How (Ethno)musicological is God? Ethnomusicology, Theology, and the Dynamics of Interdisciplinary Dialogues

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Abstract

In previous work I have suggested that developments in ethnomusicology have served as a crucial driving force behind the study of Christian congregational music. Such study inevitably draws in theological concerns alongside musical ones; however, whilst there has been increasing interest in the relationship between music(ology) and theology, much of this has focused around traditional musicological paradigms, with explicit dialogue between ethnomusicology and theology often remaining somewhat incidental in nature. I suggest that ethnomusicology has the potential to provide crucial critique of current paradigms of dialogue and that future conversations may well involve a greater degree of tension.

Introduction

«To the skeptic's ear», writes Heidi Epstein, «only curious auditory leaps of faith would translate bundled pitches spinning through time into divine revelations» (Epstein 2004, 1). Detailing a range of strategies by which composers, theologians, philosophers and music lovers throughout Christian history have associated music with transcendent meaning, Epstein describes the way in which, within these streams of thought, «[o]n the one hand, well-crafted melodies and chord progressions deliver secret messages from God; on the other, music transcends every human agenda». Her evaluation of this framework is less than enthusiastic: «I remain unconvinced that we can have it both ways.» She is, in other words, suspicious or skeptical.

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Epstein, writing from a feminist new-musicological perspective, believes that much traditional music-theology dialogue has gone astray. From the earliest church fathers writing about the dangers of musical sensuality,[1] a suspicion of the feminine, embodied aspects of musical practice has been counterbalanced by a focus on the way in which order and the abstract structural properties of music can map, instead, directly onto the divine, acting as transcendent symbols of the heavenly order and revelators of God. Epstein traces patterns of this kind of thinking throughout the narrative of Christian history, all the way through to contemporary theologians such as Catherine Pickstock and Jeremy Begbie, suggesting that they, collectively, represent a masculine rage for order. For Epstein, mainstream music theology has always shied away from and repudiated the messy, embodied aspects of music's powers in favor of models of divine harmony and order which can only operate whilst disavowing these crucial elements of music's presence. The implication, of course, is that such approaches are inadequate – at the very least they are somewhat selective in their treatment of music and, at their worst, they are either engaging in somewhat ungrounded metaphorical speculation and association or act, consciously or not, as tools of repression.

Whether or not we buy her critique and the feminist critical theory out of which it arises, it is worth considering the enabling principle of music-theology dialogue which Epstein highlights. Abstract musical structures are relatively open to metaphysical (re)interpretation, and they have thus sometimes been able to talk, without too much difficulty, to systematic theological methods interested in similar concerns. Music is free to become the embodiment of particular theological principles insofar as it transcends the social and cultural forces which produce it, and it is a particular musical ontology which allows this to happen. This is the kind of thinking, perhaps, which permits Jeremy Begbie in *Theology, Music and Time* to map the divine arcs of salvation history directly on to the nested phrases and structural articulations of western art music (Begbie 2000). Begbie goes out of his way to acknowledge music's entanglements with anything and everything in the world, he also makes it very clear that he doesn't want to deify music. Crucially,

1 McKinnon 1987, whilst somewhat reductionist in his selection of short snippets related to music, is at least illustrative of some early Christian thinking.

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however, he insists on music's irreducible integrity alongside its ability to enact theological wisdom. Despite his disavowals and qualifications, a somewhat abstract structural view both of music and of salvation-time allows a direct correspondence between the two without any particular complicating factors obscuring the nature of the mapping.

Such a project might, from one point of view, seem relatively unproblematic – Music's seemingly vague and potentially abstract character is notorious for allowing precisely this and, unless we are going to grant some other source of meaning-making some kind of quasi-ethical priority, some degree of interpretative freedom seems to be part of what it means to release musical sounds into the public realm. Ethnomusicologist Tim Rice through his fieldwork in Bulgaria has drawn our attention to the way in which even authoritative fascist regimes sometimes lack the power to control individuals' abilities to attribute their own meanings to musical performances and practices, so to complain and attempt to prevent theologians from doing the same might well be a simple case of double standards (Rice 2001).

One danger here is the possibility of illusion, of mistaking a reading of the music for something inherently present within it. With human readings of a text this is tempting enough, but when reading transcendent meaning it can be hard to resist. After all, the ultimately transcendent, in and of itself, is rarely contingent, and when this is mapped on to pure structure, there seems little room for us to go astray. If we are not careful, and allow ourselves to be drawn in, we can be left with a certain sense of inevitability. It is worth, here, reminding ourselves of the long and varied reception histories which musical works inevitably undergo – a constant reminder of particular readings being embedded and constructed, always reminding us of music's non-absolute character.

Another danger, of course, is the setting aside of important facets of music's presence in the world in the service of theological agendas; for the interpretative freedoms we allow ourselves to leave aside our embodied and embedded existence such that our play of ideas displaces the world we find around us. Again, I think that Begbie in his usage of music for theological reflection displays some sleight of hand here, affirming this embodied and embedded existence, but then largely relegating it to a mode by which we experience the processes he has already told us about. We need to be careful

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not just about acknowledgment, but about priorities and the ordering of our knowledge.

The formation of such alliances is not, however, to be laid entirely at the feet of theologians. Musicology has become increasingly self-conscious of its own history of abstracting music in this manner. Timothy Taylor's characterization of developments in the field seems particularly apt in the present context: «The 1980s saw the rise of cultural studies in Europe and the U.S., followed by what in the U.S. became known as the 'New Musicology', a musicology that sought to understand music not as a series of holy texts written by composer/gods, but as situated in culture broadly speaking.» (Taylor n.d.) The rise of the new musicology, as has been told more times than I care to count, began to emphasize more greatly the need to focus on the social and cultural meanings embedded within music, rejecting traditional separations between music and the extramusical in order to describe the way in which these are instead inherently bound up together in musical activity (Cook 2008). Such a corrective to musicology served as an important call to arms within the discipline itself, stimulating new debates and shaping disciplinary agendas and priorities. As an important part of contemporary musicology's inheritance, it is likely for a similar movement to be equally necessary within music-theology dialogue insofar as it depends on inherited musicological paradigms in order to function; a key part of Epstein's contention is that this work, as yet, largely remains to be done.

Epstein's project, then, is one of disciplinary catch-up, in which the music-theology dialogue needs to be wary of attending purely to musicological paradigms which have been the topic of such critique and, at the very least, to nurture a new stream of dialogue which attends to music in its fully embodied, culturally and socially situated and meaningful reality.[2] Epstein, in posing an alternative to existing paradigms, follows in the path of feminist new musicology, with an attendance to the way in which music interacts with the body, suggesting that in this sensual interaction we might begin to find a way of thinking about musical embodiment of the divine in a way that does better justice to neglected and theologically suppressed elements of our

2 See Broadhead 2012 for a helpful examination of Epstein's position among the different streams of dialogue which have emerged between music and theology.

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musical experience. By doing so we recover music as bound up with our humanity, as something which can speak of the divine but need not bypass our earthly, embodied order in order to do so. Music, in its complex and sensual interactions with our bodies becomes aligned with a God who, in the tradition of a number of Christian mystics, particularly in this case Hildegard of Bingen, does the same.

> Numerical relations, interconnecting music, body, soul, cosmos and God are replaced with incarnate flesh and blood, with the interconnective tissue of God's fleshly song nascently resounding in Mary's womb. With this concrete shift, human sexuality rather than numerositas and harmony has become the interpretative key to understanding music's theological significance. (Epstein 2004, 134)

It is, in many ways, a compelling vision – an act of rebellion, perhaps, against church fathers who were often as suspicious of music as they were of the female body, a deviant embrace of all that a long Christian history has forbidden, not through a turning away from God but precisely in turning towards him in a newly imagined richness and indulgence.

It is not just, however, a shift in disciplinary perspective which enables this, but a shift in musical ontology itself, a different understanding of what music essentially is and does. Epstein's work serves to remind us that existing interdisciplinary dialogues are often based on and enabled by specific disciplinary and theological values and principles and encourages us to wonder about the alternatives. If we are to wonder about dialogue between ethnomusicology and theology then her work serves as a reminder that we needn't necessarily expect such dialogue to buy into existing or historical music theological models and paradigms and, indeed, that we may find much richer potential by acknowledging existing limitations and seeking fresh contributions to the dynamics of dialogue. That isn't to say that we necessarily need to break with Christian tradition in order to do this but, perhaps, that we may need to approach it from a different angle and see it in a sometimes unexpected new light.

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The Critical Potential of Ethnomusicology

If the new musicology offered one critique of existing music theology dialogues, then ethnomusicology has the potential to offer others. The definition offered by the Society of Ethnomusicology highlights some of ethnomusicology's key features: «Ethnomusicology is the study of music in its cultural context. Ethnomusicologists approach music as a social process in order to understand not only what music is but why it is: what music means to its practitioners and audiences, and how those meanings are conveyed.» They suggest that ethnomusicologists share three main foundations

> 1) Taking a global approach to music (regardless of area of origin, style, or genre). 2) Understanding music as social practice (viewing music as a human activity that is shaped by its cultural context). 3) Engaging in ethnographic fieldwork (participating in and observing the music being studied, frequently gaining facility in another music tradition as a performer or theorist), and historical research. (Society for Ethnomusicology n.d.).

Ethnomusicology and the new musicology from which Epstein hails have had, at times, a somewhat ambivalent relationship (Stock 1997). Ethnomusicologists have often shared with new musicologists a desire to attend to cultural and social meanings associated with music, resisting the idea of music as in any way absolute or transcendent, split aside from so-called «extramusical» meaning. However, there have remained important frictions between the two (sub)disciplines. Whilst the new musicology has often looked to critical theory to discover the diverse threads of meanings and significations swirling around music, ethnomusicologists have often felt that these fall short of the grounding in the experiences and narratives of everyday human beings which form the center of the contemporary ethnomusicological project (Ruskin/Rice 2012). The ethnomusicologist, in this situation, can feel compelled to prescribe a reality check to ensure that exciting and compelling cultural narratives are not merely the product of the critic's imagination. For the ethnomusicologist it is no good, in other words, simply removing music from its absolute and transcendent position in order to restore cultural meaning to music if, in doing so, you fail to turn to the processes and articulations of the society and culture on whose behalf you seem to be trying to speak. In doing this, the critic is once again placed in the position of bestow-

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ing their own meanings on the abstract musical object which they claimed to be reconnecting to its societal frame. This is a problem which is frequently raised in musicological treatments of Adorno, and it is one of which Tia DeNora, in her work on music and everyday life, repeatedly reminds us (DeNora 2000).

An ethnomusicological reading, then, may well welcome Epstein's shifting of music-theology dialogue away from the abstract realm towards an embodied and experiential reading of the text,[3] however it may also be somewhat suspicious of a relatively unilateral move towards a focus on sexualized and gendered meaning, sensing that a rooting of such an account in critical theory and discourse may not bear a straightforward relationship to the terms in which music is likely to be framed or conceived in non-academic realms of experience. Whilst it may be a potent mystical metaphor, in taking it as paradigmatic we risk universalizing what is, in reality, often a single fragmentary aspect of musical and divine relationships. This critique has been raised in relation to Susan McClary's sexualized readings of Beethoven (Cook 2001), and it is as applicable when thinking about music-theology dialogue as it is when working solely within musicological paradigms.

Ethnomusicological approaches, as much as new musicological ones, have great potential to question some of our habitual patterns of musical thinking and the manner in which alliances are capable of being made between musical and theological realms.[4] It is common, for example, for western art music to be thought of in terms of its aesthetic beauty, a notion capable of feeding into an alliance between musical and divine beauty. Indeed, Ferdia Stone Davis (2011, xiv) suggests that beauty has been a historically dominant concept for the organization of aesthetic and theological discussion. Our perception of a potential point of resonance between familiar mu-

3 See, for example, Pitarch 2005 for an insightful discussion of embodiment in ethnomusicological research.

4 The diversity of perspectives offered in recent work on Christian congregational music, for example, begins to demonstrate alternative possibilities, providing a somewhat richer tapestry than that which might have been expected from a reading of traditional music theology literature whilst often remaining something of a polyphony of separate though related voices. See Porter 2014; Ingalls/Landau/Wagner 2013; Nekola/Wagner 2015.

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sic and God can snowball relatively quickly into theses such as this: «God is ultimate beauty, implicitly known as the ultimate desire of the human mind and heart»; «[r]evelation is the self-gift of God to humanity», in which God reveals himself in events in history, culminating in the Incarnation; «[a]rt is one of the primary embodiments of the ongoing history of this revelation and its communication» (Viladesau 2000, 218).

In the face of such a seemingly obvious and natural connection between musical and theological realms, ethnomusicological research cautions us to hesitate for a moment before fully committing and to consider that there are musical worlds which are not predicated upon such notions of the beautiful, and at the same time draws us to consider the range of human processes and experiences which come together in the production and reception of musical beauty as we understand it, asking us to consider in greater depth the mixed and complex systems of power, negotiation and meaning-making which these musical worlds inevitably bring into play. It forces us to locate experiences of beauty within socially produced and multiply understood geographically and temporally limited human systems.

To underline my point, Philip Bohlman draws our attention to both our reliance on ideas of beauty and the way in which they can be relativized by attention to the dynamics of non-modern and non-western musics: «Beauty as a condition of music is a construct of modernity, a quality of the exchange value that accrued to it when technologies in the West made it possible to reproduce music as a commodity, a product in which the object, 'beauty', could lodge» (Bohlman 1999, 30). He goes on to suggest, with perhaps a little hyperbole, that

> in those cultures in which there is no need for beauty, there is also no open exchange of musical products as commodities. Music exists in unremarkable ways, functioning through processes only to be instantiated in the cultural contexts of music […] Music is so much part of other social practices that there is no need to separate it from them or to attribute special qualities to it.

The snowballing process from music to beautiful music to beauty to God is, at least momentarily, put on hold whilst we wonder whether our bundling of art, beauty and God might not be a result of some theological necessity opening us up to the fullness of divine reality but might instead, if framed in that

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way, exclude as much as it opens up, might limit us to the products of our own imaginations by framing these products as ultimate truth.

Another example might be the idea of music's sacramentality, one that is, again, increasingly common within discussions both of church music and of music-theological dialogue (Blackwell 1999; Witvliet 2001). Western music, I might with relatively little novelty suggest, is often able to maintain an appealing vision as a sacramental vehicle of the divine largely because of western ideas of what art is and how art functions, informed in no small part by music's historical relationship to the church, particularly as something which the congregation receive from those performing as a divine gift to them.[5] We are able to conceive music as sacramental in nature fundamentally because it is something we receive from inspired composers and performers and a medium through which we observe beauty. If we strip away this framework by moving outside of such western art music traditions, then we may find that the language of sacramentality becomes a less obvious one to use. We realize that an ideal which we may well have been tempted to at least implicitly universalize is much more limited in scope than we might have imagined.

This is not to say that ideas of musical beauty or musical sacramentality therefore become entirely obsolete and need discarding. Music, when envisioned as social process and activity – may still indeed open us up to the other through a participation in divine beauty or through sacramental dynamics, and it may also provide a means by which we can participate in divine grace; but it is less fundamentally other at the root of its existence. When music enters our experience already bound up with worldly realities and meanings, we encounter it not *simply* as divine gift but, at the same time, as an externalization and extension of our selves in all their messy reality.

5 Lydia Goehr's remarks on romantic musical ontologies are instructive here. Goehr describes, for example, a «two-fold aesthetic [which] recognized […] work and artist both as separated and as bound to one another. Works could receive, on the one hand, ample attention in their own right as independent and self-sufficient entities. On the other hand, the ability of artists to reach the level of the universal and to express that universal in their works was sufficient to guarantee them their own personal respect and recognition». (Goehr 1992, 162).

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Rowan Williams, in his 2012 Cadbury lecture, helpfully explores the distinction within Scriptural and later Christian traditions that can be made between idol and icon,[6] and it is worth some consideration here:

> Images and idols are empty things […] We engage in making an image […] we set it there outside ourselves and then we bow down before this alienated part of ourselves. The implication is that we are in some sense worshipping ourselves. We cannot create […] a numinous presence, so all that we can do is to externalise what is in our own minds and hearts, yet by externalising it we make ourselves absent from the work that is made. We are subject to stand over against an object which we imagine, or decide to imagine, to be something that is not us […] What is not going on here is anything other than human action, human projection. (Williams n.d.)

Such a distinction is, I think, as applicable to our thinking about music as it is to our thinking about visual images, particularly in the extent to which in our thinking about music and theology we are tempted to make alliances between music and the divine. It may be necessary to confront the fact that music, in many ways, can offer a projection of individual or collective selves and fantasies of God even when it seems to be at its most transcendent. Without wanting to over-idealize the discipline, which is as riddled with flaws and problems as any other, the concerns of ethnomusicology can serve to make some of this visible by removing the illusion that music is pure sounding form and structure, independent of all human particularities, reminding us again and again that there are as many musics as there are musicians – it restores to us that which has often been made invisible and concealed through processes of production and performance.

Following the distinction between idol and icon, a sense that there are multiple ontologies of music is a crucial part of the ethnomusicological endeavor. These ontologies are not given to us by simply reflecting upon the

6 Icons, within Christian tradition, are understood in light of the incarnation, in which Christ is simultaneously both divine and human. Such an event challenges any simple division between humanity and divinity. Icons are therefore capable of portraying divine realities and, as the viewer interacts with them, this interaction allows them to enter into the divine presence. Gorea 2013 contains an insightful analysis of iconography and the contributions made by processes of production and viewing to iconographic ontologies.

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nature of musical sound or studying and analyzing the structures and patterns of notes on the page, but a result, as Bohlman draws our attention to, of music's embeddedness in the realities, structures and processes of everyday life. If we return to Williams then we have a similar awareness that it is precisely these kinds of embeddedness which allow us to distinguish between icon and idol, indeed, it is these that the distinction between the two is ultimately founded upon:

> We understand the difference [...] not by features that are intrinsic to them [...] The distinctions come as we examine and think about the practices in which images are embedded. How are these images made and how are they used? Are these images which are meant simply to express what is going on in my mind, in my psyche, in my heart? Are these images intended to open us up to something else? (Williams n.d.)

Ethnomusicology, by drawing our attention to these processes and distinctions may,[7] then, allow us a greater degree of discernment when talking about the divine in relation to music. It can enable us to think seriously about the conditions which might enable music to speak of or convey the divine.

One word of caution, however, when we talk about the idea of music opening us up to something else – to the other – there is a crucial double meaning here. God, of course, is other, but so are non-western musical cultures and we need to be wary of the possible slippage that this double meaning can introduce. We cannot, of course, simply equate the possibilities that other cultures offer us with the divine any more than we can our own culture, these are not one and the same. No, until further analysis their primary function here is critique, to remind us of our own tendencies towards the construction of idols and of the potential to do this within music theology as much as anywhere else.

And here we have our first problem – in moving us away from an understanding of music that much current music-theological dialogue is predicated upon ethnomusicology, to a certain extent, seems to undermine the

7 Tia DeNora 2000 is, perhaps, one of the ethnographic accounts to foreground such concerns most explicitly.

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possibility of that dialogue altogether. How, after all, can multiple, socially produced and articulated, often functional understandings and practices of music map onto talk about God. We may find ourselves in a situation in which we are forced to confront the fact that music is not always theological and cannot always be made to be.

Such challenges were illustrated to me in a concrete manner at a number of moments during my own doctoral fieldwork in a charismatic congregation where, despite my best efforts to draw out questions of spiritual significance from interviewees, their concerns and priorities remained doggedly pragmatic, grounded, or detail-orientated. My efforts to use these as springboards into something more profound would, at times, lead to drawn out detours down dead-end streets rather than the blossoming religious insights that I had hoped for. At the same time, interviewees who, themselves, struggled to use the music of the church community for spiritual purposes described vividly their own inabilities to make the music of the church theologically significant. Ritual failure, in this context, leads to the music remaining resolutely mundane within their own modes of experience.

Ethnomusicology as Anthropology – Approaching the Dialogue from a new Direction

I want to consider now an alternative angle which points us to a slightly different possible mode of dialogue between ethnomusicology and theology, and one that can be of value both to scholars on both sides of the dialogue. Again, it is one that is centered around otherness. Simone Krüger, in her discussion of «The Ethnomusicologist as Pedagogue» (2009) subdivides the ethnomusicological discipline into two streams, one musicological and one anthropological in orientation. Having fretted over some of the problems in purely musicological approaches to music theology dialogue it might be worth, for a moment, considering the dynamics of the second of these two categories, and to examine some recent conversations between theology and anthropology. Georgina Born has suggested the possibility for three principal modes of interdisciplinary relationship: In the first, «scholars assume an integrative or synthesis model, in which the interdisciplinary field is conceived in terms of the integration of two or more «antecedent disciplines» in rela-

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tively symmetrical form», in the second, «one or more disciplines are organized in a relation of subordination or service to other component disciplines» and in the third «in contrast, interdisciplinary research is conceived neither as a synthesis nor in terms of a disciplinary division of labor, but as driven by an agonistic or antagonistic relation to existing forms of disciplinary knowledge and practice» (Born 2006, 211). It is this third mode which I want to explore here.

Joel Robbins, in a provocative article considering what he calls the «awkward relationship» between anthropology and theology, has suggested three possible ways in which theological and anthropological disciplines might relate. Whilst the first two are largely concerned with disciplinary introspection, his third is of more interest:

Robbins' suggestion is that it there might be value in considering how «the encounter with theology might lead anthropologists to revise their core projects». And, that for this to happen, «anthropologists would have to imagine that theologians might either produce theories that get some things right about the world they currently get wrong or model a kind of action in the world that is in some or other way more effective or ethically adequate than their own». (Robbins 2006, 287)

Using existing conversations between anthropology and feminism as models – an interesting starting point in itself, given Epstein's work – Robbins suggests that one way in which the two disciplines of anthropology and theology might begin their relationship is by mocking each other by virtue of the way each of them achieves quite easily something that despite serious effort often eludes the other. Dialogue, in other words, begins exactly at the point where we just arrived, at the realization that there is some kind of radical distance and critique between the disciplines.

Robbins seeks to identify what this mockery might look like and he suggests centering the discussion around ideas of otherness:

> Anthropologists, by virtue of their commitment to fieldwork, find it easy to discover that there are viable ways of conceiving and living life that are different from their own. They also find it relatively easy to prove to their readers that these other ways of conceiving and living life actually exist are not merely their own imagined creations […] What anthropologists find far more difficult to carry off is the critical

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> agenda implied in their work – the one that suggests that anthropologists might convince people to learn from how others live to live otherwise themselves.
> Theologians might well feel mocked by anthropologists' ability to easily discover and prove lived differences. They too believe in the possibility of a life different than the one they currently live, but, as they see it, especially in the West they have to work very hard to find God's design for this life underneath the cultural trappings in which it comes to them. Furthermore, outside the circle of their committed readers, they find it very difficult to convince people that the other ways of life they write about are real. But they mock anthropologists by the confidence they have that the differences they find are really fundamental ones that point to wholly different ways of living, and by their sense that their committed readers really might take the bait and let these differences transform their lives (Robbins 2006, 287).

Robbins has located common concerns between the disciplines of anthropology and theology, but ones that at the same time carry a great deal of tension with them. Let us think about his statements for a moment. Theology here is about a way of life. Anthropology is about helping people to change their lives. These assertions strike against the grain of academic objectivity in order to ground interdisciplinary dialogue in the realm of engagement with the real world. This is, once again, something of a reality check. A number of writers seem, slowly, to be realizing that in order for theology to talk productively with other disciplines it is helpful to acknowledge theology's own role as a cultural and situated phenomenon. In this case, an acknowledgment that theology isn't simply God talk but is, more often humans-and-God talk, provides a way for non-divine aspects of the world to become part of the conversation without being reduced merely to matters of human self-expression. The reality being studied needn't be a direct expression of God in order to participate in the conversation, but can find other, more nuanced ways into the dialogue. Likewise, a realization that our disciplines do indeed have agendas, even missions, in relation to the world around us and aren't simply expressions of pure academic objectivity brings us to the point in which a discipline founded largely upon value-laden perspectives of reality might be able to do more than look patronizingly down on us from a higher metaphysical plain.

What happens, in any case, if we follow Robbins, and take this suggestion not just as a model for dialogue between anthropology and theology but between ethnomusicology and theology? If we imagine ethnomusicology, for

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a moment, as simply the anthropology of music and, therefore, imagine music largely as a location and enactment of ways of life and systems of meaning, then we might suggest that ethnomusicology and theology, again, mock each other; that ethnomusicology shows us the way in which music embodies and enacts, for different groups of people and in different ways, a vast range of meanings, values and patterns of life in musical practices whilst theology is, at the same time, imagining such lives and meanings which it wants others to learn from, but often having to work much harder to try and locate these in the world in which it finds itself. Ethnomusicological-theological dialogue, in this case, becomes a specific enactment of a broader interdisciplinary antagonism. This might begin to sound a little like Begbie – the idea that music performs theological wisdom. This is not to say, however, that ethnomusicology simply looks for and discovers enactments of the ways of life that theology is hoping to find – it is precisely here that the friction begins. We do not load meaning on the theological side of the equation in this manner but, by bringing both theology and music into the mediating domain of human lives, we allow the broader antagonisms present in this realm to form the texture of our dialogue. Crucially, again, there is no assumption here that God or divine order needs to be directly associated with or mediated through music in order for music to become in some sense part of this theological interaction. Just as human societies and cultures are open to theological address, providing a vast range of hooks for dialogue without themselves necessarily occupying the divine side of reality, so too do we open, here, a greater range of contact points between music and theology.

We have to be a little careful here, as the assumption that ethnomusicology always deals with something «other» is less warranted now that it might once have been. An increasing tendency to do ethnomusicological research «at home», or to engage in research centered around western art music itself means that it may not always be the choice of music to research which opens up dimensions of otherness (Araujo 2009; Bayley 2012). Indeed, Nicholas Cook (2008) has warned about precisely this issue. For Cook, ethnomusicology is primarily about a turn towards the study of performance, and the complex relationships which both musicologists and ethnomusicologists inhabit mean that insider/outsider distinctions become problematic to make – we all are always simultaneously insider and outsider, whether studying music within the western classical tradition or whether studying music which we

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have grown to know and understand from overseas. Perhaps, then, ethnomusicology's ability to open us up to otherness isn't always matter of bringing us to strange musics,[8] but of reminding us that any music is but one among many, and of drawing us out of our own academic tendencies towards solipsism through encounter with others who participate in shared acts of musicking.

The suggested model of dialogue is simple but, perhaps, boring. If ethnomusicology is, after all, this similar to anthropology then why aren't ethnomusicologists simply anthropologists? But this, then, is precisely where music might find that it can re-enter the picture. Part of music's role within culture, I want to suggest, is its tendency to exert a constant pull outward in favor of extra dimensions and realities. Jeffrey Summit, in his work on Jewish congregations has written that:

> I found again and again, when these nonspecialists spoke about music in Jewish worship they were in fact talking about the deepest spiritual questions in their lives. What tunes and chant represented the essence of who they were and what they believed as Jews? What music constituted authentic practice? What was their relationship to their ethnic and religious history? Where and when did they feel truly comfortable and fully at home? In my many conversations and interviews, we spoke about music, but the real conversation was about the locus of core meaning in their lives (Summit 2000, 18).

And whilst it will not always be spiritual questions that are foregrounded, this tendency for music to constantly springboard into other areas and questions through its embodiment of or failure to embody different aspects of existence has been an integral part of my own ethnographic fieldwork. Music is not, I think, fundamentally other in relation to other aspects of the world but has, instead, an ability to combine and superimpose them in ways that extend and complement our world as we encounter it elsewhere. Thus, it is social and aesthetic, embodied and cognitive, emotional and structured, addressing each of these dimensions through the expression and impact of musical sounds and systems. Within, and in relation to, the cultures and soci-

8 The use of the plural highlights the diversity of musical phenomena in the world and their resistance to complete assimilation under a single conceptual framework.

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eties that music finds itself, therefore, it is always adding extra layers of complexity to «purely» anthropological reality – not least through its own existence in a superimposed layer of sound upon the world. Music is, of course, not alone in being able to do this, but it does it in its own particular way. Cook's (1994) suggestion that music may primarily serve to convey nuance in relation to other things and processes draws attention to this interactive dimension of music's ontology, a layer constantly interacting with other elements of the world around it. Consequently music, as Thomas Turino observes, can often exist at the horizon of the actual and the possible, not simply accepting non-musical reality around us as it already was, but enacting the crucial tension between theology and anthropology by sonically bringing to bear alternative ways of being and interacting upon the world in which we live (2008, 16). Music, through the medium of sound, seems to find it immensely easy to construct alternative systems of meaning and life within existing societal structures – it provides a space in which to create, imagine and enact alternatives as well as to express existing patterns.

In one sense I am suggesting attention to intersections that have already been the subject of exploration: the suggestion that a more anthropological conception of ethnomusicology be put into dialogue with theological investigation is not entirely new. John Michael Spencer's efforts to establish a discipline which he refers to as theomusicology seem, in some ways to hinge upon precisely such an attempt.[9] The reception of Spencer's work has, however, been somewhat mixed and has not, perhaps, achieved quite the legacy which he set out to establish. Whilst Bennett Zon (2011, 430), for example, is happy to quote Spencer's work as a basic building block of later thinkers, Kyle Devine refers to his work as a «peculiar project» (2011, 16), Meredith Holliday points out the short-lived nature of his journal (2011, 60) and Michael Taft (1998) in a rather scathing review suggests that Spencer's work is circular, requires an abandonment of scientific rigor, veers towards dan-

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9 Spencer's own definition points well beyond this dialogue, suggesting that «Theomusicology is musicology as a theologically informed discipline. This theologically informed musicology, which especially borrows thought and method from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and philosophy» (Spencer 1991, xi). His narrative of the origins of his work, however, suggests that the desire to integrate theological reflection within ethnomusicological investigation was a key motivating force in his work.

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gerous ethnocentrism and is ultimately more sermon than scholarship. Spencer's key weakness, I suggest, is precisely his neglect of an awkward friction between disciplines in order to establish somewhat too quickly a conflation of concerns. The normative theological values of the culture being studied, for Spencer, become his authoritative sources (1991, 3). We are left with no awkwardness, except the awkwardness which comes through attempting such a conflation within scholarly realms where we might expect a greater degree of critical awareness and reflection. There seems little gap, for Spencer, between the work of theology, his musical scholarship and the mission of the church: «But the church is not alone in its call to realize ideal community within and without its institution. So is theomusicology called to realize ideal community through its normative theological critique of the multifarious musical genres produced by the myriad music-based cultures of the world» (Spencer 1991, 90). As such his approach may work well for those who already share his worldview, but his particular project is less easy for a broad range of scholars to engage with and appropriate. It is precisely in the maintenance of friction between disciplines that scholars can move forward without having to buy wholesale into ways of seeing the world that are alien to their disciplinary standpoints.

Not Just for the Theologians: Engaging Ethnomusicologists

By this stage it is, I hope, clear that I believe theology has a lot to gain from ethnomusicology. But what, then, is the ethnomusicological project, and what does it have to gain from theology? It is a difficult question to answer in an entirely general manner. Whilst ethnomusicologists have long engaged with religious music, explicit consideration of the religious dimension has been much more recent. The foundation of the Religion, Music and Sound section within the Society for Ethnomusicology began with the formation of a special interest group as recently as 2010, and in a 2013 panel discussion, members of the section suggested that, following an initial sidelining of religion as a category within ethnomusicological research, a shift began in the 1980s and 90s to consider related ideas of ritual, culminating in a post-secu-

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lar scholarly turn from the late 90s onwards.[10] Nevertheless Monique Ingalls, in her chairing of the panel still referred, without challenge, to ethnomusicology of religion as an «emerging subdiscipline». Before we even get to questions of theology, religion itself is still far from central to ethnomusicological ways of thinking, however this challenge is not my main concern in this chapter.

Even given a turn to the study of religion, theological thinking is a slightly different matter, and is less quick to enter into writing. For those researching music within Christian communities, or who are committed to finding normative meaning within Christianity, the specifics of particular theological models are likely to be close to the heart of their work, offering an obvious point of friction for their ethnographic and musicological endeavors to rub up against (Porter 2014). Such scholars are the exception rather than the rule within ethnomusicology,[11] however I suggest that the frictions which they engage in, and which help to critically interrogate the religious dimensions of music, serve as an important challenge to the discipline as a whole. Through engagement with theology there is a constant engagement with questions about the ultimate nature of the world and the way that it should be, grappling with fundamental ontologies of existence which both arise out of local theologies specific to the groups under study and cross over into the developed thought patterns of academic theologians. It is a realm in which the academy observes and describes but dares, at the same time, to refer this work back to fundamental principles of existence, re-imagining the way in which the world might ultimately be and might function, developing and fleshing out these patterns of thought within scholarship so as to envision and apply them well beyond their initial point of development. This is the daring edge of theological research which stands as a challenge to ethnomusicologists, and asks them to wonder whether perhaps they might not want to do something more with their materials, whether they might take them as

10 http://www.ethnomusicology.org/?Groups_SectionsRMS [26.05.2020] for links to mp3s of the panel discussion. Figures such as Regula Qureshi, Mellonee Burnim, Peter Manuel and Bonnie Wade, amongst others, are cited as influential in motivating a turn to religion.

11 See Robbins (2007) for a discussion of the way in which anthropology of Christianity has often been at the margins of anthropological research.

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a starting point for a more-fundamental re-envisioning of the world around them, and not to feel a sense of academic shame in doing so. Ethnomusicologists, after all, do often want something from, and to do something with their work. My experience of conferences and of interacting with other ethnomusicologists on social media suggests, for example, a desire to understand, learn and enjoy the music of their own and other cultures, to celebrate the diversity of music, to bring the music and musical models they have discovered to others, to critique and reform problematic musical practices, and to reform their departments and their pedagogical models so as to better reflect the range of musics found in the world around them (Wong 2006). In pondering these issues, they might find in theology some models for intervening in culture, for motivating new ways to act. Robbins is well aware that such provocation may be hard to imagine if one holds in mind a traditional image or caricature of a theological department, concerned with arguing obscure points of doctrine on the basis of ancient texts. In answer to such preconceptions he points to the socially and politically engaged work of John Milbank as an ideal example of relevant and groundbreaking theological scholarship. Here is work that argues about the status of social theory and argues for an alternative basis on which to construct our ideas about the nature of human beings and social life (Milbank 1990). Milbank is far from alone in such imaginative theological work, and recent work in theology increasingly takes a social, political and practical turn (Dingemans 1996; Scharen/Vigen 2011), taking up the challenge of critically reimagining the world as we find it around us. It is here, perhaps, rather than in an unmediated return to ancient texts that theology can and does stir the imagination. There is, I suggest, rich provocation here that can help ethnomusicologists reflect upon the tasks they often most desire to accomplish. Just as Robbins suggests that anthropologists may find the grounding for such thought in the communities that they study rather than in the worldviews of theologians, ethnomusicologists may well do the same, however the work of imaginative thinkers such as Milbank can serve to challenge ethnomusicologists how far exactly they might want to go with their material and what they might want to use it to accomplish in the world around them.

In conclusion I should, perhaps, be clear: I don't think, there is a grand project here. I don't think, there is a systematic agenda that can be pursued or a single overarching idea that can provide a constant locus of ethnomusi-

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cological-theological interaction. Critique, mockery, these are, I think easier to come by – relationships of tension and not of immediate resolution. Within the existing music theology conversation ethnomusicology teaches us to let go a little, to realize that we don't necessarily know already what music is or how it works, and that dialogues and points of contact may therefore sometimes come to us as an unexpected surprise. It teaches us, too, a lesson that we could have learnt long ago from *Christ and Culture* (Niebuhr 1952), that commonality and a sharing of concerns or ideals may not always form the appropriate starting point for conversation. A search for the divine in music may not always be the right question to ask. The search for such a starting point might be natural in a polarized musical reality in which we draw sharp contrasts between the godly and the ungodly, that which leads us to God and that which leads us astray. It begins to dissolve as soon as we enter a world of multiple and diverse meaning-systems and ontologies in dialogue with each other and with the world. Within ethnomusicological discourse, meanwhile, theological scholarship points back to fundamental questions and norms, daring us to consider taking a stance on more fundamental issues in our work and to consider which of these might serve as motivations to action whilst, at the same time, giving an example of how this can be done in both devastating and highly successful ways.

As Tom Beaudoin points out «There are so many ways of putting music and theology in relationship with each other that the possibilities can seem daunting» (Beaudoin 2013, xvii). Through beginning to attend more closely to musics as they are in the world, and as they interact with human systems of life and meaning we may well find that there are concerns around which ethnomusicology and theology can have conversations, not always saying the same thing, not always approaching it from the same angle nor articulating it in the same way, but we have the potential for our articulations about the enacted, performed, embodied, sounding realities of music to rub up against discourses around the action, creation, revelation and call of God. My own experience, following Joel Robbins, is that this is very much an awkward relationship, even in a doctoral thesis on congregational music I wrote half a chapter on theological resonances only to find it so jarring that I cut it out in its entirety. It is my hunch, however, that this awkwardness is worth interrogating, because otherwise we may find ourselves speaking in an echo chamber of our own voices, taking their reflected sound for the voice of God.

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