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Teaching Music in the Reformed/Calvinist Tradition



by John MacInnis

1. Introduction

In 1898, Abraham Kuyper delivered a series of lectures at Princeton Seminary with the aim of articulating a Calvinist vision for all of life, not just theology. Kuyper addressed topics such as politics and science, and he dedicated a lecture to describing a Calvinist vision for the arts. As a music professor who also teaches in the core curriculum at a confessional Calvinist college, I often use Kuyper's lecture on the arts, among other things, to engage my students as they wrestle with the Calvinist tradition in relation to music. My goal is not indoctrination; rather, we engage Kuyper's ideas as an opportunity for students to form their own opinions and to develop insight for living productively and faithfully as musicians and people invested in

musical culture, wherever God may call them. This article explains a number of my objectives, teaching methods, and sources of inspiration (e.g., the Calvinistic concept of sphere sovereignty) as I lead 21st-century students in engaging a Calvinist vision for the arts generally, and music specifically.¹ To conclude, I discuss aspects of a recent composition titled *The God of Material Things* by Jonathan Posthuma, a graduate of our college music program at Dordt College, whose work exemplifies many of the elements that my colleagues and I hope distinguish the accomplishments of music students beyond their education at Dordt College.

To begin, I would note that many of the ideas emphasized by the Reformed tradition should be considered broadly Christian.² For example, Reformed thinkers were not the first to challenge dualistic assumptions about the "sacred" and the "secular" or whether a life dedicated to the arts is a lesser calling than, say, ministry or missions. Moreover, the Reformed faith is thoroughly mainstream, and, on our best day, Reformed scholars may sound very similar to the best human thinkers of today and long ago, Christian or not. Lastly, the following is not intended as doctrinaire. That is, these are my own ideas about teaching music as a Reformed believer and the various ways that tradition inspires me personally.

2. Music Itself Speaks

My largest contribution to our core curriculum is "Introduction to the Arts," a class in which I am presented with a sizable cross section of our campus student body. The class is populated with students studying nursing, business, and engineering, as

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well as an assortment of humanities and arts majors. Leading the class is a team of professors specializing in music, film, theatre, and visual art, who all work together to present a comprehensive vision for living aesthetically sensitive lives in this world. In the course of a semester, students enroll in two consecutive subsections to study specific art forms, and, additionally, everyone gathers for several topically driven conversations on how the arts speak to each other as well as their significance within our culture.³ My music subsection usually consists of eighteen class periods, so I must be focused and selective concerning what I talk about and how I engage my students, so that my time with them provides a lasting and life-giving influence on the course and quality of their lives.

For several years, I have structured my subsections around musical topics that students confirm are most relevant and interesting to them: music for films, television, and interactive media, popular music, and church music. Within each topic, I address issues such as musical meaning and intertextual relationships, the craft of making music, musical form, and music's functions in various settings. To keep clear for students the intent of the class and its purpose within the college's core curriculum, I repeatedly ask, "Are we able to discern and articulate what God intends art and music to be in this good world, here and now?" Our discussions move in two separate directions: (1) What does God intend for art and music in my life personally?; (2) What should be the place of the specialized artist in my community?

I usually begin this class with film music because it is familiar to students, visually stimulating, and often well crafted. I show clips from the classic 1933 film *King Kong* and highlight composer Max Steiner's use of leitmotif to amplify actor emotions, indicate shifting perspectives, and add a compelling layer of meaning to the film overall. Then, I show a torture scene from Quentin Tarantino's 1992 film *Reservoir Dogs* to highlight the power of diegetic music to shape the viewer. In his choice of music for this scene, Tarantino aims to place the

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film viewer in a specific psychological state and to implicate her in the horrifying on-screen action.⁴ At this point, many of my students are surprised that music can be so powerful.

When we take up a study of music in interactive media, I introduce my class to the craft and artistry of video-game composer James Hannigan,⁵ and, in the context of that presentation, I describe Marshall McLuhan's famous idea that "the medium is the message."⁶ Once I've convinced them that a video-game medium, however it may be structured, is itself a message, I find the students are receptive to accepting that music, by virtue of its construction and production, also constitutes a message that speaks powerfully and, indeed, shapes its audience.

Students take away two leading ideas from these classes on music and associated media: Music itself speaks, even apart from attendant subject matter, just as much as it adds rich strata of meaning. And, without effort, these layers of meaning are often lost to us. For contrast, I ask students how they have experienced music lately, and if they think they have received all that music offered them on any given day and in any given situation. Normally, my students readily acknowledge that they desire more from their music. They want the joy of hearing music, understanding its language, and being challenged and changed by what it says, rather than confining their experience of music to a speechless and wearisome hum, whose meanings are stereotypical and superficial.

3. The Reformed Call for Attentiveness

In a word, I show my students the importance of attentiveness, of watchfulness in their musical activities and music listening, so that their lives may be full and rich. But the matter cannot be left here. My practice, then, is to press them to give a fuller account for why attentiveness is important. The easy answer is that God does not want us to limit ourselves; God wants us to use God's gifts, such as music, and not to misuse or neglect them.⁷ This principle is fine, but the Reformed tradition teaches

a deeper truth: God reveals God's self to us through creation and the creative activities of humans. That is, we are awake and watchful because music, as with all other things in our lived experience, is an opportunity to know and engage with God.

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin opens with a discussion of the knowledge of God. Calvin argues that we are wise to know both God and ourselves, that both species of knowledge are mutually referential,⁸ and that, in some sense, every person already possesses knowledge of God:

That there exists in the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity [*divinitatis sensum*], we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he *constantly renews and occasionally enlarges*, that all to a man, being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service.⁹

In his book *Warranted Christian Belief*, philosopher Alvin Plantinga extensively develops Calvin's assertion about this ubiquitous *sensus divinitatis*. Plantinga proposes that the *sensus divinitatis* is a cognitive mechanism that, given stimulus and the proper functioning of that mechanism, produces beliefs about God within us.¹⁰ For the purposes of the present discussion, it is striking that the sense of Divinity, as the concept is proposed by Calvin and developed by Plantinga, is prompted and characterized by our lived experience as humans in this universe. Calvin, in his *Institutes*, goes on to explain that the universe can be considered a sort of mirror in which one may view God:

And, first, wherever you turn your eyes, there is no portion of the world, however minute, that does not exhibit at least some sparks of beauty; while it is impossible to contemplate the vast and beautiful fabric as it extends around, without being overwhelmed by the immense weight of glory. Hence, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews elegantly describes the visible worlds as images of the invisible (Hebrews 11:3), the elegant structure of the world serving us as a kind of mirror, in which we may behold God, though otherwise invisible.¹¹

Furthermore, for Calvin, diligent and academic study of the universe, in all its complexity, serves to augment and elaborate what may be known about God. That is, anyone active in the world knows there is a God, that God is powerful and wise, and that there must be an appropriate response to such greatness, but the student of a given discipline has access to further testimony that enhances the quality and shapes the character of that knowledge. Calvin writes:

In attestation of his wondrous wisdom, both the heavens and the earth present us with innumerable proofs, not only those more recondite proofs which astronomy, medicine, and all the natural sciences, are designed to illustrate, but proofs which force themselves on the notice of the most illiterate peasant, who cannot open his eyes without beholding them. It is true, indeed, that those who are more or less intimately acquainted with those liberal studies are thereby assisted and enabled to obtain a deeper insight into the secret workings of divine wisdom.¹²

And, to be sure, Calvin includes the accomplishments of human creativity as opportunities to know of God's activity in the universe:

The swift and versatile movements of the soul in glancing from heaven to earth, connecting the future with the past, retaining the remembrance of former years, nay, forming creations of its own—its skill, moreover, in making astounding discoveries, and inventing so many wonderful arts, are sure indications of the agency of God in man... Shall we be deemed the inventors of so many arts and useful properties that God may be defrauded of his praise, though experience tells us plainly enough, that whatever we possess is dispensed to us in unequal measures by another hand?¹³

So, within the Reformed tradition, it is proposed that basic beliefs about God are formed and deepened in response to our engagement with the world, in all its diversity and complexity, what Calvin often termed the *theatrum gloriae Dei*, i.e., the theatre of God's glory.¹⁴ To apply this discussion to the arts, and music specifically, we find that the study of music and the experiences of performing and hearing music constitute so many opportuni-

ties to know God, to engage with God, and to have one's insights about God deepened and extended.

For example, while recently practicing the sixth trio sonata for organ by J. S. Bach (BWV 530), I found myself marveling that such beauty is possible in the world, that the capacity to create intricate and stirring sounds is so freely given to humans, that men and women can be blessed with time and training to study and understand this music. Most importantly, in the study and practice of Bach's art, my main impulse was to praise and give thanks, ascribing the glory of what I was experiencing to God. (And perhaps that is what Bach himself intended when he penned S.D.G. [*Soli Deo Gloria*, "Glory to God Alone"] after the last fugue in his famous *Well Tempered Clavier*, Book I). Knowing firsthand the character and wisdom expressed in Bach's music, after many hours of study I thought that I had learned something about the wisdom and character of God.¹⁵

The same holds true for people attending to art as audience members. For example, it is expected that individuals will respond emotionally to music, even though they are not actively participating in the music making. Depending on the nature of the emotional states evoked within a person by music, which may be subtle, complex, and powerful, they open a person's mind to a richer experience of the world and compel his conclusions about God. It is a situation similar to *feeling* wonder when surveying the complex and vast workings of creation (cf. Psalm 8:3–4: "What is man that thou art mindful of him?"); the quality of this emotional state accompanies and drives our judgment that the Creator is great. Likewise, our experience feeling love for others and being loved ourselves characterizes our conclusions about God's love and the affirmation that God is love. Music is an art uniquely suited to exploring and cultivating one's emotional life, for performer and audience member, and it is perfectly normal to conclude in response to music, "God must be something like that." Calvin himself

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said that God "constantly renews and occasionally enlarges" our sense of divinity; the discipline of music constitutes just such an occasion.

But what about the varying levels of musical quality experienced in any given day? In a situation that is similar to Calvin's astronomer viewing the night sky, I suppose it is safe to say that our sense of the Divine is justifiably at work when we are presented with music generally, as it is when we are presented with stars generally. But, the *sensus divinitatis* has more to work with when we are engaged with greater musical complexity, subtle and evocative interpretations, and more refined artistic skill. I do not intend a complexity for its own sake; rather, I mean a musical complexity and artistry arising when the discipline of music is cultivated faithfully and diligently within its own sphere of competency and authority, irrespective of cultural context.

Remembering that my intention, as a teacher of music, is to use ideas presented in the Reformed tradition as opportunities to rouse and inspire my students, I have found that presenting music, and all art, as an opportunity to know and engage with God justifies attentiveness to the study of music, as opposed to attentiveness for the purpose of a more satisfying and humane life or for its own sake.

4. The Place of the Artist

These sorts of conversations address the large pedagogical question "What does God intend for art and music in my life personally?" which brings me to the second global question for my core introductory arts class: "What should be the place of the specialized artist in my community?" While affirming that aesthetic considerations are constituent to daily human life and relationships, what do the skills, insights, and training of a vocational artist offer her community?

On this front, beyond the course requirement to attend six on-campus arts events, I ask students to observe musicians at their craft. Students are provided with a list of music ensembles on our campus

and asked to attend one rehearsal, take substantive notes, and then prepare an essay addressing the following questions: How is the rehearsal time structured (e.g., time for announcements, musical explanations, run-throughs, drills, reading new music, listening, etc.)? How are authority and freedom exercised by those in the room? What are the attitudes among the musicians? Is there a group spirit or group culture, etc.? Student responses normally emphasize the unifying effect of making music with others and the ways the ensemble director works with the musicians to produce something that is satisfying and meaningful.

Placing students in the musicians' workshop, as it were, where they can observe the practices and offices that are at work behind a recital or recording, demonstrates for them the sorts of competencies that musicians assert in their craft, that those competencies are exercised communally, and that, contrary to what we might assume, seeking a flawless performance is really not the reason musicians practice their art. Excellence is a fine standard to hold before ourselves as we work, but it can easily lead to idolatry and, like all idols, consume us. In this way, music can become just another instance in which humans deny their Creator and look to some component of creation as ultimate.

I prefer to emphasize to my students that, instead of a flawless concert, the *process* of music making, the hours of study, listening, lessons, private rehearsal, and mentorship that culminate in an act of sharing within a larger community, is at the heart of what God intends for the specialized artist. This means that the larger community should show an interest in what its musicians are up to and should support them. It also means that musicians should view their work as service to their communities. Most of my students visiting ensemble rehearsals for the first time express an interest in attending that ensemble's next concert and sharing in the fruits of their labor.

Through specialized training and mentorship, the artist learns the givens of her art—in movement, line and color, resonance, harmony, and form—and she uses these givens to offer her community an expression of reality: the glories of the world around us, the struggle within institutions and every human heart for or against God, and the

vision of a universal flourishing with justice and peace for all, as God intends. In the case of music, the sorts of stories she tells are musical, or need only be musical. That is, a composer may construct a musical narrative apart from words or textual associations, using only musical sounds and structures.

For example, in *La Primavera* ("Spring"), Vivaldi's first concerto of *The Four Seasons*, a purely musical narrative is presented that compels and satisfies, even apart from the associated poetic imagery of birds, murmuring brooks, a thunderstorm, and the return of birdsong at the end. The accompanying pictures are fun to point out because they are relatively easy to discern, but students respond most warmly when Vivaldi's underlying ritornello structure is explained to them, with insight into how the story plays out in purely musical ways. The storm is portrayed with virtuosic flashes on the violin, and its effect is felt as the ritornello theme is transposed to a minor key. When the birdsongs resume and the ritornello is returned to the home key at the end, the listener is relieved and comforted. I tell my students that they are free to substitute in their own storms, as they listen. This music is timeless because the sweep of its musical narrative is timeless. It says something true about the world; there are storms, and there is hope for renewal.

In addition to telling true stories, the musical artist serves the members of her community by cultivating their aesthetic senses, i.e., their abilities to perceive structure, meaning, and harmony, so that they may find pleasure and that their lives know beauty on a deep, satisfying level. But, more importantly, she serves so that the members of her community may find new aesthetic applications in their own work and service. All fields of endeavor have aesthetic considerations, and experiencing art often prompts our creativity. By awakening her audience members to aesthetic living generally, the artist equips them to be creative and to strive with nuance and sensitivity in their own work.

In his lecture "Calvinism and the Arts," Kuyper asserts that God is at work in and through the artist and that the work of the artist should be considered an outpouring of grace in our midst—the sort of grace that restrains our worst impulses and injustices on any given day, that empowers our artists to tell us the truth and shape our sensibilities, and that

ever guides creation's unfolding as God intends it:

Calvinism, on the contrary, has taught us that all liberal arts are gifts which God imparts promiscuously to believers and to unbelievers, yea, that, as history shows, these gifts have flourished even in a larger measure outside the holy circle. "These radiations of Divine Light," [Calvin] wrote, "shone more brilliantly among unbelieving people than among God's saints." And this of course quite reverses the proposed order of things. If you limit the higher enjoyment of art to regeneration, then this gift is exclusively the portion of believers, and must bear an ecclesiastical character. In that case, it is the outcome of particular grace. But if, at the hand of experience and history, you become persuaded that the highest art-instincts are natural gifts, and hence belong to those excellent graces which, in spite of sin, by virtue of common grace, have continued to shine in human nature, it plainly follows that art can inspire both believers and unbelievers, and that God remains Sovereign to impart it, in His good pleasure....¹⁶

In preparation for the final cumulative assignment for my "Introduction to the Arts" class, I require that my students listen to President John F. Kennedy's 1963 remarks at Amherst College, in which he contends for the place of the artist in democratic society. In that address, Kennedy asserts,

In serving his vision of the truth, the artist best serves his nation. And the nation which disdains the mission of art invites the fate of Robert Frost's hired man, the fate of having nothing to look backward to with pride and nothing to look forward to with hope...I look forward to an America which will reward achievement in the arts as we reward achievement in business or statecraft.¹⁷

In response to Kennedy's remarks, all students submit an essay in which they must present their visions for the place of the artist in their own societies, nationally and locally. Though opinions and emphases vary from person to person, of course, students generally agree that artists should be em-

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powered to pursue their vision, to cultivate their skills, and then to share their labors for the common good. My own conviction, shared by many of my students, is that we need our artists to be free to help us see and hear the world differently from what we assumed it to be. We need artists because they are our visionaries and our teachers.

I should add, quickly, that this does not mean that specialized, professional artists are somehow superhuman and should be treated as a class of people exempt from the struggles of life that are common to all. I do intend that my students realize that we need artists as much as farmers, accountants, doctors, and pastors, and that we must make room for them in our communities, however that may play out in a given time or place. For example, the presence of arts professionals in educational institutions provides a venue for them to enjoy stable employment, cultivate their art within a community, and develop insights that can be passed on to students. Regional arts councils and music groups engage members in making art locally. And federal support for the National Endowment for the Arts ensures that artistic activity is supported across the nation. My students in the core program may not be artists themselves, but many of them will serve their communities on school boards, volunteer time and resources to arts organizations, and all will vote for leaders articulating a vision for our national life together.

5. Sphere Sovereignty and the Arts

The Reformed concept of sphere sovereignty (an idea described variously by thinkers in the Calvinist tradition) also helps us to understand the place afforded artists in our communities. The idea is rooted in John Calvin's own distinguishing between the powers of the church and the state, both free to assert appropriate authority within their own spheres, as well as in Calvin's teaching about the many complex structures of the created universe, which each reflect God's intentions and unfold under God's rule.

At heart, sphere sovereignty is a respect for di-

versity, an acknowledgement that the different arenas of human endeavor deserve space to do their work well, and that, at any given time, multiple ways of being need a place in our midst. Abraham Kuyper's own elaboration of the idea of sphere sovereignty emphasizes that care must be taken to preserve the integrity of each sphere and that no sphere may impose its principles upon another, i.e., no sphere may exert authority over another sphere, for they all exist directly under the rule of God. As a negative example, Kuyper points to the sort of imposed authority that organized religion may assert over the arts. Referring to artistic endeavor broadly, Kuyper writes,

She is a plant that grows and blossoms upon her own root, and without denying that this plant may have required the help of a temporary support, and that in early times the Church lent this prop in a very excellent way, yet the Calvinistic principle demanded that this plant of earth should at length acquire strength to stand alone and vigorously to extend its branches in every direction.¹⁸

Furthermore, for Kuyper, within the sphere of aesthetic cultivation, artists are equipped and responsible to discern God's intentions:

[T]he world now, as well as in the beginning, is the theater for the mighty works of God and humanity remains a creation of His hand, which, apart from salvation, completes under this present dispensation, here on earth, a mighty process, and in its historical development is to glorify the name of Almighty God. To this end He has ordained for this humanity all sorts of life-utterances, and among these, art occupies a quite independent place. Art reveals ordinances of creation which neither science, nor politics, nor religious life, nor even revelation can bring to light.¹⁹

Kuyper describes a robust confidence of God's sovereignty, which, in my experience, is a *sine qua non* in Reformed thinking. It would not be impossible, though, for one to be challenged by his describing that sovereignty at work in the sphere of art through "ordinances." To explain his thinking in a productive way, we can say, firstly, that if God has established norms for art, they are surely to be found in the cultivation of art, not in the scientific

process or laid out systematically on the pages of the Bible, as Kuyper explains above. And, ideally, when determined, these ordinances or norms are to be studied and cultivated among artists who add encouragement when they are obeyed and who note carefully when they are misdirected. This is another opportunity for the professional artist to serve her community and to promote human flourishing in her own area of responsibility and equipping.

So, what are God's intentions for art? Specifying creational laws, as proposed by Kuyper and other Reformed thinkers, is a major challenge for artists within the Reformed tradition, especially for musicians, and there have been different perspectives. Generally speaking, Kuyper is very generous to the creators of Greek classical art, and he concludes that the Greeks, through their cultivation of arts such as sculpture, unfolded the principles of harmonized beauty which still hold true today. The Greek emphasis on beauty, though, explained as an earthly indication of Plato's world of ideals, implied hierarchies of material and immaterial, matter and spirit, that proved problematic for generations of Reformed thinkers after Kuyper.

For instance, still drawing upon the traditional Greek concept of beauty, though denying its dualism, Herman Dooyeweerd identifies harmony as the nucleus of the aesthetic mode of existence. Similarly, Hans Rookmaaker describes "beautiful harmony" as the nucleus of aesthetic living. So, for Dooyeweerd and Rookmaaker, artistic cultivation is most faithful to God's intentions for art when it addresses problems of unity in variety, proportionality, conciseness of expression, and directness of appeal.

In North America, the lifelong work of Calvin Seerveld offers a more recent development of Reformed thinking applied to aesthetics. Following the ideas of Dooyeweerd, Seerveld's contributions to aesthetics have been to explore the nature of aesthetics as an irreducible mode of existence, to describe how aesthetic considerations interrelate with other modes of living, and to articulate normative principles for aesthetic life:

Aesthetics is a special science like economics, linguistics, physics, psychology, or whatever body of analysis that can cohere as a systematic investiga-

tion of reality brought into focus by some prime structuring feature.... Aesthetics is meant to be a basic science with its own kind of integrity because there is an irreducible order of reality that demands special treatment as aesthetic reality, interwoven with all the other features of the universe.²⁰

Seerveld's conclusions about creational laws, applied within the sphere of aesthetics, challenge prevailing Western notions that art is the study of harmony and beauty. In this way, Seerveld also reforms Dooyeweerd and Rookmaaker. In place of harmonized beauty as the heart of artistic cultivation and aesthetic living, Seerveld prefers a playful allusiveness or imaginativity:

My attempt to reform the Western philosophical tradition on BEAUTY as the norm for good living and sound art is to posit instead that the nuclear moment of what has come to be called "aesthetic" is *ludicity*—that is playfulness that assumes vital, sensitive formative ability is at the core of imaginativity. The norm for the imaginative side of experiential life is, "Be allusive!": "fool around" in the connotations of your speech, in the conjectural dimension of your thinking, within the diplomatic element of your just-doing, be a trifle flirtatious in keeping troth with your neighbor.²¹

Seerveld's emphasis on allusiveness necessitates meaning in an artistic act, and, for Seerveld, the artist serves her audience members by sharpening and nuancing their ability to draw meaning from the world and their lived experience:

Artwork is an entity or act defined by adequately answering in its very structural formation to God's creational ordinance, "Be imaginative!" An artist is called by God, I believe, to serve the imaginative needs of one's neighbors with artworks. An artful image, constellation of sounds, or staged dramatic conflict, can disclose states of affairs normally unnoticed by people whose habit of daily perception and thought is casual, if not slovenly.²²

Music and all art can certainly be considered

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a meaningful text that profitably rewards our sustained attention, proportional to the skill of the artist and the learned ability of the audience. Here, artistry discloses what the artist has seen and understands of the world, its nature, possibilities, dangers, and glories. And, in doing so, art amplifies and embodies the reality of lived experience, thereby shaping our understanding of that reality.²³ Put simply, our lived experience in the world teaches us about God, and the artist specializes in presenting aesthetically nuanced insight into lived experience.

More specifically, though, the Christian artist will use juxtaposition, metaphor, and the cost-conscious application of her resources to orient her audience towards *shalom*. *Shalom*, for Seerveld, is the world as it should be, with justice, peace, and flourishing available to all, and, as a concept, *shalom* prompts two important thoughts: (1) *Shalom* laments things as they are, mired in humanity's apparently limitless capacity to pollute, poison, degrade, and disfigure; (2) *Shalom* asserts that we do not have to live this way. *Shalom* hopes, with good reasons, that God is at work among us, here and now, redeeming, restoring, pulling people together, saying "Yes!" to us, in all our brokenness. Seerveld concludes,

Artist and patron who understand what the LORD God requires of us will be generous stewards of artwork that makes Jesus Christ's call to repentance and offer of grace to forgive known allusively in imaginative deed to those who never darken the insides of art museums or churches.²⁴

Thus, for Seerveld, God's intentions for the practices of art are concerned with how art functions, the ends for which it is made, and how we engage it in meaningful ways. The benefit of this approach is that one need not preclude the possibility of artistic givens changing (in contrast to God's command for justice, which always applies). For example, the melodic possibilities offered by tuned strings and the receptive potentials of the human ear defined the development of musical art for centuries. Now, with bone conduction headphones a deaf man can hear a symphony, 3-D printing tech-

nology is opening up new worlds of possibility for instrument creation, electronic dance music is redefining the nature of musical creativity, and audiovisual technologies associated with augmented reality promise to enlarge the creative media for artists, far into the future.²⁵

In his book *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art*, Nicholas Wolterstorff describes the many meaningful ways all humans live aesthetically in the world, in the sort of integrated manner theorized by Seerveld. In contrast, Wolterstorff explains a “grand narrative,” once commonly accepted as an account of art in the modern world, which describes the increased prominence of “disinterested contemplation,” ideally during periods of leisure, as the normative mode for engaging art.²⁶ With their eyes on the art world, with its institutions, traditions, and specializations, and in an attempt to reserve art from serving purely utilitarian ends—art *for* something—thinkers like G.W.F. Hegel proposed that art is a means for finding truth and is, therefore, valuable in its own right—art *for art’s own sake*.²⁷

The unhappy consequence of this line of thinking was to sideline memorial art, protest songs, hymns, and the like as somehow less worthwhile than high art traditions, which created art for disinterested contemplation, e.g., string quartets and sonatas. So, while affirming art as a legitimate area of specialization and vocation, Wolterstorff reminds us that God’s intentions for art are not limited to fancy concerts and gallery attendance. If art is another means of knowing God, we must acknowledge the possibility that artistry shines forth in the common things of life, every day.

This impulse to emphasize the integrated nature of human life while also acknowledging essential differences among the diverse spheres is a hallmark of the Reformed tradition. In fact, Kuyper’s explanation as to why Calvinism had not produced its own religious art style (aside from what Marilynne Robinson has called a “chaste simplicity”²⁸) is the result of Calvinism’s freeing the artist from overdependence upon the Church and its institutions for creative outlet. In Kuyper’s account, Calvinism refused to “embody its religious spirit in monuments of splendor,”²⁹ preferring, rather, a spirituality that pervades all of lived experience. Quoting Eduard von Hartmann, Kuyper included the following in

his “Calvinism and Art”:

It is pure spiritual Religion which with one hand deprives the artist of his specifically religious art, but which, with the other, offers him, in exchange, a whole world, to be religiously animated.³⁰

6. The God of Material Things

Generally speaking, the Reformed tradition is resolute in affirming our rootedness in the material world, the physical universe in which we are called to action and accountability. Therefore, artistic endeavor in this tradition is often a wrestling with material reality and our extraordinary existence as physical beings *coram deo*, “before the face of God,” rather than a striving after an otherworldly, immaterial ideal. An excellent example of a musical investigation of and wrestling with creation as revelation is heard in Mr. Jonathan Posthuma’s recently composed song cycle for singers and orchestra titled *The God of Material Things*.

Posthuma is a graduate of the music program at Dordt College, and *The God of Material Things* was his final thesis project for his master’s degree in music composition at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The song cycle lasts over forty minutes, and it is comprised of eleven poems by Dordt College Emeritus Professor of English, David Schelhaas. *The God of Material Things* can be heard online using the following link: soundcloud.com/jnthnpsthm/sets/the-god-of-material-things.

Overall, Posthuma describes his composition and Schelhaas’s poems as sharing a vision for how quotidian events can have deep significance. Drawing upon several recurring themes and musical motives, his work expounds picturesque, though common, events and observations about the world, accompanied by the deep, emotional questions explored in Schelhaas’s poetry. Posthuma’s music awakens his audience to the fact that grief at the loss of a loved one, for example, finds echoes in the natural world, which contextualizes that suffering within a larger framework. In a public presentation of his song cycle, Posthuma commented,

The poems share a “narrative voice” that I describe as earnest, but easy-going. There is a gentle wisdom, playful wit, and a deep understanding that describes how material experiences and everyday happenings have a deep spiritual significance.³¹

The cycle opens with “Prelude: Sky Dance,” which includes a read narration describing a cloud of starlings wheeling about the sky in playful choreography. The starlings call to each other as they flit about during the day and as they settle down together for the night. At dawn, their renewed noise fills the air, and Posthuma quotes the familiar hymn “This is My Father’s World” with forceful brass instruments, which serve as his shorthand translation of their collective declaration. A brief silence precedes the birds taking off again for a new day of action in the world.

Musical metaphors arise from the text of the poetry, and they find correspondence in Posthuma’s score, e.g., “melodies of shape move contrapuntally, weaving a staff of eighth and quarter notes above the trees.”³² The musical metaphors eventually introduce a paradox for the narrator, who perceives a general order to the birds in their enthusiastic and apparently arbitrary movements: “random yet patterned, harmoniously wild.”³³ The piece concludes with the narrator asking what such glory of energy and excitement could mean ultimately: “Did he who marks the sparrow’s fall with care/design this choreography for birds and air?”³⁴

In the first sung portion of the cycle, “A Prayer,” Posthuma scores a wise “maternal voice,” who discovers that her own groundedness in God is mirrored in the flourishing of ash trees on 2nd Ave.³⁵ The text runs,

For these bony old ash trees on Second Avenue,
 their tough branches with twisting
 starts and stops,
 elegant curves,
 sudden juts and turns,
 haphazard as my prayers in the night,
 yet lifted up in the tremulous confidence
 that you have made them beautiful,
 thank you, oh Spirit of God.³⁶

Posthuma describes this piece as “prayerful” and explains how the musical material slowly unfolds over harmonic drones toward a stirring cli-

Posthuma describes his composition and Schelhaas’s poems as sharing a vision for how quotidian events can have deep significance.

max of realization. His music aurally depicts “huge tree branches aching and groaning as they are lifted up beautifully as an offering to God.”³⁷

Generally, the first half of *The God of Material Things* focuses more on natural experiences within the context of modern urban life, all the while marveling at God’s faithfulness in creation. The second song is “Interrupted Message,” which begins with the poet ambling down the street in the early morning light with a musical accompaniment of bird calls, imitated playfully in the score. The singer notes that the dance of light on the road, like the whistling birds, seems to declare the coming of Spring:

The looping swoops of tar that patch the
 road I walk
 are a golden script with which the just-rising
 sun has scrawled a cheery note.³⁸

Posthuma scores a new section in a jaunty waltz time (marked “With Jollity”) to humorously feature the poet’s likening one particular tree to a circus calliope and to emphasize the pleasantness of the morning for the singer. Suddenly a woodpecker begins to beat out his own message in Morse Code, and Posthuma includes an emphatic pattern played by woodblock in imitation of the woodpecker. The woodpecker’s testimony is cut short, though, and he abandons his message about the arrival of spring for the glory of experiencing its reality for himself:

He bangs out an S-P-R but then, distracted
 by diving finches scooping up the air,
 flits off to taste and see
 what it was he meant to say.³⁹

In the fourth song, “Morning News” (marked “Smaltzy, with Rubato”), human struggles come to the fore. The soloist begins by describing four mourning doves, as if rehearsing a barbershop quartet song, and nostalgically recalls an earlier stage in life, analogous to their pleasant music making. In contrast, though, as the morning news of the singer’s adult life seems overwhelmingly negative (more

like the squawk of a crow), Posthuma's score turns dark and dissonant for the song's troubling close:

Now, most mornings, I hear crows squawking
the cruel, discordant news of the day:
air strikes, suicide bombings, death counts.⁴⁰

Whereas these solo songs describe our human experience, the impact of sin, and attest to God's grace mediated to us through creation, Posthuma's intent is that the narrated scores that open and close the cycle engage larger themes concerning creation, as in "Prelude: Sky Dance," and redemption, as in "Conclusion: The God of Material Things." The conclusion features the aged narrator affirming what he has learned through a lifetime of watchfulness, while three hymns are sung beneath his statements ("God Himself Is With Us," "O Jesus I Have Promised," and "Holy, Holy, Holy"), weaving together in a triple counterpoint. On this portion of his cycle, Posthuma says,

This central thesis of the entire cycle is bound up in the Postlude, to which all of the movements have been building theologically...Throughout the cycle the singers had confessed that although we sometimes struggle to believe in the midst of our human experiences, God's grace—a "spiritual" concept—keeps showing itself and has physical, "material" existence.⁴¹

Schelhaas's poetry for this culminating portion is stirring, as it takes on a new power when heard alongside the hymn tunes sounding beneath it, which add their own separate layers of significance:

This I know: as soon as I could see,
I saw God everywhere.
He was always hanging around the house.
Never a meal, but there sat God,
smiling and blessing and keeping his elbows
off the table.
Sunday morning he was in his holy temple
and all the earth (except the crying children)
kept silence before him.
On endless Sunday afternoons he sat with
my dad and grandpa, smoking those terrible
cigars that grandpa smoked
and spelling out the mysteries of faith.

In my room at night as I read the fat
children's Bible full of pictures and
stories about David, Daniel,
and those other giants,
there was God holding the flashlight and
reading with me under the covers,
though sometimes as I got older the batteries
failed and darkness filled the room. ...
It's true I don't see him everywhere these
days but still, well, like this morning,
I was weeding the perennials,
dew-wet in morning glory light,
the wren singing his perky little heart out,
and suddenly, there was God again,
like a rabbit popping out of the strawberry
patch,
God, just for a moment,
Taking my breath away.⁴²

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, I have found helpful resources in the Reformed tradition that have aided me in thinking deeply about music, the art that I practice and which I have the privilege to teach. In an educational setting, I constantly observe students genuinely inspired by the comprehensive vision articulated in the Reformed/Calvinist tradition, a vision that allows believers to be faithfully engaged in every field of human endeavor because it presupposes that Christ is concerned with it all, even music. It is this vision that my colleagues and I share with our students, and, as Jonathan Posthuma's work demonstrates, the result can be very satisfying.

Endnotes

1. In this essay, I have endeavored to present my teaching goals and practices clearly, succinctly, and, I hope, winsomely. In truth, though, my lesson plan sometimes goes left, and wrestling with the Reformed tradition in a given class is messier than I anticipated. On those days, as always, student engagement helps me to challenge my assumptions and clarify my own thinking, which results in the sorts of insight that I share here—in hope that it is beneficial to others.
2. By "Reformed tradition" I intend the branch of Protestantism that traces its beliefs and practices to the teachings developed by John Calvin in the 16th century. Today, churches calling themselves Reformed or Calvinist can be found all over the world

and collectively display a remarkable and beautiful diversity.

3. For a discussion of one topic engaged collaboratively in CORE 160, "Introduction to the Arts," cf. John MacInnis, "The Arts of War: Reconsidering Conflict through Interdisciplinary Artistic Collaboration," *Faculty Work: Comprehensive List*, (2014): 58, accessed March 30, 2017, http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/58.
4. Kathryn Kalinak, *Film Music: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1ff.
5. Many of James Hannigan's compositions along with composer commentary can be heard on his website (www.jameshannigan.com).
6. McLuhan's remarkable thesis was that, in the end, the characteristics of any given medium shapes a person or a society as much as, if not more than, the message content delivered by that medium. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).
7. Cf. Jesus's parable of the talents, (Matthew 25:14–30).
8. For Calvin, to know oneself is inducement and opportunity to know God. Cf. Calvin's *Institutes*: "Every person, therefore, on coming to the knowledge of himself, is not only urged to seek God, but is also led as by the hand to find him." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (London: James Clarke and Company, 1949), 38.
9. *Ibid.*, 43.
10. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 173ff. For Plantinga, this sense of Divinity requires maturity and functions independently of logical argument. Furthermore, Plantinga distinguishes between the *sensus divinitatis* and the work of the Holy Spirit producing faith within the believer.
11. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 51.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 54.
14. *Ibid.*, 156.
15. Indeed, David Bently Hart is not spare in his praise of Bach's music as a vehicle for Christian truth: "Bach is the greatest of Christian theologians, the most inspired witness to the *ordo armoris* in the fabric of being; not only is no other composer capable of more freely developing lines or of more elaborate structures of tonal mediation (wherever the line goes, Bach is there also), but no one as compellingly demonstrates that the infinite is beautiful and that beauty is infinite. It is in Bach's music, as nowhere else, that the potential boundlessness of thematic development becomes manifest: how a theme can unfold inexorably through difference, while remaining continuous in each moment of repetition, upon a potentially infinite surface of varied repetition." David Bently Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 282-83.
16. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1953), 160-61.
17. John F. Kennedy, "Remarks at Amherst College upon receiving an honorary degree," (address presented at Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, October 26, 1963), accessed January 27, 2017, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/80308LXB5kOPFEJqkw5h1A.aspx>.
18. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 163.
19. *Ibid.*, 162-63.
20. Calvin Seerveld, *Normative Aesthetics*, ed. John Kok (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2014), 46.
21. *Ibid.*, 151-52.
22. Calvin Seerveld, "How Should Christians Be Stewards of Art?," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 12 (2009): 379.
23. Consider Rowan Williams's comments about the creative writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky, how, in their construction, they set forth his vision of reality and the place of God in that reality: "The Dostoevskian novel...enacts the freedom it discusses by creating a narrative space in which various futures are possible for characters and for readers. And in doing so it seeks—in the author's intention—to represent the ways in which the world's creator exercises 'authorship,' generates dependence without control...The fiction is like the world itself—proposed for acceptance and understanding but unable to compel them, since compulsion would make it impossible for the creator to appear as the creator of freedom." In this instance, Dostoevsky's reader is presented with what Dostoevsky has concluded about the world, and in engaging his vision, the reader's own lived experience is enlarged. Of course, an artist's concept, presented as it is in what she has made, may be astute or wrongheaded. In either case, by engaging the artistic creation, a person has opportunity for his sense of God to be expanded, while experiencing, considering, or challenging the author's account. Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* (New York: Baylor University Press, 2011), 12.
24. Seerveld, "How Should Christians Be Stewards of Art?," 384.
25. Furthermore, advances in artificial intelligence (AI)

- raise legitimate questions about the possibility of music composed by—and for—AI.
26. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art Rethought: The Social Practices of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7ff.
 27. *Ibid.*, 40.
 28. Marilynne Robinson, “Christian Freedom,” (paper presented at Dordt College First Monday Lectures, Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa, February 7, 2010).
 29. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 147.
 30. *Ibid.*, 159.
 31. Jonathan Posthuma, “The God of Material Things” (paper presented at Dordt College Kuyper Scholar’s Honor Program, Sioux Center, Iowa, September 28, 2015).
 32. David Schelhaas, *The God of Material Things* (Sioux Center: Dordt College Press, 2007), 33.
 33. *Ibid.*
 34. *Ibid.*
 35. Posthuma, “The God of Material Things.”
 36. Schelhaas, *The God of Material Things*, 1.
 37. Posthuma, “The God of Material Things.”
 38. Schelhaas, *The God of Material Things*, 13.
 39. *Ibid.*
 40. *Ibid.*, 18.
 41. Posthuma, “The God of Material Things.”
 42. Schelhaas, *The God of Material Things*, 30-31.