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Christian Voices in Musicology: A Report



By Karen De Mol

For many musicians and music lovers—maybe for you, and most of the time for me—music is an aesthetic thing. The concerts we give in the B. J. Haan Auditorium are intended to be significant aesthetic occasions, presenting music for which all sorts of musical, aesthetic adjectives would be appropriate: expressive, harmonious, beautiful, melodious, rich, lovely. When we think about all the areas that make up our creaturely life—economic, social, political, physical, and others—we musicians tend to hone in on the aesthetics mode and consider it our home territory. That focus reminds

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me of a panel discussion I once heard in which the panelists were describing why they entered the field of music. One panelist held forth at some length about his attraction to the structure, the order, the philosophy, the meaning of music. Another panelist looked at him in sheer astonishment; he said, “Is that really why you went into music? I went into music because it sounds so good.” I think most Dordt music majors would agree with the second panelist. None of those panelists, and none of our students that I know of, are entering music because of its connection with justice.

Historically, that second view has been in sync with the field of musicology, until recently. Musicology is, broadly speaking, the scholarly study of music, as contrasted with composition, the creative side of music, and performance, the re-creative side. Musicology came into its own as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century. It responded to the then “hero worship” of composers (today the hero worship is of performers) by seeking to shift discourse about music toward a concentration on the music itself.¹ Traditionally, musicology has focused on the music, not on the social and cultural contexts or the roles of music in individual and collective lives. Traditionally, musicologists have analyzed musical masterpieces, prepared transcriptions and performance scores, studied the performance practice of past eras, studied compositions in light of the instrumental capabilities of the time, and the like. A local example of how we are affected by the work of historical musicologists is this: this spring the Sioux County Oratorio Chorus performed Handel’s *Messiah*. Half a century ago the orchestra for

that performance would have been very large and inclusive of some instruments that Handel did not use. The research of historical musicology into the orchestras of Handel's time has led to a restoration of the original orchestration—and that was reflected in the SCOC's recent performance.

But in the last while, perhaps the past thirty years, a trend called “the new musicology” has emerged. The new musicologists appreciate the “embeddedness” of music in culture and have expanded musicological discourse to include more focus on sociological and cultural-historical questions. All sorts of new fields of musicological study have sprung up. Ethnomusicology is one; ethnomusicology studies the music of cultures different from our own. This new field is important to Wycliffe Bible Translators, which engages ethnomusicologists so that the music accompanying the Gospel to new cultures is accessible to and appropriate for that culture. Ethnomusicology is becoming a common course on college campuses; Dordt has one too—it's called “Music in Non-Western Cultures.” (Two important goals of our Dordt course are understanding the music itself in musical terms and understanding the relationship of the musics of these cultures to their cultural contexts—religion, family, work, leisure, education, social protest, entertainment, etc.)

Other new fields include music and gender, music and feminism, music and psychology. Not all musicologists agree; scholarly journals, conference discussions, and e-mail discussion lists all witness sharp dissensions between the historical musicologists, who believe strongly that the proper study of music is music, and the new musicologists, who believe equally strongly that music must be studied in relationship with other areas of human life and thinking.

An interesting thing that has emerged in this tension is common acceptance that all scholars start with a point of view. Accordingly, all manner of voices are acceptable: feminist voices, Marxist voices, gay/lesbian voices—all are being accepted as legitimate voices, even if one does not agree with them. So, why not a Christian voice? We think that the climate in this field is uniquely ripe now for the entry of Christian voices.

Seeking to seize the moment, a group of six Christian musicologists and theorists from five different schools recently banded together to de-

velop a Christian voice in the field of musicology, a voice which, we hope, will command a hearing in the field of musicology at large. It is my great privilege to be one of the six. My colleagues in this endeavor are Drs. Timothy Steele and Benita Walters Fredlund, of Calvin College; Dr. Johann Buis, of Wheaton College; Dr. Brooks Kuykendall, of Erskine College; and Dr. Stanley Pelke, of Western Michigan University. My intent in this brief essay is to describe our work so far and to encourage others to provide us with insights and examples for our continuing research. In describing our work, I will at times be using the words of our grant applications; for those words, I am grateful for the work of the colleagues just named earlier, who crafted the proposals and shepherded them through application processes.

Our work will focus on crisis, justice, and music—rather a far cry from the consideration of music as focused on a pleasurable aesthetic experience. Recent years have brought a new interest in musicological writing on music and crisis, or the relationship of music to conflict, war, injustice, oppression, abuse, and trauma. This interest is related to the new musicological interest in music in relation to specific cultural contexts. But the ramp-up of this interest can also be traced, in some part, to the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001. Since then, significant articles and books have been written, and conferences have been held on music and crisis; several universities have even offered courses on music and crisis or music and war (Columbia University and Harvard University, to name two).

A particularly galvanizing study has been that of Suzanne Cusick, of New York University. She studied the U.S. military's use of music in war and in interrogation. Her paper, titled *Music as Torture/ Music as Weapon*, exposed and sharply criticized the use of music as torture in the American War on Terror. For fifty years, she states, the government has used music as an acoustical, physical torture as part of its “No Touch Torture,” which leaves no marks on the flesh, all the while the musicology profession was believing music to be a non-political art. Most recently, detainees in Bagdad were forced without respite to listen to certain pieces of American music, offensive to their values, which wracked their psyches, and at deafening volumes, which damaged their hearing. Cusick believes

that there have been moments at which government actions on torture impress themselves on national consciousness; certainly this is one of them. Torture has become thinkable, even mandatory—and thus a threshold has been crossed, a threshold which previously was assumed unthinkable to cross without severe damage to our humanity. Cuscick's presentation at the American Musicological Society convention in 2006 was given a standing ovation by a packed room. Subsequently, the AMS board took the step, unusual for a scholarly association, of going on record to publicly condemn the use of music in physical or psychological torture, calling this practice a "misappropriation of music" and a "contamination of our cultures."² By calling the use of music as a weapon a "misappropriation," the AMS implies that music has some other, true,

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essential nature, but does not spell out what this nature is.

What would a Christian response to this question be? In the context of the on-going discussion of music and torture begun at the AMS, we six hope to speak to this question: in God's world, what is the appropriate use of music? How does music express our humanity, and what musical practices diminish it?

These recent events—9/11 and the revelation

of the use of music as an instrument of torture—have brought such themes and questions into the forefront of public consciousness; but the relationship of music to war, politics, oppression, and personal tragedy stretches back to ancient times. The Bible recounts that while the Israelites were in Babylonian captivity, they did not feel able to sing songs of their homeland, but their captors nevertheless "demanded a song" from them,³ and in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*,⁴ Thucydides describes the use of flute players to regulate soldiers' steps, as did fife and drum corps in the American Revolution. Instances in later centuries include Medieval and Renaissance composers writing elaborate music to commemorate the dead, and Dutch farmers and French Huguenot explorers bringing Protestant psalmody to the New World after suffering persecution and political expulsion, to name only a few.

Tumultuous geopolitical conflict in the twentieth century and a shrinking global village have made us aware of similar interrelationships of music and politics across the globe in relatively recent times. Such instances include the promotion of proletarian, or "people's," music (in various guises) by labor and revolutionary movements in Europe, North and South America, and Asia; the exploitation and control of music in Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, and Maoist China; the important role music played in anti-war and civil rights movements in America; the importance of a variety of indigenous musical styles in post-colonial struggles in Africa; and many more.⁵

Given all those instances from Babylon to the present, to which of these, and to what other situations of crisis and justice or injustice, might we Christian musicologists speak? Our vision for this project is to prepare and to collect several case studies of instances in which musical activity has played a special role in a time of crisis. Our aim is that these case studies cover a wide variety of eras, places, and genres. In our brainstorming we imagined that some of these studies might include, for example, music sung by Yiddish folk choirs to commemorate the Holocaust, music used in the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa, music composed by Ludwig Senfl for the Diet of Worms, the use of classical music in the Cultural Revolution in China, the reception of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* in post-9/11 memorials,

and music in personal times of grief. Each study would seek to understand the dynamics of music-making in that specific crisis context and offer a Christian reading of the ethical and philosophical implications of those dynamics. Our hope is that our scholarship will offer insights into how music and crisis interact, and that we might use what we learn to call for music's place in bringing justice and shalom to God's world.⁶

Each of us is now focusing on a topic on which we have already done research or had personal experience or which is close to our heart. In addition, we hope that other scholars will be drawn into the project once it is under way. Dr. Johann Buis will focus on music and apartheid; he brings personal experience of life in South Africa and a body of published work to the task. Dr. Timothy Steele intends to study Psalm-singing in Hungary during the long Communist oppression, particularly its role in keeping and shaping faith identity of Reformed Christians. Drs. Brooks Kuykendall and Stanley Pelke, whose special interest is early twentieth-century music, are considering a study of pieces composed by English composers who had lived through both world wars—Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* and Michael Tippett's *A Child of Our Time*, both pieces directly related to those wars—and possibly comparing the responses of these composers to protracted and reoccurring war to that of a composer responding to a terrible but single event, John Adams' *On the Transmigration of Souls*, composed after 9/11.

Dr. Benita Walters Fredlund's unique area is the role of music in the Holocaust. She focuses on the music among Holocaust survivors, particularly in the Toronto area, music which serves to help shape their identity as Jews and as Holocaust survivors, music which serves to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive, music which expresses their continuing grief. Fredlund has already published on this topic and has given conference presentations, including one at the Lilly Fellows Conference at Seattle Pacific University last fall. Another area of study might be the role of appreciation of music among the Nazis, who desired and enjoyed a highly cultivated musical life even as they systematically destroyed a people; how did their music shape their identity—at least, their perception of their own identity?

Then there was music within the death camps.

I just finished reading *Music of Another World*,⁷ written by Szymon Laks, a Polish Jew who was a prisoner in the Birkenau concentration camp for two and a half years. As prisoners' musical abilities became known, and often at the request of some guard or other, they received special permission to be excused from hard labor to play in the camp orchestra. At length, Laks became the director of and arranger for the orchestra, which was assigned to play marches for the daily walk of inmates to their place of labor and for various events and whims of the guards. His intent is to describe the music in the camp, but he cannot do so without describing the context of that music. He writes of the terrible contradiction, "that music—that most sublime expression of the human spirit—also became entangled in the hellish enterprise of the extermination of millions of people and even took an active part in this extermination."⁸ His account of music in the camp throws light on the "meaning" of music in those camps, both for prisoners and their guards. In an appendix are some Polonaises he wrote in the camp. Laks' account is both horrifying and fascinating.

I have recently become aware of Lan Adomian, a Mexican composer with Russian Jewish origins, who has been called the Holocaust composer. Adomian wrote his *Fifth Symphony* ("The Martyrs Wood") in memory of the six million Jewish victims of the holocaust, and *Terezin's Ballad*, in memory of the 15,000 children murdered in the Teresienstadt camp. He also won an international competition, "Holocaust and Renaissance," in the University of Haifa, Israel, in 1978.

How did I learn of him? One day I was surprised by a visit from Rev. Israel Ramirez. He had read my little book *Sound Stewardship*⁹ and wondered if I was writing anything else. When I described this project, he made me acquainted with Lan Adomian—and also sent me the score of a choral work he wrote using texts on peace from the Bible. I am hoping that others can suggest additional resources for the study of music and the Holocaust or any of our other topics.

That music means more in times of crisis is true, not only in times of national and societal crisis but also in times of personal crisis. Music has been used to mourn, memorialize, and heal in the context of personal tragedies. For example, alternative rock artist Tori Amos recounts her will

to survive, despite being violently raped, in the song “Me and a Gun”; and New York composer John Corigliano composed his *Symphony No. 1* as a eulogy for victims of AIDS—victims named in his accompanying text.

Personal crisis can be the death of loved ones. Every grieving family selects songs for the funeral, however small and private that service. Music can powerfully express the grief that otherwise would burst our skin. I remember that on the afternoon I learned of the sudden death of a close friend, I played the recording of Brahms’ *Ein Deutsches Requiem* three times in a row, very loud, to express my outrage at our mortality and to be steadied by texts of faith. Thomas A. Dorsey wrote the gospel hymn “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” in the aftermath of the death of his wife and infant son. To prepare himself for his own death, Heinrich Schutz composed music for his own funeral. In his Lutheran tradition, the choral cantata is to be an explication of the sermon, a “second sermon,” as it were; before Schutz could write music for his own funeral, he needed to obtain his pastor’s sermon for his own funeral. Funeral music has been composed specifically to assist in national mourning for a public figure, such as the occasion for the composition of Verdi’s *Requiem*. It has served to mourn the loss of one’s own children. Herbert Howells, agnostic English composer, wrote *Hymnus Paradisi* after three years of grieving for his nine-year-old son, who died of spinal meningitis; and Nicholas Wolterstorff, deeply Christian, commissioned a requiem by Cary Ratcliff for the funeral of his son. How do these pieces express grief and fear, anger and despair, peace and hope for the individual and for the community—both the local community at the time and the human community over time? How do these pieces express identity, and how do they express one’s beliefs about death? With my strong interest in both liturgy and music literature, this is the field I hope to explore. Some requiems have become standard concert repertoire, while others have not. What happens to the meaning of liturgical pieces when they are put on the concert stage? And can it be identified why some requiems speak to a large audience over time while others remain personal and local?

What all these instances show is that in times of war, oppression, and trauma, music takes on heightened symbolic and personal importance and

is used to express identity and worldview in ways that are more obvious than during times of peace, freedom, and contentment.

That meaning may fluctuate over time. In traditional musicology, meaning is inherent in the piece and is fixed, excluding what the piece “means” to the listener. But over time its “meaning” to listeners may vary with the context. An example is Handel’s oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus*, which was written originally to celebrate the quelling of the Scottish uprising by the British in 1746; in the 1930s, it was used by the Nazis as an example of Teutonic military superiority; later still,

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it was understood as a story of the triumph of Jews over their oppressors by Yiddish folk choirs in America during the Holocaust.¹⁰ In a similar manner, one assumes that Barney songs (sung by characters from the children’s television show “Barney and Friends”) had a radically different meaning for toddlers in America than for detainees at Camp Nama, Bagdad, who were forced to listen to them at deafening volumes as one technique of many in the American military’s “harsh interrogation” protocol.¹¹ After 9/11, a piece that almost became the theme song of the nation at that time was Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings*. What is there about

this music that gave it meaning for a nation at that time?

What is our hoped-for outcome? In general, we hope to develop a Christian voice in the field of musicology on topics related to music and crisis, music and justice. I should be saying “Christian voices,” for we envision no single Christian response to these issues—though certainly a main note in all Christian voices is that Christians care deeply about justice because of the character and the command of our God. In regard to the variety of topics, specific voices will develop specific nuances of Christian thought. We aim to amplify the voices of Christian music scholars, whose thinking about music and whose professional engagement with musicology cannot help being shaped by their identity as Christians.

I now return to the question posed at the beginning of this paper. By calling the use of music as a weapon a “misappropriation,” the AMS implies that music has some other true, essential nature, but it does not spell out what this nature is. What would a Christian response to this question be? What do we believe about how God created music and its appropriate use in God’s world? Similarly, what Christian response might we make to the use of music as a tool for propaganda or the control of musical composition and performance by those in power? When, if ever, are such practices justified, and why? What might a Christian response be to the seeming mutability of musical meaning evident in the times of crisis? How is it that music can hold meaning and significance for a given community, and is that meaning entirely relative? What in the design and structure of the music itself (that traditional focus of historical musicology) is fixed, and what is multi-valent, lending itself to multiple meanings?

For Christian scholars and “new” musicologists alike, moments of music and crisis are seen as especially fruitful and instructive areas to study. They are so because they clearly demonstrate that

musical activity is not isolated but embedded in the fabric of human life. For Christian musicologists, these contexts allow us to argue further for the ethical and moral aspects of music-making and to include Christian and biblical perspectives among the many different voices analyzing music’s ontology, semiotics, and role in our culture. This is an exciting and a challenging project. I will be grateful for any suggestions, insights, examples, and questions to raise as we go along.

Endnotes

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2. <http://www.ams-net.org/AMS-torture-resolution.pdf>.
3. Psalm 137: 3 (New Living Translation).
4. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publications, 2000).
5. Timothy Steele, Benita Wolters-Fredlund, et. al. *Draft proposal to Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities*, 2008.
6. Timothy Steele, Benita Wolters-Fredlund, et. al. *Draft proposal to Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities*, 2008.
7. Syzmon Laks, *Musique d’un autre monde (Music of Another World)*, trans. Chester A. Kisiel (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1989).
8. *Ibid.*, 5.
9. Karen A. DeMol, *Sound Stewardship* (Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt Press, 1999).
10. Benita Wolters-Fredlund, “Judas Maccabaeus as Revolutionary Jewish Hero: Progressive Jewish Readings of Handel’s Oratorio during the Holocaust,” under review.
11. Suzanne Cusick, “‘You are in a place that is out of the world . . .’: Music in the Detention Camps of the ‘Global War on Terror’” in the *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2.1 (February 2008).