s Arrow* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007).

it.⁷ Now how should we treat this claim about the origins of music? If it is an empirical generalization, then we simply lack sufficient evidence, since the psychological circumstances under which the vast majority of music was composed is unknown. If, instead, it is supposed to be a necessary truth about music, then it amounts to no more than a dogmatic claim that asserts what it ought to show. Even if in some way this generalization about composers could be sustained, there seems no reason to accede to the second claim about the audience. Why should we suppose that the *communication* of the emotion requires that it be *invoked*? I can understand from the things that someone tells me that they are grief stricken, and my understanding this explains how it is possible for me to sympathize with them in their grief. But this successful communication of emotion does not require that I grieve myself. And then there is this further point. If music is indeed the communication of emotion from composer to listener, it has to be regarded as a rather limited form of communication, because the range of emotions that music is commonly thought to express and elicit is small. Joy, sadness and excitement are plausible candidates, but there is nothing much beyond them. Does anyone think that music can evoke jealousy, envy, shame or embarrassment?

Representationism about music does not fare much better. Just what a piece of music “says” turns out to be highly elusive, once any connection with words is severed. It is no accident that in his once famous book *The Language of Music*, Deryck Cooke rests his case for music as a language entirely on examples of musical phrases accompanying words. Without words, it seems impossible to disambiguate alternative meanings.⁸ Even if we can plausibly interpret (some) compositions as having semantic content—that is to say, as representing scenes, objects or people—there is no obvious equivalent of the syntax by which this semantic content can be given different meanings. Nicholas Wolterstorff contends that “there is probably no better way to apprehend the character of angels than to listen with care to Messien’s [Les Anges].”⁹ Even if this is true, however, the music cannot tell us whether or not to believe in their existence.

These remarks amount to no more than a brief indication of a few of the philosophical problems that confront expressivism and representationism in music. Taken together with a good many others, I believe them to be insurmountable. But there is not the space here to consider the arguments fully, nor indeed would it be entirely germane to do so.¹⁰ Instead I shall focus on just two objections that apply equally to both conceptions. The

⁷The plainest articulation of this conception is Tolstoy’s *What is Art?*, where he defends an expressivist account of the arts, including music, having first rejected all forms of “aestheticism” that make beauty central to art.

⁸Though disambiguation can work the other way around—when music resolves the ambiguity of words.

⁹Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1980), 98.

¹⁰A more extended discussion will be found in Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts*, 3rd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

first of these was famously articulated by Eduard Hanslick in his nineteenth-century classic *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen, On the Musically Beautiful*. “Whoever wants to learn about the objective nature of music,” Hanslick writes on the opening page, “wants to get out from under the dubious authority of feeling.” Hanslick thinks that what I have called expressivism and representationism about music are commonly intertwined. The first claims that the aim of music is to arouse feeling, while the second claims that it is feeling that music chiefly represents. The difference, however, is not ultimately a significant one because they both founder on the same mistake. They attribute non-musical content to music and thereby necessarily fail to do justice to its being *music*. In affirming the general truth that “every art has as its goal the externalization of an idea actively emerging in the artist’s imagination” they fail to see that “in the case of music, this idea is a tonal idea, not a conceptual idea translated into tones.”¹¹ Nor, we can add, is it an emotional experience translated into tones. “The material out of which a composer creates . . . is the entire system of tones, with their latent possibilities for melodic, harmonic and rhythmic variety. . . . The content of music is tonally moving forms.”¹²

Hanslick’s principal contention is that the content of music is music. This might sound like an empty platitude, but its utter obviousness is its strength. Expressivism and representationism, in their different ways, look for the significance and value of music beyond the music—in the emotional state of the composer and/or audience, or in the revelatory ideas represented, whether the ideas are representations of emotion or of something else. But if the ultimate “meaning” of music is non-musical, then it can in principle be presented to us in some other medium—words or pictures or gestures perhaps. In that case, though, the meaning of music can be “accessed” without actually listening to music, and for Hanslick this is an absurd conclusion, as indeed it must be for anyone. It might well be the case, of course, that, as in reviews of concerts for instance, words can be used to convey a lot about the music, and even to capture some ideas and emotions that the music suggests. Accordingly, those who have not (yet) heard it are not all equally ignorant. Nevertheless, if what marks out music is the special *form* of expression that it gives to emotions and/or ideas (when it does do this), then no other medium will ever be a satisfactory substitute.

The concepts of emotional experience and revelatory wisdom are invoked by expressivism and representationism to explain the value and significance that we find in music, and to explicate the sense in which we can speak of its profundity. If Hanslick’s rejection of all such appeals is warranted, how then are these things to be explained? At one level, there is no explanation. Human interest in the system of musical tones with

¹¹Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), 31–32.

¹²*Ibid.*, 28–29.

its amazing possibilities for melodic, harmonic and rhythmic invention is just a "given," Hanslick thinks. At another level, though, there is an explanation. The value of music lies in its unique ability to create beautiful sound, a form of beauty that is available nowhere else.

Art should not slavishly imitate nature; it has to transform it. . . . The painter is moved to artistic representation by the occasion of encountering a delightful landscape, a group of people . . . the poet by an historical event or personal experience. But what is there in nature that a composer could point to and exclaim: "What a splendid prototype for an overture or a symphony!" The composer cannot transform anything; he must create everything new . . . which has no counterpart in nature and hence none in the other arts, indeed none in this world.¹³

Even the purest phenomenon of the natural auditory world, namely bird-song, stands in no relation to human music.¹⁴

I shall call the view that Hanslick is expounding here "formalism." By this account music properly so called is pure form. It has neither expressive nor representational content. Deryck Cooke voices a common objection to formalism when he writes that "by regarding form as an end in itself, instead of a means of expression, we make evaluations of composers' achievements . . . largely irrelevant and meaningless."¹⁵ But underlying Cooke's objection is the supposition that what is purely formal is necessarily *contentless* in the sense of "empty." This is false. The formalist's contention is that music's form *is* its content—or perhaps it would be better to say that, while form and content are *distinguishable* in music, they cannot be separated. It is natural and in no way improper to describe some musical sounds in non-formal terms—a sad chord, a jaunty melody, a bright sound. Yet the only way to specify the precise content of a piece of music is in formal terms—the melodic intervals, the chord sequence, rhythm, modulations of key, instrumental timbre, and so on. It is in such terms that we analyse and identify musical forms. These forms exist as music, however, only insofar as they are filled with tonal content. A *Gm* chord is a harmonic structure distinguishable from its tonal content. But the tonal content is nevertheless inseparable from the structure because, arranged in a different structure, the tonal content necessarily sounds different.

III.

This very brief consideration of recurrent issues in the philosophy of music can at best be expected to unsettle expressivism and representationism. Much more would need to be said before it would be reasonable to think that they had been dislodged. Nevertheless, some indication has been given, I hope, of the basis on which one might prefer a formalistic theory of

¹³Ibid., 74.

¹⁴Ibid., 71. I think that Hanslick is right when he says that the "song" of the birds is not music, but I shall not argue the point here.

¹⁵Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 5.

music. The main consideration operating in its favour is that it gives proper weight to the uniqueness of music. This uniqueness has a double aspect. Music is for listening to as nothing else is, and listening to it is ineliminable from understanding it. Since there is nothing that music *stands for*, there is nothing that can replace it. Though the language of emotion can be used to describe it, music is not a medium for the expression of emotion. And though music can be described as profound, it is not a medium for the revelation of ideas either. Music has no content other than itself.

Hanslick is fiercely critical of any conception of music that seeks to find non-musical content in it. Yet in a different way, he shares with those he criticizes another erroneous belief about music, namely that it is a productive art. His assumption, in general, is that just as painters produce pictures, and poets produce poems, so composers produce music.

The starting of all the creative activity of the composer is . . . the devising of a particular melody. Through this deep-seated, mysterious power, into the working of which the human eye will never penetrate, there resounds in the mind of the composer a theme, a motif. We cannot trace this first seed back to its origins; we have to accept it simply as given.¹⁶

Hanslick is here subscribing to a view that implicitly takes “art” music to be music’s ideal type and that musical *performances* are secondary to musical *works*. The emergence of this view over several centuries was the result of some important technical achievements and cultural developments.¹⁷ The historical origins of music are a matter of speculation, but it certainly existed for a great many centuries before anyone invented an effective means of writing it down. Whereas hitherto music was simply *made*, and repeated only insofar as it was remembered, the creation of musical scores established the possibility of playing music that musicians did not improvise for themselves and had never heard previously. It was thus that the idea of “a composition” became possible. Since several compositions could come from a single and identifiable source, the existence and role of named “composers” became increasingly important. With the rise of the concert hall, music became the object of special attention for which space and time was set aside. People were attracted to attend these occasions by impresarios who advertised “programs” of music in advance. Their success, both commercial and artistic, then came to turn on “name recognition.” The fame of individual composers grew, to the point where first they equalled, and then they overshadowed the fame of the performers. It is easy to see how, at the end of this trajectory, “the composer” becomes the principal artist in music, and the direct equivalent of the painter and the poet. Wolterstorff, in *Art in Action*, expresses (and endorses) just this view.

¹⁶Ibid., 32

¹⁷On this see Karol Berger, “The Genealogy of Modern European Art Music,” chapter 3 of *A Theory of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

The fundamental fact about the artist is that he or she is a worker in stone, in bronze, in clay in paint, in acid and plates, in words, in sounds and instruments, in states of affairs. On some bit of the concrete materials of our stage he imposes order.¹⁸

This belief in the fundamental unity of all the arts is widely endorsed, but in *The Birth of Tragedy* the philosopher Nietzsche protests against precisely this assimilation.

Unlike all those who seek to infer the arts from a single principle, the necessary spring of life for every work of art, I shall fix my gaze on those two artistic deities of the Greeks, Apollo and Dionysus. For me they are the vivid and concrete representations of two worlds of art . . . the Apolline plastic arts and Dionysiac music.¹⁹

Among the Apolline arts we may include painting, sculpture and poetry. In each case the artist creates an object that embodies a visual, sculptural or literary image which the audience is invited to contemplate with interest and delight. Music and dance, by contrast, are Dionysiac arts because they are not for contemplation, but for participation. In more ordinary parlance they are *performing* arts. The pulsating rhythms of dance music do not invite us to stop and listen; they invite us to take to the floor.

The validity of Nietzsche's distinction has been widely discussed.²⁰ However we interpret it, though, Apollo and Dionysus must not be understood to symbolize the different arts in a way that allocates them to mutually exclusive categories. Many people's experience of music, after all, is Apolline. What they enjoy is listening intently to a sonic object expressly created by a named individual, as *something to be listened to*. The audience in the concert hall seems no less engaged in "contemplation" than the people who stand looking at paintings in the art museum. In both instances the object to which they give such close attention is a work originating from the imagination of an individual with a mastery of a particular medium.

It is a mistake, though, to treat this Apollonian engagement with the music of the concert hall as the *paradigm* of musical engagement. Music is not simply written to be listened to; it is written to be played. Indeed, though the invention and widespread use of recording tends to obscure this important fact, music *has* to be played. A score is not music until players literally *realize* it, that is to say, give it real existence as music. Without this realization, the listener would have nothing to contemplate. The point is one to be made about the performing arts in general, a classification which includes drama no less than music, as well as some kinds of poetry perhaps. Though people are often content simply to read Shakespeare, for

¹⁸*Art in Action*, 91.

¹⁹Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 76.

²⁰See for instance, Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

instance, his characters require the realization that only the actor's appearance, voice and gesture can give them.

To this obvious, if not always evident, fact about the performing arts in general, we can add some further relevant observations about music in particular. While it may be true that most music—"pop" as well as "classical"—is written to be listened to, there is nevertheless a great deal of music that is *not* composed for this purpose. John Phillip Souza wrote music for marching to; Johann Strauss wrote music for dancing to; movie sound tracks are written, we might say, to be "watched to." More importantly for present purposes, most *sacred* music is not written to be listened to. Bach wrote a large majority of his works, not as concert pieces, but for *use* in church, a point that needs to be emphasized to a world that now mostly hears them at concerts.

It is also relevant to observe that music need have neither composer nor audience and still be a valuable enrichment of experience. Jazz musicians who improvise together follow no composition and are not playing for anyone other than themselves, yet they are undoubtedly engaged in music making. The same is to be said of sacred music. It may be true, as Wolterstorff contends, that in the case of liturgical action, the importance of the accompanying music lies in the fact that it "lends specificity to the action and even to the words by which the action is accomplished,"²¹ but the organist who improvises during the distribution of communion may simply be filling a sacred space with spontaneously invented music that serves as a fitting aural context for a sacred ritual. Great musical skill is required for this. Still, to improvise with the kind of artistry that draws the attention of communicants away from the reception of the elements and into contemplation of the music would constitute failure, not success.

The conclusion I want to draw at this stage, then, is twofold. Following Hanslick, we may say music is a formal, rather than an expressive or representational art. Following Nietzsche, we may say that it is paradigmatically a performing art. That is to say, *making* music is primary, while composing music and listening to it are both secondary. This puts us in a position to return to the original question about the place of music in worship. We can address this question most satisfactorily, I shall argue, if we think of sacred music in terms of aesthetic formalism and ritual action.

IV.

The opening stanza of a hymn by William Walsham How runs as follows.

We give Thee but Thine own
 Whate'er the gift may be,
 All that we have is Thine alone,
 A trust, O Lord from Thee.

²¹*Art in Action*, p.116.

These are, no doubt, suitably humble sentiments to sing, but they do invite the question that Socrates presses in the dialogue with which I began. If, whatever the gift we try to present, it is already God's because *everything* is God's, what is the point of giving it. Indeed on what grounds can we intelligibly call it a gift? To model musical artists on painters or sculptors is to think of them as people who make aesthetically valuable objects out of sonic materials. Conceived in this way, though, Plato's problem returns. Human beings may delight in their artworks, but the "materials" out of which they are made, and (according to Wolterstorff) the nature of those materials, flow from God's own creative activity. If so, then we are "giving" God that which he already possesses. Beautiful objects are already present in the world that God has created. Could anyone suppose that human artworks might in any sense improve upon or exceed them?

Faced with this question it is worth recalling Hanslick's contention about music—"The composer cannot transform anything; he must create everything new . . . which has no counterpart in nature and hence none in the other arts, indeed none in this world." If this is true, composition is a uniquely pure form of creation. Though Hanslick does refer to the "materials" composers use, this passage seems to assert that musical composition is creation *ex nihilo*. This accords, of course, with the unity of form and content by which, formalists claim, music is uniquely characterized. Whether or not this claim to *uniqueness* is warranted, if formalism is right, then a musical offering is not giving God back his own in the re-ordering of pre-existent materials. Rather, it is calling something wholly new into existence.

Even if this is true, however, it does not seem to resolve Socrates's problem entirely. Musical creations may be *ex nihilo* and not, therefore, simply the re-presentation of things that God has already given. Nevertheless there remains the question of what makes their presentation in the context of divine worship a kind of "service." How could what human beings make benefit God? This question, however, rests upon the supposition that what is made is an art *object*. Its focus is on an Apollonian musical *work*. What if we shift the focus to a Dionysian musical *performance*?

Here it needs to be repeated that music exists only in performance—a truth that the invention of sound recording has hidden, but not falsified; and performance is action. A song is something we sing, and singing is something we *do*. Worship, too, is something we do. It is action, but it is action of a special kind, namely ritual action. The use of the term "ritual" here should not be understood restrictively as referring only to highly *ritualistic styles* of worship. Its meaning in this context is derived from a contrast with technical and ethical action. Technical actions are those actions whose intelligibility lies in the consequences that are supposed to flow from them. Serving food and administering painkillers are obvious examples. It is pointless to serve food that does not nourish, or administer pain killers that don't kill pain. Ethical actions are actions whose intelligibility relies on their being in accordance with moral rules. Telling the truth

and keeping promises are obvious examples. The requirement to keep a promise does not derive from the prospect of future benefits, but from the implications of past actions. Ritual actions are neither of these things; they do not flow from past commitments or look to future consequences. Rather their meaning derives from the structuring symbols they invoke.

A simple example is the practice of pledging allegiance to the flag. This might be described as a way of opening the school day, but “opening” here means something quite different from the technical task of turning the key in the lock to open the school doors. And though it can be laid down as a rule that the pledge of allegiance must be said each morning, failure to observe this rule would not normally qualify as immoral behaviour (though special circumstances might make it so). In short, pledging allegiance is a *ritual* act. Like the British military’s “last post,” a bugle call that signals the end of the day, it does not bring about consequences in time. Nor does it flow from any fundamental moral principle by which human interaction needs to be governed. Rather it structures the time—and the space—within which these consequences and interactions take place. It helps give meaning to the otherwise meaningless flow of time, and to the organization of otherwise undifferentiated space.²²

Ritual acts such as the pledge of allegiance and the last post generate meaning through the use of symbols that are drawn from and related to important aspects of human life, in both these cases the identification of political communities and their maintenance. Viewed in this light, the worship of God is ritual action *par excellence*. There is not space here to do more than assert this. The thought underlying it is one that Schleiermacher articulates at length in his speeches *On Religion*, whose purpose, he argues, is “to relate us and our appearance directly to the universe.”²³ Characteristically, worship takes the natural structures of human time—birth, maturity and death—and the natural structures of space—habitat, home and nation—and relates them to the imponderable vastness of cosmos and eternity.

Schleiermacher’s reflections on religion give us a context in which philosophical formalism appears to be the best explanation of music’s peculiar virtue as a mode of worship. If, as Hanslick alleges, music has no counterpart in nature or “this world,” and if, as I have argued, the reality of music lies in its being brought into existence *ex nihilo* by enactment, then it provides us with a mode of activity that transcends this world. On this account, worship is not action aimed at presenting God with something beneficial, or which He finds pleasing. Rather it is action that enables human beings to reflect divine activity. That is to say, worship is action that both takes place in time and space and is beyond time and

²²For further elaboration of this theme see Gordon Graham, *Wittgenstein and Natural Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chap. 8.

²³Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, ed. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 44.

space, action that enables us, in Schleiermacher's phrase "to be eternal in a moment."²⁴ Or, employing the language of the seventeenth-century theologian Henry Scougal, "true religion is an union of the soul with God, a real participation of the divine nature."²⁵

These remarks are, to say the least, sketchy.²⁶ The conceptions of God and music towards which they gesture could be filled out at greater length, of course, and would, I think, become more plausible as a result. However, even were this elaboration to be supplied, one hugely important topic would remain to be addressed. A great deal of sacred music, probably the vast majority of it, is music with words. Hanslick is clear that his arguments are reflections on the nature of instrumental music. Despite widespread opinion to the contrary, words and music, he claims, have no special affinity with each other. They comprise an essentially "morganatic marriage," with words functioning as a decidedly inferior party. It is not easy to see that this could be said of hymns and anthems. From a religious point of view, their words would seem to be certainly no less, and possibly more important than the music to which they are set. How do the texts of sacred music fit into the account of music given here? This is a good, and a difficult question, but one for another occasion.²⁷

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²⁴Ibid., 54.

²⁵Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (1677), ed. Winthrop S. Hudson (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1947), 29–30.

²⁶Several of the issues are discussed at greater length in my *Wittgenstein and Natural Religion*.

²⁷I am grateful to Boston University Institute for Philosophy and Religion for an invitation to lecture in December 2012 that led to this paper.