Word & World
Volume 35, Number 4
Fall 2015

Bonhoeffer's Musical Metaphor of the Christian Life

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Musical metaphors can help Christians heed the call to follow Christ. As Jeremy Begbie puts it, "music can often offer 'something better' to help us 're-imagine a too familiar theology.'"[1] It comes as no surprise that musical metaphors have inspired innumerable theologians.[2] Notable among these is Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945). Bonhoeffer is well known as a Lutheran pastor and theologian whose condemnation of German nationalism and Christians caught in its spell led to his imprisonment in 1943 and execution in 1945. His Christian witness and martyrdom are sometimes controversial: many credit Bonhoeffer for inspiring the "death of God" theology of the 1960s,[3] and some also question the legitimacy of his martyrdom, because it resulted from his role in a plot to assassi-

[1]Jeremy Begbie, "Through Music: Sound Mix," in *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts*, ed. Jeremy Begbie (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001) 139.

[2]Others include Hans Urs von Balthasar, John Milbank, Karl Barth, James Cone, Paul Ricoeur, F. E. D. Schleiermacher, and Frances Young. David Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998) 129–132.

[3]See John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 136–137, and Charles Marsh, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997) 48.

Bonhoeffer highlights the singular importance of Christ for individual and communal flourishing. By constantly redirecting our hearts to Christ, we find the only path to true freedom, so that the independent fragments of our lives find meaning and our broken relationships are made whole. Only in that one love can all other loves thrive.

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nate Hitler.[4] Despite these controversies, Bonhoeffer's life and writings prove that he resisted the siren song of Nazism to improvise on what he heard as Christ's call on his life. How might his musical thinking help us heed Christ's call today?

Bonhoeffer's musical metaphor concerning the "polyphony of life" and the "*cantus firmus*," which I will define shortly, offers invaluable insights into Christian existence. First, in its original use, the metaphor articulates how Christians find freedom to improvise when our love of Christ takes precedence. Second, Bonhoeffer's metaphor helps us fathom not only our everyday life with God, but our everyday life together. Lastly, the metaphor's two levels coherently combine into a grand vision of Christian existence that can inspire further improvisation on Christ's call.

Bonhoeffer's Original Metaphor from Prison

Bonhoeffer was trained in the musical arts as a child, but it was not until his imprisonment that music explicitly "provided him with most of his…analogies when engaged in theological reflection."[5] But if these analogies also apply to his earlier vision of Christian community, we should wonder whether music had not in fact been informing his theological imagination all along.

Bonhoeffer was denied the chance to develop his metaphorical use of polyphony and the *cantus firmus*, yet he still leaves us with a provocative portrait of Christian existence. Most notably, in his letters he uses the musical concepts of polyphony and the *cantus firmus* to express how Christians should live *ultimately* for God while also living in the *penultimate* present.

To understand the metaphor, we need to know the meaning of polyphony and *cantus firmus*. Polyphony was a type of musical composition that first flowered in the late medieval era. As David Cunningham notes, polyphony literally means "many voices" or "many sounds," and it often refers to simultaneous melodies. This means polyphony is not the same as harmony, which has to meet strict musical criteria.[6] Bonhoeffer pairs polyphony with the idea of a *cantus firmus*, which is a "firm song" that came to mean "any fixed melody to which other parts can be added."[7] In polyphony, multiple independent melodies serve as counterpoints to the firm melody, the *cantus firmus*, so that they are only related to each other by way of that firm melody. The metaphor is this: when our earthly loves (the other parts or melodies) are polyphonically arranged in tune with the firm melody of our love for God (the *cantus firmus*), then life in all of its everyday complexity can be lived to its fullest.

David Ford praises this metaphorical application, declaring that "polyphony

[4]See David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*, ed. Colin Gunton and Daniel W. Hardy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 242, 246–247, and Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer* (New York: Continuum, 2004) 5.

[5]De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation*, 145.

[6]Cunningham, *These Three Are One*, 128.

[7]Ibid., 130.

is a good image" of what it means to be "completely in the arms of God and completely in the world."[8] Bonhoeffer uses this musical dynamic to relate the "Christian faith to…all the ordinary elements of human existence (material, social, cultural, economic, moral, and so on) which are not about ultimate matters but which make up a great deal of daily life."[9] In this way, Bonhoeffer uses polyphony and the *cantus firmus* to illustrate how we might lead a daily life of "free responsibility before God."[10] Elsewhere, Bonhoeffer explains that "the Christian life neither destroys nor sanctions the penultimate. In Christ the reality of God encounters the reality of the world and allows us to take part in this real encounter."[11]

One letter in particular develops this theme. Writing to his dear friend Eberhard Bethge on May 20, 1944, Bonhoeffer describes the *cantus firmus* as one's love for God, around which the "polyphony of life" should take place. This polyphony of life includes erotic love and all such earthly desires, so that one's *eros* is a "contrapuntal theme" in relation to the strong melody of *agape*.[12] In a letter to Bethge the very next day, Bonhoeffer adds that "sorrow and joy, too, belong to the polyphony of the whole life and can exist independently side by side."[13]

Bonhoeffer explains his metaphor nicely in his letter on May 20:

> There is a danger, in any passionate erotic love, that through it you may lose what I'd like to call the polyphony of life. What I mean is that God, the Eternal, wants to be loved with our whole heart, not to the detriment of earthly love or to diminish it, but as a sort of *cantus firmus* to which the other voices of life resound in counterpoint. One of these contrapuntal themes, which keep their full independence but are still related to the *cantus firmus*, is earthly love.…It's really good this [book, Song of Solomon] is in the Bible, contradicting all those who think being Christian is about tempering one's passions….Where the *cantus firmus* is clear and distinct, a counterpoint can develop as mightily as it wants.[14]

In short, the other dimensions of life, such as earthly love, are independent of one another and are developed best when one's love of God, the *cantus firmus*, is "clear and distinct."

Only when the love of God is one's firm *cantus firmus* can earthly life gain a "wholeness" that is faithful to God. Bonhoeffer exhorts Bethge:

> I wanted to ask you to let the *cantus firmus* be heard clearly in your being together; only then will it sound complete and full, and the counterpoint will al-

[8]Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 260.

[9]Ibid., 246.

[10]Ibid., 257.

[11]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Charles C. West, Reinhard Krauss, and Douglas W. Stott, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 159. Discussed in Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 247.

[12]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letter to Eberhard Bethge (20 May 1944), in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, and Nancy Lukens, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010) 393–394.

[13]Bonhoeffer, Letter to Eberhard Bethge (21 May 1944), in *Letters and Papers*, 397.

[14]Bonhoeffer, Letter (20 May 1944), 393–394. Italics mine.

> ways know that it is being carried and can't get out of tune or be cut adrift, while remaining itself and complete in itself. Only this polyphony gives your life wholeness, and you know that no disaster can befall you as long as the *cantus firmus* continues.[15]

As David Moseley argues, for Bonhoeffer, "it is our orientation to God and Christ as the center of gravity that anchors all human earthly existence." Although the counterpoints have their own "integrity," their value and meaning are in Christ. The *cantus firmus*, one's love for Christ, enables life's "contrapuntal improvisation" in a way that never confuses the counterpoints with the *cantus firmus*, thereby maintaining "the ultimate mystery of God."[16] In so doing, not only is erotic love given its proper freedom (which would be on Bonhoeffer's mind given his engagement), but any love of nation or *Volk* could never replace one's love of God. Instead, these secondary loves must constantly take their cues from the *cantus firmus* rather than from hollow rules, which prove receptive to manipulation compared to the living relationship necessary for loving God. Such contrapuntal loves could never come to expression in the form they did among Christian German nationalists.

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Bonhoeffer's Metaphor and Community

Several scholars have commented at length on Bonhoeffer's "polyphony of life," but none have explained the connection between this metaphor and Bonhoeffer's vision of Christian community. Moseley comes close when he notes how "Bonhoeffer's 'polyphony of life' is communitarian" by offering a "model" of how individuals and communities improvise their "witness to God."[17] We must push this further to discover how polyphony describes Bonhoeffer's vision of Christ-centered community, which is most strikingly portrayed in *Life Together*.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote *Life Together* in 1938. The book reflects upon Christian community, especially in light of his experiences with his ordinands at Finkenwalde, an "'illegal' clandestine seminary for the training of young pastors," which he oversaw.[18] *Life Together* links Bonhoeffer's early and late theol-

[15]Ibid., 394. Italics mine.

[16]David J. R. S. Moseley, "'Parables' and 'Polyphony': The Resonance of Music as Witness in the Theology of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology*, ed. Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven Guthrie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 265–266.

[17]Ibid., 268.

[18]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Introduction to *Life Together*, ed. John Walter Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954) 10–11.

ogy,[19] and its remarkable parallels with Bonhoeffer's later musical metaphor further establish the link between his pre- and post-imprisonment theology. Perhaps we should expect such a connection, given that music "was theological language par excellence" at Finkenwalde, precisely when *Life Together* was fomenting in Bonhoeffer's mind.[20]

The three key components of Bonhoeffer's musical metaphor appear in his understanding of community. First, there is a central reality that mediates all else. Second, this central reality creates freedom for all else. And third, this central reality simultaneously unites the various components. Additionally, the fact that his musical metaphor applies so well to his visions of both individual and communal Christian life indicates that there may be a fundamental connection between the two.

First, in Bonhoeffer's musical metaphor, the *cantus firmus* is the firm melody in relation to which the other melodies take their place. While in prison, Bonhoeffer directly relates this to one's love of God. In *Life Together*, the central tenet is Jesus Christ, the Word of God, who alone mediates all communal relationships. Bonhoeffer argues that "Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. There is no Christian community that is more than this, and none that is less than this.… We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ."[21] This is because, for Bonhoeffer, Christ alone is the reconciler: he reconciles humans to God and to others, and outside of Christ reconciliation is impossible. Christ alone is the "Mediator," making peace possible with both God and other Christians.[22] Bonhoeffer believes that Christ's mediation means that, on the one hand, Christians find independence and freedom in (and only in) Christ, and, on the other hand, Christians find unity in (and only in) Christ.[23] Put in terms of his metaphor, only when Christ is held as our good, clear, and strong *cantus firmus* can our relationships with others be redemptive.

Second, just as the secondary polyphonic melodies find their freedom within their relationship to the *cantus firmus,* so too the melody of a Christian life finds its freedom in relationship to Christ. The freedom granted to each melody in the polyphony is not an unbound freedom from responsibility. Rather, this freedom is *made possible* by its constraint—in this case, by Christ. Jeremy Begbie observes that this "freedom [is] not constituted by boundless openness or self-willed indeterminacy…but discovered through, and in proper relation to compounds of constraint."[24] When deriving its cues from the *cantus firmus*, a given melody can

[19]Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 249.

[20]Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014) 233; see also 255.

[21]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, ed. Geffrey B. Kelly, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 5 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 31.

[22]Ibid., 32–33.

[23]Ibid., 44.

[24]Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 223.

improvise without going adrift or out of tune, and when melodies improvise on their solid *cantus firmus*, they can develop their counterpoints to the fullest.

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Similarly, just as in polyphony the several melodies are independent of one another but take their form from the *cantus firmus*, so too, for Bonhoeffer, Christians' identities are derived *not* from others but from a relationship with Christ. We find this echoed most clearly in Bonhoeffer's rejection of "immediacy." Bonhoeffer writes:

> I must release others from all my attempts to control, coerce, and dominate them with my love. In their freedom from me, other persons want to be loved for who they are,…as those for whom Christ won the forgiveness of sins and prepared eternal life. Because Christ has long since acted decisively for other Christians, before I could begin to act, I must allow them the freedom to be Christ's. They should encounter me only as the persons that they already are for Christ. This is the meaning of the claim that we can encounter others only through the mediation of Christ.…Spiritual love recognizes the true image of the other person as seen from the perspective of Jesus Christ. It is the image Jesus Christ has formed and wants to form in all people.[25]

When considered in light of his later musical metaphor, we can understand this dynamic in terms of individuals' sonic improvisations upon Christ. Each person's life is a melody that derives from Christ, not others. Attempts at immediacy, which stem from human desires to create dependence, corrode the freedom of everyone involved to improvise upon the *cantus firmus*. Bonhoeffer argues that seeking immediate relationships produces "enslavement, bondage, [and] rigidity," whereas loving others according to Christ's mediation "creates the *freedom* of Christians under the Word." Each person, and therefore each melody, "serves [Christ] alone," because only Christ can save, and only from this service to Christ can any legitimate service to others derive.[26] This means that Christians' personal melodies serve others by pointing away from themselves to their shared *cantus firmus*, Jesus Christ.

Third, just as in polyphony many independent melodies create counterpoint in their relation to the *cantus firmus*, so too do independent Christians have a beautiful unity based on each individual's relationship with Christ. Bonhoeffer's warning against immediacy is not a directive *against* unity, but in fact seeks to *preserve* it. Bonhoeffer writes:

[25]Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 44.

[26]Ibid., 43–44.

> The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more everything else between us will recede, and the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is alive between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we really do have one another.[27]

This accords with his later understanding of the *cantus firmus* as that which maintains the diversity-in-unity of polyphonic life.

Even though he may have never made the connection explicit, Bonhoeffer's musical metaphor of polyphony and its *cantus firmus* goes remarkably far in artistically articulating his vision of Christian community as mediated by Christ. In this case, Christ is the *cantus firmus* who creates the conditions of freedom for individual persons to develop their melodies with one another, and these are held together as a polyphonic whole in Christ. The benefit of community is to point one another to the *cantus firmus*, and in so doing to increase the swell of music that Christ "has formed and wants to form in all people."[28]

One Metaphor, One Vision?

Bonhoeffer's thinking may well have evolved between 1938 and his imprisonment. Yet a degree of continuity should be expected. One possible explanation is that he had already been shaped by music all along. As Jeremy Begbie notes,

> [Music] can "inform" theology by "forming" the theologian. When Bonhoeffer, living out his last months in prison, finds that he has music constantly on his mind, and that he resorts to the language of polyphony to do his theology, is this not because his life has been significantly shaped by music, both as a listener and as a practising musician of considerable skill?[29]

Indeed, Bonhoeffer's vision of individual lives with God, on the one hand, and Christians in community, on the other, readily combine into a coherent vision of individual Christians living with others united by God. An individual's polyphonic life can itself be a melody in tune with Christ, independent of others yet united by their mutual love and commitment.

If Bonhoeffer had a chance to explain this, he might have suggested that Christian existence is polyphonic on at least two levels. First, an individual Christian's life is polyphonic and most fulfilling when she embraces the penultimate riches of life in light of her ultimate desire for God. On the second level, our Chris-

[27]Ibid., 34.

[28]Ibid., 44. This is not to say that all of Bonhoeffer's ideas in *Life Together* unambiguously cohere with his musical metaphor. In fact, in *Life Together* he advocates singing in unison rather than in harmony so that the text receives pride of place and binds those who would otherwise flaunt their distracting talents (66–68). We should note that (1) Bonhoeffer's directive may reflect his own temptations in light of his musical talents; (2) he consistently combines unity and individuality but has opted here for a different means; and (3) he consistently imagines individuals singing a *melody* united by the word (or Word) rather than a *harmony* determined in relation to someone else's part. Despite these limited consistencies, no one's thought and practice are fully consistent, and perhaps Bonhoeffer would have altered his stance had this tension been brought to his attention.

[29]Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, 273.

tian communal life is also polyphonic, so that our life together is most fulfilling when we embrace each other as unique individuals in light of what Christ has done for all. The point of organic connection is this: the more one's desires are in tune with one's love of God, then the more one's life-melody is in tune with the ultimate *cantus firmus*, Christ. This in turn promotes a beautiful, musical polyphony within the Christian community that fosters individual particularity and freedom precisely by fostering unity, and vice versa.

Further Improvisations

Bonhoeffer's musical metaphor can continue to develop in conversation with Christians today, leading to deeper insights into Christian existence. Jeremy Begbie provides a notable example by extending Bonhoeffer's musical metaphor beyond the individual and communal levels to that of God's triune relationships.

Appealing to the "three-tone major chord," Begbie explains that "we hear [this chord] as three distinct, mutually enhancing (not mutually exclusive) sounds, but together occupying the same aural space," and its "sound is rich and enjoyable." Such a model helpfully corrects others that place the three "persons" of the Trinity in competition.[30] Could not this be a third level of polyphony in Christian existence—one in which individuals-in-community are drawn into the polyphony of the Trinity?

> ***"Christ lives in the polyphony of the Trinity, and by the Spirit we are granted, through him, a share in this trinitarian 'enchantment.'"***

Indeed, Begbie might suggest that this musical metaphor works on so many levels of the Christian life thanks to its ultimate ties to the Trinity. In the Trinity, we encounter the remarkable phenomenon of polyphony, with indivisible unity and difference. In this case, however, there is no obvious candidate for the *cantus firmus*, given that we are talking about God and not God's relationship to us. Still, God's polyphony invites us in. As Begbie puts it, "Christ lives in the polyphony of the Trinity, and by the Spirit we are granted, through him, a share in this trinitarian 'enchantment.'"[31] By making these rich connections, we answer Charles Marsh's challenge to further Bonhoeffer's "unfinished project" by offering a "trinitarian articulation of selfhood"—one that resonates with the "perichoretic mystery of the triune God."[32]

[30]Ibid., 25.

[31]Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) 269–270. David Cunningham likewise links creaturely polyphony to "the polyphonic nature of its Maker" in *These Three Are One*, 129.

[32]Marsh, "Bonhoeffer," *Modern Theologians*, 49.

Bonhoeffer uses the musical metaphor of polyphony and *cantus firmus* to express realities that are otherwise difficult to articulate and for which music's idiom is well suited. Not only does this musical metaphor express the freedom of a Christ-centered life for individuals, but it illustrates Bonhoeffer's vision of community in which we thrive as independent-yet-united individuals in Christ. By making this connection, we discern multiple, interlinked levels of polyphony in Christian life. And by developing the metaphor yet further, we discover that these layers of polyphony draw us toward their source, the Trinity.

What does this mean for Christians today? Bonhoeffer highlights the singular importance of Christ for individual and communal flourishing. By constantly redirecting our hearts to Christ, we find the only path to true freedom, so that the independent fragments of our lives find meaning and our broken relationships are made whole. Only in that one love can all other loves thrive.

By making such claims, Bonhoeffer has in effect issued a series of challenges for congregations of the twenty-first century. For mainliners, his account of discipleship amounts to a challenge to reclaim a kind of christocentricity more typically associated with evangelicalism, while it challenges evangelicals to reclaim a proper penultimate love of the world. It's a challenge to root our common life in Christ alone rather than in shared values, social locations, political agendas, or tradition-shaped habits—a move that might alter the very nature of those values, locations, agendas, and habits. And it's a challenge to love others only in Christ, respecting their independence even while appreciating that we flourish when united in Christ's body, lest our good intentions devolve into destructive self-interest.

These challenges may seem daunting, yet Bonhoeffer leaves us with hope. For even when our individual and communal existence sounds discordant, if Christ is our center then we can trust that God will redeem our song.

To conclude, Bonhoeffer's metaphor is a gift for Christians today, pointing to the power of the musical arts to expand our horizons. It gives a stunning rendition of Christian life in all its quotidian and exceptional moments. It invites us to imagine how the seemingly fragmented aspects of our lives can join together in a richly polyphonic fashion. It inspires us to embrace life even in its fragmentation, knowing that we are blessed when we live in tune with our ultimate love of God. And it encourages us to live with others who also seek to live according to Christ, trusting that as we focus on our *cantus firmus*, we are in fact participating with each other in a heavenly, trinitarian music—even if we have yet to hear its final resolution.

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