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Bonhoeffer and Musical Metaphor

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"In the twentieth century, the corridors of theology were not generally alive with the sound of music." The primary exception Jeremy Begbie offers to his observation is the German Lutheran pastor, ethicist, and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Nevertheless, Begbie's appreciation of Bonhoeffer as either theologian or musician is limited to three minor passages in his book, the most substantive of which notes Bonhoeffer's "enticing discussion of polyphony."[2] The most recent significant attempt to use Bonhoeffer's reflections on music to inform constructive theology is offered by David Ford, who devotes the penultimate chapter of his compelling book, *Self and Salvation*, to the subject of "polyphonic living."[3] German Bonhoeffer specialist Andreas Pangritz has offered two important studies of these matters.[4] The

[1]I wish to thank Paul Westermeyer for his invaluable assistance with this project. This paper was originally presented at a meeting of the Southwest Region of the American Academy of Religion (March 2005).

[2]Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 5; see also 273, 278.

[3]David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[4]Andreas Pangritz, *Polyphonie des Lebens: Zu Dietrich Bonhoeffers "Theologie der Musik"* (Berlin: Alektor-Verlag, 1994); and "Point and Counterpoint—Resistance and Submission: Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Theology and Music in Times of War and Social Crisis," in *Theology in Dialogue: The Impact of the Arts, Humanities, and Science on Contemporary Religious Thought: Essays in Honor of John W. De Gruchy*, ed. Lyn Holness and Ralf K. Wüstenberg (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 28–42.

With this article, Word & World *continues its commemoration of the centennial of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's birth. Bonhoeffer used concepts from music theory as metaphors to shape and describe his theological insights. Understanding these metaphors provides an entry into Bonhoeffer's thought and his contribution to theology and church.*

most comprehensive English-language treatment of this topic was published by Walter Kemp in 1976.[5]

As demonstrated by this continued interest, Bonhoeffer's concept of "the polyphony of life" continues to be celebrated as a valuable image of the Christian life. But this metaphor is by no means isolated. References to art, particularly music, occur throughout the prison writings. Concentrated in his May 1944 writings from Berlin's Tegel prison, Bonhoeffer's musical metaphors include many concepts from music theory, including *Grundton* and fugue, along with the interrelated concepts of *cantus firmus*, counterpoint, and polyphony. Given the progression of these metaphors, it is fruitful to understand them as a bridge between Bonhoeffer's provocative thoughts regarding "nonreligious Christianity," penned in April 1944, and the ethical outworking of that notion during the next months, culminating in his proposals for engaging a "world come of age" in which "only the suffering God can help."[6]

The enthusiastic but sometimes casual manner in which Bonhoeffer's concepts have often been appropriated by later theologians tasks Bonhoeffer scholarship with careful attention to the specificities of his thought. Given their precise nature and their pivotal contribution to Bonhoeffer's later reflections, the musical metaphors here discussed lend themselves to such careful archaeological explication.

Music: "An Unexpectedly Helpful Standby"

"There continues to be a persistent feeling that Bonhoeffer was anything but a 'churchman,'" notes Clyde Fant in his study of Bonhoeffer's lectures on homiletics. "It should come as no surprise then, in any game of theological password, that 'Bonhoeffer' as a clue does not call forth 'preaching' as a response."[7] One could say as much about Bonhoeffer's relationship with music. Students of theology familiar with Bonhoeffer primarily as an existential theologian of "nonreligious Christianity" (*religionloses Christentum*) are unlikely to experience him as a pastor concerned with music or its function in the Christian community. As a result, his use of musical metaphors is most often viewed as instrumental rather than constitutive of his theological development. If one is to understand Bonhoeffer, however, his fondness for the hymn texts of Paul Gerhardt, the compositions of J. S. Bach and Heinrich Schütz, and his views regarding the importance of music cannot be so quickly dismissed.

Music filled the Bonhoeffer home and stayed with Dietrich throughout his life. Early on, he "made such musical and technical progress at the piano that for a

[5]Walter H. Kemp, "The 'Polyphony of Life': References to Music in Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*," in *Vita Laudanda: Essays in Memory of Ulrich S. Leupold*, ed. Erich R. W. Schultz (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1976).

[6]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letter of 16 July 1944, in *Letters & Papers from Prison*, enlarged edition, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972) 360, 361. Hereafter, *LPP*.

[7]Clyde E. Fant, *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991) ix.

time both he and his parents thought he might become a professional musician."[8] At ten, he was playing Mozart sonatas; soon after, he was composing trios and cantatas. "Dietrich at the piano kept us all in order," recounted Emmi Delbrück Bonhoeffer of the chamber music performed in the Bonhoeffer home. "I do not remember a time when he did not know where each of us was."[9] While serving as pastor in the South London suburb of Forest Hill (1933–1935), Bonhoeffer opened his parsonage for community and music.[10] For Bonhoeffer, music was essential to the "good life." As he would later write his friend Eberhard Bethge in reference to his godson and namesake, "I hope you have fine weather, much joy in little Dietrich, many peaceful hours and good music!"[11]

"music filled the Bonhoeffer home and stayed with Dietrich throughout his life"

In 1930, Bonhoeffer traveled to New York as a Union Theological Seminary postdoctoral fellow. That year, a period formative for Bonhoeffer's theological development, has been the focus of some recent theological attention, especially concerning Bonhoeffer's understandings of racism.[12] At Union, he met Franklin Fisher, a southern African-American scholar interested in the Harlem Renaissance. Fisher and Bonhoeffer worshiped regularly and taught the boys' Sunday School class at Abyssinian Baptist Church, led by Adam Clayton Powell Sr. Given his background, Bonhoeffer was fascinated by the music: there, he "began to learn about the improvisation of jazz, the contingency of the blues, and the liberation of black spirituals."[13] The mix of musical expression and social concern pervading Harlem Christianity filled Bonhoeffer's heart and mind as he returned home to Berlin. While blending with more traditional forms, this music would never leave him.

But it was Bonhoeffer's first musical love, the hymnody of his Lutheran tradi-

[8]Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, rev. ed., ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 25. Other details of Bonhoeffer's early musical prowess can be found here.

[9]Emmi Bonhoeffer, "Professor's Children as Neighbors," in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Wolf-Dieter Zimmerman and Ronald Gregor Smith, trans. Käthe Gregor Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 34.

[10]Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 328.

[11]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Thoughts on the Day of the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge," *LPP* 308. Good music was not only in the peaceful hours. In his compelling reading of Christoph von Dohnanyi's contemporary operatic interpretation, Bill Wylie-Kellermann recalls that during the first attempt on the Führer's life, "the Bonhoeffer family, with the Dohnanyi's, [were] at home practicing music, Dietrich at the piano, his brother on cello, and Hans in the cantata's choir, all the while...awaiting a call with news of the outcome. The phone does not ring." (Bill Wylie-Kellermann, "Treason and True Patriotism: Beethoven, Bonhoeffer, and Alberto Gonzales," in *Sojourners*, 24 February 2005 (article available online at www.sojo.org [accessed 12 December 2005]).

[12]Josiah Ulysses Young III, *No Difference in the Fare: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Problem of Racism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

[13]Scott Holland, "First We Take Manhattan, Then We Take Berlin: Bonhoeffer's New York," *Cross Currents* 50/3 (Fall 2000). Holland draws attention to the possibility that Bonhoeffer received some of his formative theological concepts from Powell. See Ralph Garlin Clingan, "Against Cheap Grace in a World Come of Age: A Study in the Hermeneutics of Adam Clayton Powell, 1865–1953, in His Intellectual Context" (PhD dissertation, Drew University [Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Microfilm 9732791, 1997]).

tion, that sustained him during his imprisonment. A few years earlier, he had written in *Life Together* that "a community of Christians living together will...try hard to master as rich a store of hymns as possible that can be sung without music and from memory." In this communal singing, "it is the voice of the church that is heard," not the voice of disparate individuals, enabling the singers "to recognize our small community as a member of the great Christian church [*Christenheit*] on earth."[14] It is no surprise then that in prison reading "psalms and hymns" was a part of Bonhoeffer's daily routine:[15] as he wrote to his parents in May 1943, "I cannot now read Psalms 3, 47, 70, and others without hearing them in the settings by Heinrich Schütz."[16]

> ***"it was Bonhoeffer's first musical love, the hymnody of his Lutheran tradition, that sustained him during his imprisonment"***

Art produced during and after the Thirty Years War (1618–1648) was especially compelling for Bonhoeffer, a relevance Andreas Pangritz attributes to "a correspondence of situations." Bethge had introduced Bonhoeffer to the music of Schütz (1585–1672) while they were at Finkenwalde. The psalm settings that permeated Bonhoeffer's reading were found in the *Kleine Geistliche Konzerte*, which "formed Schütz's musical protest against the war and its consequences."[17] Furthermore, in those times when he was "segregated and treated like a felon," Bonhoeffer found Paul Gerhardt (1607–1676), the great Lutheran hymn writer whose faith also developed during the tumult of the Thirty Years War, to be "an unexpectedly helpful standby."[18] He hoped this would be some comfort for his parents as well: "Forgive me for causing you so much worry," he wrote. "To set off against that, it is good to read Paul Gerhardt's hymns and learn them by heart, as I am doing now."[19] These hymns would later form the bulk of prayers presented by Bonhoeffer to fellow prisoners at Christmas 1943.[20]

Facing the Future with Confidence

While Paul Gerhardt's anguished yet hope-filled words supply a theme for Bonhoeffer's letters, it is music theory that makes available the metaphors for his theological development. According to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, "the es-

[14]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, ed. Geffrey B. Kelley, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (hereafter *DBW*), vol. 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 68. These reflections are quoted at length in *With One Voice: A Lutheran Resource for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995) 5.

[15]*LPP*, "Letter of 25 April 1943," 27.

[16]*LPP*, "Letter of 15 May 1943," 40. *LPP* contains many appreciative references to Schütz.

[17]Andreas Pangritz, "Point and Counterpoint," 30.

[18]*LPP*, "Letter of 18 November 1943," 128.

[19]*LPP*, "Letter of 14 April 1943," 22.

[20]*LPP*, "Prayers for Fellow Prisoners," 139–143.

sence of metaphor is understanding or experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another."[21] Through his creative use of *Grundton*, polyphony, and fugue, Bonhoeffer did precisely that.[22]

Grundton

Bonhoeffer takes the occasion of his godson's baptism to offer a short treatise on Christian faith and the ways of the world. In it, he expounds on the benefits of a stable family life providing shelter in the midst of a tumultuous and unpredictable world:

> In the coming years of revolution, the greatest gift will be to know that you are protected in a good home....In the general pauperization of intellectual life, you will find in your parents' home a palladium of spiritual [*geistiger*] values and a source of intellectual [*geistiger*] stimulation. Music, how your parents interpret and cultivate [*pflegen*] it, will bring your confusion to clarity and purify your character and outlook, and in the midst of worries and sadness will sustain in you a *Grundton* of joy.[23]

It is the practice of music, a prominent element in little Dietrich's home, that will animate and sustain within him a "*Grundton* of joy." The phrase itself is a musical metaphor. Put simply, the *Grundton* (in English, "tonic" or "key note") is the "first degree of a major or minor scale"[24] or "the main note of a key...after which the key is named."[25] Although Bonhoeffer indicates that he is not pleased with his essay,[26] his metaphorical use of *Grundton* helps him express what he had earlier stated to be his hopes for the day: "Above all, I hope the baptism will help to assure you that your own lives, as well as the child's, are in safe keeping, and that you can face the future with confidence."[27] This confidence is cultivated through faith in one's foundation, an important value for one who sought to represent a generation of "people with so little ground under their feet."[28]

[21]George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 5.

[22]It must be noted that to describe Bonhoeffer's use of music in words alone—without hearing that music as well—risks missing his point altogether. To follow Lakoff and Johnson's observation that "no metaphor can ever be comprehended or even adequately represented independently of its experiential basis," these concepts must be understood in the context of real music, the praxis that precedes the theory.

[23]Bonhoeffer, "Thoughts on the Day...," *LPP* 308 / *DBW* 8:430. The translation errors of *LPP* (to be corrected in the forthcoming edition of *DBW* 8) are keenly felt in this passage. The poor translation of *Grundton* as "ground bass" is first noted and critiqued by Kemp.

[24]David Hiley, "Tonic," in *The New Oxford Companion to Music*, ed. Denis Arnold (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 2:1832.

[25]"Tonic," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980) 19:61.

[26]"I very much wanted to write you something for the day of the baptism. It's not come out right. I'm sending it just to show you that I'm thinking very much about you." *LPP*, "Letter of 18 May 1944," 292–293.

[27]*LPP*, "Letter of 9 May 1944," 291.

[28]*LPP*, "After Ten Years: A Reckoning Made at New Year 1943," 3. This essay was given as a gift by Bonhoeffer to Hans von Dohnanyi, Hans Oster, and Eberhard Bethge at Christmas 1942.

Polyphony and Cantus Firmus

Eberhard Bethge, little Dietrich's father and Bonhoeffer's primary correspondent, had just returned from the Italian front around the time of the baptism. As with any person returning home from war, he was torn between his military service and the family from which it had taken him. Bonhoeffer is sensitive to this mix of emotions and commitments, but cautions his friend not to unduly minimize his life's experiences in order to protect his loves. To communicate his meaning, he employs another musical metaphor: "It is of course the danger in all strong erotic love, that one loses over it what I would like to call the polyphony of life."[29]

This now famous image of the "polyphony of life" is quickly embellished with theological and technical detail: our eternal and total love for God does not "injure or weaken our earthly love" but provides "a kind of *cantus firmus* to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint." One of these themes is earthly affection, sanction for which Bonhoeffer finds in the Song of Songs. Bonhoeffer develops the point further, stating that "where the *cantus firmus* is clear and plain, the counterpoint can be developed to its limits. The two are 'undivided yet distinct,' in the words of the Chalcedonian Definition, like Christ in his godly and human natures."[30]

Technically speaking, the *cantus firmus* is "a pre-existent melody that is used as a basis for a new polyphonic composition."[31] In the 1400s, English polyphony "developed a custom of moving the *cantus firmus* melody between the parts," and elaborating the melody, but never to the point that it couldn't be identified.[32] However, "perhaps the most important use of preexistent melodies after the 16th century was in Lutheran organ and vocal music, commonly based on chorale melodies."[33] J. S. Bach's cantata on *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott* (BWV 80) is a supreme example of this compositional form.

Bonhoeffer's metaphor of "the polyphony of life" is predicated, as with polyphony in music, upon the *cantus firmus*. "Do you see what I'm driving at?" he asks Bethge rhetorically:

> I wanted to tell you to have a good, clear *cantus firmus*; that is the only way to a full and perfect sound, when the counterpoint has a firm support and can't come adrift or get out of tune, while remaining a distinct whole in its own right. Only a polyphony of this kind can give life a wholeness and at the same time assure us that nothing calamitous can happen as long as the *cantus firmus* is kept going.[34]

The next morning, the day of little Dietrich's baptism, Bonhoeffer returns again to

[29]*LPP*, "Letter of 20 May 1944," 303 / *DBW* 8:440.

[30]*LPP*, "Letter of 20 May 1944," 303.

[31]Lewis Lockwood, "Cantus firmus," in *The New Grove Dictionary*, 3:738.

[32]"Cantus firmus," in *The New Oxford Companion to Music*, 1:312.

[33]Paul Evans and Vincent Paulina, "Cantus firmus," in *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ed. Don Michael Randel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) 135.

[34]*LPP*, "Letter of 20 May 1944," 303.

the theme of *cantus firmus* and the polyphony it supports. While Bethge had envied the relative safety and simplicity of his teacher's prison existence, Bonhoeffer wonders if "pain and joy are also part of life's polyphony" existing "independently side by side." He again asks, "Isn't it rather the case that you experience life in all its sides, in happiness and in danger?" Bonhoeffer then makes his point clear: "I do want you to be glad about what you have: it really is the polyphony of life (pardon this harping on [*Herumreiten*] my innovation [*Fündlein*]!)."[35]

"the point is not to impose some external order on a multidimensional and polyphonic life but rather to point a Christian to her firm foundation"

Bonhoeffer's metaphor of the Christian life as a polyphonic composition informed by a *cantus firmus* operates on two interrelated levels. First, if we follow Walter Kemp in describing the *cantus firmus* as "the controlling and the cohesive force of the motet or Mass movement in which it appeared," neglecting it would bring about "a loss of direction and purpose; as polyphonic art the composition would be invalid."[36] However, the *cantus firmus* must not be construed as an artificial limit on the resulting polyphony. Instead of acting as a controlling force, the *cantus firmus* informs the composition and provides a foothold in the midst of confusion. The point, in other words, is not to impose some external order on a multidimensional and polyphonic life but rather to point a Christian to her firm foundation.

The second layer of the metaphor allows the Christian to live freely within the complexities of human experience. Just as the *cantus firmus* grounds the independent strands of a polyphonic composition, Bonhoeffer argued, our faith informs our multidimensional existence. As Bonhoeffer would apply the metaphor one week later regarding his fellow prisoners,

> I notice repeatedly here how few people there are who can harbour conflicting emotions at the same time. When bombers come, they are all fear; when there is something nice to eat, they are all greed; when they are disappointed, they are all despair; when they are successful, they can think of nothing else....By contrast, Christianity puts us into many different dimensions of life at the same time; we make room in ourselves, to some extent, for God and the whole world....Life isn't pushed back into a single dimension, but is kept multi-dimensional and polyphonous.[37]

Far from the self-protective desire of homogeneity, Bonhoeffer was convinced that openness to the multifaceted nature of reality is constitutive of human existence. His metaphorical exploration of the polyphony of life, therefore, is the

[35]*LPP*, "Letter of 21 May 1944," 305.

[36]Kemp, "The 'Polyphony of Life,'" 146.

[37]*LPP*, "Letter of 29 May 1944," 310–311.

fullest expression of his pondering the month before; "religionless Christianity" involved not the denial of God but the "understanding" of the Christian as "belonging wholly to the world."[38] To deny the cultivation of polyphonic existence, that is, to deny the worldliness of Christian commitment, would be to dismiss the Chalcedonian Definition in favor of a docetic discipleship and ecclesiology.

Fugue

Although they have become the far more studied and celebrated, Bonhoeffer's metaphors of *cantus firmus* and polyphony rely upon the musical imagery of *Grundton* employed a few days earlier in the baptismal address. Indeed, as the keynote of a chord or an entire piece, the *Grundton* is more basic than even the *cantus firmus* to a polyphonic composition. As striking and appropriate as these metaphors are to his subject, Bonhoeffer is not in these writings attempting to display "a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish."[39] When he asks Bethge, "Do you see what I'm driving at?" Bonhoeffer is responding to his friend's need by attempting to articulate as clearly as he can the most basic element of the Christian life. Bonhoeffer's "little invention" (*Fündlein*) is not for invention's sake alone. He is instead working toward the communication of something that is at once as simple and complex as a relationship with another person, something as simple and complex as human life in the world before God.

"Bonhoeffer is working toward the communication of something that is at once as simple and complex as a relationship with another person, something as simple and complex as human life in the world before God"

In addition to providing fertile ground for the theological reflections that would soon spring forth, the musical metaphors of *Grundton*, *cantus firmus*, and polyphony revive a musical image Bonhoeffer mentions briefly in earlier writings from prison. In February 1944, when Bethge was still on the Italian front, Bonhoeffer sent a letter containing an intriguing paragraph discussing the state of public intellectuals. In language that recalls his image of a generation of "people with so little ground under their feet,"[40] Bonhoeffer notes the eclipsing of the "polymath" by the "specialist" and wonders if the present "fragmented" state of life prevents such a sustained "intellectual lifework" (*geistiges Lebenswerk*). In this letter, Bon-

[38]*LPP*, "Letter of 30 April 1944," 280–281.

[39]Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 3. Indeed, the language for him was quite ordinary. In particular, the concept of *Grundton* was in use in precisely the manner he used it, even among Nazi writers. Take, for instance, this 1934 comment on Heidegger from philosopher E. Krieck in the Nazi newspaper *Volk im Werden*: "Der weltanschauliche Grundton der Lehre Heideggers ist bestimmt durch die Begriffe der Sorge und der Angst, die beide auf das Nichts hinzielen" [The ideological *Grundton* of Heidegger's teachings is determined through the images of care and angst, both driving at Nothingness]. Cited in Pierre Aubenque, "Noch einmal Heidegger und der Nationalsozialismus," in *Die Heidegger Kontroverse*, ed. Jürg Altwegg (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1988).

[40]*LPP*, "After Ten Years," 3.

hoeffer advocates facing directly what he would later describe as the "general pauperization of intellectual life":

> The important thing today is that we should be able to discern from the fragment of our life how the whole was arranged and planned, and what material it consists of....I'm thinking, e.g., of the *Art of Fugue*. If our life is but the remotest reflection of such a fragment, if we accumulate, at least for a short time, a wealth of themes and weld them into a harmony in which the great counterpoint is maintained from start to finish, so that at last, when it breaks off abruptly, we can sing no more than the chorale, 'I come before thy throne,' we will not bemoan the fragmentariness of our life, but rather rejoice in it.[41]

The image is not so much a metaphor as an analogy. And though it appears earlier in his writings than the other musical metaphors we have discussed, I treat it last since, musically at least, it can be said that the fugue of the late Baroque is the pinnacle of Renaissance and Baroque polyphony.

Just as Bonhoeffer's appreciation of Schütz was informed by what Pangritz calls their "correspondence of situations," Bonhoeffer's choice of *The Art of Fugue* is instructive. Along with its counterpoint sustained on a single theme, the collection's unfinished state has invited comparisons with Bonhoeffer's own life and work. But there is a greater correspondence here. Bach's music reflected a crisis in Reformation cultural expression. Pangritz, for instance, follows Theodor Adorno in regarding the "archaic traits" of Bach's later musical production as "resistance to the beginning commercialization of music."[42] Historian Steven Ozment places this aesthetic resistance in a greater context of resistance to Enlightenment rationality:

> What distinguished Bach's work and made it lasting was the musical-emotional demonstration of humankind's need for transcendence and majesty, yet utter inability to encompass and master either. By contrast, the new Enlightenment faith...believed in humankind's ability to resolve the riddle of history, both to mock and to play the gods....Bach's music reasserted the dialectical character of reality and the bipolarity at the center of the human heart, each mysterious and complex beyond all human fathoming. Bach conveyed this musically by subjecting fixed and invincible themes to altering consonance and dissonance, repeatedly demolishing and reconstituting any audible fortress the listener might hope to build. In the process, variety challenged unity, and disorder order, and each contested the other in return.[43]

The Art of Fugue may be interpreted as Bach's final contribution to this confrontation. Far from presenting the music in vogue at the time, *The Art of Fugue* is rather "a pièce de résistance against the growing influence of capitalism in musical culture" and "against the enlightened absolutism of the princes who, in Bach's

[41]*LPP*, "Letter of 23 February 1944," 219. "*Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit*" (Justin Gesenius), sung to the chorale melody "*Wenn wir in höchsten Nöthen sein*" (Geneva Psalter, 1547), is tolerated as an intentionally humble ending to *The Art of Fugue* (see Pangritz, "Point and Counterpoint," 39).

[42]Pangritz, "Point and Counterpoint," 38.

[43]Steven Ozment, *A Mighty Fortress: A New History of the German People* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004) 143–144.

view, alongside...their support of the 'gallant style' in music, betrayed the original intentions of the Reformation."[44]

For both Bach and Bonhoeffer, the primary concern is not for music or art alone. Instead, both Christian thinkers see in Enlightenment rationality a grave threat to the possibility of sustained "intellectual lifework" (*geistiges Lebenswerk*). In Bach's time, the primary threat to this vocational commitment was found in the music theory of Jean-Philippe Rameau who, in the preface to his *Treatise on Harmony* (1722), claimed that "music is a science which should have definite rules; these rules should be drawn from an evident principle; and this principle cannot really be known to us without the aid of mathematics."[45]

Bonhoeffer similarly confronted the temptations of *scientia*. In opposition to what Bonhoeffer criticizes as Karl Barth's "positivism of revelation, which in the last analysis is essentially a restoration," Bonhoeffer hopes to ask a more basic question of our religious situation: "How do we speak of God—without religion, i.e., without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, inwardness, and so on?"[46] With Bach, who sought to demolish any listener's "audible fortress," Bonhoeffer warns that falsely constructed ground is worse than no ground at all under our eager feet. Instead of a flat, lifeless system, it is diversity of life that makes it worth living, "the mutual dissimilarity of the participating voices that makes a polyphonic piece like the double fugue a fully worthwhile adventure."[47] A prisoner's plainsong is not to be preferred to what "really is the polyphony of life."[48] Bonhoeffer's musical metaphors—*Grundton*, *cantus firmus*, polyphony, and fugue—work together, therefore, to demonstrate how human existence, in all its difficulty and ease, pains and joys, losses and loves, can be experienced as positively *multidimensional* rather than negatively *fragmentary*, even as Christians belong wholly to the world, *soli deo gloria*.

Theological Implications

The musical metaphors employed in Bonhoeffer's prison writings provide a bridge between his seminal insight into "religionless Christianity" and the outworking of its implications. In his letter of April 30, 1944, noted above, Bonhoeffer asked how Christians might regard themselves "not...from a religious point of view as specially favoured, but rather as belonging wholly to the world?"[49] This "world" to which we belong stands in contrast to "religion" and its function of separating us from the world. To "interpret in a religious sense," therefore, is to "speak on the

[44]Pangritz, "Point and Counterpoint," 38.

[45]Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Treatise on Harmony*, trans. Philip Gossett (New York: Dover, 1971) xxxv. Jonathan Tennenbaum, "Bach and Kepler: The Polyphonic Character of Truthful Thinking," *Fidelio* 9/2–3 (2000), develops these themes with historical and musical specificity.

[46]*LPP*, "Letter of 30 April 1944," 280, 281–282.

[47]Kemp, "The 'Polyphony of Life,'" 144.

[48]*LPP*, "Letter of 21 May 1944," 305.

[49]*LPP*, "Letter of 30 April 1944," 280–281.

one hand metaphysically, and on the other hand individualistically. Neither of these is relevant to the biblical message or to the man of today." He extends this irrelevance to Barth's doctrine of revelation, proposed as an alternative ground for Christian certainty: "The positivism of revelation makes it too easy for itself, by setting up, as it does in the last analysis, a law of faith, and so mutilates what is—by Christ's incarnation!—a gift for us."[50] Bonhoeffer's concern, arrived at in his engagement with and response to the world, is to "bar the way to any escapism disguised as piety."[51]

> ***"the musical metaphors allowed him to articulate precisely what he meant by belonging 'wholly to the world' while still knowing by faith the truth of one's rootedness in Christ"***

The musical metaphors through which Bonhoeffer's theological insights took shape allowed him to articulate precisely what he meant by belonging "wholly to the world" while still knowing by faith the truth of one's rootedness in Christ. With these metaphors playing in his mind, Bonhoeffer in June 1944 returned to reflections on biblical faith. Unlike common understandings of Christianity, he claims, "the faith of the Old Testament isn't a religion of redemption....Israel is liberated out of Egypt so it can live before God as God's people on earth."[52] Instead of a religious evacuation from the world, biblical faith places us squarely within the world. That is, Christians are called to live in the developed fullness of polyphony, not only in the relative safety of the *Grundton* or the *cantus firmus*.

Informed by his earlier work with musical metaphors, Bonhoeffer's insights into biblical faith were crucial for the maturation of his thoughts regarding "nonreligious Christianity." It was in July 1944 that he penned the now famous sentence, "Before God and with God we live without God," and with it the observation that "we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world *etsi deus non daretur*" (as if God does not exist). The hopefulness of these words is revealed through the musical metaphors. Even in the midst of fragmentary existence, even with the impending threat of its abrupt end, Bonhoeffer has confidence that the polyphony will resolve. To seek to escape the polyphony is to "look in...distress to the power of God in the world: God [as] the *deus ex machina*." But this is delusional religiosity unwilling to engage the "world come of age." By contrast, Bonhoeffer concludes, if one is to follow the call of Christ in the world, Christians must do away with this "false conception of God," for "only the suffering God can help."[53]

Subsequent theological reflection has benefited from Bonhoeffer's use of mu-

[50]*LPP*, "Letter of 5 May 1944," 286.

[51]*LPP*, "Letter of 30 April 1944," 282.

[52]*LPP*, "Letter of 27 June 1944," 336.

[53]*LPP*, "Letter of 16 July 1944," 360–361.

sical metaphor. Both David Ford and John De Gruchy have studied and moved beyond Bonhoeffer's engagement with the rich possibilities provided by art appreciation and aesthetics for theological reflection.[54] Lisa Dahill has helpfully explicated these musical images to provide a particularly Lutheran approach to discernment.[55] The multiplicity of human existence and experience canonized in Bonhoeffer's metaphors of *Grundton*, *cantus firmus*, polyphony, and fugue mesh seamlessly with readings of Bonhoeffer that seek to mine his theology for resources to deal with nationalism and racism. One such reading is brilliantly provided by Josiah Ulysses Young.[56] With the richness of these theological and ethical possibilities, it is surprising that one must agree with Jeremy Begbie that this line of inquiry is sadly underdeveloped.

There are implications here also for interpreting Bonhoeffer's own theology. Given the concern Bonhoeffer shows for the specificities of church music (as opposed to "absolute" music), therefore, his use of musical metaphor provides a corrective to overly secularist appropriations of his theological legacy: the *Grundton* and *cantus firmus* have particularly Christian content. On the other hand, one finds little warrant in Bonhoeffer for supporting the separatist ecclesial and theological tendencies of either the so-called Radical Orthodoxy or (Hauerwas-inspired) "resident aliens" perspectives. Bonhoeffer's engagement with musical metaphor achieved resistance to the systematized, instrumentalized rationality of modernity while still maintaining engagement with the multidimensional world to which Christians are called to belong. ⊕

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[54]John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. chap. 4.

[55]Lisa Dahill, "Probing the Will of God: Bonhoeffer and Discernment," *dialog: A Journal of Theology* 41/1 (Spring 2002) 42–49, esp. 47.

[56]See note 12.