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A Musical Homiletic:

Drawing on the Sonic Dimensions of the Word and Spirit

Thomas H. Troeger

I am not by training or practice a musicologist, but for over 30 years I have preached on choral works from the canon of Western sacred music, especially the cantatas of J. S. Bach, and also on nineteenth- and twentieth-century composers (Bruckner, Fauré, Britten, Schnittke), African-American spirituals, and jazz. I owe an immense debt to music critics and musicologists whose scholarship on the history of music and analysis of musical scores have been a rich resource for my preaching.

My primary work in homiletics is not the history of preaching but the impact of the imagination and cognitive theory on preaching, including special attention to music as a resource for the creation of sermons. I was therefore intrigued and delighted by the papers given at the symposium *Music and Preaching in the Early Modern Period* and their exploration of the ways rhetoric and music mutually illuminated the work of preachers and composers during that period. Many of the historical dynamics traced by speakers at the symposium and by other authors of this volume of the *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* continue in the homiletical practices of contemporary preachers who draw upon music in ways that resonate with the theories and practices described in their papers.

Before laying out a schema that moves from the simplest to the most complex understanding of the musical dimensions of Word and Spirit in the practice of preaching, I will address two major concerns that underlie any discussion of the interrelationship of music and language. First, can music communicate meaning, and if so, how? Second, can theological realities be expressed through music and other artistic forms whose primary medium is not language?

In discussing these issues I draw on arguments I lay out more fully in my book *Wonder Reborn: Creating Sermons on Hymns, Music, and Poetry*.¹

Concern I: Music and Meaning

Some schools of thought argue that pure music has no intrinsic meaning. My colleague Martin Jean, in a lecture delivered at Yale's Institute of Sacred Music, observed that

there has been in the history of musical criticism a strong movement to dissuade us from thinking that music has any extramusical meaning at all! Led by Eduard Hanslick in the nineteenth century as a kind of reaction against the Wagner movement, these critics claimed that music is just sound or sound structure; that its interest lies in the notes themselves, not in stories that they will represent or anything that they "mean." Peter Kivy calls music an art of "pure sonic design." There is, to be sure, explicit program music.

¹ Thomas H. Troeger, *Wonder Reborn: Creating Sermons on Hymns, Music, and Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

And music sometimes combines with words or images to form a representational whole, as in song, opera, film, and dance. But some will set aside these combinations as impure instances of music.²

Jean argues that human beings are creatures that make meaning. Drawing on the work of Kendall Walton, he points out “that music creates worlds, not unlike the pictorial or literary arts. Music, in similar ways to a play or a painting, induces our imaginings.” Jean then quotes a passage from Walton that summarizes many of the ways we describe the expressive qualities of music:

We call passages of music exuberant, agitated, serene, timid, calm, determined, nervous. We speak of rising and falling melodies, of wistful melodies and hurried rhythms, of motion and rest, of leaps, skips, and stepwise progression, of statements and answering phrases, tension and release, resignation and resolve, struggle, uncertainty, and arrival. Music can be impetuous, powerful, delicate, sprightly, witty, majestic, tender, arrogant, peevish, spirited, yearning, chilly. . . . [As we listen to it] we imagine agitation or nervousness, conflict and resolution.³

What strikes me, as someone who is both a homiletician and a musician, is how this description resonates with the impact of preaching upon a congregation—with the varied worlds of meaning that listeners create from what a preacher says.

Walton’s list of vivid adjectives for what music stirs in our imaginations reveals that the term “pure music” is something of an illusion. We do not perform or hear music in a vacuum. Often music, especially beloved music, comes saturated with memories and associations that create whole worlds of meaning. It is not possible to separate out as pure music the melody that our mother hummed to us as a young child, the piece we heard when we first fell in love, the processional played at our wedding, the hymn we sang at our parent’s funeral. The sounds, the memories, the associations, and the meanings—all flow together. We can no more separate them from the music than we can extract from our cups the sugar and cream that we have stirred into our coffee. The sound and the associations are fused in a unitary experience of meaning created by the vibration of our eardrums and the simultaneously charged neurons of memory in our brains.

Concern II: Music and Theological Realities

However, the fact that music awakens meaning does not mean that the process is accepted as theologically significant by all believers. Indeed, theologians have often expressed caution and wariness about music.⁴ Their skepticism about the communicative value of music stands behind the question of whether theological realities can be expressed through music and other artistic forms whose primary medium is not language. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, considered the spoken word “more valuable than a form of art, i.e. music, in instilling faith. It is almost ironic to note that Thomas undermines precisely the revelatory power of the art of music, which through

² Martin Jean, unpublished lecture.

³ Kendall Walton, *In Other Shoes: Music, Metaphor, Empathy, Existence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 157.

⁴ For a thorough historical discussion, see Quentin Faulkner, *Wiser Than Despair: The Evolution of Ideas in the Relationship of Music and the Christian Church* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996).

the ages has made people concretely feel *and know* the existence and presence of the beauty of the divine.”⁵

The propensity to set word against art, preaching against music, is evident in the twentieth-century theologian Emil Brunner. He writes that “the opinion often expressed at the present day that art—for instance, music—can become the means of expressing the Word of God as well as, and indeed better than, the human word, is based upon an error. Whoever asserts this does not mean by the Word of God the message of the God who is manifest in Jesus Christ.”⁶ Brunner’s use of the term “message” is significant. The Word of God certainly includes “message,” and Brunner is correct that language is a medium for sending messages. But the Word of God is far more than “message.” The Word is also the power to create all things that are (John 1:3) and the power by which “all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17).

There is an ontic character to the Word of God that exceeds the articulation of human language. The ranking of language and music, one over the other, results in a constricted understanding of the Word of God. A more faithful perspective is to view language and music as complementary elements whose mutually enriching presence in our worship brings us closer to the fullness of the Word. This way of framing the issue is congruent with the case Karl Rahner makes for a more holistic understanding of theology:

If theology is not identified a priori with verbal theology, but is understood as man’s total self-expression insofar as this is borne by God’s self-communication, then religious phenomena in the arts are themselves a moment within theology taken in its totality. In practice, theology is rarely understood in this total way. But why should a person not think that when he hears . . . Bach . . . he comes into contact in a very unique way with God’s revelation about the human not only by the words it employs, but by the music itself? Why should he not think that what is going on there is theology? If theology is simply and arbitrarily defined as being identical with verbal theology, then of course we cannot say that. But then we would have to ask whether such a reduction of theology to verbal theology does justice to the value and uniqueness of these arts, and whether it does not unjustifiably limit the capacity of the arts to be used by God in his revelation.⁷

A theology that is overly reliant upon words often gives birth to worship that is prosaic and arid. Worship becomes so talky that the expansive mystery and wonder of God have little room to be manifest in the service. The impact is as detrimental to sacred speech as it is to the nonverbal dimensions of worship:

Since the most vivid signs of God’s presence among humans almost invariably involve the cooperation of acts and words, sacramental consciousness begins to fade when worship places a strong emphasis on words while at the same time neglecting actions (more “saying” than “doing”). In the process, words that once were charged with mysterious awe tend to lose their power and become commonplace.⁸

⁵ Editor’s introduction to the Medieval Church in Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 61.

⁶ Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), 502.

⁷ Karl Rahner, “Theology and the Arts,” in *Thought*, “Faith and Imagination Issue,” vol. 57, no. 224 (March 1982): 25.

⁸ Faulkner, *Wiser Than Despair*, 167.

The apostle Paul offers an insight about prayer that reinforces why it is essential for theology to embrace the nonverbal dimensions of life as fully as it does language: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26).

If our profoundest prayers are prayed for us by the Spirit in “sighs too deep for words,” then any theology that is closed to the nonverbal is closed to the inarticulate intercessions of the Spirit of the living God, who is the reason for theology in the first place! This, then, is why preachers need to draw upon the sonic dimensions of the Word and Spirit: not to do so is to ignore heights and depths and currents of the divine that lie beyond the reach of human language.

Music and Homiletics

Having considered the theological rationale for musical homiletics, I now turn to a schema or spectrum of the varied ways that music and homiletics can be mutually illuminating resources to one another. Like most efforts at categorization, the schema is a generalization of phenomena that are in reality more fluid and complex than any conceptual apparatus we may devise. Nevertheless, such generalization is helpful in identifying how preachers can draw upon the sonic dimensions of the Word and Spirit for creating and delivering sermons. Here then is a schema featuring four different aspects of developing a musical homiletic, starting with the simplest and moving to the most complex. I will first list them, and then explicate each one separately.

- (1) Preachers can speak in a way that captures the musicality of human conversation: its sonically engaging use of inflection, volume, pace, and timbre.
- (2) Preachers can interpret the theological and poetic meaning of the texts that are set to music and offered as worship through the singing of congregation or choir or soloist.
- (3) Preachers can analyze how the musical devices of the composer dramatize or paint sonic pictures of the lyrics. Music and preaching are interwoven so that they mutually reinforce the Word that is proclaimed and the structure and meaning of the liturgical celebration.
- (4) Preachers can frame a piece of music with introductory remarks that allow the music to carry the sermon to a conclusion beyond words.

I now turn to consider each of these separately.

1. Preachers can speak in a way that captures the musicality of human conversation: its sonically engaging use of inflection, volume, pace, and timbre.

Although this is a prominent theme in many contemporary writings on homiletics, I was fascinated to read how thoroughly it was developed centuries before our time. Thus Todd Borgerding quotes Luis de Granada (1504–88):

“A certain novice preacher . . . asked me, after I heard him preach, to tell him whether there was anything in his sermon that merited criticism. But he performed the entire sermon from memory, without any variation in his voice, as if he were reciting from memory a psalm of David. On the way home after the sermon I saw two little girls in the road who were talking and laughing with each other. Their speech was moved by a true spirit of the soul and thus the figures and tones of their voices varied. . . . [If] my companion preacher had heard these little girls and imitated this same manner of pronunciation, he would have lacked nothing for a perfect performance. As it was, his delivery was destitute of good pronunciation.”⁹

Luis’s appreciation for the musicality of speech has continued in the homileticians of our era. I recall a lecture by the Welsh homiletician Gwynn Walters in Toronto to the Academy of Homiletics in which he said, “Every great preacher has a tune, and people in Wales used to go out to hear the tune.”¹⁰

One of our greatest living homileticians is Eugene L. Lowry, also an accomplished jazz pianist. Lowry has written extensively on how preaching works like music upon the listener because it too is a form of human expression that moves through time and, if effective, proceeds through conflict toward resolution: “One could speak of the basic *musicality* of any sermon. Music, after all, is also an event-in-time art form, with melody, harmony, and rhythm coming sequentially. No one *builds* a song; it is shaped and performed.”¹¹ In a similar fashion, Evans Crawford has developed the term “homiletical musicality” to describe the way in which the preacher uses timing, pauses, inflection, pace, and the other musical qualities of speech to engage the listener’s entire being in the act of proclamation. This musicality represents something much deeper than method; it is an expression of the holy God working through the preacher and the community, and it requires a rigorous and authentic spirituality on the part of both preacher and congregation.¹² Preaching as an aural art converges with music in the way it moves through time and in the emotions and intuitions it touches off in the listener’s heart.

I move now to the second strategy in my schema for a musical homiletic:

2. Preachers can interpret the theological and poetic meaning of the texts that are set to music and offered as worship through the singing of congregation or choir or soloist.

Again, I was fascinated to see how thoroughly this approach was incorporated in a series of sermons in 1688–89 by Pastor Johann Benedict Carpzov. My colleague Markus Rathey quotes Carpzov explaining what he hopes to accomplish by doing this:

“I have also each time explained a good, nice old, Protestant and Lutheran hymn which is often misunderstood by the common people. If possible, I have explained these hymns word by word and have arranged to have the

⁹ Todd Borgerding, “Preachers, ‘Pronunciatio,’ and Music: Hearing Rhetoric in Renaissance Sacred Polyphony,” *Musical Quarterly* 82 (1998): 586–98; here 588.

¹⁰ Unprinted lecture at the Academy of Homiletics. I have forgotten the year but not the quote.

¹¹ Eugene L. Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1997), 55.

¹² Evans E. Crawford, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1995), 16.

hymn be sung by the entire congregation when I left the pulpit [after the sermon] so that they might judge for themselves whether they had understood it correctly and were now able to sing it better than before.”¹³

I will not dwell at length on the strategy of employing a hymn text in the body of a sermon except to say that it is alive and well in many preachers, and has a special place of honor in many African-American preaching traditions. Preachers frequently interweave quotations from hymns and spirituals with biblical quotations, and often use the full text of the hymn as a powerful concluding climax to a sermon. In some cases, the recitation of the text leads to the singing of the hymn, which the organist begins playing as the preacher offers the final words of the sermon. But even if the hymn is not sung, the pace and inflection of the text as delivered by the preacher are often on the border between speech and music.

3. Preachers can analyze how the musical devices of the composer dramatize or paint sonic pictures of the lyrics.

Here is a simple example from a sermon I preached on one of Bach’s most beloved arias, “Wir eilen mit schwachen, doch emsigen Schritten” from his cantata *Jesu, der du meine Seele*, BWV 78. The lyrics and music together paint a picture of disciples who are running to Jesus for help: “We hasten with weak yet eager steps, O Jesus, O Master, to you, for help.” The soprano and alto sing in canon, one following the other with the same melody, suggesting in musical terms that they are following Christ. The buoyant music could be a movie score for people running along a path to catch up with a friend who moves ahead more easily and swiftly than they do.

The singers’ sprightly canon stops for a moment and they call out together to their Lord, “Ah, hear! Ah, hear! Ah, hear!” (“Ach höre!”). The first two exclamations feature a musical rest between the interjection “Ah” and the verb “hear.” It is as if Christ’s followers have stopped running for a second and are so out of breath they can only pant one word at a time while they call to their Master. But on the third “Ah, hear” there is no musical pause. They are panting less now and take off again as the vigorous canon returns. Bach paints through music how joy, exertion, exhaustion, and renewed joy flow together in the human heart as it hastens toward the Divine. We do not run continuously at a steady pace toward Christ. Sometimes our prayer is buoyant and robust, but then we slow down and call out, hoping to be heard by the One we are trying to follow.

Music and preaching are interwoven so that they mutually reinforce the Word that is proclaimed and the structure and meaning of the liturgical celebration. It appears that this strategy is similar in spirit to what Jennifer Bloxam describes when she writes: “The Flemish composer Jacob Obrecht (1457/8–1505) stands on the cusp between the late medieval and the early modern world; his motets in particular seem to straddle the divide exemplified by the university sermon and the humanist oration.”¹⁴ Even if musician and preacher did not literally work together, I am intrigued by Bloxam’s

¹³ Markus Rathey, “The Choral Cantata in Leipzig: The Collaboration between Schelle and Carpszov in 1689–90 and Bach’s Chorale Cantata Cycle,” *Bach: Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute* 43 (2012): 53.

¹⁴ Jennifer Bloxam, “Preaching to the Choir: Obrecht’s Motet for the Dedication of the Church.” Invited paper for the symposium *Music and Preaching in the Early Modern Period*, Institute of Sacred Music, Yale University, 18 October 2013.

observation about the close interrelationship of their work: how the composer's choice of biblical and liturgical texts, and decisions about how to highlight the words, result in a form of musical proclamation. Bloxam writes:

Now this story [of Zachaeus] from Luke served almost everywhere as the Gospel reading on the Feast of the Dedication, and it was an immensely popular source of thematic material for Dedication sermons which generally interpret the passage in terms of an individual soul seeking God, receiving Christ, showing penitence, offering restitution.¹⁵ With this first scriptural citation, therefore, Obrecht establishes a link to the Gospel message for the Dedication of the Church, and it is worth noting that, although we don't know the particular context for which Obrecht composed this motet, it was most likely sung in connection with a Mass celebration that would have included both this Gospel reading from Luke and a sermon based on that reading.¹⁶

4. Preachers can frame a piece of music with introductory remarks that allow the music to carry the sermon to a conclusion beyond words.

In this sermonic form the words may be briefly alluded to, but the focus is on the affective qualities of the music. The spoken part of the sermon may be as brief as a paragraph, for the major part of the sermon is the music itself. The music complements and completes what the preacher has said by its sonic character, flowing seamlessly out of the Word that has been proclaimed. Here is such a one-paragraph sermon that was part of a service featuring four different arias by J. S. Bach:

We might well expect that the words "Laudamus Te," "We praise thee," would be set to a joyful, declaratory theme. But in his Mass in B Minor Bach opens with an extended solo for the violin that continues throughout the aria. The violin has long arching phrases suggesting the longing of the heart from which authentic praise and adoration arise. Listening to the yearning expressed by both the violin and the alto voice, we come to a more complex understanding of the praise of God. Our praise is not always joyful and ebullient. Praise means bringing all of who we are to God, the great yearning, aching desire of our hearts, as well as our gladness and thanksgiving.¹⁷

Considering these four elements of the schema as a repertoire of musical homiletics, we come to realize that preaching as an aural art converges with music in a wide range of different ways. Although he does not employ my schema, Stephen Webb in his book *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* captures the spirit of what I am describing in what he terms the "soundscape" of Christian theology:

Surely it is the prayers of the faithful, both the vocal and the inarticulate longings of their hearts, that unite all Christians more than the jottings of the literate few: To God those prayers must sound like a constant humming emitted from the very properties of matter; a melody that accompanies the universe as it resonates with God's

¹⁵ Ruth Horie, *Perceptions of Ecclesia: Church and Soul in Medieval Dedication Sermons* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), p. 41.

¹⁶ Bloxam, "Preaching to the Choir."

¹⁷ From a sermon I preached at the Prince of Peace Chapel in Aspen, Colo., and later printed in my book *Wonder Reborn*, 110.

Word. By listening, God makes all of our sounds—from guttural moans of despair to tearful shouts of joy—matter.¹⁸

It is this conviction that all our sounds matter to God that ultimately drives me as a preacher and hymnist to practice a musical homiletic by drawing on the musical dimensions of the Word and Spirit. Such a homiletic involves far more than the conceptual language I have used in this essay. I can think of no better way to describe it than by ending with a hymn I wrote that honors the One who has created us as singing/speaking beings:

Learn from all the songs of earth
that we never sing alone,
that our music has its birth
in what wind and wave intone,
that before God spoke a word,
God first blew upon the sea,
and the breath of music stirred
everything that came to be.

The creation God conceives
brims with melody and beat.
From the wind among the leaves
to the thunderstorm's retreat,
from the whispering of snow
to the waterfall that sings—
psalms and anthems rise and flow
from the plainest, simplest things.

And the songs we daily hear
in the creatures' chirps and cries,
from the notes that signal fear
to their hymns that fill the skies,
beckon us to join earth's choir
with our own distinctive parts
that God's melodies inspire
as the Spirit fills our hearts.

When we harmonize with earth
and its elemental song,
we recall who gave us birth
and to whom we all belong,
we more deeply understand
what the living Christ displays:
we are fashioned by God's hand
for a life that sings God's praise.¹⁹

¹⁸ Stephen H. Webb, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2004), 32.

¹⁹ Thomas H. Troeger, *God, You Made All Things for Singing: Hymn Texts, Anthems, and Poems for a New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.