

Resonant relationships and ecological crisis

Abstract: As a means of world-relation and interaction, music can be a powerful means for situating human beings in relation to other entities and spaces by which they are surrounded. Whilst Christian musical practices often focus most-strongly on human-divine relationships, a recent turn to concepts of resonance suggests the potential to consider a wider-range of interactions and aspirations. I propose that attentiveness to dimensions of resonance might prove productive in connection with contemporary experiences of ecological crisis and I suggest that rethinking our patterns of resonant interaction may be an important part of our response to these challenges.

Keywords: Music, Resonance, Interaction, Ecology, Climate, Ecotheology, Ecomusicology

Divine and vibrant sounding

Reading through Tim Morton's most-recent psychedelically-infused volume *Hell: In Search of a Christian Ecology* one passage towards the middle stuck out just enough for me to highlight in my PDF software. In the midst of reflection on personal trauma, theological abuses, and the dysfunctions of British society, Morton offers up a fantastical sonic imagining:

“For joy is a kind of hallelujah, sung by the frogs in the Jamaican Lothlorien tree outside my front door currently, the tree that encircles the house in which I'm writing these sentences. Frogs are the first land vertebrates to sing, to speak, and they are using their breath and their throats to burst out percussive sounds that are pure joy. The frogs are at it all night, unlike those reptiles with wings we call birds who only do it at twilight. Reptiles are tadpoles who didn't make it, the sad silence of suffering; frogs are elves singing for joy in the tree of the world. Frogs are pagans, frogs are angels shouting “Holy! Holy! Holy!” from the heaven tree, the tree that is, according to this book, heaven.” (Morton, 2024: 134)

With this image – an image that is purposefully different from our typical imaginations of the world – Morton conjures up a world that is both enchanted and resonant. What if non-human beings are at least as sacred as humanity? What if their physicality is interwoven with the divine? What if the sacred is full of joy and praise? Whilst I initially highlighted this description for its total bizarreness, the longer I spend with it the more I am drawn to the vision it

conjures up. In a world of ecological crisis and destruction it evokes the vibrancy of life; in a disenchanted universe it puts the sacred right back in the midst of our ecological reality; and in a society where animals are often lesser beings that are there to be exploited, it places the divine breath in their lungs and places them directly alongside us in a chorus of exultation.

Morton's book is not about music, rather, music serves to draw together key elements of his wider argument – the importance of joy, the immanent presence of the sacred in life, and a playful, graceful vision of how we believe. It is not accidental, however, that music stands at the heart of this particular vision. Musical vibration can evoke a feeling of aliveness, and its travel in space and through different bodies can point to a sense of relationship and connectedness both with other living beings and with a whole range of non-living media through which it travels and vibrates. Its connection with speech and expression means that this sound can carry meaning with it, and its close connection with sacred experience and expression can mean that sacred and spiritual dimensions are also present in patterns of sonic interaction and vibration.

Crucially, Morton's vision is very different from the musical or ecological relationships that many of us habitually experience. And it is different not because the content of the song he describes is particularly novel. Rather, it is different because of who is singing it, how they're singing it, where they're singing it, and who they're singing it in relationship to. There is a different pattern of sounding and re-sounding, and this is what helps here to imagine a different world, showing us a different way of being and interacting in which the differences are embodied. Songs do more than simply describe things differently: they enact that difference.

Resonance and interaction

Music, for Christians as much as for anyone else, is a crucial means of communal world relation and interaction. As charismatics devote themselves to God in praise and worship, they express their hearts out into the space around them, they receive energy and encouragement from others doing the same, and in amidst this swirl they expect and hope to encounter the presence of God (Porter, 2020a: 71–2). As choirs sing in cathedrals, the reverberant passage of their song around the building can be received as a gift of grace, giving way to a moment of transcendence, or participating in the sanctification of a holy space of worship (Porter, 2020a: 1). These different musical expressions demand different postures of the worshipper; they express and evoke different emotional registers; they imply different relationships of power, presence, and activity; they evoke the divine in different ways; they place the individual in different relationships with other worshippers or leaders; and they interact in different ways with the physicality of the building and technology around them.

Whilst we have often understood sacred music's potential through relatively unidirectional concepts such as authentic expression or sacramentality, I have previously suggested the potential of concepts of resonance to invoke some of the diversity of social, bodily, and spiritual interactions that take place in musical activity alongside one-another in multi-directional and multi-dimensional ecologies (Porter 2017). Attentiveness to dynamics of resonance involves attentiveness to the re-sounding that takes place as sonic energy is passed back and forth alongside between different bodies and spaces, bringing them into relationship, carrying with it social, emotional and spiritual dimensions, and re-working the boundaries between self and other. Such resonance points beyond the typical well-defined categories within which we understood our ritual interactions and points to a wider range of beings and interactions which haven't typically been theorised quite so thoroughly in Christian theology. As a term that can be understood just as easily on a metaphorical as on a purely physical level it also involves attentiveness to the breadth of different relationships we aspire to in and through this musical activity. Sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2016) has prominently sought to establish the concept of resonance as a concept capable of describing ideal and aspirational world relationships, the longing for a feeling of responsiveness and the sense that the world answers us back. Through the way that ideas of resonance direct our attention we can start to observe more-closely the different back and forth interactions that take place in, alongside, and beyond musical sounding, both as they actually take place and as we might ultimately hope for them to take place.

If we bring Morton's text into dialogue with our experiences of Christian worship, then I suggest we begin to encounter an important question. In a time of ecological crisis, where our existing ways of being are doing untold damage to the world around us, might we perhaps need to resonate differently? And might music and sound be one place where we can begin to enact, imagine, and experience a different way of being? This is not simply an abstract question of relevance principally to musicians and acoustic designers. Musical activity, and ritual musical activity in particular, is a crucial location in which we learn and imagine different ways of relating to the world which have the potential to affect, inspire, or placate us well beyond the spaces where they are performed.

Politics and imagination

As the editors of the volume *Sensing Collectives* rightly suggest, aesthetic experience often plays an important role in shaping our collective orders: "The entanglement of aesthetics and politics comes as no surprise when we consider that both reflexively engage with ways of living together, constituted as they are in ways of sensing and feeling and in ways of commonly identifying with

values and interests that mobilize collective agency and legitimize norms” (Voß, Rigamonti, Suárez, and Watson, 2023: 12). At the same time, as Thomas Turino observes, music 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 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.

Different authors have analysed what that potential might look like in relation to social movements in general and in relation to the ecological crisis in particular. Simon Kerr suggests that in the face of our current climate crisis, music “can tell stories, cultivate empathy, increase solidarity and provide emotional release” (2018: 181). Helen Prior (2022), meanwhile focuses on its emotional capacity, its ability to strengthen particular subjective norms, to influence our habits or our relationships to different groups, its power as a communication tool or a way of cultivating empathy and its potential ability to foster biophilic love for the natural world through the incorporation of natural sounds. Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flax highlight the potential dangers of music – in containing political activity, in excluding those who don’t identify with it, in presenting illusions or enhancing conformity with an existing status quo – but they also point to its positive potential in creating solidarity, attracting people and articulating ideas. They suggest that “musicking becomes more resistant than accommodative to the extent that it presents or preserves some sense of an alternative way of life” (2011: 192).

Rethinking patterns of interaction

If we look at a range of recent Christian musical initiatives then we can see some of the ways that some re-working of musical interactions has already begun to take place in response to the ecological crisis in which we find ourselves. Requiems for lost species draw us into relationships of sonic grief and hope with the non-human world, extending the reach of our emotional expression to encompass more than simply human realities. The sonic practices of forest church groups meeting to worship in outdoor spaces are highly attuned to the presence of plants, weather, and animals alongside the production of human sound, questioning a human-centric sonic ontology and wondering how best to do justice to a wider range of beings within a ritual space. Worship music album writers seek to reimagine relationships of power within the wider community of creation as they produce albums in response to climate change, looking to find significance for a wider range of entities within a genre typically focussed on direct human-divine interaction. Christian Climate Action activists take their musical practices in a different direction, as music becomes a means

both to manage their own emotional dynamics and to interact with a broader public as provocation, prayer or disturbance (Porter 2024).

These practices, and many others alongside, begin not simply to bring ecological issues into Christian musical ritual as a new theme or topic, but to re-imagine the role of and relationship between different entities, individuals, and groups within this ritual realm. This, I suggest, is one of our crucial tasks both in the realm of music and worship and beyond this realm as the alternative ways of being we begin to imagine and enact in the ritual realm become a resource and catalyst for the reimagination of our ecological interactions on a much wider scale. Ecotheology has already begun to teach us how to think differently. However, thinking on its own is never enough. We need for this thinking to be enacted and felt – we need for it to become a habit (Nita, 2016: 74).

How, then, do our patterns of resonance need to change and evolve? Drawing on the different illustrations mentioned so far, we can begin to trace some preliminary directions. Firstly, I suggest that worship built purely around direct human–divine interaction no longer makes any sense. Or, rather, that is increasingly clear that it is not adequate to the fulness of the Christian calling. Unless non-human beings, animals, plants, and ecosystems have a role in our worship we have failed to understand our proper situation in the world and failed to comprehend the value and interlinkage of the whole of creation. Patterns of resonance which place the individual human in direct relation to a transcendent creator and fail to draw the wider world around us into this relationship spiritually bypass a God-created and God-blessed ecology.

Secondly, the role that this wider ecology takes on must not simply be as a means to an end, as a metaphor for our human struggles or as a beautiful stepping stone which serves as inspiration for human-divine interaction. This may feel like a way of establishing ecologically-focussed resonant relationships in worship, but unless it goes further than this it serves to reinforce an exploitative posture in which other beings fail to be appreciated in their own right. A crucial ingredient in reimagining these interactions is through the recognition of a divine and spiritual dimension that enchants and infuses the whole of creation. This allows for relationships and interactions with non-human species, objects, and spaces to take place across the same plane of significance as other spiritual activity, overcoming a sense of dualism whilst enriching and extending our imagination and the reach of our attention and concern. We need to allow non-human others to offer us their own sense of presence, their different ways of sounding, their senses of space and time and level. Rather than simply imposing human patterns of interaction upon them, we need to allow other ways of being to have an impact on us, opening up a bi-

directional interaction which appreciate the other for what it is rather than how we wish to imagine it.

Whilst Morton's imagination serves to extend a sense of joy, we also need to extend a solidarity in sorrow and mourning. The sadness, sorrows, and losses of species and spaces need to resonate in our rituals just as much as their celebration. In a time of crisis, a solidarity in loss may take greater prominence than in times of abundance, and we need to allow and enable this to take place.

It is not just direct relationships with the non-human that need to be re-worked, but also our relationships with other humans, with those in power and with a wider public. In acknowledging the importance of the whole of creation we also need to understand our relationship with other who have power over it. Through protest, through defiance, through strategic alliance and communication, we can establish appropriate postures towards this wider range of actors, allowing our broader social and political resonances to be transformed alongside our spiritual and physical interactions. Crucially, musical and ritual practices are often undertaken communally. Whilst a number of scholars have highlighted the challenge of moving congregations to imagine ecological forms of action that extend beyond the realm of the individual, or to build a meaningful connection between the realm of faith and ecological concerns (Koehrsen, Blanc, and Huber, 2023), both of these areas are something that music and ritual practices excel in, and whether there may be significant potential to rework our ways of being and acting together. If we can shift the patterns of interaction to be found in our rituals to place us in new kinds of relationship with the ecologies around us, if we can put them into different modes of interaction with power, with commercial systems, with plants and animals and weather, with the social landscape outside of Christian community, then perhaps we can begin to reshape our collective life together and turn ecological reorientation into a common project.

This may seem somewhat hypothetical and idealistic, but recent years have shown us exactly the opposite. The mobilisation of faith, music, and worship in the service of pandemic protest and pro-Trump politics in the USA has shown exactly how explosive Christian musical practices can be in particular settings. If, as Adam Perez (2021) has suggested, there is a close relationship between some of the public worship music protests that have taken place and particular theological imaginations of the relationship between musical praise, divine presence, claims to power and the progression of political conflict, then we can see how easily world-relations expressed in music and worship can become a means of mobilising groups of Christians in a way that has wide-reaching implications beyond the realm of worship. If some of these re-workings are problematic and harmful, then perhaps we need to spend time imagining those

that might be healing and beneficial. It is possible to resonate with our wider ecology in truly beautiful ways, and it is about time that we learned to do so.

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