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Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to the readers and editors of YJMR. This article was improved through their feedback, as well as in conversations with Bill Kirkpatrick and Birgit Meyer. Discussions with my colleagues at Canadian Mennonite University helped me hone my ideas. Finally, I am grateful for sabbatical support from Denison University that enabled early work on this project.

Congregational Music as Phatic Communication

Affect, Atmosphere, and Relational Ways of Listening and Being

Anna Nekola

It was a large Roman Catholic church in the suburbs of a large midwestern city.¹ I arrived after dark on a weeknight in December to rehearse as part of a small orchestra hired to play Christmas Mass. The giant parking lot was almost empty, save for a few cars and the sounds of Amy Grant singing Christmas carols, piped in on small speakers set on grassy islands in the concrete sea.² This parking-lot soundscape wasn't music to sing along with or even to pay close attention to. Instead, this music filled the otherwise empty space, generating a vague but potentially powerful "Christmas spirit" – an atmosphere, a mood – a familiar affective experience that could be triggered by multiple sensory experiences of smell, taste, touch, sound, and sight. Although no service would happen that evening, and the only cars in the lot were there for rehearsal, this background music still played loudly enough to be heard in the yards of neighboring houses. Significantly, it changed the feeling of the empty lot, transforming it into something more than an expanse of pavement: the music I was hearing offered a sense of presence, of company. Coming from hidden speakers in the landscaping, it extended the spatial dimensions of the religious experience beyond the sanctuary and the temporal dimensions of that experience beyond the actual scheduled corporate worship event, surrounding me not just with sound but with *feelings*.

What are we to make of religious music deployed in this way? Much of the scholarship on congregational music

focuses on participatory music in organized corporate worship. But that music is just the tip of the iceberg of the musics heard in church, especially in our current media age. In addition to the musical parts of a service that the congregation is meant to participate in or listen attentively to, most services have music that functions as background, music that signals to congregants how to think and feel and what to do. Furthermore, many church buildings also play recorded music in spaces beyond the sanctuary – including lobbies, bathrooms, and, as above, parking lots – that functions as background or ambient sound.³ We might acknowledge these kinds of music as directing our emotions, creating a vague feeling that we try to summarize with words like "mood" and "atmosphere," but the specific religious and communicational significance of such music deserves further attention.

In this article, I foreground the background music in church spaces – the nonparticipatory mood music that happens alongside other events in a worship service or in places other than the space of the sanctuary – in order to direct our awareness, our listening, and our scholarly attention to these common, even taken-for-granted soundscapes. The background and ambient sounds we hear in church, and how we listen to them, are equally important to the participatory music in terms of shaping our experiences, our worship practices, our experiences of a physical environment, and our feelings of social connection. Thus, my aim in this essay is twofold. First, I argue for a more complex attention to sensational and

social dynamics around sonic experiences and soundscapes in religious contexts. Instead of providing a single case study or ethnography to illustrate those dynamics, I look at examples of soundscapes across a variety of Christian church contexts in North America, Europe, and Australia – not to collapse or reduce any differences and distinctions between Christian groups, but to track an accumulation of discourses over time and across locations. These discourses demonstrate important consistencies, revealing people struggling to put into words sensations and feelings around nonparticipatory music and soundscapes, revealing unconscious (or at least less mindful) practices of musical meaning making that are as powerful as those in congregational singing and liturgy. I seek not only to make sense of the discourses of mood and atmosphere that already exist in our attempts to talk about how music functions, but also to challenge readers to notice and acknowledge the unspoken ways that music works as a relational process, above and beyond how it works as a musical text or a cultural artifact.⁴ So, the first contribution of this article is a consideration of this nonparticipatory music in organized worship services and in curated church soundscapes beyond organized worship, analyzing what these many musical/sonic experiences can reveal about shared social experience and not just individual emotion.

Second, I seek to provide conceptual tools for directing that consideration, drawing upon scholarship from a diverse range of fields. Thus, the second contribution of this article is its weaving together of theoretical strands from affect theory, sound studies, communication studies, musicology, visual cultural studies,

and more, to shift our attention away from Christian congregational experiences as predominantly individualized and interior, calling attention instead to the hidden collectivity and intersubjectivity produced in these moments of atmosphere and feeling. To do this, I draw on theories of how music works socially to communicate, provoke, prompt, and inspire, how it is emotional and embodied yet how it also can exceed these individual feelings and bodies. Most significantly, I turn to affect theory as a framework that prompts us to look beyond interior and individualized emotion, paying attention instead to the connective and intersubjective potential of these sound experiences. In contrast to hermeneutic and semantic analyses that privilege the text as the site of meaning, affect theory offers a useful way to theorize music's use and value beyond the limits of language or representation,⁵ providing a means for exploring music's role in social processes of connection.⁶ In addition to affect theory, I argue that theories of "phatic communication" also offer ways to examine how sacred background musics enable affective experiences and engender powerful feelings of connection. Overall, this article argues for scholars of congregational music to investigate the range and multiplicity of musics and musicking in, around, and outside of organized worship services, and to pay more complex attention to the sensational and social dynamics of soundscapes in religious contexts to better recognize the intercommunal and intersubjective dimensions of meaningful practices of passive hearing and active listening.

Finally, this article seeks to interpellate you, the reader, as a listening subject. I have deliberately employed a first-person plural

voice throughout the text as an invitation and opportunity for you to engage with the text in feelingful and not just intellectual ways. Whether you do or do not identify as religious, I encourage you to allow yourself to imagine and en-listen, not just envision, the soundscapes and experiences described here. Here is the map for our journey. Before diving into affect theory and phatic communication, I introduce ways of thinking about music as a social and cultural practice, where practices of meaning making relate to multiple listening contexts. Then I outline how theories of affect help us understand our embodied feelings as intersubjective. This frame helps us appreciate the ways church leaders seeking to create moods and atmospheres of connection – of community and spiritual convergence – create affective soundscapes available for background hearing or active listening. Curiously, as physical church buildings have become visually plain, they have become more deliberately sonically engineered and curated. Finally, I explore how theories of phatic communication can explain this turn toward affective church soundscapes, soundscapes that include the sanctuary and organized services but that also exceed them, offering multiple opportunities for feelingful spiritual experiences of social and divine community.

Sacred Music as Cultural Practice: Reflecting on Learning to Listen

We begin by grounding this study in ideas of music as cultural practice, inseparable from context, social relations, and power. Music and other forms of creative art perform a range of functions in religious practices, contributing not only to intellectual understanding but also to emotional and embodied experiences of

faith.⁷ Sacred music exists in believers' lives as art, instruction, evangelism, identity, and community. It makes our worship spaces holy and enables us to learn and connect with others who share our faith, and it also offers a route into an experience of transcendence – a shifting of attention from the mundane to the sacred, a moment of spiritual communion, or an encounter with God. For instance, David Morgan explains how the ringing of the bell during the words of consecration in the Roman Catholic Mass is not merely a prompt to focus one's thoughts and to react physically by kneeling or bowing one's head; the sound of the bell has initiated a moment of being "in the presence of something sacred."⁸ In churches whose corporate worship services follow a "Revival" or charismatic "Praise and Worship" model, where a period of music making precedes the message or teaching, music is valued as facilitating a rite of transcendence.⁹ Worship sets of sequenced musical works seek to open channels of human-divine communication and enable worshipers to journey toward spiritual and divine connection. Importantly, evangelical and mainline churches have adopted this idea of flow as a way to pace a worship service, perpetuating the idea of crafting a worship "experience."¹⁰ It is this sense of presence and connection that is relevant here. Across belief traditions and theologies, we seek the experience of feeling connected via spiritual encounters. Yet, even as many agree people that music and sound are integral to congregational worship practices as well as to the everyday lived experience of Christianity, these same people may differ in crucial ways on the relative importance of any of these multiple ways that music works.

The meaning and value of music and sound are constantly formed and reformed

via the multiple relationships around a listening experience.¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu argues that we are socialized into our taste; it is through our structured interactions with the world that we learn and relearn ways to make sense of, interact with, and find a comfortable place within the world around us. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* refers to a coconstitutive process of meaning making between the social and the individual where social "agents" are always simultaneously "subjects."¹² In other words, meaning and understanding are mutual and reciprocal: people shape the social world, even as they are in turn shaped by it. This *social* dimension of cultural taste allows us to expand our understanding of emotional and embodied responses to music beyond the individual subject. Drawing on similar ideas, Ola Stockfeldt explains musical meaning as a contextual dynamic: we make sense of music through socially learned "modes of listening" and via "different views of the relation between music, the individual, and society," as well as the culturally habituated things that we might be doing or not doing while we listen.¹³ Both Stockfeldt's "modes of listening" and Bourdieu's *habitus* emphasize situated cultural competencies resulting from ongoing processes of social meaning making.

Importantly, in both Stockfeldt's and Bourdieu's analysis, these processes are inseparable from ongoing negotiations of social power.¹⁴ Not only does meaning making vary and flex across time and place, but because power dynamics are hidden within differences in meaning making, we end up with differences in taste that roughly cohere not only with social location but also in battles over culture, such as whether music is "good" or whether it is being performed in the "right" way. For instance, the "Hallelujah"

chorus from Handel's *Messiah* was different when sung in Dublin in 1742 than in 1789, when Mozart revived it and added a wind section. Certainly, too, we experience the chorus differently as a single selection at a sunrise service on Easter morning than we do when we hear it during an Advent sing-a-long of the entire oratorio, or watch the cute "Silent Monks" flipping their cards on YouTube.¹⁵ Most listeners accept these many revisions and arrangements of the "Hallelujah" chorus without question, consenting that this musical text can be revised, rewritten, reinterpreted, and recontextualized, and even used for certain kinds of humor. Yet, sometimes social attitudes can shift unexpectedly or differ strongly, as when many took to the internet with angry complaints about its use in an Oscar Mayer commercial, arguing that using the "Hallelujah" chorus to sell sandwich meat was not playful humor but an affront to its "sacred" nature, which requires "the same reverence we feel when the National Anthem is played."¹⁶ Regardless of how one feels personally about Handel (or turkey sandwiches), we can productively understand this musical controversy as arising because competing modes of listening or sets of cultural expectations had been used to "en-listen" the "Hallelujah" chorus. Meaning depends, not on the work itself, but on how listeners are making sense of a work within a context.¹⁷ Thus, we have to accept that Handel's composition is not inherently and in-all-times-and-places sacred. Instead, sacredness is a quality we attribute to the work based on everything from how much we know and value the biblical basis for the text, to our many and varied experiences hearing and singing this popular work, to our own negotiations around cultural capital and power within a social context.

Religious feeling is more than just a personal, emotional response—it's social, interpersonal, relational. Furthermore, it is not enough to acknowledge musical meaning as socially constructed; we must also attend to the politics of these meaning-making practices for what they reveal about our unquestioned assumptions around these musics and practices.

Getting into That Christmas Spirit: Theories of Affect and Ubiquitous Musics

Given the above understanding of music as cultural practice—inseparable from power, context, and social relations—we can now better understand how our embodied feelings and experiences of religious musics are equally contextual and intersubjective. For that I turn to affect theory.

Affect theory, when applied to the study of religion, explains the powerful, unconscious, and ineffable experiences of sacred music as constituted in social processes, in and between and among people. *Affect* is sometimes used interchangeably with *emotion*, and while that comparison offers a useful entry point into considering what affect theory seeks to illuminate, the notion of affect refers to something importantly and distinctly social, and emotion signals an internal and individual response.¹⁸ Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth describe “affect” as the “visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension.”¹⁹ Within music studies, Steven Feld has proposed the term “acoustemology” or “acoustic epistemology” to describe “how sounding and the sensual, bodily, experiencing of sound is a special kind of knowing.”²⁰ Feld’s “acoustemology”

reminds us to expand our awareness to how these social sounds relate to the larger sonic environment or soundscape, which may include all sorts of natural and artificial sounds, while affect theory pays particular attention to social relationships. I will return to this concept of soundscapes in the next section, but here I explain the usefulness of affect theory for explaining how background music can affect us so powerfully, not only individually but in relational ways.

Affect is used to describe ontological processes of subjects who are constantly coming into being, not as isolated static subjects but as dynamic manifestations of ongoing encounter and relationship. Writing about the uses of affect theory for the study of religion, Jenna Supp-Montgomerie argues that it offers a productive “turn away from the individual as the bearer of emotion to the social lives that emerge between bodies and things.”²¹ Using ideas from Deleuze, Supp-Montgomerie describes how the atmosphere of a social experience can make us feel *and act* differently, giving us energy and vitality that make us engage, or bumming us out and shutting down our will to act: “Unlike emotion (affection), affect is not a state of a body but the waves of energy that move through and among bodies,” and its “territory is the inbetween.”²² For instance, applying affect theory to the Cane Ridge Revival of 1801, Supp-Montgomerie explains that rather than investigating what people felt, a “cultural understanding of affect” turns attention to “what subjectivities became possible in this particular context” and how people were able to act differently at the revival than they had before.²³ Durkheim called the feelingful social experience a “collective effervescence,” explaining that shared participation—thinking, acting, and feeling

in a kind of social unison—in a religious ritual “generates a kind of electricity that quickly transports [participants] to an extraordinary degree of exaltation.”²⁴ The significance of affect theory for music is not just that it helps us explain something unconscious, effervescent, and emotionally moving, but that it names a social experience.

A significant part of our meaning making is how we experience something—how we come to know things, not solely in rational and intellectual ways, but in feelingful ways involving both mind and body, or better yet, an embodied mind or mindful body.²⁵ Sound has unique affective potential in the way it touches our bodies and moves between bodies as physical energy (i.e., as perceptible vibrations), but it is the particular way that sound is embodied and felt, especially how it can engender experiences of connection in specific contexts, that highlights its impact as an affective experience between and around bodies. This is obviously relevant for the study of sound and religion: in *Religion Out Loud*, Isaac Weiner argues for attention to sound and audition in public contexts, calling it a “particular mode of sensory contact” that reveals significant insights into the ways that “adherents have materialized their beliefs.” His intervention is especially important given the dominance of scholarly attention to vision and even touch in religious settings. Weiner notes that visual culture studies have led the way in thinking about religious meaning making beyond the cognitive and intellectual, focusing instead on a rich “sensorium.”²⁶ For instance, although he doesn’t name it as affect, David Morgan describes the visual realm of religious experience as powerful because vision “promise[s] touch,” and verbs like “behold,” “see,” and “look” all reveal “an element of desire” for a kind

of physical connection.²⁷ Film scholar Laura Marks similarly explores “haptic perception”—the significance of touch and kinesthetic awareness to describe visual media’s role in facilitating sensations of nearness.²⁸ From within the field of sound studies, Anahid Kassabian builds on Marks’s ideas of a haptic experience of vision as a “dialectic movement” that builds a “bodily relationship between the viewer and the image,” saying, “Such a dynamic subjectivity demands a whole-cloth rethinking of the study of music . . . we can speak of auditory and haptic hearing” that is deeply embodied, not only a physical sensation but a process of connection.²⁹

Rather than make the case for one sense being better than another, or replacing another in priority,³⁰ these ideas disturb our easy assumption that sensation is an individual experience based in a unidirectional encounter with an external object. My senses do not reveal how something acts upon me; rather, we participate in dynamic processes of feeling and meaning making within sensory and social worlds. In language similar to that used to describe what psychologists call “music frisson,”³¹ Supp-Montgomerie says that “we might understand religious revivals not as subjects *expressing* religious fervor but, rather, as fervor pulsing through the veins of bodies, tingling at the fingertips, and dancing among surfaces of skin.”³² As a sensation, sacred music is immediate, close, moving our minds, bodies, and spirits.³³ As a node of affect, sacred music enables connection and makes transcendence possible. We recognize this when we make music and are attending to music carefully, focusing our attention on it, and otherwise enacting what Western musical cultures validate as “good” ways of listening.

But what about sacred sounds that are not participatory and that we are not actively attentive to, such as those in the parking lot in my opening anecdote? Returning to my call for more attention to background, ambient, and incidental musics, how does affect theory help us understand a fuller range of music in religious contexts? Many churches broadcast recorded music outside of the sanctuary and, in newer church buildings, many common spaces, including the foyer and meeting rooms but also restrooms and kitchens, are often wired for sound playback, enabling churches to create soundscapes of Christian music beyond any temporally fixed worship service or church event.³⁴ This recorded music is intended to perform several related functions, foremost among them creating a welcoming atmosphere and jumpstarting a worship experience. In particular, the foyer is considered a place for fellowship and “conviviality” before and after worship,³⁵ so creating the right feel for the space is a high priority for many churches. Chad MacDonald from Westside Church in Vancouver explains that a church’s foyer music can be a way to deliver a kind of “message” about the experience of church before the service even begins.³⁶ Chuck Lawless, Dean and Vice-President of Graduate Studies and Ministry Centers at Southeastern Seminary in North Carolina, explains that the right music in the foyer can “facilitate worship” as people gather: “soft worship music in the background can help turn a heart to God.”³⁷ Eric Liljero of Hillsong Church Stockholm says everything from lighting to music is important for creating the right welcoming “vibe” in a church foyer, producing a space that is “full of life, full of atmosphere.”³⁸ This is a delicate balance, says sound engineer Curt Taipale, because

churches need to avoid trying to make their background music do too much work!³⁹ For example, music with lots of words might send a useful spiritual message but could compete with the desired socializing in these liminal times and spaces. In other words, the “right” mode of engagement with this sacred and sacralizing music can be importantly different from participatory singing or rapt attention to the lyrics.

Anahid Kassabian proposes the concept of “ubiquitous music” to describe the many musics that we encounter in our everyday life that we hear alongside or as accompaniment to other activities and which we often refer to simply (but perhaps rather dismissively) as “background music.”⁴⁰ We encounter ubiquitous musics aurally adorning an array of physical spaces—shopping centers, dentists’ offices, bus stations, restaurants, the cabins of commercial airliners, and many more. At different moments we may pay greater attention to this background music, and our active mode of listening transforms it into an experience of “foreground music.”⁴¹ Both Kassabian and Jonathan Sterne posit a meaningful distinction between inattentive hearing and listening, with Sterne calling listening a “definite cultural practice” and Kassabian positing that, as a cultural activity, listening “engages us in sensual and sensory affective processes” that transform our personal subjectivities.⁴² In and around a church building, these ubiquitous musics are affective “spatial practice[s]” that can accomplish a range of functions depending on listener and context, from aurally claiming space for the church to sacralizing spaces, shaping the meaning making that takes place within them.⁴³ Reflecting back on my experience at that church parking lot, that music was deliberately put into this environment and made available for either

foreground or background engagement, for active listening or passive hearing (or a shifting between them) in a dynamic with the listener. The parking lot was transformed into an extension of the worshipful space of the church building. And, significantly, it encouraged an affective response tied to social relationships: hearing it made me, one woman in a dark, lonely parking lot, feel much less alone, reducing my sense of fear and vulnerability, even though I was not in the physical company of other people.⁴⁴ Sound brought the church community to me, affectively if not physically, and embedded me in a set of shared meanings and intersubjective relationships that shaped my experience of that moment. And that's the point. Applying affect theory and communication theory to the ubiquitous and atmospheric musics in our sacred and sacralized spaces provides a way to go beyond individual subjectivity and to talk about experiences of feeling as relational: less *me* and more *we*.

Church as Soundscape: Acoustics and Architecture

That the experience of a parking lot could be transformed by background music, made into an affective soundscape—in this case an atmospheric, even worshipful soundscape—may feel unsurprising. We are used to the ways music is deployed as spatial practice in elevators, malls, and airports to decorate the space and, importantly, to suggest directions for who and what the space is for. What makes attending to background music in many North American church spaces particularly interesting is that, as many North American Christian churches have become more visually plain, with fewer expressly religious symbols and decorations (looking and feeling more akin to malls and

airport lounges), sacralizing sounds become a key way to shape people's behaviors and experiences of a church environment.

So, to move to the third step in my argument, we need to attend to meaning making and affect not just in relation to those effervescent group connections, meaning-laden social contexts, and vectors of identity, but also to the physical and spatial settings within which those sonic-social dynamics emerge. Mario Trifuoggi explains that we cannot conceive of *habitus* without considering “spatial practices” which “are the matrices of human actions and interactions that make physical space in everyday life as much as social practices make the social space.”⁴⁵ This thinking resonates with aural historian Emily Thompson's argument for the power of soundscapes: “Like a landscape, a soundscape is simultaneously a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world.”⁴⁶ In her words, soundscapes “incorporate scientific and aesthetic ways of listening, a listener's relationship to their environment, and the social circumstances that dictate who gets to hear what.”⁴⁷ Trifuoggi and Thompson thus make the case for investigating the sonic and social practices of church environments. In my opening anecdote, the empty parking lot was key to shaping my spatial listening practices and affective experience, its sociality simultaneously interpersonally absent but sonically present. Investigating how people have sought to create particular soundscapes in and around church buildings to engender particular affective social experiences provides insight into the values and priorities of a group's religious culture. Hidden within a history of ongoing friction between spoken word and musical sound in

church spaces is a story of spatial practice and sonic affect that can uncover ways that design and architecture can have substantial effects on how we make meaning in and around what we hear in church.

Where and how our attention to sound is directed by physical space and social patterns can influence our experiences of sound and music in and around church buildings, shaping what messages and experiences we engage with as significant and meaningful. For instance, we may often assume that neogothic church buildings constructed in the last hundred years are as sonically resonant as they are visually intricate, but the acoustical history of church buildings reveals that the spoken word has been of much higher sonic priority than music, whether participatory or performed for an audience. Beginning in the United States in the 1920s, the guiding philosophy for designers of public buildings was that spaces should be free from distracting (and harmful) noise. “Good sound” was clear, efficient, orderly, and modern, with listeners learning to value this sound via everyday encounters with the increasingly “clean” and unreverberant sounds of radio, film, and phonographs.⁴⁸ For instance, the invention of ceiling surfaces and porous ceramic tiles that looked like stone or traditional terracotta changed the acoustic space of many American houses of worship built or renovated in the early twentieth century.⁴⁹ Specifically, these new surfaces (which looked suitably old) substantially cut reverberation times in church sanctuaries, deliberately shaping the acoustic space to privilege the comprehensibility of the speaking voice. Architecture critic Montgomery Schuyler, writing in *Brickbuilder* in January 1914, proclaimed that “preaching holds the first place in the attractions of the church,” and

thus tile technology would bring the layman out of the “shadowy background” to which he’d been relegated in the vast echoey medieval church.⁵⁰ Yet even during the boom years for tile technology, church musicians were already complaining that these spaces absorbed too much sound. By the 1950s many churches sought to seal these porous surfaces, increasing reverberation times and making the spaces more friendly to a range of musical practices, from choirs to orchestras.⁵¹ Rather than regarding this as a history of failed acoustical innovation for church soundscapes, we can instead understand it as revealing changing understandings of what elements of congregational worship are particularly valued in different times and by different groups of people, for reasons that may be both cultural and theological.

Today, many church spaces reveal competing sensational, theological, and social priorities. Balancing the tensions between spoken word, unamplified congregational singing, and amplified musical instruments in the sanctuary is proving to be a substantial challenge that even the best electronic sound system cannot completely solve. Even as some pastors have sought to make the case that “live’ acoustics made for a stronger sense of the church as body of Christ,” trends in church architecture in the late 1990s were for “all-electric” sanctuaries in which congregational sounds are deprioritized and “you can only hear what is generated from the platform.”⁵² Furthermore, different types of music making and different genres of church music also require different acoustic considerations—dry spaces are good for amplified instruments such as keyboards, electric guitars, and drums but bad for singing⁵³—posing formidable challenges for worship leaders employing “blended”

worship strategies. The reduction of aural distraction and “noise” is one way that churches have sought to focus churchgoers’ attention on language. Some churches removed visual elaboration, while other churches were deliberately constructed to downplay the visual and sonic sensorium.⁵⁴ For instance, in many nineteenth-century “auditorium” churches in the United States, music and visual decoration, when allowed at all, were secondary to preaching. Yet, even when preaching was central to the attendees’ experiences, preaching was still an affective aural and sonic experience.⁵⁵ For instance, designs for the semicircular “tabernacle” or rotunda Protestant churches in the United States focused a congregation’s aural and visual attention on the preacher and were favored by revivalist preachers who augmented their verbal message with gesture and facial expression.⁵⁶ Interestingly, the visual appearance of church organs was sometimes more important than how they functioned as actual musical instruments—smaller churches were advised to buy cheaper instruments but to make them appear visually, if not sonically, larger and grander by installing false pipes.⁵⁷ How people listen to church soundscapes depends not only on the acoustics but on the visual elements of spatial practices and *habitus*.

Which brings us to the interesting way that many recently constructed Christian churches, especially in North America, Europe, and Australia, are visually plain, favoring “minimal detailing,” functionality, and a “utilitarian ethos” in public spaces including the sanctuary, but are simultaneously also deliberately filled with ubiquitous background music.⁵⁸ The popularity of more minimal church spaces can be explained by a range of factors: a continuation of Neoplatonic ideals of

simplicity, purity, and truth that have been longstanding in Christian artistic theologies; iconoclastic theology; the increasing popularity of a minimalist design aesthetic; construction and maintenance costs; and a conscious distancing from the past in an attempt to demonstrate that faith and belief can be “modern.” In addition, however, architecture and design efforts have sought to make churches more attractive to potential members, particularly those people perceived to be intimidated by churches that look and sound like, well, churches. Edwin Young of Houston’s Second Baptist Church described the visually plain main church building as a deliberate part of the church’s mission to make sure that “a secular, unchurched person could go there and not be threatened.” Second Baptist’s goal is “to develop a wonderful environment, full of love and fun and light.”⁵⁹ Over one hundred years before Young, preacher Thomas De Witt Talmage told architects in 1870 to build a church that looked “as little like a church as possible, so that people not used to sacred edifices will feel welcome.”⁶⁰

This downplaying of visual elements corresponds to increased emphasis in the dimensions of sound and sociability. For example, Rick Warren argued that a church’s musical choice was crucial to making newcomers feel welcome, and that the best strategy is to go with the tastes of the majority.⁶¹ Jill Stevenson writes in *Sensational Devotion* that “spatial design functions as a valuable tool” and identifies the megachurch lobby as “an especially powerful device” that orients people into the affective experience of that church. Plain lobbies may feel like a familiar mall or coffee shop, and it is the people, she argues, whose altered demeanor creates the “atmospheric space” of the lobby. Although Stevenson

does not explicitly discuss the soundscape of the lobby of Willow Creek Church, she acknowledges that the “resonant texture” of a church event begins even as early as the church parking lot.⁶² Stevenson also links these sensational experiences to the church’s hope that visitors will “get connected.”⁶³

We might wonder if there was music playing in the lobby during Stevenson’s visits. But her descriptive words of atmosphere and resonance point yet again to the powerful affective experiences happening in spaces beyond the sanctuary. In this section, I’ve sought to demonstrate the many ways that approaches to church architecture and design participate in creating soundscapes that both affect musical practices and are also co-constitutive of affective sonic experiences. These soundscapes are sometimes related to the apprehension of language but, more recently, have been used to engender experiences of social connection. I now turn to the concept of phatic communication in order to integrate those experiences of social connection into my larger argument on the role of music in religion.

Background Music as Phatic Communication: The “Small Talk” That Binds Us

How is it that the soundscapes of churches can make us feel social cohesion and relationship? Because of the ways that our communication practices are meaningful beyond just the literal apprehension of language. In particular, as Kassabian argues persuasively, musics act as a form of phatic communication that works beyond and alongside language to connect us.⁶⁴ Bronislaw Malinowski proposed the term “phatic communication” in 1923 to describe the social processes that occur when people converse without needing to exchange

information: colloquially, “small talk.”⁶⁵ He argued that phatic “convivial gregariousness” is fundamentally about sociability and creating “ties of union” among the speakers.⁶⁶ Linguist Roman Jakobson also explains phatic communication as having a socializing function, operating among people to “check whether the channel works” and to “establish” and “prolong” communication.⁶⁷ If we examine our own conversations, we can see how our casual chit-chat about how full the trains were that morning is (usually) less a reflection about the state of transportation and more an interpersonal check-in with each other, building short-term goodwill among colleagues and long-term community in our workplace. It is this significant social function—opening a channel and establishing a relationship—that prompts Christiane Nord to argue that phatic communication is “the most important of all possible communicative functions,” the one that enables all other communicative behaviors (expressive, appellative, and referential) to occur.⁶⁸

Why do we need theories of affect and phatic communication in sacred music? First, because they offer a means to understand how music works beyond the referential and expressive. But, even more than that, these frames enable us to discuss how soundscapes and nonparticipatory musics do more than just create personal, subjective moods. Theories of affect and phatic communication, applied to these sacred sonic moments, highlight for us how they are relational, connective, and intersubjective. In this section we pick up the thread of feelingful social connections, weaving together theories of affect and phatic communication in order to highlight the intercommunal and intersubjective dimensions of our

sacred soundscapes. These sacred phatic musical experiences open avenues of communication, counteract any silences that could be considered rude or even hostile, and, most significantly, work to bond the communicators, fostering social relationships and interactions. In our current historical and theological moment, where individualized faith is valorized as the primary mode of religiosity, we should not take for granted the significance of community connections in all their various embodiments.

John Fiske explains that phatic communication works on the principle of redundancy and predictability—the meeting of communicative expectations, the following of social conventions—that helps create easily decoded and shared understandings among communicators.⁶⁹ Greeting a person is a redundant gesture, he argues, since it does not communicate any new informational content. But even these redundant gestures are necessary, potentially even crucial, since to deliberately *not* greet someone may have the effect of denying their existence in relation to you. Consider the function of the *Dominus vobiscum* in Christian liturgy where the celebrant states, “the Lord be with you,” and the congregation responds together, saying, “and with your spirit” or “and also with you.” Many Christians recognize this to signal the opening of worship, not only a mutual invocation of God. As a Christian greeting, one that is at the very least repeated if not necessarily redundant, we can see how it operates as phatic communication, opening a channel of human communication as the celebrant and the congregation publicly acknowledge each other. Phatic communication, says Fiske, “is crucial in holding a community

or a society together.” Interestingly, Fiske uses a musical analogy to illustrate how patterns and repetitive structures can be socially bonding: “Nothing can be more redundant than the refrain of a folk-song, but in singing it we reaffirm our membership of that particular group or subculture.”⁷⁰ He adds, “The point is that it is the use of the conventional, redundant aspects of the music or dance that determines and affirms membership of the group. Individual variations are permissible only within the limits of the conventions,” since too much variation from an expected form can be off-putting, working to exclude rather than include.⁷¹

If we look beyond the usual place of hymns and congregational songs, we find many other musical practices and soundscapes that are both predictable and redundant. Indeed, it may be these qualities that contribute to the background nature of these ubiquitous sacred musics. For some churches, key moments of phatic communication happen in the discrete and bounded moments, particularly those agreed upon as the spaces for instrumental music, such as the prelude and postlude. Both the prelude and postlude work affectively, engendering feelings (and prompting certain kinds of activity), as well as phatically: the former opens the divine and human channels of communication for organized worship, while the latter works to support a maintenance of community bonds. The prelude works phatically to signal a change of channels, closing one channel, thoughts and chatter of mundane life, and opening channels of sacred connection among worshipers and with the divine.

Discourses around the prelude, both historical and contemporary, note its affective possibilities, particularly around

mood, atmosphere, and emotion, yet they also reveal struggles over the genres and styles of music thought to facilitate this kind of phatic communication. These are also musical moments that some believe should also be about aesthetic experiences or cultural edification in ways that support spiritual practice. Yet we can also see a longstanding discourse of affective and feelingful experience around these musical moments of opening and sending. For instance, in 2006, William Mahrt, the president of the Church Music Society of America, wrote in an editorial in *Sacred Music* that the prelude “should be an anticipation, an ordering of the affections” in preparation for the liturgy, while the challenge of the postlude is to help people exit while maintaining a reflective state.⁷² That the prelude music should set the tone or atmosphere for the service is a longstanding idea, with little debate over the years. For instance, writing to pastors in 1939, Stanley Leddington argued that the prelude should “induce a serious, worshipful mood.”⁷³ Even earlier, in 1894, R. Huntington Woodman argued that prelude music “should be eminently devotional” and considered part of the service itself.⁷⁴ As early as 1876, the Presbyterian newspaper the *New York Evangelist* argued that secular classical music, although “well worth rescue from the Devil’s service,” was inappropriate for the church, saying, “the religious influence of mere instrumental music can be little unless it be thoroughly artistic; but . . . it must be intentionally religious in tone—subdued, earnest, devotional—as well as artistic” lest it neglect “the spirit of the service,” turning the church into a “concertroom.”⁷⁵ Taken together, these isolated discussions of the prelude reveal a concern that the music itself should not distract the hearer but help them

transition into a different mindset and tune into a sacred communication channel. Like the spoken *Dominus vobiscum*, the prelude is a kind of “musical small talk” that is about worshipful gathering and the establishing of a sacred community of togetherness.

Debates about the right style of music, as well as the right kind of listening, appear more frequently in discourse about the postlude, revealing ways that people understand this music to be a necessary component of the overall worship experience. Again, these historical debates should feel familiar to us, even over a century later. A lively debate occurred in the 1890s in the pages of the *New York Evangelist*, with questions about whether the postlude is artistic performance, music to exit to, music to socialize to, or music that is still part of the worship service. Dr. Henry G. Hanchett tried reverse psychology in suggesting that churches might experiment with dropping the postlude in order to rekindle congregational interest in this edifying music, or that the minister should signal that the postlude is a part of the overall order of worship by sitting down and modeling “reverent” listening during this music.⁷⁶ Organist and choirmaster John Camp of Hartford, Connecticut, also favored changing the order of the service to engender more attentive listening to the postlude, claiming in 1896 that the postlude “means nothing” because it is just “an accompaniment or background for our social talk,” having been degraded “to an ordinary, weak, ineffective thing.”⁷⁷ The concern these church musicians express that people are listening wrong or not even listening at all has elements of paternalism around certain musical aesthetics, but hopefully we can also see here a concern around communication and connection.⁷⁸ They seem to worry that people will “change

channels” too quickly, leaving their personal state of spiritual reflection behind, losing touch with the divine—that music as just accompaniment or background is not a powerfully sacred soundscape. Perhaps a theory of affect might have helped them understand that religious feelings extend beyond the personal and individual, so that even this social postchurch small talk the music is facilitating has a significant function for a sacred collective effervescence and the ever-important maintenance of community bonds.

So, let us continue to notice these moments where background, non-participatory instrumental music works affectively and phatically (and usually in the background) within the structure of liturgy and organized worship services. Musical soundscapes may accompany the sermon, happen alongside prayer, and function as connective tissue across elements of the service, acting in some ways like a film soundtrack. Again, the dominant discourse explaining this music centers on its role in creating “mood” and providing “atmosphere.” For example, Cheryl Sanders explains the role of the Hammond organ in African-American Holiness Pentecostal churches as “shap[ing] the mood and express[ing] the energy of the song, speech, and dance.” The organ acts in both the foreground and the background to shape the affective experience of worship, augmenting even the sermon with accompaniment but sometimes acting in what sounds like a call and response with the preacher, where the organ is understood as mediating a divine message from God.⁷⁹ Birgitta Johnson describes the improvised musical accompaniment to sermons at Los Angeles’s Faithful Central Bible Church as similar but importantly

different from the interplay of preacher, organ, and congregation described above. Music director and keyboardist Tracy Carter would usually provide music during the sermon introduction, coming back with music at the sermon’s climax, “much like the performed sermon (or song sermon) of the traditional Black church.” However, sometimes Carter would provide “soft [original] instrumental music throughout the entire sermon” meant to “match the tone and spiritual mood of what Ulmer is preaching without the music being a distraction.”⁸⁰ Instead of musical interplay with the preacher that takes an active role in a kind of dialog, this ubiquitous organ music is meant to create a particular affective experience for the listener, demonstrating how to feel in response to the message of the sermon. It signals a particular *habitus* of worship tied to identity and values, but it also works phatically, bonding the congregation in shared practice and facilitating divine connection.

Paradoxically, these soundscapes and ubiquitous sacred musics are incredibly powerful and sonically unobtrusive; they are much more than decorative or aesthetic *because* they produce these affective moments of connection, these collective experiences of effervescence. Sonic mood and atmosphere is necessary for phatically facilitating communal bonds necessary for religiously transcendent sacred and social relationships to emerge. Since the 2010s, tutorials have abounded on YouTube for musicians to learn improvisatory keyboard skills for use to accompany sermons, prayer, and other elements of the service that can fall into the general category of “free worship.” These tutorials for what is called “worship keyboard” practice stress that the sounds should, first and foremost, not

distract from whatever primary activity this music accompanies. We can see John Fiske's insights about phatic communication's predictability and redundancy in these examples of musical small talk. For instance, keyboardist Sandra Chen says that she usually chooses a chord progression from a song recently sung in the service and advises strongly against changing chord progressions or inserting a "new" chord progression into this familiar material. She usually chooses a section of a previous song, such as the chorus, that is musically "very repeatable," rather than a verse that is more "story-like" in its structure.⁸¹ This repeatability has a practical function in this background music, since it frees the event it accompanies from time restrictions, but as Fiske noted, repeatability also has an important phatic function. Peter Thompson, whose YouTube video "Worship Keyboard Tutorial: Playing in the Background" has nearly half a million views at this writing, describes the skills for playing unobtrusive music as useful for a range of activities within a church service, such as between songs in a worship set (the series of worship songs sung at the beginning of services in a Praise and Worship model), "when there's an altar call about to happen, . . . or maybe it's just the end of the message or there's an offering message going on." Unlike Chen, who suggests using the chord progression from a song that worshipers have recently sung, Thompson advises against using a recognizable song. But his reasoning is the same as Chen's: "people are drawn to music and they would be immediately distracted."⁸²

Both Chen and Thompson want to be careful not to create sounds that would be available as foreground music for active listening, offering specific directions for how to approach harmony, rhythm,

timbre, and attack/articulation. To do this, Thompson suggests alternating chords between the tonic I and the subdominant IV while playing the first, second, and fifth scale degrees, creating a sense of movement without a goal-directed harmonic progression. He advises against playing anything too rhythmic, recommending instead "leaving a lot of space between notes." The sonic options offered by an electric keyboard can help create music that functions well as background sound, with many worship musicians using "pads" to create washes of ambient sound that can either exist alone or can be used to soften any sounds layered on top of it.⁸³ Thompson explains that a keyboard "pad" sound has "virtually no attack to it" and instead offers very "sustained sound." Pitches enter the sound as if simply emerging from the overall texture, and again the effect is one of subtle movement, without any overt action or noticeable change. Thompson searches for the exact right words to explain how this music is supposed to function in worship, saying, "it's really just to provide a nice, [pause, looks down] um, background and an atmosphere – that's really the key term." This atmosphere, he continues, can "help people respond to God." Again, we notice the powerful discourse of atmosphere and mood used to explain this affective experience. In addition, Thompson also indicates the phatic communication that he intends these sounds to engender.

These carefully crafted atmospheric musical sounds communicate phatically to worshippers, without any words or literal directives, that the channels are now open, the space is now "thin." Returning to Jenna Supp-Montgomerie's explanations of affect discussed earlier, this secondary nonparticipatory background music has

changed the possibilities for subjectivity and intersubjectivity in this time and place, and people feel and act differently than they did before. The music sacralizes the space, making it holy and set apart by changing how people feel—their personal experiences of mood, but also the energy between the bodies present. Like the incense used in some holy spaces, it fills the air around us in ways we can sense. The music helps us sense the change; the music helps create the change.

Yet, however magical and even mystical these affective and phatic experiences may be for some, we cannot forget that they operate within our social and cultural systems. Phatic communication operates *because* of our *habitus*, and while phatic utterances may foster connections, they are connections structured in power relations. Norms work to exclude as well as include, by setting up unspoken codes of behavior and compelling our participation and conformity. Affect and phatic communication enlist music in the project of defining, regulating, and policing both community and one's religious experience. For instance, Sarah Bereza explains community codes around singing in many U.S. Christian fundamentalist churches. Not participating enthusiastically in congregational singing is read as a sign that your faith isn't fully right—not just that your relationship to God isn't right but that your professed membership in this particular Christian community is also in doubt.⁸⁴ Similarly, in response to those who complain that they feel emotionally manipulated by church music, particularly the euphoric flow experience of a musical worship set such as those described in the introduction to this article, defenders argue back that the problem lies not with the music or the emotional power of the

experience but with the incorrect stance of the individual worshipper who has turned the music or experience into an idol that they have put before God in their hearts and minds.⁸⁵ The solution, some say, is to submit (which in some churches fits with a doctrine of necessary Christian obedience) and to change your orientation from yourself back to God. And, even in the 1890s debates over the postlude, church musicians debated different means of constraining congregational behavior in order to get people to act appropriately, listen reverently, sit quietly, and let the edifying power of music work on them.

Here, then, is where we find the payoff in phatic communication for reconceiving these sacred musical experiences in terms of communal affect rather than personal emotion. When we locate musical power primarily in individual subjectivity, then we not only remain caught in debates over musical style and aesthetic taste, we too easily miss the social and intersubjective aspects of the ways that musical meaning and affect work within contexts.

Conclusion: Ubiquitous Subjectivities and Our Need to Connect

Why is our current moment a time when we are filling our spaces—our cars, our shopping centers, our church buildings, and even our church parking lots—with so much music? On the one hand, it's because we can. Speaker and playback technology is relatively inexpensive and physically unobtrusive, and digital audio interfaces from MP3s to streaming—what Patrick Burkart and Tom McCourt call the “celestial jukebox”—give us nearly unlimited and immediate access to vast cloud libraries of musical recordings.⁸⁶ This invisible playback technology creates a sense of “liveness” and “co-presence,” of

“connecting to an event and ‘witnessing’ something as authentic, true, and intimate.”⁸⁷ But perhaps there is more. As scholars across disciplines of religious culture, communication, and music, we can see expressions of desire for social connection, both for producing it and for apprehending it more clearly in moments that seem at first to be solely personal/individual. Jesús Martín-Barbero suggests one reason why we long for a world of deep experiences of moods and atmospheres, of secondary music that shapes how we feel and not just what we think: in the face of the “emptiness” we feel in our fast-paced modern lives and superficial social relations, and in response to the dizzying social and cultural changes we experience, “we continue to seek ways to re-enchant the world, bring back the magic, and clothe our lives in mystery.”⁸⁸ In this article, I’ve sought to account for the ways that many churches are using background music and creating affective soundscapes to help with this kind of sacralizing work.

But it is not enough to consider these musics only as providing a sacred sonic decoration or setting the right spiritual atmosphere in which individuals can

have an emotional worshipful experience starting in the church parking lot. Theories of affect and phatic communication allow us to understand that these experiences are always relational, always social, and always happening between us, whether our community is physical or imagined.⁸⁹ Like Martín-Barbero, Anahid Kassabian argues that our particular moment in late capitalism has created in us a profound desire for experiences of phatic communication through which we can feel social connection. We surround ourselves with sound, she argues, to combat the silences that highlight our aloneness, saying, “We prefer to be connected, need to listen to our connections, cannot breathe without them.”⁹⁰ When people fill their indoor and outdoor church spaces with background sounds, and when they add nonparticipatory musics before, after, and throughout worship services, they are not only adding to a sacred sensorium, they are also opening the channels, creating feelings that are not just within our minds and bodies but between them, activating our social and sacred connections, binding us together, and making us feel just a little less alone in this turbulent world.

NOTES

1 The church building holds 1,300 and dates approximately from the 1990s. The congregation was formed in 1987 and, according to its website, in 2022 it counted approximately 4,000 families as belonging to the church. This suburb has grown exponentially, from 400 in 1980 to 11,500 in 2010.

2 In the late 2000s, the Men’s Club worked with the church’s sound engineer to set up speakers with the outdoor nativity scene, playing Christmas music by contemporary Christian musicians for several weeks each year. In 2016, church discussions of the outdoor crèche and its music centered on whether or not this outside display should conform to

the musical and liturgical practices *inside* the church building, where the indoor nativity scene appears only at Christmas, and some church leaders have made the case that Advent is not yet the time to sing Christmas hymns and carols.

3 To be clear, this article is focused on music that fulfills an ambient or atmospheric role in an overall soundscape, not the genre of “ambient music” associated, at least initially, with minimalism and sound artists such as Brian Eno. For further reading on the role of ambient music (the genre) in ecstatic religious practices or in the “alternative worship movement,” see Rupert Till, “Ambient Music,” in *The*

Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music, ed. Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 327–37.

4 Friedlind Riedel investigates the complexities of “atmosphere” in religious musical contexts, arguing that it is an experience of “affective communitisation.” See “Music as Atmosphere: Lines of Becoming in Congregational Worship,” in *Music as Atmosphere: Collective Feelings and Affective Sounds*, ed. Friedlind Riedel and Juha Torvinen (London: Routledge, 2020).

5 Language is a complicated part of affective experience, as F. Hollis Griffin notes in his study of affect and media. He writes: “But feeling, emotion, and affect are so bound up in one another and so tightly linked to the texts and practices of media culture that they can be difficult to isolate and examine.” See F. Hollis Griffin, *Feeling Normal: Sexuality and Media Criticism in the Digital Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 3. I believe the value of affect theory lies in its acknowledgment of language as part of a complex experience of meaning making—a both/and relationship with language rather than an either/or.

6 Rather than examining texts as the sole or primary repositories of musical (or religious) meaning, we must examine the co-constitutive processes of meaning making that happen through and around texts. See, for instance, David Morgan, “Introduction: Religion, Media, Culture: The Shape of the Field,” in *Key Words in Religion, Media and Culture*, ed. David Morgan (New York: Routledge, 2008), 1–19; and Stewart M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

7 For an overview on the shift in religious studies from text and belief to culture and practice, see Angela Zito, “Culture,” in Morgan, ed., *Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture*, 69–82.

8 David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 160.

9 James R. Peck, “American Revival Worship,” *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 2: *Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Nashville, TN: Star Song Publishing, 1994), 88–89; Robert E. Webber, “The Praise and Worship Renewal,” *ibid.*, 131–34.

10 Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 35–36, 121.

11 Significantly, Birgit Meyer argues that studying the social processes of religion is an important step in acknowledging and challenging the longstanding but unspoken assumption of a Western

Protestant paradigm in religious studies that has understood religious belief as primarily individual and interior, and religious objects as belonging to a high/low aesthetic hierarchy. See Birgit Meyer, “Picturing the Invisible: Visual Culture and the Study of Religion,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 27 (2015): 338–40.

12 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1986), 469–70.

13 Ola Stockfeldt, “Adequate Modes of Listening,” trans. Anahid Kassabian and Leo G. Svendsen, in *Keeping Score: Music, Disciplinarity, Culture*, ed. David Schwarz, Anahid Kassabian, and Lawrence Siegel (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press), 132. Music scholar Simon Frith also notices this complex musical, social, and physical dynamic, arguing that music “creates and constructs an experience” that is not just individual but a co-constitutive interaction between the individual and society: “the social in the individual and the individual in the social, the mind in the body and the body in the mind.” Simon Frith, “Music and Identity,” *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: Routledge, 1999), 108–09.

14 Working in the field of religious visual culture studies, Birgit Meyer describes these “embodied, habitual practices” as “visual regimes.” Meyer, “Picturing the Invisible,” 335. We might similarly identify “aural regimes” within which we engage with and make sense of sacred music.

15 David Stabler, “5 Versions of ‘Hallelujah Chorus’ That Will Have You on Your Feet,” *The Oregonian* (Dec. 23, 2013), http://www.oregonlive.com/performance/index.ssf/2013/12/5_versions_of_hallelujah_choru.html.

16 “Oscar Mayer Deli Creations, Hallelujah Chorus,” *USAComplaints.com*, 2012, <http://usacomplaints.com/advertising/639943-oscar-mayer-deli-creations-complaints-reviews.html> (accessed Feb. 4, 2016); Curtis D. Dale, “Oscar Mayer Uses Hallelujah Chorus to Advertise Turkey. I’m Offended!,” *Woolymammoth*, 2012, <http://www.woolymammoth.org/cdd120607OscarMayer.html>.

17 Boschi, Kassabian, and García Quiñones point out that the aesthetic paradigm of Western classical music is based around “attentional” listening and the dominant idea that musical meaning happens when a listener “decode[s] the meaning of the musical work.” “Introduction: A Day in the Life of a Ubiquitous Musics Listener,” in *Ubiquitous Musics: The Everyday Sounds That We Don’t Always Notice*, ed. Marta García Quiñones, Anahid Kassabian, and Elena Boschi (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.

18 Jenna Supp-Montgomerie, "Affect and the Study of Religion," *Religion Compass* 9/10 (2015): 336.

19 Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregg and Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1. Gregg and Seigworth explain that the suppleness of the concept is central to its usefulness but also holds an inherent challenge: "There is no single, generalizable theory of affect: not yet, and (thankfully) there never will be. If anything, it is more tempting to imagine that there can only ever be infinitely multiple iterations of affect and theories of affect: theories as diverse and singularly delineated as their own highly particular encounters with bodies, affects, worlds. . . . But such a state of affairs might also go some distance toward explaining why first encounters with theories of affect might feel like a momentary (and sometimes more permanent) methodological and conceptual free fall" (3–4).

20 Steven Feld, "From Ethnomusicology to Echo-Muse-Ecology: Reading R. Murray Schafer in the Papua New Guinea Rainforest," *Acoustic Ecology Institute* (from a talk given in 1993 at The Tuning of the World Conference on Acoustic Ecology), <https://aeinews.org/aeiarchive/writings/echomuseecology.html>.

21 Supp-Montgomerie, "Affect and the Study of Religion," 336.

22 *Ibid.*, 337.

23 *Ibid.*, 340.

24 Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 162.

25 Katie Graber and Matthew Sumera explain that affect theory helps us consider rich forms of musical embodiment, refocusing "our emphasis from hearing and listening to account for the physicality and bodily consequences of musical engagements." Katie J. Graber and Matthew Sumera, "Interpretation, Resonance, Embodiment: Affect Theory and Ethnomusicology," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 2020: 9.

26 Isaac Weiner, *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 8–10.

27 Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 111.

28 Laura Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 2–3. See also Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 111. Media scholars have discussed the intimate eroticism of listening technology. For instance, MP3 players are described as "devices fabricated expressly for stimulating various human desires or 'drives,' sometimes by direct insertion into

an orifice." Joshua Gunn and Mirko M. Hall, "Stick It in Your Ear: The Psychodynamics of iPod Enjoyment," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 5/2 (2008): 136. Connecting the dots between religious music and affective experience, Martyn Percy has argued that the intimate "embodiment and somatic experience" of music in charismatic worship is a kind of "sublimated eroticism." Martyn Percy, "Sweet Rapture: Subliminal Eroticism in Contemporary Charismatic Worship," *Theology & Sexuality* 7 (1997): 71.

29 Marks, *Touch*, 2–3, quoted in Anahid Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening: Affect, Attention, and Distributed Subjectivity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), xvii; see also xiv–xviii.

30 Jonathan Sterne points out the problems of practicing an "audio-visual litany" that decontextualizes sensual phenomena and also implies a "zero-sum game" between the senses. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). Unpacking the complex conversation of the audio-visual litany is beyond the scope of this article. It is notable that, in this discussion of the audio-visual litany, Sterne links hearing to speech and language (15). Debates over the relationship of sound and sight, and hearing and seeing, have a complex relationship to language. As I discuss in note 5, the relationship of text to affect is a complex both/and. Many analyses of music's meaning consider the text as a meaningful site and, as I note earlier, in sacred music the text is often the most distinguishable location of specific sacred meaning. But, following Sterne, Stockfeldt, and Kassabian, I seek to decenter language from this position of primacy in sacred music, looking instead at the unpredictable meaning-making dynamics around sound in sacred contexts, where language may and may not, depending on the listener and the moment, be the most meaningful element of the experience.

31 Luke Harrison and Psyche Loui, "Thrills, Chills, Frissons, and Skin Orgasms: Toward an Integrative Model of Transcendent Psychophysiological Experiences in Music," *Frontiers in Psychology*, July 23, 2014, <http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00790/full>.

32 Supp-Montgomerie, "Affect and the Study of Religion," 341. Musicologist Nina Eidshem similarly pushes back on the "ossification of music," for a paradigmatic shift in thinking about sound as a sensational phenomenon and vibrational practice that is profoundly relational. Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 1–3 and 180–81.

33 Not all affective experience, including that around religion, may be outwardly perceptible to

others, nor even consciously understood by the one doing the experiencing. For instance, physical activity and movement during worship are just as much of a *habitus* as are stillness and physical quietude.

34 A representative example: weasel2htm, “Church Building Distributed Background Music System,” Nov. 26, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ck1bu63HpiQ>. Additional evidence that many churches are wiring the building for sound can be found in practical discussions on various Christian and secular internet tech forums, online magazines, and private company blogs such as *Christian Guitar*, *FOH Online*, and *Listen Technologies*. In a checklist posted to the online resource portal for Hillsong Leadership Network, the very *first* item on a long list (including everything from cleaning toilets and putting out umbrellas) is “Grab Ipod Shuffle from Office to Plug In at Reception.” “Hillsong Sunday Checklist (Foyer),” *Hillsong Network*, October 2015, <https://hillsong.com/pass-resource/sunday-foyer-checklist/>. On an audio technology website, one user recommends using Sirius radio or an iPod rather than a PC with music library for background music in a church lobby. Dbaxter, comment in “Foyer/FoH Sound System,” *Control Booth*, July 23, 2013, <https://www.controlbooth.com/threads/foyer-foh-speaker-system.32542/>.

35 Anne C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 191–92; Tim Stafford, “God Is in the Blueprints,” *Christianity Today*, Sept. 7, 1998: 79.

36 Innovate 4 Jesus, “Chad MacDonald: How to Choose Lobby Music at Church,” *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZFoyJNPZYA> (accessed June 4, 2012, link now private).

37 Chuck Lawless, “10 Problems of Church Foyers,” *Chuck Lawless.com*, April 21, 2016, <http://chucklawless.com/2016/04/10-problems-in-church-foyers/>.

38 Hillsong Leadership Network, “How to Use Your Church Foyer to Build Atmosphere,” *YouTube*, June 5, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrH75-H636g>.

39 Curt Taipale, “How to Choose Pre/Post Service Music,” *SynAud Con*, Oct. 23, 2015, <http://www.prosoundtraining.com/site/synaudcon-library/how-to-choose-prepost-service-music/>.

40 Anahid Kassabian, “Ubiquitous Listening,” in *Popular Music Studies*, ed. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus (London: Arnold, 2002), 131–42.

41 *Ibid.*, 135–36.

42 Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 19; Kassabian, *Ubiquitous Listening*, xxiii.

43 Martin J. M. Hoondert and Janieke Bruin-Mollenhorst, “Music as a Lens to Study Death Rituals,” *Jaarboek voor liturgieonderzoek* 32 (2016): 96.

44 It also occurred to me that this music, playing into the deserted dark parking lot late on a Wednesday night, might actually be a gentle deterrent against people who might be seeking a dark, quiet place for nonchurchlike activities. For more on this, see Jonathan Sterne, “The Non-aggressive Music Deterrent,” in García Quiñones, Kassabian, and Boschi, eds., *Ubiquitous Musics*, 121–37.

45 Tifuoggi brings Bourdieu, Lefebvre and De Certeau together to argue for a “spatialized theory of practice,” carefully avoiding spatial determinism. Mario Trifuoggi, “Habitus and Place: Notes for a Spatialized Theory of Practice,” paper presented at BSA-BSG Conference, Bristol, UK (July 4–6, 2016).

46 Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 1.

47 *Ibid.*, 1–2.

48 *Ibid.*, 3 and 233–40. Weiner explores the distinction between good and bad sound, between music and “noise,” particularly in public contexts where religious sounds occur beyond a building that neatly contains and controls religious sounds. See Weiner, *Religion Out Loud*.

49 Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*, 189.

50 Quoted in *ibid.*, 185–86.

51 Jaume Soler-Bertolich, “Masonry Acoustical Tile: Acoustical Challenges and Solutions in the XXth and XXIst Centuries,” <http://web.mit.edu/cron/Backup/project/guastavino/www/Soler-MasonryAcousticalTile-AcousticalchallengesandsolutionsintheXXthandXXIstcenturies.pdf> (accessed April 10, 2016, link no longer active).

52 Stafford, “God Is in the Blueprints,” 80.

53 Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 232.

54 Victoria Ann George, *Whitewash and the New Aesthetic of the Protestant Reformation* (London: Pindar Press, 2012). George argues persuasively that, more than just a means of covering previous images, whitewashing was a political-religious tool, at times even a ritual act in itself, on the one hand disciplining worship practice in the space and on the other serving as a means to a certain kind of Protestant identity (7–15). Even today, white walls and plain spaces are increasingly popular in the design of new Protestant and Catholic churches in Europe and North America, with some scholars describing this design as importantly facilitating the democratization of Christian belief and practice (37–44). See also

Robert Proctor, *Building the Modern Church: Roman Catholic Church Architecture in Britain, 1955 to 1975* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).

55 As Jojada Verrips reveals in his discussion of the emotional speech-singing practices of some ultra-orthodox Dutch Calvinists, even strict “pietistic language use” can “evoke mystical, ecstatic or even trance-like” affective experiences in congregants. Just because a church eschews the musical doesn’t mean that it doesn’t have an affective soundscape. See Jojada Verrips, “Speaking and Singing, or How Ultra-Orthodox Calvinists Tune Their Bodies,” *Jaarboek voor liturgieonderzoek* 29 (2013): 144.

56 Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 34, 53–54.

57 *Ibid.*, 57.

58 *Ibid.*, 149 (see also 48 and 127). In addition, some churches have been prioritizing spending program space over sanctuary space. Susan Power Bratton, *ChurchScape: Megachurches and the Iconography of Environment* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 4.

59 Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 150.

60 Quoted in *ibid.*, 41.

61 Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 280–85. Lim and Ruth argue that white evangelical and mainline churches adopted contemporary worship primarily “as a strategic way of attracting new people,” in important contrast to the way Pentecostal churches developed a theology around the “sacramentality” of musical worship. Lim and Ruth, *Lovin’ on Jesus*, 131.

62 Jill Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First-Century America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 224, 221.

63 “Visiting Willow,” Willow Creek Community Church website, quoted in Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion*, 221.

64 Kassabian, “Ubiquitous Listening,” 140.

65 For Malinowski, literal translation could never fully capture the social nuances of an utterance. Put another way, he argued that we cannot understand language without considering the context around an utterance. Bronislaw Malinowski, “Supplement I: The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages,” in *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language Upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, ed. C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), 299–302. See also G. Senft, “Phatic Communion,” in *Culture and Language Use*, ed. G. Senft, J.-O. Östman, and J. Verschueren

(Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2009), 226. Note that Stockfeldt’s modes of listening echo this attention to context and process when they explain that the same piece of music can mean different things to the same listener in different contexts.

66 Malinowski, “Supplement I,” 315–16. It’s perhaps interesting for us to note that Malinowski uses religiously inflected vocabulary to describe what happens via phatic communication. In his words, “The breaking of silence, the communion of words is the first act to establish links of fellowship” (314). Other scholars have picked up on these religious connotations. Professor of speech sciences John Laver described phatic communication as “a complex part of a ritual, highly skilled mosaic of communicative behavior” (quoted in Senft, “Phatic Communion,” 231), and Jakobson uses similar language in his description: phatic communication “may be displayed by the profuse exchange of ritualized formulas, by entire dialogues with the mere purport of prolonging communication” (Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok [Boston: Technology Press of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and New York: Wiley & Sons, 1960], 355). What both Laver and Jakobson are saying is that phatic communication operates and is understood to open channels of communication via culturally agreed upon patterns of engagement.

67 Jakobson, “Closing Statement,” 355.

68 Christiane Nord, “The Phatic Function in Translation: Metacommunication as a Case in Point,” *Belgian Journal of Linguistics* 21/1 (January 2007): 172.

69 John Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 11.

70 *Ibid.*, 14.

71 *Ibid.*, 15. Interestingly, the music that works well as ubiquitous music (and as phatic communication) has not been valued by critical perspectives on music that hold the breaking of convention as the greatest signifier of musical value, as we hear. For one potent critique, see Theodor Adorno’s sociomusical critique of jazz and popular musics: Theodor Adorno, “On Popular Music (1941),” in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 301–14.

72 William Mahrt, “Editorial: New Directions for Sacred Liturgy,” *Sacred Music* 133/3 (Fall 2006): 4–5.

73 Stanley Ledington, “The Music of the Church Service,” *The Ministry*, January 1939, <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1939/01/>.

74 R. Huntington Woodman, "Church Music: Preludes and Postludes," *New York Evangelist*, Aug. 16, 1894): 20.

75 "The Religious Press," *New York Evangelist*, Aug. 5, 1876: 2.

76 Henry G. Hanchett, "Church Music: The Postlude," *New York Evangelist*, July 30, 1896: 22.

77 John S. Camp, "The Postlude Again," *New York Evangelist*, Aug. 20, 1896: 22.

78 Sarah Bereza explains that in many U.S. fundamentalist Christian churches, music is "emphatically not" meant to be in the background (232). All music is directly engaged with, either for good purposes or for bad, regardless of whether the listener desires to "refuse music's influence" (331). Within the context of organized worship, instrumental music is intended to enable a kind of deliberate "meditation" or "inner singing" where the music prompts the listener (who is expected to already know the hymn text belonging to the tune being played) to reflect on the meaning of the implied text: "This meditation is what makes instruments-only music not just acceptable in fundamentalist services but a prized art form" (323). Sarah Bereza, "The Right Kind of Music: Fundamentalist Christianity as Musical and Cultural Practice" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2017), 232–33 and 331.

79 Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 55–56.

80 Birgitta Johnson, "Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing': Music and Worship in African American Megachurches of Los Angeles, California" (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 2008), 465. The reference is to Bishop Kenneth C. Ulmer, head pastor of Faithful Central.

81 Sandra Chen, "Keyboard Tips--What to Play During Free Worship," *YouTube*, March 6, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1w6KOWlc2PU>.

82 Our Worship Sound, "Worship Keyboard Tutorial: Playing in the Background," *YouTube*, Feb. 7, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3PsiLm4xv4>.

83 Joshua Busman has called attention to the worship music market in pads which are sold, not just as ways to "glue everything together" and to

provide "atmospheric, ambient texture," but as one easy way church musicians can sound more like the commercial worship music recordings whose sound they are seeking to reproduce in their local churches. Joshua Kalin Busman, "Worship Isn't Something You Do, It's Something That Happens to You: Agency, Performance, and Musical Skill in Evangelical Worship Music," paper presented at the Christian Congregational Music Conference, Cuddesdon, UK, Aug. 4–7, 2015.

84 Bereza, "The Right Kind of Music," 169–80.

85 See the original post and comments at David Santistevan, "Is Your Worship Leading Mere Emotional Manipulation?," *Beyond Sunday Worship*, 2013, <https://www.davidsantistevan.com/manipulation/>.

86 Patrick Burkart and Tom McCourt, *Digital Music Wars: Ownership and Control of the Celestial Jukebox* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

87 See Anna Nekola, "Mediating Religious Experience: Congregational Music and the Digital Music Interface," in *Studying Congregational Music: Key Issues, Methods, and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Andrew Mall, Jeffers Engelhardt, and Monique Ingalls (New York: Routledge, 2021).

88 Jesús Martín-Barbero, "Mass Media as a Site of Resacralization of Contemporary Cultures," in *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 102–16.

89 See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

90 Kassabian, "Ubiquitous Listening," 140. Writing nine years after Kassabian, in 2011, Victoria Wang, John V. Tucker, and Tracey E. Rihll concur that there's something about modern societies that "amplif[ies] significantly the human need for phatic technologies: "Whether there's a need for more connection now in our technological modern age—whether we somehow feel more disconnected from each other now than we did or whether we worry about feeling more disconnected now than we did then—is a difficult issue to easily resolve" (85). Victoria Wang, John V. Tucker, and Tracey E. Rihll, "On Phatic Technologies for Creating and Maintaining Human Relationships," *Technology in Society* 33 (2011): 44–51.