



Dissonance and Discordance, Consonance and Concordance: Late-Twentieth-Century Music as Reflective of a Violent Society?

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VIOLENCE, ACCORDING TO THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY, IS:

The exercise of physical force, so as to inflict injury on, or cause damage to, persons or property; action or conduct characterized by this; treatment or usage tending to cause bodily injury or forcibly interfering with personal freedom.¹

I take it that is what we are talking about here.² I assume the definition is not re-

¹*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University, 1971) 3635.

²When I agreed to do this article, I immediately set out to challenge whatever preconceptions I might have by getting advice from friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and teachers. Many of them responded to my queries. None of them is responsible for what I have said here, but they were very helpful as I tried to sort this out. To the following I express my gratitude and appreciation for their thoughtful responses: Mark Bangert, Robert Batastini, Harold Best, Carolyn Bliss, Philip Bohlman, Philip Brunelle, Ton Cady, David Cherwien, Susan Cherwien, John Ferguson, Richard French, Alice Hanson, Mark Harbold, Michael Hawn, Richard Hillert, Donald P. Hustad, Hugh T. McElrath, Paul A. Richardson, Naomi Rowley, Don Saliers, and Russell Schulz-Widmar.

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Does music reflect the violence of its culture? Does it contribute to it? The questions are focused by the violence of the late twentieth century, but not unique to this time. Christian music will always belong to its culture and yet always be alien to it.

stricted to people or to what is physical, but includes a wholeness: injury to the whole created order and to the whole person, defined in mental, emotional, and spiritual ways or however one chooses to define that wholeness.

I. TWO CONCERTS

1. A contemporary music concert

Some years ago I went to a concert of contemporary music with a companion. This was before the word “contemporary” had been allied with “Christian music” to denote what musicologists would not call contemporary. The music consisted of new and avant garde musical compositions. One piece included breaking a light bulb. My companion, who had not been to concerts like this before and was not prepared for such things, was so visibly upset that we had to leave. Others in the audience appeared equally shaken.

This experience and similar ones like it with music appreciation students have taught me that music relates to the social fabric in some profound way.³ Breaking a light bulb, with the context of sounds that surrounded it, plus other similar pieces in the concert, was for my companion a violent tearing apart of something. The ordering, or disordering, of reality which had been expressed in the music violently tore into my companion’s ordering of reality and life.

This concert took place in an art museum. The room was small in comparison to concert halls. There were few performers with few, mostly non-traditional, instruments, which were largely played independently and quietly before a small audience. Intimacy, quiet sounds, and the surroundings of an art museum would not suggest violence, yet for my companion and for others who reacted the same way the experience was deeply violent.

2. A rock concert

Contrast that experience with a rock concert in a large auditorium and thousands of people. Or think of some church services or dances where the same equipment and auditory experiences can be found. Microphones and loudspeakers cover the stage. The performers wear ear plugs, and the decibel level is driven beyond the threshold of pain. The sound of the bass guitar is turned into a bodily pressure as its vibrations push against the chest and ride up the neck with a choking sensation. The screams of the audience themselves split the air. The building itself literally shakes as the crowd pulsates in rhythm, and small pieces of paint and plaster fall from the ceiling beneath the balcony. Those whose ears start to hurt go outside at the loudest points, and everyone leaves the concert with at least brief hearing impairments. In the second concert the violence of the experience is more obvious than the first one, though most of the audience may celebrate the event as a kind of numinous and mystical entry into a transcendent realm that they would not per-

³Cf. Edward Foley, “Musical Forms, Referential Meaning and Belief,” *Worship* 69/4 (1995) 318, and the work by Alan Lomax to which he points.

ceive to be violent at all. The physical violence of the event cannot be denied, however, any more than the psychic violence of the first one, though some people may associate violence with one and not the other, while others may reverse such associations.

II. TEXTS AND ASSOCIATIVE MATTERS NOT OUR CONCERN

1. *Texts*

As I recall it, the first concert referred to above included no texts. Even if there had been texts, however, the result would have been the same. In the second example, texts could be about violence—inflicting pain on oneself or on others—or they could be opposed to such activity, either obviously or simply as jubilant celebrations of life. If the event were a church service the texts could be praise choruses with snippets of the psalms. A dance might have love songs with some of the same words as the rock concert. Musically, however, as in the first example, the description of the second event could be exactly the same whether or not there were texts and no matter what the texts might be.

That does not make texts irrelevant. Words are often carried by or associated with music. So are activities, such as worshiping, dancing, love-making, war-making, or the way a performer or an audience looks and moves. Some of these words and activities can be and have been violent. It would be possible therefore to do a study of violent texts or violent activities which relate to music (like “I shot the sheriff”⁴ or “Rape me, rape me”⁵ or gangsta-rap and the videos that accompany some texts⁶). That would be a valuable study, but it is beyond the scope of this article. Here the topic is music and its relationship to violence in a late-twentieth-century society. So textual matters will be bracketed out of the concerns considered here.

Textual matters and actions related to music have to do with music’s associations or how music is used, not with the actual music itself. Two other issues are even more subtle and will also be bracketed out of our considerations for the same reason as texts.

2. *Commercial Purposes*

One has to do with music’s associations with or use for commercial purposes. As with texts, it is impossible to isolate a genre of music here, because all sorts of genres can be and have been used. A Bach two-part invention, Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus,” a Christmas piece—“What Sweeter Music”—by John Rutter, Richard Strauss’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, or Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, as well as more trivial compositions, have all been employed to accompany a sales pitch. At one level this is cute or just good fun or wonderfully creative, but there is another level which raises serious questions. One question is whether treating fine music in this

⁴Bob Marley, 1973.

⁵Nirvana, 1993.

⁶I am grateful to Ton Cady for providing me with these and numerous other specific examples.

manner can be justified and is its own violence, but the more basic issue is about how human beings relate to one another and the violence of treating people as consumers who are valued only for their buying power. Music here is used to manipulate people, to get them to buy a product. It is allied with sex when sex is used as a degrading means of selling things and with the violence of the mass media. The most obvious example is MTV.⁷ This is not so much a specifically musical matter as it is a question of how music is used.

3. *Perpetual Adolescence*

The other issue is this. If it is true that our society has embraced a form of perpetual adolescence⁸ in which music is held to a “fifth grade” level,⁹ one is compelled to ask how violent such stunting of our lives may be. Here actual musical syntax is involved, but the syntax is not necessarily violent, nor is it the real issue. The real issue is holding our musical and human development to a certain ceiling by our commercial culture.¹⁰ As with texts, these and related associative matters are important topics which would make valuable studies on their own. We will keep bumping into them, but they are beyond our concern here.

III. MUSIC AND VIOLENCE IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY: FURTHER EXAMPLES

In addition to the examples given above of the relationship of music to violence in the latter part of our century, there are others. Here are some of them, organized by categories.

1. *Vocal abuse*

If one goes to choral concerts of young children in some schools or churches, it is possible to encounter severe tightness in the voice. Sometimes this is expressed in what is close to shouting on an approximation of a pitch. Children who recover quickly from abuse to their bodies may not suffer long-term consequences unless they continue to misuse their voices, but abuse or violence is clearly being done to young bodies.

This sort of abuse was made poignantly obvious to me some years ago when

⁷See Quentin J. Schultze, et al., *Dancing in the Dark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 180.

⁸Ibid., 65 (see also 33ff.).

⁹Richard French, letter to author, 10 April 1995.

¹⁰There is a related issue here that concerns not only those who consume what is created, but those who do the creating. It is tartly summarized by Martin Franzmann, in a discussion of hymnody, but applies to matters well beyond hymnody: “I am reminded here of a little poem on an artist who sold himself out, a poem that is not nearly as funny as it sounds:

He found a formula for drawing comic rabbits,
And the formula for drawing comic rabbits paid,
But in the end he could not change the habits
That the formula for drawing comic rabbits made.

We had better be careful about indulging in such condescension, lest we too find the comic rabbits too powerful for us.” This is from Franzmann’s sermon, “Theology Must Sing,” quoted in Paul Westermeyer, *With Tongues of Fire* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995) 71.

one of my college students, a singer around the age of twenty who performed regularly at night with a rock band, walked into my office complaining that his throat was almost always sore and tight—to such an extent that he was getting hoarse and having a hard time speaking at all during the day. I asked him to demonstrate how he sang. The chin went up and the head back, the neck tightened, veins popped out, there was virtually no diaphragmatic support or breath at all, and the vocal folds were turned into a pseudo-diaphragm through which a very tight sound was forced. I told him he was in for long-term vocal trouble unless he learned how to use his voice properly. This was clear violence to a human body.

2. *Tone color*

What about the tone color of our period? Early in this century the *Motu Proprio* of Pius X held up sanctity, goodness of form, and universality as ideals of sacred music.¹¹ Purity of tone color has often been connected with this. Instrumentalists and vocalists, with different ideals from Pius X, have had their own notions of pure tone color. They spend hours and hours in practice studios striving to produce what they or their teachers or some societal norm tells them is the purest possible tone color they can achieve.

Many sounds in our century exhibit just the reverse of these ideals. Instead of striving for a pure tone color—and sanctity, goodness of form, and universality which often are allied with it—the twentieth century has produced music which values distortion. To produce the distortion, many devices are used. They include unusual means of sound production, electronic manipulation, modifications to instruments like “prepared pianos,” even destruction of instruments. Is there some violence here?

3. *Rhythm*

What about rhythm? Is there a frenzied, out-of-control, wild, violent character to twentieth-century rhythm, from Stravinsky’s ballets right on throughout the rest of the century?

4. *Dissonance*

What about dissonance? Is Schönberg’s atonality violent, or Stravinsky’s version of it? What about Bartok’s biting bitonality? Or Daniel Bukvich’s Symphony No. 1, which memorializes the bombing of Dresden in 1945 with sounds of the “Fire Storm” and listeners wanting to “jump out of their skin”? Or Krzysztof Penderecki’s *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*?

5. *Danger music*

In *New Directions in Music*,¹² David Cope describes “danger music.”¹³ Here

¹¹Pius X, *Tra le sollecitudini* (22 November 1903), translated in Paul Hume, *Catholic Church Music* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1956) 180-193. See p. 184 for the references to sanctity, goodness of form, and universality.

¹²David H. Cope, *New Directions in Music*, 4th ed. (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown, 1984)—first published, 1971.

¹³I am indebted to Mark Bangert for giving me this reference.

there is no question of violence because of the possibility of a “direct attack on the performer or spectator.”¹⁴ Cope’s examples include finger boxes with razor blades, broken glass, and pocket knives; “blood (and even death)”; “ear annihilation” by sound consciously cranked to the highest possible decibel level;¹⁵ a rifle pointed at an audience (with a counterpoint of flowers); and the threat of throwing a bomb into an audience.¹⁶

6. *Consonance*

The above examples are, or could be construed as being, in some sense obviously violent. Is there a subtle but more insidiously violent character to music which is not obviously violent, which even appears on its surface to be non-violent? What about music which is characterized by continual consonance—sugar-coated musical envelopes, sometimes called “elevator music” or “easy listening” music—especially when it characterizes a whole musical diet? If some of the above examples tend toward perpetual dissonance so that dissonance virtually becomes consonance, does the sugar-coated variety do the reverse, namely, turn consonance into dissonance? And then, in a way parallel to omitting from the psalms the laments and human rage against one another and even against God, does this omission of any artistic expression of the nastier side of reality drive that reality into hiding and with it the impulse to do violence until it can no longer be held in, at which point actual physical violence of some sort breaks into the open?

7. *Ingrown ease*

Another quite different example introduces more complications. What about a concert of music or a service of worship that uses music in any style, but where the people in attendance are oblivious to the poverty and injustice all around them outside the concert hall or church? Is that violent? Here the issue is ingrown ease and lack of concern for the neighbor—which is, of course, what elicits the outrage of prophets like Amos. This may be regarded in two ways. Some might say this is not a syntactic musical issue at all, but something which concerns the mind-set of the people, no matter what the music. Others might argue that some music is inherently violent, that musical syntax is indeed involved.

IV. PERSPECTIVE

The examples listed above certainly could be construed to suggest that music is reflective of violence in our period. They could suggest that the surrounding cultural context may not be healthy and that music reflects the disease. But before blanket assumptions are made about that or about our period, some caution is in order. Let us revisit the categories listed in section III from a historical perspective.

¹⁴Cope, *New Directions*, 306.

¹⁵This is parallel to the rock concert (or church service or dance) mentioned earlier, with the added twist that the destruction of the ear is here consciously expressed.

¹⁶Cope, *New Directions*, 306-307.

1. *Vocal abuse*

Concerning the way the voice is treated, we have to acknowledge that there are not only examples of bad singing among us, but also examples of good singing, by children and adults—singing which is both healthy and musical. (The two are closely related.) Bad training can happen at any period and is a possible culprit here. Historical representations of singers in taut poses or accusations about Puritans straining their throats¹⁷ indicate that we are not the first people to treat our voices poorly. And, of course, one has to ask how different cultures have used their voices.

2. *Tone color*

This raises the question of how various cultures have approached ideals of sound and begins to relativize concerns for purity of tone. Curt Sachs points to primitive ideals of tone colors for the voice, “a very hollow sound” and “a buzzing nasal timbre,”¹⁸ for example, which are surely not the same as those of classical western music. Even in the west there are variations. “French monastic choirs” may have had more of a “viol-like edge” than the *bel canto* ideal to which musicians often point (and which William Flynn calls “immature”).¹⁹ Is any one of these, or any other sound—that of some sort of “folk” music or black spirituals or Sacred Harp or country western, for example—more violent or more reflective of violence than any other one?

3. *Rhythm*

As to rhythm, is it any more violent for us than it has been in the past for others? Curt Sachs, in discussing the ritual functions of drums, recounts this story from the lore of a Reindeer Koryak, told in 1901. Universe was

beating the drum and his wife Rain-woman, sitting next to him. In order to produce rain, he cut off his wife’s vulva, and hung it on the drum; then he cut off his penis and beat with it, instead of an ordinary drum stick.²⁰

For primitive cultures Sachs says the drum is “indispensable...no instrument is held more sacred.”²¹ It has both male and female connotations, among them “cohabitation in the ramming action,”²² and it is also the instrument of the warrior.²³ Here we are back to associations, not necessarily violent intrinsic syntactic musical qualities, though it is easy to see how connections like drum sticks to phallic symbols, the

¹⁷See Percy Scholes, *The Puritans and Music* (Westminster: Dacre, 1948) 274, where Scholes quotes the famous lines by Webster from *The Duchess of Malfi* 4.2: “He makes alum and sells it to Puritans that have sore throats with overstraining.”

¹⁸Curt Sachs, *The Rise of Music in the Ancient World East and West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1943) 23.

¹⁹William Flynn, “Anonymous 4: New Audiences for Early Music,” *Atlanta Early Music Alliance Newsletter* (June 1995) 4.

²⁰Curt Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1940) 36.

²¹*Ibid.*, 34.

²²*Ibid.*, 37.

²³*Ibid.*, 36.

drum's membrane to a hymen, and beating as a warlike act could readily be made. The point is that percussive rhythmic activity may have had associations of violence for past peoples as they may for us.

4. *Dissonance*

Is there anything unusual about dissonance for the twentieth century? The introduction of polyphony was regarded as dissonant a millennium ago. Thirds and sixths were not always considered consonant. The *ars nova* represents a break with the *ars antiqua*, as does the beginning of the baroque with the renaissance. Is twentieth-century atonality and polytonality qualitatively distinct from any of the dissonant introductions or evolutions which preceded them in the history of western music? Ben Arnold has "examined more than 1300 compositions from the Middle Ages to 1991" that are related to war.²⁴ To what extent does any of this reflect violence in the social fabric of the society which produced it?

5. *Danger music*

As to "danger music," David Cope cites Paul Nougé's *Music Is Dangerous* to indicate all music's potential for danger.²⁵ Nougé argues that music used for relaxation, forgetting, or pleasure is but a subtle facade for emotional dangers and that the audience is never safe from musical performance.²⁶

6. *Consonance*

Sugar-coated music may be more prevalent in our period if one assumes the pull of the commercial culture is stronger than ever before and because we have the technical means to pipe musical drizzle into shopping centers, elevators, telephones, cars, airplanes, and every other place we frequent. Whether that means a qualitative distinction can be made between us and the past, however, may be difficult to demonstrate.

7. *Ingrown ease*

The disparity between haves and have-nots, or between those who have power and those against whom it is used unjustly or even violently, can call musical syntax into play; but this is not related only to our period. Susan McClary says that

the point of recapitulation in the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony unleashes one of the most horrifyingly violent episodes in the history of music....

The desire for cadential arrival that has built up over the course of the development finally erupts, as the subject necessarily (because of narrative tradition) finds itself in the throes of the initial void while refusing to relent: the entire first key area in the recapitulation is pockmarked with explosions. It is the consequent juxtaposition of desire and unspeakable violence in this moment that cre-

²⁴Ben Arnold, *Music and War* (New York: Garland, 1993) xiv.

²⁵Cope, *New Directions*, 302. Nougé's work has not been accessible to me.

²⁶Cope, *New Directions*, 301-302.

ates its unparalleled fusion of murderous rage and yet a kind of pleasure in its fulfilling of formal demands.²⁷

This raises all sorts of questions about tension and release in music and whether all western art music, not only Beethoven's Ninth or other Beethoven symphonies, is by definition inherently violent. The violence could be construed as sexist in the case of Beethoven, sexist in the case of Gesualdo, if you think the wild musical syntax he wrote bears some relation to his killing of his wife, and racist in the case of Wagner and Hitler's use of Wagner if you think that musical syntax is involved there. This is hard to sort out, especially when one considers the comfort ("and yet a kind of pleasure," to quote McClary) both women and men have derived from so much western art music, including Beethoven and Wagner if not Gesualdo.²⁸ Whatever one thinks about this, the point here is that it is not related only to our period.

8. "Everything we do is music": a new category?

Is there one way in which music in our period does reflect a violent context that differs from the past? Mark Bangert refers to Jacques Attali's contention that music is helpfully

understood as noise. Because music is channeled or *controlled* noise, it can exert power over uncontrolled noise. Noise uncontrolled is destructive and therefore violent. But music can overcome such noise, can exercise control, and is therefore powerful.²⁹

In music theory classes students were once taught that music is "regular vibrations" and noise is "irregular vibrations." Attali changes that definition, but his definition amounts to the same thing: in effect it substitutes "controlled" and "uncontrolled" noise for "regular" and "irregular" vibrations so that music is defined as order versus disorder.

What happens now if you take John Cage's qualitatively different definition as normative, namely, "Everything we do is music"?³⁰ What if that is true? What if a composition like Cage's 4'33" defines music? When Steven Berg played it in an organ recital, he said in his program notes, "In 4'33" Cage demonstrates that, in addition to sounds produced by traditional musical instruments, music can consist of any sounds in the room."³¹ If you sit motionless at your instrument and assume the sounds of the surrounding environment are the music, have you contributed to the

²⁷Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991) 128.

²⁸See, for example, "Music in the Holocaust," *Choral Journal* 36/5 (1995) 9-19.

²⁹Mark Bangert, "Dynamics of Liturgy and World Musics: A Methodology for Evaluation," *Worship and Culture in Dialogue*, ed. S. Anita Stauffer (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1994) 201.

³⁰Cope, *New Directions*, 304.

³¹Steven Berg, Program notes for organ recitals at the University of Minnesota School of Music, May 24 and 27, 1993.

violence that music, according to Attali, characteristically silences?³² Here's Bangert again, relying on Attali:

People who make music actively join forces to silence the violence, and this is, according to Attali, one of music's chief functions. Whenever people are silenced, they are victims of noise and those who manipulate it. The world of MTV, insofar as it silences the individual, is a world of noise.³³

MTV and John Cage are worlds apart, but do they and the first example I cited at the beginning of this article—the concert in the art museum with breaking the light bulb—all point to the same thing: a context in which any sense of order is lost? If music is everything and everything else is everything until nothing is anything, is one lost in a chaotic sea of violence? Does music in our period reflect just that sort of violent chaos in the society itself? Is this all true even if you think John Cage is a big spoof?

Or is this whole thing an impossible contradiction? Is 4"33" or MTV or breaking a light bulb in a piece of "music" itself an order? Is it impossible to escape music as some sort of imposition of order as soon as one does "music" at all? And is that an attempt to impose the absence rather than the presence of violence, even if the content of this "absence" could be construed as its own sort of violence? Said another way, does whatever one dreams up musically—even random sounds in the room at the moment of your "composition"—invariably turn out to order things and therefore paradoxically to react against the chaotic disorder (violence) of society even if the "musical" event itself could be regarded as disordered (violent)?

V. REFLECTIONS

I don't know the answer to these questions. Specifically, I don't know if our society is any more violent than societies that have preceded us, nor do I know if a culture's music generally reflects its level of violence or whether that is particularly true in our period. I am suspicious of presuppositions which assume any human society is qualitatively distinct from other ones, and especially of the egocentricity of our age which seems to think we invented everything including sex. There is certainly evidence that music reflects the violence of our society, and both technology and Cagian sorts of presuppositions may point to something somewhat new and

³²This is to use "silence" in just the opposite way from John Cage. See John Cage, *Silence* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1969), which, in the black ink of the cover (versus the brown and red ink), says this: "Silence by which John Cage means unintended, indeterminate noise...in written form here includes: autobiographical fragments as Zen koan—blank pages as 'white paintings' of the mind—anecdotes of Schönberg and Suzuki—celebrations of Satie, Varèse, Rauschenberg, private friends, mushrooms—and swords and spaces on Master Eckhardt—Zen—Dada—the Random Chaos composition by hexagram, coin-tossing, paper fly specks—composition for prepared piano, magnetic tape, Happenings—Silence heard as the 13th tone—music as space-time transformation (bounded notes becoming unpredictable time sequences)—the indeterminacy of modern science—the one-in-all in order-in-chaos and the (musical) rest is (Cagian) silence." *The Saturday Review*, also on the book's cover, says, "Perhaps more than any other living composer, Cage holds up an auditory mirror of the sound of music around us."

³³Bangert, "Dynamics of Liturgy," 201.

different here. But there is also enough evidence to suggest that we are not alone in these matters, that societies before us have been violent, and that music has been reflective of violence then as it is now. Those who have preceded us have experienced the same things as we, albeit under different guises.

From the same data, however, one could just as easily argue that there is little or no connection between music and social ills, that music goes on its own course no matter what. This would suggest that dissonance and consonance or tension and release, for example, have developed as they have in response to the laws of music or the logic of its historical development and that they would have turned out much the same as they have no matter what the social conditions. Mark Harbold wants to say the syntactic musical connections to social conditions are dubious at best.

In the Renaissance, songs of war are often jolly things (Jannequin's *LaGuerre*), while the most chromatic, dissonant music around dealt with woes of love, not war (Gesualdo madrigals). Some of the most riotous, cacophonous music of the early 19th century again deals with love as well as programmatic depiction of a Witches' Sabbath (Berlioz' *Symphoniefantastique*). Many popular songs were written during the Civil War (possibly the most devastating war our nation ever experienced in terms of its emotional impact) that portray the sorrows of the war with great poignance—yet most of these songs are written in the major mode, and contain remarkably little dissonance. Finally, some of the really dissonant work of the early 20th century seems to be inspired by primitive ritual (*Rite of Spring*), urban bustle and modern science (Varèse), or “existential” alienation and Freud's psychoanalytic theories (Schönberg's *Erwartung*). I'm not sure that societal violence had much, if anything, to do with it.³⁴

One could respond to Harbold that his societal examples do indeed point to violence in a broad sense, but making the syntactic musical connection to them is harder, maybe impossible, to demonstrate. The problem is that you can't have it both ways. You can't argue that violence results in both the presence and the absence of dissonance. And if, as Harbold suggests, you can find examples of both things or even of seeming contradictions where violence appears to issue in musical consonance and love in musical dissonance, then what is demonstrated? Perhaps that music is used to soothe rather than violate, or perhaps that syntactic musical connections to anything except the internal logic of the music are impossible to substantiate.

There is yet another possibility. When Michael Hawn reacted to my query about this topic, he pointed to the definition of “endemic”: “prevalent in or peculiar to a particular locality, region, or people.” Is it possible that any of the potentially violent syntactic musical realities one could isolate is indeed perceived as violent, is endemic to violence, for a given group or locality? Is the problem for us that we have so many sub-groups and such an absence of consensus among us that it is impossible to say anything about this unless one speaks very specifically about one very narrow group of people or even one person? As Philip Brunelle said, “The

³⁴Mark Harbold, letter to author, 12 May 1995.

fact is that what is dissonance to one person is consonance to another.”³⁵ For example, some people feel strophic metrical hymns in worship violate them, while others feel prose psalms with refrains violate them. Some think elevator music is violent because it hides society’s violence; others would say it is soothing and non-violent. Some would say rap is violent.³⁶ Others, like Philip Bohlman, argue that it honestly reflects and resists the reality we face.

My own feeling is that rap is a site of resistance in the African American community. It has become a means of articulating responses to injustices, among them the violence that impinges daily on the lives of African Americans.³⁷

This derails us again, by getting back to the matter of texts and how music relates to them, but the issue here is this: With all these conflicting sub-groups, is the real problem the lack of center, the lack of coherence, the lack of consensus itself, so that violent chaos³⁸ results with groups set against groups? Whatever one says about one group and its music may not be true about another one. Even if you relate music to bodily movement in a way that transcends groups, what suggests violence for one may simply be celebrative jubilation for another.

However one argues this, the critical questions relate not only to us and to our period, but to the issue as a whole, to what we face as human beings across time and space. That requires an excursus, a theological analysis, and a response.

VI. EXCURSUS: FOUR POINTS

1. *Autonomist and heteronomist*

Lurking in the background of a topic such as this is the question about which Eduard Hanslick and Richard Wagner disagreed, whether music is its own world of relationships, which mean nothing beyond those relationships, or whether music is a language that communicates beyond itself into matters like love or hate. That is, whether one is an autonomist like Hanslick or a heteronomist like Wagner or positions oneself with Susanne Langer or Leonard Meyer or someone else probably has something to do with the approach to this topic. A related question is also involved: whether or how music and other artistic forms reflect the society. These are important questions, but they are beyond the scope of this article.³⁹ It will probably be clear that my own presuppositions are that music, art, and other cultural arti-

³⁵Philip Brunelle, letter to author, 11 April 1995.

³⁶See Michael Eric Dyson, “2 Live Crew’s Rap: Sex, Race, and Class,” *The Christian Century*, 2-9 January 1991, 7-8.

³⁷Philip Bohlman, letter to author, 5 April 1995.

³⁸This is to use “chaos” negatively. The word can be used positively, as Harold Best uses it, to mean “creation and creative rightness of unrepeatable, unpredictable order...riotous scatter, found in meadows, weather patterns, and coral reefs...poetry...surprise...ambiguity.” See Harold Best, “Creative Diversity, Artistic Valuing, and the Peaceable Imagination,” *Arts Education Policy Review* 95/5 (1994) 3.

³⁹See Morris Weitz, “Editor’s Introduction,” in Eduard Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music*, trans. Gustav Cohen (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957); Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1942), especially chapter VIII, “On Significance in Music”; and Leonard Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1956).

facts in some way reflect their culture of origin and that I am closer to Hanslick than Wagner.

2. Greek ethos

Also lurking in the background of a topic such as this is the question of ethos, the Greek idea that certain modes have certain ethical properties or characteristics. This is not restricted to Greek thought, however. Those people who attribute meditative, healing characteristics to Gregorian chant, without necessarily having a systematic theory about this, consciously or unconsciously have made the same move. I knew one woman who, when she became pregnant, always left the room when Brahms was played, on the assumption that Brahms was not good for her unborn baby's health. Some pregnant women choose not only to avoid, but consciously to expose their babies to certain types of music or certain composers.

Even if you don't make conscious decisions at all about this, but simply judge the effect various kinds of music seem to have, you move into this arena. This can take the form of physiological measures, like music's capacity to dilate blood vessels or affect the heartbeat, or it can be less scientific. Naomi Rowley wrote to me of a presentation of *Billboards* by the Joffrey Ballet. All the music was by Prince. She said she appreciated the artistry of the entire production, but, "the overall deep immersion into music of such great intensity, rhythmic drive, and volume for such a long time span left me in a less than tranquil mood!"⁴⁰ Then Rowley compared that with what was at the time a best-selling CD called *Chant* by the Benedictine monks of Santo Domingo de Silos.⁴¹ This may not lead you precisely to a Greek doctrine of ethos, but it certainly suggests something similar.⁴²

3. Is it all music?

An even more basic question is whether everything named so far in this article is actually music. What about danger music? To the extent that it may not even involve sound, but may be thought or scoring or speech about what you say you will do but never actually do, is it philosophy rather than music?⁴³ The same sort of question may be asked about a Cagian perspective in which everything turns out to be music. Is that philosophy and not music? This too is an important question. However one answers it, since the issues involved relate to music and to violence in our period, this "philosophy" or "music" certainly needs to be included in a discussion such as this. But individual readers, based on their own presuppositions, will have to decide the basic question of whether or not it is music.

These are all important matters. They lie underneath this discussion and need to be sorted out separately.

⁴⁰Naomi Rowley, letter to author, Spring, 1995.

⁴¹Released by Angel.

⁴²Cf. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987) 70-71. See also Susan Palo Cherwien, "That Spoke So Sweetly and So Well: Music and the Body, Music and the Mind, Music and the Spirit" (unpublished paper, 10 March 1991).

⁴³See Cope, *New Directions*, 308.

4. Reflecting and inciting violence

If music does have some connection with or is endemic to a social milieu in any sense, we have to distinguish between music that reflects the reality of violence and music that seeks to incite it. Both could be broadly conceived as reflective of or endemic to a given society, but a distinction still has to be made.

The music in the concert I described at the outset of this article is probably best understood as reflecting the society, as endemic to it in a strict sense. It has an effect on the hearer but not necessarily one of violence. My companion was distraught, but violated rather than driven to do violence. Bukvich's Symphony No. 1 and Krzysztof Penderecki's *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* are in the same category with less sense of violation and more sense of healing. They respectively reflect the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima and make listeners "jump out of their skin," but by memorializing the violent horror they give a healing release. I have heard those who were present in Dresden at the time of the bombing and who now hear Bukvich's piece testify to such a result.

There are pieces or even genres, however, which, though they are broadly reflective of—or endemic to—a society's violence, may incite hearers to violence. Their anger and hostility pull auditors into their orbit and propel them toward violent activity. Gangsta rap could easily be placed in this category, though some might argue it is simply an honest statement—reflection—of how things are.⁴⁴ Hitler's use of music in his propaganda⁴⁵ was more obviously demonic. It had a part in both drugging people into following an evil dictator and then inducing them to violence against another race. In both gangsta rap and Hitlerian propaganda, however, texts and the way they are used accompany the music, so that associations of the texts with the music here are as important as the music itself. That muddies the picture again because it means we are not dealing solely with music.

VII. THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

What kind of response does the Christian church make to violence and music's relation to it? The first thing a Christian might say is, "So what else is old?" Is it any surprise that society is violent? Of course not. The Christian confession includes the reality of evil in the world, radical evil. Violence is simply a manifestation of the horror of the brokenness of the good creation, of this massive rift in our midst, of our separation from God, of our capacity yet incapacity to do good, and of our perpetual propensity to go it on our own as if we could set our individual egos at the center of the universe and treat others however we please—which often turns out to be violently.

Everything in the whole creation participates in and mirrors this violent real-

⁴⁴Bohlman, letter to author, 5 April 1995, sets up the complexity like this: "Rap becomes a discourse for addressing sexism and violence against women in African American society, precisely because gangsta rap becomes the target of feminist rap."

⁴⁵See Warren B. Morris, Jr., *The Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1982) 221.

ity, everything including art and music. Whether or not music mirrors anything in a specific period or social milieu is in this sense totally irrelevant and avoids the more important and underlying reality that everything, including music, is broken and out of joint. This is a shock to a Christianity that has abandoned its birthright of realism and has sought to take refuge in a world of mirage and well-sugared make-believe, but it is no shock to a church that honestly assesses and seeks to make sense of its message. Talk to a seasoned Christian; she or he will likely say something like what Luther and Calvin said, though the reformers said it more forthrightly and articulately than most of us might be able to do. Martin Luther wrote:

Take special care to shun perverted minds who prostitute this lovely gift [music] of nature and art with their erotic rantings; and be quite assured that none but the devil goads them on to defy their very nature which would and should praise God its Maker with this gift, so that these bastards purloin the gift of God and use it to worship the foe of God, the enemy of nature and of this lovely art.⁴⁶

John Calvin, though he didn't sound like Luther because he exuded a nervousness about music and its power that did not characterize Luther, nonetheless knew—maybe more strongly than Luther—that the gift of music could be perverted. Music was for him like a funnel which made the word pierce the heart more strongly, so that melodies joined to bad words “distill” the “venom and corruption...to the depths of the heart.”⁴⁷

Neither Luther nor Calvin were pointing to music as a reflection of a society's violence. And when you seek to apply their remarks you run into interesting questions like what precisely are the erotic rantings that prostitute the gift of music, what words ought not to be joined to music's powerful lure, and does all music exert such power. But underneath their particular concerns there lies the very clear brokenness in which music and all the rest of creation are enmeshed.

Luther and Calvin also point to another reality. Just like the gift of the whole creation, music is not meant for the prostituted ends of violence. It is made to be—and to reflect—something else. Music as the gift of nature and art is meant for a community that is at harmony with itself and the whole cosmos. Its telos is the praise of God, as Psalm 150 indicates. Or, as Patrick Miller says so well, the call in Psalm 150 at the end of the Psalter for everything to praise God—which happens precisely with music—is not just a literary device, but an anticipation towards which the whole cosmos is moving.⁴⁸ Or, one can say this with a “Christ above culture” Aquinian twist, as Joseph Gelineau puts it, “Music can never reveal to us the whole of its mystery until it has become silent and no more sounds reach our ears.

⁴⁶Martin Luther, *Preface to Georg Rhau's Symphoniae iucundae* (1538), *Luther's Works*, vol. 53, ed. Ulrich Leupold (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) 324.

⁴⁷See Charles Garside, Jr., “Calvin's Preface to the Psalter: A Re-Appraisal,” *The Musical Quarterly* 37 (1951) 570-571.

⁴⁸Patrick Miller, “The Psalms as Praise and Poetry,” *The Hymn* 40/4 (1989) 15.

For the praise of heaven, pure love, will have no further need of the art of sound.”⁴⁹ Or, as Francis Williamson explains when he analyzes this same posture, “The phrase, ‘to enhance the word,’⁵⁰ is not to interpret the word in a meaningful sense so much as it is to clothe the word with beauty and sacral character. Ultimately even this word becomes mute because it is secondary to the act of sacrifice and communion. The climax of adoration in the Presence is silence, symbolic of final peace.”⁵¹

Lutherans, Calvinists, and others who stand in the reformation heritage may object to the potential for works righteousness in the kind of position Gelineau and Williamson describe. Lutherans are more likely to say with Walter Bouman that in the eschaton there will be no need for preaching, but there will be song around the throne of the Lamb—which seems to be what the book of Revelation is all about.

However Christians may disagree about this, most of them would agree that the telos of music is related to the new creation, not the broken old creation.⁵² So, whether this is sheer praise of God, praise as pure love or silent music, peace, or a sonic universal chorus and orchestra of some sort, the being of music at its essence is related to shalom, to wholeness and health, not to violence and disease.

The Christian not only affirms the reality of the broken, but also makes the strange and outrageous affirmation that, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, in Christ this song toward which the whole creation is moving has broken into our very midst. And, indeed, we can sing it. The song of the Christian church reflects the world in which it is placed, to be sure, so sometimes it is prostituted. When that happens it sounds like the gang songs of the violent culture all around it. But the church also knows this other fragile, but ultimately more potent reality, “this distant triumph song” which “steals on the ear.”⁵³

VIII. RESPONSE

I agreed to write this article because I thought it would be interesting to assemble the data, namely, music among us that might be construed as relating to violence, and then see what conclusions could be drawn. As is obvious, conclusions are hard to draw. The topic turns out to be enormously complex. The data—the music and that to which it relates—are sufficiently contradictory to force you to ask about other societies. When you do that, no easy answer is forthcoming be-

⁴⁹Joseph Gelineau, *Voices and Instruments in Christian Worship*, trans. Clifford Howell (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1964) 27.

⁵⁰See Pius X, *Tra le sollecitudini*, in Hume, *Catholic Church Music*, 183-184: “Since its [sacred music’s] principal office is to clothe with suitable melody the liturgical text proposed for the understanding of the faithful, its proper aim is to add greater efficacy to the text.”

⁵¹Francis Williamson, “The Lord’s Song and the Ministry of the Church” (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1967) 261.

⁵²This will not be so clear for Christians like Zwingli or Quakers who unhook music from associations with the word or with worship.

⁵³William H. How, “For All the Saints.”

cause presuppositions about music are brought into play. How you interpret the data depends on how you view music.

But let us be clear: the complexity does not preclude a response. At least for the Christian there is a response. The response is inherent in the theological analysis. The Christian sees clearly the violent horror all around us, just like anybody who honestly reads the newspaper. If we isolate ourselves historically and make the mistake of assuming we have lost some golden past somewhere, it is easy to stop there and to stare at the violence of the society and music's relation to that violence, however this might be defined, and then to give up on the mess. A Christian response does not stop there. The distant triumph song, no matter how distant and quiet, is the more powerful reality.

That means the Christian community is that group which enters the violent world on behalf of the violated—which includes both people and the whole created order—and sings another song. It stands against the violence and for the peaceable kingdom that will ultimately prevail in spite of all appearances to the contrary. This is not pie in the sky by and by, but the driving force for action on behalf of the violated at this very moment. Musically this means the Christian community fashions a song which has *einen anderen Geist*, “another spirit,”⁵⁴ to quote a nineteenth-century source. The song it fashions is forever new, not new because of perpetually new sounds which immediately become old anyway, but new because the life of the gospel is forever new. The song is the song of shalom which enters deeply into the world's pain and suffering as well as its celebration and joy. The musical syntax must be in some measure that of the culture in which it finds itself, but always with the catholic spirit of other times and places, pointing beyond time and place. It is consonant and dissonant—not simple balance, however, but incarnational tension which moves as it has to move with the essence of the message for the situation in which it lives. It sings of life and hope, where there seems to be neither life nor hope.

The way the big fissure with its absence of life and hope takes shape in our world is in a culture of “docudrama...swagger and ego...and violence,” to quote Harold Best, where reality is blurred with fantasy, and the “horror or violence lost in the perceptual blur.”⁵⁵ Best points out that great art deals with violence too, but it does not “diffuse or confuse reality. It respects reality for what it is in all of its *primary* force. And art...is its own reality [which] does not mistreat reality.”⁵⁶ Best is not pointing here to a Cagian perspective which—whether successful or not—wants to break open artistic strictures toward freedom. Best is getting at a much more insidious notion that blurs everything including violence and leads to bondage.

⁵⁴See Luther D. Reed, “The Sphere of the Choir in the Rendering of the Service,” *Essays on Church Music*, Series 1 (n. p.: Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, 1898 and 1899) 15. (For an overview of these essays, see Paul Westermeyer, “Church Music at the End of the Nineteenth Century,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 8/1 [1994] 29-51.)

⁵⁵Best, “Creative Diversity,” 7.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

The Christian community refuses to be bound. It sees with other eyes, hears with other ears, and sings with *einem anderen Geist*. To modify slightly what Bernard of Clairvaux apparently said: “Hearing [this song] will restore your vision.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer is also helpful in describing this alien song. I don’t want to restrict it to monophony the way Bonhoeffer tends to do. His remarks about unison singing as the spiritual discipline of a loving community are accurate and deserve more consideration than we give them, but I still would not be so restrictive. Beyond that feature of his thought, however, he teaches us well.

[The song] is bound wholly to the Word....It is the voice of the Church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the Church that is singing, and you, as a member of the Church, may share in its song. Thus all singing together that is right must serve to widen our spiritual horizon, make us see our little company as a member of the great Christian church on earth, and help us willingly and gladly to join our singing, be it feeble or good, to the song of the church.⁵⁷

Bonhoeffer describes the alien song of non-violent life together. It is the seemingly insignificant voice of the little or great congregation, joined to the church across time and space, and bound to the word. Music itself has in its own telos as God’s good creation something of this same spirit. Wherever it has been treated as the gift it is and then beautifully crafted in “folk” or “high” art,⁵⁸ one senses glimpses of this same song. And then the church remembers that those who are not against us are for us. With them we celebrate and work for a non-violent life together. And we sing it. ⊕

⁵⁷Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954) 59, 61.

⁵⁸Cf. Luther, *Preface*. See also “The Snowbird Statement on Catholic Liturgical Music” (Salt Lake City: The Madeleine Institute, 1995), which, without “promot[ing] aestheticism,” affirms aesthetic beauty in worship and challenges the notion that worship should be committed to “pragmatic, ideological or political ends.” I agree with both Luther and the Snowbird signatories and also want to say that we who are Christians share a common spirit with all those who make beautiful music, that, as Ralph Vaughan Williams said, this is a moral issue, and that it has everything to do with the nature and quality of our life together.